EXPLORING FEAR: ROUSSEAU, DEWEY, AND FREIRE ON FEAR AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. Fear is not the first feature of educational experience associated with the best-known progressive educational theorists — Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. But each of these important thinkers did, in fact, have something substantive to say about how fear functions in the processes of learning and growth. Andrea English and Barbara Stengel juxtapose the ideas of these thinkers in this essay for three purposes: (1) to demonstrate that there is a progressive tradition that accounts for negative emotion in learning; (2) to explore doubt, discomfort, and difficulty as pedagogically useful, with links to fear as both a prompt for and an impediment to growth; and (3) to suggest that teachers take negative affect into account in their pedagogical practice. In doing so, English and Stengel join with contemporary theorists in and out of education to recognize that affect cannot be left out of social theory and that understanding the play of emotion is an integral part of creating truly educational contexts and experiences. The authors’ focus here is on fear in processes of learning.

Fear is not the first feature of educational experience associated with the best-known progressive educational theorists — Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire. But each of these important thinkers did, in fact, have something substantive to say about how fear functions in the processes of learning and growth. We juxtapose the ideas of these thinkers here for three purposes: (1) to demonstrate that there is a progressive tradition that accounts for negative emotion in learning; (2) to explore doubt, discomfort, and difficulty as pedagogically useful, with links to fear as both a prompt for and an impediment to growth; and (3) to suggest that teachers take negative affect into account in their pedagogical practice. In doing so, we join with contemporary theorists both within and outside of education to recognize that affect cannot be left out of social theory and that understanding the play of emotion is an integral part of creating truly educational contexts and experiences.¹ Our task is distinguishable in that current discourse around fear and education has been primarily concerned with cultural difference and sociopolitical interactions, while we are focusing specifically on fear in processes of learning.

We begin our reading of Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire with one eye on taken-for-granted notions of feeling and emotion and the other on William James’s

well-known insight about emotion, first articulated in his *Psychology*. In ordinary conversation, the term “fear” is commonly associated with uncomfortable feelings prompted by a (cognitive) judgment of [real or perceived] threat, feelings viewed as instinctual in origin (that is, they constitute a specific affective repertoire linked to danger and built into the human organism), and assigned the power to stimulate physiological and behavioral responses. In other words, it is the judgment of threat that elicits the specific emotion of fear, and fear is then *expressed* in one of three ways: flight (that is, distancing from dangerous persons, places or things), fight (that is, defeating the dangerous other to save oneself), or paralysis (that is, lacking the ability to act at all).

In the late 1800s, James found this formulation untenable, claiming that fear is not felt and then expressed, but rather expressed and then felt.2 James’s most notorious statement of this position is that “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.”3 James insisted that the bodily disturbance is integral to the experience of emotion and not simply the corollary of cognitive activity. For James, what we take to be emotional expression — physiological and behavioral — comes first and the emotion of fear is born when the bodily changes we associate with fear — racing pulse, pounding heart, and the like, and even flight, fight, and paralysis — come to consciousness.

Dewey acknowledged several powerful elements in James’s formulation: (1) James was looking for a functional classification of emotion, one that is both objective and dynamic; (2) James valued the body in action and acknowledged the mind as implicated in cognition, volition, and affection as dimensions of action; and (3) James challenged “our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions … that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression.”4 However, as we shall see further on in our discussion, Dewey

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2. James claimed that “the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion.” See William James, “What Is an Emotion?” *Mind* 9 (1884): 188–205.
3. Ibid., 190.
4. Ibid., 189.

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rejected both the commonsense view of fear and the James-Lange feeling theory of emotion⁵ in a way that foregrounds connections among emotion, action, and reflection.

Here, we consider both Rousseau’s and Freire’s largely pedagogical reflections on fear and learning, as well as Dewey’s carefully crafted phenomenological insights, to uncover the meaning of fear in educational contexts. In the process, we seek to define fear as it plays a role in learning and growth. We ask, does fear prompt learning or impede it? To what extent can and should fear be removed from educational contexts?

One response to these questions has been a move toward creating classrooms and schools as “safe” spaces, safe not only from extrinsic sources of fear such as bullying, but also from intrinsic sources such as a learner’s social insecurity. Recently, important studies in educational philosophy and curriculum theory — critical of this trend toward safety — have investigated fear in ways that go beyond the conventional understanding, as we hope to do here. These studies have approached the topic of fear from a sociopolitical standpoint, pointing out that the plea for safety can amount to a plea for the removal of challenges, diversity, and difference from education.⁶ We join these scholars in questioning the nature and value of safe spaces in educational contexts. However, our approach will be more focused on fear from a learning-theoretical standpoint. We will examine to what extent fear is part of all learning, insofar as learning necessarily involves encounters with the new, unfamiliar, different, and strange.

In this inquiry, we will look at the connections Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire each made between “fear” and concepts such as “discomfort,” “doubt,” and “difficulty.” These concepts prove central to each of these authors’ understandings of learning and underscore the need to question safe spaces as productive learning environments. In sorting out these connections, we highlight the complexity involved in understanding when fear initiates and when it impedes learning. First, looking to Rousseau, we underscore a central challenge to educators, which involves knowing when to protect the child and when to let the child explore the world and overcome what he or she fears. To address this issue more fully, we look beyond Rousseau’s discussion to Dewey’s phenomenological analysis of emotion generally and fear in particular. We demonstrate that Dewey’s understanding of fear as essentially relational and contextual provides a helpful interpretive lens for educators who encounter students’ discomfort and resistance in learning contexts. With Dewey, we address a further challenge to educators: the challenge of

⁵. James’s formulation of how we experience fear and other emotions has come to be popularly known as the James-Lange theory of emotion. This general hypothesis on the origin and nature of emotions was developed independently by James and another nineteenth-century scholar, Carl Lange.

determining the circumstances under which the learner’s doubt and discomfort go from being constructive to being destructive. Third, we turn to Freire’s discussion of critical reflection and the social aspects of learning in order to address a challenge that confronts both educators and learners alike, namely, how to face one’s fears and transform them into educative experiences.

In closing, we compare the contributions of each of the three philosophers and examine how each thinker offers vital — though differing — insights into how teachers can and must deal with the challenges associated with students’ fears without reducing learning environments and classrooms to strictly safe, comfortable spaces. In light of this examination, we suggest ways that teachers can recognize the already rich play of affect in classrooms and incorporate considerations of affect into lesson and curriculum planning.

