Virtual Charter Schools and the Democratic Aims of Education

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Abstract

Virtual schooling is expanding as an alternative to traditional public schooling in the early twenty-first century. This paper analyzes virtual schooling with regards to the democratic associational aims of public schooling as conceived by John Dewey. We examine the general landscape of virtual schooling by looking at recent history, governance, and student performance in these schools. Next, we analyze the significant ways in which virtual schools fail to meet associational aims for schooling. We conclude with a normative argument about the nature of new educational trends and innovations, drawing from Dewey's ideas in *The School and Society* to articulate the importance of aligning those innovations with democratic social ideals.

"When citizens can associate only in certain cases, they regard association as a rare and singular process, and they hardly think of it. When you allow them to associate freely in everything, they end up seeing in association the universal and, so to speak, unique means that men can use to attain the various ends that they propose. Each new need immediately awakens the idea of association. The art of association then becomes, as I said above, the mother science; everyone studies it and applies it"

– Alexis De Tocqueville, 1835

When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the United States from France in the 1830s, he noted that many voluntary associations existed among citizens throughout the American landscape, something that did not exist in the aristocracies of Europe. De Tocqueville called the formation of these associations that arose and worked to solve issues that existed within society "the mother science."[1] It can be argued that the political associations and citizen engagement opportunities, about which

De Tocqueville wrote, are the basic element that band people together within the United States' democracy. De Tocqueville wrote that he saw more than just the burgeoning country of the United States, but "it was the shape of Democracy itself which I saw."[2]

By a number of measures, our political associations—and the accompanying capacities of cooperation and collaboration with citizens different from ourselves—are frayed at present. Polling data bears out these trends. In October 2017, Pew Research confirmed that few people have friends from their opposing political party. They also found that 43 percent of Republicans identify as such because they disagree with Democrats, and that 40 percent of Democrats do the same.[3] Pew Research has documented that the divide in American politics between right and left, as well as urban and rural citizens, has grown markedly over the last two decades.[4] In addition, many institutions of civic life, that important third sphere of democratic life, are weakened.[5] Voluntary associations that once were structures of civic life in the United States, such as Rotary Club, National Association for the Advancement of Color People, Optimist Club, labor unions and religious denominations have significantly declined in the last fifty years.[6] These civic spaces are where citizens learn to associate across difference for common aims, while learning to solve problems through deliberation and action. Peter Levine writes that, as these institutions decrease in our national landscape, we face a crisis in our ability to deliberate: "Good citizens deliberate. By talking and listening to people who are different from themselves, they enlarge their understanding, make themselves accountable to their fellow citizens, and build a degree of consensus."[7] Levine proposes that civic renewal focus on deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships. This framework, conveying what De Tocqueville termed "the art of association," or the "mother science" of democracy, offers an alternative to the divisive political system that has steadily risen in US politics and which has helped foster civic disengagement.

Public education is a key institution for fostering capacities and habits of associational democratic arts both inside the classroom as well as through the varied, rich co-curricular and community landscape of many US public schools. The associational arts, as we will argue here, form a major educational aim for education in democratic societies. Yet the ability of public education to play a strong role in education for democratic association has also been waning. This trend is not simply due to the standardization and accountability trends of the past two decades, which have pushed math and reading at the expense of other educational aims (e.g., civics and citizenship education).[8] State and federal education policies have fostered differentiation as privatization and public choice options have flourished, moving the system away from the common school model. The reign of the republican, local US common school model (albeit never truly "common" due to racial and social class segregation) created in the late nineteenth century

has ended. Since the desegregation efforts of the 1970s and 1980s, the education accountability movement and privatization movements that followed in the 1990s and 2000s, alternative ways to govern and organize schools have formed that substantially diverge from the local model used to structure schools since the Jeffersonian era.

