Practitioner-Based Inquiry:
Theoretical Probings

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Abstract

Building on Kurt Lewin’s maxim that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, this essay examines the theoretical underpinnings of Carr and Kemmis’s (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research* in light of the pragmatic epistemology (theory of knowing) of John Dewey. Carr and Kemmis’s work, a landmark study in support of practitioner-based inquiry, is grounded in the communicative theory of Jurgen Habermas in his search for the “ideal speech act.” Carr and Kemmis link this vision to the neo-marxist Critical Theory of the Frankfort School of Social Research which provides the political underpinning to their call for “action research.” Dewey builds on the more reformist temperament of the American pragmatic tradition, which has also influenced Habermas. Specifically, Dewey’s instrumental logic provides a compelling trajectory in moving from a problem identified in experience to an “ends-in-view” as its temporal resolution through a “means-ends continuum” that guides the focus of inquiry. Unlike Carr and Kemmis whose action research is linked to the “emancipatory” political ideology of critical theory, despite the authors’ more pragmatic intent, Dewey’s logic is grounded in the social ecologies of actors that require no redemption beyond what they are able to visualize and enact themselves. While this essay remains focused on the abstract plane of theory, its ultimate objective is quest for a more viable praxis that will require practitioners working through its premises in order to demonstrate its viability.

Educational problems, however, because they arise out of practical educational activities, are not determined by the rules and norms governing the practice of the educational researcher. Rather, they occur when the practices employed in educational activities are in some sense inadequate to their purpose. They arise, in other words, when there is some discrepancy between an educational practice and the expectations in terms of which the practice was undertaken. Now the fact that educational problems occur because of this kind of non-fulfillment of expectations is informative; for to have expectations for a practice necessarily implies the possession of some prior beliefs and assumptions by virtue of which these explanations are explained and justified….An educational problem, therefore, in denoting the failure of a practice, thereby implies a failure in the theory from which a belief in the efficacy of a practice is derived. By undermining the expectations of an educational practice, an educational problem undermines the validity of some logically prior theory or interpretation of an educational practice (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 100).
Demand for the solution of perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection (Dewey, 1991, p. 11).

Overview

Whether or not the theory/practice split, so pervasive in contemporary cultural and institutional life represents a polarity, as sometimes believed, it reflects an epistemological divergence in what counts as valid knowledge by whom. As stated in the Carr and Kemmis quote above as well as in the work of the organizational psychologist Chris Argyris, in his concept of “theories-in-use,” the most seemingly mundane practice presupposes a theoretical framework whether or not consciously articulated. Similarly, the most esoteric theory presupposes some contact with empirical reality, however detached the observer may be from that which is directly observed.

The field of practitioner-based inquiry (variously referred to as practitioner or teacher research), grounded in the “action-research” of Kurt Lewin, but having its roots in Deweyan pragmatism, aims to heal the breach between theory and practice. As put by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), “[t]he unique features which prompt teacher research is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two” (p. 15). Such research is defined most succinctly by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as that which “cannot be other than research into one’s own practice” (p. 191). Contrasting teacher research from traditional academic research which “emerge[s] from study in a[n academic] discipline” (p. 12), Cochran-Smith and Lytle, (1993) argue that teacher research: “[g]enerally emerg[es] from problems of practice: felt discrepancies between intention and reality, theory/research and practice; reflective and referenced to the immediate context” (p. 12). Thus, on their interpretation, teacher researchers “use
[their own]… interpretive framework…to provide a truly emic [insider’s] view that is different from an outsider, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom” (p. 18). According to various proponents such work is not merely subjective, but “systemic (emphasis added) subjectivity” (p. 43).

As put by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, teacher research is “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (pp. 23-24). Other advocates of practitioner inquiry such as Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Quigley (1997) share a broad affinity with this general definition notwithstanding various differences of emphases.

Thus, for practitioners, a problem emerges not as a result of some dilemma defined within the context of an academic discipline. Rather a problem emerges out of some felt incongruity in lived experience wherein critical reflection as well as thoughtful action is drawn upon to heal the breach. Resolution requires less a need for theoretical coherency as understood within the context of modern academic disciplines, than an equilibrium of the tensions that initially evoked the crisis within a given environment or situation that sparked the search for resolution. Theoretical insight (whether or not academic) may contribute to such “healing.” Yet theory, alone, is insufficient. What is wanted, rather, is a more tacit sense of existential coherence grounded in both personal and collective consciousness that reconstructs experience and thought to improve a situation or at least leads to a more acute comprehension of its dynamics from a practitioner-based perspective. The manner by which such reconstructions can be interpreted as “critical” are major issues of practitioner-based inquiry.

A complex understanding of practice can be gleaned from a wide divergence of vantage points such as research on “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 1981, 1994),
experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), folk psychology (Bruner, 1991), as well as neo-pragmatism (Rorty, 1982, 1989), feminism (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986), and postmodernism (Jameson, 1991). All of these perspectives break down traditional dualisms between thought and action that challenge modernistic interpretations of social science. In their various manifestations they provide avenues for a critical praxis as a mediation between the two, which challenges enlightenment presuppositions of cognitive rationalism based upon an empiricist (objective) epistemology, supported by the philosophical assumptions of positivism (Polkinghorne, 1983, pp. 59-91).

An extended analysis of these various frames of reference would lend great insight into the complex ways in which experience and theory intersect and could be of considerable value in moving forward the emerging field of practitioner-based inquiry. Such an endeavor extends beyond the bounds of this essay. However, I will explore the theoretical underpinnings that shape Carr and Kemmis’s call for action research and the philosophical framework of John Dewey’s pragmatic epistemology. Both perspectives seek grounding in the lived experience (personal and social) of critical practitioners. Both practitioners and theorists have drawn upon the work of Carr and Kemmis and Dewey in search of a useful praxeology. Carr and Kemmis create their framework through the Critical Theory of the Frankfort School of Social Research, particularly the work of Jurgen Habermas in a subtle mediation with its precepts and the subjective or phenomenological perspectives of practitioners. Dewey eschews formal academic theory to focus on existentially based problems encountered within the phenomenon of what he
characterizes as lived experience. Dewey links problems identified by those that experience them to critical inquiry through the instrument of “severe thought.”

It is argued in this essay that Dewey’s rich model of inquiry supplements Carr and Kemmis even while the latter provides a critical dimension “outside” the immediate framework of participants that could add a radical edge to Dewey’s epistemology. Both contribute important theoretical insight that can be drawn upon to ground the intellectual presuppositions of practitioner-based inquiry. Both integrate lived experience with critical theory (broadly defined), but do so in different ways that supplement each other. A critical analysis of the two perspectives can contribute to a more complex theoretical understanding of practitioner-based inquiry. This essay will focus on such theoretical underpinnings rather than on the practice of practitioner-based inquiry. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin’s maxim that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, it is my hope that this essay will contribute to a more informed praxis.

