

How Joe Schwab Thinks

A Review of *The Practical 1* after 40 Years

THOMAS W. ROBY IV
City Colleges of Chicago
Saint Xavier University

THE MOST STRIKING ASPECT of *Practical 1* is its sheer reach. Joe Schwab's thinking is comprehensive. He brings the many parts of education as a field of study into an overall view, instead of limiting it to one specialty, discipline, theory, or body of research. He explores the interconnection between them and how these bear on learning. Moreover, his thinking is dynamic, reaching out to new versions, integrating older ones, ever aware that "any apparently definitive or highly persuasive solution to a clearly defined problem ought to appear in a context which will indicate that there is yet more to know or more to know about." (Westbury and Wilkof 1978, 153).

He parallels the potential dynamic and comprehensive development of education with the actual progress made in government, economics, psychotherapy, and law when they ceased to rely on theory and operated as practical enterprises (Westbury and Wilkof 1978, 311–312). Schwab makes no little plans for education because he sees how its parts can fit together into a more effectively functioning whole. The broadness of the base for engaging any educational problem rests on the coordinate use of the commonplaces of education, learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu, which remain underused or out of balance, perhaps because they are viewed as "too commonplace."

Few thinkers have brought such a vibrant range, depth, and skill to educational problems. In areas where I had knowledge and would challenged him, he proved to have more. When I presented the introductory passage of Schubert's Ninth Symphony as an illustration of Augustan's ideas, he knew the score, corrected Toscanini's interpretation, and developed a metaphor on the spot that expanded my point. It was unnerving to watch him take apart critics on their own ground, especially if he was doing it to you. This is why his single-handed, two-fisted challenge caused such a jolt in the research community of the late 1960's. It also tends to make *Practical 1* a hard read for specialists; it challenges readers' scholarship in the necessary polymathic disciplines. It challenges readers to engage puzzlement about issues rather than absorb mere answers. Moreover, it challenges readers to engage in close reading of text to

comprehend how he redefines terms like “arts,” “eclectic,” and “practical” in ways that differ from their curbstone meanings. For the recent generation of readers raised on the doctrine that “the reader is all,” this emphasis on textual communication of an author’s meaning is especially unsettling.

This range and vigor create the need to explain more, so it is not surprising that Practical 1 became the first of a series of practical papers as he expanded *The Practical* into five more articles. Three are published: Practical 2 on how eclectic arts modify theories to make them workable in practical terms; Practical 3 that brings the practical art of curriculum-making into focus; and Practical 4, a kind of thought experiment showing how the appropriate curricular leadership could make *The Practical* actually function in a properly collaborative school setting (Schwab 1984). He worked with me on Practical 5, an anticipatory generation of eight alternative readings of William Faulkner’s short story, *A Rose for Emily*, with suggestions for their curricular use, an exercise anticipated toward the end of Practical 1. We were unable to complete Practical 6, an explication of how to find subject matter commonplaces, using the psychological commonplaces that undergird Practical 2, as well as the literary ones that govern Practical 5¹(Westbury and Wilkof 1978, 315).

Joe Schwab’s thinking is all of a piece, and education is at the center. *College Curriculum and Student Protest*, a kind of nuts-and-bolts version of *The Practical* written at the same time as Practical 1, is connected in spirit and substance. Moreover, his ideas arise out of earlier curricular activities at the University of Chicago, Camp Ramah, and the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, which constituted the empirical base for *The Practical*. Further, his thinking is non-derivative. Schwab borrows from Aristotle, Bacon, and Dewey, but eclectically, because he is an educational philosopher in the fullest sense.

He grounds his educational philosophy in education itself, rather than educational aspects embedded in some larger philosophical view as with Aristotle, attached as an offshoot or afterthought as with many others, or even developed as a major concern, e.g., Dewey. In this sense, he is Socratic, since Socrates is the first philosopher who engaged the whole world through educational inquiry. While his essays on science, governance, and psychology can stand alone in their disciplines, they also provide a matrix for education. The key is the use of theory, which I will explain shortly.