Charter schools are one part of that diversification. A charter school is an independent school created with public funds, established by teachers, parents, community, and/or for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) under the terms of a charter with a local or national authorizer. In addition, "The percentage of all public-school students who attended public charter schools increased from 1 to 6 percent between fall 2000 and fall 2015."[9] The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools documents a five percent increase in charter enrollments in 2016–2017, bringing total national enrollments to around 3.2 million students.[10] Virtual schooling growth, while not limited to the charter sector, accounts for a large part of the increase in charter schooling in recent years. In 2017–18 there were 501virtual schools operating in the U.S, some were operated by school districts, but those operated by for-profit charter Educational Management Organizations constitute 64.4 percent of the student population of all virtual schools.[11] Clearly, some state governments have opened the doors wide to virtual charter schools, also called cyber charters, which like all charter schools are governed by Educational Management Organizations that are not accountable to elected or appointed boards who represent citizen interests. Yet many questions remain beyond the issue of their public accountability, including how these schools meet the unique purposes of public schooling in a democratic republic. While there have been useful examinations of the accountability and student performance issues related to virtual schooling, scholars have not yet evaluated the question of how these schools meet the democratic educational aims of promoting civic renewal, citizen deliberation, collaboration, and healthy civic relationships.

In this paper, we analyze virtual schooling with regards to the democratic associational aims of public schooling. We focus particularly on virtual charter schools, as they make up the schools serving the largest number of virtual students and have been subject to less regulation and scrutiny.[12] In the first section, we sketch a Deweyan account of the associational aims of democratic education, drawing primarily from *Democracy and Education* and Dewey's conception of democracy. We then examine the general landscape of virtual schooling by looking at the recent history, governance, and student performance of these schools. We pay special attention to the ways that virtual charter schools have grown and performed, focusing on the case of Ohio, a state in the forefront of early choice expansion efforts in the late 1990s and with an active virtual charter sector today. In the second section, we explore ways in which virtual schools, as thus far imagined, designed and regulated, seem to disregard the importance of civic, and particularly associational,

aims of schooling. In the final section, we turn to a normative argument about the nature of new educational trends and innovations, drawing from Dewey's ideas in The School and Society (1900) over a century ago, to articulate the importance of aligning those innovations with democratic social ideals.[13]

The Associational Arts in Education

> The obvious fact is that our social life has undergone a thorough and radical change. If our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete transformation.[14]

In *The School and Society* (1964), Dewey discussed new educational trends of his era, wanting to understand the changing social contexts and how these impact educational ideas and structures.[15] Over a century later, the social changes offered by digital technologies, and their implications for education, are indeed transformational, but are these educational changes serving democratic ends? One of the central democratic aims concerns De Tocqueville's "associational arts," or what Dewey outlines in the first chapters of *Democracy and Education*, which he wrote fifteen years after The School and Society. It is this aim we seek to investigate related to innovation of virtual charter schooling.

Dewey's philosophy of education in *Democracy and Education* devotes its first chapters to illustrating how education is inherently social, working to undo the individualist tendencies that his readers (of 1916 or today) would bring to the topic.[16] On the first page he discusses living things in interaction and communication with other living and non-living things in their environments. Further into that chapter he states that social life is identical with communication, the process of enlarging and changing individual experiences through sharing with others. Society exists not "by transmission, by communication . . . but *in* transmission, *in* communication."[17] Since the process of "living together educates," Dewey saw the ideal school as setting up an environment where educators could select the best conditions for individual and social growth. The chapter "Education as a Social Function" explains the functions of the "special environment" required for education, which include "creating a wider and better balanced environment than that by which the young would be likely, if left to themselves, to be influenced."[18]

What creates a "better balanced environment"? Dewey offers us the democratic criterion in chapter 7, where he argues that "democracy is a form of associated living, of conjoint communicative experience."[19] Education in a democracy is not simply important so that future voters can elect good and just leaders. It is important because education should create a broader community of interests and associations, so that diverse groups and classes can share experiences, understandings, and communicate constructively. He explains:

The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.[20]

Dewey saw that the success of democracy itself was tied up in forms of education which could enable students to find their own life directions *in communication and association with the shared interests and aims found among diverse social groups.*

