Dewey and the "Cult of Efficiency": Competing Ideologies in Collaborative Pedagogies of the 1920s

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Two collaborative pedagogies, the Project Method and the Dalton Plan, coexisted in the 1920s under the "big tent" of the progressive education movement, which claimed as its greatest influence the pragmatist philosopher and social reformist John Dewey. Progressive educators viewed these practices with great promise. They saw them as a response to new scientific and philosophical knowledge, as an alternative to the deadening boredom of traditional recitation, as a way to teach students to work together in support of democracy, and as a sensitive approach to individual differences. How did these collaborative practices fare? The answer lies in examining the social forces at work: Dewey's influence, of course, but also other ideologies within progressive education and their articulation with the broader society. Although "traditional" practices such as the lecture, the recitation, and current-traditional writing instruction were dominant in the 1920s, as they have been throughout the twentieth-century (Connors 60; Berlin 58), the 1920s produced a wide scholarly and popular discourse about innovation in education, partly as a result of Dewey's influence. With the impact of the progressive movement, "student-centered" practices and expressive writing dominated the innovative literature, although there were significant discussions about collaborative practices, also connected to the progressive movement (Berlin 58), which attempted to enact Dewey's dialectical relationship between individual and social consciousness. Another influence on US education in the 1920s was business, which provided an ideological rationale for the goals and organization of schools which competed with Dewey's educational philosophy. The 1920s were marked by a widespread faith in business and efforts to adapt business management techniques of "social efficiency" to the classroom.

The Project Method and the Dalton Plan gained significance in English studies in the 1920s partly as a result of the leadership of English Journal editor Wilbur Hatfield, who supported each method in his editorials over the course of the decade. The Project Method was developed by Dewey's student,
and later colleague, William Heard Kilpatrick, who popularized the method in a pamphlet which gained immediate run-a-way success, selling 60,000 copies throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. The Dalton Plan included among its advocates John Dewey's daughter, Evelyn Dewey, who published a book in 1922 called *The Dalton Laboratory Plan*. My goal is to show how proponents of these methods achieved pragmatist ideals in some ways, but were pulled in antithetical directions in response to competing ideologies.

My examination of the Project Method and the Dalton Plan is based on a range of primary and secondary sources. Advocates of the methods wrote several widely-read books and pamphlets, which I have incorporated into my analysis. Given my particular interest in composition and English studies, I also focused on the discussions of these methods in *English Journal*. I found twenty-five articles and editorials on the Project Method and fourteen on the Dalton Plan from 1918 to 1932, including the separate high school and college editions published after 1927. I have compared the rationales and ideologies of these practices with Dewey's "middle years" writings on education (1900-1924), and his 1938 assessment of the progressive education movement in *Experience and Education*. Finally, I have drawn on educational histories and some "scientific business management" texts from the period. The Project Method and the Dalton Plan exemplify a mix of ideologies available to educators in the 1920s. Although these models incorporated some aspects of what Lawrence Cremin refers to as "Deweyan progressivism," such as an emphasis on education as experience and the hope for education as a means of social reform, their descriptions of student interaction and teachers' roles suggest a model of a benevolent dictatorship of elite experts, rather than Dewey's participatory democracy.

**Dewey and the "Cult of Efficiency"**

Dewey was a committed radical democrat whose politics were consistent with his philosophy. The basis of his radical democracy was his belief in the thoroughly social nature of the "self," a stance he shared with his colleague and collaborator George Herbert Mead, and which David Russell has cogently defined in the following words: "Each of us has a unique sociocultural heritage: a history of interactions with others and events which produces individual, original adaptations of one's self and others and events" ("Vygotsky, Dewey" 178). For Dewey, individual consciousness exists, not as separate and autonomous, but rather formed and reformed through social interaction, and at the same time influencing that social interaction. Thus, individuals and society are in a constant state of change as a result of their influence on each other. The concepts "society" and "individual," then, are merely different perspectives of the same thing, two Burkean "terministic screens" of a socially constructed reality. This reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups is further clarified by considering Dewey's conception of the role of individual experience in scientific inquiry. As
Dewey conceived the ideal scientific enterprise, any given state of knowledge was a product of consensus among a community of inquirers. Dewey’s notion of consensus, however, relies on difference. He criticized the nation’s focus on standardization in 1930, noting the tendencies of quantitative science to ignore differences and to promote agreement (Individualism 23-24; see Yen go 48). Growth in scientific understanding could come only from the experience, or experiments, of individual scientists. But individual scientists could engage in meaningful experiments only by drawing on the fund of previous experience represented by the scientific community. What impressed Dewey so much about scientific method, and made it for him an exemplar of democracy, was the assumption that people are expected to influence the society that influences them.

