ABSTRACT

        A philosophy of education course focused on concepts
of democratic education was taught to primary and secondary school
teachers working in a private bilingual school in San Salvador (El
Salvador). The teachers' school was an "International School" serving
children of the wealthy and the educated who lived nearby. The course
was designed so that the form and content of the course were
congruent and the students could experience democratically organized
debate and evaluation. The course goal was to read two recent texts
on democratic education and to examine participants' beliefs and
practices to see whether they assisted or impeded the formation of
persons able to participate in civic debate. Observations of the
responses of the participants to the entire course led to three
conclusions: (1) teachers are not comfortable evaluating their peers,
even when anonymity was assured; (2) teachers face a profound
struggle in democratizing their workplace as expressed in final
essays where participants reported that the course had made them more
aware of their limited autonomy some of which they conceded was
self-imposed; and (3) that the crafting of a philosophy of education
can be justified on different grounds: vocational, professional, and
collegial. (JB)

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Teaching democratic theories of education in El Salvador: Is the laboratory open?

Jeffrey Roth

University of Florida

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"Education is the laboratory in which philosophic distinctions become concrete and are tested."

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*[1]

Introduction

It may be helpful to start out by stating what this paper is not. It is not an analysis of the educational system in post-civil war El Salvador. Nor is it a dramatic tale recounting the collision of ideals between a Yanqui professor committed to unconstrained inquiry and a group of Salvadoran teachers timorous of change. Rather, it is an account of a visitor seeking to enact in the space of a very short time several key concepts of democratic educational theory during a course for primary and secondary school teachers who had very little reason to question the prevailing social and pedagogic arrangements in their work place.

Setting

The site of this one-time experiment in non-authoritarian forms of pedagogy was an international school in San Salvador, capital city of El Salvador. At the time of my visit, May 1994, voters in El Salvador had just chosen decisively *not* to elect as president the candidate of the left whose party had been guaranteed participation in the political process as one of the chief compromises negotiated to end an exceedingly cruel, 12-year old civil war which had taken the lives of an estimated 23,000 civilians.[2] The winner of the election was a Yale-trained economist, who promised to re-open the war-scarred country to foreign investment. Approval of his party's platform meant continued intensive cultivation of coffee for export and development of the Pacific coastline for tourism.

The setting for the course was a private, K-12 bilingual school. Like its counterparts in the capitals throughout central and south America, it was located in the richest enclave of the city. (The Spanish word for these urban neighborhoods is *colonia*.) The homes and apartment houses surrounding the school were guarded day and night by armed sentries brandishing automatic weapons. The faculty of the school was half Salvadoran (concentrated primarily in the

elementary grades) and half US nationals, the majority adventurous young women rotating through two year contracts on the circuit of international schools strung out along the hemisphere. Part of their contract at this school included living quarters inside the *complejo*, a walled, guarded compound located on the edge of the campus, beyond the soccer fields.

Fourteen of these teachers had enrolled in a philosophy of education course which was offered to them through the University of Alabama. Eleven of them were US nationals, two were bi-nationals, and one was an indigenous Salvadoran. (Therefore, the class was comprised more of middle and high school teachers than elementary.) Other graduate education courses were available throughout the year and could be amassed toward the master's degree. The international school itself was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) so that its graduates could matriculate to US universities.

Starting around 1980 when Jesuit priests at parochial schools in the cities and countryside as well as at the University of Central America began preaching the gospel of liberation theology in earnest, middle class families began to withdraw their children from Church schools which traditionally had been the terminus for the education of local business and professional classes. Though enrolling their children at the international school was a serious financial burden for these families, it appeared a haven of social class stability amidst an armed insurrection which was demanding that the government begin to redistribute wealth and power.

The international school had always served El Salvador's important politically-connected families who intended their children study at US universities and graduate schools before returning to assume posts in government ministries and national corporations. Another, smaller group of students at the school was the foreign counterpart of these future power brokers-- children of transnational corporation executives and diplomatic service personnel, usually on five year assignment to the country.

