

McGill Journal of Education
Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill



Stephen M. Fishman & Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (2007). 219 pp. \$35. (ISBN: 10 0-252003200-4)

Boyd White

Volume 43, Number 3, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/029705ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/029705ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

0024-9033 (print)

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

White, B. (2008). Review of [Stephen M. Fishman & Lucille McCarthy. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (2007). 219 pp. \$35. (ISBN: 10 0-252003200-4)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 43(3), 374–380.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/029705ar>

BOOK REVIEWS

STEPHEN M. FISHMAN & LUCILLE MCCARTHY. *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. (2007). 219 pp. \$35. (ISBN: 10 0-252003200-4).

This relatively slim volume provides accessible reading and should be of interest to anyone teaching college or university-level philosophy, and not just for the analysis of Dewey's philosophy of hope. As well, while John Dewey is the main focus of Fishman's teaching, the text is the result of a four-year project that offers a useful account of the authors' attempts to link teaching, research and writing, concerns with which many of us grapple as we pursue our academic careers.

As the authors explain in the prologue, this book is the fruit of collaboration between them to examine the nature of hope in our troubled times, and the insights that Dewey might have to offer in this regard – in the context of an undergraduate course taught by Fishman. The idea for the course was Fishman's, and he invited his long-time research collaborator, McCarthy, to join with him in an examination of his course. The intent was to see, ultimately, if and how students became more hopeful as a result of taking Fishman's course. The course itself consisted of examination of a number of readings of Dewey's that specifically address the concept of hope. The Dewey readings were augmented by works from a handful of other authors who provide alternative visions of hope, and so, an enriched context within which to consider Dewey's perspective. It is, I think, important to add that Fishman developed his course to see if his teaching could help him address his own strong feelings of dismay and discouragement in the face of current world events, to which the United States has contributed in no small measure. What might Dewey (and others) offer that could provide pathways towards a more hopeful daily life for Fishman and his students? In other words, as Fishman demonstrates in his classes, he sees himself as a co-investigator into, rather than as an ultimate authority on, the questions Dewey presents to us.

McCarthy's contributions to the text demonstrate this clearly. Her task was to observe several of the classes, analyze the videotapes of all classes, interview students and read their assignments, and, of course, consult extensively with Fishman. Both Fishman and McCarthy offer a detailed snapshot of how Fishman's class functioned, how students interacted with one another and with the various readings, what ideas the students took with them, and whether they were able to apply those ideas to their personal lives. Of course, as McCarthy notes, it is not possible to know if, at some point in the future, a student might find an application that was not evident at the conclusion to the course. The resulting research is, therefore, qualitative. The study is small (ten students, two of whom dropped out, for financial reasons, before completion of the course), not intended to be replicable. The study does provide insights into alternative ways of teaching philosophy, ones that encourage students to explore their own philosophic positions. As a teacher of educational philosophy myself, I was interested to see how Fishman organized his classes, interacted with students and made demands of them.

These details emerge as Fishman describes his course content and his teaching. His commentary takes up approximately the first two thirds of the text. This is followed by McCarthy's report on her findings in regard to Fishman's course. McCarthy provides a short description of each participant in the course, including the two who dropped out – their reasons for taking the course, what they contributed to it, and what they got out of it, according to the students' own perceptions and McCarthy's interpretations of outcomes.

The final, short chapter is entitled "Final Reflections." These cover just what the title suggests, from both authors. The text concludes with a number of appendixes that address the research methods involved in this study, the syllabus for the course, an explanation of the reasons for the course readings, including a brief overview of the various authors' works. Several pages of notes on the text, works cited, and a thorough index follow the appendixes.

In my own reading of Dewey, and in my teaching of him, I have not dwelled on the concept of hope. Therefore I enjoyed the opportunity to read Fishman's concise and insightful commentary in the initial chapters. In the space of this review I can only touch upon a few of Fishman's emphases, but enough, I hope, to give a sense of the breadth and depth of his coverage of Dewey.