A normative aim of democratic education, among Deweyans as well as a variety of public education advocates, has been that of practicing the associational arts with diverse others—in classrooms, in extra and co-curricular areas, and in the day-to-day shared living of schooling. It is of course true that individual schools and districts often fail in achieving diversity of association (e.g., due to the persistence of racial segregation) and often fail to fully realize the educational benefits of diverse associations in teacher-centered, test-focused schooling. But it is also true that, over time, public schools have achieved great success as an institution in advancing the aim of education for "associated living," serving as one of the most important institutions that most Americans learn with and from people about other social classes, religious groups, or ethnicities. School privatization policies often ignore these associational aims of democratic education, and we worry this loss will jeopardize our democratic future. In our exploration of virtual charter schooling that follows we explore and explain these concerns.

Virtual Schooling in the US and the Case of Ohio

Virtual schooling began in the 1990s.[21] Clark defines a virtual school as "an educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet or Web-Based methods."[22] Virtual schools provide courses and curriculum through the use of a personal computer which allows students to take courses at their own pace. Prior to the rise of virtual schooling, there were ways to take courses through correspondence learning via the mail, and later through audio and visual mechanisms known as distance learning.[23] Virtual schools sometimes operate through single and multidistrict outlets where brick and mortar schools exist, and increasing numbers of public school districts offer online schooling as an option for their students. Alternatively, virtual schools can operate through charter schools or Educational Management Organizations, where a school applies to a state or educational organization for a charter to create and run an online school.[24] Other virtual schools operate through state level initiatives, private schools, or through a consortium, where a group of people comes together to form a virtual school.

Virtual schools fill a variety of needs for students and families. They help deliver more diverse coursework to students who live in geographical locations with limited offerings at their local public school (e.g., providing access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses).[25] Virtual schools can also accommodate students who need to be educated at home for physical and mental health reasons.[26] Others choose online schooling because it works with uncertain schedules, such as for students whose parents travel for their jobs or who are engaged in pursuits (e.g., athletics or arts) which require them to travel extensively.[27] In addition, some students and parents choose virtual schooling because of the perceived failures of their local public school, including concerns over bullying, school safety, and negative peer pressure,[28] or for ideological reasons, including the desire to provide more religious-based instruction.[29] Virtual charter schooling is now a free tool for parents choosing to homeschool for any of these reasons, providing a way to exit schools and still access teachers more knowledgeable than parents about a field or subject area.[30]

Ohio is an interesting case to analyze in charting this ubiquitous expansion of virtual charter schools. Ohio has an active charter sector, with 340 public charter schools now educating 105,000 students[31] and powerful lobbying groups in the statehouse.[32] A 2019 report issued by the Fordham Institute documents that "since the enactment of Ohio's charter school law in 1997, more than 600 public charter schools in Ohio have offered parents and students choices in their education."[33] Part of the Ohio educational choice landscape since 2003, virtual schools include both district-operated virtual schools or academies and charter schools operated by third parties such as EMO's, which enroll the majority of virtual school students. Virtual charters in Ohio and many other states receive tax dollars, like their brick-and-mortar counterparts, from the per-pupil tax allotments that would otherwise go to the home districts where the students would be enrolled.[34] As of 2019, over thirty-six thousand students were enrolled in fully online charter schools, representing 30 percent of Ohio's charter school population:[35] "Ohio boasts one of the country's largest populations of full-time virtual students. The sector has also grown tremendously, with a 60 percent increase in enrollment [between 2012 and 2016], more than any other type of public school.[36]

Ohio virtual schools can be sponsored by the state, a district, a state university, or a state-approved nonprofit organization. When they were introduced in 2003 they received a great deal of autonomy, which was limited in 2005 by a cap on new online schools. However, the cap was lifted in 2011.[37] A package of charter school reforms passed in Ohio in 2015 attempted to ensure better alignment with national online schooling operating standards.[38] As of 2019, there remains a cap on online enrollments. The state sponsors the majority of schools, but there is only about half of the total number of virtual schools compared to 2016.