Democracy for Dewey, then, was a process in which socially-created individuals consciously participated in the continual growth of group knowledge and social institutions. For Dewey, this kind of democracy was not an empirical fact, but, like Habermas’ “ideal speech situation,” something to be worked toward. This implies that members of a society need to develop the skills and be provided the resources of participatory democracy on a continuing basis. One of Dewey’s goals was the restructuring of education as a tool for reforming society, though he recognized that radical educational reform required a concomitant change in the U.S. economic and social structure. Dewey wanted to harness the potential of education to provide citizens the skills, knowledge, and habits they needed to govern themselves: both to have control over their lives and to help revitalize their society. Students and workers should be taught how to work together creatively by participating democratically in their schools and workplaces, because, Dewey maintained, authoritarian methods will impede the growth of individuals and society.

Education for participation required acquainting individuals with both the history and the current state of the culture as it is studied from various disciplinary stances, as well as developing habits of active participation. Such education, Dewey argued, required the intelligent leadership of the teacher. The teacher’s task is to create conditions in which students can work through problems cumulatively and see the results of their achievement (Experience 77-88). Dewey further cautioned that teachers cannot give students absolute freedom, because students need to be taught how to structure learning (Experience 64-65). From Dewey’s stance, the teacher has a difficult job: to set up constraints to encourage students’ intelligent freedom.

As Robert Westbrook has noted, Dewey was critical of the prevailing “negative liberal” depiction of freedom as a simple lack of constraint, arguing that a more meaningful conception of freedom recognized not only “freedom from,” but also “freedom to”—that is, freedom to positively enable self-realizing activities, made possible through the personal development of knowledge, skills, and habits acquired from association with others (42-51). From Dewey’s stance it made as little sense to set students free to explore...
their own ideas spontaneously as it did to educate them through the exclusive use of "fact-centered" recitation and lecture. Each extreme, as Dewey explained in *Experience and Education*, was a misunderstanding of the dynamic interplay between individual impulse and historical situation necessary to both intellectual and societal growth. That Dewey has so often been misrepresented as fostering "student-centered" education, as David Russell points out, is partly a result of the unfortunate tendency to identify him with almost everything "progressive" ("Vygotsky" 174). But another set of discourses and material conditions competed even more strongly with Dewey's influence on social pedagogies.

"Social efficiency," was associated primarily with business and with what Cremin has termed "administrative progressivism." It linked education and business as part of a larger alliance between business and government, promoting the belief that cooperation among education, business, and government was a moral imperative toward social reform. To explain the power of this ideology, I will provide some historical context. The 1920s was a period of increasing affluence in the United States. Gross National Product rose by forty percent from 1922 to 1929, while unemployment hovered around three to four percent. Per capita income rose from $641 in 1921 to $847 in 1929, an increase of thirty-two percent in a period of negligible inflation (Henretta, et al. 709). Many business leaders, such as Henry Ford, styled themselves as "trustees of the public interest" and were enormously popular, as captured in President Calvin Coolidge's words: "The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there." Bruce Barton's 1925 best seller *The Man Nobody Knows* went even further, portraying Jesus Christ as the father of big business, who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world" (qtd. in Henretta, et al. 711).

Business in the 1920s was in transition from "frontier robber baron" capitalism to "scientifically" managed capitalism. Key to this transition were several changes intended to rationalize the production process and legitimate it socially. Frederick Taylor developed "time studies" to determine the most efficient use of human movement in factory production. Industrial psychology, which represented a softening of Taylorism, extended principles of scientific management to the control of worker selection, training, and motivation. Furthermore, business advocates engaged in a public relations campaign to change their image from profit-seekers to social benefactors (Person 222). Finally, industry called on education to provide a work force trained to industrial specifications. Industrial personnel expert Charles R. Mann stressed in 1927 that "the personnel game is the educational game ultimately," and suggested a system whereby "industry will be setting down specifications all the time, and schools will be using them all the time as instruments for the discovery and development of capacities in children" (141).
The social efficiency movement in education combined a faith in business ideology and management practices with the rise of new "scientific" methods of intelligence and mental achievement testing, popularized in the U.S. by H.H. Goddard, Lewis Terman, and others. Educators argued that intelligence testing could accurately measure the innate abilities of individuals, who could then be slotted into training consistent with their capacities. Further, achievement testing could evaluate the efficiency of educational "production" as measured in higher test scores. The period from 1910 to the end of World War I, which Harold Rugg described as an "orgy of tabulation" (qtd. in Cremin 187), witnessed the development of scales for measuring achievement in a wide range of areas. The use of I.Q. tests by the US Army during World War I to sort and eliminate recruits, while of questionable utility in retrospect, increased their popularity. Such testing, when combined with new developments in psychology (particularly in connection with Thorndike's work), was seen by many in the 1920s as providing an objective science of education that dovetailed nicely with the needs of US business.

This "sorting game," in Joel Spring's words, was an attempt to achieve industrial efficiency by capitalizing on individual aptitudes and abilities, and it produced a rich discourse on individualism which sometimes conflated two different perspectives: Romantic expressive individuality and "scientifically" measured individuality. Advocates of social efficiency deproblematized the relationship between individuals and groups by asserting that individuals could be guided to expressive self-realization and social integration through scientific educational practices as they were evaluated and trained by experts according to their natural inclinations and abilities. Within this perspective, the use of education as a tool for business and social stability was considered a democratic ideal. Society, formed of an aggregate of appropriately slotted individuals, would work like a well-oiled machine. A popular definition of democracy, "government for the people by benevolent elites" (Westbrook 189), supported this hierarchical social order in which the smartest (management) were responsible for the social welfare of the less capable.

