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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a hermeneutic perspective--the art of interpreting and understanding across differences--should be considered in any educational discussion about leadership. It explains that hermeneutics searches for understanding and creates meaning, not explanation. The paper goes on to examine the educational philosophy of John Dewey, noting that he regarded science and the scientific method as a matter of hermeneutics of shared interpreting and meaning-making. Dewey, instead of favoring narrow specialization, desired those qualities, such as initiative, inventiveness, and readaptability, that would enable education to be a life-long process of growth. It is concluded that hermeneutics and a Deweyan educational philosophy point toward a leadership paradigm in which work groups move toward a horizontal rather than vertical decision-making process, with collegiality--democratic cooperation--instead of a marked polarity between leaders and followers. Authority will be shared because meaning-making and inquiry are shared experiences, and leaders will emerge situationally in a community respectful of individual and communal growth. (Contains 27 references.) (MDM)

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"Hermeneutics, Education, and Leadership in Contemporary Society"

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2

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Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy. This paper proposes that, more than ever, an hermeneutic perspective (the art of interpreting and understanding across differences) should be considered in any educational discussion about leadership, whether we are referring to students, teachers, or administrators. Intending to trace the commonalities that these three discursive domains share, I will discuss first the general meaning and scope of hermeneutics, and, within that context, a review of John Dewey's philosophical-educational pragmatism.

Afterwards, there will be an examination of the significance of leadership and the place of hermeneutics in the educational formation of leadership relevant to our post-industrial socio-historical context.

The Hermeneutical Turn

Although we traditionally associate hermeneutics with the humanities, repercussions from the postmodern, post-positivist, post-Fordist, or "post-formal" (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1993) *Zeitgeist* and its disenchantment with the view of truth as merely a "methodological affair" (Smith 1991: 189) have provoked interest in what it means to "interpret" in all disciplines. Heelan delineates the general scope of hermeneutics as "...the space of shared and transmitted meanings within the context of the social-historical lifeworld" (1998: 274), the latter being the "space of and for human understanding, characterized by the action of embodied human inquirers in communication with one another and with their environment against a background of active cultural networks" (1998: 277). While hermeneutics began with the interpretation of canonic and sacred texts, it has been extended beyond documental texts to include



the notion of **text as "meaningful action"** (Ricoeur 1971; also McEwan 1996). In general terms about the hermeneutical act, it can be said that

an interpreter is someone who helps another understand the meaning of something. What is to be understood is already there, but is unable to speak for itself. Its message needs mediation through the interpreter's special knowledge and skill. (Marshall 1992: 159)

process done by a current inquirer who...is challenged to construct a contemporary meaning for a social event,...originating in a different linguistic and cultural environment and possibly elsewhere at an earlier time. (Heelan 1998: 281)

During this recursive journey, the interpreter also goes through a self-interpretation and transformation, or **transaction**, through "appropriating" the text to him or herself (Ricoeur 1987: 343). It is therefore **impossible to separate the knower and the known** (object) in some impersonal space of "truth" (Steedman 1992: 53-55). Meaning thus conceived is **historical**, **local**, **social** (Heelan 1998: 278), and **inexhaustable** given the diversity of human contexts and purposes. There is no one "definitive" understanding of a cultural text for all times. **Truth is seen as the result of human** understanding, and having only "partial, historical, local, practical, or contextual



transparency" (Heelan 1998: 287).

Consequently, there is **neither absolute "truth" nor "methodology**" in hermeneutics, in spite of the title of Gadamer's fundamental book, *Truth and Method*. According to him, the appropriate method **emerges** through the "dialogical engagement" of the interpreter and the phenomenon (Smith 1991: 192). Here it can be noted the **non-mechanistic vision** of hermeneutics: its purpose is not to provide **valid** readings, but rather it seeks through **insight** the **revelation** of the text through the rhetorical art of convincing and persuading (Krajewski 1992: 12-13). In other words, hermeneutics tries to answer the question, "What is fitting to say about x?" and not "What is x?" (Krajewski 1992: 45). It should be pointed out that there have been different tendencies, from the hermeneutics that wishes to **restore and recover** a text's meaning to the "**suspicious**" hermeneutics that desires to reveal what the text does *not* say.

In sum, hermeneutics searches for understanding and creates meaning, not explanation. Its very purpose is to encounter dialogically the "Other"--be it text, action, phenomenon, or person:

The hermeneutical imagination has the capacity to reach across national and cultural boundaries to enable dialogue between people and traditions superficially at odds. Hermeneutics is able to shake loose dogmatic notions of tradition to show how all traditions open up onto a broader world which can be engaged from within the language of one's own space. (Smith 1991: 195)

Dewey's Philosophical-Educational Pragmatism

In this section I will briefly summarize the main lines of John Dewey's philosophy, which, with his holistic vision of life, he believed to be unified to philosophy of education.



