In 1916, the same year that John Dewey wrote his seminal book on the philosophy of education, *Democracy and Education*, he also wrote that democracy would have to be reborn each generation with education serving as the midwife, assuring a vital and healthy civic life (1916b). Perhaps the same is true for the movement for civic engagement in higher education. There are indications that it is time for a rebirth of the movement. Participants at a 2004 Wingspread conference on the future of engagement in higher education (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher) concluded that while the movement has created some change, it also has plateaued and requires a more comprehensive effort to ensure lasting institutional commitment and capacity. Thus, it is particularly timely that this book has come on the scene with the explicit goals of agenda-setting and movement-building for civic engagement in higher education.

*Dewey’s Dream: Universities and Democracies in an Age of Education Reform: Civic Society, Public Schools, and Democratic Citizenship* is co-authored by Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, and John Puckett. Each brings valuable intellectual expertise to interrogating John Dewey’s writings, even though it is Harkavy who is best known nationally and internationally for his leadership in the higher education civic engagement movement. Benson is professor emeritus of history at the University of Pennsylvania and is recognized as the grandfather of service-learning at Penn. He is a historian of the University and his influence is particularly felt in providing the context for the evolution of community-based education at Penn and its mission-oriented outreach into the neighborhood of West Philadelphia. Puckett teaches in the Graduate College of Education at Penn and has been actively involved in building University partnerships with West Philadelphia schools. He brings to the book a special knowledge of community-based schools, and most recently co-authored *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education As If Citizenship Mattered* (2007). Covello was the founder of a community-centered school in East Harlem whose work is a model of creating citizen-centered community schools. Finally, there is the contribution of Ira Harkavy, who for many in the world of community-engaged higher education, is a statesmanlike figure nationally and internationally as well as the intellectual architect of the community engagement work at UPenn where he is Associate Vice President and Director of Penn’s Center for Community Partnerships.

Because of Harkavy’s influence, many of us have heard the arguments put forth in *Dewey’s Dream* in one form or another. But never has the basis for Penn’s engagement been so cogently explained. *Dewey’s Dream* will be—and should be—widely read in part because it carries the weight of Harkavy’s leadership in reclaiming the civic responsibility of higher education and in formulating and implementing democratic education. I am reminded of what Henry Commager wrote about Dewey in *The American Mind*, that “so faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the mentor, and the conscience of the American people; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken” (p. 100). In the world of higher education and its democratic engagement with local communities, much the same can be said of Harkavy. For many of us tilling the fields of higher education civic engagement, it is because of his role as guide, mentor, and conscience of the movement that this book will be taken seriously.

There are four explicit purposes of this book. One is to remind us of those aspects of Dewey’s educational philosophy that are fundamentally central to civic engagement. The second is to remind us of the...
limitations in Dewey’s thinking, and to do so in a way that we can attempt to overcome those limitations as we work to achieve what Dewey himself failed to achieve. This is, in essence, what the authors identify as “The Dewey Problem:” “what, specifically is to be done beyond theoretical advocacy to transform American society and other developed societies into participatory democracies capable of helping to transform the world into a ‘Great Community’” (p. xiii)? A third purpose of the book is to provide a concrete example of a historical and theoretically grounded experiment in “the terribly difficult job of trying to transform [Universities] into engaged civic institutions that actively and wholeheartedly accept reciprocal and mutually respectful collaboration with their local schools and communities” (p.80). The specific example presented is the work done at the authors’ home institution, begun in 1985. A final purpose is to reenergize the civic engagement movement, which has been adrift in providing a clear vision or plan for addressing many of the “second order” issues that involve moving beyond programs, structures, and rhetorical positioning to institutional culture and underlying policy. This is where the greatest challenges lie. Beyond making improvements to existing practices, the real challenges involve reconceptualizing or transforming organizational purposes, roles, rules, relationships, and responsibilities.

Dewey’s Dream provides a useful and unique instrument for igniting a robust dialogue and critical inquiry of higher education’s role in the work of democracy. As the authors emphasize, their hope is “to stimulate constructive criticism, creative counterproposals, serious sustained debate, and experimental action” (p. x). Because “Dewey never actually developed, let alone implemented, a comprehensive strategy capable of realizing his general theories in real-world practice” (p. xiii), the aim of the book is to “pay homage to Dewey by trying to transcend him” (p. xiii). The authors approach Dewey “critically and constructively” (p. ix) to develop “the means necessary to construct a participatory democratic American society” (p. 33). In the end, we are presented with “The Dewey Problem” and its antithesis, “Dewey’s Dream”—a vision for transforming universities into institutions in which engagement in the life of local communities can advance knowledge, learning, and democracy. This is a tall order but absolutely necessary, both for the health of democracy and vitality of higher education.