Dewey was well aware of the social efficiency movement in education. At first his stance was that of a "cautious critic," who endorsed attention to efficiency in education, but who held reservations about how "scientific" the movement really was, and who recognized potential problems if it was taken too far (Yengo 36). In a series of articles in the New Republic in 1922 and 23, he attacked restrictive uses of I.Q. testing, pointing to their "reprehensible social overtones" and noting that, as Cremin observes, "insofar as they tended in the name of science to sink individuals into numerical classes, they were essentially antithetical to democratic social policy" (190-91). Through the 1920s he became increasingly vocal and direct in his criticisms, which went beyond the single issue of I.Q. testing. Dewey argued that efficiency experts could only organize already existing knowledge, and therefore by themselves were likely to become "preserver[s] of the past whose methods
shackle men rather than liberate them" (Yengo 39). His criticisms of social efficiency advocates in education revolved largely around his disagreement with their conceptions of science and democracy.

As previously discussed, Dewey's views of science and democracy were closely connected. Each was conceived by him as enabling the dynamic interplay of socially created individuals with society in a process of constant evolution in which society was modified through individuals' novel insights and creations. Both science and democracy were useful primarily because they provided an optimal avenue for social revitalization. The science of social efficiency as described by its proponents, however, was concerned only with the selection and training of individuals for preconceived ends on the basis of already existing knowledge. It represented an educational system in which the individual had no creative role, but served merely as a cog in a social machine guided by experts in service of the status quo.

Like Dewey, social efficiency advocates perceived a functional relationship between individuals and groups, but they assumed a static, nonconflictual relationship ("what's good for the group is good for the individual" and vice versa), as opposed to Dewey's recognition of difference and conflict. Social efficiency proponents were responding to the recent changes in corporate industrialization, in which elements of laissez-faire capitalism with its assumption of individuals as free agents was grafted onto a more recent ideology of big business in an increasingly populated world, thus necessitating social control (Spring 199). Rather than reconceptualizing "individualism" in a way that enabled individuals to participate in their society, as Dewey suggested, social efficiency advocates tried to "balance" the equation by positing a simple correspondence between individual and social needs in industrial capitalist society. Their belief in the accuracy of this correlation, and of the benevolence of the corporate system which they were both allying themselves with and modeling themselves after, enabled educators to feel comfortable with the notion that good management is good pedagogy. However, their faith in the simple mechanical correspondence of individual and societal needs led them to ignore several issues of crucial relevance to social pedagogies, including, most prominently, the nature and role of teacher authority and the relationships between individuals and groups. I will demonstrate how these and other issues were complicated by the ideologies competing for dominance in 1920s progressive education.

The Project Method
The Project Method was conceived by efficiency expert David Snedden, who extrapolated a method used with vocational agriculture to the teaching of science. Snedden started a journal devoted to the Project Method, General Science Quarterly, in 1916, in which the lead article was a lecture by Dewey advocating the teaching of science organized around students' experience. In 1917 William Heard Kilpatrick published an article in the journal titled
"Project Teaching," and followed it with a pamphlet called "The Project Method" in 1918, which subsequently catapulted both Kilpatrick and the method to overwhelming success, ultimately resulting in a curricular reform movement called "the project curriculum" (Kliebard 156-66). Kilpatrick, who was a follower of Dewey, developed the Project Method as a reaction against Taylor's extreme version of scientific management. But in doing so he called upon the work of psychologist E.L. Thorndike, who attempted to humanize Taylor's regimented workplace, but who was, nevertheless, a social efficiency advocate. In English studies the Project Method was popularized by *English Journal* editor Wilbur Hatfield and James Hosie between 1918 and 1923. In 1918 Hosie outlined Kilpatrick's method for the readers of *English Journal*. Subsequently, Hatfield wrote several editorials calling for papers describing classroom experiments using the Method, and in 1922 and 23 he authored a series of four articles explaining the Project Method.

As explained in *English Journal*, the Project Method focused on a more complex notion of project than Kilpatrick had anticipated, but one which Dewey preferred (often a semester-long series of tasks involving community work or research) which students were expected to initiate, plan, and accomplish together. One example is a compilation of a vocational needs survey for the state of Washington (Struble). Another describes a play written and performed by students in which the topic is a class-motivated question about international relations (Green). The Project Method was a strong alternative to traditional education, one of many attempts by progressive educators to respond to scientific and cultural change. It attempted to engage students with subject matter, to encourage them to think critically, and to foster their responsibility for learning. In *The Way Out of Educational Confusion*, Dewey encouraged use of the Project Method if modified from Kilpatrick's intent, that is, if accomplished over a long period of time, and if not substituted for subject matter. Dewey included among potential advantages that: (1) it can be a corrective to specialization; (2) it organizes learning around a central question, rather than around a particular discipline; (3) it requires intellectual activity from teachers and students; and (4) it obviates the distinction between theory and practice (31-36). Sterling Andrus Leonard, who had been a colleague of Dewey's at Michigan, viewed the method as a way to foster cooperation among students, to teach them to work together (24-27). And in his 1918 outline Hosie said simply that the method "is indispensable to education for democracy" (600).