Considering a society in the experience of its social-historical context, Dewey in Democracy and Education affirms the inseparability of society, philosophy, and educational philosophy:

"Philosophy of education" is not an external application of ready-made ideas to a system of practice having a radically different origin and purpose: it is only an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life. The most penetrating definition of philosophy which can be given is, then, that it is the theory of education in its most general phases....The reconstruction of philosophy, of education, and of social ideals and methods thus go hand in hand. (Dewey 1966: 331)

With Peirce and James, Dewey formed American pragmatism, which in general terms, rejects universal *aprioris* in favor of meanings and knowledge obtained through lived individual and collective actions and experiences. Through experience men and women "test" their "hypotheses" about the world to lead to richer experiences. In other words, we "deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action" (West 1989: 5). Therefore, knowledge---and truth---are not eternal but rather contextualized---socially contingent and fallible (Dewey 1998b: 103-118).

From this common base, Dewey points out that humans and their mental lives, have a biological, evolutionary, and social character. His starting point is everyday experience where all thought arises, and where each person acts (or should act) determinately in search of integral, meaningful solutions. In an emergent, mutually transactional process, both we and our environment are constantly changed and changing (Dewey 1998a: 48-50). Totally against a dualistic view of life, he declares that



Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but a continuous interaction of a great diversity (literally countless in number) of energies. (Dewey 1966: 167)

Our development, then, is conceptualized as our growth, potentiality, in society--guaranteeing opportunities for more significant experiences, so that growth becomes an
end and not a means (Dewey 1966: 50). The ideal environment for Dewey to promote
rich, growing experiences is through the diversity in individuals and multiperspectivity of
democracy, which is not a political system but instead "a mode of associated living, of
conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1966: 87). As individuals reconstruct
themselves, the community is reconstructed, which leads to further new experiences
(Carr 1995: 85). Dewey does not ignore the traditions of a society but emphasizes that
they must be reinterpreted and reconstructed in the experiences of each generation, for
"We can retain and transmit our own heritage only by constant remaking of our own
environment" (Dewey 1998b: 27). Additionally, he states:

...there is an enormous difference between availing ourselves of them [our cultural traditions] as *present* resources and taking them as standards and patterns in their retrospective character. (Dewey 1966: 74)

It should be stated that such a pragmatic philosophy is not self-centered, but instead includes a concern and sympathy for the "other" in an "ethic of care" (Noddings1995: 164; Kloppenberg 1995: 539).

In a Deweyan perspective, all experience is hermeneutical; through what Dewey terms the "art" of "scientific thinking," "instrumentalism," or the experimental method (1998a: 374), or what we may call "reflective thinking," we make sense of our world. As



in engineering or education, new ways or solutions must emerge through contextual problems, not regimentizing them ahead of time (Dewey 1998a: 271-273) or demanding a uniform method (Dewey 1996: 172-173). This importance of context----"culture", and the ability to "read" and interpret it, draws Dewey to make innumerable references to the value of seeing all sorts of connections and interconnections in experience, whether the past with the present and future, geographical connections, disciplinary links, or diverse cultural ones, "seizing upon relations of events as the proper objects of knowledge ((Dewey 1998a: 140). For him, **meaning-making is discerning connections**: "The increment of meaning corresponds to the increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged " (Dewey 1966: 76-77).

Furthermore, he explains:

It is the nature of an experience to have implications which go far betond what is at first consciously noted in it. Bringing these connections or implications to consciousness enhances the meaning of the experience. Any experience, however trivial in its first appearance, is capable of assuming an indefinite richness of significance by extending its range of perceived connections. (Dewey 1966: 217)

Thus he stresses the importance of history, geography ("to place our own doings in their time and space connections" (1996: 208)) and reinterates throughout his works against narrow, non-humanistic, specialization in education (Dewey 1966: 67).

If meaning is seeing connections, it is because we exhibit a "socialized mind":

"The power to understand [things] in terms of the use to which they are turned in joint or shared situations...a way of understanding objects, events, and acts which enables one to participate effectively in associated activities" (Dewey 1966: 33; 36). Through



communication.

[s]omething is literally made common in a at least two different centres of behavior. To understand is to anticipate together....the establishment of cooporation in an activity to which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. (Dewey 1998b: 55; 104).

