

## Forty-Three

# Collecting and Preserving the Educational Present

Craig Kridel

*The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying, and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.*

—A Common Faith, LW 9: 58

I am touched by Dewey's selflessness and his reminder that we are indeed an important part of a larger entity—namely, the continuous human community. We often forget this exalted role as we cope with the constant and endless procession of students who pass through our classrooms. Yet, as Dewey reminded us in his characteristically gentle way, we must not overlook our responsibility to those who come after us.

That ours is to conserve and transmit the heritage of values has become a moral call to me. As a curator of a museum of education, my life is committed to conserving and transmitting the heritage of values that represents our educational system. I maintain that, in what certainly may be construed as an idiosyncratic interpretation of this passage, this same moral call goes out to all educators who live fruitful lives in schools today and who wish to pass on this rich heritage to future generations of teachers and students.

## Material Culture and Life in Schools

Why do I raise this topic? Because while much is being written about education—newspaper editorials, professional journal articles, No Child Left Behind critiques, and charter school reports and descriptions—not enough of the material culture of schools is being preserved. *Material culture*, a term commonly used in the fields of archives and museums, refers to those artifacts, documents, and objects modified by humans, consciously or unconsciously, that define and reflect the beliefs and values of the larger society of which they are a part. Can we identify material culture that represents the beliefs and principles that we as educators hold dear for the schools? And, of this material, what is being conserved?

Perhaps various newspaper accounts and journal articles represent your values. Those documents are being saved in our libraries. Further, we can rest assured that federal records also are being kept. The federal government currently generates in a four-month period records equal in volume to those of the first 124 years of our government—from the Washington to Wilson presidencies—all cataloged and

archived. Yet, do these federal reports and academic writings truly characterize the heritage of values for which we wish to be remembered?

While this abundant amount of material will survive, does it reflect our lives in schools? Does it embody the markings on a lesson plan (marginalia) for that day when a class finally “gets it”? Does it represent the newsletter clippings with accompanying notes posted by the proud teacher, or the troubled student’s corrected worksheet saved by a concerned teacher aide? These are the items, the material culture, that reflect our values and serve to remind future educators that their struggles and their joys of teaching, different yet similar through the years, have been shared by others. The human community of educators is indeed continuous, and it is our responsibility to contemporary times to ensure that our lives in schools are fully documented, solid, secure, and accessible. To this end, I ask educators to accept a role of collecting school culture.

## Collecting School Culture

Please do not groan at the thought of yet another educational duty. This role does not require committee meetings, agreed-upon goals and objectives, or even the knowledge of others. The profound gesture of collecting may be an active or sedentary activity with or without a public profile. Further, educators already collect school documents! Today’s educational research is filled with the outgrowths of accumulating material culture: teacher portfolio (Bullough and Baughman 1997; Bullough 1989), teacher narrative and autobiography (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Connelly and Clandinin 1999), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 2002), local history (Butchart 1986), and biographical research (Kridel 1998). Teachers compose portfolios for National Board Certification, and students are asked regularly to compile exhibition portfolios of their work. Teacher memoir, narrative, and portraiture have improved staff development and teacher education and, when saved with accompanying artifacts, could transform the presentation and understanding of educational values for future generations.

Could not such school portfolios be prepared for future generations? A scrapbook here and there, a carton of clippings, or one mere filing cabinet drawer in a teacher’s room filled with an array of documents and artifacts could more than portray school life for a 10- to 20-year period. The intent is not comprehensiveness; one need not rent storage space at the nearby mini-warehouse. With periodic donations to one’s local historical society, a collage of material culture would be preserved. Certainly some teachers would leave such archival treasures, selected with care, as mementos of a rewarding life of teaching.