Hatfield's comprehensive and detailed explanation of the Project Method in his four *English Journal* articles demonstrates that in many ways he was trying to accomplish Dewey's goal that students participate in genuine, open-ended experiences, rather than contrived experiences with pre-planned conclusions, that a student have, in Dewey's words, a "question of his own and is actively engaged in seeking and selecting relevant material with which to answer it" (*School and Society* 150-51). Furthermore, I believe that Hatfield
was in good faith attempting a Deweyan resistance to administrative progressivism with its emphasis on step-by-step efficiency methods. But Hatfield, a businessperson himself (he owned both *English Journal* and the Chicago building which housed NCTE) ("Some Reflections" 6), was influenced as well by social efficiency ideology and the concomitant popularity of subjective rhetorics. Thus, he departed from Dewey in his conception of the role of the teacher.

Hatfield was concerned that teachers might misinterpret the Project Method by leaving too much responsibility to students. So Hatfield warned readers that a teacher must do more than walk into a classroom and say, "What do you want to do today?" The teacher can tell a story, show a picture, or ask a genuine question to initiate discussion which may lead to the development of a task ("II" 12). Hatfield was also worried, however, that teachers might try to maintain their traditional authoritarian role and thus keep students from taking any genuine responsibility. Thus, in his first editorial call for papers in 1920, he warned potential submitters that their articles must provide evidence "that the pupils really held purposes of their own and were not merely agents of the teacher's will" ("Saving" 476). The project underway, Hatfield suggested that teachers refrain from solving students' problems, so that students would learn more ("II" 17-18). In short, Hatfield asked teachers to walk a thin line between demonstrating and relinquishing authority, to lead without seeming to lead. If the balance of freedom and authority tilts, however, it tilts in the direction of institutional authority. A closer look at Hatfield's and others' descriptions of the role of the teacher suggests the ideology of social efficiency, with its notion of democracy as management by a scientifically-selected corps of benevolent elites. Remarks by advocates of the Project Method indicate that the teacher should have a "hidden agenda": to manipulate students into reproducing teachers' purposes.

For instance, Melissa Jones at Indiana Avenue School in Atlantic City, New Jersey, said that "it is essential that the teacher... be a tactful leader rather than a dictator, an engineer who gives momentum to the purpose by skilful [sic] maneuvers in the background, from which she appears only when needed" (498). Hatfield, in speaking of the subtle play of authority in the teacher's role, stated that "this bit of social engineering is the most difficult part of his work" ("II" 11). In terms of starting a project, Hatfield said, "The enterprise successfully initiated, the teacher knows he will win. The scale of his success may be somewhat increased by skilful [sic] management of the remaining steps" ("II" 16). (The "remaining steps" include acting as chair or referee as the project moves to fruition.)

Some of this confusion of aims in the role of the teacher originated with Kilpatrick, who saw himself as bringing Dewey's theory to practice, but who was in fact more influenced by both student-centered progressives and E.L. Thorndike. Basing his comments on Thorndike's psychological theory of
learning, Kilpatrick wrote, "When the teacher merely coerces and the other pupils side with their comrade, a contrary 'set'...is almost inevitable, often so definite as to prevent the fixing in the child's character of the desired response" (14; emphasis added). Kilpatrick's statement implies that the teacher uses the power of the group to reinforce his or her own authority, a technique endorsed by industrial psychologists.

Not surprisingly, given Hatfield's and Kilpatrick's theoretical spin, students in the Project Method were apparently expected to organize themselves, even though they had had no experience in how to learn in groups. For all the talk about the teacher as social engineer, there is a pronounced silence in the literature regarding students' relationships with one another. This absence of discourse on student relations compared to the lengthy discussions on teachers' roles seems significant in that it is convenient to maintaining the teacher's "hidden agenda." Students left to their own devices will probably continue to focus on the teacher as the authority figure, as they are accustomed to doing in traditional classes.

The neglect of students' interrelations in the Project Method is antithetical to Dewey's promotion of reciprocal interaction among individuals and groups, as is the pseudo-passive, manipulative role of the teacher. From a Deweyan standpoint, a teacher would actively and unapologetically structure students' activities so that they would depend upon each other to solve problems designed by the teacher in line with his or her knowledge of the social and material constructions of her culture. Instead, the descriptions of practice point to a coupling of scientific management and a free-market faith in the individual. The teacher could be a "tactful leader, rather than a dictator" (Jones 498) because of his or her faith in students to do naturally what he or she expected them to do, with a "preconceived end" as Kilpatrick said (9). There is no sense here that the teacher and student might have different aims, and that individuals might have conflicts with each other, fruitful conflicts which could lead to unpredictable conclusions. The assumption is that individuals and groups, rather than influencing each other in Dewey's terms, ultimately have the same grand purpose.