Fishman reminds us, for example, how, for Dewey, hope is tied to growth, and, therefore, ultimately to nature. The connection to nature is important to Dewey insofar as he sees hope as an instinctive, that is, non-cognitive impulse towards growth. At the same time we do bring cognition into play as well when we assign specific goals to those impulses. This is where, for example, Dewey's commitment to democracy becomes evident, and with it his "faith in an ultimate hope for this-worldly social reform" (p.4).

This is not to say that in his efforts towards a better future world Dewey ignores the past. Indeed, it is our connections with nature and our acknowledgement of the contributions of our ancestors that, according to Dewey, provide us with a sense of belonging and purpose. In *A common faith*, Dewey writes, "Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received" (cited in Fishman & McCarthy, p. 7). This is a conservative side of Dewey, and it struck me how closely Dewey's sense of obligation to the past coincides with the position of Hannah Arendt (1968), who likewise wrote about the need to harvest the pearls of our past as contributions to our present (see, for example, Gordon, Mordechai (2001).

At the same time, Fishman is quick to point out that the past is also problematic. For example, Dewey acknowledges that customs and traditions can be barriers to social reconstruction. That is, it is not our instincts that create problems, but our socially ingrained habits. Perhaps on this point and similar others, Fishman explores examples in his classes. If so, he doesn't describe such examples in the text. This is unfortunate, an opportunity lost to demonstrate how this particular theory plays out in the real world.

I raise the above point because one of Fishman's objectives is to encourage his students to apply the readings to their daily lives, to make the sometimes-complex language and concepts personally meaningful. It is apparent that, at least for some students and on some occasions, they were able to make these connections. In Fishman's case, he does acknowledge having difficulty making the connections himself, at least in some instances. For example, in the section on Dewey's discussion of religious experience, as opposed to religion (Dewey was a non-theist), Dewey claims that religious experiences can result from three approaches: philosophic reflection, poetry, or devotion to a cause (p. 26). By religious experience Dewey means a feeling of harmony, being at peace with oneself and the world, but a peace that is "highly charged with emotion that is 'ineffable' and 'undefinable'" (p. 26). Fishman is comfortable with philosophic reflection. That is his academic background after all; but, as a practice, reflection is insufficient to lead Fishman to that state of "unifying wholeness" that he desires (p.26).

If philosophic reflection doesn't achieve this for Fishman, even less so does poetry, or more broadly speaking, the arts. Fishman observes that, whereas reflection relies on consecutive reasoning, responses to art are embodied, experiential. Apparently such experiences don't come easily to Fishman, as he acknowledges his inability to listen to his own intuitions and pay attention to his embodied, experiential learning (p. 29). This suggests, to me, that perhaps Fishman just doesn't "get" aesthetic experience; and maybe Dewey's own language contributes to Fishman's difficulties. For example, Fishman refers to Dewey's contention that "the idea of art, that is, all intentional and reflective problem solving, [is] 'the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity'"

(p.101). While I embrace the idea of art's contribution to humanity, it is not because art solves problems. It doesn't. What problem does *Anna Karenina* solve, for example, or any of Picasso's works? No, art's contribution rests in its capacity to articulate the complexities of the human condition. Dewey's conflation of art and science does not serve Fishman well here.

As to the third approach, devotion to a cause, Fishman claims disappointment here too. Although he has been a devoted teacher throughout a lengthy career, he states, "the times when I fail as a teacher, the times when I lack sufficient enthusiasm and skill to win the attention of my students, my devotion to the cause of teaching has wavered" (p. 30). I appreciated Fishman's candor here, both in terms of his commentary on the difficulties of teaching – with which surely most of us must identify – and in terms of his efforts, however unsuccessful, to apply theory to life practice. So in spite of his lack of success in this area, his failures do provide a useful account of his attempts to apply theory to practice. Further, as Fishman notes, Dewey feels failures are important opportunities for learning and should be embraced.