The Critical Theory of Carr and Kemmis

Car and Kemmis (1986) critique both “positivist” and “interpretive” social science in their call for a “critical theory” based upon Jurgen Habermas’ concept of communicative competence. Both positivism and interpretative social science provide insight on the theory/practice nexus. In the former, application of theory yields to technical control. That is, the theoretical work of the specialist provides the practitioner with technical information wherein top-down solutions are applied in specific contexts. On this interpretation the practitioner is a recipient of specialized knowledge.

In the interpretive approach the purpose of social science is to illuminate the phenomenological perspectives of subjects. Much of the anthropological work of
ethnography is premised upon such “thick description.” On this interpretation the researcher does not stand above nor outside, but is a “participant-observer.” Instead of describing “behavior” in an objective sense, as in positivism, interpretative social science seeks to discern the meaning of “actions” as they are expressed within specific socio-cultural contexts of subjects. Unlike “behavior,” actions “always embody the interpretations (emphasis added) of the actor” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 88). “A task of ‘interpretive’ social science is to discover these meanings and so make action intelligible” (p. 88). The purpose of interpretive social science “is not to provide causal explanations of human life, but to deepen and extend our knowledge of why social life is perceived and experienced in the way that it is” (p. 90).

Carr and Kemmis view interpretive social science as an important corrective to positivism and a legitimate form of educational research since identified issues stem from the perspectives of practitioners. However, the authors are concerned that both positivism and interpretive social science are merely descriptive in analyzing the world rather than progressively improving it through a practitioner-grounded critical theory that sheds insight beyond the immediate perspectives of actors that yet can be appropriated by them. Such critical distancing, Carr and Kemmis argue, should lead to more discerning analysis of the social, cultural, economic, and political determinants of schooling and to prudent action leading largely to modest reconstruction of unjust conditions within the immediate purview of practitioners’ educational environments.

Thus, a major problem of the interpretive perspective is the possibility that “the self-understandings of actors may be shaped by illusory beliefs which sustain irrational and contradictory forms of social life” (p. 129). A critical stance is required, then to
“provide ways of distinguishing ideologically distorted interpretations from those that are not” (p. 129, original italics). For Carr and Kemmis, reality is often discerned through probing beneath the world-views of historical actors whose insights may be limited by various ideological “distortions” that shape them.

Carr and Kemmis draw on the Frankfort School of Social Research to develop their critical theory. Positivism and the “darker” side of the Enlightenment in its emphasis on scientific rationalism, was a major target for this school. It was not science itself that these researchers deplored, but its privileging of instrumental reasoning and technical control at the expense of practical insight. Unlike Carr and Kemmis as well as Dewey (1927) who believed that such practical knowledge could contribute to the emergence of a democratic public, the early Frankfort researchers expressed considerable dubiousness about any such reform. As put by a later, more reformist, Franfort scholar, Jurgen Habermas, upon whom Carr and Kemmis draw:

The real difficulty in the relation of theory to practice arises not from science's new function as a technical force but rather from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between technical and practical power. Even a scientific civilization is not excused from practical questions; a peculiar danger arises, consequently, when the process of making civilization scientific goes beyond technical questions without freeing itself from the level of reflection of a rationality restricted to technology. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus of citizens regarding the practical control of their destiny. Instead, an attempt is made to maintain control over history technically, in the form of a perfected administration of society, an attempt that is as impractical as it is unhistorical (Habermas, 1973, p. 255).

Thus for Habermas, a second generation Frankfort researcher deeply indebted to the tempered optimism of American pragmatism, the argument is not that there is no valid role for instrumental logical. Rather, Carr and Kemmis, like Habermas are concerned that it and the philosophical impact of positivism so pervasive in the
technocratic society of late modernity, overwhelm practical reasoning and democratic politics through a reification of the role of specialists and the concomitant administrative technical control of social policy at the expense of practical reasoning and democratic politics. As a synthesis of positivism and the interpretive approach, Carr and Kemmis construct their “action research” on the premises of such practical reasoning which they link to Habermas’s theory of communicative competence that, on their reading, serves as a critical underpinning for a democratic politics.

While with positivism the source of knowledge is “instrumental” and with the interpretive approach it is “practical,” with critical social science the source of knowledge is “emancipatory:”

Hence, a critical social science will seek to offer individuals an awareness of how their aims and purposes may have become distorted or repressed and to specify how these can be eradicated so that the rational pursuit of their real goals can be undertaken (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 136).

Based upon these objectives, Carr and Kemmis subscribe to the Marxian thesis of “false consciousness,” that actors’ “real” interests are sometimes distorted and mystified through ideological obfuscation which critical theory is designed to illuminate. In their appropriation of Habermas, “[w]hat is required…is a method that will liberate individuals from the causal efficacy of those social processes that distort communication and understanding [whether from positivist or interpretivist readings] and so allow them to engage in the critical reconstruction of suppressed possibilities and desires for emancipation” (p. 137). That method is “ideology critique” (p. 138) through reflection and critical dialogue.

Carr and Kemmis as well as Habermas recognize the fallibility of their methodology in its capacity to fully realize the desired end of praxis, but seek, rather, a
“regulative ideal” to guide thought and action in the here and now rather than the achievement of any purified state of enlightenment and emancipation. The specific conceptual tool that undergirds Carr and Kemmis’s theory of action research, is Habermas’s concept of “communicative competence.” Habermas’s theory is incredibly rich, complex, and often appears convoluted among those not well versed in modern European social theory. Its kernel is that in an “ideal speech act,” all participants in a dialogue have equal opportunity to argue rationally and completely for their varied position in which the only thing that counts is the better argument. Anything that blocks or distorts such communication is ruled illegitimate.

Carr and Kemmis acknowledge personal sources of potential distortion. Yet they were primarily concerned with ideological distortion often masking the abstruseness of power in its privileging of specific types of knowledge of those with a preponderance of power over that of the “authentic” knowledge and interests of the participants of a particular argument. Like Freire (1970), they also are concerned about the internalization of false consciousness and a need to enact a critical perspective both theory-based and action-oriented to break through the logjams that positivist and interpretive social science reinforce.