What is the virtual charter school experience like for students? A 2016 Fordham report on Ohio virtual charters provides a look at the structure. Virtual charter students

> access the entire curriculum for all their courses via the Internet. Instead of face- to-face interaction with a teacher, e-school students receive content via recorded videos or other media, or use course materials that are either downloaded or mailed to their homes. (While brick-and-mortar students are allowed to take online "independent study" courses, e-school students can't take any face-to-face courses. All e-school students are full-time.) Problem sets, homework assignments, and course exams are also generally conducted using online platforms. Older students tend to use more digital resources, while younger ones more often rely on physical materials. . . . Each . . . course is taught by a licensed Ohio teacher. Students may connect with the teacher (or other students in the course) in real time, using video-conference, email, or chat to work on problems together. Interactions can also be asynchronous, where (for example) teachers provide feedback on student work over email, or students connect with one another using online discussion forums. In addition, parents may be asked to work through a curriculum and associated activities with students at home.[39]

Beyond these general patterns and student outcome data, which are discussed below, there is a deficit of knowledge about how students are experiencing virtual charter schooling. Molnar et. al. state, "Unfortunately, there is almost a complete absence of research into the nature or quality of curriculum and student experience, nor is there research examining the unstated assumptions about the type of learning provided by the virtual education experience."[40] We know that parents and/or guardians, for virtual schooling to be successful, figure prominently in the virtual school experience. A Wisconsin appeals court found, in a case involving a virtual charter school run by K-12, Inc., that parents were the primary source of instruction for the students enrolled in the virtual school. This is due in part to the second fact about instruction in virtual charters: that teacher-student ratios in these schools are higher than in brick-and-mortar charters and traditional public schools. Numbers by providers and states vary, but in general virtual charters have nearly three times as many students per teacher than the national average.[41]

While little is known about virtual charter school teaching, student learning, and the overall student experience, there is resounding agreement—among both proponents and critics—that the standardized tests results are poor. Fordham Institute's report provided this news for the Ohio context: "Holding all else equal (including prior achievement), e-school students perform worse than students who attend brick-and-mortar district schools."[42] Moreover, on average, students in virtual charters "are academically behind at the start of each school year, and

they lose even more ground (relative to their peers) during the year spent at the e-school."[43] A 2019 CREDO report shows that Ohio virtual charter students "have substantially weaker growth in both reading and math" than traditional public school counterparts: "The gaps translate to 47 fewer days of learning in reading and 136 fewer days of learning in math for online charter students."[44] These trends are showing up consistently across policy assessments. In 2015, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes released a rigorous report on online charters based on data collected from 18 states which demonstrated that when compared with similar students who attended brick-and-mortar schools, the average student attending online charters experienced diminished academic gains.[45] As of 2019, assessing data from 21 of the 34 states who have opened virtual charter schools, 55 percent of the virtual charter schools were rated as "Unacceptable" in performance ratings based on state performance measures for schools, generally including student performance data in math and English/language arts testing, graduation rates, and achievement gaps.

Beyond poor outcomes, Ohio's virtual charter sector has been insufficiently regulated; financial corruption as well as disruptions in student progress have been the result. In 2016, the Ohio Department of Education examined the largest online charter school in the state, called the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), and found that they had billed the state for over 60 million dollars that they could not justify with their attendance data.[46] ECOT was ordered to pay back $80 million dollars to cover its overstated enrollment for a two-year period, which has led to questions about online charter school accountability.[47] ECOT was found to have misreported attendance data, in one case claiming that one student had engaged in 9,000 hours of learning in one year, which is more hours than exist in a year.[48] In January of 2018, ECOT's sponsor pulled its support from the school mid-year and the school abruptly closed, leaving more than 15,000 students without a school.[49] In June of 2019, ECOT agreed to pay the state $879,000 as repayment for the over enrollment issue.[50]

Virtual charter schools contribute to segregation by race and social class. Ahn and McEachin found that Ohio virtual school students and families tend to self-segregate in several ways, showing that low-income and lower achieving white students are more likely to choose virtual schools.[51] They also found that there is a higher percentage of students that are identified to have special needs within virtual schools, and that black students comprise only ten percent of the virtual school demographics. Black students are 29 percent less likely to attend a virtual elementary school and 24 percent less likely to attend a virtual high school than white counterparts, and Latino students are 9 percent and 7 percent less likely respectively. In urban and suburban districts, white students are more likely to enroll in e-schools, while black students are more likely to enroll in a charter school.

