

A Pragmatist Approach to Inquiry: Recuperation of the Poetic

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This paper is based on a chapter I have written for my dissertation, entitled, *ironically*, “A Pragmatist Methodology.” Pragmatists eschew methods and, therefore, the title is an oxymoron: Pragmatists are against what Richard Rorty (1999) calls “methodolatry,” the idolatry of methods (xxi).¹ The story here regarding “methods” and the pragmatist evasion leads me to a deeper understanding of pragmatism, explaining Richard Rorty’s efforts to shift discourse, his inference that conversation is poetic (1979, 360), and his suggestion that we need to imagine new *poetic* metaphors to move beyond modernity.² My most focused interest concerns this sense of imagination that Rorty mentions; I wonder, where do new ideas—or any *new* things—come from?³ I begin by describing the relationship I now see between methods and rational thought; I sketch briefly two points from Timothy Reiss’s (1982) explication of rationalism as a dominant discourse, outline, in broad terms, the intentions of pragmatist thought in regard to these two points, and finally suggest the connections I see between creativity—*imagination*—representation⁴ and a pragmatist approach to inquiry.

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Method and Rationality

Michel Foucault (1995) describes how “methods” subtly discipline society as part of the “great carceral continuum,” pointing out that method is a function of *regulation*, which sits at the heart of discipline. The method established a uniform way of doing things and established the standard of normativity to which all things needed to conform. The “carceral net,” of regulation moved gradually, “by means of observation and assessment hierarchized, differentiated, judged,” from the correction of irregularities to the punishment of crime” (299). Punitive procedures moved gradually from the penal system to the entire social body through institutions such as hospitals and schools.

All this was accomplished “without resort to arbitrariness,” no dialogue, no negotiation. Medievalist Walter Ong points out that this was the beginning of “the decay of dialogue,” (Ong, 1983); but I concur with Timothy Reiss, that in effect, it was the beginning of the dominance of rationalism and the disappearance of the *role* of discourse. *Without arbitrariness* means that unspoken rules replaced the negotiation that existed previously.⁵ Society’s habits are, in part, normed, through its various “compact institutions” such as methods. In the carceral net, education is organized around “method(s)” —the standardization of teaching, of curricula, and of research;⁶ and its representational aspects are conceived in such a way that the system is one of *re-production*. Foucault’s analysis illustrates the pervasive power of modern discourse—its presence absent—to dominate and thus hold one captive in a rational thought habit. Underlying the method is a rationalist methodology, a set of organizing principles, that leads to normative, categorical knowledge; the rationalist reasoning foundational for this discursive practice is, however, concealed.

The Conceptualizing Practice of Rationalism

In his brilliant, but very challenging book, *The Discourse of Modernity*, Timothy Reiss (1982) exposes the underlying dynamics of rationalist discourse, historicizing it, tracing its evolution from the early 1600s through literary analysis. Rationalism is a *class* of discourse, the dominant discourse of modernity.⁷ Reiss uses the broad term *conceptualizing practices* to characterize classes of discourse; the conceptualizing practice of rationalism involves linguistic elements that are organized, ordered, and then “the principle of their regularity” is determined and fixed as *concepts*, a movement from particular to the abstract. In this process order and meaning are imposed on a world conceived as set, ordered, and external to the observer; and there is an assumption that the world can be known further through the proper use of language—rational reasoning.

The conceptualizing practices of rationalism are embedded in grammar, institutionalized as “the right way,” to think, speak, and write; these practices are “normative” in a modern world, and tend to reproduce society. These same practices of organizing and ordering, and imposing meaning on the basis of regularity create the conceptual forms of reasoning about education and curriculum practices. The forms of education remain fixed in a reproduction mode and reform (re-form) loses its meaning. By this I mean, the discursive practices that constitute education tend to re-produce what is, the status quo, which helps to stabilize society; but it also reinforces certain forms of thought and speech (Heidegger, 1971, 2000), politics (Oakeshott, 1962), morality and ethics (Bauman, 1993), and aesthetics—all representing ways of thinking about, and being in, the world.