As an “ideal speech act” Habermas’s vision of communicative competence is inherently utopic and problematic (below), but as a regulative ideal, it opens up a trajectory of discourse which proponents hope move practitioners toward a more emancipatory project. Linking Habermas’s communicative vision with ideological critique, Carr and Kemmis propose a method of research that, while building upon the experiences of participants, penetrates beneath their common sense understanding both of
personal psychology and social reality to get at the root of “their problems …[in order to] eliminate their frustrations” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.150). Carr and Kemmis are aware of the potential reification of the expert in Habermas’s vision (p. 140). However, their definition of educational research as a “practical enterprise” linked to problems identified by practitioners, keeps their appropriation of critical social science grounded within the dynamics of issues defined at the field level rather than by the canons of academic theory.

Their strategy is through “action research” to unearth the theoretical presuppositions of practitioners, which are not typically academically based, but rather implicit “theories-in-use. This helps practitioners make connections between such theories and the problematic practices or situations they seek to mitigate, that in turn, opens the possibility of realizing how a more ideological understanding of such theories-in-use can lead to a more enlightened practice that at least in part mitigates such problems. Theory, then, serves as a tool to improve practice as determined by practitioners and that is its only legitimate function for practitioners of educational research. This pragmatic function, in turn, determines not only the usefulness of theory, but helps to shape it since its validity is determined exclusively upon its capacity to transform problems or situations in ways that practitioners interpret as improvement.

The focal point for educational research, then, is the identification of educational problems as discerned among practitioners, particularly in “some discrepancy between an educational practice and the expectations in terms of which the practice was undertaken” (p. 110). It is at this juncture that theoretical analysis becomes viable; “for to have expectations for a practice necessarily implies the possession of some prior beliefs and
assumptions of which these expectations are explained and justified” (p. 110). For this reason, “[a]n educational problem…, in denoting a failure of practice, thereby implies a failure in the theory from which a belief in the efficacy of that practice is derived” (p. 110). Probing various relationship among practices, beliefs (theories) that undergird them, problems, and quests for resolution, open up space for an ideological critique based upon the precepts of critical social science. Yet this will likely emerge not so much from the direct theoretical presuppositions of the Frankfort School of Social Research.

Practitioners, who may or may not possess extensive academic training in the social sciences, need to express any ideological critique in an idiom authentic to their experience and knowledge base. Yet at least implicitly on Carr and Kemmis’s reading, the key assumptions of critical theory would be appropriated by practitioners. Typically they would do so through a different, but presumably related idiom that directly impacts practice and is invariably moderated by it, in contrast to the “purity” of theory that grounds much of academic discourse, including Habermas’s.

The impetus of Carr and Kemmis’s project is to “encourage teachers to develop a more refined understanding of their own problems and practices” (p. 126) by building upon but moving beyond their essentially non-critical subjective interpretations through ideological critique. “[A]ctive participation of practitioners in the research enterprise is an indispensable necessity, but also requires an analysis of the actual (emphasis added) context in which educational practices are conducted” (p. 126). For such educational research to be valid, an “alternative epistemological base is required” (p. 127) that synthesizes, but moves beyond both scientific positivism and interpretive social science.
Part of the “actual” context for Carr and Kemmis, is the political dimension of educational practice and theory. Specifically, a critical educational theory “requires an integration of theory and practice as reflective and practical moments in a dialectical process of reflection, enlightenment and political struggle carried out by groups for their own emancipation” (p. 144). The teleology (or purpose) of critical educational research is the progressive movement of increasing enlightenment and emancipation of all the affected groups and individuals engaged in particular educational practices.

Foci that contribute to such direction are deemed “authentic.” Those that do not manifest “false consciousness,” however “authentically” participants may hold such beliefs. Nonetheless, “true” enlightenment emerges only when practitioners themselves, identify both their sources of oppression and potential sources of emancipation and organize themselves to realize the latter over the former, however progressively and partially so. On this reading, the facilitator as change agent, whom Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) refer to as a “transformative intellectual,” plays a major role in helping practitioners link and interpret their own practice to a more critical ideological critique to unearth the sources of oppression in an institutional and societal analysis of power. However proximate such a project is to the ideological perspective of the Frankfort School of Social Research even in its more tempered Habermasian manifestation, the ideological critique and critical practice that ultimately emerges “must be grounded in the language and experience of a self-reflective community [for educational research, practitioners] and meet the criteria of authenticity and communicability” (p. 149) among practitioners.
Analysis

In their depiction of action research, Carr and Kemmis have made a vital contribution to practitioners who have implemented their methodology of reflection on practice through a “spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting” (p. 162). Equally important, although less noticed is the intellectual placing of “action research” as a subset of educational research, as both seek to illuminate the world views of practitioners, though through different lenses. The difference, a matter of degree, is that the former is more vigorous in emphasizing the role of practitioners, themselves both in theory reconstruction and practice while the latter sifts such phenomenon through the lenses of the academic disciplines, which it typically privileges over lived experience.

What is needed now is more penetrating ethnographic work that more critically compares and contrasts anthropological interpretations of educational researchers from those of the subjects of such studies. Ideally, this would include practitioners writing or co-authoring of such texts and the concomitant need for such practitioner researchers to move beyond the immediacy of direct practice toward increasing conceptualization at least as part of the critical work of practitioner-based inquiry.

Whether there is a great divide between academic research on education through the various scholarly disciplines and educational research grounded in the perceptions and needs of practitioners as Carr and Kemmis intimate, also needs a closer examination. Certainly there is a divide or at least a rift as currently practiced. Yet on the assumption that however removed from direct experience, academic research ultimately has its origins in practice, there are linkages worth exploring that could add richness for
practitioners, educational researchers, and disciplined-based academic scholars of education who all have much to gain by a greater cross-fertilization of knowledge.

Given the current divergence, if not polarity of agendas, this represents difficult space to occupy. Mediational work could take place, however, along specific projects that variously call upon the expertise of practitioners, educational researchers, and more “distanced” academic scholars. The object of such collaboration would not privilege one discourse over another, but would explore a range of discourses that a community of participants and observers might draw upon to resolve particular problems. Determining the composition of such a community, identifying particular problems, and the nature of particular “solutions” would require considerable interpretation and negotiation to approximate the communicative consensualist ideal of Habermas. Yet, such a community, it is argued, would be richer and more incisive than that based upon the segregation of disciplines and communities of interpreters that currently prevail. In any event, searching for more of a continuum than demarcating a chasm between academic scholars of education and practitioner-oriented educational researchers could open up some intriguing passageways of knowledge.