Communication is realized through the social medium of language, "a natural function of human association" (Dewey 1998b: 53), "the tool of tools...the cherished mother of all significance" (Dewey 1998b: 58). Through language and communication, we can partake and share the experiences of others, and therefore, make ours more meaningful:

To formulate the significance of an experience a man must take into conscious account the experience of others. He must try to find a standpoint which includes the experience of others as well as his own. (Dewey 1966: 227)

In indicating this socialized nature of human existence, Dewey repeatedly talks about the **benefits that a diversity of differences**, whether in society at large---democracy, or in education, can create opportunities for richer experiences: "Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought..." (Dewey 1966: 85). Plurality also can help correct biases (Dewey 1998a: 216). If we remember that for Dewey, continual growth is the purpose of life (and education), it is little wonder that he proposes that

The more numerous and varied the forms of association into which anything enters, the better basis we have for describing and understanding it, for the more complex is an association the more fully are potentialities released for observation. (Dewey 1998a: 308-309)



In writing specifically about education. Dewey simultaneously characterizes the teacher, among other qualites, as learner, intellectual leader, partner, guide, pioneer, and artist (Simpson and Jackson 1997: 129-151). If we take into account his non-dualistic position toward experience, and advocacy of democracy and cooperative association, it is not contradictory to view both teacher and student as a learner, partner, guide, pioneer, and leader (Dewey 1966: 160). In fact, he describes what should be the school's environment: a miniature democracy, connected with community and experience outside the school (Dewey 1966: 360). Since environment is all-important, the teacher's task is to shape it to bring about opportunites for "growing" experiences, since we "never educate directly but indirectly by means of the environment" (Dewey 1966: 19; 118; see also Dewey 1998a: 241). The teacher must be able to interpret the child's life in order to guide or direct the learning process (Dewey 1998a: 239). Nor should we consider directing or guiding as an external dictate. "It is freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment (Dewey 1998a: 240; italics in the original). Thereby, the issue of personal response (or "experiencing") and imagination through the individual's interpretation of subject-matter is of vital significance to Dewey (1998a: 242-243; 1966: 236). For all of education, Dewey, instead of favoring narrow specialization, desires those qualities that will enable education to be life-long process of growth: "initiative, inventiveness, and readaptability" (Dewey 1966: 68); open-mindedness (1966: 175); and sympathy (1966: 121). Given the democratic scope of Deweyan philosophy, we may turn all that is said about the student on its head and apply it equally to teachers and administrators (Hickman 1995: 388). The



classroom cannot be a miniature democracy if the school as an institution is not also a community of shared activites, meanings, and understandings in learning, partnering, and leading. Against any sort of elitism, Dewey is adamant about sharing knowledge and **not having policymaking be reserved for only "experts**" (Westhoff 1995).

As stated before, although Dewey has been characterized by some as an "instrumentalist" in love with the scientific method, he conceives science and the scientific method as a matter of hermeneutics of shared interpreting and meaning-making, for as Nel Noddings states:

Whenever philosophers reject ultimate purposes and fixed meanings, whenever they urge a diversity of views and a continuing conversation, whenever they recognize pluralism and reject monistic tendencies, they are working in the hermeneutical spirit. (Noddings 1995: 72)

Interpreting "Leadership" for Our Present World

If ever there was a current "buzz" word that cried out for interpretation, it is "leadership." From *Webster's Dictionary*: leadership is the quality or capacity to lead. Hence we have "lead": "to guide on a way, especially by going in advance; to direct on a course or in a direction; to serve as a channel for; to go through; to direct the operations, activity, or performance of; to have charge of...." From this we could deduce that leaders are guides, pioneers, vanguard, initiators, negotiators, mediators, effective decision makers, and orchestrators. The very fuzziness of these terms brings me to agreement with the position of V. A. Howard, who conceives leadership as an art:

...leadership is neither univocal nor readily systematised for scientific investigation. Like creativity, intelligence, or human potential, leadership is an everyday notion of variable meaning and application rather than a scientific concept of fixed meaning. (Howard 1996a: 111)



