

JOHN DEWEY ON LISTENING IN SCHOOL AND SOCIETY

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In this paper I re-examine Dewey's important but neglected account of listening. I draw on Dewey's formulations to establish a direct connection between listening and democracy.² The paper is organized in two parts. In the first I explain Dewey's crucial distinction between one-way or straight-line listening and transactional listening, and then demonstrate the close connection between transactional listening and what Dewey calls "cooperative friendship". In the second I establish the further link between cooperative friendship and democratic society.³

I. LISTENING

Listening in One-Way or Straight-Line Communication

Readers of *School and Society*, Dewey's lectures on the ideas that shaped his laboratory school, will remember the charming passage in which he attempts to find movable furniture for his school and discovers that all available furniture is good only for "listening":

Some few years ago I was looking about the school supply stores in the city, trying to find desks and chairs which seemed thoroughly suitable from all points of view--artistic, hygienic, and educational--to the needs of the children. We had a

¹ All citations from the works of Dewey will be taken from the collected works, including Dewey, J. *The early works of John Dewey, 1882-1898* / edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill : Southern Illinois University Press, 1972 (hereinafter identified as *ew*); *The middle works of John Dewey, 1899-1924* / edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill : Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, hereinafter identified as *mw*; and *The later works of John Dewey, 1925-1953* / edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill : Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, hereinafter identified as *lw*.

² To achieve this end I have examined every passage in which listening and conversation are discussed by Dewey – more than 500 passages in all. Each line in the paper stems directly from one or more cited passages in the collected works. I follow Dewey in considering his entire corpus after the earliest works as developing a few core themes, which are re-addressed and amplified in subsequent works, with the later statements generally being the more considered and complete. Thus, while I rely on a close reading of key works, especially *The School and Society*, *Democracy and Education*, *Experience and Nature*, *The Public and its Problems*, *Art as Experience*, and *Freedom and Culture*, I treat the entire corpus after around 1893 as one unfolding, internally self-reinforcing text developing a system of ideas, and not merely as a series of distinct works considered in isolation. In building my account I liberally paraphrase or quote indirectly from passages throughout the corpus, adding direct quotations as they further illuminate or confirm the account. The formulations throughout are Dewey's own.

³ Because Dewey's account of listening is both complex and neglected, it deserves a careful explication in its own right; I thus refrain here from criticizing it or connecting it to the recent wealth of literature on listening in education, though both would be worthwhile projects.

great deal of difficulty in finding what we needed, and finally one dealer, more intelligent than the rest, made this remark: "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening".⁴

It would be a serious mistake to write this passage off as a cute anecdote, because Dewey uses it to introduce "listening" as a term of art that extends beyond listening in an ordinary sense to include other forms of passive information reception.

The attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity, absorption; that there are certain ready-made materials which are there, which have been prepared by the school superintendent, the board, the teacher, and of which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time.⁵

He sheds further light on this notion of 'listening' by noting that most school reading - e.g., reading from textbooks and basal readers - is also a kind of listening: students listen in their minds' ears, so to speak, to reading contents that are predetermined without regard to their present interests and are not inter-active with their responses as individual readers.⁶

If everything is on a "listening" basis, you can have uniformity of material and method. The ear, and the book which reflects the ear, constitute the medium which is alike for all. There is next to no opportunity for adjustment to varying capacities and demands⁷.

Teacher talk, which monopolizes classroom time, suffers from the same faults. Both school reading and teacher talk convey ready-made, second hand materials, which even when heard

⁴ *The School and Society* hereinafter identified as *SS*, mw1. 21.

⁵ *SS*, mw.1.22.

⁶ *SS*, mw.1:22.

⁷ *ibid*

remain unassimilated, not understood: just so many words standing “on a dead level, hostile to the selective arrangements characteristic of thinking . . . ; existing as verbal symbols to be mechanically manipulated”.⁸ Such materials, he says, “inevitably (have) a disintegrating intellectual influence”⁹.