A final concern is the relevance of critical theory to action research and its relation to the lived experience and perceptions of practitioners. To be sure, in their call for “prudence,” Carr and Kemmis emphasize a modest praxeology. Moreover, in their reliance on Habermas’s theory of communicative competence, they have adopted a more reformist aspect of the Frankfort School of Social Research than an appropriation of the more radical work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse (Giroux, 1983). While the teleology that Carr and Kemmis espouse is that of “emancipation,” in part through the
neo-marxian concept of “false consciousness,” their more pragmatic intent is to help practitioners broaden their own self-perceptions in moving a bit beyond the ideology of “common sense” without extending too astray from the broad parameters of the socially given. Ideological critique such as critical theory offers the advantage of another way of seeing. In its depiction of “truth” and other problematic “essentialist” terms that sometimes mar their text, Carr and Kemmis offer a vision of clarity that does not, however, characterize their praxeology in their emphasis on prudence, openness, and the ambiguity of human experience, collective and personal. The ideological critique provides a certain set of lenses that otherwise would not be available. Yet, the authors have not resolved major tensions between the interpretive view in its relationship to critical theory.

Several issues are at stake. Most importantly is that of where “truth” resides. The authors have made a strong case that “truth” resides within the ideological critique of existing social patterns to the extent that the subjective world view of participants in educational settings are mired in “false consciousness.” This, in turn, is linked to a political project of “emancipation” as a self-evident teleology of educational praxis. At the same time, Carr and Kemmis insist that whatever interpretation be ultimately viewed as legitimate needs to come from practitioners, themselves, however assisted through the efficacy of the “transformative intellectual.” Except for the emphasis on Habermas, this view is profoundly Freirian. Yet, there is a reformist edge in their project, which belies the more radical ideology that shapes critical theory.

The authors link the interpretive perspective to “social phenomenology” (p. 83) of which they are critical. However in linking a theoretical construct to a reformist
praxeology social phenomenology merits a closer examination. I draw specifically on the narrative theory which undergirds the “folk psychology” of Jerome Bruner (1990) to help build a theory/practice construct applicable to practitioners based upon their own capacity to engage in reconstruction. This is similar to the intent of Carr and Kemmis, but from a more “immanent” perspective than that of critical theory, in which the culture broadly defined, including reform impetuses from within, is privileged over the emancipatory ideal.

Bruner’s first point is that folk psychology “is narrative rather than conceptual” (p. 35) and is therefore built on a different framework than highly cognitive critical theory. This is not meant to imply that folk psychology is non-critical or non-cognitive, only that it is grounded in a narrative epistemology that governs what counts as rules of evidence. On this reading, our sense of the world is shaped by our beliefs, our world-views, which enable as much as they limit perception and behavior. Such beliefs “are cultural meanings that guide and control our individual acts” (p. 38). Moreover, according to Bruner, narratives do not emerge unless there is something the matter in a given socio-cultural arrangement that the story helps to mitigate or explain. “When things ‘are as they should be,’ the narratives of folk psychology are unnecessary” (p. 40). But, since “folk psychology has room for such reconstruals” (p. 40), the creation or the recreation of narratives, are themselves, forms of immanent critique.

For Bruner, “[f]olk psychology is invested in canonicality” (p. 47) in support of a given culture. In this respect it is parallel to Carr and Kemmis’s depiction of interpretive social science. Its logic will not submit to an easy deconstruction or even critical analysis beyond the parameters of its framework. Yet there is scope for reconstruction since the
emergence of narrative itself represents a dissatisfaction of sorts, with the status quo. On this reading, cultures, themselves, have the capacity through various narrative construals “for dealing simultaneously with canonicality and exceptionality” (p. 47).

Thus, while a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also contain a set of interpretive procedures for rendering departures from those norms meaningful in terms of established patterns of belief. It is narrative and narrative interpretation upon which folk psychology depends for achieving this kind of meaning. Stories achieve their meanings by explicating deviations from the ordinary in a comprehensible form [within the context of a given culture] (p. 47).

Bruner’s interpretation of folk psychology does not necessarily deconstruct Carr and Kemmis’s reliance on critical theory, but given their emphasis of building upon the understanding of practitioners, any such theory needs to be appropriated within narrative construals and cultural patterns that contribute to their meaning making. Given the modest praxeological goals of Carr and Kemmis, it may be a moot point whether the framework for such theory reconstruction is premised on critical social phenomenology or a Habermasian critical theory of communicative competence. The latter, without too much difficulty could be appropriated within one or more of the various narratives that undergird a reformist tradition in educational practice that lies at the basis of their practical intent notwithstanding the reliance, at times, on a more radical idiom.

**Deweyan Pragmatism**

Dewey’s epistemology is an extensive social phenomenology (or ecology) of lived culture that contains within itself a powerful imminent critique. As such it provides a largely overlooked theoretical framework in adult literacy education for grounding practitioner inquiry. It adds considerable specificity to the concept of “folk psychology” described by Bruner to live and work out of problems within the cultural frameworks that
give shape to them even when such work leads to reconstruction. In its linkage with scientific experimentalism, Dewey’s imminent critique provides compelling tools through which practitioners can burrow into and critically evaluate their own experience within the environments that give shape to them.

The following sections will describe the unfolding of Dewey’s epistemology from the identification of a problem to quest for resolution in what he refers a “means-ends continuum” which culminates in an “ends-in-view” as a temporal “finality” of a specific problem. Such ends-in-view, in turn, become “means” for further development, which Dewey refers to as “growth” or “reconstruction” in an open social universe toward an increasing, but never fully achievable democratic public culture. However incomplete the gap between desired end and achieved state, Dewey’s processive teleology toward greater enhancement of human life unleashes a praxeology of considerable power in governing practice. The goal, then, in a Deweyan universe is not the attainment of democracy (an impossibility on his interpretation), but the “creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and all contribute” (Dewey, 1939, cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 343) stimulated by the democratic quest. Unleashing processes toward the unattainable goal is the ultimate objective wherein utopian aspirations become embedded within the dynamic of existing experience and contribute to its enhancement in a manner lacking in a more “realistic” epistemology. Identifying and reconstructing the “full potential” of such a process would govern a Deweyan approach to practitioner inquiry.
Experience

Dewey makes a fundamental distinction between experience and knowing, where the latter emerges out of a resolution of some problematic within the former. His location of experience as the primary datum of life allies him with the proponents of practitioner-based inquiry. Such experience forms the starting point for his epistemology. For Dewey, feeling, or brute experience, however socially, cognitively, or psychologically mediated, is the raw data of existential experience. In analyzing the phenomenology of experience, Dewey makes a distinction between mind and consciousness. Influenced by G.H. Mead, mind is the social ecology of the life world in which consciousness is but a specific focal point. “Mind is, so to speak, structural, substantial; a constant background and foreground; perceptive consciousness is process, a series of heres and nows. Mind is a constant luminosity; consciousness intermittent, a series of flashes of various intensities” (Dewey, 1925, p. 303). For Dewey, thought breaks forth within experience in response to a disruption of the habitual stream of mind. Put by Dewey scholar Tom Burke (1994) “[w]hen some sort of imbalance occurs in the ongoing interactivities of a given organism/environment system, that system will have to adjust its current actions in some way in order to correct a problem” (p. 31).