Reiss identifies five elements characteristic of representation of rationalism;⁸ in this section, however, I bring forward just two characteristic elements to illustrate points of difference in regard to a pragmatist approach to inquiry. The first element concerns the dynamic of conceptualization (reasoning and representation) that leads to the subject-object split. Reiss explains this “split” as a “metaphorical” distance, a distance achieved only *discursively*, and only since the early 1600s as Galileo learned to make “scientific” observations while looking through telescope. The enunciating “I,” virtually, a “spectator,” led to the ordering of the world by the mind (Reiss, 30). Galileo, being the scholar that he was, was much imitated, and the new form of discourse caught on quickly. Within 50 years, throughout Europe, scholars used this new rational scientific approach to making observations (Reiss, 9–54).

Over time, this discursive habit has led to two problematics: first, the concept of the modern (objectified) self—autonomous and independent—and its distanced “other”; and second, the denial of subjective experience as an integral element of rationally-reasoned thought. Habituated to rationalism as a conceptualizing practice, one takes for granted one’s subjective position in relation to an objective world—and hence conceives even of *self* as an object.

A point of interest concerning the “object” is that in the process of objectifying, boundaries of certainty are clearly defined, as the *object* of that knowledge is defined. The defining of an object creates a *frame*, the difference between the liminal, being that of which one is conscious, and the ineffable, being that for which there is no articulation. For the “inexpressible,” during the early seventeenth century, the French developed the phrase *je ne sais quois*, indicating a certain something ineffable. The *je ne sais quois* developed as a topic into the *sublime* (sub-liminal), then into a discussion of *taste*, and finally, into a separate concept in itself—aesthetics (Reiss, 39).

The second characteristic of rational representation I focus on is “causation.” This concept is a holdover from the rational reasoning of Greek meta-

physical philosophy: for every effect—in an orderly world—there is a cause. This notion of causation is closely related to a particular rationalist conception of time. In Hegel's rationalist narrative, history represents logical progress toward the present; the dialectical relationship of thesis and antithesis lead to a synthesis; the synthesis is the solution to the problem. In this closed system of thought, causation is to be found in the most proximal antecedents of the synthesis. Time in this version of history is a constant, and represents a linear progression; there is nothing new in the past, nor will there be in the future—the answers, in a fixed and stable world, are all present. Much problem solving within a rationalist frame recognizes the problem as an effect and is satisfied with the most obvious or most proximal "cause." Finding a probable cause, further searching is unnecessary.

Pragmatist Concerns with Rationalism

The great impetus for the development of Pragmatist thought was the recognition of a transforming universe, particularly with the revelation of Darwin's evolutionary theory.⁹ The conceptualizing practices of rationalism, oriented to discovery of universal laws of a fixed universe, finding regularities, creating concepts, ordering and manipulating them, were made obsolete. Pragmatists, responding to *developmental change* as an ordering principle, looked to a logic of "relations" as a conceptualizing practice. They directed their efforts to improving reasoning,¹⁰ moving away from foundational logic. Here I offer not a full description of pragmatist insights and intents, but rather focus on the reconsideration of objectivity and time, both of which have implications for a pragmatist approach to inquiry and, as well, have implications reconceiving "imagination"—or *poetic* thought.

As rationalist thought isolates and defines an object, and then generalizes to focus on the "regularities," the object is considered out of context, isolated from the unique circumstances against which it was originally seen, the surroundings that make it appear to be what it is. On this point, John Dewey notes,

The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end the unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped. (in Ames and Hall, 118)

Objectification obscures the *relationship* between the "seen" and the ungrasped. For pragmatists, the relationship of the object to its surroundings, to its history, are a part of its story and lead to a fuller understanding of the present.

The pragmatist views the (artificial) distance between the *subject* and the *object* as a discursively created "problem," one that repeats throughout modern culture as the relation between the one and the many—interestingly, a

ratio. What seems to be key for pragmatists is the inseparability of organism, words, and environment (the tools of representation). Rorty uses these biologicistic “Darwinian” terms to escape the loaded-ness of other discourses. For Rorty, as for other pragmatists, *organism, environment* and *words* are “nodes in the causal network.” Socio-historical inquiry looks into the discourse and circumstances that led to the present; it looks at the *causal network* of “organism/environment/words,” not as linguistic elements separate from the enunciating subject, but as a bundle which cannot be divided up; they are inseparable. Their inseparability defies “objectivity” and brings subjective experience into the equation. It also brings to awareness the role of the subject in the representation of the object. Representation for pragmatists is not a medium conducting truth, but rather, is a tool for description, a narrative account of experience, the connections one makes in one’s inquiry.

