Democratic Self-Cultivation

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Abstract

In this paper I draw on the concept of Confucian self-cultivation to strengthen John Dewey’s democratic education project. For Dewey, democracy is primarily a form of associated living, marked by the broad sharing of interests and rich communication among social groups. In appealing to Confucian philosophy to bolster Dewey’s educational project I adopt the framework of global Intercultural philosophy, placing philosophical approaches from different cultural traditions together to augment intellectual resources and advance philosophical understanding. This approach initially dictates a comparative method: “setting into dialogue sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams” (Littlejohn, n.d.). I draw particularly upon the Analects of Confucius, the collected works of John Dewey, and standard interpretive works. But I go beyond mere comparison, to argue for an enriched form of democratic education, bolstered by Confucian insights, and suitable for contemporary Western democracies.

Keywords

self-cultivation – intercultural philosophy – democratic education – Confucius – John Dewey – the literary canon in education – rituals in education

1 Introduction

Democratic values are under siege. In the West, far-right populist regimes with anti-democratic tendencies – nationalist hostility to immigrants and those with religious and ethnic differences, attacks on the free press – have recently led governments in Brazil, Colombia, Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey and the United States among other countries. According to the Economist Intelligence
Unit (EIU)’s 2018 annual report on the state of democracy in 167 nations, “deep disillusionment with establishment politics means that the quality of democratic societies is eroding.” The report “considers the U.S. under President Donald Trump, a ‘flawed democracy’, having been downgraded from a ‘full democracy’ when he was elected” (Rapoza, 2019).

Meanwhile, China’s quest for democracy has, according to philosopher Sor-Hoon Tan (2007), “been a frustrating tale of broken promises and unfulfilled hope” (p. 142). Since the May Fourth Movement (1919), many Chinese intellectuals and youth leaders have called for liberal, Western style democracy in China, but their Western-oriented democratic goals have been thwarted.

Despite many setbacks, democratic values remain attractive to many Chinese intellectuals, civil society leaders, and even members of the Chinese Communist Party. Scholars have recently been searching for forms of democracy suitable in light of Chinese cultural history. Fewer today think that democracy must assume the liberal Western form. Many look instead to Confucianism – as more in keeping with Chinese traditional values and a firmer ground for Asian democracy. As one influential scholar puts it, “In East Asian societies democracy would be most politically effective and culturally relevant if it were rooted in and operates on the ‘Confucian habits and mores’ with which East Asians are still deeply saturated ... if democracy were a Confucian democracy” (Kim, 2014, 4, emphasis original).

Some leading theorists of such a Confucian Democracy have drawn on the philosophy of John Dewey (Hall & Ames 1999; Tan, 2004), emphasizing both similarities between Deweyan and Confucian conceptions of the self as inherently social, and Dewey’s notion of democracy itself as primarily social rather than political. This move opens a space for democratic reform efforts in civil society and education rather than in the state, and indeed, many of these democratic efforts have been encouraged by the current Chinese government.

2 Confucian Education for the West

This paper reverses the direction. Instead of turning to the West – and John Dewey in particular – to interpret Confucian democracy for China, I turn to the East – and specifically to Confucianism – to address the democratic crisis in the West, drawing on Confucian self-cultivation education to strengthen John Dewey’s democratic education project.

For Dewey, democracy is primarily a form of associated living, marked by the broad sharing of interests and rich communication among social groups. These defining democratic values are particularly relevant in countering
today’s far right populism, which trades on antagonisms among ethnic and religious groups, and denies the authority of both scientific inquiry and investigative journalism.

In appealing to Confucian philosophy to bolster Dewey’s educational project I adopt the framework of global Intercultural philosophy (Brooks, 2013, Bai et al., 2014), placing philosophical approaches from different cultural traditions together to augment intellectual resources and advance philosophical understanding. This approach initially dictates a comparative method: “setting into dialogue sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams” (Littlejohn, n.d.). I draw particularly upon the Analects of Confucius (Eno translation, 2015), the collected works of Dewey (see references for details), standard interpretive works, and secondary literature found through structured searches associating both philosophers with terms such as “classical study”, “ritual” and “music”. But I go beyond mere comparison, to argue for an enriched form of democratic education, bolstered by Confucian insights, and suitable for contemporary Western democracies.