Indeed, on Dewey’s account neither lectures nor books *can* convey ideas or thoughts from teachers to students, because as he conceives them, ideas are plans for action and thoughts are efforts to work out the implications of ideas. Both presuppose that students are engaged *actively*¹⁰ while the listening mode is *passive*. Ideas stemming from schoolbook reading or student listening thus remain “pulpy and vague”; they can become definite only as related to the action-orientation of the students, and the students then find expressive outlets for their use.¹¹ Ready-made, fixed contents, moreover, are particularly objectionable because by supplying allegedly ready-made solutions without even taking stock of concrete concerns and problems, they merely interfere with whatever thinking the listeners are already actually doing in the inner milieu,¹² reducing it to soliloquy, broken and nullified.¹³

Sadly, this reliance on ‘listening’, Dewey tells us unequivocally in *School and Society*, “tells the story of the traditional education”.¹⁴ He repeats this indictment in *Democracy and Education*: “Almost everything” about the traditional education, he states there, “testifies to the great premium put upon listening (and) reading . . . It is hardly possible to overstate the contrast between such conditions and the situations of active contact with things and persons in the home,

⁸ “Contributions to A Cyclopedia of Education,” mw.7.268

⁹ *How We Think*, mw.6.326. Subsequent references to this work will be identified as *HWT*.

¹⁰ mw.4.67; *Schools of Tomorrow*, mw.8.286 All subsequent references to this work will be identified as *ST*; *Democracy and Education*, mw.9.167. All subsequent references to this work will be identified as *DE*.

¹¹ *HWT*, mw.6.278; “Between Two Worlds,” lw.17.219

¹² *DE*, mw.9.166-167

¹³ *PP*, lw.2.371

¹⁴ *SS*, mw.1.21

on the playground . . .”¹⁵; the fundamental distinction between traditional and ‘progressive’ education lies may be said to lie in the latter’s attempt to recreate the communicative conditions of homes, playgrounds and workplaces.

As one-way, straight-line communications leave no room for response, listeners habituated to them remain passive and lax, irresponsible, thoughtless, fickle, emotionally susceptible, shortsighted, amusement-seeking, and shiftless,¹⁶ imbued neither with courage or energy to speak nor intellectual power to say anything worth listening to.¹⁷ This, as we shall discuss in part two, makes them incapable of democratic living and vulnerable to despotism.

Dewey notes two distinct exceptions, however, to this critique of one-way listening. Students will listen actively to storytellers who, as artists, draw upon and transform prior experiences and associations of students to fascinate, delight, and move them emotionally¹⁸. They will also listen to workers in the community and older students who in speaking provide useful guidance about tasks the younger students will themselves *soon* be expected to perform.¹⁹ These exceptions provide insights into what Dewey then identifies as the *most* important educational question: how, if not by ordinary classroom listening and reading, *can* experience be conveyed -- passed from one generation to the next?²⁰ Dewey’s answer is that learning from the past is accomplished not through one-way listening but from participation, from doing. As he put it, in a well-known passage:

Allow (the child) to act out the idea and it becomes real to him, or the lack of understanding is shown in what is done. Action is the test of comprehension. This

¹⁵ *DE*, mw.9.162

¹⁶ *Syllabus: Social Institutions and the Study of Morals*, mw.15.236

¹⁷ *PP*, lw.2.340; *Ethics*, lw.7.359

¹⁸ *Art as Experience*, lw.10.245 (Subsequent references to this work will be identified as *AE*)

¹⁹ *Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools*, lw.9.137

²⁰ *DE*, mw.9.162

is simply another way of saying that learning by doing is a better way to learn than by listening²¹

And this brings us to his distinct account of an alternative kind of listening.

Transactional Listening

Dewey distinguishes between one-way or straight-line listening and *transactional* listening—in-conversation. This distinct kind of listening is not understood in terms of separate, fixed poles of speaker and listener, ready-made speaker contents, and even ready-made vocabularies. As he puts it, “When A and B carry on a conversation together the action is a transaction: both are concerned in it; its results pass, as it were, across from one to the other”,²² an image that suggests electrical currents that connect the two poles in a single circuit. In this *connected* form of listening the receptive sides of the transactions are also active and aimed, and the active sides are also receptive.²³ The listening is *constructive*, in that the participants, their communication contents, and even their very vocabularies, are all constructed or re-constructed in conversational give and take. All are elements of what Dewey later calls a total inclusive transaction; they are isolated and treated independently only by unempirical theories that depart from or distort observation.²⁴

Let us put these conversational transactions into a broader life context: following Darwin and James, and expressing what he tells us is the third of four central organizing themes of his mature philosophy²⁵ Dewey construes humans as living creatures who, by virtue of prior biological and social conditioning, seek new enjoyments and renewals in each transaction. They

²¹ *ST*, mw.8.286.