Constraints and Opportunities in the Teaching Assignment

For reasons owing mostly to perversity, I chose to conduct in this explicitly conservative, class-conscious setting a philosophy of education course that would focus on the contours and practicalities of democratic education and its attendant commitment to rectifying inequities in civil society. One circumstance, I surmised, might favor this probing of social amelioration: the duration of the course was extremely compressed. The required 45 contact hours had to be delivered within a two week period. That small window of time meant that class would have to meet for 3½ hours a day, six days a week for twelve days. I would learn soon enough whether the course was inducing any questioning among the teachers about the social and pedagogical arrangements operating at their school and in their own teaching practices. So, thirty minutes after they bid their last students of the day good bye at 3 p.m., 14 teachers assembled in a 12th grade English classroom. It would be my job to see to it that they found something during those 3½ hours that could keep fatigue, hunger, and boredom at bay.

Goals of the Course

The task I set myself in conceiving and executing this particular philosophy of education course was to create a pedagogical situation in which the form and content of the course were congruent. Specifically, I hypothesized that a class in democratic theories of education should also be an experience of democratically organized debate and evaluation. Though the ideal was to have course form and content mutually shape and reinforce each other, it will not be possible, at least initially, to talk about these two aspects simultaneously; I will have to delineate the substantive and formal goals of the course separately.

Substantive goal. I selected two recent texts, one well received and constructed along traditional lines, Amy Gutmann's *Democratic Education* (1987), the other just published in the US and quirkily organized, Paddy Walsh's *Education and Meaning* (1993).[3] The goal of our short time together was twofold: 1) to read these authors and come to understand how each justified the role of schools in fostering democracy; and 2) to examine our own pedagogical

beliefs and practices to see whether they assisted or impeded the formation of persons able to participate in civic debate.

Formal goal. The formal goal for the course is easily stated: Organize the instructional format of the course so that it manifested some of the main democratic procedures and values set forth in the texts being studied. The formal arrangements that were made to achieve this goal are detailed in a subsequent section. Here I want to turn to the arguments made by the one of the texts' authors and subsequently by course participants on behalf of schooling as incubator and guarantor of democracy. I intend to focus mostly on Walsh's work (and students' application of it), in part because Gutmann's arguments are fairly well known, and in part because *Education and Meaning* brings an unusual spiritual dimension to theorizing about democratic education which has not been conspicuous in discussions of schooling in a secular state.

Course Content--Democracy as a search for harmony

Walsh belongs to a new generation of British theorists of education. He expresses deep respect for the work of his predecessors such as Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, but he acknowledges that philosophy of education now must move beyond clarification of terms. T; ·ned in the British tradition of linguistic analysis, Walsh starts, but doesn't stop, at determination of meaning. He is much more open than his predecessors were to Continental and American influences. His thinking and writing show the profound effect that Habermas' work has had in bringing the work of American social theorists, particularly Mead and Parsons, but also Dewey and Merton, to the task of constructing democratic models of society based on unconstrained forms of communication.

For Walsh, philosophy's first contribution toward making public life less divisive and more equitable is that it can help probe the slogans and buzzwords that are used in public debates about education. Linguistic analysis then has to be extended beyond clarifying the arguments that undergird contemporary educational controversies. Delineating the sides in a debate involves attaching rhetorical positions to specific, socially-situated interests.

Walsh is careful to point out that locating multiple and divergent meanings expressed within and outside the sphere of education is simply a first step in taking stock of belief structures and values among different constituencies. This first step merely demonstrates that education is an "essentially contested concept."[4] Identifying areas of disagreement has to be followed by detection of underlying commonalities. Citing Wittgenstein,[5] Walsh sees this search for consensus as coextensive with living in social groups.

Walsh's proposal for using philosophy of education to build a coherent view of life is explicitly derived from Dewey. The steps in this three-stage process are : 1) identifying sectarian interests as arising from social location and therefore subject to partial understanding, 2) analyzing disagreement about the aims of education in terms of historical and contemporary social arrangements, and, 3) building a more inclusive yet always contingent consensus through continuous, sympathetic public debate. Walsh invokes Dewey's linking of democracy and education, the sine qua non of both being untrammeled inquiry and communication. He envisions local but interconnected communities engaged in continuous debate and reconfiguration, evolving toward a society that secures the conditions for freedom and fulfillment.

