Midwives of progressive education: The Bureau of Educational Experiments 1916-1919
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“You see,” said the stick, “there were as pretty little children once as you could wish to see, and might have been so still if they had been only left to grow up like human beings, and then handed over to me; but their foolish fathers and mothers, instead of letting them pick flowers, and make dirt-pies, and get birds’ nests, and dance around the gooseberry bush, just as little children should, kept them always at lessons, working, working, working, learning week-day lessons all week-days, and Sunday lessons all Sunday, and weekly examinations every Saturday, and monthly examinations every month, and yearly examinations every year, everything seven times over, as if once was not enough and enough as good as a feast — till their brains grew big, and their bodies grew small, and they were all changed into turnips, with little but water inside; and still their foolish parents actually pick the leaves off them as fast as they grow, lest they should have anything green about them.”


This dissertation explores the role the Bureau of Educational Experiments and its members played in the history of experiential learning during the final years of World War I. The above epigram describes an old longing for experiential learning. It is from the closing chapter of *The Water-Babies* by English clergyman, historian, and writer Charles Kingsley (1864) who has Tom, the boy chimney sweep, visiting an island where the children had turned into turnips, radishes, beets and mangold-wurzels. They had become incapable of play because their legs had turned to barren roots, planted firmly in the ground, but “burst and decayed, with toad-stools growing out of them” (p. 280). A pillar with an inscription stood on the shore, “Playthings not allowed here” (ibid.). An old stick explained to Tom what had happened to the children. They had become physically disabled, powerless to run about and play, merely mentally preparing for a growing number of examinations.

Kingsley’s call for learning methods reform dates from 1862-1863, when his novel appeared as a serial for *Macmillan’s Magazine*. Later a variety of English and American educational reformers advocated learning by doing — that is, learning from activity and experience instead of rote learning — and reached the same conclusion as did Kingsley before them. They too found that the prevailing approach to education turned children into lifeless, motionless, beings without a sense of self. Another approach to education was desperately needed.

**My Professional Interest in Experiential Learning**

In 2001, after twenty years of fulltime housekeeping and raising a son, I began a career teaching physics, chemistry, and mathematics in Dutch pre-vocational secondary education schools. During these years my interest in experiential learning methods grew substantially. I expanded my interest by teaching physics and chemistry through active learning methods (for instance, my students spend half of their lessons in laboratory circumstances doing experiments), but also through stimulating, organizing and coordinating learning by projects during project weeks involving the whole student population of the school at the same time. In 2008, I had my students, who were in the final months of their study, organize a one-day symposium about learning by
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competences. This as a preparation for their future vocational opportunities, and to encourage continuing self-education that is inherent in these learning methods. Efforts included planning and organizing the entire process of inviting symposium key-note speakers, parking of cars of symposium attendants, other security and fire prevention measures, catering, musical intermezzos, cleaning afterwards, as well as creating and regularly updating portfolios, etc. In addition, between 2005 and 2008, I made a study of contemporary Dutch educational reform initiatives, and consequently also of those of the past, in particularly in the United States: nineteenth-century *New Education* and twentieth-century *Progressive Education* approaches. During these years, I paid visits to experimental schools in The Netherlands and in the United States. These activities enabled me to gain experience in *Nieuwe Leren* (New Learning) practice in The Netherlands and earn a professional master’s degree in Pedagogy in 2008.

The Origin of the Dissertation

In 2005, at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, I publicly defended my doctoral dissertation on Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955). That dissertation comprises an extended biography discussing the life, work and influence of the self-educated actor who became the founding father of a method of changing habits related to stance, pose, respiration and gait. The Alexander Technique is primarily a breathing and posture education method that Alexander evolved from nineteenth-century singing guidance informed by gymnastics tuition. In essence it concerns instructions for observing sensory-motor habits that are usually sub-conscious and implementing strategies for bringing them under more conscious control, to the extent that that is possible, and changing them when that is deemed appropriate (Staring, 2005). According to Alexander himself (1923) his ‘technique’ relates to the very heart of learning and learning procedures. Influential New York City Columbia University philosopher John Dewey (1918b-d, 1922, 1923, 1931) shared Alexander’s opinion.

Researching the historic roots of New Learning in the context of an assignment for the professional master’s degree in (New Learning) Pedagogy mentioned above, I wrote an explorative survey of educational literature concerning the Alexander Technique. In addition, I conducted small-scale short-term action research to test educational efficacy of incorporating certain of Alexander’s concepts at the pre-vocational secondary education school in Maarssen, The Netherlands, where I taught math. The research outcomes show that the students particularly valued practicing Alexander technique-inspired guided procedures as preparation to their math tests and examinations (Staring, 2007b). As a consequence, from that time onwards, I let these students prepare themselves psycho-physically by practicing and experimenting with habit-changing methods akin to Alexander’s.

Not long before, Dalton’s (2002) *Becoming John Dewey* had made me aware that Alexander, between 1916 and 1919, had been involved with the NYC Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE), established in 1916, to act as an education reform clearinghouse and to research educational reforms. Alexander had also been involved with Caroline Pratt’s NYC experimental elementary education Play School. Both facts shed a new light on his influence on educational reform, as it did too on his dealing with education innovators at Columbia University — including economist and BEE member Wesley Mitchell, who kept diaries of his and his family members’ lessons with Alexander. It appeared that Alexander played some role in the American early twentieth-century educational reform closely related to *Nieuwe Leren* (New Learning) reforms in the early twenty-first-century Netherlands.¹
Understandably, I sought to investigate the Bureau’s history (Staring, 2007a). During yearly visits to New York City since 2006 I consulted available BEE and BEE-related archival sources. These were mainly divided over four archives: City and Country School archives, Bank Street College of Education archives, Rutgers University Libraries archives, and Columbia University Butler Library archives. From studying the contents of the archives and from additional literature research I learned that the majority of BEE charter members knew each other for many years before they joined the Bureau, and had worked together in diverse social reform pressure groups. Most interestingly, all these BEE members, all women, had played major roles in diverse New York City educational reform activities in, for instance, settlement houses and civic organizations. The professional expertise they brought with them to the BEE in 1916 meant that the BEE quickly gained an important place within educational reform, not only in New York City, but also nationwide.

Mid-2011, through becoming familiar with secondary sources, consulting educational experts in the U.S., and through research of library, internet and other electronic archival resources, I realized I had gathered considerable new primary material, material that had not yet been analyzed and described by recent historians of education. I felt compelled to illustrate the importance and relevance of the Bureau of Educational Experiments by writing a dissertation about my findings.

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