How time is conceived, and its significance, is different for rationalists and pragmatists. For rationalists, the past is the foundation for the present; facts, laws, and knowledge are eternal. The present and future are, in a sense, always anchored in the past. As Michael Oakeshott (1962) points out, rationalism has a strongly conservative tendency. For a pragmatist, the past is relational. To understand actual problems in the present, Rorty says, we need to view the panorama, situating the present in terms of the past; not to find set answers—but to understand the practicalities of past circumstances, how past “tools” have been useful. The past, as Darwin brought to attention, is important to a transforming present but it does not anchor the present—chance is continually at play in an unfolding present, influencing the near and distant future.

More important than the past or the present, the pragmatist is oriented to *future directions*—to come to an agreement about what to do, how to make things better: how may we go forward to create a better, more just world. The result of each inquiry is a “proffered hypothesis,” an offering to one’s community; it is one’s voice in the conversation that leads us all forward in our thinking. For pragmatists, this is the *purpose* of inquiry. In going forward, a pragmatist has a direction in mind, guided by “virtues”: Rorty’s are, curiosity, open-mindedness, and conversability (1999, xxi); Cornel West’s virtues are specifically democratic ones (1993). These virtues are always directed toward improving *relations*.

Finally, in regard to time, the pragmatist, sees inquiry as both ongoing and recursive. In Peirce’s terms, the *ends* of inquiry are the fixations of belief—only until further doubts arise, which spur further inquiry. Therefore, inquiry “ends” only until such time as doubt arises as to the veracity of the findings, and what was before useful as an understanding is no longer adequate. In this way, inquiry is *ongoing* and recursive, and time is progressive even as it recursively folds back on itself.

Moving toward Complexity—Imagination

Returning to my question, where does the *new* of imagination come from? I think of imagination as thought, therefore in pragmatist terms, it is part of the “organism/ word/environment” bundle. When these words are conceived not as *objects* to be considered separately in relation to each other, but as dynamically *construed*,¹¹ their evolving relationship becomes complex. Here I favor the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, and find in his pragmatism and logic of semeiotics, something akin to Gregory Bateson’s (1979) later idea of cybernetic *stochasticism*.¹² I find potential in complexity theory for providing a vocabulary (in Rorty’s sense) for describing the complicated interplay of “organism /word/ environment,” and now I substitute self/representation/culture. In this bundle, for example, *self* is not an “object” but is *inferred* (Peirce), as it is in Gregory Bateson’s concept of “self-in-relation,” a characterological composite developed in and through play,¹³ which for Bateson combines experience and environment. Within this system of dynamical interplay, *self* is a self-organizing node (via feedback loops) in a dissipative, open-ended, always interpretive structure. The triadic interplay of nodes in this bundle provides a logical space of *possibility* for the emergence of the mystical, magical, and ineffable— all that is excluded in rationalist conceptualizing practices. There can be, in the interplay of this “three-body” bundle, a genesis, a creation—the emergence of the new.

A Pragmatist Approach to inquiry

Prophetic pragmatist Cornel West (1993, 3–7) outlines four overlapping “moments” in a pragmatist approach to inquiry. The first is that a pragmatist pays close attention to the language, to *words* (representations, signs) and their inextricable connection to humans and culture. For example, West asks, what do the words “freedom” or “democracy” mean? These are conceptual, intellectual words that demand *discernment*, a broad and deep analytical grasp of the present in light of the past, leading to a view of what is obscured or obfuscated in the way language is used.

Secondly, pragmatist inquiry is oriented to human situations. On the basis of our common humanity, recognizing our differences, we need to be empathetic to and attempt to understand others—not as concepts, but as human beings. This connectedness locates inquiry (and its representation) in relation to our human-ness inseparable from culture and history.

Third, in “tracking hypocrisy,” West suggests that pragmatists work to address the gap between “rhetoric and reality,” pointing out the social terrain of rationality, where the hidden ironies, paradoxes and deceptions lie. For example, while rhetorically touting “equality” our ignorance of the reality of *difference* becomes significant. As West says of the postmodern crisis:

Large numbers of people in the world, especially in American society, do not believe they make a difference. In the black community that is what the meaninglessness and the hopelessness and the state of siege that is raging is in part about: the collapsing of structures of meaning, and the collapsing of structures of feeling such that hopelessness becomes the conclusion and walking nihilism becomes the enactment of it. How do you preserve agency? (91)

We need to understand the social terrain of rationality self-critically, to understand that we are a part of that rationality, shaped by the technologies we criticize, and therefore complicit, not only in that rationality, but in our own acceptance of its affect. West calls this understanding “intellectual humility.”