My argument proceeds by first outlining the central aims and methods of Confucian self-cultivation education, emphasizing its two key elements – reverent study of literary classics as texts isolated for special study, and performance of customary ritual; and second, providing a similar outline of Dewey’s democratic education for comparison, noting Dewey’s rejection of both of these elements of Confucian self-cultivation education. I then argue that both classical study and ritual can nonetheless be incorporated in democratic education in the Deweyan spirit to strengthen democratic values.

3 Confucian Self-Cultivation Education

3.1 Background
Confucius (551–479 BCE) belonged to the shi (士)- originally the class of chariot-riding warriors and archers governed by a strict, ritualized ethical code. As rulers turned to a professional military after the Chinese iron age (officially dated as starting in approximately 600 BCE), the shi were transformed into an administrative and scholar class known for their proficiency at ritual ceremonies and stringent code of conduct.

Confucius came of age during the Spring and Autumn period (771 to 476 BCE), a time of great turbulence and disorder. Here some background is in order. The Zhou dynasty began when King Wu, son of King Wen of Zhou (the “cultivated King”), defeated the Shang dynasty rulers in 1046 BCE. When King Wu died, his young son Cheng became king and his brother Dan, the Duke
of Zhou, became regent. Dan is widely regarded as both a capable ruler and culture hero—the legendary creator of the I Ching, the Book of Poetry, and the basic texts of Chinese classical music, as well as the founder of the Rites of Zhou (周礼).

In a long decline after 970 BCE, the Zhou kings eventually became figureheads. In 771 BCE, after the death of You, the twelfth Zhou King, and the near destruction of his capital at Haojing, the Zhou court, devoid of power, relocated eastward to Luoyang. This date marks the beginning of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the first stage of which is known as the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE). During this period, the nobles fought among themselves for power, and the traditional Zhou culture languished.

Confucius’s father belonged1 to the lower aristocracy of the state of Lu, which prided itself on counting among its founders Dan, the Duke of Zhou. After the decline of the Zhou court, Lu became the repository of Zhou aristocratic culture (Eno, 2015, ii). It was thus natural that Confucius would look back to the presumed golden age when Zhou culture thrived, when Zhou sage kings ruled, ritual codes were observed, and society was well-ordered and harmonious.

Like others in his family, Confucius was deeply impressed by the Zhou ritual practices as representations of proper relations among people with different social statuses. The neglect of ritual practice, he felt, had undermined the normative social order, and Confucius set out to preserve and re-establish Zhou knowledge and ritual behavior among leaders and their ministers (Ivanhoe, 2000). The Analects provides Confucius’s vision of legitimate Zhou culture, and his account of why it’s pattern contained the basis for a new utopia (Eno, 2015, iii). He said of the Zhou “How splendid was its pattern! And I follow the Zhou” (3.14); “The virtue of the Zhou may be said to be the utmost of virtue” (8.20).

3.2 The Ideal of the Junzi

Confucius’s moral ideal was the junzi (君子) – literally “ruler’s sons” or “princes”, but in common usage, superior persons or noblemen – as opposed to xiaoren (小人)- petty, servile commoners. Confucius ethicized the term junzi; he reconceived junzi not as men of noble pedigree, but of noble character (Pines, 2017). He urged his students to aim at the highest virtue—to become junzi and rise above pettiness (6.13). Junzi possessed humaneness or benevolence (ren, 仁), an over-arching virtuous character incorporating such component virtues as ritual propriety (li, 礼), filial piety (xiao, 孝), wisdom (zhi, 智), sympathy (shu, 恕), cultural refinement (wen, 文), and charisma (de, 德).

1 All references to the Analects are drawn from Eno, 2015. I retain the standard chapter and paragraph number citations, so that e.g., (3.14) refers to chapter 3, paragraph 14.
among other virtues suited for leadership (Olberding, 2013, 21). Confucius in the Analects tells us that junzi are concerned with lifelong learning and self-improvement; not about obtaining full bellies or comfortable homes (1.14). They are always inclusive and never partisan (2.14). Their virtue is truly radical: “The junzi works on the root – once the root is planted, the dao (道) is born.” (1.2) They are moral through and through: “they insist on nothing and refuse nothing, but simply align themselves with the right” (4.10). Once learners grasp Zhou patterns and constrain their behavior by ritual practice, they can never turn back – their moral transformation is permanent (6.27).

