

Passages and Pivot Points

Experience and Education as Rites of Passage

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AS A CURRICULUM THEORIST working in higher education for almost a decade, I regularly see the transformative capacity of educational experience. The human learning process involves a continuous flux from the familiar to the unknown—a transition that relies on inquiry, reflection, and application. This process is integral to the educational journey and deserves more attention from theorists and practitioners. Unpacking the learnings that surface from an educational experience requires a deliberate reflection process. When theorists and practitioners recognize the transformational potential embedded within reflection, a shift of theory and pedagogy can take place. This shift of pedagogy becomes more significant when experience is situated within the framework of a rite of passage. In this paper, I will compose a functional overview of the rite of passage model, compare John Dewey’s educational philosophy with the rite of passage framework, and explore the implications of viewing educational experience as a rite of passage.

Rite of Passage Overview

The rite of passage model contributes to the explication of experience and its integral role in learning. French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep extensively studied rites of passage around the turn of the 20th century. He defines the rite of passage as “a three-stage system of social transformation mediating role changes in a community” (Bell, 2003, p. 41). According to Andrews (1999), a rite of passage is a “universal phenomenon” composed of three phases: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. The first phase, *separation*, is one in which individuals are removed from the ordinary/established structure of everyday life. The *transition* or *liminal phase* (the second phase) occurs when individuals go through an “intense experience with different norms and characteristics from those accompanying the normal patterns of social organization” (p. 35). The third phase is the *incorporation* or *reintegration* phase in which individuals re-enter the social order in a “different place, status, or state of being” (p. 35). According to Andrews (1999), this is a flexible model, and “the rite of passage engenders a broad application and has become...‘an anthropological commonplace’” (p. 35). Arnold van

Genep (1909/1960) is credited with coining the term “rite of passage” and defined it as “a rite which accompanies any change in social state, age, place, or life cycle stage, such as birth, puberty, marriage or death” (Bell, 2003, p. 41). A rite of passage is a “ritual, event, or experience that marks or constitutes a major milestone or change in a person’s life” (rite of passage, 2019). The rite of passage signifies a significant shift in one’s life journey. Andrews (1999) adds that coming-of-age rites are one “subset of a rite of passage” (p. 41).

The rite of passage is a coming-of-age experience situated in the areas of building and transforming character. Ecologist Carolyn Servid (as quoted in Lopez & Gwartney, 2006) states that, “The word passage evokes images of hallways, secret tunnels, openings between here and there; a sense of moving through, going between, crossing over” (p. 262). Servid’s notion of “crossing over” connects well to the rite of passage and deserves further investigation. As Servid points out, “Passages allow movement. In the landscape they provide routes to get from one open area to another” (as quoted in Lopez & Gwartney, 2006, p. 262). Similarly, educational experiences facilitate a crossing over, a transition into new realms of knowledge and understanding.

In the educational realm, the rite of passage represents the hallway used to transition from one frame of reference to another. The rite of passage provides the initiate with “a renewed insight and a clearer sense of purpose” (Binkley, Decarbo, & Mullen-Kreamer, 2002, n.p.). Turner (1985) identifies the significant role that experience plays within a rite of passage. He states that a rite of passage signifies “a true psychological passage from one way of seeing and understanding to another” (p. 205). This change in understanding is attributed to the union of old ideas with new ideas, which are formulated throughout the liminal stage of the process. The merging of new and old ideas contributes to the formation of a more holistic perspective and ultimately a more balanced worldview.

Ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and graduations typically recognize the completion of a rite of passage. These celebrated events are what most people identify as rites of passage. However, van Genep (1909/1960) believes that there are more rites of passage than typically recognized. He says a person cannot “pass from one [dramatically different life stage] to another without going through an intermediate stage” (p. 1). This suggests that virtually all significant life changes require a rite of passage. Van Genep posits that the life of an individual in virtually any society is composed of several passages from “one age to another and from one occupation to another” (pp. 2-3). The experience of undergoing a rite of passage has many connections to the theory of educational experience outlined by John Dewey. Particularly relevant are Dewey’s theories of experience, inquiry, and reflection.

