Learning about on Global Learning

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Abstract

This response focuses on three points: pragmatic constructivism and the relationship to democracy; valuation in international society and communities of practice; pragmatism and feminism.

Introduction

Fallibilism is an important part of the Pragmatist temperament I write about in *On Global Learning.* I have also found that it has a liberating quality when one takes it to heart. It opens the mind to criticism as part of (I am bound say) a learning process. The social construction of knowledge is also something I write about and have internalized. Without the reviewer and critic – without a community of practice – we would not exist as academics and certainly lack the permission to profess. We would be like the hermit Charles Peirce (1877) wrote about in what surely was the seminal Pragmatist work, *The Fixation of Belief.* We would be a voice that lacks epistemic authority because we have not listened. I am therefore so grateful to David, Maren and Molly for taking the time to engage so carefully and thoughtfully with the arguments I offer in the book. Their generous reviews encourage my sense that Pragmatism, as a way of thinking, makes a significant contribution to the theory and practice of international relations. Their challenges and questions remind me that learning is an ongoing experimental process of listening, reflecting and acting.

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Pragmatic Constructivism and the relationship to democracy

McCourt's (2022) *New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* was published while I was writing *On Global Learning.* It is an excellent summary of how Constructivist theorizing has evolved and, as he notes in this forum, I agree with much of how he summarizes the New Constructivist contribution. The exception is his claim that Constructivism is 'politically agnostic'. This description, which is one of seven defining features of New Constructivism, is I think problematic (Ralph, 2023: 44–50). This is because it risks hiding the inescapable political implications of the other six defining features, including anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism. To make my point in the book, I put the New Constructivist in dialogue with President Reagan, who (arguably) held an essentialist view of the Soviet Union as 'evil'. I am not certain such a conversation would have lasted long because the Constructivist argument - that the Soviet national interest and identity was socially constructed by processes that included the way US Presidents interacted with it – would have been perceived to be politically inconvenient. My 'wager' in *On Global Learning* was that many Constructivists would not be happy with the way such politicians – and what Dewey referred to as the 'men of executive habits' – dismiss their theory because as good academics Constructivists like to think their knowledge is somehow relevant. In that disappointment is, I suggest, an opposition to the politics of essentialism.

I was introduced to the idea that theory is relevant, and therefore political, by Critical theorists like Robert Cox who of course insisted that theory is 'always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox, 1981: 128). We do, however, find a similar idea in the philosophical Pragmatism of John Dewey, and I have recently written more on its relationship to European Critical Theory (Ralph, 2025a). Dewey (1965 [1908]) writes on how the theories produced by a ('leisure') class of philosophers have, throughout history, needlessly dictated the lives, and limited the experiences of, a ('labouring') class of artisans; apart from those occasions when materially powerful practitioners (the men of executive habits) see through the charade and simply act to make the weak - including the politically agnostic philosopher - suffer what they must.

Dewey's (1972 [1920]) implication is that philosophy should be 'reconstructed'. Instead of adopting the stance of disinterested objectivity and trying to discover universal and timeless laws – what he called the 'quest for certainty' (Dewey, 1930) – the philosopher should (pragmatically) accept that their theories are going to have political implications. McCourt seems to accept the persuasiveness of this point (I look forward to seeing it in the second edition of *New Constructivism*), but he pushes back on the implication that Constructivist theory lends itself to a democratic ethos. I maintain that it does, but I should clarify.

Like Barkin and Sjoberg (2019: 63–77), I accept that our values and political commitments can be independent of our social theory, but only up to a point. Surely, as anti-essentialists and anti-foundationalists, Constructivists would have problems accepting (e.g.) conservative and liberal values that are based on essentialist reasoning about (e.g.) human nature, race or gender. This does not mean Constructivists agree on everything even though they (surely) unite around the 'meta-politics' (McCourt's phrase) of anti-essentialism. Conservative Constructivists might emphasize the wisdom

of the past, for instance, whereas liberal Constructivists might emphasize the wisdom of greater inclusion. But I think as anti-essentialists and anti-foundationalists these conservatives and liberal Constructivists can only advance their respective positions as *hypotheses*, and to advance an argument or a value as a hypothesis means one cannot be politically dogmatic.