Since leadership only exists in value-laden cultural contexts of such a broad range, it is impossible to pinpoint the common denominator in leadership that would cover all social situations, and therefore, it is futile to think that leadership training can be effective (Howard 1996a: 109-110). For Howard, "the quest for a technology of leadership is as Quixotic as the quest for a technology of creativity or discovery" (Howard 1996b: 130). Dewey recognized this in criticizing narrow specialized education and stressed instead the distinctive values mentioned above that would enable the person to be in a continuous educational process; such qualities can only come forth through discovery in situations within a democratic context and not through an easily predictable "teaching by pouring in" (Dewey 1966: 38). So, while leadership cannot be taught directly, it can be "learned" through coaching in a contextualized mentor-protégé relationship that naturally "emerges" through mutual admiration (Howard 1996b: 131-133). One can "create the conditions for learning leadership" (Howard 1996b: 125) that will depend to a large extent on the hermeneutical powers of the protégé: "The mentor behaves existentially, as it were, allowing the protégé to interpret what it means, what it takes, to serve an ideal of performance or service" (Greenleaf in Howard 1996b: 132). Thus, we can ascertain that leaders and leadership "education" will be interpretive (hermeneutical), cooperative, contextual, and situationally emergent. Different situations or contexts will create or need different qualities as leaders.

Let us now look briefly at the characteristics of the post-industrial or postmodern ambiance to see the stage upon which leadership will be played out. In very general terms, we are in a globalization process simultaneously experiencing transnational and intra-national encounters on economic, political, and cultural levels. These contacts



have been aided through the development of information technology and mass media, that often bring to light the consideration of, and frictions with, the "Other." There has also arisen the recognition of the complexity of the whole human being to replace an allexclusive interest in the faculty of reason. Various authors describe the current global scene differently, but there are points of contact. Beare and Slaughter indicate that our prevailing "postbureaucratic" world demands flexible generalists with communicative and rhetorical skills, creative innovators, multidisciplinary team work, and citizens of the world with a wide knowledge of other nations' languages, histories, and political and legal systems (1994: 76-82). In David Harvey's The Condition of Postmodernity, he paraphrases Swyngedouw's portrait of our era's flexible accumulation. The worker will have multiple tasks with an elimination of job demarcation. There will be an emphasis toward on the job training and learning. With workers given co-responsibility, the labor organization will have a more horizontal structure (Harvey 1989: 177). Tuffs depicts the post-Fordist organization as having a customer focus with continuous performance improvement. Flexible structures will adapt to customer needs, as workers are "empowered" through decision making in a horizontal organization. And leadership will be driven by vision and values (Tuffs 1995: 495). Lastly, a recent document from the UNESCO on the future of world education underscores those abilities that will be necessary for the future labor force: interpersonal skills; the ability to work in teams, initiative and risk-taking, communication skills, both deductive and inductive reasoning competence, problem-solving ability,



intuition, discernment, and foresight (Delors 1997: 92-97).

So, we may ask, what can hermeneutics and a Deweyan educational philosophy offer toward understanding leadership as it is enacted in our post-industrial society? Looking at the above socio-economic characteristics that now or in the future will shape our culture(s), we see work groups tending toward a more horizontal than vertical conformatiom with an atmosphere of collegiality---democratic cooperation---instead of a marked polarity of leader vs. followers. Authority will be shared because meaningmaking and inquiry are shared experiences, welcomed from diverse perspectives through the ability to put oneself in the place of the other (teacher to student, student to teacher, student to student, administrator to staff, nationals to foreigners, or different races, genders, generations, etc.). Since meaning emerges in experience, we will need the ability to "read" and interpret situations ("meaningful texts") that will be constantly changing into different contexts, obliging us to be open-minded, interdisciplinary, flexible, and not dogmatic. If meaning and inquiry are shared endeavors, verbal skills will be highly valued, for there is no one definitive, eternal significance; meanings appropriate to new, evolving contexts must be discussed and argued through language(s). The need for innovative perspectives and solutions to dynamic situations necessitates the faculty of creative imagination in addition to reflective reason in order to see new and possible connections.

If our meanings are emergent, we can suppose that leaders will emerge situationally (and therefore, temporarily) in a community respectful of individual and communal growth. In such communities, whether a classroom, faculty committee, or



other work group, the <u>pro tempore</u> leader can help stimulate a cooperative environment of rich, shared experiences that will induce the continued synergetic reinterpretation and reconstruction of that very group. If we believe that leadership is an art and not a positivist-like science, its very nature and significance will be discussed, argued, and contingently agreed upon----for a while----in a shared association, only to be discarded in the future due to novel, emergent conditions that demand a quest for a distinctive, relevant interpretation. If our contemporary world is marked by contingency and the need to speak, understand, and work with and through differences in order to make and share meaning(s), hermeneutics and the hermeneutical, democratic philosophy of Dewey can help to envision a kind of postmodern notion of leadership.

Notes

1. It should be obvious that for Dewey, whatever applies to education applies to human society in general.



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