**Rousseau: Fear in Learning and the Problem of Protection**

Early in *Emile*, Rousseau advocated a form of early childhood education that sets limits on the educator’s acts of protection over the child for the sake of his growth. On his view, feelings of fear begin to form in the early stages of a child’s life. However, he claimed that models of education that place a primacy on protection over the child can hinder the type of learning that helps the child productively deal with fear. Rousseau criticized educators who connect images of the stable, safe, and sterile atmosphere with ideas of protecting and coddling the child, because they only see learning as a product of instruction. Such views, he argued, neglect learning that arises from the child’s exploration of the new, unfamiliar, and different within his surroundings. Accordingly Rousseau considered such views as contrary to the aims of education and thus dangerously misguided: they seek to “preserve the child,” without teaching him to “preserve himself as a man” (*EOE*, 42). In *Emile*, Rousseau presented an alternative vision of education that prepares individuals for independence by fostering learning through encounters with difference, even when these encounters are coupled with discomfort and fear.

**On the Relation of Fear and Habit Formation**

Rousseau’s positive account of how learning should be facilitated by the educator is based in his analysis of how fear is formed, and accordingly how it can be prevented, in the earliest stages of the child’s life. He began by looking at how the senses are formed. He explained that the fear of darkness begins to form during the prelinguistic period of sensory development when an infant’s eyes begin to grow accustomed to the light (*EOE*, 62). The infant, only differentiating between pleasure and pain at this stage in his life, deems the “affective sensation” caused by the light pleasurable due to the fact that the light allows him to perceive the

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom [1764; repr. New York: Basic Books, 1979]. This work will be cited in the text as *EOE* for all subsequent references. We use the male pronoun throughout the discussion of Rousseau’s view because he was speaking of Emile and not Sophie. We do not know whether Rousseau viewed boys and girls in the same way with respect to the function of fear in learning.
objects in his immediate surroundings that are still beyond his grasp \((\text{EOE}, 62f)\). According to Rousseau’s explanation, what was once simply the infant’s impulse to turn toward the light transforms into habit and becomes a conscious desire to avoid darkness \((\text{EOE}, 63)\). In other words, the desire to see becomes so strong that darkness becomes undesirable, painful, and frightening since it obscures the child’s vision of his surroundings.

On Rousseau’s account, the fact that children become accustomed to light and begin to fear darkness creates a problem for educators in two central ways. The most apparent problem is that the child “cries and screams” when it is dark, and the educator must decide how to respond. But underlying this problem is one of a more significant nature for Rousseau, namely that as the child becomes habituated into his environment, it becomes more difficult for educators to differentiate between the child’s real fears of oncoming harm and the fears that are merely a product of his socialization. Rousseau deemed this a problem that pervades all aspects of the child’s learning processes, since these are connected to the child’s formation of habits. As Rousseau wrote, “soon [the learner’s] desire no longer comes from need but from habit, or rather, habit adds a new need to that of nature” \((\text{EOE}, 63)\).

The salient point of Rousseau’s analysis of habit formation is that as the child begins to equate the realm of the predictable with the realm of the desirable, he begins to \textit{fear} the unexpected. As Rousseau sought to point out, this process of habit formation is not necessarily educative. To prevent desires and fears from forming in this way, Rousseau recommended a form of “negative education” by which the educator seeks to prevent habits from forming that limit the child’s growth in other areas \((\text{EOE}, 63; \text{see also 93})\). Accordingly, the educator should not allow feeding and sleeping patterns to form, nor should he allow the child to grow accustomed only to light, but should also “get [him] habituated to darkness” \((\text{EOE}, 63)\). On this model, the motto for the educator should be “the only habit the child should be allowed to contract is none” \(\text{[EOE}, 63]\). For Rousseau, educators who lack this understanding of how habits are formed will lose sight of how their own repetitive habitual actions indirectly influence the child’s formation of habits.

On Rousseau’s view, educators must avoid perpetuating the learner’s habit formation not only in the realm of the sensory, but also in the realm of cognitive development. To do this, he suggested introducing change into the child’s environment as a means of changing the child’s expectations. In the cognitive realm of learning, just as in the affective realm of learning, the educator, on Rousseau’s account, has the task of preventing the child’s fear of the unknown. However, Rousseau suggests a slightly different approach. Whereas in cultivating the child’s sensory development the educator’s method is more one of allowing the

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8. Rousseau also advocated developing the other senses as a way of diminishing the fear of darkness. Along these lines, he recommended that when Emile gets older, he must learn in the darkness by going on night walks and playing games in the dark so that he can sharpen his other senses. Rousseau urged, “do not reason with him whom you want to cure of loathing of the dark. Take him out in it often, and rest assured that all the arguments of philosophy are not equal in value to this practice. Tilers on roofs do not get dizzy, one never sees a man who is accustomed to being in the dark, afraid of it” \((\text{EOE}, 135)\).
child to explore and encounter difference and discomfort on his own, in cultivating the child’s cognitive development the educator becomes provocateur, stimulating some fear in order to facilitate growth. In this way Rousseau advocated a method of selectively and gradually introducing the child to new things with the purpose of extending the child’s understanding and in turn dissipating his fear. Rousseau gave an example of this when he wrote that the child must become familiar with all new things, in particular those that are “ugly, disgusting, and peculiar” such as spiders, snakes, toads (EOE, 63). He emphasized an approach that fosters the child’s “natural” curiosity and interests, while at the same time recognizing and accounting for the child’s fears. For example, he explained how the educator brings Emile to learn about spiders. The educator’s approach is to allow Emile to first observe the spiders from a distance and watch how others handle them without fear “until he is accustomed to” the spiders and “by dint of seeing them handled by others, he finally handles them himself” (EOE, 63).

With this concise example, Rousseau explicated a complex idea of how fear and learning relate. The educator’s task is to expand the child’s experience of the world by providing the child with insight into the consequences of human interactions with things in the world, such as scary objects. The educator aims to introduce the child to things that he may otherwise not approach out of fear due to his physical weakness and dependence. In this way, the child is given the opportunity to overcome his initial fear and to learn from and understand the world through the experiences of others. The child thereby begins to learn to estimate in his own mind whether there is any real harm and any real reason to be frightened, or whether he safely can follow his interest in the things around him.

