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Gregory Clark  
*Brigham Young University*

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## **The Civics of Getting Along**

Gregory Clark

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Conference on Public Education in a Democratic Society

As I write, my state legislature is considering a proposal that would require high school students to pass a civics exam before graduating that would test their understanding of the American form of government. That sort of understanding is what "civics" usually means. The proposal, of course, expresses one of the purposes of public schooling in the United States: to prepare a new generation of citizens to participate in the nation's democratic life. Understanding the processes of government is certainly part of that preparation. But it is far from sufficient.

My claim that an understanding of how American government work is not sufficient to prepare productive citizens follows from my conviction that there is much more to "democratic life" than government and that government does not encompass the civic life as it ought to be in this nation. For me, civic life is the life people live when they find themselves together in space, time, or purpose, whether as a nation or a city, a neighborhood or a workplace, in worship or in family. It is life lived cooperatively with others. In the United States, that civic life proceeds on the basis of stated values and shared expectations that are democratic in precisely this sense: we encounter each other with the expectation that we will be treated as more or less equal and acknowledged as more

or less free. For Americans, at least, this how we get along. It is the sort of civics that each new generation of citizens is expected to understand and to practice. I don't think an exam can't tell us much about prepared young people are to do that.

An exam can't tell us much because we cannot learn to live this sort of democracy from explanation alone: We must learn this by experience. In John Dewey's (1958) definition, "Experience is a store of practical wisdom . . . useful in conducting the affairs of life." More specifically, it is "a fund of insights" that begins in "sensation and perception" and then matures through our trial and error as we select, interpret, and connect its practical lessons. Learning from experience, Dewey continued in his abstract way, "is an active, personally conducted affair" that results not in "knowledge" but in "knowing" as "external" concepts become "internal" and intimately our own (p. 354).

### **Education by Experience**

It was in June of 1901 that John Dewey came to Utah. He came to Utah to present a series of lectures on his developing concept of experiential education to the faculty and students of the Brigham Young Academy. The school's president, George H. Brimhall, had arranged for Dewey to stop in Provo on his way from Chicago to Berkeley that summer. Not quite 10 years old, Brigham Young Academy had recently occupied a new campus that was beginning to fill the city block at 5<sup>th</sup> North and University Avenue. Brimhall probably welcomed Dewey at the Education Building, the monumental centerpiece of that campus and the only one of the four eventually built there that remains, now as the façade of the Provo City Library. Until the early 1990s, the College Building stood directly behind the Education Building to the east, connected by an entry foyer that opened into both. Occupying its entire third floor was College Hall, an

auditorium with a full stage and fixed rows of bentwood theater seats that served the Academy and then the University it became as the primary performance and lecture hall until 1941 when a building with much larger auditorium was completed on the hill a few blocks to the north and the BYA block became known as Lower Campus. In June 1901, College Hall was where John Dewey presented his ten lectures on experiential education.

I knew College Hall well. Through the 1960s, Lower Campus was the site of my junior high and high school, part of BYU's Lab School, a concept, by the way, that John Dewey was developing at University of Chicago when he came to Provo in 1901. My review of documents and photographs suggests that the Education and College Buildings were in the 1960s much as they had been in 1901. From my 7th through my 12th grade I went to classes in the Education Building and attended assemblies and plays, rehearsed concerts, and even gave a speech or two in College Hall. So when I read the 10 lectures Dewey presented there I encountered more than his words. I encountered my own experience of the place where he spoke them in memories so palpable that it seemed at times as if I had been there myself on those bright June days of 1901.

This was a time when John Dewey was exploring systematically what schooling would be like if instruction were made less conceptual and more experiential, one of several ways he was applying the developing philosophy of American pragmatism to which he would become an important contributor. In the year following his visit to Brigham Young Academy he would refine the ideas he had shared there into a book, *The Child and the Curriculum*, published in 1902. Through the next several years he would develop and extend them for *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916. Then, in 1938, he would present them in mature form in *Experience and Education*. This was the

concept of education that George H. Brimhall had brought Dewey to Brigham Young Academy to share with the teachers, preparing and practicing, who converged that summer here to improve their craft. It was a conception of schooling very different from the one they knew, and Brimhall considered it sufficiently promising that he arranged before Dewey left Provo to publish the lectures in the next few issues of the Academy's magazine, *The White and Blue*.

