**Learning   Volume #45**

Peggy Deamer, August, 2015

"… all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move."

- Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*[1]

Have we heard the call for the primacy of learning over its stagnant rival education before? We have indeed, most clearly in the work of John Dewey, who worked on *Experience and Education* from 1896 until its publication in 1938 and who throughout mined poets like Tennyson for their confirmation that learning is ongoing, challenging and rarely equated with school. Dewey champions "experience," something not actually contrasted with education - it is a subset of experience – but seen as the equivalent, positive, "learning" entity. Dewey's *Experience and Education* makes clear that we have overlooked the former in our search for the "right" latter. He emphasizes the "continuity" of experience that insists that "growing" needs to be continuous; that experience must be dynamic: "Every experience is a moving force."[2] Dewey's insistence that experience is not held "inside" us but exchanged with the animate and inanimate context is deeply aligned with Actor-Network-Theory, which the *Volume #45* editors – "learning is an essential process to all things in the world, from fleshy beings to metallic artifices and beyond." – clearly references. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

But they do change. The Volume editors suggest that something else is at stake. The image of "education" – packaged and imposed from above – endures, but "learning" implies something different today.

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[1] 1842, In. 19-21, as quoted in John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (Indianapolis, Indiana: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938 and 1998) 27.
[2] Dewey, 31.
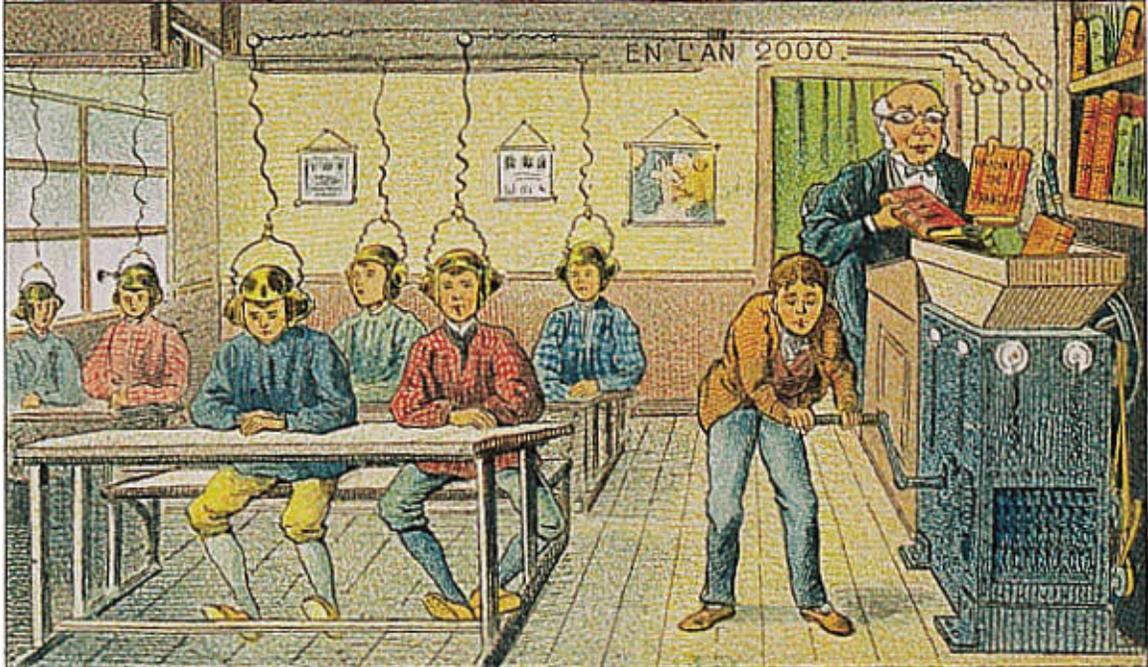
Open-sourcing, social media, and internet technology, things that Dewey never dreamed of, are its new conduits. The editors rightly indicate that we should not automatically embrace these technologies/platforms as the key to the "good" life, but Volume puts them squarely on the list. Bibblio, an "intelligent discovery platform" designed by "a band of Knowledge-hungry idealist based in London and Capetown...(who) are determined to transform how the world's knowledge is catalogued, related and ultimately discovered" comes to mind as the paradigmatic case in point.