Dewey’s Dream’s strength is its contribution to a re-visioning of higher education’s democratic commitments. It is not the authors’ intent to provide a significant contribution to understanding John Dewey’s educational philosophy, thoughts on social reform, or activism. Those not familiar with Dewey, nevertheless, will learn a great deal about his approach to education, schools, and social problems. It is the authors’ intent to demonstrate why Dewey matters in shaping the future of higher education. Those familiar with Dewey may take issue with the authors’ contention that Dewey abandoned educational reconstruction in favor of the reconstruction of philosophy when he went from the University of Chicago to Columbia University in 1902, a view that doesn’t fully acknowledge Dewey’s concern with social reform that persists as his activism recedes. Others may take issue with the lack of emphasis placed on the influence Jane Addams had on Dewey’s thinking, particularly on the social and theoretical framework of the centrally important 1902 essay, “The School as Social Centre.” Dewey’s greatest loss in moving to Columbia may have been less that he no longer had the Laboratory School as a concrete experiment of his educational philosophy, and more that he lost the influence of Addams and his direct connection with Hull House that deepened his thinking about the relationship of schooling and democratic culture. Others may point out that it is unfounded to claim that Dewey made little effort to practically connect universities with elementary and secondary schools once he moved to Columbia; Dewey had not made the theoretical connection prior to that so why would we expect that he might next logically be expected to test that theory in experience?

There is also an element of Dewey’s thought that the authors recognize as problematic—his evasion of politics in presenting a strategy to address the problems he identified. This, significantly, is an area that requires more analysis since it has implications for how we effectively solve the “Dewey Problem.” Part of this critique is addressed by the authors in invoking Dewey scholar Ellen Lagemann, who comments that “however appealing John Dewey’s thought may be, there is no denying that it lacks a sense of real politics...when one reads Dewey’s writings wanting to know how the kind of democracy, education, or politics he described might be developed, one comes up lacking” (p. 12). More pointedly, the critique of Dewey’s lack of attention to politics and citizen action goes deeper. As Harry Boyte (2007) has noted, Dewey gave “little explicit attention to the concept of power...[understood] as the relational capacity to act in making the world,” entailing “closer attention to public agency, the roots of communal solidarity, and social movements.” As Boyte has pointed out, Dewey “like many academics, lived largely in ‘the world as it should be’ [and] neglected full engagement with ‘the world as it is.’”
Thus, Dewey “neglected the gritty, power-laden, and culturally rooted work needed to retrieve, sustain, and generate democratic values in a world that assaults them” (Boye, pp. 20, 23). Transcending Dewey to solve the Dewey Problem will require raising the question of how can higher education develop the capacity for civic agency and empower students and other citizens in the work of democracy?

Dewey is admired by those working for civic engagement in higher education in part because his educational philosophy provides the foundation for community-based experiential learning linked to public problem solving (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Morton & Saltmarsh, 1997; Saltmarsh, 1996). Thus, the authors of Dewey’s Dream “strongly agree with his general theories, propositions, and orientation” (p. 33). Well before there was David Kolb’s (1984) work on experiential learning theory, Barr and Tagg’s (1995) attention to improving teaching and learning with the identification of a paradigm shift toward learner-centered education, the focus on active and collaborative learning and the push for student engagement in the process of authentic learning, and the contributions to our understanding of the learning process from the cognitive sciences or our understanding of different ways of knowing from feminist psychology, there was Dewey.

The authors sum up the relevance of his educational philosophy in this way:

Human beings best develop their innate capacity for intelligent thought and action when they purposefully use it as a powerful instrument to help them solve the multitude of perplexing problems that continually confront them in their daily lives—and when they reflect on their experience and thereby increase their capacity for future intelligent thought and action. Intelligence does not develop simply as a result of problem-solving action and experience; it develops best as a result of reflective, strategic, real-world problem-solving action and experience. Dewey emphasized that action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem-solving education can function as the most powerful means to raise the level of instrumental intelligence in individuals, groups, communities, societies, and humanity. (emphasis in the original, p. 25)

Service-learning practitioners have long discovered in Dewey an educational philosophy legitimizing innovative community-based pedagogy grounded in “the real-world problem solving that Dewey brilliantly theorized” as “the best way to engage [students’]… intense, sustained interest and develop their capacity for reflective critical inquiry and collaborative practical action” (p. 29).