Again, McCourt might accept this, because he says Constructivism can accommodate a plurality of views, but he rejects the implication that treating each view as a hypothesis leads to a pragmatic ethos because 'there is no "view from nowhere"'. It is precisely because all views are from somewhere, and cannot dogmatically claim universal applicability, that an inclusive and deliberative (i.e. democratic) process appeals as *a pragmatic means* of working out how to act in any given situation. We cannot know for certain what will better the lived experience, but we can commit to a *process* that enables us to find out. My thinking on this was very much informed by Peirce (1877). As well as condemning the epistemic claims of the hermit, Peirce condemned the authoritarian. We may be dogmatic, and we may use power to assert our values, but we can be more certain that our (value) claims are right – we can actually be *more* authoritative – if we have persuaded (rather than coerced) others to adopt them; and, of course, that process often involves reflecting and compromising on our initial position.

I think the problem is that McCourt is potentially reading my commitment to democracy as a foundationalist commitment to a particular position, rather than an anti-foundationalist commitment to a *process* that respects and mediates a plurality of positions. This process may operate at a meta level, but that makes it no less political, and no less significant, especially when we are facing political movements that question democratic procedures. I do understand McCourt's concern, however. An assertive form of 'democracy promotion' has created more problems for international relations than it has solved. But then that form of 'liberal internationalism' is often based on an unwarranted and dogmatic commitment to the supremacy of Western values, which is far removed from the pragmatist commitment to an inclusive and deliberative process that helps identify, and then works through, problems so that the lived experience is ameliorated (more on that below).

I reject then McCourt's reading that Deweyan Pragmatism leads to a support for *liberal* democracy. At best Deweyan Pragmatism supports liberalism only because it has been able to adapt to changing circumstances (Dewey, 2000 [1935]), and that is a question today's liberal internationalists must consider. I address this point in more detail in a co-authored article (Ralph and Gaskarth, 2025) that applies Dewey's idea that democracy is an *ethos* or 'way of life' (Dewey, 1998 [1939]) to foreign policy discourse. Democracy is not necessarily centred on the relationship between the individual and the state. Rather it is (simply?) a matter of including the (collective) Other in the processes that define the (collective) Self in all its forms.

Valuation in international society and communities of practice

A similar concern for the particular and its relationship to the universal concern is evident in Cochran's contribution. She asks if the Pragmatist-informed practices that, in my

argument, encourage global learning might be considered 'a civilizational gift to non-Europeans'. Behind this question is Hobson's critique of the English School's conceptualization of international society and the way that reinformed the cultural hierarchies and political exclusions of the post-1945 world. This is something I was concerned about when writing *On Global Learning.* I was drawing heavily on a white American male philosopher while nodding in agreement with those calling for greater pluralism in our discipline. I continue to use English School framings in my other work (Ralph, 2025b), and connections can be made to *On Global Learning*, but I do not see it as an English School text. I also try to address the charge of Euro- or Western-centrism in the concluding chapter of the book where I put Pragmatic Constructivism in conversation with Qin's (2018) Confucian-inspired relational theory. I found harmonies across a shared critique of (Western) rationalism and a commitment to relational approaches. It is also interesting to note how others, not least the Indian leader B.R. Ambedkar, have merged Deweyan Pragmatism with Buddhist thought to de- and re-construct repressive social hierarchies like caste (Ralph and Misra, 2025). For these reasons, I am still of the view that Pragmatic Constructivism is an ally of the 'Global IR' project. It is a useful way of thinking about how the exclusionary hierarchies of existing international institutions can be reconstructed.

