

COMMUNICATION
AND THE GLOBAL
PANDEMIC:
SUSTAINING
CONTINUITY,
RHYTHM, AND
BALANCE

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Resumo:

Neste artigo, David Hansen aborda as implicações existenciais e espirituais da realização do trabalho educacional na modalidade online em resultado da pandemia global. Ele ilumina estas implicações examinando o papel dinâmico da continuidade, do ritmo e do equilíbrio na condução de uma vida. Estas características que dão corpo à experiência humana foram interrompidas ao serem forçadas a terem lugar num mundo virtual. No entanto, Hansen baseia-se na filosofia de vida democrática de John Dewey para demonstrar como as pessoas podem responder habilmente às condições atuais, por meio de uma revalorização do próprio significado de "comunicação".

Palavras-chave:

Comunicação. Continuidade. Ritmo. Equilíbrio. Filosofia da Educação. Pandemia.

Abstract:

In this article, David Hansen addresses the existential and spiritual costs of having to undertake educational work online as a result of the global pandemic. He illuminates these costs by examining the dynamic role of continuity, rhythm, and balance in leading a life. These embodied features of human experience have been disrupted by being forced into a virtual world. However, Hansen draws upon John Dewey's philosophy of democratic life to show how people can respond artfully to current conditions, through a heightened appreciation of the very meaning of 'communication'.

Keywords:

Communication. Continuity. Rhythm. Balance. Philosophy of education. Pandemic.

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Introduction

Observers everywhere seem to agree that the effects on education of the current global pandemic will be felt for a long time. A generation of students – children, youth, and adults – have had their educational journeys disrupted, sometime severely, in ways that will be difficult if not impossible to rectify, at least in a holistic sense. At the same time, a generation of teachers in schools and universities have had their lives thrown off course. For nine months, and counting, they have faced intense pressure to find creative ways to sustain their pedagogy in the midst of a massive movement to online platforms. Moreover, educators and students, along with their families and communities, have had to redistribute their focus and energies away from education in an entirely unanticipated manner. They have been forced to address life-threatening health issues, unemployment and other forms of economic precarity, and the psychological and spiritual costs of confinement to homes and apartments (and many people continue to lack secure housing). All of this comes on top of challenging political and environmental concerns, such as the rise of autocratic regimes in our time and the intensity of global warming. The term ‘pandemic’ transforms to encompass an extraordinary array of simultaneous, challenging circumstances.

Under such conditions, countless people have attested to how difficult it has been to retain their human bearings: that is, their sense of perspective, of value, of purpose, and of hope. This loss of bearing can be characterized, in a broad sense, as a breakdown of continuity, balance, and rhythm in life. In this article, I want to examine these terms in order to capture the existential situation so many persons feel themselves in today. At the same time, I hope to show how the meaning of the terms points to a path of recovery and reconstitution, even as material realities continue to press down on people.

Drawing upon John Dewey’s Naturalistic Vision of Life

The philosopher John Dewey devotes considerable attention to the three terms. I will draw especially upon his *Democracy and Education*, *Experience and Nature*, and *Art as Experience*.

Continuity is the carrying over of the lessons and insights from one experience to another. It denotes an awareness on the part of persons of where they are and of what is happening, fueled by memory of previous events and how they responded to them. This mindfulness includes consciousness of their resources and, again, of the pertinent range of their past experiences. Instead of approaching life as a disjointed, unrelated set of activities and moments, the spirit of continuity helps people see that life, like breathing, is indeed continuous. It is our perceptions, our expectations, our concerns and worries, and our sensibilities – *not events themselves* – that break the world apart into separate, supposedly unrelated compartments.

However, life is not homogenous, and continuity does not imply sameness across time and space. Experiences, events, and meanings really do differ, and sometimes radically so. People cannot enact the same degrees of agency across the situations of life. In some, what they say and do makes a direct difference. In others, their influence may be minimal or non-existent. Furthermore, surprise and the unanticipated seem to be a part of each day, in matters large and small. In addition, human beings are vulnerable and fallible, and the world does not wait upon them. To be sure, people are not vulnerable in the same way or to the same degree. Economic and political inequality, with its accompanying insecurity, throws some people and communities into far greater danger of harm than others.