Confucius noted that despite his unstinting efforts even he did not fully exemplify junzi perfection (7.33). The junzi is thus a moral ideal, but one that served as a guide light in fostering ren in his students. By dedication to the ideal, they in turn could exert moral authority as teachers and ministers, spread Zhou learning and practice, and restore peace and harmony to “all under heaven” (tianxia, 天下).

3.3 The Confucian Curriculum

Confucius sought to transform young men into junzi through a curriculum of reverential learning of literary classics (xue, 学), and ritual observance (li, 礼). According to legend, Confucius was the editor of the six Zhou classics: The Classic of Poetry, The Book of History, The Book of Changes (1 Ching), The Book of Rites, The Classic of Music (now lost) and The Spring and Autumn Annals. Students in self-cultivation education read these texts closely, and reflected on them with teachers and peers to disclose their deeper meanings. The educational ideal expressed in this tradition have recently been synthesized by Charlene Tan (2017) as follows:

The aim of education is to inculcate ren (humanity) through li (normative behaviours) so that learners could realise and broaden dao (Way). To achieve this aim, the curriculum should be holistic, broad-based and integrated where students constantly practise what they have learnt through self-cultivation and social interaction.

Classical Study. In Confucian self-cultivation education, the Zhou classics were the initial focus of learning, and students were expected to master them. But the aim of study was not merely to memorize them or grasp their literal meaning, but rather to absorb, through discussions and reflection about them, the ancient wisdom they depict. As Barry Allen (2017) puts this point, in Confucian education, “classical learning is a school of experience... The Classics are the works of ancient sages and a record of their experience. The study of this material is a method for establishing an intuitive continuity between that
experience and our own.” Through reading and reflection the students were to attain a larger view of the world and greater flexibility and responsiveness of behavior (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 2).

The knowledge gained through close study of the classical texts is thus inherently moral. Confucian thought makes no sharp distinction between thinking and doing. Elliot and Tsai (2008) note:

For Confucius, ‘pursuing knowledge’ or ‘knowing’ refers to a dynamic process of becoming intelligent, of ‘realizing’ new possibilities for action within a specific set of circumstances of which he is a participant...Knowledge is not determined independently of action in the circumstances of everyday life; the relationship between knowledge and action is a non-instrumental one. Knowledge is only fully achieved in action.

The aim of classical learning is effectiveness in action. As Confucius in the Analects explains,

You can recite the 300 poems from the Book of Odes, but when you try to use them in administration, they are not effective, and in handling the outlying regions, you cannot apply them, then even though you know a lot, what good is it? (13.5).

Confucius expected students to do the heavy lifting: “Where there is no agitated attempt at thinking, I do not provide a clue; where there is no stammered attempt at expression, I do not provide a prompt. If I raise one corner and do not receive the other three in response, I teach no further” (7.8). Self-cultivation education was in this way learner-centered – the learners cultivated themselves – within a group of peers bound by filial bonds of mutual regard and support.

Classical study was also aimed at inculcating a deep love of learning – the development of lifelong study and practice as a source of edification and joy (le, 乐): Confucius says of textual learning, “Knowing it is not so good as loving it; loving it is not so good as taking joy in it.” (6.20). The opening statement in the Analects sounds this keynote: “to study and at appropriate times, to practice what one has studied, is this not a pleasure?” (1.1). (For more on the role of joy in Confucian self-cultivation, see Shun, 2017).

**Ritual Practice.** Classical study was united with ritual practice in self-cultivation education. Confucian rituals represented normative human relations – between ruler and ruled, father and son, elder brother to younger brothers, husband to wife, teacher to student and friend to friend – in symbolic form. In
the hierarchical relations subordinates showed obedience to their superiors, who in turn showed benevolent regard for their subordinates; thus everyone had respected and satisfying roles, symbolizing a harmonious society. These rituals were supplemented with music and dance – augmenting the beauty and joy to be found in ritual performances (Ji, 2008; Liu, 2014; Yi, 2017).