Fishman's comments on his occasional lapse in devotion to teaching reminds me of the work of Parker Palmer (1998), who writes of similar moments of existential angst in his text, *The Courage to Teach*. Probably Palmer's work has appeal mostly to those of us in teacher education, and these are not Fishman's students. Still, there are enough parallels between Dewey and Palmer in terms of self-reflection, self-knowledge, democratic practice, and hope that I think Fishman would find in Palmer a useful perspective on Dewey.

I mention Palmer because Fishman devotes about half his course time to readings by authors other than Dewey, in order to provide enriched perspectives on the ideas Dewey introduces. In his text, Fishman devotes a chapter each to three of these authors. They are, in order: Gabriel Marcel, Paulo Freire, and C.R. Snyder. Fishman explains his choices. First, he chooses Marcel because, "although Marcel is intentionally unsystematic in his thinking, he is one of the few mainstream twentieth-century philosophers to explicitly discuss hope" (p. 32). Further, Marcel provides a theistic counterpoint to Dewey's non-theistic stance. Fishman chooses Freire for the latter's strong stance on "this worldly, social reform, rather than otherworldly, individual transcendence" (p. 54). Finally, in a departure from philosophic tradition, Fishman chooses Snyder, a proponent of "positive psychology." That discipline, Fishman feels, eschews political and moral neutrality and, as such, is in keeping with Dewey's general agenda. Where the philosophers discussed here address the topic of hope in largely theoretical terms, Snyder offers specific strategies for increasing and attaining hopes. Interestingly, only one of Fishman's students expressed a preference for Snyder's approach to the topic. But perhaps this is not surprising. That student did not come from a background in philosophy, whereas the others did.

While all the authors covered do address the topic of hope and do share certain convictions in common with one another, their differences are often in sharp relief as well. For example, for Marcel, one's hope is directed towards eternal life; for Dewey, hope is directed towards this-worldly social progress. Or, again, for Dewey, "the central demand of living is problem solving," whereas Marcel sees problem solving as an activity that keeps people apart insofar as it is scientifically oriented, rule-governed, not spiritual (p. 49). Dewey's view of education is that of gradual refinement of individual and community views, i.e., continuity; Freire advocates "dramatic personal transformation" and social revolution, i.e., rebirth (p. 62). Fishman's teaching strategy entails the introduction of these parallels and divergences in order to bring Dewey's concepts into higher relief. Sometimes we don't notice certain distinctive features, whether in the empirical world or in philosophic argument, until they are juxtaposed against related ones. The anecdotal accounts in this text would seem to bear out Fishman's faith in his compare-and-contrast strategy.

On the topic of strategies, as a fellow teacher of philosophy I found Fishman's, and later, McCarthy's descriptions of Fishman's class routines to be of particular interest. It's probably human nature to want to know how the other guy does it. I was reassured when I realized that he and I share some tactics, with variations that acknowledge our differing teaching situations. (My classes are roughly ten times the size of Fishman's.) So, for example, Fishman assigns a particular reading for homework. At the beginning of the next class he has his students "free-write" for about ten minutes at the start of class. In this writing the students might respond to a quotation they have chosen, or compare the reading to an earlier text. Fishman also asks students to describe what the reading means to them personally. These warm-up exercises often become the basis for ensuing discussion. What I gained from this description was how the application of theory to one's individual life can be so directly elicited. I too want my students to see a practical application of philosophy to their teaching practice, but my route to get there has been longer. I'll adopt this component.

Fishman's concern is that students adopt three learning strategies: critical thinking, constructed knowing, and shared inquiry. Readers of this review will need no refresher on critical thinking, so I'll just comment briefly on the other two. By constructed knowing, Fishman means the ability to adapt the text to one's personal situation, to make it one's own, as part of the free-write exercise described above illustrates. Then too, for the shared inquiry component, Fishman has his students share their homework assignments in class, with a partner. They read each other's papers out loud and initiate discussion. He feels that often students learn more easily from each other than from "the teacher." The interview material collected by McCarthy seems to corroborate this view.