To a certain extent, Rousseau’s ideas of education in the examples dealing with scary things in Emile seem to correspond to the cognitive explanation of fear he formulated in his earlier Discourse on the Origin of Inequality. There he gave a description of the human being’s fear of the unknown according to which fear appears to be the affective and physiological face of a judgment that there is danger or threat of harm. However, his view of fear in Emile goes beyond this explanation. He also demonstrated, as in the example with spiders, that fear of the unknown can be a result of learning, or rather a lack of learning in certain realms of human experience. In Rousseau’s thinking, the two ideas are intimately intertwined, since the more the child learns through different kinds of experience, the less prone he would be to feel an oncoming danger. Thus, Rousseau argued, there is a strong correlation between the absence of certain experiences in one’s childhood and the

9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, ed. Patrick Coleman, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28. Rousseau wrote against Thomas Hobbes that man is not naturally fearless, nor is he always timid; rather “concerning things he does not know,” man “is frightened by every new sight that greets him whenever he cannot discern the physical good or evil he can expect from it, nor compare his strength against the dangers in store.” For a further discussion of nature and the fear of darkness in Rousseau, see also Jonathan Marks, “Who Lost Nature? Rousseau and Rousseauism,” Polity 34, no. 3 (2002): 479–502.
fears one has as an adult. He explained, for example, that children raised in clean houses are usually afraid of spiders as adults \( (EOE, 63) \). Just as fear can become an obstacle to learning, learning can also become an obstacle to fear: “If during childhood [the child] has without fright seen toads, snakes, crayfish, he will when grown, without disgust see any animal whatsoever. There are no longer frightful objects for whoever sees such things every day” \( (EOE, 63) \).

**On the Problem of Comfort and Safety in Learning**

Embedded in Rousseau’s examples is the notion that a static environment is the friend of fear because it gives the child a sense of comfort and tranquility, yet in reality it makes him increasingly vulnerable to and more frightened of any type of change in circumstances. Thus, Rousseau argued that the child is to be habituated “into seeing new objects without being affected by them” in a way that “destroys his fear” \( (EOE, 63) \). His considerations of the connection between childhood and adulthood fears point to a central question for educators: Is strengthening the child’s ability in one realm of learning weakening or limiting his abilities and potentially making him more frightened to later engage in exploration in another?

Rousseau sought to make it apparent that individuals’ past experiences structure their new experiences, and that this is true of what they come to desire and what they come to fear. The objects that he chose to present to Emile seem to be implicitly part of a safe environment, preselected to be objects within Emile’s realm of learning and experience. But his vision of the educator at this early stage in the child’s life is one of a somewhat removed adult, who is to a certain extent emotionally detached from the child’s experiences. Emotional responses on the part of the adult, for Rousseau, come in only two forms. Either the child expresses worry and anxiety, in which case the adult seeks to pacify the child by coddling and calming him when he cries, or the child expresses contempt and anger, in which case the adult seeks to intimidate the child by means of an angry or irritated response to the crying and fearful child \( (EOE, 65f) \). Rousseau deemed both responses unjust and equally invalid, for in the first case, the child gains only a pseudo-sense of safety and actually becomes weaker and more dependent, and in the second case, the child becomes aggressive and tyrannical \( (EOE, 65f) \). As Christopher Winch points out, Rousseau asked educators to “walk a moral and emotional tightrope” when deciding how to correctly react to a crying baby.\(^\text{10}\)

**The Limits of Rousseau’s Account**

For the most part, Rousseau’s concept of the educator’s task in response to fear in early childhood education seems devoid of any consideration for the adult’s feelings of caring, love, and affection for the child that could have a productive connection to the dissipation of the child’s fears.\(^\text{11}\) For Emile, Rousseau sought

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\(^{11}\) Rousseau did however hint at how such feelings may emerge as an appropriate response to the child’s fear in his discussion of an example from Homer’s *Iliad*. There he described a situation in which
primarily to prevent situations in which fears are misplaced and the result of a misunderstanding. He described, for example, his method for teaching Emile not to be afraid of masks. Ultimately, Rousseau’s approach is not one of care and concern; rather, it approximates modern-day approaches to phobia desensitization:

All children are afraid of masks. I begin by showing Emile a mask with a pleasant face. Next someone in his presence puts this mask over his face. I start to laugh; everybody laughs; and the child laughs like the others. Little by little I accustom him to less pleasant masks and finally to hideous faces. If I have arranged by gradation well, far from being frightened by the last mask, he will laugh at it as at the first. After that I no longer have fear that he can be frightened by masks. (EOE, 63)

Rousseau’s approach is not only limited because it exclusively addresses fears of a distinctive form, object, and history; it also overlooks the fact that the kind of discomfort that Rousseau anticipated for Emile could potentially prompt fear rather than learning.

While Rousseau’s methods prove problematic as a means of pedagogical action, his attempt to demonstrate how learning takes place proves insightful for understanding the educator’s role in mediating between the child’s (potential) fears and the child’s interests. He sought to develop a form of education that fosters learning through exploration in such a way that the child begins to understand how his impressions and perceptions of the world could be mistaken. Emile is set on a path at a very early stage in his life of slowly coming to know new things and gradually overcoming his fear by coming to understand the objects around him. In dealing with new objects, he not only experiences the object, but he simultaneously begins to experience learning. To experience learning means to experience being wrong. Emile experiences this not by simply being told that he is wrong, but by being given the opportunity to realize that his first impulse — his impulse of fear, and his initial assessment of the situation — is not accurate. Upon further analysis, and observation of the consequences of the actions of others, he finds another way of viewing the situation. As Jonathan Marks emphasizes, Emile, “like Socrates, does not think he knows what he does not know.” In this way, Rousseau’s vision of early childhood education demonstrates a profound recognition of the child’s perfectibilité, or his capability of learning in all areas of life. This capacity for learning and self-transformation that Rousseau attributed to all human beings is directly connected to the fact that human beings, unlike other animals, have the potential not to follow their instincts, but to move past these with reason and

the son in the story cries out of fear because he does not recognize his father, who is wearing a helmet that hides his identity to the child. In response to the child’s tears, the father removes his helmet and runs to his son to caress and console him. Rousseau saw the father’s response to the child’s tears as the correct response, only because his emotional response of caring and consoling the child is connected to removing the helmet (EOE, 63). The father is showing care for the child, but he is also revealing to the child that his fear was the result of a misunderstanding. Rousseau took the idea further by saying that given enough time the helmet should be handed to the child so that the child could touch it and learn that it was nothing to fear (EOE, 63). In this way, Rousseau condoned the educator’s emotional response to the child’s fear because it is connected to facilitating learning, thus, it is not an act of pacifying and weakening the child, but rather one of cultivating his independence.

understanding. Rousseau’s insights warn educators not to fall into the trap of accommodating the child’s fears without giving equal recognition to the child’s ability to learn and overcome fear.

Rousseau’s considerations are vital for exposing the educational paradox: an environment of comfort and safety can potentially lead to the child becoming more uncomfortable and more frightened. However, he gave limited insight into how educators can successfully deal with the necessary balance between protecting the child and exposing him to frightful situations. Rousseau’s educational vision is imbued with his desire to prevent corrupt social relations from affecting the child. These are based in the imposition of one person’s will over another’s. In preventing educators from responding unjustly — for example, with worry or fury — to the child’s needs, Rousseau saw himself as preventing a society formed out of tyrants and subjects, those who rule and those who follow, those that are to be feared and those that are fearful. He sought to make Emile not a man “of our whims” but one who is free and capable of making his own decisions. For this reason, he conceptualized early childhood education as largely individualistic, ultimately failing to recognize the social relations, such as family, friendship, and even contact with strangers, that can help the learner to deal productively with feelings of fear.