But Dewey is more than pedagogy. When students are active participants in education grounded in community-based public problem-solving, they learn to become knowledge producers instead of knowledge consumers; the civic corollary to this form of education is that students are not only active participants in learning—they are educated to become active participants in democratic life instead of being spectators to a shallow form of democracy. Democracy and education, for Dewey, are inextricably linked, as they were in the title of his 1916 book. The problem, as the authors see it, is that Dewey never developed a practical strategy to realize the power of his educational ideals. They lament that Dewey “never actually developed, let alone implemented, a comprehensive strategy capable of realizing his general theories in real-world practice” (p. xiii). Even in creating the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, “the specific solution he proposed was remarkably scholastic, academic, impractical, and unrealistic” (p. 33).

So how can genuinely democratic education come about? Dewey stepped right to the edge of educational and social reconstruction, but then stepped back. Nonetheless, he laid a path, and the authors see in it the possibility to take Dewey’s lead and achieve what he was never able to do.

The two key signposts along the way are critical writings of Dewey, one from 1902 and the other from 1927. In 1902, deeply influenced by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House in Chicago, Dewey wrote “The School as Social Centre,” what the authors refer to as “the prophetic essay.” What the authors discover in this essay is the argument that schools are educational institutions infused with a potent civic dimension. As such, they can function as a community’s civic glue, performing civic functions that call forth active public civic agency in solving community problems to the point where “Dewey predicted that the school-based operations of ‘civil society’ would be more important than the traditional functions performed by the State in solving ‘the difficult problems of life’” (p. 40). Dewey wrote in “The School as Social Centre” that “what we want to see is the school, every public school, doing something of the same sort of work that is now being done by a settlement” (p. 39). While the authors praise Dewey for “the strategic contributions” in the essay, they also recognize that he failed to connect the idea of community schools with his educational philosophy and therefore

he had little or nothing to say about two critical-ly important functions the community school might perform: (1) the school as a community institution actively engaged in the solution of
He failed to make the connection between community schools and his philosophy of education. The idea of a true community school had great democratic promise, but Dewey “did almost nothing to extend or develop his ideas” (p. 44).

Much the same pattern emerges with the 1927 publication of *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey’s only work of political philosophy. It is in this book that Dewey famously argues for revitalizing democratic culture through the practice of community. He wrote that community life was defined by individuals engaged in “conjoint, combined, associated action.” For Dewey, “democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself” (1927, p. 148). Democracy, he argued, “must begin at home, and home is the neighborly community” (1927, p. 213). What the authors of *Dewey’s Dream* find compelling in *The Public and its Problems* is “Dewey’s argument...that democratic, cosmopolitan, face-to-face, neighborly communities are necessary for a democratic society” (emphasis in the original, p. 58).1 But, as with his 1902 essay, Dewey presented “a utopian end without any practical means to achieve it” (p. 59)! After “having brilliantly identified the central problem confronting human beings in the twentieth century,” Dewey failed “to present a possible solution to it or rather to suggest an intelligent strategy to develop a solution to it” (p. 58). Dewey could not make the connection between his ideas on democratic schooling and his political philosophy. If only he had, he might have recognized “that in 1902 he already had, to a large extent, brilliantly provided a practical solution to the problem of constructing democratic, cosmopolitan, and neighborly communities” (p. 60) in the creation of community schools. If only Dewey had made the connection between his insights on community schools and his understanding of the core democratic function of face-to-face neighborly communities, then the power of his ideas might have been fully realized.

Instead, what we are left with is “the Dewey problem,” which can be restated as how can community schools effectively function as social centers for the revitalization of democratic communities? The answer: higher education. Community-anchored, resource-rich, mission-driven universities would provide an answer to the Dewey problem. Universities would be the “key source of broadly-based, sustained, comprehensive support for community schools” (p. 86). Universities would provide the resources and support allowing community schools to fulfill their democratic function. The solution to the Dewey Problem is what the authors describe as “university-assisted community schools designed to help educate, engage, activate, and serve all members of the community in which the school is located” (emphasis in the original, p. 84). “University-assisted community schools,” according to the authors, “constitute the best practical means to help realize Dewey’s general theory of participatory democracy” (p. xiii).

