

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



### Constructive Conflicts

"[People] still want the crutch of dogma, of beliefs fixed by authority, to relieve them of the trouble of thinking." As Dewey (1916, p. 339) argues, thinking is hard work; life flows more easily when conventional wisdom and normative beliefs provide the channels for thinking about and acting in the world. And indeed, the articles of faith accepted by any community of practice can provide the bonds that hold the society, writ large or small, together.

Yet the comfort and security available through established doctrines can also lead to complacency. To Dewey (1958), a democratic society not only perseveres with its canonical beliefs but also undertakes the less certain, more difficult task of engaging in reflection, the genesis of which is "the problematic and confused" (p. 65). Dewey's belief in the value of grappling with dissonance jibes with that of other theorists. As Stephens and her colleagues (2000) point out, Peirce (1877/1955) argues that doubt is a necessary precursor to investigation; and as Piaget (1952) has argued, cognitive conflict generates the response of adaptation through assimilation or accommodation and helps promote growth.

Dewey (1938) goes as far as to argue that the human disposition for

inquiry has biological roots, much as the oyster responds to irritation by creating the pearl:

Living may be regarded as a continual rhythm of disequilibrations and recoveries of equilibrium. . . . The state of disturbed equilibration constitutes *need*. The movement toward its restoration is search and exploration. The recovery is fulfillment and satisfaction. (p. 27; cited in Hillocks, 1995, p. 108; emphasis in original)

The notion that the problematic, doubt, and cognitive conflict must be resolved through inquiry does not mean that the resolution depends on the dialectical interplay of opposing forces. Wertsch (1997) maintains that inquiry can also be a dialogic process in which participants in inquiry co-construct new meanings. Nor does inquiry mean a detached experimentation. As Garrison (1997) argues, it has an important affective dimension. Inquiry is motivated by doubt. And Garrison contends that for Dewey, doubt "is a living, embodied, impassioned condition" (p. 94).

The articles that we present focus on the problematic in different ways. We believe that the passion of which Garrison speaks is evident in each of them. We hope that they foster that same kind of passion in their readers.

Bob Fecho analyzes the range of ways that threat can exist and be transcended in a critical inquiry classroom. Fecho reports on his experience as a teacher engaged with his students, all of whom were African or Caribbean American, and with a student teacher in examining issues of race and ethnicity and how they played out in the conflict that occurred between Lubavitcher Jews and working-class African and Caribbean Americans in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Fecho argues that in such inquiries feelings of threat are inevitable. Threat is multifaceted in his inquiry, involving the Crown Heights situation itself, Fecho's students' feelings of unease in discussing it, his student teacher's inexperience with emotional and political confrontation as students involved her in the discussion, his Jewish colleague's belief that such an inquiry would upset relationships within the school and disagreement with Fecho over his teaching the topic, a parent's fear that exploring the Crown Heights hostilities would create conflicts in the school and opposition to Fecho over this concern, and Fecho's own concerns over venturing into the unknown in taking on this volatile topic. But like Dewey, Pierce, and Piaget, he argues that confronting the problematic can be generative, though he acknowledges that threat is experienced differently by those in different political positions in the classroom. His study confirms his belief that confronting the problematic and potentially threatening is essential in the kind of critical inquiry classroom that he advocates.

Catherine Beavis investigates what happened when Australian teachers were faced with a new literature curriculum that emphasized critical theory, a radical change from the curriculum's traditional adherence to text-based conceptions of literature and reading. The problematic then arose from teachers' imperative to shift ontological ground from authoritative readings of texts to critical assessments of norms, including authoritative readings of texts. She develops case studies of teachers who responded to the problematic in very different ways, identifying three discourses among which teachers both positioned themselves and were positioned: Leavisite and New Critical formations of the subject literature, charismatic pedagogy, and critical theory. She also identifies the influence of the traditions and culture of their schools. Although some teachers embraced the new curriculum as the impetus for critical reflection and change, others found ways to subvert the new curriculum and remain faithful to the tenets of the old. For yet others the changes so challenged their teaching selves that they could no longer sustain them. In short, although the problematic can create a need, the different positioning of teachers among competing discourses has a significant impact on the ways in which they take up the search and exploration necessary to meet that need.

In their article on the early English reading development of Latino students in the "low" reading group in a first-grade classroom, Paul Neufeld and Jill Fitzgerald demonstrate how work

can be enriched by confronting problematic issues that arise in the writing of that work. Neufeld and Fitzgerald view their study through the lens of research and theory on early reading development. Through the review process they became increasingly aware of both the affordances and the limits of applying that lens to second language learners. They address this issue by writing of what they call stakeholder tensions, in so doing bringing in other perspectives, most notably those of researchers who would have framed the study in terms of bilingual reading development. Some bilingual advocates, for instance, would stress the need to understand the home literacy practices of the focal students rather than focusing on their reading development relative only to conventional classroom norms. The review process forced Neufeld and Fitzgerald to accommodate these other stakeholders' concerns in their efforts to account for the reading development of their case study students.

Finally, Mark Dressman and Joan Webster's article is intended to create a problematic for the field itself. They conduct what they call an archeology on Louise Rosenblatt's influential *Literature as Exploration*, tracing the changes made as the book went through its five editions. They argue that Rosenblatt moved away from the larger social implications of her initial edition to a position that increasingly emphasized

the personal over the social. This move away from social and cultural considerations, they argue, serves to move her apart from Dewey's transactional theory, which takes into account not only the transaction between two subjects (e.g., billiard balls colliding, readers and texts) but the cultural practices within which these transactions take place. In making this argument they challenge the idea that Rosenblatt's notion of transaction is indebted to Dewey and that it anticipates such movements as post-modernism, which Dressman and Webster find antithetical to her views. Their argument thus challenges the field to rethink Rosenblatt's influence on the way reading and literature are taught and in so doing to rethink their own understanding of what it means to engage in a reading transaction.

The articles in this issue of *RTE* illustrate the ways in which productive tensions can help move the field forward. We do not expect readers to agree with everything the authors say. We do hope, however, that these studies are sufficiently provocative to create dissonance relative to the conventional thinking accepted across the field, to promote reflection on that dissonance, and to contribute to sustained careful thinking about the complex problems that continue to vex us. This willingness to be disrupted, we think, is central to being a scholar and is what makes the scholarly project so worthwhile and invigorating.

P.S. M.W.S.

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