Dewey: Connecting Doubt, Discomfort, and Fear

Dewey’s view that discomfort and doubt prompt thought and action is well known. The concrete impact of this view on pedagogical action — that learning can only occur under conditions of some discomfort — is less well considered. The kind of discomfort Rousseau anticipated for Emile as he learns about the world does not inevitably resolve into interest and useful learning. Discomfort can also dissolve into fear in ways that undercut possibilities for learning. So the educator who provokes affect must guard against the possibility that fear becomes the learner’s habitual response. Dewey’s analysis of emotion provides a basis for understanding — and preventing — that possibility.

13. On this concept, see EOE, 61; and Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, 33 and 34. See also David Gauthier, Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], especially 5–9; and Marks, “Who Lost Nature!”

14. See Winch, “Rousseau on Learning,” for a clear explanation of Rousseau’s concepts of the natural and the social. Winch explains that Rousseau did not deem all social relations corrupt, only those that lead to the division of society into the dominating and the subjugated. See also, Gauthier, Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence.

15. John Dewey himself might contest our characterization of him as a progressive educator. After all, despite his historical location within the Progressive Era of social and political change in the United States, Dewey was quite critical of the Progressive Education Movement. However, like Rousseau before him, Dewey had faith in individuals’ ability to learn and grow. Dewey’s belief, as confirmed in his “Pedagogic Creed,” that “education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform” clearly marks him as progressive. See John Dewey, My Pedagogic Creed [1897], in John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969].
The doubt born of discomfort has a central role to play in this analysis. As the cognitive function of perception, doubt asks the question: Is this what I think it is? As such, like discomfort, doubt is, in Dewey’s terms, prereflective and indeterminate, not yet an (educative or miseducative) experience. The educator’s responsibility is to encourage students to stay in the discomfort and doubt associated with new learning, to avoid a premature commitment to fear and the avoidance behaviors that mark fear as fear, until interest emerges and learning becomes possible.

Dewey’s Account of Emotion

As noted in the introduction, Dewey rejected both the commonsense formula for fear (that cognitive recognition of a perceived threat prompts instinctual feelings that cause a physiological and behavioral response), and the James-Lange feeling theory (a dangerous stimulus prompts an instinctual physiological response that becomes conscious as feeling with subsequent cognitive recognition). Where James argued simply that “the order of sequence is incorrect” in the common, largely cognitive view of fear, Dewey maintained that emotion is neither the stimulus nor the response in a unidirectional sequence or “reflex arc”; rather, emotion is one aspect of an organic circuit that only has meaning when we reflect on action. In this way, Dewey shifted focus to the action associated with the feeling in reflection, and in the process illuminates one of the interesting puzzles about fear for educators: Does fear motivate learning, or does it impede growth? Asked in this way and considered empirically, the answer seems to be “both.” How can that be? Dewey’s answer is to reject the question’s premise. He argued that fear does not do or cause anything; that is, fear does not cause flight, fight, or paralysis. Instead, as an emotion, fear is part of a person’s reflective assessment of the affective dimension of experience and is identified by the presence of flight, fight, or paralysis behaviors. For Dewey, it is not possible to determine whether a feeling is fear when we are caught up in the direct experience of something (no matter how we may speak of it); a feeling is named “fear” when the meaning of the total experience (including behavior) is assessed.

Dewey’s argument for this position is grounded in a pair of early essays jointly titled “The Theory of Emotion.” However, the force of the argument only becomes clear with the publication of How We Think in 1910, Democracy and Education in 1916, and Human Nature and Conduct in 1922. In Democracy and Education, when Dewey focused on disciplined interest and linked it to growth and the “power to learn,” he relied on a conception of interest as the outcome of a process of “emotional adjustment,” the adjustment that constitutes experience. To understand the process of education is to understand the


function and play of affect and emotion. For Dewey, education as growth is connected to experience conceived of as a process of trying and undergoing linked meaningfully through reflection. From this starting point, Dewey moved to the claim that reflective thought begins when we encounter the unexpected and new in experience, an idea he developed in detail in How We Think.18 It is only a "genuine problem" developing within a "genuine situation of experience" that constitutes a "stimulus to thought."19 On his account, if there is no interruption that arises in our engagement with the new, unfamiliar, and unexpected, there is no educational possibility, no learning, no growth.20 The interruption — whether felt as a diffuse dissatisfaction, difficulty, or confusion, or perceived as a definable problem — reflects the failure of habits of behavior and accustomed modes of experience to function effectively in a given situation. The same interruption that sparks the cognitive function we call reflective thought stimulates the affect (that is, the felt neurophysiological change) that James identified as the essence of emotion.

In fact, Dewey’s two-part “Theory of Emotion” is a response to the claim by James that we delineated in our introduction. In part 1, subtitled “Emotional Attitudes,” Dewey sought to reconcile James’s theory of the nature of emotion with Charles Darwin’s principles with respect to emotional attitudes, and to do so in a way that uncovers the spectatorial assumption behind the phrase “expression of emotion.” It is not the case that emotions exist and are then expressed. Rather, Dewey stated, the “so-called expressions of emotions are, in reality, the reduction of movements and stimulations originally useful into attitudes” (TE I, 569; emphasis added). That which is visible to an observer is separated from experience, reified, and named. While there may occasionally be pragmatic reasons for doing this, it is critical to remember what is set aside in the process — the context and lived meaning that prompted both affect and act.

Dewey’s phenomenological analysis of emotion mirrors his thinking in “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology.” For Dewey, “stimulus” and “response” are meaningless concepts without subsequent reflection. In human action, some idea or object comes to be understood as stimulus because of its intelligent coordination with an act that comes to be understood as response. The result of an individual’s reflective connection of stimulus and response is what Dewey called habit. Habits that “serve as means for realizing ends” incorporate affects or attitudes (TE II, 32). Most often, these attitudes are unproblematic and unnoticed because the associated habits of response “work” — that is, stimulus (idea/object).

and response (act) coordinate without friction, reinforcing habit. However, when habitual responses are ineffective, there is a breakdown of coordination and the affect interferes with, rather than reinforces, the “efficiency of behavior” (TE II, 15). Idea and act remain separate and distinct in understanding and also pull together as parts of a whole fueling “emotional excitation” or “emotional seizure” (TE II, 15 and 32). It is to this phenomenon that Dewey turned in part 2, “The Significance of Emotions.”