This assumption is particularly interesting given the popularity of business in the 1920s, the ideology of the businessman as the proprietor of the social good through his or her beneficence, and the prevalence of scientific management, in which management was taken to be "smarter" and therefore capable of more efficiently directing the movements of workers (as so powerfully parodied in Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times). The teacher's role in the Project Method is both a reaction against the prevalent ideology (giving student-workers "a purpose of their own") and a reflection of the prevalent ideology (teacher as social engineer), a contradiction Hatfield and others failed to recognize, one that assumes that a classroom technique can rather neatly and without much conflict fulfill the needs of the individual and the group at the same time. Students ostensibly learned in the classroom the
skills required to make them participating citizens in a socially-efficient meritocracy, not Dewey’s grass-roots democracy, unpredictable and full of conflict, but rather a socially-engineered industrial democracy in which teachers prepared students for the work force. Hatfield claimed that the Project Method produced not only better writers, but also more self-directed workers, and, therefore, more capable, cooperative US citizens, “the thing most demanded by our business-men critics” (“IV” 178).

Concerns over the viability of the Project Method began as early as 1922, when Melissa Jones, in “Dangers and Possibilities of the Project,” warned that the method required an extremely well-prepared teacher and administrative support to be successful (407-08). Hatfield himself said that a teacher for whom it is successful most of the time is “more precious than rubies”. (“II” 16). Mary Aiken and Margaret Richardson were wary of the teacher’s “hidden agenda,” stating, “The impression is made that the children must be tricked into learning” (210-11). Boyd Bode, Ohio State University professor and former Dewey student, was also concerned about mixed messages in the teacher’s role. “On the one hand the teacher all but fades out of the picture,” Bode said. “[O]n the other hand the teacher functions like a drill sergeant in charge of the awkward squad.” Bode contended that the Project Method had distorted Dewey’s focus on experience into “a mystic faith in a process of ‘inner development’ which requires nothing from the environment except to be let alone.” Leaving students alone, concluded Bode, “is not carrying out a constructive educational program, but a harking back to Rousseau” (163-65).

Another common complaint is represented by Carlton Washburne, a founder of the Winnetka Plan, closely related to the Dalton Plan. Washburne focused on the Project Method’s neglect of individual students, saying that it gives students “a random, unscientific training” and ignores “the wide differences which exist among individuals” (qtd. in Kliebard 211-12). If the Project Method paid too little attention to the individual, the Dalton Plan more than compensated by focusing almost entirely on the individual, while failing to resolve the issues of freedom and authority that plagued the Project Method.

The Dalton Plan
In the Dalton Plan, popular in English studies between 1922 and 1932, a student signed a “contract” committing him or herself to a set amount of work at his or her own pace for a particular grade. Although there were variations, the basic plan was that students received a monthly assignment card designed by the teacher, kept their own records, and when they were ready, asked for examinations (Kliebard 211). Subject matter remained in traditional categories. Thus the plan, a reaction against traditional recitation instruction, appealed to both conservatives, who wanted to keep the core curriculum, and progressives, who wanted educational reform. The Dalton
Plan was named after a Dalton, Massachusetts high school, which experimented with the Plan under the supervision of Helen Parkhurst, who popularized it in her 1922 book *Education on the Dalton Plan*. Parkhurst's work influenced educators in Britain and the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s, mostly in middle-class suburban areas.

Wilbur Hatfield chronicled the rise and fall of the Dalton Plan in English studies in his editorials between 1925 and 1932. At first Hatfield welcomed it as an innovation in line with tracking, which was gaining in popularity as a result of the growing belief in meritocracy. Hatfield's first 1925 editorial reflects his excitement about this new, efficient means of teaching that enables both "motivation and ability grouping [to be] provided for at once!" ("Place" 329). His early perception of the Dalton Plan was of a perfect embodiment of the socially-efficient conception of democracy as simultaneously fulfilling both individual and social needs, arguing that the individual-instruction plan allows "the highest social efficiency... by giving each individual with all his peculiarities the training he most needs" ("Social" 414).

In the ideal Dalton situation, classrooms were changed into "laboratories" devoted to particular subjects and outfitted with resources (usually books). Small groups of students moved from room to room as they completed one task and began another. After the monthly contract was written, teachers functioned as consultants. Students were expected to rely on each other for encouragement, support, and problem-solving. In Margaret Durkin's words, they would learn to "share the apparatus and to work together to obtain results" (260). Parkhurst conceived the Dalton Plan as a thoroughly social, "life-like" method of teaching in line with Deweyan progressivism and antithetical to Taylorism, which assumed "smart" managers and "ignorant" workers. At the same time, however, she saw her method as "socially efficient," incorporating the principles of "freedom" and "cooperation" (19). For Parkhurst, the point of the Dalton Plan was for the school to function as a community. The "social experience accompanying the tasks" was her priority, because, she said, "it provides invaluable play of mind upon mind" (29, 43).