To understand this further, it is worth recalling Dewey's argument that learning is a two-way process. He argued (Dewey, 2015[1938]) that traditional teaching methods were ill-equipped for a world that was (as Constructivists tell us) in a constant state of becoming. Traditional methods saw the teacher relaying the established knowledge of past thinkers to current students who were expected to internalize that knowledge through repetition. Not only did this perpetuate anachronistic practices by providing a veneer of epistemic authority, it crushed social agency because students felt they lacked the permission and/or the critical skills to peel back that veneer. Traditional teaching methods, in other words, taught the student to know their place and suffer what they must. This was clearly at odds with Dewey's wider view that knowledge should be put to work in ways that ameliorated the lived experience. To do that the epistemic hierarchy of 'the classroom' had to be democratized. In other words, the teacher had to be 'sympathetic' to the student's situation and include them in the production of knowledge. That would reduce a sense of alienation and nurture the skills that were necessary to adapt outdated (and possibly dangerous) practices.

If, as I try to do in *On Global Learning*, we scale this up to international relations then I think it guards us against Cochran's concerns. Certainly the 'teacher-student' binary conveys a hierarchy, but I think Dewey's insistence that the 'teacher' must learn what the 'student' knows and then pursue the tasks that nurture critical skills together, illustrates how in the Pragmatist view practical knowledge is co-produced. In fact, by breaking down the binary and doing away with the hierarchy of traditional thinking we might even lose the 'teacher' and 'student' labels. Learning, including global learning, is not found in the 'gift' of knowledge that is granted by those sitting in positions of epistemic or cultural hierarchy. Learning is a process whereby those in such positions become aware (either through inward reflection or external political activism) of the consequences their practices have on the lived experiences of others, and how they then deliberate together on ameliorative practices.

I tried to capture this in my first normative test of really-existing communities of practice: are they inclusive of those affected by practices in a way that encourages reflection. But I am also conscious in my second normative test – deliberative practical judgement – of the epistemic division of labour in the Pragmatist commitment to problem-solving. Where 'publics' – those affected by practice – must be included in communities of inquiry if knowledge is to be useful, deliberation about *the value* of alternative practices must take place to identify best practice. In this respect, I think a process of valuation is – or should be – occurring in communities of practice. I was very much concerned when writing the book by the move to devalue expert opinion and the rise of 'post-truth' politics, and my second criteria was informed by that aspect of Pragmatist thought that can countenance giving additional normative weight to 'expert' opinion. I accept that this latter criterion does enable the assertion of epistemic authority, but I think that can be valuable. We do not democratize the inquiry into our personal health problems, for instance. We consult a medically trained professional. But as Hofius notes with reference to my case study on the climate change governance, even when we are dealing with technical problems the criteria of inclusive reflexivity acts as a check on a 'colonial' mentality.

I think a similar division of labour informs my decision to deploy both the Constructivist 'communities of practice' concept, and Dewey's concept of 'publics'. Cochran asks why not just go with the latter? On my reading, Deweyan 'publics' are constituted by those experiencing the effects of practice but are otherwise excluded from the epistemic processes that enable those practices. That suggests that something else is needed to capture what 'publics' are excluded from, and this was loosely referred to in Dewey's (1927, 123) classic *The Public and its Problems* as those 'trained specialists who manage things'. This maps directly on to the way New Constructivism in IR has used the 'communities of practice' concept. Such communities are made up of practitioners who are distinguished from publics by the 'competence' their training grants them. As Dewey argued, if these kinds of technocratic societies were to authoritatively claim to know *best* practice (or *the* public good) then publics had to be included in decision-making. If they were not, then that gave normative weight to the politics of reform and/or resistance.

Pragmatism and feminism

The definition of 'publics' that Dewey offered in *The Public and its Problems* helps me make the link to Hofius's argument that Pragmatic Constructivism needs 'deeper engagement with feminist care ethics'. A 'public' Dewey (1927, 15–16, emphasis added) wrote:

> consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transaction to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically *cared* for. . . . Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transactions in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected.

