

# Discontinuity in Learning

Dewey, Herbart, and  
Education as Transformation

Andrea R. English

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## **Discontinuity in Learning**

In this groundbreaking book, Andrea R. English challenges common assumptions by arguing that discontinuous experiences, such as uncertainty and struggle, are essential to the learning process. To make this argument, Dr. English draws from the works of two seminal thinkers in philosophy of education – nineteenth-century German philosopher J.F. Herbart and American pragmatist John Dewey. Dr. English's analysis considers Herbart's influence on Dewey, inverting the accepted interpretation of Dewey's thought as a dramatic break from modern European understandings of education. Three key concepts – transformational learning, tact in teaching, and perfectibility – emerge from this analysis to revitalize our understanding of education as a transformational process. Dr. English's comparative approach interweaves European and Anglo-American traditions of educational thought with a contemporary scholarly perspective, contributing to a work that is both intellectually rewarding and applicable to a classroom setting. The result is a book that is essential reading for philosophers and scholars of education, as well as for educators.

**Andrea R. English** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada. Dr. English, an American scholar, previously taught at Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, from which she received her doctorate in 2005. Her work on theories of teaching and learning has appeared internationally in scholarly journals and essay collections.



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*Dewey, Herbart, and Education  
as Transformation*

**ANDREA R. ENGLISH**

*Mount Saint Vincent University*



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*to my Dad*





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## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Note on the Translation</i>	xv
<i>Note on Usage</i>	xvii
<i>Prologue: Why Herbart and Dewey?</i>	xix

### PART ONE: EDUCATION, DISCONTINUITY, AND TRANSFORMATION

1. The Moral Dimension of Education – Herbart (I)	3
1 The Moral Individual and the Educational Paradox	6
2 The Learning Being: Perfectibility without Perfection ( <i>Bildsamkeit</i> )	11
2. The Problem of Continuity, the Need for Struggle, the Role of Tact – Herbart (II)	16
1 Learning to See Difference without Disruption	18
2 The Struggle of Learning, Teacher as Moral Guide	30
3 Pedagogical Tact: Teaching as a Theory-Guided Practice	48
4 Conclusion: A Look Back and a Look Ahead	53
3. Discontinuity and Educational Openings in Learning – Dewey (I)	55
1 Pragmatism, Discontinuity, and Learning	55
2 Notions of Discontinuity in Peirce, James, and Mead	56
3 Learning “In-Between”	65

4.	Teaching in the Openings of Learning – Dewey (II)	79
1	Reflective Practice as Teaching In-Between	80
2	The Classroom: A Space for Interrupting Experience	87
3	Teaching as a Moral Task	96
4	Democracy and the End of Education	100
5.	Conclusion: Morality, Democracy, and Pluralist Society	103
1	Dewey: A Break in the History of Educational Philosophy?	103
2	Reading Herbart with Dewey – Reading Dewey with Herbart	105
PART TWO: TEACHING AND LEARNING FORGOTTEN?		
6.	Revisiting Learning In-Between and <i>Umlernen</i>	113
1	Forgotten Learning, or Remembering Plato’s Cave	113
2	Remembering Learning as a Transformational Process: On <i>Umlernen</i>	116
3	The Inward and Outward Turn of Learning	121
7.	Pedagogical Tact: Learning to Teach “In-Between”	126
1	Improvisation and Risk	129
2	Listening and the Voice of the Learner	133
3	Reflective Teacher-Learner Engagement	142
8.	Perfectibility and Recognition of the Other	147
1	Learning as Human – Human as Learner	147
2	Teaching as Recognition of the Other	149
3	Conclusion: Preserving the In-Between of Experience for Education	152
<i>Epilogue: Should Teachers Think? – Re(dis)covering the Meaning of Philosophy for the Education of Teachers</i>		155
<i>Bibliography</i>		161
<i>Index</i>		173

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Sections of [Chapters 1 and 2](#): “Critical Listening and the Dialogic Aspect of Moral Education: J. F. Herbart's Concept of the Teacher as Moral