In defending education against charges from the left that schools manipulate the young to serve the state's interests and charges from the right that this manipulation is not rigorous enough, Walsh does not take a midpoint position. Rather, he recommends a transcending, that is, a spiritual perspective, advancing two claims which callous partisans of rationality might consider mutually contradictory, namely, that the world is full of marvels and that human beings profoundly desire unity. Walsh sees education, like religion, as a journey through which we come to embrace a wider and deeper vision of life's possibilities. In ideal circumstances, education encourages and equips all people equally to undertake an ongoing quest for ultimate value, to them personally and to the society with whose members they perforce interact. In its

helping us to discover an overarching coherence which gives meaning and purpose to our private and public acts, Walsh locates the spiritual dimension of education.[6]

In order to describe how this spiritualized version of Dewey's ideas[7] was put into practice by this group of teachers, I need to describe how the course was organized. It is to these formal arrangements that I now turn.

Formal Arrangements

At the heart of Walsh's vision of what a democratically oriented philosophy of education bequeaths is "self-knowledge." He sees "self" as containing both a personal and social dimension (p. 3). This compound identity that we each possess, individual actor as well as potential ally/enemy, becomes known to us through the shifts in perspective that Mead called "taking the role of the other." It was therefore extremely important that this course contain ample opportunities for students to consider seriously the viewpoints of others, particularly ones that might be unfamiliar, threatening, or repugnant.

The 230-minute class sessions were divided equally between whole class exposition and discussion followed by small group work, culminating in panel presentations. (The order of these formats alternated at each class meeting.) The break-out work was carried on in four groups as students rotated through constellations of three- and four-member teams. Within a four-person team, role assignment was also subject to rotation. At each session, students would assume one of four different (but not mutually exclusive) roles: facilitator, critic, recorder, and panel spokesperson.

The first break-out of groups came about through a process of self-selection. At the first class meeting, students were asked to write down, cold, their educational credo, taking the form, "My philosophy of education is . . . ." In their declaration, they were asked to consider the following questions:

1. What is your understanding of the word or activity called philosophy ?

2. What is your understanding of the word or institution called education ?

    a.   What are its aims?

    b.   What are its methods?

3.   What are the duties and responsibilities of a teacher?

    a.   What do I owe my students?

    b.   What do I owe the school?

    c.   What do I owe myself?

4.   In what ways does my school contribute to the welfare of the community,

    (understood both proximately as neighborhood and distally as nation)?[8]

Instead of having students each espouse their statement of ideals, the first day's

discussion was centered around the obstacles that they had encountered in fulfilling their own

philosophy of education. After these obstacles were listed on the blackboard, the class grouped

them under four canopies: teachers and students, teachers and administrators, teachers and

community, and teachers and society. Those whose obstacles were placed under the same

canopy formed the first of a series of self-selected work groups.

The assignment for this first set of small groups (as well as subsequent ones) was first to

find additional obstacles within the thematic relationship. (For example, obstacles under the

canopy teacher-and-students included: "students no longer respect teacher authority"; "teachers

can't compete with the media for students' attention"; and "parents are too busy to support their

children's learning.") The second task of the groups was to prepare a causal claim that might

explain the problematic nexus. (The group exploring obstructed relations between teachers and

students concluded their synthesis of obstacles with the statement: "Teachers have not yet

discovered a way to motivate unmotivated students.") The groups' third task was to generate an

ameliorative hypothesis, that is, a plan of action that conceivably could reduce the estrangement

between the two parties. (The recommendation of the group considering the impasse in teacher-

student relations was: "Try novel situations and techniques to motivate students.") Taken

together, this three step generative process--obstacle-claim-hypothesis--was an exercise in

understanding the multiple meanings that different factions attach to a problematic nexus and then imagining a more comprehensive, inclusive conception of the connection, one ample enough to incorporate a fuller portion of each side's interests.

