John Dewey’s work on education is foundational for most K–12 educators. I doubt many teachers trained in colleges of education leave without at least a passing familiarity to his works and philosophy. In Clifford P. Harbour’s book, *John Dewey and the Future of Community College Education*, the author systematically reviews Dewey’s works with an eye to how the philosopher’s ideas can inform community college education. Harbour argues that this examination is particularly important at this moment because of the changing mission of the community college. He identifies the mission of the two-year college as having been about access but argues that it is now about economic preparation of workers couched in the completion agenda. He offers the democratic vision of Dewey’s work as a compelling alternative to the neoliberal logics driving the completion agenda.

This book is important for two-year college English studies practitioners for several reasons. First, Harbour rightly points out that change is coming to the community college. Few readers would disagree that it has already arrived. Harbour chronicles the reduction of state funding for education along with the ballooning student and state debt crises to show just how dire circumstances are. The author links this difficult moment to those Dewey worked through and to the history of the community college. In fact, the attention to institutional and educational histories is one of the main strengths of this volume. I, like many community college instructors, began working in the institutional type without a deep understanding of its history. Harbour’s work at contextualizing the access mission through a recounting of the Truman Commission, the GI Bill, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Higher Education Act is important knowledge for our profession. Further, his look at how community colleges have simultaneously been conceived as points of access and “cooling out” institutions is insightful. In essence, he provides a parallel summary of how community colleges changed and how Dewey’s philosophical work on democracy and education developed in the twentieth century.

Harbour draws on Dewey because he was trying to “explain the kind of education needed to advance American Democracy in a period distinguished by rapid technological change” and by the astonishing income inequality in the period before and during the Great Depression (7). The author points to Dewey’s critique of school systems “failing to prepare students to think critically about the very difficult problems their society was facing—unemployment, poverty, and the...
inequitable distribution of wealth and income” (143). Dewey turns to democratic education to combat this. Because of that orientation, one that echoes our present moment, Harbour argues for an adoption of Dewey’s normative vision to counteract the economic vision being predicated by outside forces.

Harbour makes the point that Dewey did not provide specific details for how his democratic vision should be enacted. Instead, Harbour asserts, Dewey knew the “reformation of any institution must be grounded in the experience of the individuals at the institution” and that “progress needed to be made in ‘face to face associations in communities’” (10, 151). This notion of local interactions fits with recent work in TETYC such as Christie Toth and Patrick Sullivan’s “Toward Local Teacher-Scholar Communities of Practice: Findings from a National TYCA Survey” or in books like Shari J. Stenberg’s Repurposing Composition: Feminist Interventions for a Neoliberal Age. Change must come from local interaction within the institution and the community. Harbour’s work to draw our attention to the democratic normative vision offers two-year college English studies practitioners a historical orientation that allows us access to a vocabulary to rhetorically reposition and resist the omnipresent market language shaping our classrooms and institutions. Harbour argues that Dewey offers “a set of beliefs, a coherent philosophy, and a collection of priorities and values for a group of educators disappointed with a set of aspirations that goes no farther than access and completion” (159).

To aid us in our thinking, the author’s last chapter is entitled “The Deweyan Community College,” in which Harbour distills Dewey’s astonishing writing output to eleven principles for the community college aimed at helping to articulate and foster a democratic vision. While Harbor doesn’t specifically cite faculty classroom practices here, I couldn’t help but think of John Duffy’s 2012 Inside Higher Education essay, “Virtuous Arguments” wherein Duffy argues that first-year writing is one of the only places for the kind of course “offering students opportunities to learn and practice the moral and intellectual virtues” (Duffy). Clearly, there is a place for the development of democratic thinking in writing courses. In reading this clearly written slim volume, I came away agreeing that Dewey’s vision is a both a needed balm and a tool we can use to advance our students’ interests.

Works Cited


Darin L. Jensen
Des Moines Area Community College