²² *PP*, lw.2.244

²³ *The Philosophy of the Arts*, lw.13.366-7

²⁴ *Knowing and the Known*, lw.16.142

²⁵ From Absolutism to Experimentalism, lw.5.158 hereinafter identified as ATE. The first two themes are the emphasis within his philosophy upon the practice and theory of education, particularly of the young, and the untenable dualism between science and morals. See ATE, lw.5.156.

possess flexible and ever-changing organizations of energy; they are always on the go; each experience is caught on the fly, in the course of pursuing a multitude of aims which can come into and pass out of view from moment to moment as situations and the opportunities they present alter. This ‘living creature’ orientation leads directly to Dewey’s fourth central theme, the crucial place in philosophy of communication and participation.²⁶ Humans are *made* for communication,²⁷ it is the first among the natural impulses of young children²⁸ there is nothing more natural than bringing energies to conversational transactions to be modified and re-directed²⁹ to be made more flexible and effective in subsequent action.³⁰

Conversation takes place in the medium of language, which Dewey conceives as primarily practical and social rather than abstract and intellectual.³¹ Human language is continuous with animal signaling³² and builds up in humans through social coordination in a great variety of language uses (i.e. “language games”): command, guidance³³, exhortation, warning, etc. long before it evolves into a tool of intellectual expression. Speakers aim to be understood by listeners, of course, but understanding in practice *means* coming to share an action orientation, not reproducing prior meanings of speakers in the minds of listeners³⁴. As Dewey puts this important point,

The heart of language is not "expression" of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of

²⁶ “The objective biological approach of the Jamesian psychology led straight to the perception of the importance of distinctive social categories, especially communication and participation. It is my conviction that a great deal of our philosophizing needs to be done over again from this point of view,” ATE, 1w.5.159.

²⁷ Events and Meanings, mw.13.276

²⁸ SS, mw.1.29

²⁹ Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us, 1w.14.229. This work will subsequently be referred to as CD.

³⁰ CD, *loc. cit.*

³¹ My Pedagogic Creed, ew.5.90; The University School, ew.5.439

³² *Experience and Nature*, 1w.1.213, 217. This work will hereinafter be identified as *EN*.

³³ *AE*, 1w.10.243

³⁴ *EN*, 1w.1.141

cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action.

Word meanings are manufactured for specific purposes and modified in concrete situations of use.³⁵ Partners rely on a background of common terms of course, but in each transaction prior vocabularies may be reconstructed, modified or abandoned; old words may be put to new uses and new words may be invented to serve specific emergent needs.³⁶ Philosophers should be particularly aware of this, as they constantly abandon and invent new technical terms.

To attain mutual understanding conversational partners must be able to assume each others' roles; that is, each must be able to conceive the other's organization of energies sympathetically, imagining what his or her words in use will mean to the other in the context of the other's present organizing of future action to attain his or her ends.³⁷ As Dewey states it,

. . . language . . . compels one individual to take the standpoint of other individuals and to see and inquire from a standpoint that is not strictly personal but is common to them as participants or "parties" in a conjoint undertaking.³⁸

The characteristic thing about *B's* understanding of *A's* movement and sounds is that he responds to the thing from the standpoint of *A*. He perceives the thing as it may function in *A's* experience, instead of just ego-centrally.³⁹

³⁵ *The Logic of Judgments of Practice*, mw.8.66

³⁶ *Individualism Old and New*, lw.5.61. This work will subsequently be referred to as *ION*

³⁷ *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, lw.12.52 " . . . language . . . compels one individual to take the standpoint of other individuals and to see and inquire from a standpoint that is not strictly personal but is common to them as participants or "parties" in a conjoint undertaking." This work will subsequently be identified as *LTI*.

³⁸ *LTI*, lw.12.52).