Some Confucian rituals had profound educational significance. One example will suffice. In the crown prince’s school entrance ceremony – consisting of a ‘request for lessons’ and ‘offering simple presents’ and ‘bowing to teachers’. in Tang dynasty China, the crown prince bows twice to the teacher, who bows once to the crown prince. The crown prince represents all children, and the ritual symbolizes respect for teachers (Park, 2019). Even today, school children in China bow at the beginning of each class and say “good morning (afternoon), teacher,” and bow at the end of class and say “thank you, teacher.”

4 Dewey and Democratic Education

4.1 Background
Dewey first took up democratic education in the American socially stratified multi-ethnic industrial cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As he states in *The School and Society* (MW 1: 1–92), many peoples had been drawn from all corners of the earth to work as laborers in huge capitalist enterprises in the industrial cities, transforming the United States from a frontier society of roughly-equal, enterprising individuals (plus former slaves and other excluded minorities) to a vastly unequal society of elites and ethnically and socially distinct workers struggling for basic democratic rights. This was also a time of great turbulence and disorder. Dewey’s concerns – poverty, class warfare, racial discrimination, child welfare, women’s rights, free speech and press, and world peace – were shared by other intellectuals and activists of the American Progressive Era (1890–1920) such as Upton Sinclair, Jane Addams, Lester Ward, Florence Kelley, Grace Abbott and Richard T. Ely. Dewey was active in the fight for equal justice in all of these interconnected areas, for example, as a founding trustee in 1899 of Jane Addams’ Hull House (a social settlement house for

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2 All citations to the works of Dewey in the text and bibliography are from *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, 1882–1953, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–1991), published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW) and *The Later Works* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. In the bibliography I also include the original year of publication.
immigrants), a founding member in 1909 of the National Association for Colored People (NAACP), a prominent early member of the American Civil Liberties Union (founded in 1920), and a member in other movements for peace and social harmony for all.

4.2 Dewey's Ideal Democracy and Democratic Personality

Dewey conceived democracy ideally as a “form of associated living” with shared interests within and rich communication between social groups and classes (MW9: 94f). In such a society, while conflicts were inevitable, they could be resolved peacefully, through discussion and negotiation, rather than violence. Dewey’s most detailed discussion of democracy as a form of associated living is found in Chapter 7 of Democracy and Education (MW9: 88f). In this chapter, he both analyses the concept of democracy and explains the moral value of the democratic way of life.

Dewey begins by explaining that any modern society, democratic or otherwise, is in concrete reality a collection of many interrelated groups, and thus a society is a kind of complex super group, with individuals belonging to various overlapping sub-groups – economic, political, religious, and cultural. He asks what the standard of value for any group is, and answers that in any group we will find some common interests – for otherwise what would hold the group together – and interactions with other groups (MW 9: 88–89). We then can thus evaluate any group along two dimensions: how numerous and varied are the interests shared by members; and how full and free are the interactions of the group with other groups.

He then provides two examples, and evaluates them to demonstrate his point. In a criminal band, the members share only a single interest – in plunder. This narrow interest in turn limits its free exchange with other groups – they cannot let their potential victims know about the one thing that holds them together. The criminal band is thus an impoverished form of group life. A healthy family, on the other hand, shares many mutual interests – in health, economic and cultural development and more. And the progress of any member in advancing these interests is felt as valuable by all of the others. Their lives bring them into contact with many other groups and organizations – economic, cultural, educational, and political; they actively support these groups which, in turn, support them in achieving their shared aims.

Dewey then moves from these examples of well-contained groups to modern societies. In a non-democratic society some groups have inordinate power and use it to dominate other groups for their own narrow aims. The ruling class sends directives to those in subordinate groups but has no interest in taking their thoughts and feelings into account, so there is no communication.
The lack of equitable intercourse limits the growth of both classes, because diversity of stimulation creates novelty and provokes thinking. Both groups remain stagnant, ignorant, fearful, and antagonistic.