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- Sections of [Chapters 1](#) and [6](#): “Transformation and Education: The Voice of the Learner in Peters’ Concept of Teaching.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43, Issue Supplement s1 (Special Issue “Reading R. S. Peters Today: Analysis, Ethics and the Aims of Education, edited by Stefaan Cuypers and Christopher Martin), 2009a: 75–95.
- Sections of [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#): “Wo *doing* aufhört und *learning* anfängt: John Dewey über Lernen und die Negativität in Erfahrung und Denken.” In *Dem Lernen auf der Spur*, edited by Konstantin Mitgutsch, Elizabeth Sattler, Kristin Westphal, and Ines M. Breinbauer, 145–58. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008.
- Sections of [Chapters 2](#), [3](#), and [4](#): “Die Experimentelle Struktur menschliches Lehrens und Lernens: Versuche über die Rolle negativer Erfahrung in den Lehr-Lerntheorien von Herbart und Dewey.” In *Johann Friedrich Herbart: 200 Jahre Allgemeine Pädagogik. Wirkungsgeschichtliche Impulse*, edited by Rainer Bolle and Gabriele Weigand, 97–112. Berlin: Waxmann, 2007a.
- Sections of [Chapter 4](#): “Nietzsche, Deception and Education: A Response to Katz’s Nietzschean Puzzle.” In *Philosophy of Education 2006*, edited by Daniel Vokey, 401–03. Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007b.
- Sections of [Chapter 4](#): “Interrupted Experiences: Reflection, Listening and Negativity in the Practice of Teaching.” *Learning Inquiry*, 1 (Special Issue “Listening and Reflecting,” edited by Leonard J. Waks), no. 2, 2007c: 133–42.
- Sections of [Part One](#) and [Chapter 8](#): *Bildung – Negativität – Moralität: Systematisch-vergleichende Analysen zu Herbarts und Deweys Konzepten der Erziehung*. Dissertation, Berlin: Humboldt University Berlin Library Archives, 2005c.

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Sections of [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#): “Negativity and the New in John Dewey’s Theory of Learning and Democracy: Toward a Renewed Look at Learning Cultures.” *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 8, no. 1, 2005a: 28–37.

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## Abbreviations

### THE WORKS OF HERBART

|            |                                              |
|------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <i>AP</i>  | <i>Allgemeine Pädagogik</i>                  |
| <i>APP</i> | <i>Allgemeine Praktische Philosophie</i>     |
| <i>ARW</i> | <i>The Aesthetic Revelation of the World</i> |
| <i>SE</i>  | <i>The Science of Education</i>              |

### THE WORKS OF DEWEY

|            |                                     |
|------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>AE</i>  | <i>Art as Experience</i>            |
| <i>DE</i>  | <i>Democracy and Education</i>      |
| <i>HWT</i> | <i>How We Think</i>                 |
| <i>LTI</i> | <i>Logic: The Theory of Inquiry</i> |





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## Note on the Translation

I have modified the standard translation of Herbart's texts in various ways. It is important to note that I am making a significant change to the standard translation of Herbart's term *Zucht*, which in the standard translation is translated as "discipline," but which I translate as "moral guidance." Also, Herbart's term *Vielseitigkeit*, which relates to his theory of instruction, is translated in the standard translation as "mansidedness"; however, I have determined that a better-suited translation is "multifacetedness." In cases where I have modified the standard translation of a text passage, I note this with the words "translation modified." As for all of the untranslated German texts of Herbart and other authors, I have translated these texts myself, and note this as "translation mine."



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## **Note on Usage**

Throughout this book, with reference to the use of generic singular nouns and pronouns, my usage should be understood as inclusive of all human beings. When it does not hinder reading, I use “or” (e.g., “he or she”). In all other cases (e.g., when referring in the singular to teachers, learners, individuals, etc.), I vary between using generic male and female nouns and pronouns.



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## Prologue: Why *Herbart* and Dewey?

Questions concerning the structure of learning date back at least as far as Western Antiquity. From Plato through to the modern era, philosophers have recognized and investigated the aporetic and paradoxical aspects of human experience and learning. Certain authors in this tradition have highlighted the fact that learning necessarily involves discontinuous moments. This runs contrary to the more common understanding of learning as a smooth, continuous transition from ignorance to knowledge. Discontinuous moments in learning can be described as points at which the learner is confused, perplexed, filled with doubt, or engaged in a struggle with new and unfamiliar objects or ideas.