When “emotional seizure” occurs, there are three possibilities for resolution, that is, three external changes that signal — quite differently — the quality of the act: (1) blind discharge, (2) sublimation, and (3) suppression. In blind discharge, there is affect, but not emotion, as activity is without direction. In suppression, there is no adjustment, but the affect continues to play a subversive role in activity, uncoordinated with the perception of object or activity that prompted the affect. In sublimation, the affect is coordinated intelligently with other factors in a continuing course of action. This results in interest, according to Dewey, when “the various means succeed in organizing themselves into a simultaneous comprehensive whole of action. [It] is undisturbed action, absorbing action, unified action” (TE II, 31f). The affective impulse operates as a pivot for the reorganization of habit in the educative process.21

Predictably, Dewey dissolved the apparent dichotomy between thought and feeling using the conduit of behavior. The function of emotion is the adjustment or coordination of affect and object in action, and affect becomes emotion only when it rises to reflective consciousness and is embodied in adjusted behavior.

This explains why Dewey distinguished “emotional excitation” and “emotional seizure” from emotion, though he was admittedly not as careful with his language as he could have been (TE II, 32). Emotional excitation and emotional seizure are “affects,” that is, instinctual responses built into the immediate perception of a failure of habit. An affect is not an emotion. An emotion is a reflective assessment of the affective face of experience.

There is, then, either divided activity or directed activity. Affect arises unbidden as part of our perception of a set of circumstances and relations in which our habits of adjustment prove inadequate. It signals a failure of coordination even as it becomes available to motivate new forms of activity. If the affect goes unacknowledged or is immediately expressed, there is feeling, but no emotion. That is, there is excitation present, but it is not channeled constructively.

Educators have a vested interest in harnessing this excitation as motivation for the directed activity that results in learning and growth. But there is pedagogical danger in yoking this affect to any specific and socially constructed emotion prematurely because the emotions we “know” have behavioral patterns associated with them. This will be discussed more fully later in the essay.

ON FEAR AS AN EMOTION

On Dewey’s view of education, interest and fear are the emotions most central to the process of learning. Fear is the “emotional quale” of those teaching and learning moments that are not educative, while interest marks those moments that are educative. No matter what one feels or reports in the moment, the affective value of an experience can only be determined after the fact on the basis of consequences of the experience. In short, fear stops engagement and therefore growth; interest makes engagement and growth possible.

This might seem simplistic and counterintuitive — as many of Dewey’s insights are — and Dewey himself acknowledged that “fear need not be an undesirable factor in experience.” Can we reconcile the intuition that fear is sometimes productive and useful with the Deweyan analysis that an emotion is determined by the quality of its associated action? We believe the answer is yes — if educators keep in mind that feelings of doubt and discomfort signal the spaces within the learner’s experience where growth is imaginable. When growth does result, the feeling is best characterized as interest. When flight and paralysis are habituated and impede growth, what might have become interest has instead become fear. In either case, recognizing and acknowledging the educational potential associated with the feelings that, in Dewey’s terms, can “become” fear is useful for both teachers and learners.

In his early essays, Dewey offered a functional analysis of emotions in general, but did not specify the function of fear in particular. However, in Human Nature and Conduct, Dewey distinguished fear from other emotions by focusing squarely on how fear functions in social relations. He analyzed fear as marked by “contractions, withdrawals, evasions, [and] concealments,” and later by “organic shrinkage, gestures of hesitation and retreat.” Dewey noted that these terms only make sense in light of given environments because they are descriptions of actions toward particular persons or things. Each fear is qualitatively unique. Each is what it is in virtue of its total interactions or correlations with other acts and with the enviroring medium, with consequences. . . . It is customary to suppose that there is a single instinct of fear. . . . In reality, when one is afraid, the whole being reacts, and this entire responding organism is never twice the same.

Dewey’s claim that fear can be identified by behavioral “contraction” and “retreat” is in accord with taken-for-granted views of fear as “expressed” by flight or paralysis but challenges the view that fear causes one to fight. After all, fighting is a form of engagement, however destructive. So, on Dewey’s account, the student who challenges a teacher whose classroom rules seem unfair cannot be said to be afraid, no matter how the student reports his or her feelings in ordinary language. The student may have been uncomfortable, but not fearful.

24. Ibid., 107 (emphasis added).
In any case, fear is not a “separate instinct,” but a particular (and describable) part of a pattern of social interaction. It is an aspect of experience conceived as a whole, one that can only be named after the fact in reflection. However, it is important to complete the organic circuit. A pattern of interaction (“organic shrinkage”) with its associated affect becomes habituated through shared repetition and is then reduced to an attitude. A specific fear, as an attitude — that is, as a socially constructed feature of human living — can be shared through socialization. The next time one perceives a similar situation, the perception evokes the same affect and the tendency is to respond habitually with fear-type behavior (distancing, shrinkage, retreat) whether or not this is the fitting action in this context. To name the affect “fear” prematurely is to default to certain patterns of interaction. Dewey’s analysis helps reveal that habituation trumps thought; the energy available for novel response, for growth, is wasted. Thus, on Dewey’s account, it is more pedagogically promising for educators to suspend a learner’s affective responses so that they are not named, enacted, and thereby habituated as fear.

Consider the following example. A student enters a second-year Spanish class expecting the course to be similar to past (successful) experiences. However, the teacher of the new class invites and expects a level of oral communication that is new and unwelcome to the student. The student perceives a breakdown between his habit and the expectations the teacher has of him. He perceives this disjunct, of course, only because he has his own expectation framed in the reflection integral to past experience and an attitude or affect about that expectation. We can say that the student experiences an interruption to his habitual modes of interacting in the classroom environment. The student then becomes uncomfortable as a result of the new situation, and this discomfort can be characterized as affect; however, whether this affect is productive or destructive, educative or not, cannot be determined — even by the student himself — without inquiry into the larger context of the situation. In this situation, it is important for educators to recognize the student’s feelings for what they are, in this case (perhaps profound) discomfort. But if either the student or the teacher characterizes the feelings as “fear,” there is greater danger of the student’s contraction, resistance, and even withdrawal. When feeling is reduced in this way to a habituated emotion, or what Dewey referred to as “attitude” (TE I), the student’s openness to thinking is limited.