Fallibility is an unavoidable feature of being human, as contrasted with being a machine. Education has long been recognized as a way to lessen both ignorance and the damage and willfulness it can produce. As Socrates, Confucius, the composers of the South Asian Upanishads, and other educational pioneers showed,

the awareness of one's fallibility is itself a mark of education, not to mention a profound spur to a more ethical and humane form of community. Education, here, encompasses not just what transpires in institutions set aside for that purpose, but what people learn across all the domains of life.

Dewey's focus on the spirit of continuity as an outcome of a good education does not downplay these heterogeneous features of life. On the contrary, continuity necessarily fuses with a sense of rhythm and balance. Rhythm appears most organically in activities where a person is 'at home'. When truly immersed in their endeavors, parents, teachers, artists, plumbers, taxi drivers, and others enjoy the natural rhythm of 'putting in' and 'responding'. They experience the rhythmic back and forth, the give and take, in holding the child (parent), dialoguing with the student (teacher), sculpting the vase (artist), replacing pipes (plumber), and dealing with traffic (taxi driver). Dewey often refers to the rhythm of experience itself: the person tries something out, and undergoes the consequences. Life, as he comprehends it, can be understood as an ongoing experiment with the world to find out what it is like (Dewey, 1985, pp. 146, 147). Significantly, through education persons can learn to anticipate possible consequences and to vary their activity accordingly. They learn to learn, including from difficult or unpleasant situations. Here, rhythm points to the capacity to respond as nimbly as possible to circumstances, to move with them but also to retain one's wits and intervene in their course to the full extent that their resources permit. These resources encompass all that they have learned across the fields of life, as well as whatever material support is at hand that might be applicable.

Rhythm merges with a sense of balance. Some events and situations can generate doubt, confusion, uncertainty, worry, and fear. Others trigger joy, delight, inspiration, and gratitude. Education can help persons retain a sense of balance through these vicissitudes of being human in the social and natural world. Education can help persons learn to walk the unsteady beam, or tightrope, they may sometimes feel under their feet: not to fall into despair or nihilism, and not to hide inside a sentimental, rose-colored outlook. Moreover, the sense of balance links back to continuity, as the person learns to see the effects of their participation across the diverse range of their activities with family, friends, colleagues, and communities. In this light, the sense of balance has an integrative function. It helps the person hold together, rather than be ruptured by, their diverse experiences, however unlike emotionally and spiritually they may at first glance be.

The Necessity of Response – But not of Reaction

Continuity, rhythm, and balance can be seen as ongoing aspects, or constituents, in leading a life day by day. Dewey constantly argued that education is not a preparation for such a life, but is life itself. Put another way, he contended that life can itself be continuously educative. Here, lifelong education does not denote what it so often seems to mean today, namely, the acquisition of credentials in order to get ahead. Rather, the educational ideal is to build or cultivate one's life as a continuity. This orientation implies that the person learns not to react to events and their surroundings, but to respond. The difference between a response and a reaction is central to grasping the impact of education on a person. A reaction to something is often, quite literally, thoughtless and disjointed. It can be the expression of unexamined habit and disposition. As such, a reaction to a problem can become part of the problem itself. But a response – or, put another way, to be *responsive* to life experience – engages thought, promotes intellectual agility, and develops the habit of drawing on past experiences to address present encounters (for discussion, see Hansen, 2007). The person who engages life educationally learns to respond, not to react. As such, they can move with balance and rhythm, rather than being thrown from one state of mind to another, and rather than losing control of their focus and their sense of purpose. I think here of the dramatic closing sentence of Dewey's magnum opus on education, *Democracy and Education*, where he writes: "Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest" (1985, p. 370). Note how he focuses on the human being learning to learn from *all* the contacts in life, not just some – not just those with which persons are familiar or comfortable, but also those contacts that are difficult and challenging. Dewey characterizes this commitment, or "interest," as moral because it constitutes the person's fundamental relation with other people and the world. Consider the effects of the shift of so much formal educational work to online platforms under conditions of the current pandemic. Since last March, 2020, my colleagues and I have had to do all