Two modern philosophers have placed particular significance on the discontinuous moments in learning processes, namely, the well-known American pragmatist John Dewey, and one of his predecessors, the lesser-known nineteenth-century German philosopher, Johann F. Herbart.<sup>1</sup> It is generally widely recognized in Dewey scholarship that – by his own account – learning is a process that begins with the learner’s experience of

<sup>1</sup> J. F. Herbart (1776–1841) was a philosophy student of German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte at the University of Jena, and later worked as professor of philosophy at Göttingen University and the University of Königsberg, where he took the former post of Immanuel Kant. Herbart made it his central aim to investigate educational questions; he can be considered one of the foundational thinkers in modern pedagogy. Herbart’s followers created the educational movement known as Herbartianism, a movement that was influential in the United States and Europe. In the United States, the Herbartians formed the National Herbart Society around 1895, a society in which John Dewey was an active member (but he was not considered a Herbartian); see Harold B. Dunkel, *Herbart and Education* (New York: Random House, 1969). Although Dewey (1859–1952) is better known than Herbart, it is worth mentioning that he studied at Johns Hopkins University with George S. Morris and gained prominence during his time on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he initiated the Laboratory School. He later moved to the philosophy department at Columbia University, New York, where he remained until his retirement. On these and other aspects of Dewey’s biography and intellectual life, see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

“doubt,” “difficulty,” or “frustration,” and leads to reflective thinking. Far less considered is how this central tenet of Dewey’s thought connects his work to the Continental tradition of *philosophy of education* (in German, *Allgemeine Pädagogik*), in particular to the work of Herbart. For the most part, the American reception of Dewey has focused on understanding him as a dramatic break from modern European understandings of education that had taken hold in late nineteenth-century America, including, and perhaps especially, that of Herbart.<sup>2</sup> At least part of the reason for this reception may be owing to the fact that Dewey himself – although acknowledging Herbart as an influence – criticized the Herbartian movement in his 1916 canonical work *Democracy and Education*. To this day, those aspects of Deweyan philosophy that demonstrate significant continuity with the Continental tradition of education philosophy have gone almost entirely unrecognized. This marks a significant gap in the research.

*Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation* addresses this gap. In this book, I argue that both Herbart and Dewey provide answers to the question concerning the structure of learning. Their works on education demonstrate the central educational meaning of *discontinuity* in learning and, in turn, in teaching processes. Through detailed analysis of these authors’ works, this book seeks to enrich our understanding of discontinuity in education with the aim of productively reorienting how we approach education.

This book is situated in an international discourse on education currently taking place in both the English- and German-speaking worlds. In these contexts, philosophers have examined and established the importance of understanding learning as a complex process – one that entails what I have termed “discontinuous moments.” In the English-speaking world, these moments are discussed in a variety of ways, without necessarily using the concept “discontinuity.” For example, philosophers have discussed aspects of learning such as doubt, fear, discomfort, difficulty, disorientation, and

<sup>2</sup> Recently, scholars have taken an increased interest in the well-known nineteenth-century German philosopher (and contemporary of Herbart) G. W. F. Hegel’s influence on Dewey’s thought in a way that begins to contribute to understanding Dewey in the context of Continental philosophy. See, for example, James A. Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The ‘Permanent Hegelian Deposit’ in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005). For an examination of the emerging scholarship on Hegel and Dewey, see James Garrison, “The ‘Permanent Deposit’ of Hegelian Thought in Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry,” *Educational Theory*, 56, no. 1, 2006: 1–37). See also David I. Waddington, “Uncovering Hegelian Connections: A New Look at Dewey’s Early Educational Ideas,” *Education and Culture*, 26, no. 1, 2010: 67–81. Despite this important scholarship, extended study into J. F. Herbart as a foundational influence on Dewey’s educational thought remains largely unexamined.

ignorance as central aspects of educational processes.<sup>3</sup> Although each of these ideas demarcates different phenomena, they all describe aspects of learning that are conceptually connected to the idea of discontinuity, as I will demonstrate.