Similarly, a university student who has learned through experience to respect the authority of the teacher will perceive a similar sort of disjunct when her professor invites her to challenge what he has said about some political issue or cultural conflict. Her habit to accept respectfully the word of her instructors conflicts with the expectation set up by the professor. The student feels this conflict as an “emotional seizure” but the emotion is not yet determined or determinable. Nor should it be if education is the goal. She is uncomfortable; she is not afraid. The instructor’s task is to anticipate, recognize, and accept the discomfort the student is experiencing and encourage the student to hold herself in suspense to find possibilities for new interest.
Fear as a named emotion is always a function of a specific situation with a particular power valence and can only be replaced by a situation of another power valence. It is this link to power relations that distinguishes affects characterized as fear from affects characterized as other emotions. Education is an intentional effort to alter the power valence of one’s experience. In a speech later in life, Dewey argued that replacing fear with the power that arises in educative experience is the only constructive option, observing that “this attitude of fear cannot be abolished by any direct attack. It can be expelled only by power of another positive attitude and emotion, that of going out to and welcoming all incidents of a changing experience, even those which in themselves are troublesome.”25 This suggests a more global goal for educators: the development of the habit of interest, rather than the habit of fear. But this is always complicated by the educator’s responsibility to interrupt the learner’s taken-for-granted attitudes and views, expand their knowledge and experiences, and thereby provoke the very affect that can become fear.

THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

When educators consider the pedagogical play of fear, then, how does Dewey’s analysis provide guidance? Dewey contrasted fear and interest as the (respectively) negative and positive results of provoking discomfort and doubt for students.26 Provocation, the stimulation of a productive pause, is an educational requirement, but care must be taken to ensure that discomfort and doubt issue ultimately in interest rather than fear. To name an affect “fear” in the moment of perception and prior to the coordination of feeling and idea/object in action is to prematurely limit the potential response, especially educative response. For the educator, it is important to suspend any reflective assessment of students’ affect, but to encourage and accept affect as felt (even when it is manifested as discomfort and resistance) in order to enable the elements of thought to proceed into fitting action and new habits of response. It seems important to encourage students to do the same with respect to their own feelings.

While Dewey’s insights push educators toward preventing fear’s formation, nonetheless the wise educator can learn from a student’s fully formed fear.27


26. One clear criticism of Dewey’s view is his typical optimism that the resolution required by “emotional seizure” will result in interest — in other words, that coordination of idea, act, and affect is productive rather than destructive. He failed to entertain and explore the possibility that the “completed coordination” of the instinctual affect may not be educative. We agree with Dewey that “emotional seizure” cashes out in three ways: expression, repression, and coordination. However, coordination need not issue in interest (as the power to learn). Relations of power, material conditions, cultural mores, and social expectations all loom as aspects of person and environment that alter how freed energy is coordinated and directed.

27. Though we will not explore this here, it is not only the student’s fear that warrants recognition. An educator’s recognition of his or her “organic shrinkages” with respect to issues of content, interaction with students, ideas in theory and research, or inhibitions with respect to practice all complicate the interpretation of and response to students’ fear.
By recognizing and naming fearful moments in their students’ (and their own) experiences, educators become aware of the places where growth is needed.

In summary, Dewey was suggesting a dual and deconstructive task for educators with respect to affect experienced by their students. Educators inevitably provoke affect as they interrupt students’ taken-for-granted ways of understanding and responding to the world, and they have a responsibility to attend critically and respond pedagogically to any resulting affect felt by students so that ultimately interest rather than fear results. Nonetheless, the “negative” emotion of fear is itself pedagogically useful as a marker of those places where students need to grow. While Dewey’s insights focus educators on the prevention of fear, Freire directed their attention to responding to students’ fully formed fear.

**Freire: On Facing Fear by Attending to Difficulty in Learning**

Fear is, for Freire, “a manifestation of being alive,” and particularly a manifestation of life under conditions of oppression. In itself, fear is neither positive nor negative; it is an appropriate and predictable response to difficulty. But for this self-proclaimed progressive educator, fear becomes negative if one fails to face (and conquer) it and is thereby immobilized by it. This paralyzing potential of fear prevents one from dealing with what is difficult and thus stops growth and learning. For Freire, facing fear relies on the social strategy of critical reflection rooted in intellectual discipline.

That Freire took fear for granted as a feature of education can be inferred from the title of his 1986 dialogue with Ira Shor, *Fear and Daring: The Daily Life of the Teacher.* It is also evident in the attention he paid to fear in *Teachers as Cultural Workers,* a series of letters to those who “dare to teach,” where he addressed specifically the fear faced by students and by teachers in learning situations in schools. In one of the letters focused on learning to read, Freire asked directly: If what is difficult triggers fear, and fear halts my ability to deal with the difficulty, then how can I overcome either? He answered with the title of the letter: “Don’t Let the Fear of What Is Difficult Paralyze You.”

The seemingly simplistic and even heroic answer embedded in this title is drawn out in Freire’s analysis of the meaning of difficulty in learning. For Freire, just as for Rousseau and Dewey, all processes of learning necessarily present individuals with challenges that they may perceive as difficult. Yet Freire, unlike Rousseau and Dewey, focused attention primarily on the individual’s perception of difficulty. Freire underscored that in situations of fear, there are three components: the subject who fears, the object that is feared, and “the fearful subject’s feeling of insecurity in facing the obstacle” (*TCW*, 50). This third component highlights the subjective judgment involved in fear, namely that one’s fear is always relative.

28. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* [Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2005], 76. This work will be cited in the text as TCW for all subsequent references.

to the one’s judgment of his or her capacity to respond to a particular difficulty. As Freire wrote, a perceived difficulty and the fear attached to it are “always directly related to an individual’s capacity to deal with it, in light of his or her own evaluation of the ability to respond” (TCW, 50). In other words, an activity or task, such as reading or solving a math problem, becomes a difficulty for me when I doubt my capacity to engage in it effectively. When I have confidence in my ability to engage in the activity or task, the difficulty dissolves into a doable task. On this account, when I perceive difficulty (that is, challenge plus perceived lack of ability) in a learning task, I experience fear.

Freire took apart fear and argued that in such situations when a person is afraid, it is necessary for the person to separate the fear of the task (for example, to read a text) from a fear of oneself, that is, the fear of one’s inability to deal effectively with the situation. By parsing out the aspect of fear that is based in self-judgment, Freire explicitly invoked fear as tied up in the process and purpose of learning. In this way, he shed light on a potentially problematic cycle connecting fear and learning: Whenever an individual approaches an unfamiliar situation or task, he or she may feel insecure and retreat from the perceived difficulty. The perception of difficulty then prompts fear, and fear in turn impedes the initiation of a learning process. However, since the source of the problem is the individual’s lack of learning, then the solution is to engage in a process of learning. Yet, the needed learning process is hampered by fear . . . and so on.

How did Freire help students break this cycle of fear? He did so by emphasizing the social value of learning and the discipline of critical reflection. Freire emphasized — in a way similar to Rousseau and Dewey — that an individual who does not recognize the opportunity to learn from a fearful situation may “drown in panic” and become paralyzed (TCW, 50). To stop such paralysis that hinders learning, Freire suggested, our focus needs to shift from individual assessments of lack and failure to intersubjective social understandings and opportunities for learning.