From this realized humility arises the final moment of pragmatist inquiry, which is hope:

To engage in an audacious attempt to galvanize and energize, to inspire and to invigorate world-weary people...the future is open-ended and *what we think* and *what we do* can make a difference (6; emphasis added).

The Poetic as a Conceptualizing Practice

In my inquiry, following Rorty and West, I look at the poetic as a conceptualizing practice, which provides insights into how discursive practices may function differently, offering new ways of seeing/thinking/doing. Such functioning is allied with seeing the poetic in terms of *poiesis*.

Traced etymologically, *poiesis*, from the Hellenistic “mytho-poetic” presents an entirely different sense of representation (*mimesis*) than we have today.¹⁴ In mythic or mytho-poetic societies, *mimesis* was a complicated concept, involved with the process of cultural education called *paideia*, and the poet was a teacher, a wise man, and a leader.¹⁵ *Mimesis* meant re-presentation in the form of a re-enactment; each *poietic* re-enactment involved pulling the past into the present. The *recollection*, and its re-presenting *with variation*, was a vitally important to the concept; each performance was intended to improve upon, while still honoring, the past, and thus to stand in relation to the future. Variations on the epics by the poet often included the insertion of political commentary.¹⁶ From the poet-performer’s perspective, *poiesis* involved spontaneous interplay within the formulaic structure of the poem, between himself, the audience, the chorus, and the muse. *Poiesis*, from the audience’s perspective was related to making sense *between* one’s experience and the cosmos as presented/performed, connecting with one’s history, culture, and community. One was drawn out of oneself in enchantment with heroes, gods and goddesses, and alternately plunged into wrenching tragedy as one feels their pain as one’s own. In this setting, where time is collapsed, where gods and goddesses dwell with heroes and mortals, one

was called to question one's experience, actions and intents in this world, experiencing *katharsis*, a moment of clarity, insight and connection (Leon Golden, 1996). Reiss (1982) calls this conceptualizing practice "an ordering of the mind *by* the world (*bricolage*) (30).

A Point of Convergence

There is a point of convergence here between pragmatist thought, its refusal of method, and my inquiry into the poetic inspired by Rorty. I believe that what a pragmatist approach brings to thought is a recuperation of the poetic as *poiesis*. This poetic is an element of pragmatist thought.

Pragmatism, in its recuperation of *poiesis*, brings a regard for the play of time, past, present, and future, to the moment; these are elements of both continuity and change that appeal to progressive reconstructionists. *Poiesis*, as a part of a pragmatist project, looks to the past not to be read from the present, but "to recollect," to acknowledge established patterns of relationships between organism/word/environment, that is "to re-enact," and to create, to bring forward "with variation," that is, to give voice, thought, and action, with an eye to future *possibilities*. Pragmatist thought is practical, finding its application in actual situations, and proceeding toward a progressive reconstruction of new realities. Finally, pragmatist thought is inherently political, oriented to a logic of relations, infused by a social hope for a better future. Shifting from mimetic representational discourse to a discourse of *poiesis* opens curricular and educational thought to possibilities yet to be conceived—those which will emerge.

Notes

1. It is true, as William E. Doll (2005) points, that C. S. Peirce and John Dewey were both concerned with improving "methods" of thought and inquiry; indeed, Dewey is often associated with the "scientific method." It is also true that misappropriations of Dewey's ideas dominate; but more important perhaps is to note the tendency within the dominant discourse to interpret in terms of the dominant discourse. Therefore, the scientific method becomes an objective procedure instead to the "experience" Dewey would have one "suffer."
2. The dissertation, *Complexifying the Poetic: Toward a Poiesis of Curriculum*, is an inquiry into "the poetic." I explore historically rationalist discursive practices that led to the shaping of the modern curriculum. A *standardized curriculum* and a *representational* epistemology evolved; that evolution, paralleling rational thought, includes successive exclusions—of the supernatural, the spiritual, "difference," the *ineffable*—to create what I call a *mimetic curriculum*, broadly intended to reproduce and therefore stabilize society. I explore the poetic as a discursive practice to understand its conceptualizing practice—its logic. Con-