Newspaper accounts as well as asides recorded in transcriptions of the lectures suggest that everyone, including Dewey, enjoyed his time in Utah. Local interest was sufficient for *The Deseret Evening News* to provide its readers with daily summaries of the lectures as they were given (June 19, 1901). *The Salt Lake Tribune* described an evening during Dewey's visit when he joined President Joseph F. Smith, Apostle Reed Smooth, Zina Young, Susa Young Gates, and a crowd of others at an LDS meetinghouse in Springville for a reunion of the Sons and Daughters of the Pioneers of Utah (June 21, 1901). And on the day Dewey left for Provo for Salt Lake and his train on to Berkeley, *The Deseret Evening News* (June 22, 1901) concluded its report of his final lecture by noting that "Dr. Dewey . . . will be remembered as a most comprehensive student and profound thinker, and a modest unassuming gentleman. The transcripts of his lectures that were published in the next few issues of *The White and Blue* record Dewey commenting on his own good times when he began one afternoon lecture by apologizing that his ideas were not "in very good shape" because he had spent the morning with Brimhall and others on a horseback tour of "the heights east of Provo" and of nearby Rock Canyon (cited in Boydston, 2008, p, 323).

I read that with a vivid sense of what that morning had been like for Dewey. I live on those “heights,” hills and gullies that are covered with grass that is losing its green at the beginning of June as scrub oak leaves deepen theirs. I walk in Rock Canyon every few days and know the steep creek that would have been filled with snowmelt as Dewey walked along it, the crashing water so loud against the cliffs above the path that you can’t hear much else. I have experienced what Dewey did, and somehow that brought the words of his lectures to life for me. Or more precisely I was reading words that had been spoken in the same College Hall where I had listened to many speakers, a man who had later that day went to Mormon church building to commemorate Utah pioneers just as I had so many times. That left me feeling connected to him in ways that gave his words an immediacy that belied let me forget that sixty some years separated our moments of shared experience.

What Dewey said in College Hall was this: We are *made* for experience. It is in our nature to learn first and best by seeing and feeling and doing. As he put it in his opening lecture, “The child is not waiting passively to take in experience.” Rather, children live in a state of “original and spontaneous eagerness to get more experience.” This is “implanted in the child’s makeup. What the teacher or parent has to do is just to supply proper objects and surroundings upon which these impulses may assert themselves” (Boydston, 2008, p. 217). Then suddenly circumstances in College Hall interrupted Dewey's explanation with experience itself. This is how the transcript of his lecture records what happened:

We know from the structure of the brain that the organs of sensation are very closely connected with the organs of movement, which shows that there is no

sensation at all which does not tend to express itself in movement. [A window fell at this point in the lecture.] We heard that sound, for instance. There was a tendency on the part of everyone to jump a little or at least turn his head. Why? Because sensation does not stand alone as sensation merely, it is the beginning of a movement that would investigate, would explore, and find out more about the thing producing the sensation. (2008, p. 217)

Sitting in College Hall you would see a row of large, double-hung wood windows lining each long wall of the room on your left and your right. I wonder if the window that “fell” was that loose one, the one fourth from the back on the north wall that, opened on warm days to let in fresh air, would sometimes suddenly slip and slam closed. That happened multiple times when I was sitting there. Each time the experience went precisely as Dewey that day had described experience how experience works. The sharp sound first surprised me, made me jump. Then I looked away from whatever was on the stage to see what had happened, and then, each time, I asked myself if not the others around me why the glass in that window hadn’t broken and why someone hadn’t fixed the thing yet. (In my time, no one ever fixed that window.)

For Dewey, this is the living anatomy of experience. It begins in a bodily sensation that prompts the mind to find that sensation’s source. Then you turn to language to articulate an understanding of its meaning. So experience comes first and words follow. That’s what happened to me and my classmates each time that big window fell. And it fell again in my visceral memory as I read in the transcript of Dewey's lecture that bracketed statement, "a window fell." Like his reference to a tour of the foothills and the canyon near my home, like the newspaper description of the pioneer pageant held in a

town where I once lived at the kind of building I have been in all my life, that statement his lecture an intensity and immediacy it probably would not have had otherwise. My own experience gave depth and dimension to what his words described.

