

From Two Kinds of Fear in Communication to Transformative Intercultural Communication for Creative Democracy

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Abstract

Democracy is creative. Dewey argued that democracy must be continuously renewed by each generation to avoid stagnation. The task can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity, and communication is at the core of creative democracy (Dewey, 1939). However, is free communication with no fear possible, in the new realities of social media, schools, landscape, and broader society that have created social forces that challenge core assumptions about democracy? These challenges get bigger and deeper, between different generations, race, genders, political orientations and ideologies, while proving that we have not made much progress in democracy and need to create and recreate it. In this study, I take up such warnings by arguing that transformative intercultural communication can be inventive effort for creative democracy. By focusing on Dewey's notion of communication, this study examines two kinds of fear that block communication: uncertainty (vulnerability, ambivalence) and power associated with language. Then, this paper explores how those fears can be changed through transformative intercultural communication, particularly by highlighting aesthetic, poetic, and attentive listening, social imagination, and multi-directional communication that exist in relationship to the experiences of those who participate in communication. This study suggests that Dewey's analysis of intercultural communication as leading to a fusion of horizons can help us move beyond the impasse of multiculturalism and democratic education, in persistently and newly segregated contexts within our society and across the globe, and learn and grow as community.

Keywords: Dewey, democracy, communication, intercultural

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Introduction

Today we see conflicts, wars, hatred, and violence in many places on the globe. Even in USA, whose core value and identity has been democracy, People are afraid to express their opinions at workplace or on social media, and scholars are feared to present their research freely. If they are non-white Americans and immigrants, it becomes more serious as safety problem. They are warned to be cautious in every conversation and action, so that they did not become direct victims of hatred attacks and discrimination, or get expelled. With these challenging conditions, how will we be able to handle important global issues together and pursue common values? The problem exists closely because this is happening within educational institutions. Many students said that they were fearful, particularly when it came to expressing their opinions in their classrooms post-elections. It is incredibly unfortunate that students face such unnecessary challenges in American schools where they have to learn democracy.

Such situation proves that we have not made much progress in democracy. It also demonstrates that the democracy is undergoing change, while, as Garrison (2012) points out, many American students assume their democracy is complete and only requires preserving. Dewey wrote this article in 1939 when he thought they faced crisis in democracy. It is timely and critically important for us to re-read John Dewey's essay "Creative democracy – the task before us" in today's crisis in democracy. This crisis can be an opportunity for moving up to another level of democracy. As Dewey stated, "the most experienced and wisest men of the country gathered to take stock of conditions and to create the political structure of a self-governing society" (p. 224) He continued to say that, "It was a country of physical opportunity and invitation" and "at the present time, the frontier is moral, not physical" (p. 225). The frontier is moral today, but is it truly a country of physical opportunity and invitation now? The crisis of two hundred years ago and at Dewey's time called out social and political inventiveness is with us today in a form which puts a much heavier demand on human creativeness.

Communication as the Core in Creative Democracy

Dewey emphasized that "the task can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity" and "it is in part because the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy was something that perpetuated itself automatically" (p. 225). Many thought and still think the U.S. accomplished democracy and the task is done. In part, assuming and acting like that seems to contribute to this crisis. For example, when a college course discusses racism, there are often students who say "it's enough" "actually we talk about this too much and that's a problem". Then the professor, especially non-white, and other students stop and avoid talking about racism in their classroom. For Dewey, however,

Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. (p. 229)

Therefore, although there will be uncomfortableness, the current "striving" to be democratic, rather than stopping or avoiding talking about racism, is meaningful and important itself. It is

ends and means to the further action toward more mature democracy. Therefore, it is educative.

At the core of such inventive and creative efforts, according to Dewey, there is free communication. As an experience in connection with others and surroundings, “free interaction with surrounding conditions, especially the human surroundings” (p. 229) is the tool for creative democracy. This free interaction “develops and satisfies need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are.” “Knowledge of conditions as they are is the only solid ground for communication and sharing; all other communication means the subjection of some persons to the personal opinion of other persons.” The wonder, that only unknown and not pre-possessed knowledge can give, raises need and desire, and out of which grow purpose and direction of energy that “help go beyond what exists, and hence beyond knowledge, beyond science” and “continually open the way into the unexplored and unattained future” (p. 229). It is not disturbing knowledge, but shows a progression and the importance of such knowledge as the tool and energy for the good work in the future.