our teaching, and conduct all our meetings with one another and our students, online. Time and again, teachers in schools in my place of residence, New York City, have had to do so as well. It seems to me we can rightly say that this situation has disrupted continuity, balance, and rhythm for teachers and students alike. Many of the pedagogical habits that educators have developed through years and years of face-to-face interaction in educational settings do not work anymore, because these habits literally cannot function if educators are not physically together with students. In this situation, their habits have no 'room' to be expressed. And because human beings cannot develop new habits overnight, this pandemic period has triggered tremendous anxiety as a consequence of the suppression, or the lack of expression, of important structures of habit built into the human fabric, of teachers and of everyone. These structures reside deep in the core of human beings, as a result of the nonstop social life in which they were raised as children and which were in operation right up to the point of the pandemic. Like numerous scholars across philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and other fields, Dewey showed that humans are *embodied, holistic beings*. He rejected dualistic theories that separate mind from body, reason from emotion, logic from feeling, and so much more. People are permeable, or porous, creatures constantly being influenced by the environments in which they move, even as they influence those environments themselves, however modestly or microscopically in given situations. It is not possible to determine 'here the person stops, and the environment begins', or vice versa. The existential challenge of the moment is that under conditions of having to work almost exclusively online, teachers and students are forced, in effect, into *disembodiment*. They are forced into the very dualisms or separations that Dewey and others perceive as highly problematic for holistic well-being. Teachers cannot 'read the room' - they cannot take note of important student gestures, exchanges, mutual responses, and much more - because there is no *room* to read, only a screen before their eyes. Thus, we see many reports of 'Zoom Fatigue' (a new concept coined for our era), which captures the strain people experience when they try to make up for what is absent - that is, to make up for all that they used to take for granted and had learned through their face-to-face lives. People concentrate as hard as possible on those faces on the screen. They try as hard as possible, through this *limited* presence, to make up for absence, which for educators has to do with all those spontaneous gatherings before and after

class, all those spontaneous meetings in the library and other places on campus or in school, where students and teachers *live* so much of what it means *to be* a student and a teacher (cf. Agamben, 2020). On top of all of this are the many reports of teachers, at all levels of the system, who are worrying about their students. Without the familiar moments of spontaneity and contact so characteristic of normal life in educational settings, there is a constant feeling many teachers have of concern. Just as the expression of many of their habits is blocked by not being physically present with students, and with one another, so their emotions have no clear outlet either. And the life of any dedicated teacher is a deeply emotional life, not necessarily on the surface, so to speak, but as embodied in their sense of care and commitment. As Director of the Program in Philosophy and Education at my institution, I have still not met *in person* the new students who began this past September, 2020. I lack a suitable way to describe the deep sense of missing something fundamental, amounting to a form of sadness, that I feel about this strange situation. The questions force themselves to the front: What might be done to restore continuity, balance, and rhythm? How can people re-integrate their wholeness as human beings? How might they re-integrate, or re-balance, their interactions and collaborations with other persons? To recall that closing line from Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, how can people learn from the challenging and difficult 'contacts' that comprise our current pandemic moment?

Reimagining Communication as a Response

Philosophy's role in human affairs comes into play as a response to the questions that close the previous session. I think especially of Dewey's philosophy of language and of communication. In his book, *Experience and Nature*, which I mentioned a moment ago, he writes: "Of all the affairs in nature, communication is the most wonderful" (1988, p. 132). Dewey means communication is a source of wonder, in that it is through communication that people live not in a world of mere events but rather live in a *meaningful world*, that is, a world where events have meaning rather than being no different than rocks rolling down a hill, or sand stirring in water. Events acquire this meaning through communication. They do not 'speak' for themselves. At the same time, Dewey considers communication wonderful because it is precisely through communication that human beings are rescued from isolation and solitariness. Communication literally lifts human beings to a new existential platform where they can share in a communion of meanings.

This platform is dynamic, though from time to time - like in the current pandemic era - people have to work to retain its dynamism. I am thinking of Dewey's argument that social life, as contrasted with mere brute existence, exists in, by, and through communication. Consider his perspective as expressed here:

Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise, you resort to expletives and ejaculations. The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with

the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning. Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art. (1985, pp. 8-9)

In genuine communication, which is more than merely an exchange of information or of facts, participants are always undergoing personal transformation, however subtle or microscopic in a given case. People have to be artful in their communications with one another. They have to be creative - even if they are quite unaware of being so - in order to truly express their thought or their feeling to others, and in order to really listen to and grasp what another is saying to them. "All communication is like art."