In the last several years, even charter school proponents are raising serious questions about virtual charter schooling, including many about the way they are governed and held accountable, but also about the ways they are helping students learn and develop intellectually, as measured by performance data. In the rush to virtual schooling, any substantive discussion about how they conceive of the broader aims of education is almost wholly absent. How do virtual schools fare with regards to teaching De Tocqueville's "arts of association"? It is impossible to clearly know, empirically, the answer to this question, given the kinds of general and incomplete picture we have of virtual charter schooling from the existing research. Yet from what we do know, it is possible to sketch preliminary responses to this question, and then consider implications for the future of virtual schooling in regards to associational educational aims.

Virtual Schools, Social Isolation, and Democratic Citizenship

Common schools were founded with the idea that students should be taught modes of democratic citizenship so as to form the *demos* of the republic. Public schools traditionally have offered the opportunity for children to come together in a common space on a regular basis to interact with those who construct their broader community. The interaction between individuals within a community provides lessons and demonstrations about democratic citizenship for students; direct experience is instructive as to how a deliberative democracy operates. When children attend community schools, they mix with populations that are more diverse, which exposes them to different ways of life, demonstrating that society is pluralistic.[52] While it is true that too many communities are racially homogenous, students who attend public schools often interact with others who have diverse beliefs, norms, and values. In contemporary polling, US parents report that in assessing school quality, the school's success in "teaching cooperation, respect, and problem-solving skills" is the most important factor.[53] This type of interaction is crucial in a democracy, as it enables children and citizens to learn about a pluralistic society; in an Aristotelian sense, this process is the formation of the polis.[54]

Virtual charter schooling threatens these associational aims of education. These threats include the demonstration of racial self-selection in choosing virtual schools,[55] the social isolation and loss of social capital benefits created by schooling that requires little to no synchronous interaction with other human beings, and the diminished engagement among online schooling parents and other adults compared to that seen in brick-and-mortar schools.

Online schooling has the potential to prevent children and future citizens from engaging in important socialization with neighbors, community members, and members of society at large. Social isolation, or the "lack of meaningful social

contacts," has negative effects for the functioning and well-being of individuals, and for solidarity and social cohesion. Personal quality of life is very much affected by being part of a social network."[56] Social isolation is one of the factors blamed for the higher drop-out rates among online students versus brick-and-mortar school students.[57] Social isolation impedes learning and human development in several ways: it is bad for student overall well-being and mental health,[58] it limits students' ability to learn from peers and teachers, and it curtails students' ability to acquire important social, political, and economic attributes, such as collaboration and respect.

Social isolation is a structural function of most of virtual schools, as they are presently designed and executed, absent efforts by parents to infuse the child's curriculum with experiential or social elements beyond the required curriculum. Virtual schools commonly employ self-paced and asynchronous curriculum.[59] Self-paced curriculum is not bound by a calendar and time sequence, leaving each individual student with the freedom to move through modules and assessment at her own pace. One national study showed that 60 percent of online charter schools utilize independent-driven self-paced study as the only means of course delivery.[60] This means that the most common form of instruction in virtual charter schools is "individualized, independent student study."[61] Seventy-seven percent of virtual schools offer a self-paced type of instruction as an option. Gill et. al. found that only 21 percent of instruction at the high school level used collaboration with others as a means of student instruction, and that virtual schools have as much synchronous instruction in one month as traditional brick-and-mortar schools have in one day. The most common type of synchronous instruction found was through telephone usage, which does not include visual contact, much less physical contact. The student-teacher ratios in virtual schools are much higher than in brick-and-mortar schools, with thirty students per teacher compared to seventeen students in public schools.[62]

