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Review of Creativity and Chaos: Reflections on a Decade of Progressive Change in Public Schools, 1967-1977 by Charles Suhor

Stan Scott

University of Maine, Portland, stan.scott@maine.edu

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Suhor, Charles. *Creativity and Chaos: Reflections on a Decade of Progressive Change in Public Schools, 1967-1977*. NewSouth Books, 2020. 304 pp.

Stan Scott

University of Maine, Portland

In the title of Charles Suhor's engaging memoir, the words *progressive*, *change*, and *creativity*—even *chaos*—will I suspect light fires of the imagination for many progressively inclined teachers and other readers. That goes all the more for those of us who lived through the upheavals and exciting breakthroughs of the late '60s and '70s, who may also have fought battles, like the ones recounted by Suhor, on behalf of our own students and children, to bring progressive changes to schools and colleges. As a former professor of English and philosophy and co-chair (with my friend and colleague Irene Papoulis) of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, I have a special admiration for Charlie Suhor's work as an educational reformer and his vision as one of the founders of this Assembly of creative teachers and scholars.

As suggested by its Latin original *educere*, to lead out, the word *education* names—for reformers like Suhor and progressive philosophers of education like myself—an arena of opportunity to lead students out from "the numbing effects of...inherited traditional programs" (54), from the deadening effects of mass culture, peer pressure, and the threatened social construction of an anti-democratic political reality, etc. In one of his zinging judgments, Suhor writes: "In the progressive years, the enemy of exciting learning was the weight of tradition. The past, as Hawthorne said, 'lies on the present like the body of a dead giant.'" And in the book's final chapter "Update: The (Non)Persistence of Innovation" he says, "The hazard today might well be both the persistence of conservative goals and an overabundance of electronic means in a 'cybernetic ecology,' like Richard Brautigan's dystopia where we are 'all watched over by machines of loving grace'" (217).

Today, in tune with the positive thrust of Suhor's vision, we might argue that education still has a great imperative to give students tools to navigate the cybernetic ecology, to decode the flood of electronic messages, advertising, social-media, etc., and learn either to dismiss them or to interpret them constructively. The tools offered by progressives—e.g., critical and creative thinking, genuine dialogue (with emphasis on *genuine*), and writing to discover—if taught well may enable students to see the difference between the minefields of disinformation found on the internet and daily conversation, and authentic knowledge, found only by experiment and genuine discovery. They can also point to the possibility of escape from conventional but unproductive teaching and learning, cutting loose from toxic political clichés and from structural prejudices like racism, sexism, and classism. Suhor describes himself early in his career as a "young Catholic idealist" and many readers, including myself, will identify with the underlying idealism in his conception of school. For people like us, school is or can become a place for nurturing our own and our students' capacities for creative imagination and intuition—largely neglected in traditional schooling that emphasizes rote learning, overly prescriptive writing instruction, etc.

Such idealism, stemming in part from John Dewey's monumental *Democracy and Education* (1917), expresses itself in contemporary theory and practices that treat language as a dynamic medium of the creative process leading to discovery, rather than just a means of transmitting static information. Among other things Suhor's book is a breath-taking series of personal narratives and historical facts about what he calls "the progressive decade" (1967-77), including an account of the conservative reaction that dismantled, and today still threatens to dismantle, the gains of progressivism. Without sturdy leadership like that of Suhor and his co-workers, the elements of progressive education—like student-centered learning environments, treating subject matter from multiple perspectives, expressive writing, small group discussion, and respect for reason and truth—can be replaced by curricular trends like back to basics, skill-and-drill phonics instruction, and rote memorization that may discourage individual creativity and sometimes undermine reason itself.

In *Creativity and Chaos*, Suhor opens a window into this vibrant period of progressive change, and its eventual decline. He presents a granular chronicle including the names and much detail about colleagues, events, and policies in the institutions in which he worked—New Orleans public schools as a teacher and English supervisor and the National Council of Teachers of English. For readers with no connection to New Orleans politics, social climate, or educational institutions, the sheer number of names, titles, and actions taken by members of this large cast of characters may seem like over-sharing. For those from the local area, especially those who recognize the names and faces in the photos, the book will be an unalloyed pleasure. But for any sympathetic reader, Suhor's first-person narrative voice, peppered with persuasive documentary evidence, will bring battleground issues of the progressive era to life, potentially bringing inspiration and stirring the imagination to see new possibilities for future reforms.