To understand how that happens it might help to look at what John Dewey understood *experience* to be. I find his best explanation in his book, *Art as Experience* (2005). Experience begins as “inchoate”—as an excerpt of the relentless flow of sensation and thought that just happens to us, the raw material of our consciousness. Immersed in that flow, Dewey wrote, “Things are experienced, but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience” (2005, p. 37) *An experience* is what we make of the flow of *experience* by selecting, combining, and giving order to the elements of it that we can use to give our hours and our days usable meaning. To be meaningful, experience must have a beginning, an end, and a trajectory through them to some sort of purpose that gives the disparate elements of experience a common meaning. That is how art works, but Dewey's point in *Art as Experience* seems to be that everyone is an artist: making meaning from experience is itself the work of art. As we do it, “different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity” that is “constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts” (p. 38). That is how art is made, and it is how we make of our lives.

[So] a piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not

a cessation. Such experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience. (p. 37)

### **Personal Democracy**

During the early 1950s, Langston Hughes—the poet and playwright of the Harlem Renaissance—wrote three books for the Franklin Watts First Books series. I had some of those. I remember *The First Book of Magic*, *The First Book of Airplanes*, and *The First Book of Horses*, books I had because I imagined myself doing what they described when I grew up. That's what the First Books were for, I think—to provide a sort of self-education for children old enough to know that they would soon be making their own way into adulthood. That's what the publishers had in mind: shaping the understanding and attitudes of their young readers. That's one of the reasons that in the early 1950s they asked Langston Hughes to write *The First Book of Negroes*, *The Book of Rhythm*, and *The First Book of Jazz*.

Most of the children who received and read the First Books in those years were White. And Hughes seems to have kept clearly in mind the idea that his readers would, more than likely, be the ones to confront their nation's greatest failure of its democracy, the racial divide, head on. So he wrote in *The First Book of Negroes* (1952) of the noble history of Africans and of the diverse and significant achievements of one African-American after another. He wrote in the form of stories that were told to the main character, a "Negro boy" in New York City, whose parents were trying to explain to him the meaning of what he had discovered in his friendship with a White boy: their racial difference. Those stories culminate on the last page of the book as the boy's father tells him that though they have many problems to solve, each American, whatever his or her

color, is trying to be a good citizen, "a part of democracy," by "treating our neighbors as we would like to be treated" (p. 68).

That's an essential principle but stated that way still abstract. When I was 10 and reading my First Books, abstractions like that didn't hold my attention. But Hughes soon published another First Book, this one *The First Book of Jazz* (1955). Like *The First Book of Negroes*, its trajectory was historical, but the history it told was of an infectious sort of music that expressed the sort of experiences he had described in that earlier book. Jazz, as he described it, was music of movement and feeling born of the insistent rhythms of African drums, the aching work songs of slaves (though writing in 1955 he didn't use that word), the jubilant music of the churches where their descendants found solace, and the blues—that uniquely American music that sings with a wry smile of the saddest of things.

Jazz is improvised within a framework of key and chord changes and rhythmic patterns all agreed upon by the people who play it together. It is democratic life in music. That's what Langston Hughes meant throughout in *The First Book of Jazz* when he said that "jazz is a *way of playing* music even more than it is a composed music" (p. 50). And playing music that way, he insisted, beginning on the first page, is "just for fun." The book ends with this explanation of "The Joy of Playing": "This is the element that gives jazz its zest and verve, its happy, dancing quality, that brings musicians of all races together" (p. 50). What Hughes is trying to convey is the experience of jazz. These phrases are vivid descriptions of an experience, but still descriptions. So he made for the book a companion recording of himself playing this music for his young readers. Here they can feel the rhythms of jazz that make all who listen feel the music for themselves

and move their bodies with it. And that's what Hughes's *First Book of Rhythms*, which soon followed in 1954, was about: "Rhythm is something we share in common, you and I" (p. 56). It has the feeling of getting along.

### **The Shared Experience of Music**

"We have *an* experience," Dewey wrote, "when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment," to "conclusion," to "the consummation of a movement" (as qtd. by Burke, 1973, p. 362). That conclusion, that consummation, is a feeling, one that tells us we have completed something and taken some kind of step forward. And that's what people who must live and work together need to share. Dewey was not describing music here, but his language fits. Music is the art form that illustrates this structuring of sharable experience most precisely. And rather than concepts, music provides experiences made of sensation that are inhabited by those who encounter them rather than studied or observed. Inherently, a piece of music is an experience made for many to share as it carries listeners through the same experience, each one moving through the same melody, harmony, and rhythm, feeling for themselves its connections, its coherence, and its emotional journey.