- sidering curriculum reforms, most tend to be a rearrangement of what exists, or a return to the basics, indicating, perhaps, a failure of modernism to think beyond itself. A problematic, then, for “reform” that will be more than re-forming *what is*, becomes one of thinking beyond modernity, a progressive project.
3. This ancient question relates to meta-philosophical discussions concerning the nature of things, creation, genesis, and the relationship of humans to nature and to God. Rorty demystifies this discourse by referring to the Darwinian or biological relationship of “organism / word / environment.”
 4. I use the term “representation” in the general sense of “the use of one thing to stand for another,” with the appreciation gleaned from critical theory that “symbolic constructions represent the belief systems and preserve the values of the dominant culture” (Bedford Literary Dictionary).
 5. Foucault’s (1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* begins in the 1500s and ends at 1840. Walter Ong discusses a transition in the late 1500s and early 1600s from rhetoric and the oral tradition to modern discourses. The transition in the 1500s is marked as well by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) in *Rabelais and his World*.
 6. See William Doll, 2002, 2005.
 7. I use the term *discourse*, very generally, as the use of language (*la langue*); I use the term “discursive” to refer to “reasoning”; *discursive practices* brings into question *ways* of using discourses—the “more” of language (*la parole*).
 8. The five characteristics of rationalist representation are all related in some way to the initial one of objectivity—and all have further implications for inquiry beyond modernity. They are: (1) objectivity, and (2) the use of metaphor as an ordering device (subject-object split); (3) a (viewer’s) *perspective* on the object; (4) objective *certainty*; and (5) the linear narration of *causality*.
 9. For C. S. Peirce, a logician, mathematician, and historian of science, in addition to Darwin’s theory of evolution, much other scientific work was also important to the formulation of pragmatist thought and his own logic of semeiotics. Boole’s mathematics (Boolean logic), for example, stimulated Peirce’s thinking in his formulation of triadic system of logic to emphasize the category of firstness, the phenomenological.
 10. Rationality and reason have long been conflated. To be rational is the mark of sound thinking. To be irrational is an indication that one is not in one’s right mind. Pragmatists, especially William James (1995/1907), decry rationality and prefer “reason.”
 11. For the significance of this word see Davis and Sumara, 2002.
 12. Cybernetics, for Bateson, was an aggregate of the ideas that came together at the Macy Conferences, combining communications theory, information theory, and systems theory as a unified set of ideas. Two main points about this convergence stand out in relation to *explanation* (the use of discourse): First, instead of scientific explanation being confined to the simple cause and effect relations between constants, *time* was introduced as a variable. This important fact allowed for the configuration of a system whose parts interacted and influenced each other through feedback loops and, therefore, self-correction and adaptation within a system could be conceptualized. Bateson explains that in cyber-

- netics “every given system embodied relations to time, that is, was characterized by time constants determined by the given *whole*. These constants were not determined by the equations of relationships between successive parts but were *emergent* properties of the system” (1979: 114). In Bateson’s view a system develops not unilaterally, but stochastically (partly random). The random element within the system allows for the system to transform itself—to create newness. The new emerges via a dynamic system’s continued stochastic recursion.
13. Play for Bateson has to do with limit experiences, finding out where the boundaries are; other limit experiences are “exploration” (the limit of how far I think I can go) and “crime” (the limit of what society will allow).
 14. After Plato, *mimesis* (representation) was an imitation or copy of ideal forms. Discourse was assumed to mirror objects in the world. Simplistically interpreted from the Latin by the medieval scholastics, representation was just “imitation, copy.”
 15. Greek theatre favored a male-dominated society, hierarchically ordered society, complete with slavery. Men and women led very different lives; however, women of status attended performances (for women) and female poets were known and respected in ancient Greece by women and men alike (Sappho is the most famous).
 16. One of the criticisms that Plato had of the poets was that they did not speak in their own voice, but spoke through the characters. Therefore he accused the poets of deceit. Richard P. Martin (1989) confirms, after lengthy analysis of the Iliad and heroic speech patterns of the early Greeks, that Homer’s “voice” is likely that of Achilles.

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