I suspect Dewey's invocation of 'care' here is insufficient for Hofius who wishes to supplement my Dewey-inspired Pragmatic Constructivist normative commitment to

'inclusive reflexivity' and 'deliberative practical judgment' with a 'thicker account of what it means to act ethically in relationships of interdependence'. I quote this passage, however, to underline the fact that Feminist and Pragmatist thought often aligns. Indeed, Hofius is right to suggest Pragmatism has 'roots' in the early Feminist thought and activism of women like Jane Addams. I am also reminded of Charlene Haddock Seigfried's point that Dewey's emphasis on 'sympathy' as a means of nurturing 'growth' captured a 'feminine style', if not the feminist voice (Seigfried, 1996: 31–37).

The disagreement here (if that is what it is) is perhaps how one interprets 'sympathy' and 'care' and how that might – to use James's (1907 [2019]) value test – 'cash out' in practice. For Hofius, I interpret sympathy too thinly. 'Sympathy', she writes, 'can expand one's horizon' and that is captured by my 'inclusive reflexivity' test. Sympathy does not however, 'guarantee action that alleviates harm and suffering'. Here, Hofius argues, 'feminist care ethics provides a crucial extension'. It is a high standard to ask for a theory to 'guarantee action' and I am not sure such an extension would do that. But I take the point, and it allows be me to elaborate on a phrase I have used here and in the book: 'the lived experience'.

This again overlaps with a Feminist epistemology which sees valuable knowledge in the otherwise marginalized experiences of women. I think it has an additional meaning, however. I use the phrase 'lived experience' to refer to the ameliorative position that emerges from Dewey's naturalism and humanism. This is not just 'experience' as knowledge acquired through practice (to be experienced), but 'experience' as an emotion that informs valuation (to have an experience). Philosophical Pragmatists rejected the quest for certainty, but they (pragmatically) accepted human life was worth living. Dewey (1958 [1925]: 419) quotes Justice Holmes on this. We act 'because we want to live . . . because we want to realize our spontaneity and prove our powers, for the joy of it, and we may leave to the unknown the supposed final valuation of that which in any event have value to us'.

Now, the social multiplicity that constitutes the IR discipline of course begs the question, which humans? I think the answer to that is to recall the Pragmatist commitment to ongoing experimental social inquiry. It is ongoing because the world can and does change, and if the collective identities that have evolved improve the experience of some at the expense of others then that is a problem to investigated. Again, the commitment is to an open method, and to the hypothesis that we might find a better experience in practices underpinned by a post-national, and indeed post-global, identities. Pragmatism is against 'methodological nationalism' therefore. Its focus on the lived experience means it does not subscribe 'to the territorial-based assumptions of modern European political thought' (Frega, 2019: 361), especially International Relations.

I make two final points. Hofius recalls the work of care ethicist Tronto (1993) to help extend Pragmatic Constructivism in a feminist direction. Tronto identifies four interrelated values of care: attentiveness, responsibility, *competence* and responsiveness. These values, Hofius concludes, resonate with my approach but 'provide more concrete guidance for judging the adequacy of practices'. I have italicized 'competence' because as Hofius (2024) knows well, and as I have argued above (also Ralph and Gifkins, 2017), the practitioner's claim to be 'competent' is a statement of epistemic authority and that can be problematic if it goes unchecked. Anyone familiar with the allegations of abusive

practices in the UK 'care sector' knows that a pretence of competence can have perverse consequences (BBC, 2023). The point is this: publics still need to hold care givers to account. Second, if an ethic of care is to supplement Pragmatic Constructivism it is important that the care giver does not slip into a dogmatic insistence that they know the recipient's best interests in a way that disempowers and demeans. This is why the fallibilism that encourages reflexivity and learning remains so important, and it is something that Addams (1902 loc.319) was so sensitive too when she criticized those who described her work as 'charity'.

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