Other instances of taking the role of the other were located in the evaluation process. The final grade for the course was the product of three different judgment schemes. One third of the grade was the sum of all internal grades that were awarded (in secret balloting) by each group member to each other for their contribution to the group's oral presentations. Another third of the final grade was the tally of all scores that members of the audience gave to each group's oral presentations. The final portion of the final grade consisted of the score awarded for two essays assigned by the instructor and completed individually as a take home exam on the last weekend of the course. The previous weekend a sample essay question had been assigned and each group turned in a collaborative text to be graded (but not recorded).[9] In addition to requiring students to summarize one week of class discussion about their relationship area (teacher-student, -administrators, -community, -society), this assignment also served to familiarize students with the instructor's standards for expository writing.

Before concluding with some lessons I learned from this brief experiment in conducting a philosophy of education course that used shared forms of instruction and peer-determined forms of evaluation, I want to touch quickly on the class's response to the Gutmann text, *Democratic Education*. I had originally conceived the two authors as distinctly representing the two poles of the course. formal and substantive concerns. Walsh's insistence on the power of linguistic analysis to set in relief the moral and epistemological perspectives of the parties debating public education I saw as analogous to a surveyor who (in week one) mapped out for us the terrain of discourse. His emphasis on empathetic turn-taking, I thought, would generate a sort of trans-national set of rules governing dialogic engagement. Gutmann, on the other hand, I imagined as supplying expatriate US teachers with a crash course in case law through which they could see in concrete terms the public consequences for communities of education as an "essentially

contested concept." By the end of the course (and in their final essays comparing the two authors), however, the majority of students found Gutmann's technique of supporting her theorizing with court cases to be highly formulaic whereas they begrudgingly concluded that Walsh's arguments, though on the surface tending toward categorizing and abstraction, were nonetheless deeply informed by a quasi-religious passion for personal and social harmony. <u>What did this experiment in democratized pedagogy teach me?</u>

I drew three conclusions from teaching this course in the manner I have described: one was reached while class was still in session, and two were derived from careful reading and rereading of their examination essays. The first lesson, which the students explicitly communicated, was that teachers were not comfortable evaluating their peers, even when anonymity was assured. The system of awarding grades to individuals within a group and to groups giving a panel presentation was scrapped by the end of the first week after a midpoint joint evaluation of classroom procedures. The students deemed the secret ratings unnecessary on the grounds that, for professionals, peer pressure within groups and competition across groups provided sufficient protection against malingerers. As I moved among the small groups each evening, I of course noted some variability in levels of enthusiasm and commitment to the tasks but I agreed with the teachers that a mutual (and, for all intents and purposes, spontaneous) grading system was a clumsy and immature way to enforce or record involvement.

The second lesson has to do with being sensitized to the struggle teachers face in democratizing their workplace. In an essay for their final, students were asked to speculate on what effect the readings, small group work, and whole class discussions might have on altering their philosophy of education. Students reported that the course had made them even more aware of their limited autonomy (some of which they conceded was self-imposed). In general, they acknowledged that their rights as professionals were indeed circumscribed in a private school setting; they recognized how vulnerable they were to complaints made by disgruntled parents, whose appeal to the school's board of directors could and did result in summary termination.

(Teachers at international schools belong to no bargaining unit.) Yet, in spite of this vulnerability, Walsh's injunction that they seek to understand (and forgive) their adversaries, be they lazy students, scandalized parents, craven administrators, or a free-booting economy, had the effect of deepening their commitment to engage with others with the end-in-view of fostering a democratic workplace.

Before moving on to the third lesson, I'd like to take a moment to report on the contours of this democratic workplace as they were sketched out in the students' essays. The description that follows is an amalgamation of the class's reflections; it summarizes what they took away from the readings, the whole class discussions, and the presentations they and their peers gave. I confine myself to three features which appeared repeatedly in their essays.