Kenneth Burke provided a description of that in a 1933 review of a Broadway musical titled *Run Little Chillin!* (cited in Burke, 1973). Burke was just then a leading light in American letters whose writings were turning insistently toward civic concerns. Recognizing, as Dewey, the power of the arts to influence people in feeling and attitude if not in concept, Burke was exploring in these years of the Great Depression how the arts were shaping the ways his American compatriots understood themselves as citizens and how they were inclined to interact with their fellows. That was on Burke's mind as he sat

down in New York's Lyric Theater to see this musical play about life in a small African-American town in the post-Civil War South.

It is clear in the review published afterward that the music in this play is what interested Burke most. It came out of the tradition of the "spiritual" that expressed a combined sorrow and hope that could not be explained in words. As Burke described it, this music had

a positive ability, exemplified with a conviction, a liquidness, a sense of aesthetic blossoming, and a gift for spontaneous organization which is capable . . . of actually setting the spectator aquiver as he participates in the vocal and mimetic exhilaration taking place before him. (1973, p. 362)

Simply put, it was something he not only listened to but experienced, as in a particular "choric scene in which the cast, like migrating birds, could fall into a unity, and this unity in turn could absorb the spectators, precisely as one might, in observing the bird's movements, veer and deploy with them" (1973, p. 365) That description, though made of words, is vivid enough to call upon our wordless experience to help us understand. That understanding, one that a White and privileged intellectual was able to share fully at least for a moment with these Black performers in a segregated America, dislodged Burke's sense of himself as an American. "Where does this fit?" he described himself wondering as he left the theater. "Where does it apply as you elbow your way towards home?" (p. 365).

This is sort of experience that music can provide, as the very structure of music enlists listeners in a process of moving themselves through it. To listen to music is to be *in* the music, moving through the steps that mark its trajectory—rhythmic, harmonic, and

emotional—from beginning to end. Burke let himself do that at this play and at its end he found feelings and attitudes that had not been his at the start but had become so. To listen to music is, by necessity, to experience: to move within it from phrase to phrase, chord-to-chord, beat to beat. In Burke's description, it was as if he now shared with those on the stage a common identity, an American identity he had not known. What followed from that was a new understanding of himself and his nation.

Burke once wrote, “Art is not *experience*, but *something added* to experience” (1968, p. 77). What is added, it seems, is the new sense of self that those who encounter the art, and who allow themselves to inhabit it, come to share. So when people hear the same speech, read the same book, see the same film, or let themselves be absorbed by the same music, they come away having experienced themselves differently than before, and they share, at least for a time, the same hopes and expectations. During that time, as he put it, they are “*acting-together*,” living together the same “way of life” (1969).

I started listening to jazz this way some time ago when I went to a concert of what was then the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and heard its leader, Wynton Marsalis, say that jazz is the sound of democracy and then use the next hour of music to show how that is so.

Great [jazz] musicians demonstrate a mutual respect and trust on the bandstand that can alter your outlook on the world and enrich every aspect of your life . . . from individual creativity and personal relationships to the way you conduct business and understand what it means to be a global citizen in the most modern sense. (Marsalis & Ward, p. xv)

The reason for that is simple: The way they play “reminds you that you can work things out with other people. It’s hard, but it can be done.” Playing jazz, even listening to it well, lets you start to understand “the importance of expressing the core of your unique feelings” at the core of individuality, as you develop at the very same timewhat would seem to be the very opposite: "the willingness to work things out with other people.” If we live our lives with assumptions like that, building self and community both at once is our civic work. “When a group of people try to invent something together, there’s bound to be a lot of conflict,” Marsalis says. But this music helps us out. “Jazz urges you to accept the decisions of others" and "sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow.” In that exchange is where we find ways to “make something out of whatever happens—to make something together and *be* together" (2009, p. 12). What can follow from that can seem like magic as they end up playing sometimes beyond themselves, as each finds elements of a new self, maybe a better self, in the process of playing with others. This is getting-along of a transformational kind.