What, then, is a democratic society. Dewey says that the two criteria of social value, taken together, “point to democracy.” They do not, however, sufficiently define it, a fact which has sometimes been neglected. I will shortly turn to the significance of this neglect.

Democratic society is precisely characterized by two features: First, in a democratic society, not only are there numerous and varied shared interests, but also greater reliance on the recognition of these shared interests as a factor in social control. That is, the shared experiences of mutual interest and cooperative activity by themselves are not sufficient; members also have consciously to recognise mutuality as a factor in sustaining and enhancing group life; they must consciously engage in both self-direction and social influence by explicit reference to the ends of others beyond their immediate circle of family and friends, and must have self-consciousness of doing so.

Second, not only do groups interact freely and fully, but there must also be a consequent change in social habit – the continuous readjustment of both individuals and groups as they meet new situations produced by their ever-increasing variety of social contacts. This requires a self-conscious, even loving, embrace of new challenges and the behavioral changes required to meet them (LW11, 549–561).

Democracy thus understood requires specific educational arrangements. The interests of members are mutually interpenetrating, and all share an interest in continual re-adjustment under changing conditions. As they seek to be self-governing, and reject external authority, they must find a substitute in voluntary disposition – self-government through communication and mutual concern. These dispositions are not “natural” even though they have roots in deep human instincts. They need to be developed through an education of a specific sort – one based on shared activities requiring communication and cooperative action. Even more important, as in a modern society citizens have to communicate over large distances and across many differences to refer their own actions to those of others, they must actively cooperate in breaking down all barriers and obstacles of race, class, ethnicity and gender that keep individuals or groups from perceiving the full impact of the aims and actions of others.

The goal of democratic education at the individual level is to foster the democratic personality (Dewey’s junzi) – marked by such virtues as intelligent sympathy for those from all social groups and active concern to break down social barriers (MW9: 128); flexibility of re-adjustment to new situations (LW11: 550);
and “attitudes of open-mindedness, intellectual integrity, observation and interest in testing opinions and beliefs that are characteristic of the scientific attitude” (LW9:100).

5 Dewey’s Curriculum

For Dewey, every course in every subject should have as its chief end the cultivation of democratic personality (LW9: 100). Knowledge in all fields – from history, literature, and science to mathematics – originated in human efforts to solve problems and enhance life. Each field makes a unique contribution to moral development (MW 4: 206–214). The arts, for example, provide vivid, intense models of consummatory value. History and geography provide records of human attempts to meet ends in concrete natural and social circumstances and hence are rich with lessons for effective action.

All intellectual learning, at all levels, should thus begin in cooperative endeavors with shared ends that call out for knowledge inputs. As Dewey puts this in his most concentrated summary:

(a) “Every educative process should begin with doing something... something inherently significant, and of such a nature that the pupil appreciates for himself its importance enough to take a vital interest in it” (MW 4: 186). In a surprisingly dogmatic tone, he adds that “All intellectual instruction would grow – all of it – out of the needs and opportunities of activities engaged in by the students themselves. This principle would be universal” (MW 4: 188, my emphasis).

(b) These activities in turn inevitably call out for communicated knowledge inputs, which must:

cluster about the development of activities. Some information is immediately required in order to do anything successfully; a child cannot garden intelligently without learning about soils, seeds, measures, plants and their growth, the facts of rain, sunshine, etc. Interest in the continuous carrying on of such an activity would, however, generate curiosity and openness of mind about many things not directly related to the immediate needs (MW 4:189).

When teachers share information or direct students to written materials, it is only educative to the extent that it grows naturally out of questions the students are raising, and fits into their own frames of experience to increase
their practical efficacy in, and deepen their grasp of, practical situations out of which it grows (MW 9: 195).

(c) The communicative exchanges should culminate in presentation of organized, systematic knowledge, of the sort drawn upon by adult professionals in their occupations. This knowledge should be scientific – that is, grounded in experience and held as tentative and subject to further test and modification. Because it has a firm rational basis grounded in prior experience, it can be used to enrich subsequent cooperative activities. It is taken on board for use. “What is known, in a given case, is what is sure, certain, settled, disposed of; that which we think with rather than that which we think about” (MW 9: 197). This organized subject matter knowledge then serves as the intellectual ground in further practical activities. It is settled, but not certain – it is thus always, at least indirectly, subject to test in subsequent experience.