Looking back, one can see how Schwab’s critique legitimized many practical orientations not before possible. The field is definitely more pluralistic. Critical theorists have brought a multicultural orientation to the milieu, although his systematic philosophical pluralism is not congruent with the current univocal emphases on topics like race, class, gender, ethnicity, et al. (Booth 1979). Still, we see a different landscape now, from Eisner’s connoisseurship, to Shulman’s pedagogical content knowledge, to Connelly and Clandinin’s personal practical knowledge, which tend to center on the teacher commonplace (Craig, 2003). There have been promising new practices like the small schools movement, in which the students hold a stronger place than in the anonymity of conventional schools. Even views of subject matter have become more flexible with competing versions offered by multicultural expansion of the literary canon and new forms of criticism. Many things, however, remain the same. Subject matter as “a rhetoric of conclusions” still holds an increasing large and onerous place in testing, whose top-down model undermines teacher collaboration, creativity, and input.

The problem remains that practical innovations have been partial, relying on one or two of the commonplace at the expense of the others. There has been no systematic exploitation of Schwab’s total vision for education, and now he is fading as the most over quoted but underused

footnote in the research literature. If *The Practical* is to become a viable enterprise, there need to be working centers of Schwab Studies, containing all his collected works, available to researchers, teachers, and graduate students and run by knowledgeable colleagues (Roby 2005). The more such centers, the better, since the bits and pieces of *The Practical* that are now floating about need the full vision that he set forth in *Practical 1* to repair the partial views, incomplete efforts, and anemic results of educational reform. These could in turn seed Schwabian schools and school systems. Such a development would also save this paper from becoming just another flight from the field (number four in his list); it might even assist a return to it (Westbury and Wilkof 1978, 304).

As I said earlier, part of the problem in Schwab Studies is that his reach is a stretch for any reader. Through his extensive teaching in the liberal arts at the University of Chicago, Schwab had become a genuine polymath in education. (He confirmed to me that he taught every course in the old college except mathematics and foreign languages.) Without an absolute commitment to any given discipline or method, he was unable to muster support from the ranks of the specialists. He used his range to function as gadfly rather than philosopher-king. He knew only a few would be able to join him in the ongoing effort for comprehensive mastery of education as a field of study. He hoped for generosity of collaboration and adaptive communication, which makes it possible to bring together all the relevant parties, each with their partial knowledge, to provide the broadest platform for solving school problems. This requires several stretches for practitioners: a practical one across local subject matter departments and a quasi-practical one up and down the chain of authority from federal to state to local. The collaborative aspect of Schwab's thinking, perhaps its most promising one, has been the least realized.

The most striking turn in Schwab's thinking in *Practical 1* concerns his stance toward theory. Theoreticians have always engaged in turf battles. Our times, like his, are regrettably eristic as we find ourselves fighting wars and fighting over wars. Today the battles are not so much over theory or theorizing, since the hard edges of what constituted theory in Schwab's day have dulled; theory itself has become a diminished commodity, subject to religious attacks on its hypothetical foundations in evolutionary biology, spoof submissions in physics journals, and the banishing of the text in literary criticism. This is in addition to the loose thinking of pseudo-theorizing when any general proposition with a few examples becomes "theoretical."

Schwab was a scientist who contributed to biological theory qua theory. He is very clear about what constitutes a theory and its misuse in education. A theory is an empirically replicable general hypothesis that surpasses its competitors in reliable verifiability, making it a warranted, albeit not absolute conclusion. By contrast, education as a field of study is a deliberative activity for particular situations whose problematic formulations and solutions lead to defensible, though not replicable, decisions that could turn out better or worse than anticipated but from which we can always learn. His concern for education in his day was that it was too driven by statistical studies mimicking social sciences modeled on natural sciences. Research conclusions that come out of one set of classrooms cannot be directly applied to others (or even the same classroom later) without adaptation. Schwab was for theory in its own realm, but modified for practical considerations. Thus, as we understand theory less, our grasp of Schwab's unique contribution to the theory-practice paradox—the modifiability of theory for practice by eclectic arts—diminishes.