The Dalton Plan did seem to resolve some of the troublesome issues of the Project Method. The teacher's role, although still not without its own contradictions of authority, was simpler for a teacher to enact: the teacher made up the students' contracts and then checked their progress. There was less manipulation and more straightforward guidance, at least in structuring tasks. And in theory, at least, Dalton Plan teachers constructed task sheets for individual students who worked at their own speeds, resolving the Project Method's potential neglect of individual differences among students. And, finally, classroom space was modified so that students could work together, maintaining the principle of group work which had been a strength of the Project Method. In fact, the two progressive methods shared much in
common (when compared to traditional education) and were in other ways complementary, as Evelyn Dewey noted in the conclusion to *The Dalton Laboratory Plan*:

Complete experiences, individual work and scope for interests are essentials in both the Dalton Plan and the "project method" . . . [The Project Method] contributes a new subject matter to meet the needs of modern life; [the Dalton Plan] a way to give children working conditions that accord with the discoveries of modern psychology. (173)

Like Parkhurst, Evelyn Dewey put great emphasis on student interaction. With classrooms transformed into "laboratories," she said, "groups and individuals are brought into constant inter-action, and it is impossible for anyone to live independently of others" (7). Evelyn Dewey's descriptions of the ideal Dalton Plan make particular sense if we remember the influx of immigrants and the burgeoning use of the new I.Q. tests. Unlike many Dalton Plan advocates who followed her, Dewey embraced cultural diversity, envisioning the Dalton Plan as one way to use difference to benefit all students. Since classes are too big to easily take into account differences among students in interest and ability, her argument went, the smaller groups permitted by the Dalton Plan work well for drawing students with common interests together, as well as for encouraging individual points of view, which have had a chance to develop during the course of individual study (19).

Despite Parkhurst's and Evelyn Dewey's descriptions of the Plan as fundamentally social, however, the group interaction that they expected was never written concretely into classroom practice. They assumed that the "life-like" quality of the plan would allow students to transplant behaviors learned outside the classroom without any direct intervention by the teacher. Parkhurst's description follows:

Conditions are created by the Dalton Laboratory Plan in which the pupil, in order to enjoy them, involuntarily functions as a member of a social community. He is accepted or rejected by this community according as his functioning, or conduct, is social or the reverse . . . . To be effective this law must not be imposed, but unwritten, an emanation as it were of the atmosphere breathed by the community. (20-21)

Parkhurst's expectation reveals the influence of "student-centered" progressive pedagogy, which assumed that students have innate knowledge that will guide them in their individual learning processes. Students' extensive classroom experience, however, has taught them not to interact with each other. Traditional education is a competitive affair, John Dewey noted, in which, "for one child to help another in his task has become a school crime" (*School and Society* 12-13). Excerpts from student evaluations of the Dalton Plan in Britain indicate, in fact, that most students competed, rather than cooperated. "The quick and intelligent girls," said one student, "need not wait for the slow ones, but learn more and more to get ahead of them" (Parkhurst 277). Their comments suggest a high-pressure environment in
which students do not view helping each other, or revealing that they need help, as in their best interests.

As did Project Method teachers, Dalton Plan teachers encouraged students to take control of their own learning, and, similarly, this advocacy of student autonomy was more apparent than real. Margaret Durkin contended that it is more important that a student get a personal impression of a work of literature "without any outside interference" than that he or she should have "a complete understanding. If, however, such an impression is erroneous," Durkin concluded, "the laboratory teacher corrects this by tentative suggestions" (262). Durkin's assumption that the teacher, nevertheless, does have the "correct" emotional impression of a literary work undercuts the teacher's appeal to the student's autonomy. Both Durkin and Blandford Jennings pointed out that students in their classes took on part of the responsibility of evaluation. Jennings saw this as an advantage to the teacher: "When the time comes to record these final grades the teacher may well emphasize the fact that he is acting merely in the capacity of clerk" (670). Jennings' remark plays down the fact that it was the teacher's job to write up the contract in the first place and that students had no negotiating power over the terms of their "contract." In line with scientific business management, the teacher designed a step-by-step procedure for the student to follow to accomplish the course objectives.

The Dalton Plan was considered managerially efficient because it ostensibly wasted nothing. The "contract" system ensured that no student had to adjust his or her progress to any other. It "eliminates wasteful repetition," said Hatfield in a 1925 editorial ("Place" 329). "The pupils glean the requisite knowledge in the shortest possible time," Margaret Durkin wrote (265). The clarity of the task in the context of the larger course goals, along with the requirement for extensive organization and record-keeping, gave teachers and students the sense that they had measurable, scientific control over the process of learning.