Dewey’s Perspective on Experience and Reflection

Inquiry plays an important role in the educational process and is launched by encountering uncertainty. Dewey (1938b) defines inquiry as the “directed or controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one” (p. 117). He believes that the point of departure for initiating the inquiry process is “perplexity, confusion, or doubt” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 12). The uncertainty associated with an indeterminate situation launches thinking and inquiry. Dewey (1910/2005) further articulates this by stating that,

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a pause. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another. (1910/2005, p. 10)

Metaphorically, climbing a tree is what we as curriculum theorists need to do when faced with a practical or theoretical educational “forked road situation.” Ascending a tree allows the climber to gain a new vantage point; similarly, we can seek a new vantage point to enable us to see disciplinary interconnections and engage in pluralistic forms of inquiry and ways of knowing. A secondary benefit of this new perspective is that it facilitates reflective thinking.

According to Dewey, inquiry involves a process of reflective thinking that leads to an enhancement of one’s ability to make decisions. According to Rodgers (2002), Dewey maintains that:

Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. (p. 845)

Dewey believes that reflection creates the possibility of more integrated, thoughtful, and conscientious judgment. However, he recognizes that this advanced judgment does not come easily for the learner; it involves unrest, and it is “always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 13). Enduring the cognitive dissonance (or mental unrest and disturbance) associated with not knowing is a key component to advancing reflection. Reflective thinking can be challenging as it requires “judgment [to be] suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 13). Although painful, suspending judgment for further inquiry is at the crux of reflective thinking and increasing intelligence, the latter being what philosopher Michael Eldridge (1998) insists was Dewey’s lifelong goal. Eldridge says that Dewey understood intelligence “to be deliberately transforming” (p. 13). Dewey (1938b) posits that “judgment is the settled outcome of inquiry” (p. 120). When a person settles their inquiry, they are able to transfer their increased judgment aptitude to future situations.

Dewey (1938b) examines the necessity of inquiry. He claims that inquiry is invariably the movement towards intellectual freedom, which is a function of the holistic nature of knowledge. Therefore, according to Dewey, converting an indeterminate situation to a determinate situation is a cornerstone to educational experience. Furthermore, Dewey defines education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases [one’s] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 74). Dewey (1902) argues that an individual’s direct experience grounds conceptual knowledge. He states that, “the connecting bonds of activity...hold together the variety of the student’s

personal experiences” (Dewey, 1902, p. 6). Educational experiences, according to Dewey (1938a, p. 35), develop continuity, meaning that all experiences are carried forward and influence future experiences.

Connecting van Gennep’s Rite of Passage with Dewey’s Conceptualization of Experience

Dewey (2008) states that education’s aim is “not preparation for living, but for noble living” (p. 287). Dewey’s notion of learning through experience complements and extends van Gennep’s notion of a rite of passage. It is helpful to explore and parallel the rite of passage concept with Dewey’s inquiry model because observing these connections illustrates the importance of learning through experience. Dewey’s (1916) argument that education is life is similar to the ideas embedded in the rite of passage. For example, in the inquiry process, new connections force the learner to see the world from a new perspective. Similarly, a rite of passage enables the initiate to see the world from a new viewpoint (Ivory, 2003). Dykhuizen (1973) explains that Dewey’s conceptualization of inquiry occurs when a person starts to pass through, moving from an uncertain situation into a condition of settled adjustment. This process of passing through an uncertain situation into a condition of settled adjustment is similar to the rite of passage. As in Dewey’s conception of inquiry, a rite of passage also concludes in a place of settled adjustment.

Dewey asserts that, in order to find truth, it is essential to return to primary experience for its final adjudication (Garrison, 1997). A portion of Dewey’s work deals with experience and its morphology in relation to education and curriculum (Dewey, 1902, 1938a). From the standpoint of a rite of passage, one of the most notable is Dewey’s experiential learning cycle. In the learning cycle, Dewey (1938a) posits that the

formation of purposes is a rather complex, intellectual operation. It involves: [an indeterminate situation followed by] (1) observation of surrounding conditions (2) knowledge obtained partly by recollection, and (3) judgment, which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (p. 69)

Dewey’s theory of experience is often simplified to be: action, reflection, and application (Hensley, 2011). This learning cycle is developed from Dewey’s theory of inquiry and serves as a synopsis of his educational philosophy. As mentioned before, Dewey recognizes that the optimal conclusion of a learning cycle is an increase in one’s judgment (Dewey, 1998, p. 174). Judgment can be characterized by the development of a schema that is capable of responding to a diversity of situations (Dewey, 1998).