This brings me to Part Two of the text, in which McCarthy discusses her findings. She begins with an overview of the class – students enrolled, course materials and assignments, general classroom atmosphere, Fishman’s approach to teaching. In other words, McCarthy establishes the context for her study. As well, the authors clearly hope to provide readers with a sense of what might work in their own teaching situations.

An important part of the context is that five of the ten students signed up for the course because they felt “they needed more hope” (p. 107). In other words, half the class was looking for a course to address their personal rather than academic needs. Others in the class were there because Fishman’s reputation as a dedicated and inspiring teacher preceded him; three students had taken courses with him before, and a fourth had a friend who had studied with Fishman and recommended him. Only one student was a non-philosophy major. She took the course because it fit her schedule and she thought it would be an easy “A”. The complexity of the readings and the demands of the class interactions soon disabused her of that notion.

In this same chapter McCarthy expands upon Fishman’s teaching philosophy and specific teaching strategies; that is, she fills in some of the details that Fishman hints at in the first part of the book. Thus, for example, McCarthy describes how, in the assigned essays, Fishman aims to have his students report on their individual progress as investigators into the nature of hope, and in the course of so doing, utilize critical thinking, constructed knowing, and co-learning. It is clear from McCarthy’s account that these were not easy tasks. For a start, some students had difficulty with the assigned readings, either digesting the material or connecting it with their own lives.

McCarthy provides extensive description of class interactions, as co-inquirers, and examples of indirect teaching. Fishman’s teaching style does not consist in handing out answers, but some students have been conditioned to be passive recipients. These ones found it difficult to adapt to Fishman’s approach, particularly in terms of connecting the material to their own lives. In fact, apparently some saw personal experience as irrelevant to learning. This is a surprising finding as well as a sad commentary on the divorce of academic learning from life concerns. I say surprising because one complaint we get in the Faculty where I teach derives from the fact that sometimes students don’t see the connection between what they are studying and what they expect their lives as teachers to be – but they definitely want that connection. Perhaps if Fishman had had a larger class the author would have seen more evidence of that desire for connection.

McCarthy devotes chapter seven to a more detailed description of the ten students, their trials and, occasionally, their triumphs. She follows this with reflections on the five students who came to the class looking for guidance toward hope, and then a parallel section on the five who attended without that

specific agenda. The latter group was more typical of undergraduate students in terms of their expectations for the course.

I found this chapter interesting for the insights it provided into the lives of individual students and how those lives influenced their learning. McCarthy has considerable empathy for her subjects. The result is that each student portrait is compelling and, in and of themselves, each is an eloquent statement in favour of small classes where people can really get to know one another and contribute selflessly to each other's learning.

In chapter eight McCarthy provides some highlights of the study. She notes, for example, that all ten students had trouble with the concept of constructed knowing, but that six eventually succeeded. Given the small class size and the amount of individual attention each received, we might have expected a higher rate of success on this point. But perhaps the results simply demonstrate the amount of challenge this goal presents. Certainly they provide food for thought.

McCarthy concludes the chapter with a listing of ideas that students found most useful, as provided by each of the authors examined. Because most of the course time was devoted to Dewey it is not surprising that his were the most influential readings. McCarthy lists five Deweyan ideas that seemed to strike a chord with several students. These had to do with Dewey's concept of rhythm as it counterbalances moments of disturbance and harmony, his notion of gratitude for the past, engrossed present experience, faith in humanity's capacity to work together for change, and finally, "Dewey's faith that little acts can have large consequences" (p. 161). These do sound hopeful. Given the state of the world, if students find Dewey relevant to their lives today, then perhaps we are entitled to a degree of optimism for the future of our children.

BOYD WHITE, *McGill University*

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (1968). *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. New York: Viking.
- Gordon, M. (2001). Hanna Arendt on authority: Conservatism in education reconsidered. In M. Gordon (Ed.), *Hanna Arendt and education* (p. 37-65). Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Parker P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (10th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.