Mind & Time subscribes to open access and creative commons license policies and offers academic publications free of charge for the authors and the public. We practice and encourage diversity, creativity, and systems and ecological thinking. We request proper credit attribution to our published authors, at the same time reserving the publisher’s right to independence as far as the ideas expressed.

CCL © Autumn 2013, Mind & Time Publications
Special Issue 2013/2014 of Mind & Time<sup>GEN</sup>
ISSN: 2292-6992
Author: Andrea English

Published by
Mind & Time Publications
Open Journal Systems
University of Toronto
URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/mindandtime/
POBox 7015, Station A
Toronto, Ontario M5W1X7
Canada

Discontinuity in Learning: A Brief Account

Andrea R. English
Mount Saint Vincent University

Abstract: Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation (2013) challenges common views of learning and argues that discontinuous experiences, such as doubt, struggle and resistance are essential to all learning processes. The book highlights three key concepts — perfectibility, tact in teaching, and transformational learning — to reveal how teaching and learning contribute to transformational educational experiences. Drawing on educational theorists from German and Anglo-American traditions, the book aims to reorient how we approach education in a way that proves relevant to scholars, teachers and parents.

Keywords: critical thinking, discontinuity, educational philosophy, learning, moral education, teacher-learner relation, teaching as a reflective practice; J. Dewey, J. F. Herbart, W. James, G. H. Mead, C. S. Peirce, J.-J. Rousseau

1 Dr English’s book Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation (2013) is published and distributed by Cambridge University Press. Her presentation article contains material from the book, with the publisher’s permission. [ed.]
In *Discontinuity in Learning*, I put forth a view that challenges common conceptions of learning as a continuous step-by-step process from ignorance to knowledge. In my view, before we can begin educating another person, we must ask, How do we, as human beings, take in something new—a new object, a new idea, or a new perspective—and transform our previous ways of thinking and doing? More simply, How do we learn? It is my aim in this book to demonstrate that answering this question entails analyzing discontinuous moments in human experience.

I argue that both the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), and his lesser-known predecessor German philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841), place particular significance upon discontinuous experiences, such as uncertainty and struggle, as essential to transformative learning processes. It is generally recognized by Dewey scholars that, on his own account, learning processes begin with moments such as “doubt”, “frustration”, or “uncertainty”, and lead to reflective thinking. Far less considered is how this central tenet of Dewey’s thought connects his thinking to the Continental tradition of philosophy of education, in particular to the work of Herbart.

Herbart can be considered one of the foundational thinkers in modern pedagogy, but there is a good reason why readers today may be unfamiliar with his work. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Herbart’s theory was widely known by educators across Europe, North America and elsewhere, primarily due to Herbart’s followers, the Herbartians. Later, however, discussing Herbart went “out of fashion” in many places, including in North America. This was at least in part due to Dewey’s criticism of Herbart’s instructional theory as not adequately attending to the learner’s experience (see *Democracy and Education* 1916, p. 77). Dewey’s criticism is only partly right: he overlooked significant aspects of Herbart’s theory of moral learning that draw out the importance of discontinuous experiences, such as the learner’s inner struggle. I show that Herbart’s theory of moral learning can help revitalize our current understanding of the human capacity to think critically and be open to difference.

By drawing from the works of Herbart and Dewey, I focus on the central educational meaning of discontinuity in learning and, in turn, in teaching processes. I connect their thoughts on education to Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
Andrea English

Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the early American pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and George Herbert Mead. Additionally, I bring together contemporary educational philosophers from both the English- and German-speaking world, specifically, those who discuss aspects of learning such as doubt, fear, disorientation, and resistance in a way that reveals the educational significance of discontinuity in experience. In this context, I connect my argument to important educational concepts including critical thinking, moral judgment, teaching as a reflective practice, and recognition of the other.

My argument seeks to demonstrate that the breaks and gaps in our experience of the world should be investigated, rather than ignored. These breaks and gaps point to moments in which we have encountered something new, and unexpected. Such encounters with the unexpected interrupt our smooth progression of action, remind us that we are fallible; they are unsettling, and often leave us with a lingering feeling of doubt, discomfort, or frustration. In other words, we have encountered our own blind spot. By analyzing these encounters, we can identify a realm of experience and learning that is between knowledge and ignorance, ability and inability, what I call the “grey zone”, or “in-between realm” of learning.