Asynchronous learning environments are part of the allure of virtual schools for many families, as they greatly expand the flexibility and portability of curriculum. Yet this asynchronicity can produce harmful social isolation outcomes. If students stay at home, log onto schooling software that does not require interaction with peers, and do not engage with other human beings beyond family on a regular basis, what could this mean for a society whose political and social institutions operate through various forms of deliberation and similar decision-making processes? Some research shows that peer-to-peer interaction has been linked to enhanced grade outcomes for students.[63] There is also a rich literature on peer effects related to student achievement.[64]

Since schools are places where young people can learn how to be members of a democratic society, schools with less peer-to-peer interaction, or that lack a space where collaboration and deliberation can occur, are bound to further exacerbate the problem of civic disengagement. According to Gutmann and Thompson,

deliberation and collaborative problem solving should be accessible and inclusive of different voices to enable consensus and shared understanding across difference to be built.[65] In our partisan and divided era, where trust is at a premium, this goal is even more important. Yet virtual charter schools drastically reduce collaboration as a commonplace form of instruction and a social skill students regularly practice in their co-curriculum through clubs, sports, or volunteer activities conducted through traditional schools.[66] Collaboration on a daily basis with students who might have different backgrounds and opinions is crucial in a democratic society. Furthermore, Gill et. al. found that interaction amongst students in virtual charter schools is even further diminished in high school courses, which is the time period right before students reach legal adulthood and are granted all of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, making this a consequential issue with regard to democratic life and citizenship.[67]

Parental engagement, another important element of the common school structure, is also impacted by virtual schools. Since the inception of the public school, schools have acted as microcosms of the greater representative democracy.[68] Campbell argues that our civic identity is something that we learn from the time we are children, and that this can be especially beneficial in diverse communities where people often disagree. Schools are places where our civic identity is formed, and public schools help model the way that we deliberate and come to consensus about issues that are important in a democracy. School boards provide opportunity for parents and members of the community to raise concerns and have their voices heard as well. Parents can also run for school board membership, serve on committees, and participate in school board elections. School boards demonstrate representation at a local and observable level by providing an outlet for members of a community to voice concerns about the way in which its school functions; and it has been argued that they are the most pervasive example of democracy in the United States.[69] Having a voice through a local, elected body with regard to school governance can empower people and demonstrate on a small scale the type of faculties needed in a democracy. Webber studied the impact of electoral participation in school board races and concluded that school districts with higher voter turnout translated into districts with greater progress in achievement scores and graduation rates, which suggests that civic participation can impact the performance of schools.[70]

An analysis which points out the threats to the social aims of education in virtual schooling must not romanticize schools-as-they-actually-exist, nor assume that students in virtual schools are isolated and alone all day, every day. It is important to state that just because a student does not attend a school each day it doesn't mean that they do not interact with others in their community. Home schooling literature documents rich possibilities for the creation of diverse and enriching experiences in the community. Virtual schooling can be blended with an array of

educational experiences arranged by the parents or community organizations for youth.[71] It is also important to point out that for some schools, and for some students, the social life of schooling can be toxic and harmful. Bullying, harassment, and exclusion can abound in schools. For others, traditional schools have not been a place of academic success. Virtual schooling is also known to be used as a school of last resort for students who simply are not on track for graduation at their high school.[72] More research on social and associational aspects of virtual schooling is needed, including the quality of these interactions and the diversity of types of people with whom a "typical" student interacts. But from what we know about how some of these virtual schools create curriculum and provide instruction, we can draw some preliminary conclusions that increasing social isolation, and an overall failure to address the associational aims of education in a democratic society, is one outcome of the rapid growth of the virtual charter sector.

In this section we have relayed the ways in which virtual schooling falls short in developing the "arts of association." While much more research is needed, preliminary evidence suggests that concern is warranted, particularly since virtual schooling will likely only continue to rapidly develop and evolve. Here again, Dewey's wisdom can be helpful as we wrestle with his examination in *The School and Society* of how we can harness social and educational change towards desired social ends. In this final section of the paper, we seek some historical and philosophical perspective on educational innovation. Public schools need innovation and improvement—the critical question is how we shape those innovations to reflect social and democratic aims, rather than merely conforming to the aims allowed by the free market, which has been the primary driver of much virtual charter schooling policy to date.