## Preserving the Present

One still may ask whether this preservation is truly necessary. While educational historians talk about the importance of preserving the past, I question whether we are conserving the present. I have spent years assisting researchers who were able to obtain more information about certain classrooms in the 1890s

than about educational practices from the 1970s. As I work on a progressive education school study from the 1930s, I find many period documents of students' work and teachers' thoughts and reflections of school life. For some of these same schools, similar materials cannot be located from the early 1980s. Other than a few brochures or yearbooks, little exists. Certain institutions have preserved a distinguished and distinctive past—yet the recent is lost.

Further, the present is being lost during this time that we assume to be an abundant information age. Actually, documents are becoming victims of the false sense of assurance that is suggested with each technological advancement. While paper lasts for decades and vertical files may be accessed by anyone, today's technological storing, arranging, and retrieving of information creates new complications. CD-ROM storage has a life of just 20 years. Audiotapes and videotapes are most likely nonfunctional after as few as 10 years. As computer technology advances, the danger of storing data in irretrievable, antiquated forms increases. I regularly receive e-mail from well-meaning archivists who have found buried material, such as Kaypro files, with no ability to retrieve the records.

Transferring electronic information from one medium to another has been termed *technology refreshing*. I find myself in too many conversations where administrators, far removed from the intricacies of archival retrieval, state how easily the information can be refreshed. However, I rarely hear that funds actually are set aside for such activities. Irreplaceable audiotape cassettes may be digitized and then further refreshed once the DAT (Digital Audio Tape) medium is replaced. But for now, the cassettes wait, playable only until a rewinding snaps and destroys the tape. Many of the Museum of Education's irreplaceable three-quarter-inch Betamax videotape interviews from the mid-1970s remain safe, solid, and secure, yet inaccessible. Perhaps I should be pleased that we were unable to transfer the content to a one-half inch VHS format because we now would be searching for funds to refresh to DVD. Regardless, the irreplaceable content is, in fact, irretrievable.

Even with technology refreshing, many samples of material culture, representing dimensions of school life and the individual lives of teachers, are not conserved. Too often, old technology leads not to refreshing but to dispensing. Many filmstrips and reel-to-reel tapes from the early 1970s are thrown away—not due to bureaucratic inefficiency or to administrative ineptness, but instead to the pretentiousness of living in a technological age where we assume copies abound and always will be preserved—by others.

## Preserving with Foresight

Dewey's call, however, should not give carte blanche privileges to anyone to go out and start gathering artifacts. Contemporary materials must be preserved with some foresight. To restate the primordial caveat of archivists: "There is little virtue in mere acquisition if it is divorced from intelligent purpose." I have suffered through too many occasions where a donor has displayed a "willing suspension

of significance” and has thrust upon my archives a batch of materials representing little purpose and importance. Material culture consists not of those piles of texts and unused workbooks.

Instead, teacher and student artifacts—corrected worksheets of a child’s repeated attempt to complete an assignment, an exhibition poster representing students’ work, teacher notes for next week’s lessons, meeting agendas with the doodling of a bored staff member, a school newsletter with witticisms (and complaints) jotted in the margins about school policy—these are the items that display the richness of school life. Such perspectives manifest themselves in autobiographies and diaries; in personal narratives and class ethnographies from students’ writings and projects; in school and institutional documents, newsletters, annuals, yearbooks, and audio and video documentaries; and in the professional portfolios of education that emerge from our offices as a result of neglecting to prune our filing cabinets. These are the materials, selected from vast unbridled accumulations with the care of a reflective teacher’s eye, which must be preserved.

I will be the first to admit that I have interpreted Dewey’s statement from *A Common Faith* in a rather peculiar and atypical manner. Yet, his plea to conserve finds its resonance for me in the quest to preserve the educational present and to transmit our educational heritage for those future members of our profession. By accepting an active role in the collection and preservation of educational material culture—*archival agency*, so to speak—today’s educators rectify the limiting aspects of lost materials and technological refreshing and fulfill Dewey’s plea to expand the heritage of values so that those teachers and students who come after us “may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared.”

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