³⁹ *EN*, lw.1.141

It is as a result of this intense imaginative mutual awareness that conversation becomes transaction: the results “pass from one partner to the other”.⁴⁰ Speakers shape messages for particular listeners, in concrete situations, with subsequent partnerships for cooperation in view. As a result of this imaginative preparation for and response to the words they speak, they themselves are thus as likely to be altered by their speech acts as are their listeners.⁴¹ Indeed, they are so closely intertwined in the transaction that it can be difficult even to say where one ends and the other begins.⁴² They have reconstructed themselves in the conversation, at least momentarily and provisionally dropped prior, static identities to the point that the statements they make may surprise themselves even more than others.⁴³

Listening and the Art of Conversation

Conversational give and take, speaking and listening, are thus acts of imagination that aspire to the status of art. Dewey explains: “Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases, one has to assimilate imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art.”⁴⁴

Conversation is thus not merely practical but also consummatory,⁴⁵ propitious but also delightful,⁴⁶ functional and vital, a reminder but also a novelty, satisfying expectations but also arousing longings.⁴⁷ Like dramatic theatre and the novel, it can both record and sum up the value

⁴⁰ Dewey generalizes this important point from two speakers in conversation to all participants in civilization over time: “In one way everyone is shut off from everyone else. We have, for instance, no access to each other's consciousness, should we choose to be silent; and yet through the medium of my voice you somehow or another are enabled to participate in my consciousness; and my consciousness is enabled to expand and enlarge until it gets into the community with yours; so that my consciousness--while it is individual--is also social, because it has taken to itself an indefinite number of thoughts and suggestions coming from everyone in all ages.” *The Social Value of Courses, Educational Lectures at Brigham Young Academy*, lw.17.321

⁴¹ *DE*, mw.9.8; lw.7.345

⁴² *DE*, mw.9.194

⁴³ *EN*, lw.1.152

⁴⁴ *DE*, mw.9.9.

⁴⁵ *EN*, lw.1.144

⁴⁶ *Events and Meanings*, mw.13.279

⁴⁷ *AE*, lw.10.174

of what precedes and evoke and prophesy what is to come.⁴⁸ Conversation is associated with work but even more with pleasure: the experience of gathering together for conversation around fireplaces or in local saloons and pubs is continuous with festivals and public rituals⁴⁹; like art conversation aims to shape experience as a common possession⁵⁰, and in overcoming isolation and creating experiences of emotional closeness and group consensus it achieves the *most* satisfying of human pleasures.⁵¹

We can learn more about the art *of* communication by considering art itself *as* a form of communication. Communication, Dewey reiterates, is the process of generating participation, making meanings common.⁵² And art, drawing upon and intensifying prior experiences without limit, is the only complete and unhindered form of communication.⁵³ It works by means of emotional contagion⁵⁴ to generate shared experience and a powerful unity of outlook that breaks down all social barriers.⁵⁵

Each art has its own language, but the needs of daily life make speech the most important medium of expression.⁵⁶ Literary art is itself one form of communication,⁵⁷ but it furnishes the model of supreme successes in stating of experiences.⁵⁸ We acquire a *mother* tongue as young babes, and regardless of our linguistic sophistication we fall back upon it in moments of excited

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *EN*, lw.1.69

⁵⁰ *DE*, mw.9.12; Religion and Morality in a Free Society, lw.15.179

⁵¹ *EN*, lw.1.145

⁵² *AE*, lw.10.248

⁵³ *AE*, lw.10.110

⁵⁴ Contributions to a Cyclopedia of Education, mw.6.356

⁵⁵ *AE*, lw.10.249

⁵⁶ *AE*, lw.10.111

⁵⁷ *Plan of Organization of the University Primary School*, ew.5.231

⁵⁸ *DE*, mw.9.235

emotion.⁵⁹ The materials of literature are thus highly charged with vibrant associations; literature works with “loaded dice”.⁶⁰

Literature and the arts become broadly valuable, however, only as they leave the academies, salons and museums and return to everyday life, infusing its “walk and conversation” with aesthetic quality.⁶¹ Emotive power, borrowed by literature from the terms and semantic associations found in everyday speech, is returned to everyday routines and exchanges, with compound interest. Indeed, for Dewey the sole reason for maintaining a continuity of culture is to make that culture operative in daily life⁶²; the arts and sciences are only liberal in effect when they feed into and revitalize every day conversation.⁶³