Then, promoting need and desire is the important task. Before then, however, Dewey elaborated the condition of free communication. Dewey (LW 14) strongly believed that mutual suspicion, abuse, fear, and hatred choke free beliefs, free expression, free assembly, and free communication (p. 228). They also destroy the essential condition of the democratic way of living. He argues that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in unrestricted gatherings of neighbors and friends to converse freely with one another. Hence, the more suspicion, fear, and hatred our society spreads, the stronger efforts we need for free and genuine communication with one another. Dewey continued to explain this in his contemporary situation: “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...” (p. 227). This is not just a story of Dewey’s time or far foreign countries, but the everyday experiences of people, like students of color or foreign professors’ story. college classroom, or immigrants of color who live in whites’ dominant neighborhood and behave extra carefully.

For Dewey, democracy should be discussed at the level of human associations. Two criteria for evaluating the moral or ethical worth of them include the numerous and varied shared interests they involve and the full and free interplay with external groups they promote (MW 9: 89). According to Dewey, a democracy is primarily “a mode of associated living, of *conjoint communicated* experience beyond a form of government” (MW 9: 93). As Waks (2011) drew on Dewey’s work of listening and democracy, this implies that communication should include listening, and the listening is not one-way or straight-line listening but should be transactional listening. Herein lies the problem of not free communication. We don’t listen well. While we may listen to what is spoken, we don’t attentively listen to the language and the other who speaks it (Jones, 1999; Langmann, 2015; Waks, 2010). Then, is free communication possible? What does block it, and how can we remove the blocks?

Is Free Communication Possible? (Or, What Blocks Intercultural Communication?)

Intercultural communication is important now in this interconnected global era. But, intercultural communication is not new; it does not simply mean communication between just two different countries’ people, but people from different cultures, ages, gender, orientation,

religion, position, needs, or parents and teenagers. According to Dewey, “For everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life” (pp. 227–228). That is why we have to go beyond current assemblies, which ironically are dividing more. Assembly and association require what Dewey meant “fullness of communication” by two-way communication including “listening.” Mutual suspicion, abuse, fear and hatred block free intercultural communication and these do not just hinder speech but also listening, because we humans naturally have fear of being vulnerable and shaking their foundation and changing their beliefs. When we think about fear as barriers in promoting free communication, we usually assume fear that the oppressed people possess. However, both sides of communication can have fear, and this universally happens as a profound and innate pattern of human reaction to a new and different others or experiences. Therefore, to understand fear in intercultural communication and think about how to overcome it and move forward is important to intercultural education and our growth and learning.

Two Kinds of Fear

Waks (2010) says we need special listening that helps learners to experience new possibilities of thought and expression within themselves and be more willing to open up and share deep feelings with others with a sense of acceptance and fascination from the listener.

Uncertainty (Vulnerability, Ambivalence)

Dewey’s *The Quest for certainty* (1929) claims that we humans seek certainty. This hinders change and growth. But this also can work for growth, if it meets uncertainty and ambivalent state. Hence, uncertainty gives us drive to certainty, pushes ourselves to expand and grow. To meet uncertainty, we need to be vulnerable to different others. Therefore, uncertainty and vulnerability are not threatening but good and necessary for learning and growth. Facing uncertainty is hard in some cultures, especially. For example, in many of east Asian countries, it feels like almost impossible for the people who are culturally expected to answer only one correct and only outcomes. Also, vulnerability is not about losing, but about breaking and growing self.

Many situations involving humans are qualitative contexts requiring intuiting data, with the difficult task of intelligent selection and discrimination. In this view, empathy is “the best source of data in the social sciences and in moral deliberation” (Garrison, 1997, p. 37). Without empathy there is always a danger of misunderstanding. The empathetic and generous recognition of the needs, desires, and hopes of others may propel us beyond the bounds of our fixed selves. If we allow ourselves to grow, we will go through the process of losing our “selves,” our personal identity, many times along the way. To grow, we must be vulnerable and risk ourselves in relationships of care and concern (Garrison, 1997, pp. 37–38). This reminds us of Dewey’s concept of education, which is communication toward growth. Dewey (1916) considers all communication is like art and educative, because communication is a process of sharing experiences till it becomes a common possession and has changed and enlarged experiences. In this process, it is inevitable that an individual must be vulnerable and flexible and be able to modify his/her own possessions, which means growth. Education is all one with growing.

Power and Language

The other kind of fear in intercultural communication is caused by the power in language. Language is significant especially in intercultural communication, because people use language as media communication but there may be people who use the language as a foreign language.