In moments when he takes a step back from the details of personalities and events, Suhor paints a big picture of the dialectic gripping American society and its educational systems in that era, when an entrenched traditional foundation built on conservative premises and standards is followed by a dynamic progressive upheaval. Supporting the latter became the main purpose of Suhor's life work. But the dynamism and success of the progressive decade is eventually overturned by a "backlash" from opponents of change and reversion to traditional ideology and teaching methods. Suhor's skill in accounting for the turmoil and changes in American society and education offers a perceptive history of the nation at that time. Though focused on changes in schools in his native New Orleans, Suhor portrays his home-town district as a microcosm of struggles and changes in the nation as a whole. This enables him to give first-hand testimony to the controversies between progressive and conservative forces that rocked educational systems from coast to coast. "The developments in New Orleans schools were variations on themes of the national progressive movement" (xiii), he explains. These developments included curricular innovations such as emphasis on "reasoned interaction" (79) in small group discussion and moving away from mainstream writing instruction that is "rule governed" toward "real-world writing," treated as "a communication event" (91). It also included efforts on Suhor's part to validate the grammar of non-standard forms of English (NSE) like Black English, in a very public dispute with (among others) TV

personality Edwin Newman, who strove to argue that there is only one “correct” system of grammar and usage, Standard English (or SE).

Though he deals mainly with public high school issues, there is enough pointed emphasis on post-secondary English to make it of interest to college and university educators of a progressive bent as well. After teaching for nine years in New Orleans public schools, Suhor moved “from the classroom to district curriculum work [as a K-12 English supervisor], to further graduate study, a doctorate, and textbook writing” (15), to employment with the National Council of Teachers of English, where he eventually became deputy executive director. In the large project of educational reform, “progressive leaders needed to be research-savvy teacher educators,” he says. “They had to be both aggressive and humble in selling new programs and methods. They needed to select and train teachers in the new concepts, then observe how they were incarnated in the classroom.” The research Suhor speaks of often involves the gathering and skillful interpretation of data about such things as standardized test scores and other quantifiable outcomes of teaching and learning to be used as evidence for the effectiveness of a progressive agenda. At times he uses research of a more conceptual nature, as in making a case against memorization of grammatical rules. He writes:

With the dissemination of knowledge about Piagetian psychology it became clear that definitions and rule-centered instruction had failed because few adolescents have reached the stage of mental development needed to learn, interiorize, and readily apply the highly abstract rules of grammar. Even when understood, the concepts are easily forgotten.... Independent reviews of research on the teaching of grammar in the 1960s and beyond confirmed, to the embarrassment of the profession, that knowing about the structural elements of SE [Standard English] grammar had no effect on changing most students’ oral and written *language behavior*. (72)

Though clearly an inspired teacher-researcher and activist, Suhor explains little about the sources of his own inspiration to pursue a path based on progressive principles. But from time to time he mentions Dewey, Moffett, and other pioneers in contexts where their ideas were influential or relevant. He writes that “the profusion of research and practice materials for teachers on classroom interaction in the progressive decade was astonishing. It rekindled the Deweyan idea that social interaction skills are part of intellectual growth and an absolute necessity in a democratic society. The emphasis was shifting slowly from recitation of memorized responses to the elaboration of thoughts in large and small group discussion” (212). But in his 2020 update, he tells us, “Belief in rich, open, tolerant classroom talk still runs strong among enlightened educators—and it is still honored more in the breach than in observance.” However, in light of research near the time of this update, Suhor claims “the dominant pattern was [again] teachers doing most of the talking as they presented materials elaborated by handouts designed to facilitate the recall of information” (213). Further he writes, “vigorous progressive protests against mass testing and the promise of healthy innovations from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were no match for the popular hunger for ‘objective’ data on student performance, the pressure for teacher accountability and the politicization of testing in the years that followed” (217).

In an endnote to chapter five, “Grammar, Usage and Oral Language,” Suhor writes that James Moffett was “a true visionary, a philosopher/practitioner of immense knowledge, range, imagination and compassion. At his most radical—e.g., *The Universal Schoolhouse* [1994]—I wasn’t with him, but I was usually just a few steps back, gathering insights that informed my view of the profession. Moffett was the chief inspiration for NCTE’s Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning [AEPL], which I co-founded with Richard Graves and Alice Brand in 1993.” This and a slim thread of personal comments in other parts of the book hint a little about Suhor’s personal beliefs and reasons behind his interest in moving educational leaders beyond “objective” data to the inner or spiritual life of individuals. Is this inner dimension important in the framework of a progressive agenda that emphasizes creativity and personal motivation above following external authority and memorization of objective facts? Like other reformers, Suhor does not typically express himself in the language of spiritual ideas. Spirituality may have been of little interest to him during the progressive decade, and from this book it seems likely he found little value in incorporating it into his language and activities either in the schools or at NCTE.