Collective governance. The "laws" (rules and regulations) governing schools and classrooms ought to emerge out of small-scale informal discussions followed by collective formal debate. All stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, administrators, community members, elected officials) must be assured participation in these two arenas in order make known their position with regard to the aims and methods of education. As a preliminary, small groups are an ideal site for role playing exercises. In such a locale, taking the view of the other can lead to acknowledging that the needs of each party are partially and unavoidably circumscribed by the needs of the collective enterprise to represent and serve the interests of all.[10] When debate moves to large scale public arenas, the building of consensus then appears properly to be. as one student phrased it, "a consultative process," one which necessarily takes time as the particulars of compromise are negotiated.

Rational deliberation. The discerning of a common ground occurs at the intersection where fixed roles and mutable situations meet. No catalogue of job descriptions nor school mission statement can ever fully designate a range of appropriate responses when an educational community becomes embroiled in an unexpected challenge (e.g., an escalation of violence or a shortfall in funding.) To develop mutually acceptable policies requires instituting forums and

procedures for resolving conflicts in viewpoints. These conciliatory forums are dedicated to the cultivation of tolerance and operate on the basis of respect for personhood of all parties. As an illustration of the value of engaging dialogically with fellow stakeholders, consider this statement made by one of the teachers, referring to her customary nemesis, the administration: "I have begun to tolerate other people's passions and my own, and understand their force in shaping the character and motives of people."

Contingent solutions. Incremental changes, prompted by problematic situations, need to be advanced, tested, and evaluated publicly by all stakeholders. This confirmatory process must be accompanied by the recognition that every proposed modification ("improvement") contains within a seed packet of new problems. Once the modification is implemented, some of these seeds germinate and, if not attentively weeded, these "volunteer" problems gradually choke out our vision of the anticipated improvement. All ecosystems, be they natural or social, are forever poised between harmony and conflict, as they proceed through overlapping cycles of disturbance and restoration. Of all forms of governance, democracy is the one best suited for making continuous adjustments to accommodate this unstable state of affairs.

The third and final lesson I learned from students of this course was that the crafting of a philosophy of education can be justified on different grounds--vocational, professional, and collegial. The vocational justification ran as follows: itinerant, international school teachers and administrators (here one can substitute any ambitious educators) need to stock their portfolios with an educational position statement at the ready for job searches. As for the having of a philosophy of education for professional reasons, the argument was advanced that generating an explicit point of view was a necessary precondition for identifying and perhaps securing one's autonomy in the face of increasingly standardized national assessment schemes of teacher competence. Last but by no means least, the preparation of a position statement allows educators to examine the constraints and opportunities attendant on their social location in the school's status network (novice vis-à-vis veteran as well as teacher vis-à-vis administrator). Knowing

how much one can do can be amplified by forging strategic alliances or, minimally, by signing peace treaties. This was the conclusion reached by a teacher recently promoted to principal: " I have come to believe that the unavoidable tension between these two particular views of the school need not be mutually limiting and definitely need not be mutually exclusive."

In this last section I have tried to give the reader a glimpse of what a group of teachers not in the most promising circumstances for experimenting with democratic theories of education said about reconfiguring their relations with other major stakeholders in the educational enterprise. I cannot refute the skeptic's charge that what they wrote may have been chiefly to please the visiting instructor who furthermore had no way of independently assessing the extent of gradual changes in their workplace practices. Yet, like any instructor who continually seeks ways to make philosophy of education deeply relevant to the lives of teachers, I entertain the notion that what was said and done in that class altered the perceptions and widened the sympathies of each one of us.

NOTES

[1] John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 9:1916*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 339.

[2] For details about the military offensives and counteroffensives between the rebels and government forces and their impact on the civilian population, see James Dunkerley, *The Pacification of Central America: Political Change in the Isthmus, 1987-1993* (London: Verso, 1994), 65-76.