For Dewey, subject matters should never be isolated in separate disciplines (science, mathematics, literature) but always coordinated around human problems and their cooperative resolution (MW 7: 114–128; MW 9: 259)). This is especially true for literary study, which marks Dewey’s approach in stark contrast with Confucian self-cultivation education. Indeed, a central plank of Dewey’s “Pedagogic Creed” is that literary study must follow upon, not precede, human problems in curricular learning (EW 5: 90). This reverses the order in the Confucian curriculum.3

A striking example is Dewey’s discussion of the uses of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe in primary education. Because, he says, American colonial history and Defoe’s novel address the same problem – the man who, having first “achieved civilization” is “suddenly thrown back upon his own resources” – the work should not be studied in isolation as literature, but used “as an imaginative idealization” of a type of problem (MW 1: 107) in coordination with other subject matters. Works of imaginative literature should not be studied as such,

3 An exception is found in the educational theory of Wang Yangming (1472–1529). Wang, the leading Ming dynasty philosopher and leader of the ‘school of heart’ (also called the ‘school of mind’) opposed the view of both Confucius and the Song dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), founder of the ‘school of principle, or ‘rationalist school.’ For Zhu Xi, as for Confucius, investigating the classic works was the preliminary stepping stone to action as a wise person. Wang, like Dewey, conceived on the contrary that thought and knowledge grew directly out of action situations, and that thought and action were always discrete facets of one complex action-thought-action complex. As Wang put this, “If you want to know bitterness, you have to eat a bitter melon yourself” (Kim, Y. ND).
and in isolation, but should always be brought into the curriculum alongside of, and in interaction with, the literatures of other scientific, artistic, commercial and industrial fields bearing upon human problems (MW 9: 259).

5.1 Democratic Self-Cultivation

At first glance, Deweyan democratic education excludes both special study of literary classics and repetitive rituals. Self-cultivation through classical study, for Dewey, has “usually been futile, with something rotten about it” (MW 9: 130), producing “only a feebly pretentious snobbishness of culture” (MW 10: 182). Customary rituals, by the same token, he says, are akin to irrational magic spells and charms. Rather than breathing meaning into natural human relations, such rituals obscure the values inherent in human relations and block inquiries to enhance these values (LW 9: 48–9).

Dewey would further reject Confucian rituals as anti-democratic, not only because they assign unequal roles to those in subordinate positions, but because these roles – which symbolize the roles obtaining in actual social life – are not self-chosen and self-shaped through personal initiative and effort of their occupants, but imposed upon them (EW 1: 244).

Nonetheless, as I will now argue, both reverential study of classics and repetitive rituals – akin to those in Confucian self-cultivation – can enhance the Deweyan democratic education project.

5.2 Study of Democratic Classics

The present crisis of democracy in the West demonstrates that our established educational practices have failed broadly to inculcate democratic values. Today we see citizens in the liberal democracies of the West fall prey to populist demagogues preaching division. Leaders attack the free press that exposes their corruption and anti-democratic conduct as “fake news,” and their devotees enthusiastically embrace propaganda. Writing in Freedom and Culture (1939) during the rise of fascism in the West, Dewey warned that we see “supposedly free institutions in many countries not so much overthrown as abandoned willingly, apparently with enthusiasm” (LW 7:67). He forewarned that the conventional schooling practices in modern democracies could not protect us, because while political and educational leaders preach rational discussion and scientific method, they in fact rely upon arbitrary dictate:

In homes and in schools, the places where the essentials of character are supposed to be formed, the usual l procedure is settlement of issues, intellectual and moral, by appeal to the “authority” of parent, teacher, or textbook. Dispositions formed under such conditions are so inconsistent
with the democratic method that in a crisis they may be aroused to act in positively anti-democratic ways for anti-democratic ends. (LW 13: 155)

Dewey’s democratic alternative – starting with habitual participation in cooperative activities at school – might be expected to engender a larger range of mutual interests, greater exchange among groups. In his approach, democratic values would develop gradually, incidental to experiences of shared interests and inter-group cooperation in activities increasingly enriched by discipline-based knowledge.

