

# Emerson, Dewey and Pat

One of the people we Americans quote most in commencement exercises is Emerson. One of the people most quoted in the education department of American universities and colleges is Dewey. Nobody quotes Pat, at least to my knowledge. Pat was my student. I think Emerson and Dewey would love Pat. But, I think some college professors might not.

In learning to be a teacher at Rutgers, Adelphi, and UNC Charlotte Universities, I was taught a lot about managing behavior and preparing students for tests. My college classes were mostly analytic, or what is now often called *left brain* lessons. You know the kind, lectures filled with concepts and information. In actual teaching, however, it's not like that. Here's an example. One about Pat. I was teaching in an alternative high school of about 150 students, mostly emotionally disturbed adolescents, and about 40 teachers, counselors, and administrators. Though Pat did ok on his tests, he was not great at behaving and he seemed to have an unusually high level of what many studies on the brain are calling an integration of his right and left brain. You know, he would sometimes jump from details to the big picture, or he would spurt out a string of seemingly unrelated, lateral ideas that apparently made sense to him.

Pat was the student that my teacher training had told me to *manage*. But, I don't think that's what Emerson and Dewey really suggested, is it? Let me give you an example from my classroom. I was teaching science to a class. Pat was there. I was explaining the "right hand rule" – the rule in the physics of electromagnetism where you hold out your right hand with your fingers curled and your thumb out straight. While your thumb

shows the direction of an electric current, your fingers show the magnetic field curling around the current. As I brought up the phrase, “right hand rule”, Pat said, “Isn’t that the hand you’re supposed to use for shifting gears?” Pat could be counted on to make such comments off point or only tangentially related to the lesson. I taught Pat over the span of four years in three different courses: geometry, physics, and an advanced science seminar. It was amazing how he could consistently join a discussion with a view that was in from left field. Almost every time Pat did this, the class was stopped, however. Often, none of us could make the connection to what Pat was saying, and if asked, he usually could not explain himself. One time I drew a geometric figure on the board. Pat called out, “Hey, if you turn your head sideways, that looks like a person smiling.”

I came to know and truly respect Pat. I grew to realize that he was not simply being a wise guy, making flaky remarks out of mere self-indulgence. He was aware of a good many more ideas than most of us and was following up and trying to learn to integrate them. Because he was in three of my classes, I got to know him quite well. I think that Pat was using his intuitive right brain in concert with his analytic left brain. Current research has shown unprecedented evidence that each side of the brain needs the other to attain coherence. At his best, Pat may be a prime example of such a balance. He was a very intelligent, creative thinker. In the main, he was not trying to be a class clown in making offbeat comments; at least no more than any healthy teenager. I think that Pat was often in touch with larger ideas than he could express. He just had to blurt them out. He had to share them. For instance, once we were talking about the *wholeness of nature* as portrayed by the Oxford physics professor, Henri Bortoft, who wrote a book by the same name (1996). Pat posed a question to me and really to the whole class. He said, "If the whole can be in the part, then every one of us must have the ability to know everything, if only we could get access to that whole that is in us." This stirred a lively discussion.

I added, "Pat might be right. If we have the whole of everything, including all knowledge, somehow within us, perhaps we do have access to that whole." The discussion sent Pat into several conjectures. He began posing possible scenarios and instances of one person seeing an object from one angle and another person seeing the same from another angle and the two miscommunicating though they were really seeing the same object. I told the class the parable of the six blind men examining the elephant and each having a totally different experience. One blind man touched the tail and claimed an elephant is like a rope. Another touched the leg and asserted the elephant is like a tree - and so on.

My way of managing Pat's behavior was to respect and listen to his odd comments and questions, then gently remark something like, "I don't know exactly where to go with that, but I'm sure it is worthwhile for you to pursue." Pat taught me to honor the creative process of learning, the way I think Emerson and Dewey suggest!

Excessive attention to surface phenomena (even in the way of rebuke as well as of encouragement) may lead to their fixation and thus to arrested development. What impulses are moving toward, not what they have been, is the important thing for parent and teacher. The true principle of respect for immaturity cannot be better put than in the words of Emerson: 'Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude. But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion. Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer, - Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect

yourself.... The two points in a boy's training are, to keep his nature and train off all but that; to keep his nature, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horseplay; keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction in which it points.' (Dewey, 1916/2005, Chapter 5: Preparation, Unfolding, and Formal Discipline, para. 10)

Even when I came to respect that Pat had something of value however, I could not entertain every one of his comments. So, without completely stopping the class and losing the train of thought, I would outwardly demonstrate my respect for Pat by briefly acknowledging his ideas. This showed the whole class that I thought Pat was not a behavior problem, but rather, a valuable member of the class whose learning process was a bit different. It is interesting to note that it was enlivening to the whole class to see my obvious display of respect for Pat. It enhanced the mood and attention of the whole group. I think that a conventional way to handle a student who appears constantly to want to deviate from the topic at hand could have easily made Pat feel bad and generate an unsafe mood in the class. It could have signaled the other students to be wary of being slightly ridiculed and disrespected. And although respect is a very fragile commodity with teenagers, I have seen some teachers use a bullying technique of making students afraid to venture far from the teacher's agenda for fear of being handled sarcastically in front of the others.