Cooperative Friendship

Intense friendships, says Dewey, express themselves through the art of conversation, and the art of conversation in turn *creates* intense friendships.⁶⁴ Though any desired thing can become a source of conflict as many seek separately to possess it, it can also become a common possession for mutual benefit in a world where force and violence are no longer means for resolving conflicts. Through sympathetic imagination, conversation can thus bring otherwise separate selves together so their desires and satisfactions can *literally be shared* in the harmony of action.⁶⁵ The *cooperative friendship* resulting from the experience of mutual listening-in-

⁵⁹ *DE*, mw.9.21

⁶⁰ *AE*, lw.10.243)

⁶¹ *Art as our Heritage*, lw.14.257

⁶² *The Educational Situation*, mw.1.302

⁶³ *Ethics*, 1st edition, mw.5.401. Here Dewey might be thinking of ideal examples like Lincoln’s use of Biblical expressions; contemporary examples include Robert Kennedy’s reading of passages from Shakespeare to himself in the mirror each morning to improve the emotional resonance of his political diction.

⁶⁴ *AE*, lw.10.275

⁶⁵ *AE*, lw.10.291

conversation thus serves as both the means and end of democracy as a form of social life.⁶⁶ To that notion to we now turn.

II. DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Democracy and Communication

Transactional listening and cooperative friendship are themes that re-occur throughout Dewey's theory of democratic society. The essence of the *social* is, Dewey states, achieving community by communication,⁶⁷ and the essence of *democratic* society is the broad achievement of unity or harmony in action, the taming of conflict and violence, by broad communication.⁶⁸ More to the point, society exists not just *by*, but *in* communication as *communion*, the experience of unity.⁶⁹ This is the condition where individual boundaries momentarily dissolve and speaker and listener, in working toward cooperative partnership, become so *intertwined* that it hard to say where one ends and the other begins. Indeed, the word 'social' is inherently transactional; it *means* participation through the *interpenetration* of meanings between speakers and listeners in communication.⁷⁰

Of course no national society can merge in such a monolithic communal unity. In any society there are many divisions and partial associations⁷¹ ; "men associate together in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of purposes",⁷² though there are also barriers e.g., of race and class, that block communication between their members.⁷³ Democracy in society means the unceasing effort to break down these barriers. Its essence is voluntary cooperation, achieved through full

⁶⁶ John Dewey Responds, lw.17.87

⁶⁷ Religion and Morality in a Free Society, lw.15.179

⁶⁸ The One World of Hitler's National Socialism, mw.8.444; *Ethics*, lw.7.358;CD, lw.14.228..

⁶⁹ The One World of Hitler's National Socialism, mw.8.445; *DE*. mw.9.7

⁷⁰ *Syllabus: Social Institutions and the Study of Morals*, mw.15.238

⁷¹ *Ethics*, mw.5.406

⁷² *DE*, mw.9.87

⁷³ The One World of Hitler's National Socialism, mw.8.444; *CD*, lw.14.227

and free communication rather than force.⁷⁴ This idea, Dewey states, is central to the liberal tradition⁷⁵ and is implicit in the U.S. constitution with its rights to free speech and assembly.⁷⁶

In modern societies people belong to many associations including those of ethnicity, religion, political party and occupation which shape their separate identities. These associations can be positive or negative as they expand or restrict sociability; they are optimally social, or *democratic*, in so far as there is both a broad sharing of interests *among* members as well as free association and exchange of between their members and members of other groups.⁷⁷ This crucial yet opaque formulation (from *Democracy and Education*) contains Dewey's most extended conceptual analysis of democracy, and repays careful explication and amplification.

Starting with the second criterion, there is a general ambivalence about 'others' demonstrated by institutions of hospitality; 'hospitality' and 'hostility' share a common root referring to the outsider. We treat 'others' as guests to avoid rousing their ire and to keep lines of communication open in order to foster mutually beneficial exchange and maintain at least the possibility of humaneness and sympathy in our relations.⁷⁸ As in-group members actually speak and listen to outsiders and work toward mutual practical understanding, moreover, they can sympathetically enter into shared experience with them. As they acquire new, cooperative ways of doing things through conversation, both parties are transformed. Instead of feared aliens, the "others" become cooperative friends.