On a personal note, I paid relatively little attention to the broad reach of *Practical 1* when it appeared, since I was deep in my dissertation and proud that Schwab had made substantial reference to it in *College Curriculum and Student Protest*. My project was to create a relevant

curriculum for upper, lower class black students in a failed college remedial program (the largest in the country) at Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago. This involved inventing a new form of dissertation (which has become one of the current standards), with an introduction followed by contrasting plotlines, and empirically backed (not necessarily statistical) conclusions. I taught a curriculum of short stories that engaged the students and their milieu. I contrasted this to the watered-down courses of the remedial program that was modeled on a college-oriented curriculum borrowed from the University of Chicago based on a dysfunctional ideal of the Advantaged Student.

I backed up my view with over 80 student interviews and classroom tapes. I showed how the minority students read stories that provoked their stereotypes of themselves and white society. I demonstrated what curricular methods could bring them to reflect upon these and possibly change them. Now I see how the vision of Practical 1 provides context and rationale for such nuts-and-bolts research, as well as how the research correspondingly advances The Practical and strengthens its vision. This is one of a handful of dissertations that put The Practical albeit fragmentarily into school curricula. The rest of what we know about how the whole Practical can actually operate is back-loaded in Schwab's own career (Roby 2007).²

However, we have now a record of Schwab's own legendary teaching. Classroom episodes at the University of Chicago, deliberative sessions at Camp Ramah (both from the 1960s), and seminars at Michigan State University (in the 1970s) are being transferred from cassette recordings to CDs. This record is helpful in two ways. First, it addresses the language problem—that readers find it difficult to unpack Schwab's prose. This is because he not only draws upon the technicalities of disciplines he used but also employs a dense, arcane, and difficult style intended to puzzle and challenge the reader, but that confuses many, who are often untrained in close reading of text. By contrast, the recorded sessions show a more colloquial, direct, and earthy Schwab, full of illuminating stories and clarifying examples that reveal the Commonplaces in a language vividly and effectively operational. Certainly, he would not want us merely to mimic "Schwab talk" on these records but rather penetrate their meaning and function as inspiration.

Second, we find a side to Joe Schwab's thinking that tends to be muted by a wry irony in the scholarly pieces. This side is a kind of comic enthusiasm for deliberative curricular inquiry and action. Sessions in the seminars at the Institute for Research on Teaching (Michigan State) are sometimes difficult to transcribe, since the conversation enters into what the transcriber translates as "general hilarity," reflecting a sense of fun as the group attempts to crack the tough nuts of information processing. The felt presence of Joe Schwab in these settings will interest the next generation of (perhaps more aurally oriented) scholars. Moreover, these sessions confirm an even more broadly comic presence in Schwab. He rejects the "tragic view" of educational failures, regarding them as opportunities to do better. He believes in reform, while never ceasing to criticize when and where it falls short. Practical 1 is not a screed, but an invitation to dialogue, collaborate, and improve. This optimistic view is central to all his work and is how his thinking can help us embrace the ongoing life of education.

NOTES

1. Practical 5, Practical 6, and the Camp Ramah recordings are available from the author (roby@sxu.edu). The recordings and transcripts from the Institute for Research on Teaching and University of Chicago are in process. A group of education scholars dedicated to preserving and building on Schwab's work in the Practical has supported this work.

2. Of the dissertations reviewed in this article, only Roby actually took *The Practical* into the field. Judy Siegel never took her brilliant deliberation on how to teach Hamlet into the classroom. There are several empirically oriented theses by Herron, Klinckmann, Charbonnet, and Chekouras. Overall, however, we have “lone-wolf” deliberations, not collaborations.

REFERENCES

- Booth, W. C. 1979. *Critical understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Craig, C. 2003. *Narrative inquiries of school reform: Storied lives, storied landscapes, storied metaphors*. Charlotte, NC: Informational Age Publishing.
- Roby IV, T. W. 2005. What to do about Joseph Schwab and the rabbis. *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies 1*. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from <http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/jaacs/>
- Roby IV, T. W. 2007. A dissertation is a publication: A review of theses in education supervised by Joseph Schwab. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Curriculum History, April, Chicago, IL.
- Schwab, J. J. 1969. *College curriculum and student protest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwab, J.J. 1984. The practical 4: Something for curriculum professors to do. *Curriculum Inquiry 13*: 239–65.
- Westbury, I. and N. J. Wilkof, eds. 1978. *Science, curriculum, and liberal education, selected essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