Democratic Purposes and the Future of Virtual Schooling

> Online learning is often touted as the future of K–12 public education. It's an efficient way to diversify, and even democratize, educational opportunities and experiences in a connected world.[73]

Virtual schooling has been presented as a new educational innovation. Free-market education policies along with new personal computing and internet communication tools provide a rich context for prospecting in the virtual school realm, but with very mixed results thus far. The writings of John Dewey and contemporary Dewey scholars provide perspective on this experimental era and its connections to the democratic aims of schools. Dewey also confronted an era of rapid and complex technological change. Waks has explored Dewey's 1900 publication, *The School and Society*, to mine its lessons for how rapid and dramatic technological change

might impact educational thought and practice. *The School and Society* collected three of Dewey's lectures on his experimental schooling model, developed during a time of urbanization, immigration, and industrialization in US society.[74] Dewey considered how the turn of the twentieth century American school—a place characterized by rote memorization and teacher-directed lessons—needed to change to meet new social conditions.

Dewey's experimental school design presented and defended in *The School and Society* has no traditional classrooms; it is an educational design based on cooperative activity, shared occupations (in the experiential, task-oriented sense of that term rather than the vocational), and firsthand experiences based on the connections between school and the other social institutions to which it should be organically linked: home, farm, business, research and discovery, gardens and parks, and community life. Dewey sought to create an "embryonic society," introducing a "spirit of free communication, of interchange of ideas, suggestions, results."[75] While contemporary schools do not look like Dewey's design for experimental schools, many traditional schools have adopted progressive ideas and innovations, some of which survive even in the face of school standardization and the test-based accountability "reform" of the twenty-first century. Science laboratories, choirs, theater and debate clubs, discussion- and project-based learning, service-learning, cooperative learning strategies, and many other examples illustrate this point. While not available in each and every public school–as inequality and accountability-oriented, test-driven pedagogies plague the system–a variety of progressive pedagogies have certainly shaped the public school of the early twenty-first century and many are common-place features of public schools.

Waks, in examining Dewey's ideas in *The School and Society*, considers how today's traditional schools look when confronted with the changing conditions of twenty-first century society. Our society is increasingly global and networked, with fluid and fast-paced structures for knowledge circulation and creation (as well as miscommunication and misrepresentation). As Waks explains, these trends create pressures for change in the form of myriad new educational trends, including e-learning:

> Thus the new educational trends, including active and cooperative learning, interdisciplinary projects, networked distance learning, and global corporate universities, can be accounted for as more or less conscious attempts to bring learning in line with the changing pattern of life and work activities in global network society. At the same time, students are surrounded by the high-technology culture—interactive computer software and games, mobile Internet phones. High-tech interactive media and computer information systems in schools are thus increasingly necessary merely to bring schooling into line with their out-of-school experiences and expectations.[76]

Waks suggests that a global, networked society requires learning conditions that take advantage of these new patterns of knowing, living, and learning. This vision suggests that our future might contain a rich variety of schooling options which blend face-to-face and virtual environments. As we observe the dominance of digital media expansion and usage, some such blend seems likely in the future. Yet this rich educational vision is hardly realized in virtual schools as they currently exist, which tend to replicate traditional classroom patterns of instructor-delivered lessons, student practice, and student assessment measures to complete the learning cycle.

Waks notes a second important point that Dewey makes in his *School and Society* lectures. Educators today find themselves entrenched in a system plagued by old forms of knowledge circulation (too much memorization, too much static learning) as new forms of knowledge creation and associational forms are blooming. Waks notes, "as in 1900, the entrenched physical and organizational structures of schooling appear maladaptive in the emerging situation of knowledge content, distribution, and utilization."[77] The situation that confronts us is perfectly exemplified in the challenges presented by virtual schools in their fledgling stages of development. Waks poses this important question:

> How are educational leaders to build upon current educational trends to realize our contemporary democratic aspirations? In addressing this question I restrict myself to three preliminary observations growing out of the three themes in Dewey's lectures of 1899: (1) *structural transformation* of the school, which is needed to (2) *connect natural processes with children's instincts*, so that (3) educators can shape pupils' activities to *foster democratic habits*.[78]

Dewey's lab school envisions the present moment in a curious way. This classroom-less school imagined the rich possibilities of bringing education, outside of individual desks in rows, into real environments of experimentation, work, play, and civic involvement. This structural transformation connects human beings' urges to move, create, and try-out ideas with real situations, while also connecting schooling with the fostering of democratic habits of collaboration, cooperation, deliberation, and similar "arts of association."