## Education vs. Learning

Over the past 24 months since we started developing Bibblio, my head has often hurt from the sheer volume of new knowledge I've accumulated about how we learn. I've read, seen and digested more than I can express in a pithy statement, but fortunately Joi Ito found an important and short maxim that's a good place to start:

> **"** Education is what people do to you. Learning is what you do for yourself
>
> Joi Ito **"**

Clearly espousing learning over education, Bibblio wants to make knowledge accessible, organizable, and marketable. It indeed seems like an excellent addition to the open-source world: with it, you can "Curate your own content" ("We can automatically process your content, curate it and align it to domains, saving you time and money on the donkey-work."); "Get your content discovered" ("Once processed, you can redeliver your content through your own products with improved powers of discovery and recommendation."); and "Populate your platforms" ("Got a product but need content? No problem. Increase stickiness and engagement with the constantly-updated, quality knowledge feeds.") But it complicates *Volume*'s argument as much as it exemplifies it. One way to interpret the editorial statement that "schools around the world have become increasingly financialized, standardized, over-academicized austere personal debt machines" is that the cost of tertiary education now is ridiculous: either one's parents are broke or

the student, as the editors rightly indicate, is saddled with long-term debt. But another way to interpret this "increasingly financialized" statement is the "Stanfordization" of contemporary university education. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, encouraging federally funded research in universities to obtain patent rights over their inventions, changed what universities researched – grantable and patentable technology and science as opposed to the humanities - and brought universities and industry closer.[3] *The Economist*, which had originally supported the act, wrote in 2005, "Many scientists, economist, and lawyers believe the act distorts the mission of universities, diverting them from the pursuit of basic knowledge, which is freely disseminated, to a focused search for results that have practical and industrial purposes.  Whether this is a bad thing is a matter of debate. What is not disputed is that it makes American academic institutions behave more like businesses than neutral arbiters of truth."[4] The complication is that this bonding of industry with academia is precisely what spawns platforms like Bibblia. The link between IT start-ups, entrepreneurialism, and the venture capitalism AND universities is, to say the least, intimate.

This complication is partially about whether this incubator space IS good or bad. Start-ups and entrepreneurialism don't make everyone money and the rhetoric of "innovation" and creative risk can be seen as repackaging freelance labor, precarity, hyper-individualism, competition, and the inability to identify as a class in need of common security; entrepreneurialism might be neo-liberalism's dream child. But more pertinent to this *Volume*, is that fact that open-source industries like Bibblio depend on the universities as much as the other way around. We might want to think that "learning" can operate without universities, but we can't forget that Facebook started at Harvard and Google at Stanford.  It is not merely that universities gather intelligent individuals but that they also provide the expensive infrastructure – instructors, websites, computers, licensing advisors, grant-sourcing –indispensible to start-ups, idealist or otherwise.

All of this brings us back to Dewey who, in addition to espousing experience over traditional education, argued vehemently against thinking in dichotomies. A positive solution never comes from opposing an identifiable "other;" the terms of the dichotomy themselves need to be overturned. It isn't helpful, in other words, to set a term like "learning" against that of "education".

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[3] See Brett M. Friscmann, *Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 312.

[4] "Bayhing for Blood or Doling out Cash?" *The Economist*, December 24, 2005, 109; as quoted in. Friscmann, *Infrastructure,* 313-314. See also See "In Pictures: Top Patent-Revenue-Generating Universities," http://www.forbes.com/2008/09/12/google-general-electric-ent-tech-cx_mf_0912universitypatent_slide.html, accessed July 30, 2015.

The editors of *Volume #45* surely know this, but it warrants a clear statement as this dialogue on learning continues.

This isn't to say that there isn't need for identifying "good" and "bad".  It is to say nothing on this earth is pure; all is animated and contaminated by capitalism. Althusser would have chuckled to think that "learning" is outside the ideological state apparatuses. In learning, we are shown how to be the productive, obedient citizens that capitalism requires. This observation is not meant to be a downer. Rather, it aims to place the judgments "good" or "bad" not on abstractions but on the use to which they are put. Freedom, autonomy, self-fulfillment, social consciousness, creativity – these all are conditions of agency, action, and vigilance. They are a plan of action. As Dewey says, "Like any plan, it must be framed with reference to what is to be done and how it is to be done."[5]

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[5] Dewey, 17.