Moments of educational discontinuity are essential to both teacher and learner, and are part of any genuine process of personal or social change. They connect to our capacity to act morally, that is, to recognize and respect the other. The concepts I develop in the book aim to facilitate our thinking about how education presents the possibility of radical social transformation, beginning with the individual teacher-learner relation.

In today’s world, public discourse on education is narrowly focused on ends. Much of educational policy serves to fixate the focus of teachers and administrators on learners’ achievements of predefined outcomes. In practice, there is an increasing danger that teachers may entirely overlook the educative value of learners’ experiences of limitation, that is, of forms of discontinuity in learners’ experiences.

What we as a society are losing in this fixation on ends is the educational value of paradoxical moments in human experience that have been considered a vital part of human learning processes at least since the Socratic tradition. In this book, I argue that such moments are in no way signs of a
Discontinuity in Learning - A Brief Account

failure to learn, but rather, they are an indispensable part of what makes learning educative. That is, such paradoxical moments connect to the real possibility for us to change how we view ourselves and others, examine what we care about, and redefine the ways that we act towards others.

By highlighting discontinuity as a central aspect of educational thought, this book tells an untold story of the connections between Herbart and Dewey in a way that does not conflate the myriad distinctions between these thinkers, but rather illustrates how they each have something important to say about education as a transformational process. I develop several key concepts in order to reorient how we approach education. By providing philosophers and educators in the international community a way of discussing discontinuous aspects of learning and teaching, the book seeks to further cross-cultural dialogue about education in the 21st century.

I have divided the book into two parts. In part I, I offer a historical and philosophical examination of the idea of discontinuity in education by examining the central educational works of Herbart (e.g., The Science of Education 1806 and "On the Aestheti
cal Revelation of the World" 1804) and Dewey (e.g., Democracy and Education 1916, How We Think 1933, Art as Experience 1934). In chapters 1 and 2, I discuss Herbart’s general concept of education as distinct from socialization and reveal that, whereas Herbart viewed cognitive learning as primarily a continuous process, he viewed moral learning as a discontinuous process, necessarily involving inner struggle. In chapters 3 and 4, I analyze the role of discontinuity in Dewey’s theories of learning and teaching. Chapter 3 introduces the notion of discontinuity as a learning-theoretical concept by addressing how it relates to key ideas in the tradition of pragmatism. Chapter 4 draws on Dewey and Donald Schön to develop a notion of teaching as a unique reflective practice.

In part II, I turn my attention to the contemporary landscape of philosophical discourse in English- and German-speaking contexts. I develop the concepts of transformational learning (chapter 5), tact in teaching (chapter 6), and perfectibility (chapter 7) as key concepts for present-day discourse on education. In the epilogue, I draw out important implications of this discussion for current educational policy on teacher education.

The book is designed for both professors and students of education or philosophy, as well as for school teachers, policy makers, and administrators.
Featured Book


“This book opens new doors to the understanding of the learning process, shedding unexpected light on J. F. Herbart’s influence on John Dewey’s work. Dr English enables the reader to make new sense of the importance of uncertainty and struggle in the learning process. Revealing unexpected connections between J. F. Herbart and John Dewey’s work, she enhances our understanding of transformation, tact, and perfectibility. Engaging with this text releases the reader’s understanding of learning. This text holds great relevance for the active classroom.”

— Maxine Greene, William F. Russell Professor Emerita in the Foundations of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University

---

References


Herbart, Johann Friedrich (1908) The science of education, its general principles deduced from its aim and The aesthetic revelation of the world. Translated by Henry M. Felkin & Emmie Felkin. With a preface by Oscar Browning. Boston, MA: D. C. Heath & Co. [originally published in English in 1891]


---

**About the Author**

Andrea R. English is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada. She is an American scholar, who previously taught at Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, from which she received her doctorate in 2005. Her work on theories of teaching and learning has appeared internationally in scholarly journals and essay collections. Contact: andrea.english@msvu.ca.