A particularly gruesome atrocity was carried out by a US-trained counter-insurgency battalion of the Salvadoran army in a remote village of Morazan province in 1981. Over a two day period, battalion commanders in an effort to frighten and punish villagers who supported the rebels ordered the execution of 766 non-combatants, many of whom were children under the age of six. This action, its cover-up, and eventual reckoning is meticulously recounted in a new book by Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[3] Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Paddy Walsh, *Education and Meaning: Philosophy in Practice* (London: Cassell, 1993).

Walsh lectures in the Curriculum Studies Department at the Institute of Education, London University. Unlike Gutmann's work which was seamlessly constructed from the ground up during a sabbatical from Princeton, Walsh's book knits together, not without gaps and differences in tone, chapters which had previously appeared as journal articles.

[4] "If language is to be a means of communication, (queer as this may sound) there must be agreement not only in definitions but also in judgements, a sharing not so much of opinions as of a form of life." *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 242.

[5] Though Walsh cites five different writers who have discussed this idea (amongst them, Ernest Gellner and Alasdair MacIntyre), he gives as the *locus classicus*: W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955/56): 167-98.

[6] This search for ultimate values may also be considered spiritual because the quest itself is infinite. It involves never-ending debate over: 1) the proper ordering of values within a tradition--e.g., in democratic states, liberty before justice; 2) the validity of values presented by alternative traditions--e.g., Moses' injunctions or Buddha's; and 3) the validity of the criteria used to order values within and across traditions--e.g., utilitarian versus transcendental hierarchies. (See Walsh, p. 93.)

In Chapter 8 of *Education and Meaning*, entitled "Basing Values on Love of the World," Walsh offers four justifications for education. He categorizes them according to which disciplinary language most commonly provides their justificatory criteria: "possessive" (economics), "vital" (psychology), "ethical" (philosophy), and "spiritual" (religion). Implicit to this last justification is the notion that life cannot have meaning lest it be located within a whole or totality. (In support of this view, Walsh groups together such disparate writers as Chesterton and Sartre who both wrote extensively about their own education.)

[7] The recent large-scale biography by Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), goes to great pains to demonstrate that at the heart of Dewey's writings lies a profound spiritual belief in human perfectibility. Two of many passages that Rockefeller has isolated to bolster his claim will have to suffice here. The first can be found in *The Ethics of Democracy* (1888):

"Democracy is a society in which the distinction between the spiritual and the secular has ceased, and as in Greek theory, as in the Christian theory of the kingdom of God, the church and the state, the divine and the human organization of society are one." John Dewey, *The Early Works, 1882-1898, Vol. 1*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 248-49.

The second comes from an address, "Christianity and Democracy," given at the University of Michigan in 1888:

"It is in democracy ... that the incarnation of God in man (man, that is to say, as organ of universal truth) becomes a living, present thing, having its ordering and natural sense. This truth is brought down to life; its segregation removed; it is made a common truth enacted in all departments of action, not in one isolated sphere called religious. ... John Dewey, *The Early Works, 1882-1898, Vol. 3*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 8-9.

[8] This statement of belief was not turned in to be graded. It was to be the first entry in a journal students were asked to keep to record their impressions of the course. Their credo was to be revisited periodically as they moved through the readings, discussions, and panel presentations. It also served as the basis for the first question in the open-book final examination. Part One of the question began: "Review the 'credo' that you wrote the first day of class. What have you learned in this course about your beliefs and actions as a professional teacher?" Part Two asked: "What might you consider changing in the way you teach that would strengthen the formation of a democratic society?"

The other question asked on the open book final examination was: "Which of the two educational theorists whom you have read, Paddy Walsh and Amy Gutmann, did you find more helpful in clarifying your own philosophy of education? Explain your preference."

[9] The topic given to each of the four groups for joint authorship was: "Summarize the obstacles to and suggestions for improving teacher-X relations" (where X was the domain of the group, either -students, -administrators, -community, or -society).

[10] Role playing (i.e., taking on the viewpoints of others) builds on the insight, imagination, empathy, and volubility of all actors involved. It also is occasion for social interaction among groups of individuals who otherwise have only second-hand knowledge of one another. In addition, the objectification of our roles which results when they are enacted by others is a useful way of assessing the extent to which we are integrated into our social roles.