Turning back to the first criterion, as a result of these new shared understandings with outsiders, the members' subsequent transactions with their own fellow *primary* group members become more challenging. Due to changes in attitude and behavior stemming from agreements

⁷⁴ The One World of Hitler's National Socialism mw.8.445-6

⁷⁵ The Meaning of the Term: Liberalism, lw.14.253)

⁷⁶ *Ethics*, lw.7.359

⁷⁷ *DE*, mw.9.88-92

⁷⁸ *Ethics*, mw.5.68

with their new cooperative friends from outside their primary groups, longstanding in-group expectations about attitudes and ways of doing things break down.⁷⁹ But insofar as the primary in-groups are sociable, sharing broad interests and speaking and listening openly among themselves to gain the benefit of new understandings while forestalling disorder,⁸⁰ these groups as well as their relations with the outside groups can also be transformed; the alien groups themselves can approach conflicts amicably and become cooperative friends. It is in and through such communication practices that the larger multi-group society becomes democratic.⁸¹

New Technologies of Communication and the Threat of Totalitarian Society

Prior to the machine age most communication was direct, oral and local, taking place in neighborhood communities.⁸² But contemporary life (as Dewey experienced it in the rapidly advancing industrial society) is entirely bound up with new communications technologies: e.g., the telephone, radio and cinema that provide the necessary means for broad communication in modern society.⁸³ These new communication technologies of the machine age have, he states, dissolved distance and removed physical barriers and broadened communication, but they have also weakened its intimacy and directness – the broad sharing of interests -- in local groups.⁸⁴ They have invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without setting any more inclusive form of community in place. But only community provides the social context for sharing emotions and ideas and initiating joint undertakings⁸⁵; the new communication technologies of his time became necessary but not sufficient conditions for

⁷⁹ *DE*, mw.9.92

⁸⁰ *DE*, mw.9.105

⁸¹ *CD*, lw.14.228

⁸² *PP*, lw.2.322

⁸³ *Ethics*, mw.5.427

⁸⁴ It is worth considering the potential of new Internet technologies, especially social networks, in alleviating or accentuating these trends. This is, however, a topic for another paper.

⁸⁵ *PP*, lw.2.322; *Freedom and Culture*, lw.13.176. This work will subsequently be referred to as *FC*

sustaining democracy under industrial conditions; they pose a problem, rather than offering a solution.⁸⁶

Mass communications technologies of that sort have also been taken up by totalitarian despots, who draw upon the power of art to disseminate compelling propaganda stirring powerful emotions and creating conformity in mass opinion⁸⁷ and even a specious consensus.⁸⁸ Propaganda messages, he notes, can now be endlessly and mechanically repeated to captive audiences forced to ‘listen’ passively and inertly to one-way messages,⁸⁹ while spy networks monitor and effectively prevent any frank private face to face conversations.⁹⁰ The barriers erected to full and free communication in totalitarian societies demonstrate the centrality of free communication in democracies.⁹¹

But even in modern democracies, mass communications have not enlivened but dampened political conversation.⁹² He laments that not one private conversation in a hundred addresses a political topic. Citizens overwhelmed by contemporary events converse instead about soap operas and the adventures of Amos ‘n Andy.⁹³ The “cheapened and multiplied access to amusement” is the combined product of modern communications technologies, media capitalism and passivity.⁹⁴ The enemy of political freedom is not just coercion but passivity and sloth.⁹⁵

⁸⁶ *FC*, lw.13.111

⁸⁷ *FC*, lw.13.70

⁸⁸ *FC*, lw.13.156

⁸⁹ *FC*, lw.13.156

⁹⁰ *FC*, lw.13.127; *CD*, lw.14.227

⁹¹ “When I think of the conditions under which men and women are living in many foreign countries today, fear of espionage, with danger hanging over the meeting of friends for friendly conversation in private gatherings, I am inclined to believe that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another,” *CD*, lw.14.227.

⁹² *PP*, lw.2.321

⁹³ *Is There Hope for Politics?* lw.6.183

⁹⁴ *PP*, lw.2.322

⁹⁵ “Dispositions like love of ease, of sensational excitement, and desire to be relieved from responsibility for obtaining information and for careful reflection, are the internal forces which re-enforce the suppression of truth and

Masses in modern democracies fail to organize for political action not because they are afraid, but because they feel they have nothing to say that would compel anyone else to listen.⁹⁶