In Dewey’s theory of inquiry, converting an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate is vital. He states that the “chief function of philosophy is not to find out what difference ready-made formulae make...but to arrive at and to clarify their meaning as programs of behavior for modifying the existent world” (Dewey, 1908, p. 90). In Dewey’s theory, students conceptualize their reflections and subsequently incorporate them into their programs of behavior (Miettinen, 2000). Ideally, a student generates a more compatible schema for solving problems as a result of inquiry. Reflection within the inquiry process can lead to an enhancement and grounding of the student’s problem-solving abilities (Dewey, 1910/2005). Dewey (1933) argues that “one can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to

undergo the trouble of searching” (p. 16). Thus, Dewey held that inquiry played a significant role in experiential transformation. Accordingly, Dewey suggested that before “an immediate experience [has] any cognitive value, it must play a role within inquiry” (Dykhuizen, 1973, p. 135). Exploring the fundamentals of Dewey’s theory of experience allows one to better understand the rite of passage.

Separation Phase of the Rite of Passage

A closer examination of the three stages of a rite of passage helps to compare Dewey’s theory of experience and van Gennep’s concept of a rite of passage. As previously mentioned, the initial phase of a rite of passage is known as *separation*. This phase is represented by taking a leave from the community and signifies the end of the initiate’s former role. The separation creates cognitive dissonance and disequilibrium. In this first phase, the initiates are in the process of situating themselves for the ambiguities of the upcoming transition. The novelty of the separation requires the initiate to be a beginner, which serves as a virtual renewal of one’s life position. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1993) said, “Resolve to be always beginning—to be a beginner” (p. 25). However, being a beginner is risky and generates disequilibrium. A majority of this disequilibrium is instigated by an incongruity that forces the student to begin building a bridge from the unknown to the well-known. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and, as Maxine Greene (2001) described, there is an “uncoupling” from what was once “known” (p. 67). In a rite of passage, as in education, the separation phase is characterized by the detachment from the old.

The separation phase requires uncertainty represented by an indeterminate situation. As Dewey suggests, the separation is at the “center of the redirection and reconstruction of action” (Dewey as quoted in Garrison, 1997, p. 95). For Dewey, uncertainty initiates the separation phase by converting an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate (Dewey, 1933). The adjustment of one’s thinking and rhythms demands energy and new perspectives (Dewey, 1933).

Separation is the first of several pieces that need to be in place for a complete inquiry cycle to occur. Connecting to the notion of the initial steps of a rite of passage, Greene (2001) suggests that people need to be equipped to “crack the codes, to enter in, to take the risks to uncouple—if only for a while—from ordinary, commonsensible reality” (p. 205). At the outset of inquiry there needs to be disequilibrium. Similarly, uncertainty makes up the very essence of liminality, the second phase of the rite of passage.

Transition Phase of the Rite of Passage

The transition phase of the rite of passage is an intense experience for the initiate, who is between the familiar and the unknown. This phase often conjures feelings of great uncertainty. Shaw (1994) points out that “The ritual passenger is neither here nor there, he is ambiguous” (pp. 17-18). This transition experience is simultaneously a departure from a previous way of living and an entry into a new phase of life. French philosopher and theorist Michel Serres (2000) refers to this transition as a process of moving to the other side. It is a blank middle, which has no direction, and therefore, it is simultaneously composed of all directions.

The transition phase is also called the “liminal” phase. The word liminal means “threshold” in Latin, which is appropriate as, during this phase, the initiate is at the threshold of developing a new homeostasis. Turner (1985) referred to this transitional space as the *liminal habitat, a main place for transformation to take occur*.

Reynolds (2003) states that the transitional phase is similar to being lost, but he believes that “being lost is not a bad place to be” (p. 55). Being lost can embolden our senses and push us to formulate new ways of knowing. Bolen (as quoted in Reynolds, 2003) adds that, when one is “in a liminal place and in between in some major way” (p. 55), one is dealing with the essential life questions.

Andrews (1999) explains that there are three components embedded in a transitional experience—the development of: a *sense of self*, a *sense of community*, and a *sense of place*. Engendered by these components, the liminal process forces learners to reconstruct their role within society. This reconstruction is the transforming energy within a rite of passage. This process of transformation begins at the personal level. The idea of developing a sense of self, a sense of community, and a sense of place is an excellent point of departure for weaving the rite of passage framework together with that of the educational process.