Another efficient characteristic of the plan was its automatic tracking. In most versions there were separate contracts for each grade from "D" through "A." To make a "D" a student needed only to finish the work required for the "D" contract. To make a "C," a student had to move through both the "D" and "C" work, and so on. Therefore, the Dalton Plan supported the goal of an educational meritocracy by having students help weed themselves out (in addition to the newly popular I.Q. tests and other sorting measures). Olive Ely Hart described three groups of students that the Dalton Plan had sorted for her in her own classes, one of which is "a group of very low ability, comprised of those who "have been segregated, given a special course which does not lead to graduation, but which does lead to wage-earning positions of a minor clerical type" (169). Hart's complacency about her economically tracked students is an example of scientific paternalism, the expectation that those who are categorized by ability should be content with their categories
because they are objectively determined, and therefore indisputable. "The allegedly scientific nature of the [I.Q. and achievement] tests," says Spring, "gave an air of objectivity to ethnic and social-class bias" (241), an air of which Dewey was strongly suspicious (Cremin 190). Many advocates of the Dalton Plan, however, had faith in scientific "sorting" to promote social harmony. The school is at one and the same time, according to Parkhurst, a community which moderates the individual's behavior for the common good and "a community whose essential condition is freedom for the individual to develop himself" (18). Parkhurst's oversimplification of the goals of freedom and cooperation obviates the possibility of mutually exclusive needs, a convenient stroke for social efficiency advocates who wanted to believe in the possibility of a just, scientifically managed economy. It is not surprising that supporters of the Dalton Plan, like supporters of the Project Method, cited as one of its advantages the education of citizens for participatory democracy.

Although the Dalton Plan enjoyed great popularity in English studies for a few years, it began losing support in the late twenties, and by 1932 Hatfield advised teachers "to avoid contracts in English," judging current uses of the method of failing to meet the very principles that Parkhurst had ten years earlier cited as its advantages ("Contracts" 843). As the Dalton Plan had grown in influence in the mid-to-late twenties, it had become apparent that Parkhurst's principles of freedom, cooperation, and individual instruction were untenable in practice, given institutional constraints. Even fully equipped Dalton curricula faced problems of state-required syllabi and unmotivated students (O'Connor 302). In other classrooms, unequipped with classroom "laboratories" and a flexible time schedule, self-paced instruction deteriorated into mechanical drill work, which was particularly a threat to writing instruction (Stephens 146; Sheridan 509). This tendency was exacerbated by the introduction of departmental standardization of student contracts, which alienated the teacher from his or her work, forcing the teacher to spend the majority of time keeping records and helping students complete tasks he or she had not designed (Stephens 147; Sheridan 510). Many teachers were emotionally drained by the increased paperwork and the ever-growing demand for individual attention from students (Sheridan 509).

The Way Out
The Project Method and the Dalton Plan did not disappear entirely with the 1930s economic depression. Hatfield remained interested in the Project Method, which he helped develop into the "experience curriculum" with his 1935 NCTE report, An Experience Curriculum in English. Nor did the Dalton Plan completely die away; its Winnetka variant became an early model for the "programmed learning" of the 1950s which emphasized teacher use of instructional packages developed by educational experts (Lortie), and at least one educator recently has suggested that we "Bring Back the Dalton
Plan," specifically to train students to work in today's business world (Edwards). The foregoing discussion should alert us to possible problems in later variants of the methods, but the implications of this analysis are much broader. It suggests the historically situated character of pedagogical discourse generally, and the potential susceptibility of all such discourse to competing contemporary ideologies.

The Project Method and the Dalton Plan shared two fundamental oppositions to Deweyan educational discourse: their lack of engagement between individuals and groups, and their one-sided emphasis on freedom at the expense of authority in the classroom. As discussed earlier, Dewey conceived of a dialectical relationship in which individuals were both formed by their society and in turn gained the skills and abilities to interactively transform aspects of their culture. This was the heart of Deweyan education, and it was the central criterion by which he measured the worth of any educational innovation. In the Project Method and the Dalton Plan, the mixture of personal expressive ideas of individuality and, even more significantly, social efficiency notions of the scientific measurement of individuals' abilities, led advocates of these methods to posit a world in which the individual's place in society was given in the natural order of things. In terms of student-centered assumptions, unguided individual self-realization was seen as leading to the good of the social whole, as an Invisible Hand assured the coming together of individual desire and group well-being. In terms of social efficiency assumptions, the teacher need only be concerned with scientific techniques of measurement and training in order to place the individual in the position for which he or she was most suited, whereupon the student would function happily. Neither student-centered nor social efficiency notions recognized any need for education to foster the ability to engage in the kinds of social relations central to Deweyan pedagogy. This is further revealed in the ways the methods failed to explicate the issue of authority and the teacher's role in the classroom.

Both the Project Method and the Dalton Plan tempted teachers to ignore the complexity of authority. The teacher was urged to avoid interfering with students' natural inclinations. And yet, the superiority of the teacher's knowledge was generally accepted. The role of the teacher was therefore ambivalent, requiring, as in the Project Method, subtly hidden guidance toward preconceived ends, or, as in the Dalton Plan, providing students with a range of contract options from which to choose "freely. In each case the teacher seemed to renounce authority and to turn education over to the students, hoping to motivate them by doing so, while still holding underneath to a foundationalist epistemology. Dewey, with his anti-foundationalist epistemology, did not view the teacher's authority as based in a transcendent, foundational domain, but rather as connected to socially-produced and evolving knowledge. The teacher's authority was based in his or her understanding of the current state of knowledge and his or her ability
to guide students toward and engage them in reconstruction of that knowledge. From this perspective the teacher should not try to disguise authority, because to do so would be to prevent students from gaining an awareness of its socially and politically situated nature.  