### **Civics Lessons from Jazz**

So civics, as I'm using the term, is less about governing than it is about getting along. People who find themselves in a situation, whether by choice or by circumstance, where they must work together can work with their differences or try to eliminate them. Communion is not what happens in community most of the time. Most of the time maintaining community is done in spite of the differences that would otherwise divide people who find they must work together because to eliminate differences is to eliminate that community altogether. So citizenship, it turns out, is an ongoing project of finding

ways to work and live together in difference and even conflict. That is what I mean by getting along, the kind of getting along that gets good things done.

Jazz music made this vivid for me in a summer workshop I observed designed to help accomplished young musicians make the transition to professional. For two weeks these students worked with a faculty of eminent jazz musicians to learn how to move in the music, a matter of attitude as much as knowledge and skill. This faculty—a bassist, a guitarist, a pianist, a drummer, a tenor saxophonist, and a trumpeter—brought to the workshop their own differences. In jazz, it is the differences at play among the musicians in an ensemble that make the music good. But in this case, the differences that divided two of them, the trumpeter and the sax player, soon turned to conflict. It was a fundamental one regarding the very concept of the music itself: whether the essence of this music of cooperative improvisation was tradition or innovation. The saxophonist insisted to the students that jazz must be played deep within an evolving tradition that is more than a century old, that innovation must always acknowledge and include that. The trumpeter countered with the conviction that jazz must be made by breaking free of every tradition, that musicians are accountable only to freedom. For one, the music is progressive continuity. For the other, it's revolution.

For most jazz musicians this is not a conflict but a tension. Most find value in both sides and see a stance on one side or the other as not fixed but provisional. But for these two a line between sides was drawn early on. With the students they discussed and debated across that line for a few days but then reached an impasse and stopped talking about it at all. This was frustrating to the students. They had come to the workshop to find the common ground they would need to learn to occupy to play jazz well with a wide

variety of other professional musicians and now any sense of that ground they had developed seemed to be eroding away. By the second week their consensus was that the conflict was unresolvable, and that jazz itself was not a coherent concept nor practice. They were wondering aloud how their six teachers would be able to do what they were scheduled to do on the last day: perform jazz together for their students as a sextet.

I was there when they met on that last day to rehearse. Talk about a playlist for the evening performance soon collapsed: This tune too traditional, that one too extreme, this too constraining, that one too free. It was the two horn players objecting, mostly. The other four shared the stabilizing responsibilities of a rhythm section and so tried to moderate these two soloists, but after some abortive attempts to play together the rehearsal broke up.

So that night they gathered on the bandstand without a plan. Their students jammed the room. So the bassist called a standard tune and they began to play. They followed well-worn jazz convention: playing through the tune together a couple of times in improvised harmony, then each taking a solo turn backed by the accompaniment of the others, then playing the tune together again. The trumpeter took the first solo. As he pushed the ensemble toward the far edge of what the structure of that standard tune could allow, the saxophone played an unusually assertive accompaniment that dug deep into swing sounds of the thirties to pull him back. Then as the saxophonist tried on his solo to take the band all the way back to pure New Orleans music, the trumpet threw out an accompaniment made of experimental dissonance. The two were clashing, contradicting each other, but both stayed on tempo, played in the same key, and preserved enough harmony between to keep the music from crossing into noise. That was enough to let the

other four fill in the gaps and make the music whole. The music could have collapsed, as it had in rehearsal. But it didn't.

The sextet played standard after standard for an hour. You could see on their faces how strenuous this playing was. The students were transfixed because they knew what it takes to play this music well even when people agree on things. And they knew the extent of the contention these guys were playing through. For an hour they played at the edge of dissolution--an eloquent place to make jazz it turns out. Their tension filled their students, as did their relief as the music held together when it might have come apart. At the end the students were on their feet cheering. They had experienced for themselves the common ground that professional jazz musicians must share: The fact that the music must be made, that it can't be allowed to fail. That is what the students had come for, and they left the room smiling. Their teachers weren't smiling though, and left the bandstand avoiding each other's eyes. They had held their common ground together, but the price had been high. These six great musicians would not play together as a sextet again.

My point? The civics lessons that are likely the most important to learn are interpersonal rather than political, and those lessons of interpersonal citizenship are likely best learned by experience--by persisting in the practice of getting along.

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