In a book about working with presence, Goleman and Senge (2007) recommend a stronger-than-usual form of listening, where the teacher leaves room for the possible wisdom that a person might be seeing, even if it cannot be fully brought up to the level of conscious discussion. There are times when high school teachers, college professors, and even fellow students do not really listen to lateral thinkers who seem to bring in thoughts

from the side, rather than ones that are in line with the current discussion. Why do we do this? Perhaps we simply want to conform. Maybe we are used to listening lightly for terminology and superficial concepts. Maybe we are satisfied learning how to name things – to learn words and names that will be on the test.

One of my favorite ways to make fun of this conventionally superficial listening is in teaching about gravity. For instance, once I asked Pat's advanced science seminar, "Do you know why things fall?"

"Of course. Gravity. We knew about gravity since we were little Mr. B.," someone in the class answered.

"Oh," I would say. But, then, there's Pat. "Pat, do you know what gravity is?"

Pat said, "I have no idea. Do you, Mr. B.?" I knew I could count on Pat.

"No. I don't think anyone does. You guys probably don't. And I know scientists definitely don't. That's why they gave it a name. Somebody walked up one day and said, 'We have absolutely no idea why things are attracted to earth, or why any mass is attracted to any other mass for that matter. So, let's have a quick way of saying this. I know, let's call it 'gravity'.' You see kiddies, you name stuff that you *don't* understand."

When I taught like this, using more of my right brain than my left, Pat was my perfect audience. He was not one to go along with the crowd. And he didn't use scientific names as if labeling things with the correct term would show mastery. In not conforming, Pat refused to follow the left brain love of categorization and rules. He almost always chose the creative approach. For instance, once I performed a role-play of a teacher ostensibly complimenting a student saying, "Oh, do I know

Susie? Of course, I do. She is quiet and polite and always gives dependable answers to questions. And she's smart, too." Then I spoke in a whisper to the class, "But this week, Susie's world has come apart. Her mom is very sick, and her father is leaving. This teacher is complimenting her, but he is not seeing her. This is because he is not looking at Susie. He has labeled her based on things she is known to have done in the past. He stopped really looking at her long ago."

Here, once again, I could count on Pat. He joined the little improvisation I had set up in the class. Taking the role of Susie, adopting a high pitched voice, he sang out in a comical, yet poignant comment, "Oh, thank you Mr. Bickart. My life is in ruins, but your remembering my superficial personality has made me feel sooooo good!" Pat could be whimsical, yet responsible enough to nail the essence of a problem.

So, you can see why it was easy for me to tell both Pat and the entire class that there must be something interesting in what Pat is seeing when he would add strange comments and viewpoints. In his books on social and emotional intelligence (Goleman & Boutsikaris, 2006; Goleman & Whitener, 2005) Goleman asserts that it may be validating to a student to see his or her contribution used, even if it is simply noted. Sometimes, I would stop the class to try to help Pat bring out his ideas. In these cases we were almost always rewarded by his cleverness or the refreshing effect his ideas had in pointing out a view that no one had thought of. Once, Pat got a gleam in his eye and said, "If you can't see atoms, how do you know they are there?" I knew that answering him was not going to be as easy as naming the scientist or historical experiment that fostered the idea of "atom". I also knew that he would not be very impressed with the fact that most scientists since 1899 believe in these atoms.

So, I told Pat how the original interpretations Rutherford made were that if you could shoot a really, really, really narrow

beam of particles at matter and see how they bounce back, you can infer the shape of the little things they must have hit - thus, you can infer atoms. "Here it comes," I said to myself, "Pat's not going to stop there."

"So," said Pat, "Rutherford didn't see them."

"No," I admitted.

And here comes the reason I honor students like Pat ... "Couldn't there be multiple explanations for matter behaving that way - bouncing those particles back like that?"

"Like what, Pat? Can you see another explanation?" Uh-oh, asking an open-ended question like this to Pat is like opening Pandora's box - only a good box - with good stuff in the box - like seeds for our future minds.

Pat said, "Well, for example, what if matter consistently *behaves* that way; but it's not the matter who is running the show ... What if it behaves according to the thoughts of some kid in his bedroom who is avoiding doing homework? What if matter isn't real, you know, what if what we see as matter is the result of some consciousness thinking something. Then all of Rutherford's experiments would still produce the same bouncing off patterns, but the cause would not be atoms, it would be consciousness."

At this point I ask you, the reader, "What do you say to that!?" For all I know, Pat may be planting seeds in us for future realizations about the nature of matter and the nature of science itself. According to Pat, all of our experimentation to find out what everything is made of could have a flaw in it. It might have the bias of assuming that everything is made of matter. Maybe it isn't. Maybe Pat is right. Maybe everything is made of relationship or other immaterial realities. So, I'm not asking you - I'm begging you, "Tell me what to do with that?" I'll tell you what

I did. I sat down. The class watched with extreme attention, true scientific curiosity, and a childlike sense of wonder. Then I spoke. "Pat, I am so glad to know you. No, really. You have just opened us all. ... (pause) ... Now class, I see the bell is about to ring. Have a good night."