Greene (2001) believes that powerful educational experiences can open up a petrified world, provide new perspectives on the ordinary, and allow individuals to “pose a range of questions that never occurred to them before” (p. 22). This intellectual advancement is transformational. The *educational rite of passage* provides a lens with which to explore the diverse landscapes of educational experience and unites previously fragmented ways of thinking. The educational rite of passage lens offers a transformative perspective in educational research and encourages educators and educational philosophers to embrace self-reflection and critical consideration, which are key players in the educational rite of passage. Self-reflection leads to a more accurate appraisal of one’s sense of self, resulting in the “potentiality of opening multiple worlds” (Greene, 2001, p. 22). Developing a more complete sense of self enables access to multiple worlds because one becomes more grounded and attenuated to what is possible. Attenuated to the nuances of self, one is better positioned to participate in the development of community.

Exploring the *sense of community*, Turner (as quoted in Andrews, 1999) suggests that a rite of passage involves a brief release from the daily exposure connected to “privileges and obligations [and the] many degrees of superordination and subordination” that make up the ordinary social structure (p. 37). Social structure is reconceptualized during a shared liminal experience. The “shared ordeal and common release...lead to a strong sense of connection between participants” (Andrews, 1999, p. 37). When a group is working together, they may experience what Dewey refers to as a democratic learning environment in which all participants’ voices are heard and the group can affect change. For Dewey, the notion of a democratic learning environment is a central theme throughout his work. Accordingly, Dewey urges educators to move away from a dictator-type educational approach and to incorporate a more democratic approach.

Students undergoing a rite of passage become more familiar with their surroundings. This is referred to as the development of a *sense of place* (Andrews, 1999). The state of liminality in a rite of passage removes the “historically constructed, socially maintained, and individuality applied” symbols and allows the student a more organic “earth interaction” (Geertz as quoted in Andrews, 1999, p. 39). A sense of place describes one’s connection to the surrounding ecological and social communities and requires experiential and holistic ways of knowing. A person

strongly connected to the surroundings is more likely to protect it. In the context of a rite of passage, a sense of place is a form of the settled adjustment that comes from being detached from a previous way of knowing while integrating a new location into one's worldview (Hensley, 2011).

Incorporation

The last stage of a rite of passage, *incorporation*, is the stage in which the initiate harvests the fruit of inquiry by setting the new learning into motion. In William James' (1998) words, the incorporation stage involves reestablishing "congruence between the world and the mind" (p. 207). At this stage, students who are going through an educational rite of passage start to integrate their new knowledge into their worldview and begin adjusting their schemata for inquiry. James (1998) posits that knowledge can take a while to permeate our worldview and claims that "new truths are resultants of new experiences and of old truths combined and mutually modifying one another" (p. 83). Developing new skills to undergo inquiry is a heuristic that enables life-long learning. Accordingly, the inquiry skills gained in the rite of passage are skills that the initiate will utilize in day-to-day life because they are incorporated into one's way of being.

For Dewey, reflective judgment and increased interest are crucial outcomes for effective education. Effective educational experiences involve well-guided redirection. An effective outcome of reflection ultimately leads to the conversion of "thoughtless struggle into reflective judgment" (Dewey, 1938b, p. 53). The stabilization following the transition involves the confluence of the old with the new. The transformed self is then ready to begin the process of transforming the world. Greene (2001) suggests that, at this point, "the work may infuse our consciousness, bring new and unexpected patterns [and]...new vantage points" (p. 11). This vision requires that new vantage points are integrated into the previous social structure of the student/initiate.

Ronald Grimes (as quoted in Ivory, 2003) states that, when effective rites of passage are enacted, "they carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one. To enact any kind of rite is to perform, but to enact a rite of passage is also to transform" (p. 345). Dewey (1899, 1902, 1931, 1938a) maintains that education equips students with tools that transform their thinking. In the context of a rite of passage, this thinking involves a metamorphosis in which one's thinking process "is never again the same" (Grimes as quoted in Ivory, 2003, p. 345).

