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Are John Dewey's Ideas Alive and Well in Undergraduate Education? New Zealand Case Studies in Inquiry-Based Learning

The isolation of thinking from confrontation with facts encourages that kind of observation which merely accumulates brute facts, which occupies itself laboriously with mere details, but never inquires into their meaning or consequences (Dewey 1920, 141).

For many undergraduates, John Dewey's description of an emphasis on "brute facts" and "mere details" instead of thinking is unfortunately accurate. The encouragement to think, inquire, and consider the "use to be made of observed facts" is often only for students who continue to graduate study. Dewey's charge to an undergraduate instructor, then, is to find an approach (in his vision, progressive or experiential) that combines thinking with facts. He characterized this challenge with a series of questions: "What is the place and meaning of subject matter and of organization within experience? How does subject matter function? Is there anything inherent in experience which tends towards progressive organization of its contents? What results follow when the materials of experience are not progressively organized?" (Dewey 1938, 20).

Inquiry-based (or inquiry-guided) learning (IBL) is an approach for undergraduate education that appears to answer these questions by Dewey through integrating students' interests and experiences with content knowledge. The IBL approach has been described as "a range of strategies used to promote learning through students' active, and increasingly independent, investigation of questions, problems and issues, often for which there is no single answer" (Lee 2004, 5). Further, characteristics of IBL as: "it is student-directed, it encourages reflection on the teaching/learning process, it develops collaborative learning skills, it promotes active and deep learning" (Plowright & Walker 2004, 187), align with most descriptions of experiential education.

In order to identify, explore, and describe an IBL approach in undergraduate education, research is underway during the first semester of 2007 at the University of Canterbury. Through a successfully funded grant from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, four case studies of classes in Communications Disorders, Engineering, Fine Arts, and Sociology are being developed.

In this hands-on session, participants will be invited to join the researcher in interacting with the data, tenets of Dewey's experiential education theory, and characteristics of IBL through experiential and metaphorical activities. In keeping with the spirit of Dewey and IBL, participants and presenter will travel together in co-creating new intellectual paths during the session. It is expected that we will all leave the session having learned from and taught each other using the data, Dewey, and IBL.