Science and education have a terrible habit of naming things like atoms, matter, gravity, electricity, relativity, and the like. And the silent majority has a terrible habit of thinking we know something when we hear a name. It is then that we stop looking, stop wondering, and become less of who we are. Wonder is an appreciation for what is felt, but not yet fully understood. When confronted with a new version of our reality, why can't we say, "I don't yet understand this, but I like it and feel it is important." I feel that *wonder* was often motivating Pat. A friend once suggested, "Perhaps wisdom begins in wonder, and a true beginner/scientific mind is one that persists in wonder: a right brain response to being." Emerson, in his defining essay on "Self-Reliance", says that, "The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." (1992, p. 134). We need Emerson and we need Dewey; but we also need students like Pat. At the very least, the nonconformist keeps us awake to be present to the reality we are looking at right now, right here. But sometimes - just sometimes - the nonconformist is receiving an intuitive reality that is new and fresh. And this is worth a lot. "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages" (Emerson et al., 1992, p. 132).



So, I guess my suggestion is, first of all, not to be too hard on kids who are a little un-disciplined, but creative. Then, listen to them, for they may be bringers of presence. But, to take the point even further, such nonconformists may also be a gateway to intuitive ideas that those of us who sleep most of the time may not have heard in our own minds. So, if I have successfully sold you this train of thought, then a valid question might be, "How does one encourage and train oneself to be more intuitive?" Let's use Pat as an example. Pat may often be reacting to a whim that just crossed his mind; but isn't that just how we would train ourselves to become better at receiving intuitive gems? Later, in Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance", he asserts, "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation" (Emerson et al., 1992, p. 135). Still later in "Self-Reliance", Emerson pursues what he feels is the most important way to receive ideas. He asks "What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded" (Emerson et al., 1992, p. 141)?, and he answers, "The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin" (Emerson et al., 1992, p. 141).

I applaud Pat. I teach all of my classes to distinguish when they think their minds are receiving brand new intuitions, versus when they are analyzing previously received ideas. This not only honors such right brain learners like Pat; it is what I strive for – for myself – in teaching. Further, the result of handling Pat's ideas this way was validating for the whole class. At the very least, they saw that there are always many ways to look at a problem. In this openness to multiple points of view, we were building a foundation for creative problem solving techniques. They also saw a respect for diversity and appreciation

of multiple intelligences as Howard Gardner recommends (1993, 2008). In addition, they saw a tolerance for multiple world views (Hutchison, 2010), even in the face of some world views being at odds or slowing down the predominate one, namely, the teacher's agenda for the class that day.

A possible objection to this example might be that teachers do not often have time to stop and entertain ideas that are tangential to the lesson. This is true. We must work within the constraints of keeping to state and national curricular mandates. That is why I feel it is important to teach intuitively. When I felt that I taught intuitively, Pat and the whole class became validated. Also, I believe that their thinking became more productive for later problem solving in real life problems. Maybe if we had enough teachers turning out true problem solvers, state and federal decision makers might lessen the pressures on teachers and students to stay within the curriculum so strictly and to test the information so extensively. According to Einstein, his hero, Michael Faraday rose to be one of the most articulate scientists in history on field theory. Einstein felt that the Faraday-Maxwell field descriptions were "probably the most profound transformation which has been experienced by the foundations of physics since Newton's time" (Einstein, 1950/2011, p. 33). Yet, Faraday, like Einstein had trouble with the rigid requirements of school. He begged his parents to let him learn at home because his teacher constantly reprimanded him for not conforming to his classmates. Faraday had a speech impediment. This deviation from the norm was something the teacher could not get past. This caused a brilliant learner to be driven from school. As Faraday began an apprenticeship with a book binder he read through a set of encyclopedias he was binding. If his teacher had been open to alternate forms of expression, young Faraday might have been spared extreme emotional and social difficulties. Maybe someone should have told Faraday's teacher about Emerson, and Dewey, and Pat.

## References

- Bortoft, H. (1996). *The wholeness of nature: Goethe's way toward a science of conscious participation in nature*. Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916/2005). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Einstein, A. (1950/2011). *The theory of relativity and other essays*. New York: Open Road Integrated Media.
- Emerson, R. W., Atkinson, B., & Ebrary, I. (1992). *The selected writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Modern Library.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences* (10th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: BasicBooks.
- Gardner, H. (2008). *Five minds for the future*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.
- Goleman, D., & Boutsikaris, D. (2006). *Social intelligence the new science of human relationships*. New York: Audio Renaissance.
- Goleman, D., & Senge, P. M. (2007). *Working with presence*. New York: Audio Renaissance.

Goleman, D., & Whitener, B. (2005). Emotional intelligence.  
Prince Frederick, MD: Landmark Audiobooks.

Hutchison, C. B. (2010). *Teaching Diverse Learners*. Charlotte:  
Catawba Publishing Company.