



## EDITORIAL

### We Live in Interesting Times

Beth Cross\* [Beth.Cross@uws.ac.uk](mailto:Beth.Cross@uws.ac.uk)

Rachel Shanks\*\* [r.k.shanks@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:r.k.shanks@abdn.ac.uk)

\*University of the West of Scotland

\*\*University of Aberdeen

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26203/8j4z-kz83>

Copyright: © 2017 Cross *et al.*

To cite this article: CROSS, B. and SHANKS, R., (2017). Editorial: We Live in Interesting Times. *Education in the North*, 24(1), pp.1-2



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

## Editorial - We Live in Interesting Times

**Beth Cross, Lecturer, School of Education, University of the West of Scotland**

**Rachel Shanks, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Aberdeen**

---

We are writing this editorial during interesting times. Whether, as the Chinese saying suggests, that is a curse remains to be seen. Politics, particularly in the UK, seems perilously poised. This uncertainty, not unsurprisingly, has many people, with increasing urgency, longing for simpler times, even if that means an authoritarian simplicity. Just what shape some new political settlement will take requires, more than ever, the intelligent commitment of a wider range of active citizens.

Within this context, a conference to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication of John Dewey's famous work *Democracy and Education* took place at the Ayr campus of the University of the West of Scotland in June 2016. Like the conference, this special issue aims to reflect on the legacy and significance of Dewey's thinking for 21st century education, but also to consider the more general issue of the relationship between democracy and education in current times. We invited articles on a broad range of themes both conceptual and empirical that examine the legacy and modern relevance of John Dewey's work on progressive education and its relevance to citizenship and democracy. Dewey's work is relevant in relation to a number of important themes: democratic control of education systems within globalised neoliberalism; state education and the promotion of democratic ideals; the role and purpose of schooling/education; supranational bodies and education. All of which are explored within this issue.

In its centenary and beyond, *Democracy and Education*, continues to attract proponents/adherents and detractors. Pring reminds us in his foreword to *Democracy and Education* that it was listed only after *Mein Kampf* and *Das Kapital* among the most dangerous books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and may still prove to be provocative in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Indeed, as the articles included demonstrate, Dewey's ideas continue to serve as provocation to current thinkers such as Biesta, Kellner, and Giroux.

In this issue Pring's article helpfully addresses the false dualisms that give rise to such starkly divergent characterisations of Dewey's work. He responds to the erroneous assumptions that underpin the loose use of the term "child-centred education" in the critique of Dewey. Pring argues that crucial to understanding child-centred education is an understanding of experiential learning as not a passive process but as an active process of revising knowledge that is always practical, provisional and open to further reconstruction and, crucially, learning that requires an active educator who "introducing new situations, new experiences, new and more profitable ways of seeing the way ahead through the understandings (referred to as the different forms of knowledge) which we have inherited".

Humes's article also clarifies the philosophical, historical, psychological and sociological contributions of *Democracy in Education* in order to examine how educational studies are currently framed within higher education in Scotland, asking, what options are open to those who are concerned about the relationship between education and democracy? Is it possible to recapture something of Dewey's comprehensive vision within educational studies? Humes is critical of a field that has become chaotic, crowded and, at points, contradictory. Nevertheless, he maintains that educational studies' impact on policy and curricular decisions necessitates that it should be informed by an intellectual tradition exemplified by Dewey's *Democracy and Education*.

The articles that follow examine the application of Dewey to specific learning contexts. Shanks and Molloy consider the implications of Dewey's work when young people have a greater say in a constitutional referendum than they do in everyday decision-making about their lives in school.

Wallace examines the activism of young people for its potential “as the engine of community development”. He argues that Dewey’s concepts are central to understanding the pedagogical opportunities within active citizenship. In particular, he looks at the dynamics within the reciprocity of the mutually coupled trying and undergoing within experiential learning that Dewey identified.

The article by Cross considers recent political activism, focussing on how changing social media practices and their affective impact change the landscape of civic engagement and the opportunities for informal education and community development. Her article contrasts challenges and resources in Scotland and the United States, drawing on Dewey’s later work *Freedom and Culture* to understand how communities can renew the experiment in democracy in order to face the challenges that globalised media networks pose. She argues that the locus of such experiments may be closer and more accessible than may first be imagined.

Our feature provides insight into the application of pupil participation in the development of decision-making and citizenship education in schools in Finland.

Between the conference and the publication of this special issue, a most resonant commentator on our current state of affairs, Leonard Cohen, passed away. In his song *Democracy in the USA* he asserted that democracy is coming, whilst the lyrics refer to many of the conditions that suggest otherwise. He portrayed himself as in no way exempt from them:

*I'm just staying home tonight  
Getting lost in that hopeless little screen  
But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags  
That Time cannot decay  
I'm junk but I'm still holding up  
This little wild bouquet*

The work within the issue cannot perhaps be called a ‘wild bouquet’, but together provide departure points for the work that is yet to be done in different educational settings so as not to acquiesce to the conditions beyond our control but, on the contrary, identify what best can be drawn from conditions to create contemporary laboratories for the next generation of experiments in democracy.