This dynamic view of communication does not dissolve the very real constraints of communication when forced to go online. The elements of disembodiment that I mentioned are a genuine cost that I believe educators have to suffer until this pandemic finally ends, when their online activity as educators becomes one element of their lives rather than THE dominating element. Nonetheless, I think Dewey's rich conception of the nature of communication, and of how it articulates with the generation of a world of meaning and of purpose for humans, sheds light on how to *respond* rather than to *react* to the current pandemic environment. Again, to respond is different from a mere reaction. A response is what it means, to recall the other terms from Dewey, to learn from all the contacts of life including those that are most pressing. To learn something is to be able to say something. To have experienced life under the pandemic, and above all to *learn* from this experience, means, in part, to give it a name, to describe it. By naming the existential difficulties of this life, its disembodiment and the other aspects touched on here, people can begin to see it differently. They can begin to give it a *different meaning*. It becomes a call to action - it beckons a response (not a reaction). As mentioned, we cannot eliminate the disembodied dimensions. But the suffering they cause can be transformed if people remember that communication is also bound up with democracy.

Here, I have in mind Dewey's conception of democracy as more than a system of government, but as a way of life. To be sure, democracy requires institutions that can support justice and equity, and Dewey fully acknowledges that reality. However, in many of his writings, including his famous essay entitled "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" (1991), Dewey underscores that democracy at its core

actually lives in and through communication. It lives, or *comes to life*, in the most open, mutually respectful, honest, and informed communication of which humans are capable. Democracy describes the quality of communicative life, not just a set of institutions, crucial as they are. Democracy invites persons to broaden their consciousness of the contours, the reach, and the impact of communication.

In practical terms, people's current lives online can be reimagined as continuing the task of promoting democracy: precisely through using media as imaginatively as possible and in a conscious, deliberate manner, where people are mindful of both the intended and unintended consequences of their communications, of both their direct and indirect effects. The flip side of disembodiment, as a disempowering condition, is the added range of contacts online communication can facilitate. If these are conducted with a consciousness of the democratic meaning in genuine communication, the current existential constraints may feel a bit less debilitating.

As everyone knows, today's modes of communication have created platforms for attacking the conditions for democracy. Numerous online movements are undermining openness, respect, honesty and trust, and truthfulness about reality. If democracy *lives in communication*, it is *harmed in miscommunication*, which is often rooted in misogyny – a hatred of reasoned deliberation, discourse, and inquiry – and misanthropy – a hatred of other human beings seen as alien or foreign. Institutions are indispensable to withstand such attacks and to support democracy as a way of life. These institutions include a judicial system, legislatures, free and fair elections, and the like. But such institutions themselves require democracy as a way of life. That is, there is a dynamic reciprocal relation at work here. Without good institutions, life on the ground can become chaotic and dispersive. But without democratic life on the ground, to which every person can contribute through the quality of their everyday communications, there can be no soil in which vibrant institutions can grow.

This life on the ground has been transferred, in broad respects, to life in the virtual online world. Nonetheless, a conscious remembrance that democracy lives through communication can remind us that while online contact may be a second-best way, with respect to the conception of the human being as an embodied creature, it is 100% more powerful than no way at all. I think here of what educators did – and could not do – during the world pandemic of 1918, when communication technology was vastly less instantaneous than today. How harrowing it must have been for so many teachers and students not to be able to communicate.

Final Note

This remembrance of what communication means, of how it literally creates a world of meaning in which people share communally as human beings, may help persons keep an eye on the 'After Time'. I use that term as a contrast to what my students began calling, months ago, the 'Before Time' when we were living face to face. In the After Time to the pandemic – which is coming – when people have reconstructed continuity, balance, and rhythm, I hope human lives take on a new intensity of appreciation, of gratitude, and of commitment to democracy and education as a dynamic unity. I hope persons can remember how their very being as human beings suffered by having been forced into a virtual world, so that they can resist the pressure, which is sure to come, to make being online the new educational 'normal'. They might then perceive why, in the After Time, it will be more important than ever to be face to face. Human beings can exist and function online, but they can only live when fully embodied.

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