The idea of university-assisted community schools is as much about political philosophy as about education. The political philosophy underpinning university-assisted community schools is based upon universities functioning as “the primary shapers of the overall American schooling system” and the recognition that the schooling system “acts as the core subsystem...of modern information societies.... [and] has the greatest ‘multiplier effects’” (p. 81). Further, the authors’ political philosophy—what might be characterized as neo-Deweyian—prescribes a role for government which facilitates “the deliberate dispersion of initiative downward and outward through the system.” This means that “government would function only as a second tier deliverer of services with higher eds, community-based organizations, school children and their parents, and other community members functioning as the first tier operational partners” (emphasis in the original, p. 83). In this framework, the University constitutes “the primary component of a highly integrated (pre-K—post 16) schooling system that could potentially function as the primary agent of democracy in the world and in the United States in particular” (p. 78).

It is out of this framework that the University of Pennsylvania, beginning in 1985, would assist schools in West Philadelphia to become Dewey’s “school as a social center.” “Public schools are particularly well suited...to function as neighborhood ‘hubs’ or ‘centers’ around which local partnerships can be generated and developed....They then provide a decentralized, community-based response to rapidly changing community problems” (p. 85). The University of Pennsylvania can best assist schools—and fulfill its democratic responsibility—“by effectively integrating and radically improving the entire West Philadelphia schooling system” (p. 87). It is this work that has begun to transform Penn as it works to improve its local community.

The lessons from that work are bigger than Penn itself. Penn represents a revolution of a kind in higher education, nationally and globally, in which universities are reinventing the way they fulfill
their core purposes and, to quote from a document of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, are becoming institutions that interact with the world outside the university in “at least four spheres: setting universities’ aims, purposes, and priorities; relating teaching and learning to the wider world; the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and taking on wider responsibilities as neighbours and citizens” (Bjarnason & Coldstream, 2003, p. 323). What this means is that civically-oriented universities function differently in the areas of mission, pedagogy, knowledge generation, and community partnerships. They are emerging in a new form, able to reclaim what Ernest Boyer referred to as higher education’s “civic mandate” (1990, p. 16) and become “more vigorous partner[s] in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems” (1997, p. 20).

Perhaps the most important lesson from Penn and this book is that it is the generation of new knowledge that fundamentally demands engagement in the 21st century. At Penn, faculty and students have found that engagement advances knowledge and learning. It has allowed the institution to fulfill its core purpose more effectively because it has created intellectual space for what Donald Schon called a “new epistemology” (1995). Penn has brought the questions of how do we know what we know and what is legitimate knowledge in the academy into their engagement work. And by providing space for new ways to generate new knowledge, they have reframed the way students and community partners are perceived as assets to the educational enterprise and as knowledge producers instead of knowledge consumers. It is this epistemological shift that allows Penn to fulfill its mission better, and is why engagement continues to be more deeply institutionalized.

So when Penn is faced with solving the “Dewey Problem,” the question it really asks of engagement is, what’s it in for Penn as an institution of higher education? The authors write that “as Dewey forcefully argued, working to solve complex, real-world problems is the best way to advance knowledge and learning, as well as the general capacity of individuals and institutions to advance knowledge and learning” (emphasis added, p. 85). The Dean of Penn’s School of Arts and Sciences makes the point most powerfully:

Penn students have so much to learn from engagement...they have a lot to learn about the process of the creation of knowledge in a democratic society...knowledge is made in the world, in the end, and for the world, as much in art as it is in science. Universities engage multiple partners in the production of knowledge, and we cannot erect barriers between universities and communities in that process. (p. 99)

The more Penn and other universities become systematically engaged institutions, the more they will be better able than they are now to achieve their self-professed, loudly trumpeted, traditional missions, these missions being to advance, preserve, and transmit knowledge, and they will help produce the well-educated, cultured, truly democratic citizen necessary to develop and maintain a genuinely democratic society. (emphasis in the original, p. 81)

This is Dewey’s dream fulfilled.

Note

1 What Dewey writes about education in The Public and its Problems would also have been worth bringing into the authors’ argument. For example, on the point of Dewey making the connection between community life and a form of education that would be defined by community-based public problem-solving, Dewey writes in 1927 that “the young have to be brought into the traditions, outlooks and interests which characterize a community by means of education: by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomenon of overt association” (p. 154). “The important thing,” writes Dewey, “is the level of action fixed by embodied intelligence” (p. 210). It is interesting to note that the idea of embodied intelligence, or what Dewey refers to in other writings as “embodied knowledge,” is determined, in a contemporary perspective, as an outcome of service-learning. The 2002 National Survey for Student Engagement reached the conclusion that “complementary learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program...service-learning provides students with opportunities to synthesize, integrate, and apply their knowledge. Such experiences make learning more meaningful and ultimately more useful because what students know becomes a part of who they are” (emphasis added). This is the essence of embodied knowledge—education transforms the individual in such a way that what they know becomes who they are.

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