Freire emphasized that since fear is a function of self-judgment, it cannot be prevented or transformed without changing our judgment of ourselves. According to Freire’s analysis, overcoming fear involves not only addressing its physical-emotional aspect but, first and foremost, its cognitive and social aspects. This involves directing one’s attention toward the cognitive and social resources and experiences that expand one’s understanding and ability, and in turn one’s self-judgment. So, if fear is based in perceived difficulty, one who feels fearful can address the cognitive aspect of this experience by asking, do I have enough knowledge and understanding to attend to the difficulty? The person can address the social aspect of this experience by asking, are there others who can help me face this difficulty?

Freire delineated this account of fear with an example of a student who experiences the fear of reading a text, because it seems too difficult and beyond comprehension. Freire pointed out that to deal with this situation the learner must approach the text differently. First, this requires estimating to what extent the right background to the text has been gained. One might inquire into whether other
texts or the use of supplementary tools such as dictionaries can aid understanding \(TCW, 52f\). But there is another aspect to this cognitive dimension involved in overcoming a difficult text. This is what Freire called “intellectual discipline” \(TCW, 52f\). Intellectual discipline is the self-discipline to engage the text beyond one’s initial curiosity and, further, beyond one’s first experience of obstacles to understanding. In this process of studying a text, Freire wrote, “we will encounter pain, pleasure, victory, defeat, doubt, and happiness,” and only discipline can help us through this \(TCW, 52\). Freire’s point here is that methods of “child-centered learning” that rely solely on allowing the learner’s curiosity and interest to set the pace of learning will never lead to the learner learning anything at all; they lack the notion of intellectual discipline that gets the learner to confront difficulty head on, rather than turn away in the face of fear.

“Intellectual discipline” is not an individualistic pursuit for Freire, but a social experience — as is all learning. It involves not only the interaction between teacher and learner, but also between peer learners. Freire pointed out that in order to overcome the fear of the text, the student must seek the help of others and engage in group reading, incorporating the social dimension of overcoming fear. In group reading, the learner begins to gain “different points of view” that foster his or her understanding of the text \(TCW, 55\). Further, by listening to and discussing different perspectives in such a way that the student gains a deeper understanding of that which he or she feared, what once was an object of fear now becomes an object of learning. This engagement with others enhances the learner’s sense of what he or she can accomplish, or self-judgment, and thus leads to increased self-understanding. This engagement with difference through social interaction is essential for reframing the individual’s future experiences: one has learned not only how to address a specific fear of a text, but has also learned generally that fear in any context need not paralyze us; it can be overcome.

By focusing on learning, a fundamentally social experience, one acquires intellectual discipline and breaks the cycle of fear. However, Freire’s analysis aims beyond just breaking the cycle of fear for an individual. On his account, intellectual discipline is not an end in itself, but a means to engaging in a process of learning that becomes increasingly more experimental, more imaginative, and more inventive. Where fear tends to shut down learning possibilities, Freire sought to open those possibilities wide in the name of democratic education for freedom. Only when this occurs, can we defeat the banking model of teaching and learning and achieve a shared and socially attuned problematization model.

**Fear and Teaching**

It seems obvious that students might encounter difficulty and thereby fear in learning contexts, but Freire was also attuned to the fear experienced by teachers. He focused on “courage” as one of five “indispensable qualities” of progressive teachers, and argued that courage and the other qualities [humility, lovingness, tolerance, and decisiveness] are “not attributes we can be born with” but are “acquired gradually through practice” \(TCW, 71\). Teachers must learn to be courageous in order to deal with the difficulties involved in teaching.
Freire made the point that teachers’ fear, like that of students, is born of the mismatch between task and capability. The difficulties encountered by teachers are generally political, because as democratic teachers they have dreams that are political in nature — that is, dreams of freedom. Teachers who would achieve these dreams with students work with the awareness that dominant powers enforce “myths that deform us” (TCW, 75). The task is to “critically provoke the learner’s consciousness” (TCW, 75), and this presents itself as difficult, as a task that may require more skill than the teacher possesses.

Freire made clear that acknowledging fear is the first step for teachers and learners alike, but he also suggested that the difficulties teachers face are more complicated (being both political and pedagogical in nature) and therefore more challenging than the difficulties students face in schools. However, the necessary response to fear by students and teachers alike is the same — discipline:

I do not need to hide my fears. But I must not allow my fears to immobilize me. If I am secure in my political dream, having tactics that may lessen my risk, I must go on with the fight. Hence, the need to be in control of my fear, to educate my fear, from which is finally born my courage. Thus I must neither, on the one hand, deny my fears nor, on the other, surrender myself to them. Instead I must control them, for it is in the very exercise of this control that my necessary courage is shared (TCW, 76).30

In a revealing passage, Freire described fear as “that which ‘speaks’ of our humanness as we manage to limit, subject and control it” (TCW, 76). Fear, on such an account, is a part of the human condition; only in controlling it do we progress.

Freire’s account of teaching acknowledges teachers’ fear and allows them to be vulnerable, but at the same time he was warning teachers not to let themselves be overwhelmed by new and unexpected situations that often appear to require immediate decisions and action. When teachers experience the insecurity of doubt about their own ability to face a difficult or frightening situation, they too must look to expand their knowledge, gain a deeper intersubjective understanding of the situation at hand, and trust their own ability to learn and grow.

For both students and teachers, on Freire’s view, fear is unavoidable. It is unavoidable by virtue of being human; it is unavoidable by virtue of the political realities we encounter; it is unavoidable any time learning and growth are the goal. Freire’s recommended response to fear is, first, to face it and name it and, then, to make an individual commitment to a social process of intellectual discipline.

**Comparisons and Conclusions**

It is important to remind the reader that Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire framed fear not merely as a survival instinct, but as a feature of social interaction; in addition, for each of them, this form of fear matters because it figures as a potential, though not inevitable, impediment to educational experience. Their focus is not on those evolutionary instincts developed through natural selection to preserve physical well-being. Rather, they — and we — are interested in the way those evolutionary mechanisms have become associated with non–life-threatening

30. See also Freire and Shor, *Medo e Ousadia.*
forms of discomfort that come to feel like (and look like, to the spectator) evolutionary fear. It is important to note, however, that in both cases, Dewey’s insights prove most productive. Fear is not simply the feeling one has in the face of a threatening natural or socially constructed phenomenon, and the feeling is not simply the cause of some behavior. Rather, the feeling, the behavior, and the idea (or object) taken together constitute fear.