Such disruptions are normative since the living ecology of a given social environment, however large or small, is an evolving phenomenon embedded within the stream of a fluctuating human history. Nonetheless, as a relatively enduring phenomenon, it provides the backdrop, the unconscious and unspoken assumptions that undergird human behavior and thought in a given cultural milieu. For Dewey, much of
living experience is not shaped by conscious thought but by habitual modes of behavior and attitudes as a product of the ecology of a peculiar social environment.

Consciousness breaks forth with a felt experience of a problem as some disruption within a given environmental setting or situation in a manner similar to the emergence of narrative described in Bruner’s (1990) concept of folk psychology. Emotion precedes thought which then becomes a tool for problem solving, the purpose of which is to create a new homeostasis with the emerging social ecology. All experience is mediated rather than existing in a “pure” or “raw” state. When Dewey refers to “primary experience,” he is speaking “of a minimum of incidental reflection” (Dewey, 1925, p. 4) where the emotional intensity of what is perceived is elevated in response to some disruption that alerts consciousness. Thought, then, emerges as an organic response in the quest to grasp and to resolve the perplexity. In Dewey's words:

That the subject-matter of primary experience sets the problems and furnishes the first data of the reflection which constructs the secondary objects (reflective inquiry) is evident; it is also obvious that test and verification of the latter is secured only by return to things of crude or macroscopic experience....[The objects attained in reflection]...explain (original emphasis) the primary objects, they enable us to grasp them with understanding, instead of just having sense-contact with them (Dewey, 1925, pp. 4-5).

This is the crux of Dewey's pragmatic epistemology, which grounds his theory of education. Critical reflection may prove far reaching and often moves well beyond the primary experience, which provokes it. The strength of academic research is that it does reach far and wide. The problem, according to Dewey is that typically, it does not return to the environment from which it emerged to enlarge and illuminate the phenomenon under study. Instead, it reinforces the reified social universe of the academy and the notion of thought for thought’s or the academic discipline’s sake rather than for the
purpose of resolving or even illuminating concrete problems as they are experienced and lived within the social environments in which such problems are based.

Dewey’s critique against such philosophy “is not that it depends on theorizing” (p. 6). This is essential to move beyond the datum of primary experience. The concern, rather, is “that it fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience” (p. 6) in order to “render [it] more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with [it] more fruitful” (p. 7). Without this connection between primary and secondary experience through the medium of “severe thought” (p. 38), there are no means available to evaluate the significance of primary experience. As Dewey put it: “the things of ordinary experience do not get enlargement and enrichment of meaning as they do when approached through the medium of scientific principles and reasonings” (p. 6).

On Dewey’s reading, critical reflection on primary experience can become as abstract as it needs to be to make meaning of it as long as it does so in ways that reflect back upon and enrich experience. Such theory construction, should it play more of a role in practitioner inquiry within the field of adult literacy education, will require significant dialogue between practitioners and theorists, probing experience for its richer meanings that practitioners alone may not discern. Neither the province of the scholar nor that of the practitioner can reign supreme in this scenario. Instead, a problem-focused stance toward inquiry is needed with participants sharing their insights from the divergence of perspectives they represent.

The identification of problems in the context of their emergence within experience as our discussion of Carr and Kemmis make clear, is a key axiom in
practitioner-based inquiry which corresponds as well to Quigley’s (1997) reference of an “itch” as a stimulus to practitioner research. As we have seen, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue similarly in identifying teacher research as “[g]enerally emerging from problems of practice: felt discrepancies between intention and reality, theory/research and practice, reflexive and referenced to the immediate situation” (p. 12). What a Deweyan analysis of experience adds is an acute appreciation of the environmental ecology (whether on a more global or localized scale) in giving shape to the forms of “consciousness” which emerge in the identification of a “problem.” Central for Dewey are the disruptions that emerge that give shape to problems and their separations and linkages with the habitual (pre-reflective) environmental milieu from which they sprang.

Specific concerns include:

1. the contexts that makes these and not other phenomena problems
2. the ways in which a problem challenges or is constrained by a given environmental configuration.
3. whether the need is for a minor adjustment or for a more major reconstruction
4. the relationship between personal and environmental factors in both the emergence of and the working toward a resolution of a problem
5. the way the problem is perceived by the variously affected participants as well as more distanced social actors
6. the way the problem grasped is mediated by various forms of informal and formal (scientific/academic) thought.
7. how the various forms of thought mediate the problem along the means-ends continuum with and for those most affected

While many of these issues are currently addressed by the practitioner-based inquiry community, Dewey’s emphasis on the relationship between mind and consciousness provides an important contribution in grasping the contexts in which problems emerge. Also valuable is his emphasis on dialogue among individuals and groups exhibiting various forms of knowledge, whether practical or more formal (“scientific”). All
represent gist upon which practitioner-based inquirers might draw to help identify and resolve problems within particular environmental settings toward the realization of a more reconstructive future based upon the “full potential” of what is possible to achieve at any given time, a key aspiration within a Deweyan framework. As will become clear in the next two sections, such context provides valuable insight into Dewey’s theory of logic.

**Means-Ends Continuum: The Search for Ends-in View**

In Dewey’s epistemology, the experience of “undergoing” is fundamental in identifying problems requiring resolution. For Dewey, emotion plays a more primary role than cognition, at least in the initial identification of pressing existential (a word he frequently used) problems. As part of the resolution of perplexity, thought and knowledge begin to play a more pervasive role not over and above experience, but “in bettering and enriching the subject matters of crude experience” (p. 22). In Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy, knowledge never becomes an end in itself. It is never viewed as “primary [so that] the cord that binds experience and nature is cut” (p. 23). Knowledge, then, is no more and no less than a tool in the reconstruction of experience toward a more desired state. It is a tool or more precisely, a pivotal point within consciousness in the resolution of perplexity toward a more enduring stabilization that is always evolving and never complete in the dynamic fulcrum of human history.

Dewey views satisfaction in direct experience (the aesthetics of living) a natural objective of human life. For him, thought emerges as a necessity in grappling with and eventually overcoming dissonance between desire and reality. Such a process takes place not in any final state since the social universe is perpetually in process of reconstruction.
What emerges is a temporal end or what he refers to as a “consummation,” which brings a sort of resolution to a finite human episode that in turn, opens passageways to new problems that also require “reconstruction.” Not all human ends result in the desired fulfillment. “Being an end may be indifferently an ecstatic culmination, a matter-of-fact culmination, or a deplorable tragedy” (p. 97). However, in a Deweyan universe the *telos* of human life is to seek such satisfaction within natural human experience where “severe thought” is the instrument to realize the purpose. As Dewey puts it:

> Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization is our salvation. And it is a faith that must be nurtured and made articulate (Dewey, 1917, cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 69).