The traditional education persisting in the schools offers no solution. The common schools, he declares, long considered the solution to this problem, are dominated, like totalitarian societies, by ready-made one-way speech and inert listening. One-way straight-line listening in traditional education is of a piece with, and a significant cause of, passivity in society and vulnerability to despotism. The schools as we have known them thus do not offer a solution to the problem of industrial democracy; rather, every dimension of common schooling from teaching and learning to curriculum and administration set problems which, despite decades of progressive theorizing, remain all but ignored in practice.⁹⁷

Creating the Great Community

A democratic society is constructed out of transactions of “integrated individualities”,⁹⁸ it is a form of associated life replacing force and fear with the give and take of communication; thus conditions making for cooperative friendship are cherished, enabling each individual to develop fully and freely in an harmonious social context.⁹⁹

One-way straight line communication, which characterizes the deeply entrenched form of schooling, leads to negative conformity, the absence of vital interchange, the swallowing up of individuals in an undifferentiated mass.¹⁰⁰ But there is also a *positive* conformity, in which individuals, despite their differences, unconsciously act from a depth of agreement stemming

the distortion of fact which come from without. Mental passivity probably accounts for more failures in democratic government than does actual corruption . . .” *Ethics*, lw.7.359.

⁹⁶ Freedom, lw.11.253

⁹⁷ *FC*, lw.13.92

⁹⁸ The Underlying Philosophy of Education, lw.8.80

⁹⁹ “To take as far as possible every conflict which arises . . . out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree-- even profoundly-- with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends” CD, lw.14.228; see also Education and Social Change, lw.11.417.

¹⁰⁰ *ION*, lw.5.82

from the rich everyday transactions of genuine community life.¹⁰¹ Cooperative friendship across difference, he assures us, is a binding force in society more powerful than either fear or the submergence of individuality in the mass.¹⁰²

But only the give and take of communication can make the society into a genuine community, one marked by affection and trust, and in its full sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face speaking and listening: the eye is a spectator but the ear is a participator.¹⁰³ A public formed on the basis of photo ops, TV clips and print images is only partly formed until meanings are shared “from mouth to mouth”.¹⁰⁴

A democratic society in the machine age, conceived as a Great Community, can never possess all qualities of a local community. Abiding social affections are “bred in tranquil stability; they are nourished in constant relationships”.¹⁰⁵ Stability and constancy will never characterize a democratic society taken as a whole. There is no substitute for the give and take of face-to-face conversation among neighbors and friends. Those who have not participated in the daily rounds of community life may “inspire admiration, emulation, servile subjection, fanatical partisanship, hero worship; but not love and understanding”.¹⁰⁶ “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community”.¹⁰⁷

To create a modern society grounded in cooperative friendship, local communities must therefore be restored.¹⁰⁸ But when they are, they will find themselves transformed by the radio and television and cinema, the new communications technologies of the machine age.¹⁰⁹ They

¹⁰¹ *ION*, 1w.5.83

¹⁰² Why I Selected “Democracy and America” 1w.15.367

¹⁰³ *PP*, 1w.2.371

¹⁰⁴ *PP*, 1w.2.371

¹⁰⁵ *PP*, 1w.2.322

¹⁰⁶ *PP*, 1w.2.368)

¹⁰⁷ *PP*, 1w.2.367-8

¹⁰⁸ *PP*, 1w.2.371

¹⁰⁹ *PP*, 1w.2.350

will have been rendered responsive to the world wide scene in which they are enmeshed. While local, they will no longer be isolated. Daily conversation can draw on an inexhaustible flow of meanings to share. But for this potential to be realized, the mass communication of significant knowledge must, like that of the story teller, rise to the level of art, fascinating and delighting ordinary people, informing and moving them to think and to share in community dialogue.

Summary

Dewey's theory of listening rests on a distinction between one-way or straight-line listening and transactional listening-in-conversation. The former he sees as the dominant feature of both traditional schools and undemocratic societies. Indeed, by fostering passivity, traditional schooling even in nominally democratic societies makes citizens vulnerable to undemocratic forces. Transactional listening, by contrast, generates an attitude of cooperative friendship that lies at the heart of democracy. New technologies of mass communication, while providing means for extending communications throughout modern industrial nations, nonetheless undermine the conditions fostering face to face listening-in-conversation. To advance democracy in modern societies, schools and local neighborhoods have to be revitalized so as to promote and sustain conditions for the give and take of speaking and listening in everyday conversational exchange.