All of this is fine as far as it goes. But what about the conscious recognition of mutuality as a factor in social control? What about the conscious recognition of continual readjustment in the face of changing circumstances, and the conscious adoption of scientific reason to generate and test the value of proposed changes? These are necessary conditions for democratic living. Democratic values are paramount for Dewey. We must, he says, “use education to promote our national idea – which is the idea of democracy,” (MW 10: 210–11); “The necessity for a frame of reference (for education) must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy.” (LW11: 416). Or as he states “Upon one thing we take our stand. We frankly accept the democratic tradition in its moral and human import. That is our premise...” (LW8: 77).

Dewey, nonetheless, does not make specific space in his normative curriculum sequence (see, for example, MW 4: 179–192; MW9: 189–202) for conscious reflection on the democratic tradition and democratic values, grounded in the canonical democratic texts. When the knowledge inputs called forth in practical activities are eventually presented in organized scientific form, it is the science content, not knowledge of democratic classics, that is organized for further use. For example, after a cooperative garden project, soil chemistry – not cooperation – is studied systematically.

So the question remains: why not illuminate the democratic frame of reference itself? Why not give democratic values pride of place in the curriculum? A special site for reading and reflection on democratic classics with peers – adjusted for different nations and regions – can bring democratic values to the fore and thus deepen democratic learning. Like Confucian self-cultivation, democratic self-cultivation can thus be a school of experience; it can establish continuity between the leaders who forged these values, in the crucible of democratic struggle, and today’s youth. It can provide a larger view and promote greater flexibility and responsiveness in behavior – hallmarks of democratic personality. Even if we wished, we could never achieve such results through indoctrination. In democratic self-cultivation, as in Confucian self-cultivation, the students will have to do the heavy lifting, taking the lessons on board and making them their own. That is what makes it “self-cultivation.” Democratic
self-cultivation is simply, in Dewey’s words, the opportunity for “deeper loyalty to intelligence, pure and undefiled, and to the intrinsic connection between it and free communication: the method of conference, consultation, discussion” pooling the net results of experience (LW14: 277).

In the United States, such classics might include – George Washington’s farewell address, Madison’s Federalist #10, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Seneca Falls Declaration, Frederick Douglass’ “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”, selections from Whitman’s poetry and Democratic Vistas, Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus,” Dewey’s “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us,” Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” – all selected and edited for students at different levels.

In this light, we should note that Dewey himself urged, in his essay “Presenting Thomas Jefferson” (LW 14: 202–224) that we should be “amazed, as well as grateful, at the spectacle of the intellectual and moral calibre of the men who took a hand in shaping the American political tradition” (LW 14: 204). He calls out Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Franklin, John Adams and Monroe as “giants.” Nothing, he says, should “create indifference to what they contributed to American institutions and to what we still may learn from them” (LW 14: 204). And given his other portraits, we know he would add Emerson, Horace Mann, Whitman, Jane Addams, and others to this list of giants.

This leaves open the question of just how school students should be introduced to them. Here it is necessary to recall and reconsider Dewey’s concerns about studying literary documents in isolation from concrete human problems. He insists that communicated subject matters must be “organized into the existing experiences of the learners” (MW9: 196–7). Fair enough. But in considering the core democratic canonical texts I would argue that we have no need to combine the texts with new activities. School students are surrounded daily by experiences which resonate with such texts: Are students from early ages not familiar with factions (Federalist 10)? Or Immigrant experiences (Lazarus)? Or unequal treatment of minorities or females (Douglas, Seneca Falls)? Even from the earliest grade levels, students – especially those in multi-class, multi-ethnic schools – encounter barriers to the formation of shared interests and inter-group communication and cooperation. It is an important plank in the democratic education tradition that such experiences be taken up as school subject matters and augmented with further reading and reflection, and a well-selected democratic canon provides the key reference points.

Despite Dewey’s frequent insistence that intellectual learning should always begin with cooperative activities, in a noteworthy passage in “The Way out of Educational Confusion” (LW 6: 76–90) he offers (somewhat begrudgingly) an alternative approach in line with the program of Democratic self-cultivation.
Dewey begins the passage with a sharp defense of project-based and problem-based learning and the activity curriculum, making it clear that the educational values of cooperative problem-solving activities are found not only in primary education, but also in the high school and college (LW 6: 86–89).