Any other aim, according to Dewey is a form is a compensatory strategy “for [the] inability to make reason effective in practice” (Dewey, 1925, p. 19).

For Dewey, “thinking enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or purposes” (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 212) that bring increased satisfaction to human life both in its individual and collective manifestations. It “enables us to act in deliberate and intentional fashion to attain future objects or to come into command of what is now distant and lacking” (p. 212). “The ulterior problem of thought is to make [such] thought prevail in experience” (Dewey, 1925, p. 120). For these purposes, instrumental thought may indeed be abstract, and only by moving outside the immediate circle of primary experience may it be possible to find resources to reconstruct experience to a more desired state. While academic discourse creates ideal worlds through high levels of abstraction, its primary limitation, according to Dewey, is its divorce from the existential plane of life experience. Thus, for Dewey:
...there is here supplied, I think, a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving them of having in "reality" even the significance they had previously seemed to have? (Dewey, 1925, p. 7).

According to Dewey “valuation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack, or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing conditions” (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 90). The object of thought is to identify and to critically work through the problem towards an “ends-in-view” as that combination of reflective thought and critical action that “will supply the existing need or lack and resolve the existing conflict” (p. 90). This entails a continuous process from identification of needs to resolution in which the desired state (even if not fully grasped or formed) is holographically embedded within each continuous step toward the final objective leading toward the resolution of a particular problem. “An active process [of reflective thought and critical practice] is strung out temporarily, but there is a deposit [a holographic residue] at each stage and point entering cumulatively and constitutively into the outcome” (Dewey, 1925, p. 368).

The means-ends continuum is also stimulated “by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience….as the only preparation in the long run that amounts to anything” (Dewey, 1938, p. 49). The means by which an ends is sought is as important for Dewey as the attained goal. He is not saying that the journey is more important than the destination. Rather, he argues that in order to realize the latter, if the objective is the result of an existential problem requiring critical thought for its
resolution, then each stage needs to be explored to its fullest. As means, it needs to be viewed for its contribution to a particular ends-in-view, which it embeds within the stages of its evolution like “a train, chain, or thread” (Dewey, 1991, p. 3) toward its final destination in a concrete situation. For Dewey, means are as important as ends, which served as means or “pivots” for other ends.

Dewey’s basic assumption that problems emerge within consciousness through some disruption of the social ecology, is an insight that the practitioner inquiry community could explore in considerable depth, with or without the tools of formal academic theory. So is the argument that the purpose of “severe thought” is its reconstruction in a manner that integrates the breach. Specifically, an emphasis on ends-in-view including a “deposit” of such ends as part of the means of attaining the desirable state, could inject a rigor to practitioner inquiry that is not always currently evident. An appropriation of Dewey’s scientific methodology of discerning facts and making and evaluating hypotheses as critical tools of inquiry within the contexts of particular ends-in-views, also has much to offer.

Such appropriation would require a disciplined approach to practitioner-based inquiry that may not always accommodate the more flexible style that many practitioners prefer. However, without such discipline the danger is that the experience of practitioners becomes so diffuse that a thoughtful analysis and reconstruction become problematic. As Dewey (1938, p. 31) puts it, “to reject the principle of organization in toto, instead of striving to discover what it means, and how it is to be attained on the basis of experience” is a grave mistake. Rejecting an “either/or” polarity separating traditional and progressive education of the 1930s, Dewey argued that:
[w]hen external control is rejected, the problem becomes that of finding the factors of control that are inherent within experience. When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority (p. 21).

For Dewey, that authority was the instrumental logic he appropriated for delving into the means-end continuum which serves as a critical linchpin of his pragmatic epistemology.

In appropriating Dewey’s methodology contemporary practitioner inquirers possess a valuable tool that is both disciplined and linked to the illumination of experience within its emerging processive manifestations.

**Growth as the Reconstruction of Experience Through Critical Thought**

In a Deweyan epistemology, ends-in-view are not finalities, but are “foreseen consequences which arise in the course of activity and which are employed to give activity added meaning and to direct its further course…. [In other terms,] they are redirecting pivots *in* (original emphasis) action” (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 72) resulting in further human development through the confluence of environmental influences and intentional actions of individual agents. Although such development could lead to “weal or woe,” the impetus of Dewey’s teleology; that is, his desire, is “growth,” “reconstruction,” or the enhancement of human experience through the continual exercise of “severe thought” on the pressing existential problems humankind faces without the hope of “transcendental” resources “beyond” nature. As he puts it:

> If there be truth eternal and absolute, and yet that truth cannot become operative in human affairs so as to extend and secure their prosperity, the existence and nature of absolute truth may be of interest to incarnate angelic beings, but not to man as human, to him only as sharing in the angelic essence (Dewey, 1911, cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 122, Vol. 2).

Rather than “transcendence,” for Dewey “[a] value is final (original emphasis) in the sense that it represents the conclusion of a process of analytical appraisals of
conditions operating in a concrete case…. [Therefore,] any conclusion that is taken to warrant the conclusion is ‘final’ for that case” (Dewey, cited in Archambault, 1964, p. 102), and, as we have seen, a “pivot” for further reconstruction beyond the specific case or problem to which the particular ends-in-view addressed. The result of either the “stream or flow” (Dewey, 1991, p. 3) as means toward an ends-in-view, or its actual attainment for a particular situation is “growth” or “redirection” or “a transformation of conditions once hostile or indifferent to characteristic human activities into friendly and favoring conditions” (Dewey, 1916, p. 37).

Dewey defines “growth” succinctly as the “cumulative movement of action toward a later result,” (p. 41), the ends-in-view. There is much packed into this definition. What Dewey means by this is development toward a more desirable state, the realization of the full potentiality of each experience in a consecutive stage of development toward a particular ends-in-view as well as its culmination or “consummation” as he refers to it, in a concrete situation. Dewey links growth to plasticity “by which some persons take on the color of their surroundings while retaining their own bent” (p. 44). This is an important dimension of human development and a critical aspect of Dewey’s philosophy of growth. Dewey also means more than that. Specifically, growth:

is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation. This means power to actions on the basis of the results of prior experiences, the power to develop dispositions (original emphasis). Without it, the acquisition of [new] habits is impossible (p. 44).