Like Waks, Langmann (2015) also suggests poetic and attentive listening. But she approaches with more focus on language from a critical perspective based on postcolonial critique, pointing out that the western simple idea of language as tool has a problem in intercultural communication. Citing Ashcroft et al, Langmann says there is the risk that one overlooks the “hierarchy of languages” in promoting intercultural communication and dialogue in education, namely that control and power over the “right” or “proper” language was a major feature of Western imperial suppression of the non-West (Ashcroft et al., 1989). As Gayatri Spivak (1988) shown, the subaltern woman of the third world can only be heard by her oppressors if she speaks in the language of the oppressor, making the abandonment of her culturally customary ways of knowing and thinking a necessary part of many postcolonial situations. As Langmann analyses Spivak’s, this forced abandonment is due to the fact that critical thinking tends to articulate its relation to the other solely within a Western hegemonic vocabulary. Hence, Langmann says, if we want to speak and listen to the other as *other* in intercultural education, that is, as someone whose otherness is never completely knowable or appropriable by me, language seems to be at the same time the path *and* the non-path in education (Derrida, 1996).

Aesthetic Approach to Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication as Dewey’s concept of “art as experience” can contribute to these efforts, because art has the power to break all such fear, prejudice and preconception, and gives rise to imagination to see best possibilities in an individual and a situation (Garrison, 1997; Kim, 2009). In communication both the speaker and listener must expand their imaginations to encompass the other, the attitudes of both are broadened (Waks, 2009, p. 120). Such imagination deepens recognition of their common problems. *Communication should be aesthetic and aesthetic communication is necessary instrument to get to aesthetic experience.*

Langmann explores new ways of relating to language to speak and listen to the other as other, and discuss how a more poetic attentive listening to the silence between us could open up for a non-hierarchical and transformative intercultural communication in difference.

Communication is essential to get to aesthetic experience which is summative and ultimate experience. This communication is not one direction, but inter, cross, and both – exists in relationship to the experiences of participants. This especially needs poetic (Langmann) and attentive listening. We cannot anticipate it along with a calculated plan. Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock (2005) explain the fact in this way: “Aesthetic experiences almost have a life of their own, are unpredictable, and cannot be stereotyped. They appear unexpectedly and visit again without notice. They are characterized by novelty, suspense, and surprise even when anticipated.” (p. 141). Its “transitory” nature, Kerdeman says, “is especially true in educational settings” (2005, p. 91). Aesthetic experience is also “vulnerable” and “fragile.” All these qualities typically are not valued in formal educational settings. Formal education, Custodero writes, is “often limited to single pathways and predetermined outcomes, where

‘what if’ questions are rarely welcomed – especially in today’s political climate of high stakes testing” (2005).

Kim et al.’s (2018) study shows intercultural experience of teacher candidate students who participated in global project in their teacher education course at a university in USA. Through intercultural communication with peer teacher candidate students in another country, the participants from both cultures not only reflected on their experience, but they also gained insights that they had not considered. The experience ultimately expanded their ideas of good teaching and eliminated any stereotypes that they may have had. The importance of overcoming stereotypes is emphasized in multicultural education (Gomez, 1991). The participants learned, through communicating and working with the teacher candidates in another country, how things that can be seen as trivial. This experience made them more aware of every little intricacy of teaching. The participants also voiced about ideas they would not have thought about before the communication experience. While the participants found both differences and similarities between two different cultures, they said that the experiences from intercultural communication were important because they realized that many education systems have the same issues. In this way, communicating with teacher candidates in another country helped the participants to develop their tolerance to different culture and cosmopolitan values.

Langmann hopefully said we need to cultivate this but did not suggest how. Waks said it’s not directly taught but suggested several things that help. It is important being exposed and facing to be vulnerable as many as you can.

Conclusions

Intercultural communication is not about politics, but about learning and growth as individuals and countries. As Waks (2007) suggested, “Dewey’s analysis of intercultural communication as leading to a fusion of horizons can help us move beyond the impasse of multiculturalism and democratic education in our situation of re-segregated metropolitan schools” (p. 35). The suggestions of this paper will be to further contribute to the discussion on creative democracy for USA, and beyond, world as community. In Green’s term, “social imagination” (1995) works like an engine of a mustang, moving towards the community in the making that Dewey called democracy. “Observation supplies the near, imagination the remote” (*How we think*, p. 291).

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