Dewey (1998) suggests that the "end of inquiry is institution of a unified resolved situation" (p. 180). This allows one to secure the unity of the whole. In Dewey's terms, the incorporation stage is the platform on which fragmented ideas become united. Thus, incorporation can prepare a student for more learning. Dewey (1916) uses the word "plasticity" and states that it is essentially "the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with difficulties of a later situation" (p. 53). A deeper look at experience and its value in a rite of passage helps educators to enhance their epistemological awareness. Turner (1985) states that experience plays a critical role in a rite of passage:

“[E]xperience” equals our “rite de passage.” But this remark is no metaphor; it describes a true psychological passage from one way of seeing and understanding to another, a passage not vouchsafed to those who hold hard to the values, meanings, goals, and beliefs they have grown up to think of as reality. (p. 205)

Thus, lived experience has the capacity to serve as a vehicle of transformation.

Effective Teaching and the Epistemological Implications of a Rite of Passage

Effective teachers furnish the unique opportunities that engage students in the inquiry process. A good teacher recognizes the epistemological points of departure, facilitates the experiential process, and encourages the students to construct their own meaning out of direct experience and reflection. The informed teacher recognizes the importance of primary experience as a pedagogical priority, a notion that encourages the students to become autonomous and not anonymous. Philosopher Martin Buber (1947/1966) states that, “Personality is something which in its growth remains essentially outside the influence of the educator, but to assist in the moulding of character is [the teacher’s] greatest task” (p. 104). In this case, Buber insists that the fundamental aim of education should be the development of character. The rite of passage not only contributes to the development of character but also to the strengthening of identity. An examination of the rite of passage’s epistemological implications reveals that “a rite of passage can provide a useful model for teaching and facilitating transformation under specific conditions” (Bell, 2003, p. 42).

If teachers develop an understanding of the rite of passage framework, they are better equipped to facilitate the learning process. The teacher who is familiar with the educational application of the rite of passage framework understands the importance of creating indeterminate situations that trigger the cycle of inquiry. Utilizing the rite of passage structure can strengthen the transformative capacity of learning experiences for the student. In the rite of passage modality, the educator serves as a crossing guard by encouraging students to navigate liminal terrain from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Teachers can help students transform by creating a learning environment that encourages students to tackle challenges and overcome adversity while embracing the experiential learning process. Teachers can model the learning characteristics of a liminal traveller and show students what it looks like to navigate through cognitive uncertainties while engaging in the inquiry cycle. Dewey (1899) states that “guidance is not external imposition...it is freeing the life process for its own most adequate fulfilment” (p. 17). This freeing of the life processes contributes to the meaning of experience and “increases [one’s] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, pp. 89-90).

Dewey (1938a) supports the idea that people need challenges and states that problems stimulate thinking and learning. Problems set the epistemological rite of passage into motion. They arouse student interest in seeking out information and become the grounds for further experiences (Dewey, 1938a). They allow one to part ways from old thought structures and contribute to a more vital and energized worldview. As Greene (2001) states,

Surely we can learn to articulate more clearly what it is about making and attending that so often opens up new perspectives, that allows people to perceive new experiential

possibilities, that offers them new symbolic languages through which to express themselves...we can break through the either/or. (p. 20)

It is crucial that educators set up opportunities that will “release our students for live and informed encounters” and make the potential for transformation more likely (Greene, 2001, p. 27). Education towards a rite of passage is a process of guiding the student into a realm of new understanding that emerges from the backdrop of their own experiences. It is a demanding journey that relies on deep reflection and intentional action. The educator is involved in the process of directing students into a state of “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 2001, p. 50). According to Garrison (1997):

A good education brings out the best in us. It holistically unifies our character in judgment, compassion, and practice. It disciplines our desires to serve the greatest good, that is, those persons, things and ideals that are of most value. (p. 2)

Conclusion

John Dewey believed that education is the most effective way to promote positive social change. His educational philosophy is founded upon the notion of transformation through education. The rite of passage framework provides a valuable theoretical lens to view Dewey’s theories and generates important curriculum insight. Viewing education within the framework of a rite of passage offers a new and significant transformational model. Effective teachers can equip students to access various rites of passage in their own lives.

A deeper and more intimate understanding of the relationship between educational experiences and daily life extends the significance of Curriculum Studies. As the interdisciplinary study of educational experience, Curriculum Studies is further complicated by the notion of a rite of passage. Accordingly, a more comprehensive form of inquiry is available through integrating the rite of passage framework into the educational context. This inquiry encourages the quality of “drawing out” found in the etymology of the word *education*.

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