Twenty-two years later, Dewey added that such growth “arouses in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas. The new facts and the new
ideas thus obtained become the ground for further experiences in which new problems are presented. The process is a continuous spiral” (Dewey, 1938, p. 79) that moves beyond the specific ends-in-view stimulated by a particular problem or set of problems toward a way of life aimed at future possibilities rather than past certainties. As he puts it:

Growth is not something that is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future….Because the need of preparation for a continually developing life is great, it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and as significant as possible. Then as the present is merged into the future, the future is taken care of (Dewey, 1916, p. 56).

There is, then, a reconstructive edge to Dewey’s epistemology beyond merely the internalization of a prevailing social ethos, an important aspect of growth in its own right, toward the creation of a more humane civilization that Dewey referred to as democracy. For Dewey, authentic “growth” depends on whether development in a specific direction “promotes or retards growth in general [toward this larger aim]. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” (Dewey, 1938, p. 36). Also, in the immediacy of ripening or enhanced experience toward more expansive ends-in-view, growth is the “moving force” (p. 38) or the most fruitful potentiality implicit within any trajectory from means to ends. As Dewey puts it:

Failure to take the moving force of an experience into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself (p. 38).

Admittedly vague, part of what Dewey means by the moving force of an experience (or growth) is the trajectory or consecutiveness of the thread of activity
(reflective thought and critical practice) leading to the ends-in-view through a scientific method of experimentation and hypothesizing. He also means the extraction of the full potential of meaning and purpose throughout the process of moving toward a richer experience that in some substantial ways resolves the perplexity that led to the initial search for instrumental knowledge, in quest of satisfaction.

The end point of Dewey’s concept of growth or reconstruction is democracy, less a final state than a beckoning ends-in-view to galvanize the human project. As Dewey put it:

Democracy as compared to other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires, so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and which all contribute (Dewey, 1939, cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, Vol. 1, p 343 ).

Dewey referred to the “critical intelligence” required to move toward such a vision as “valuation,” or “a theory of criticism; a method of discriminating among goods on the basis of the conditions of their appearance, and of their consequences” (Dewey, 1925, p. 396). Such purposefulness rather than the mere attainment of particular ends-in-view is Dewey’s ultimate focus. He realizes that the reconstruction of society, culture, and civilization toward the perpetual unfolding of the democratic vision remains an aspiration, yet implicit as the “moving force” of the American Revolution within the United States, and therefore, on Dewey’s reading, this nation’s guiding telos (Demetrion, 2001). For Dewey, education is the primary tool for such work and “criticism” (the
linkage of reflective thought to critical practice) as the process of moving from problem identification to various “consummatory” ends-in-view. This pedagogical principle propells his theory of schooling, social reconstruction, and his pragmatic philosophy.

Dewey’s concept of growth or reconstruction as the enhancement of experience through critical inquiry can provide practitioner inquirers with a disciplined focus for their work. It leaves open what specifically growth means in any particular situation, but provides a broad direction in moving from means to ends which then serve as means for more comprehensive ends. The purpose of inquiry, on a Deweyan interpretation, is not simply the elucidation of critical thought, but reconstruction, changing an unsatisfactory situation into one that is more satisfactory. For Dewey, thought only completes its work with the release of new energies leading to the enrichment of human experience through the stimulation of the imagination, which breaks through habitual perceptions and patterns of doing.

There is a gradualism implicit in Deweyan pragmatism, but the trajectory of his vision is the fulfillment of democracy in a world where all human beings are enriched and share in the creation and stabilization of a humane society and culture. For Dewey, ends-in-views may pertain to relatively minor as well as more significant situations, but in either case, the process of reconstruction remains continuous until the democratic project, which is beyond full achievement in human experience, is realized. The trajectory toward such fulfillment drives the basis of his aspirations. The fulfillment of specific ends-in-views is a concept practitioner-based inquirers might draw upon by appropriating the means-end continuum as a critical problem-solving tool in matters pertaining to their daily work. Dewey’s concept of democracy as the as the perpetual
flowering of enriched community, his ultimate reconstructive aim, represents a broader purpose upon which practitioner inquirers might focus their longer term efforts. While the reach extends beyond the grasp by definition of Dewey’s concept of democracy, the trajectories unleashed in pursuit of such a vision releases energies and direction that otherwise might go untapped.

**Conclusion**

Carr and Kemmis and Dewey have made major contributions in developing praxeologies that mitigate, but far from resolve the theory/practical divergence which has characterized western epistemology since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers. They have identified education, broadly defined, as the most potent resource of social inquiry and reconstruction and have attempted to place problem identification and resolution squarely in the laps of educational practitioners. Despite their praxeological bent, certain contradictions mark the work of both Carr and Kemmis and Dewey. Carr and Kemmis’s reliance on Habermas and the Frankfort School of Social Research clearly emanates from the academy, however divergent from the ethos of positivism, its major *intellectual* target. The prose of Habermas, moreover, upon whom they *directly* draw, is largely inaccessible except to a very select group of practitioners who are extremely well versed in European social thought.

Thus, on Carr and Kemmis’s interpretation, the work of the transformative intellectual is not only essential in directing practitioner-based inquiry projects beyond the mystifying phenomenology of subjective perceptions toward a more “enlightened” path. Their text itself serves the same function in mediating Habermas’s dense prose to uninitiated readers. This is not to deny the value of their work, which for many groups of
practitioner-based inquirers might unleash the right set of heuristics in illuminating particular issues and in moving forward toward resolving certain problems. However, it is to suggest that their core vision is grounded in an academic concept (critical theory) even as they stress the need that it become “translated” within idioms that make sense to practitioners. Moreover, in their call for “prudence” and proximate solutions to actual situations, there is a tempered response, which suggests something more complex than the path of “emancipation” that is likely to emerge even in an unlikely consensualist environment where individuals are free from the “distortions” of social reproduction.