These distinctions between the Project Method and the Dalton Plan, on the one hand, and Deweyan pedagogical theory, on the other, reveal important ways in which Deweyan pedagogy was given short shrift in these techniques, reduced to a simple rejection of traditional rote educational practices and an emphasis on enhancing student motivation. Each of these issues was important to Dewey only when it was linked to establishing more substantive and participatory educational practices.

What are we to make of the Project Method and the Dalton Plan? We might treat them as quaint historical peculiarities—inferior practices of a bygone, less sophisticated era. Or, in a more Deweyan vein, we might ask what in these historical experiences is pertinent to our situations. Are there ways in which we can, as Dewey put it, make our acquaintance with the past “a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (Experience and Education 23). I would like to point to what I see as three interrelated implications for the recent past and the present.

The first is the recognition of a continuing need to base our social pedagogies on a sound model of the relationship between individuals and groups, one that recognizes their interdependence and incorporates that recognition into practical guidance for students. If we define our educational purpose as Patricia Bizzell has put it, to help our students “to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good” (271), we need to question the relations among individuals and groups, and the role of the teacher, in our own classrooms. How do we understand our roles as teachers and our responsibilities for organizing students in a non-foundationalist world in which we want to promote cultural critique and democratic participation? In order to address these questions adequately, we need to go beyond the either-or taxonomies (such as expressive, social, cognitive) that we have used to describe our practices, to confront them in their particular historical conjunctures (see Trimbur, “Articulation”).

Secondly, we need to be aware of how our own cultural and institutional environments may lead us, perhaps unwittingly, into inconsistencies in our practices that may diminish the richness of social participation. The 1920s may be suggestive, especially given some marked similarities to the 1980s. Both decades marked highwater years for business dominance in U.S. culture, an alliance between education and business (see Brown and “How Academia”), and, more recently, calls by business-oriented critics for cost-effectiveness in education. But there are also important differences, perhaps the most significant being the ethos of business enterprise in the two periods (“business as civic service” in the 1920s versus “greed is good” in the 1980s),
and the salience of the conflicts between leftist and neo-conservative ideolo-
gies (Aronowitz and Giroux). How do our practices articulate (with) these
and other prevalent ideologies and material conditions at this historical
conjunction? In the present era of postmodern multiplicity, we must be
acutely aware of ideological competition if populist democratic efforts are to
avoid being co-opted by more dominant highly organized and resource-rich
elitist interests.

Finally, for those of us who are looking “to articulate a positive program
legitimated by an authority that is nevertheless non-foundational” (Bizzell
271), Dewey’s work offers valuable leads. Dewey’s pragmatism and the neo-
pragmatist theory he has influenced (Cornel West and Nancy Fraser, for
example) offer an alternative to European postmodern theories, sharing a
non-foundationalist presumption, but departing from the political paralysis
of much European postmodern theory in their recuperation of politics and
history. Education is one major social institution that must be reconstructed
to accomplish their goal of “creative democracy by means of critical intelli-
gence and social action” (West 212)—not in isolation, but as part of the social
reconstruction of all institutions. And they offer a “fundamentally simple
and . . . immensely difficult” criterion by which to evaluate our practices.
Dewey wrote, “If there is one conclusion to which human experience unmis-
takably points, it is that democratic ends demand democratic methods for
their realization” (Freedom 175-76). I have attempted in this article to
explore some of the challenges educators in the 1920s faced in pursuing this
goal. 8

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Notes

1 For an excellent discussion of Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” as a utopian practice in
relation to collaborative pedagogies, see Faigley 42-44 and Trimbur, “Consensus.”
2 See Russell’s “Vygotsky,” 186-87 and Newkirk 204-05 for analyses of Dewey’s stance on
the role of the teacher.
3 For a grim but fascinating account of the efforts and arguments of Lewis M. Terman
(developer of the I.Q. test) and other intelligence measurement proponents, see Gould. See
Spring 236-42 for the effects on education.
4 Hatfield was editor of English Journal from 1921, when he purchased it from Hosie, to
1955. In 1928 he created the College Edition of English Journal, which became College English
in 1939 under his editorship and ownership (“Some Reflections” 6). Hosie was a founder of
NCTE (Russell, “Writing” 34).
5 The class system built into the Dalton Plan is reflected in one of its variants: the Scarsdale
Plan in suburban New York. Educational reform in Scarsdale was motivated partly by the rise
of I.Q. tests, which constructed a wide range of abilities among students, thus creating a desire
for tracking among parents and teachers. The Dalton Plan was introduced into this school system
as a result of pressure from the upper-middle-class majority, who were concerned that their
children might be “held back” intellectually by the sons and daughters of working-class people,
for whom the Plan, incidentally, did not fare as well. In the Scarsdale version, Parkhurst’s “social”
emphasis gave way to the more conservative goal of academic performance (O‘Connor 301).
An insightful current discussion of authority in collaborative learning from a roughly Deweyan stance is Kail and Trimbur 10-12, which draws out the implications of Bruffee's "polycentralized authority" in his 1971 "The Way Out."

See Faigley for an excellent, detailed account of the competing ideologies that affected education in the 1980s.

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Works Cited


Competing Ideologies 91


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