Why wasn’t Suhor “with him” in ‘94 when Moffett took a stand for “spiritual awakening through education” as he puts it in the subtitle of this most radical of his books (*The Universal Schoolhouse*)? As Suhor argues the case for establishing progressive schools and programs, having to clear many hurdles along the way in the administrative and political arenas, he uses the tools he had mastered in his doctoral program at Florida State and found effective in his work as an English supervisor in New Orleans schools. These clearly involve quantitative research to gather objective data, and the calculative reasoning to interpret it, to the advantage of the programs he believed in. There is an odd paradox in Suhor’s use of the very “objective” data on student performance,” which he considers reactionary in the passage above, in order to promote his progressive principles. These, as he well knew, emphasize personal, subjective engagement with subject matter, and such intangibles as student creativity, originality, and interpersonal skills, while de-emphasizing memorization of objective facts. The paradox is a partial answer to my question about why Suhor couldn’t take a stand with Moffett in the early ‘90s about education as spiritual awakening. Whether or not Suhor believed (or believes) personally in such a thing as spiritual awakening is not clear from his book. But he was a soldier in multiple battles for elements of the progressive agendas at the local and national level. For his part, Moffett was a warrior in a big battle in Kanawha County, West Virginia, over censorship of textbooks he’d written. But when he taught secondary school, it was at the elite Phillips Exeter Academy, not public schools. And after he became a faculty member at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, he was able to write (among others) his great theoretical works, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, *Harmonic Learning*, and *The Universal Schoolhouse*, relating to spirituality in education. He was perhaps more like a general overseeing a war and less like a field captain. On the field, Suhor needed to use the weapons he had—objectively valid data and reasoned interpretation—to win his gritty battles for progressive principles, many of which he shared with Moffett.

The list of great practitioner-theorists of progressive education with roots in spirituality besides Moffett includes (among others) Parker Palmer with his vision of “education as a spiritual journey” and others. But Moffett stands out for his “immense knowledge,

range, imagination and compassion” (in Suhor’s words) which made him an inspiration for the founding of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, and a kind of prophet of the expansive learning possibilities that organization promotes. In a culture of secular humanism like ours, dominated by scientific materialism, the word “spiritual” in its most enlightened sense signifies a core element in experience that is non-material (*consciousness* itself, the power that drives imagination, and other intangibles like compassion, integrity, etc.). It names something beyond whatever is objectively known (like the very idea of *potential*). It refers to “the more” in William James’s usage, the phenomenological intuition that there is always “more” to present and potential experience than meets the eye. In this perspective spirituality might be a first principle of progressive education. In a progressive context, “the spiritual” suggests that our “job” as teachers and students is primarily to exercise creative imagination and intuition to make discovery of new ideas, new perspectives, and new articulations of the “more” that is present though hidden in the shadows of experience. In an enlightened vision of education like Moffett’s, *spirituality* is the universal human capacity for growth and change in a person’s outlook and personality. It is not a reference to sectarian belief. So, to treat it in a public-school setting as a matter to be adjudicated by appeal to the constitutional separation of church and state, as in Moffett’s dispute with Kanawha County (recounted in his *Harmonic Learning*), is a failure to understand what spirituality means or could mean in the context of public education.

John Dewey, the father of progressive education, had little to say about spirituality in his writings about education and knowing, a possible blind spot for which he was criticized by Ron Miller in his perceptive treatise, *What Are Schools For?: A History of Holistic Education*. But despite the efforts of Moffett, Miller, Palmer, and others to expand the horizons of learning based on an expanded conception of spirituality—to move beyond the idea of learning as a mechanical input of information into the mind, and toward the development of the whole person—progressives in our secular culture have typically been reluctant to address the idea of a spiritual source of energy animating students, and human consciousness in general, toward insight and creativity. Paul Tillich called this source “the depth dimension” of human experience, not something apart from our concrete physical existence but integral to it.

As I see it, this view of spirit comports well with Moffett’s. And although Suhor was not “with him” in the ‘90s he was “just a few steps back.” This, I take it, refers to the fact that he wasn’t immersed, as Moffett was, in world spiritual and esoteric traditions. Being only “a few steps back” made him able to take inspiration from Moffett, though unable to wholly identify with Moffett’s spiritual orientation or the argument that spirit is of central importance in a progressive agenda. But Suhor remained “with him” (at least intellectually, I suspect) in turning away from the objectivism that dominated educational politics at the time, toward creativity, originality, and community as core values that progressives perennially prize as the goals of education.

The struggles in the progressive decade were carried on with little explicit reference to the spiritual dimension of the learning process. But as Moffett and Palmer and others have observed, education can be operationally approached as a “spiritual journey,” with “spiritual awakening” as its goal, and “spirit” as the non-objective force at the heart of experience that makes learning itself possible in the lives of teachers and stu-

dents. This possibility includes the “expanded” forms of learning that Suhor spent his life promoting.

Creativity and Chaos is an excellent read—for the drama of its storytelling, its wit, and its strong judicious reasoning. I recommend it highly.