But then, contradicting his earlier statement that all intellectual learning must always begin with cooperative activity (MW 4:188f), he says that he “does not urge” the project based on problem-based activity “as the sole way out of educational confusion, not even in the elementary school.” Rather, he says, it is possible (if second best) to include great works in a multi-disciplinary curriculum which merely “takes account of interdependencies of knowledge and connection of knowledge with use and application.” Using as an example the works of H.G. Wells on the sciences of life, he says that these great works “cut across all conventional divisions in the field: yet not at the expense of scientific accuracy but in a way which increases both intellectual curiosity and understanding, while disclosing the world about us as a perennial source of esthetic delight” (LW 6: 88–89).

To be clear, it is the works themselves that increase understanding, intellectual curiosity and delight. Cooperative problem and project-based activities, while for Dewey arguably the best pathways into subject matter knowledge, are, by 1931, no longer necessary even for Dewey himself.

5.3 Democratic Rituals

Schooling is filled with customary rituals. Lining up outside the building, filing in under tight control and taking an assigned seat – what is this but a ritual that establishes a specific place in a social order? Or consider school football, where alpha-males struggle for the glory of the school while females – selected for beauty and sexual allure – cheer them on, broadcasting toxic messages about gender roles and ideals (Jane, 2017; Macur, 2018; Fortin, 2019).

Not all rituals, however, are customary; new rituals can be invented. While customary rituals like football cheerleading look backward to values we now on reflection might reject, new rituals can look forward to a world of democratic social relationships we hope to build. Originating in the Ivy League around 1880, football cheerleading was an exclusively male activity until 1920, with female squads dominating only after 1950. The cheerleading ritual can be modified in a democratic direction – e.g., with male cheerleaders for female teams – or replaced by new rituals better symbolizing democratic values. Or consider the ritual established by fifth grade teacher Barry White Jr. of Ashley Park Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina; rather than lining his students up outside the building, he greets all students by name with a convivial handshake every day as they enter class while they
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are cheered on by all the students already present (Good Morning America, 2017).

Dewey was an unapologetic critic of customary rituals. Nonetheless, he strongly endorsed the establishment of religious and quasi-religious rituals representing and reinforcing the values actually to be found in natural human relations through social inquiry (LW9: 55). And his followers should welcome them in schools. This point is argued in detail by Nikkanen & Westerlund (2017). Drawing on the work of Christoph Wulf et al. (2010), they argue that “it is through rituals that a school reveals its core values... (including) how the school sees the student.” Ultimately:

school rituals are expressions of emotions and relationships that tend to create a community by using playful elements ... through rituals children and young adults learn which values and modes of behavior are important for both the school and society (p. 117).

The authors consider a Finland middle school that changed the selection process for roles in the annual Christmas play. Instead of selecting on the basis of physical appearance and talent, they adopted ritual inclusion of all students, including those with disabilities, in valued roles (here, remember the cheerleading example above).

Acknowledging that such individual ritual performances can at first glance be downplayed as insignificant, the authors argue that, on the contrary, they require careful planning and practice over time, and thus can impact the entire structure and content of the music and arts curriculum. Thus targeted rituals can eventuate in intentional change in the values consciously and demonstratively embraced by the school (Nikkanen & Westerlund, 2017, 122).

Educators working in the spirit of Dewey should be following such examples and devising new democratic rituals exemplifying respected, satisfying, equal and self-determined roles for all students. Combined with music, dance, drama, and other creative and performing arts, these ritual performances can be joyful occasions fostering democratic values.

6   Concluding Comment

This paper challenges the supposition that democratic education along Deweyan lines leaves no place for either reverential study of literary classics or ritual performance. It also proposes two further projects for democratic education: (i) the preparation of Classics of Democracy in forms suitable for school learners at various grade levels, and (ii) the investigation, modification, or
replacement of anti-democratic school rituals and the invention of new, consciously conceived democratic school rituals that can be tested and modified through inquiry and carried on with great joy by students.

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