Virtual schooling has been implemented in ways that simply reproduce some of the worst norms of traditional classrooms, but with higher teacher-to-student ratios, which diminish the relationships and interactions. These conditions can be vastly upgraded with the presence of a resourceful and attentive parent who is closely involved with facilitating the schooling experience, but it is impossible to say how often such a parent is part of a virtual schooling situation or how well that parent is facilitating an associational-rich learning experience. Virtual schooling laws and policies have not yet outlined ways that these schools should even minimally attend to important associational educational goals; although, there are ways

that online education might be made to be more associational, collaborative and deliberative with appropriate teacher training, digital capacities that foster collaborations in real-time, and support for learners and parents as work with online schooling environments. Other associational aspects of traditional public schools may be impossible to duplicate in strictly virtual environments. It is difficult to conceptualize how the richness of many extracurricular activities, for example, could be replicated in fully online virtual schools. One fully online school addresses this issue on its website, and suggests that students become involved in online clubs and organizations where they can connect with students from all over the country, while also claiming that students can interact with other students who have similar interests.[79] These ideas might be helpful start, but if only left to the individual initiatives of educators they will not lead to virtual educational environments that develop rich associational options and possibilities for students.

Conclusion

Virtual schools *could* be developed in ways that help develop democracy's arts of association. As our digital tools become more agile and complex, so will the potential grow to expand virtual school's possibilities in this regard. Perhaps a virtual charter school can be designed to prioritize experiential learning, including videoconferencing with peers where the art of association can be practiced. While some charter schools have focused almost exclusively on math and reading as the center of their mission, virtual charter schools could be designed to prioritize experiential learning, including community projects, videoconferencing around problem sets or peer review of writing assignments with other learners, or online gaming clubs where students can interact with peers, and where the arts of association can be practiced. But unless policy-makers can envision virtual schooling beyond the standard external measures of accountability, and beyond the incentives of profit for educational corporations, virtual schools will do nothing more than reproduce the worst of nineteenth century schooling models. They will exacerbate, rather than alleviate, our current trends of anti-democratic division, disengagement, and discord.

In 1933, John Dewey spoke to a group of kindergarten teachers about what education in utopia would look like. In Dewey's utopian vision, "there are no schools at all. Education is carried on without anything of the nature of schools."[80] Rather, Dewey wrote that in Utopia, "Children, however, are gathered together in association with older and more mature people who direct their activity."[81] The way of education in Dewey's utopia includes learning from others, and transmitting knowledge and skills which enable children to find their purpose in what looks like a community. This type of learning is reminiscent of the way Socrates used the city of Athens as his classroom, which is demonstrated in the opening line of

Plato's *Republic,* "I went down yesterday to the Piraeus,"[82] where the characters in the *Republic* walked and talked, often being questioned by Socrates and those that participated in the dialectics. Making education an instructive experience that occurs as a result of interaction with others is an old idea that could still lead to a thriving democracy whereby people find their purpose. Practicing the skills of citizenship and inculcating students with a deliberative conscious can potentially turn the tide of civic disengagement.

Policymakers need to hold virtual schools accountable. Virtual tools and environments are now part of the social fabric. These environments are capable of providing rich opportunities for learning with other students and adults. However, virtual schools are currently functioning largely as places of social isolation, with poor learning outcomes. Policymakers can continue to use these new tools and environments to reproduce the worst of schooling, or they can consider *all* the aims of education, including civic and democratic aims, when designing standards, expectations, and regulations for these types of schools.

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