This insight marks what may be the biggest difference between Dewey on the one hand, and Rousseau and Freire on the other, when it comes to the pedagogical response to fear. Where Rousseau viewed the anticipation and defusing of habit-formed fear as the educator’s primary responsibility in early childhood education, and Freire urged educators and students to face fear as an inevitable feature of learning processes, Dewey suggested that there is no fear until we act and reflect on experience, and that if we avoid determining that our feelings are fear during this reflective process, we keep our options for action open.

This difference is significant in that it turns the educator’s attention to a concrete description of experience, rather than an abstract naming of feelings. While Dewey agreed with Rousseau and Freire that no learning is possible without feelings that at least temporarily seem painful, frustrating, or uncomfortable in some way, he argued that those feelings of discomfort in the face of doubt and difficulty are not yet fear, do not have to become fear, and will make growth impossible if they do become fear. The actions of the educator matter, and encouraging students to refrain from naming feelings (and thus invoking the associated behavior of resistance and retreat) is more pedagogically productive. It is far easier for the educator and his or her students to interrogate and reconceive feelings and thoughts in context before they harden into habit than it is to undo a behaviorally entrenched emotion.

It should be noted that Dewey was not asking teachers to desensitize students to potential fears in advance, as Rousseau did; because each fear is a unique response to a novel set of circumstances, that would be impossible. Nor did Dewey simply acknowledge fear as inevitable, as Freire did. Instead, Dewey acknowledged discomfort as the affect that inevitably marks the moment when learning becomes possible, and he encourages educators to realize and respond to this affect so that interest (or engagement) is the resulting emotion, instead of fear (or separation).

Each of the three theorists recognized the crucial role of the new and the unexpected in all learning processes, as well as the accompanying discomfort in making learning possible. In the context of their analyses of learning and fear, it becomes clear that none of these thinkers advocated students’ comfort and safety as pedagogical goals. In fact, each understood the educator as provocateur, not just anticipating a student’s fears, or coaching the student beyond fear, but also placing the student in challenging and difficult circumstances. At the same time, all recognized an inherent danger in educational interactions: that the discomfort associated with fear has (or perhaps is) the power to either assist or impede educational possibility. Thoroughly “safe space” may be too safe for learning, but thoroughly “unsafe space” will shut students down in a resistant and defensive posture.
Perhaps the central dilemma for educators highlighted by all of these theorists is that a “safe” learning environment that seeks to prevent fear can potentially discourage learning. Of course it is true that in any classroom and in any educational environment teachers must deal with the difficulty of finding the balance between over-challenging and under-challenging, for what may be challenging to one student may bore the next. Yet the questions regarding fear raised by Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire add a vitally important dimension to this central problem of over- or under-challenging. In varying ways, each author pointed out that although teachers must seek to avoid the limiting and paralyzing effects of fear for their learners, they cannot possibly predetermine what those will be for each child; fear is part of a person’s individual historical experience, and it reveals itself in the lived experience of the moment.

In contemporary classrooms teachers face this dilemma every day, but the commonplace ways of dealing with students’ fear may actually be preventing learning. For example, when teachers see students enter algebra class hesitant and doubtful about their ability to master the ins and outs of linear equations, they may, in an effort to console the student, say “It’s okay, everyone is afraid of math.” Often, teachers experiencing this type of interaction with students begin to plan their math lessons to make them easier in order to reduce students’ general math anxiety. An art teacher, on the other hand, may assume that creative lessons and exploration of imaginative expression is exciting and interesting for all students. This assumption may make the teacher oblivious to the fact that many students fear such self-expression due to their own belief that they cannot create “good art” according to socially defined norms. Whereas the math teacher may be preventing learning by easing instead of drawing out the discomfort her students feel, and thus failing to challenge the students to face their fear, the art teacher may be preventing learning by not addressing the fact that learning in the realm of art, just as in any subject matter, is difficult when it is meant to incite meaningful and transformative learning processes.

So how can one answer the question that we have drawn out in this inquiry: How can an educator determine the “best” educational environment to prevent feelings of fear from paralyzing a student? It is impossible to know for certain and in advance the set of circumstances that shift feelings of discomfort from energizing to paralyzing for each and every student. However, experienced educators can anticipate potential pitfalls based on past students’ prior knowledge, patterns of misunderstanding, and typical interactions. Relying on one’s professional judgment informed by the “wisdom of practice” may not seem like much, but it is all we have, and it is enriched significantly by the educator’s willingness to consider affect as a key variable in the teaching and learning equation.

From Rousseau through Dewey to Freire, all have wrestled, as do classroom teachers every day, with this danger and this dilemma of creating productive and educative learning environments, a danger and a dilemma that is built into the possibility of education. Collectively, these theorists remind educators that the phenomenon called fear — for both students and teachers — should be
acknowledged, interpreted, and interrogated as part of the process of pedagogical action. Each of the three offered a distinctive take on fear as a pedagogical phenomenon. Rousseau connected the overcoming of fear at the early stages of childhood to the flourishing and freedom of the individual throughout his or her life. Dewey offered a relational and contextual analysis of fear that reveals fear to be both pedagogically useful and pedagogically problematic. Freire made explicit the social and political character of fear, which can be faced head on through learning.

Although each of the progressive thinkers considered here dealt differently with fear in educational contexts, they all addressed fear quite directly as an aspect of the human condition, seeking to understand how fear figures in education. None of the three wanted to spare children the pain of fear but all recognized that the discomfort associated with fear has the power to either assist or impede educational possibility. They demonstrated in varying ways that meaningful learning is most often not easy or smooth and that the task of the educator cannot be characterized unproblematically in terms of comfort (and certainly not of coddling). Thus, they all remind us that this seemingly negative affect ought not be, cannot be, extracted from education. The wise and effective teacher places it at the center of planning and learns to see it in practice.

By shining a light on three progressive philosophers’ views of difficulty, doubt, and discomfort as intrinsic to learning and juxtaposing these with their reflections on fear, we have sought to explore a series of questions about fear’s function in learning. Does fear prevent learning? Can fear prompt learning? How can an educator determine the “best” educational environment to prevent feelings of fear from paralyzing a student? How can educators know when to protect the child from something harmful and when to let the child explore the world and overcome what he or she fears? How can the educator and student face fear that has already manifested itself and transform it into an educative experience? Our purpose has been neither to define fear once and for all, nor to answer definitively the questions surrounding fear and learning raised by these authors. Rather we have sought to reveal fear, that is, to bring it to the attention of educators and to invite them to incorporate consideration of [potentially] fearful experiences and negative emotions into their pedagogical planning and practice.

Ultimately, fear’s status in educational interaction is ambiguous, but its impact is unavoidable. All educators are challenged — and must challenge themselves — to assess fear’s power and potential in specific contexts and, in the process, to deal with difficulties, doubt, and discomfort as aspects of learning.