Within the present-day German-speaking philosophical discourse on education, the idea of discontinuity is more prevalently discussed than it is in English. German educational philosophers have drawn on the tradition of *philosophy of experience*, as developed in particular by Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty, to analyze processes of learning and teaching. Within this discourse, concepts have been developed that provide a way of talking about discontinuities in learning and teaching using the idea of the “negativity of experience” (*Negativität der Erfahrung*) and also “negative experience” (*negative Erfahrung*).<sup>4</sup> In this context, the term “negative” has a different sense from what it does in colloquial English, in that it is not meant pejoratively. The negativity of experience arises in our encounters with difference and otherness, that is, in encounters that are the basis for learning, since learning necessarily involves confronting something that is as yet unfamiliar and new.

*Why do we need the term “negativity” in English-speaking discourse?*

To use the terms “negative” and “negativity” to describe experience likely brings a bad taste to the English-speaker’s palate. In everyday language, these terms commonly describe something bad, such as an undesirable experience. Although these and related terms have to some extent been incorporated into English-language philosophical discourse, the terms were given meaning primarily with reference to the German philosophical tradition, such as Hegel’s “the negation of negation” (*Negation der Negation*) or Heidegger’s “the nothing noths” (*das Nichts nichtet*). These usages in English-language contexts have maintained a distinctly foreign quality to their tone.

Yet, the terminology of the *negative*, especially the concept of *negativity of experience*, has proven to be significant for discussions of teaching and learning. The concept of negativity provides the philosophical basis to

<sup>3</sup> Each of these concepts and the authors dealing with these phenomena will be referenced in various ways throughout the book, for example, Nicholas Burbules’s work on doubt, Gert Biesta’s work on difficulty, Deborah Kerdeman’s work on disorientation, and relevant work by others.

<sup>4</sup> This German discourse will be taken up throughout the book, referring to the works of authors such as Günther Buck, Fritz Oser, Käte Meyer-Drawe, Dietrich Benner, and others who have discussed notions of negativity of experience in relation to teaching and learning.

examine and describe phenomena at the margins of experience in ways that can get lost or be easily overlooked without this terminology. Using this terminology, we can discuss the connection between different kinds of learning experiences (such as doubt or fear) in ways that are not possible within the limits of the current English-speaking discourse in philosophy of education.

Thus, the term “negative” is used here as a way of philosophically demarcating the moment when a person experiences a limit to his or her present ability or knowledge. These are moments in experience when our ideas or ways of acting become untenable, and thus are often coupled with doubt, discomfort, or frustration. They make us aware that experience and learning are not merely positive and continuous, but also negative and discontinuous. By examining connections between negativity and learning, we can open up the possibility of grasping meaningful differences between learning as mere *correction of error* and learning as *transformation of self and world*.

The aforementioned English- and German-language discourses in educational philosophy (although operating largely without reference to one another) serve to resist the overwhelmingly common conception of learning as merely a series of positive steps toward the acquisition of knowledge. Unfortunately, current trends in educational *policy* tend to frame learning as merely the continuous step-by-step achievement of predefined outcomes. On such models, the student’s difficulties, frustrations, or doubts are considered signs of a *halt* in the learning process and are associated with the learner’s failure. Accordingly, the student’s difficulties with a particular subject matter in school are viewed by teachers and administrators as undesirable and problematic. In this way, the concept of learning has become dramatically simplified and reified.

These current trends have serious implications for teaching. Teaching is increasingly construed as transmitting predetermined outcomes to students and then using standardized testing to verify that students have achieved these outcomes. In practice, teachers are pressured to eliminate any signs of student failure from the classroom, at the risk of losing employment or resources. The result is that students’ difficulties are not perceived as meaningful for their learning processes. The danger is that teachers may entirely overlook the educative value of difficulty and doubt, that is, of forms of discontinuity and negativity in experience and learning.

On this basis, a pressing need exists for a sustained examination of the educative value of discontinuities in learning. Indeed, it is a significant point of this book to argue that experiences such as difficulty, perplexity, doubt,



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