Still, as a regulative ideal, critical theory can act as a heuristic to move beyond the limitations of positivist and interpretive social theory. Moreover, their insight that all practice is premised on theory and an analysis of how practitioners’ “theories-in-use” require reexamination in light of concrete contradictions provides an important lever in sharpening practitioner-based inquiry. I acknowledge the importance of these insights. Yet I argue instead for a more complex social phenomenology that embraces an imminent critique as described by Bruner’s emphasis on narrative reconstruals and Dewey’s concept of “criticism” or “severe thought” in working through the means-ends continuum based upon the emergence of a particular problem. The emphasis on critical theory keeps razor sharp the distinction between perceptions of participants, individual and collective, and the “distortions” of the social context of which they may not be aware. This potentially, is an important insight. However, the assumption that the “truth” of social reality resides “outside” the contexts of participants until they receive the emancipatory knowledge is a point practitioner-based inquirers would do well to ponder.
More desirable is a critical theory that merges with as well as deepens an imminent critique, which seems to be Carr and Kemmis’s actual objective once they move in their discussion from theory to practice. Appropriated within Dewey’s pragmatic epistemology or Bruner’s concept of folk psychology, Carr and Kemmis’s emphasis on critical theory has much to offer for practitioner-based inquirers. So does their linkage of practitioner-based research as a subset of educational research, although it might now be more desirable to build bridges between the former and studies on education based on the academic disciplines, instead of highlighting cleavages. This is particularly important if practitioner-based inquiry is going to achieve the institutional legitimization needed to sustain it as an important body of study, possessing its own canonical requirements (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

In many ways, John Dewey is an enigma. On the one hand, his entire pragmatic project is designed to illuminate the relationship between experience and knowledge. Specifically, he draws upon his instrumental logic to work out problems identified within and through consciousness (personal and collective) toward “ends-in-view” as temporal “consummations” through the process of “severe thought.” This includes the identification of relevant facts (what he calls “propositions”) and hypotheses construction as essential tools of inquiry, simultaneously serving as “means,” leading to the desired state. The specific problem-solving steps Dewey identifies (the scientific method) are resoundingly close to the methodology of action research described by Carr and Kemmis. While Dewey had his activist moments in education and social reform in the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, his primary vocation was that of a university philosopher who intimately grappled with the intricacies of European and American analytical and
social philosophy and psychology. Like Habermas, much of his writing is inaccessible to most practitioner-based inquirers, although such texts as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) are clearly accessible and reflective of his best thought.

While Dewey has made an important contribution in mitigating the practice/theory cleavage, large antinomies between them persist in his work. This is due in part to his philosophical predisposition. It is also related to his faith in scientific methodology as the most efficacious problem-solving tool available to humanity. As implied throughout the section on Dewey, the means-ends continuum requires a very exacting form of inquiry that mirrors the work of the scientific laboratory regardless of what specific problems are identified. What is problematic, but intriguing, is the viability or usefulness of practitioner-based inquirers to operate in such an exacting fashion as suggested by Dewey’s methodology.

Clearly, in the means-ends continuum from problem identification to resolution, Dewey provides a framework that practitioner-based inquirers could appropriate that could add much rigor and preciseness to their work. The holographic embedding of ends within the means of achieving them and the attention to the consecutiveness of their phases in working toward ends-in-view is a major contribution to logical thinking as is Dewey’s commitment to appropriate such logic to the problems of everyday life. On a similar plane, Dewey’s identification of art as the culmination or “consummation” of human experience is also a major contribution of his epistemology as it anchors various ends-in-view to achievable, although precarious finalities which then serve as pivots for more comprehensive and enriching ends guided by the democratic project.
As a heuristic, there is much in Dewey’s epistemology upon which practitioner-based inquirers can draw, along with his experiential aesthetics, and democratic political project, which shape the context of his instrumental logic. In Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1993) call for “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 7), Dewey’s instrumental logic can make an important contribution. Appropriation of his methodology and broader epistemological framework could result in a more disciplined focus on problem identification and resolution than that which characterizes much work in the emerging field of practitioner-based inquiry that has yet to fully develop its own canonical rules and guidelines for practice. Dewey’s emphasis, moreover, in working towards ends-in-views identified by practitioners, themselves, parallels Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s emphasis on “emic” or insider’s knowledge, which in theory, obviates the need for an outside “transformative intellectual” as implicit in Carr and Kemmis’s project. In a Deweyan framework, the object is not so much to draw on insight outside the operating framework of practitioners, but for practitioners, themselves, to progressively enhance the social ecologies which shape their work to more comprehensively resonate with the world construction that consumes their immediate project.

Given the paucity of practitioner-based inquiry that stems from an intentional Deweyan framework, it is an open question on how efficacious practitioners might find it. Clearly there are problems such as whether or not something as scientifically rigorous as Dewey’s instrumental logical can be effectively appropriated within the context of practitioner-identified problems.
Closely related is whether or not the means-ends continuum unfolds in the consecutive manner portrayed by Dewey. Problems emerge and solutions are sought, that seems evident. What is not so clear is the extent to which problem resolution is based on the consecutive building of each stage toward the climatic apotheosis. As Dewey was well aware, novel contingencies emerge, which, however, may open new options not necessarily related to what went on before. Moreover, in our postmodern era of “reader response,” there is no inevitable connection between authorial intent (desire) and the reading or construction of a text (the finished product). Dewey’s quest for consecutiveness is premised on a modernistic assumption that one can work coherently toward goals through a logical staging process to which he adds the concept, that the whole is temporally embedded in the part.

This critique notwithstanding, a postmodernism in the “reconstructive mode” “that seeks to reelaborate and reappropriate modernist categories...on less absolute grounds” (Kegan, 1994, p. 324) may enable practitioner-based inquirers to find symmetry with Dewey’s quest for consecutiveness at least as a heuristic in moving forward and deepening their own research projects. Such an appropriation is worthy of considered attention among practitioner-based inquirers given the wealth of insight that Dewey illuminates about experience, knowledge, and knowing. What holds for Dewey even from a postmodern deconstructive sensibility is “extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 49) wherever it may lead and however pluralistic such meanings may be. The consecutiveness of the means-ends continuum and the identification of the “moving force” (or forces) as an essential aspect of the trajectory from problem identification to resolution are central to Dewey’s concept
of “growth” or “reconstruction.” From a postmodern perspective, Dewey’s concepts of growth and reconstruction may be best interpreted as myth, very fruitful ones, perhaps, viewed from the “reconstructive mode” of neo-pragmatism that may open important avenues of critical praxis for practitioner-based inquirers not otherwise available.

This essay has remained highly focused on an abstract plane. It has done so, in part to illuminate the theoretical presuppositions that mark the work of Carr and Kemmis and Dewey. It is also based on the assumption that all practice is grounded in interpretation, however explicit or implicit. This author is empathic to Lewin’s maxim than that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. It is perfectly legitimate and valuable, therefore, to concentrate practitioner-based inquiry research on an examination of the theory upon which it is or may become linked as well as identifying the more “practical” implications of its work. Practitioner-based inquirers have drawn on Carr and Kemmis’s research for some time with mixed results. The application of Dewey’s social phenomenology (or ecology) and his instrumental logical have proven more inchoate, particularly in the field of adult literacy education. Such application, particularly in the “reconstructive mode” is essential to test the viability of his epistemology for practitioner-based inquiry. As an experiment, it holds much potential in expanding the scope and depth of critical inquiry. The proof, though, as always, is in the pudding.
References


