

Review of

Teaching Honesty in a Populist Era: Emphasizing Truth in the Education of Citizens

by Sarah M. Stitzlein, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024

JOY DANGORA ERICKSON

Endicott College

“And if it was false, he would say, ‘It doesn’t matter, Stephanie. Just say it over and over and over again, people will believe it’” (Sforza, 2024). This statement, by former White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham on how President Donald Trump advised her to do her job, is a clear example of why Sarah Stitzlein’s recently published book, *Teaching Honesty in a Populist Era: Emphasizing Truth in the Education of Citizens*, could not come at a better time.

Research exploring the phenomenon of people coming to believe falsehoods that are repeated over and over, known in psychology as the illusory truth effect, suggests that the repetition of falsehoods can leave people believing that they are true, even when they possess strong contradictory prior knowledge (Fazio, 2020). It is no wonder then, as Stitzlein underscores, that Americans are struggling to parse out truths from lies in today’s polarized political environment. Stitzlein effectively argues that people on both sides of the political aisle have lost sight of the pivotal role that honesty plays in a well-functioning democracy, and she argues that schools should intentionally teach students how to engage in *pragmatist inquiry*, a process she endorses as capable of cultivating the “truth-seeking” and “truth-telling” necessary to sustain and improve our democratic way of life and, in turn, our collective fate.

Taking care to emphasize to readers up front that her book is for everyone and that her aim is to bring people together rather than further divide them, Stitzlein is particularly well-positioned to advocate for honesty and truth among liberals, conservatives, and everyone in between. She has sincerely identified with both liberalism and conservatism at pivotal points in her life, and affirms that she regularly engages in political dialogues, inquiries, and projects with colleagues, friends, and family representing a wide range of political views and affiliations. Contrasting her experience with that of those who find themselves routinely in shared company with like-minded people, Stitzlein gives thanks for her unique position. And she credits it with enabling her to be a better citizen, one capable of navigating “between and across [political] borders,” which she recognizes has, in turn, well prepared her to write this text for those she loves and trusts. This list includes, among others, “rural farmers, middle-class teachers, loyal soldiers, and urban academics” (p. 9). The sincerity with which Stitzlein desires to help us communicate better with one another to build a more just and satisfying common fate shines throughout the book.

Beginning with the book’s framing, Stitzlein intentionally puts forward a philosophical pragmatist account of truth and honesty primarily because she views it as capable of allowing us to engage with certain aspects of populist thinking that could support the US’s aspirations as a democratic republic. Stitzlein employs pragmatism to shed light on the “more democratizing” aspects of populism while simultaneously rejecting aspects of populism that interfere with truth and honesty (e.g., the spreading of conspiracy theories). Rather than entirely condemning populism as a threat to democracy, Stitzlein argues

that it is imperative that we pay careful attention to populist movements, perspectives, and arguments. In viewing populist activity as a democratic barometer of sorts, she points out that in valuing the people's "common sense," populism has historically been quite good at identifying the failings of liberal democracies – many of which have and continue to be overlooked by those in power. One example offered in the text is the populist outcry over the closing of schools during the pandemic; these closings made it difficult if not impossible for many people to work and support their families. Though viable solutions to this problem were not necessarily offered by populists, this example makes clear for Stitzlein how populism can unearth difficult truths.

Stitzlein acknowledges up front that pragmatists generally do not seek objective truths because they view truth as "constructed" and often "partial or temporary" (p. 26). However, building upon Dewey's civic pragmatist understandings, she makes a convincing case that pragmatists *must* be concerned with some certainties not only for their epistemic value but for their civic value, arguing that it is truth that enables us to "work together" to adapt to our environment and/or "reconstruct it to secure our well-being within it" (p. 26). Stitzlein offers the 2021 attack on the US Capitol as testament to the importance of truth in pragmatists' lives. If "ideas become true insofar as they 'work' for us," as Stitzlein's pragmatist view suggests, then it seems quite important that we clearly understand what led up to and occurred during the 2021 attack. Coming as close as possible to a true account of what happened enables us to anticipate future problems and make informed choices together to improve our collective well-being.

Contrasting populist truth-seeking and truth-telling, which tend to reject "elitist" scientific inquiries, constructing pragmatist truth, according to Stitzlein, involves a more democratic and arduous process: for beliefs to be deemed true – even if just for a short period – we must test them against the "widest range of experiences as we can to see if they hold up" (p. 27). Pragmatist inquiry values both rigorous scientific research and people's own experiences, and in doing so rejects false and divisive either/or dichotomies characteristic of populism and other epistemological perspectives (e.g., those that purport that truth can and/or should only be derived from certain research designs and/or statistical methods that are deemed capable of producing significant findings).

Stitzlein's conceptualization of pragmatist inquiry and how it should be taught is that it should support citizens in internalizing honest habits by forging a "long-standing commitment" to honesty (p. 5). She describes a pragmatist view of honesty as "a proclivity to not intentionally distort the facts as one sees them but, rather, to engage in ongoing thinking and behavior marked by forthrightness, sincerity, and accuracy regarding the establishment and sharing of truth," and also as "an urge to act in good faith to determine truth as 'what works' to secure our flourishing in the world" (p. 39). Like Dewey, she envisions the inquiry process as being carried out within publics dedicated to truth-seeking, problem-solving, and communal well-being. The inclusive, overarching question she offers to anchor all inquiries is, "What should we do?" (p. 5). Stitzlein identifies and describes the fundamental components of a pragmatist approach to inquiry: identifying one or more problems via "indeterminate situations," forming communities of inquiry, exploring identified problems from multiple angles to better understand their impacts, using evidence and experience to propose and consider solutions, testing selected action steps, and continually re-evaluating and monitoring solutions for the effectiveness of these steps. However, she moves beyond these components to make several more nuanced recommendations for facilitating such inquiries.

Specifically, she recommends first supporting students in comprehending why it is good to be honest and intellectually humble; she urges educators to make transparent the ways in which these virtues function to benefit individuals and societies, and the ways in which populism, conspiracy theories, and fake news can work against them and hinder individual and collective well-being. Additionally, Stitzlein emphasizes the importance of "doing democracy," or exploring and acting on present-day problems, including controversial issues that the students themselves are interested in exploring, within invested communities of inquiry (p. 65). She underscores the importance of the teacher's role in ensuring that students examine information representing a range of valid perspectives and in guiding them through the evaluation and weighing of anecdotal and scientific evidence. Furthermore, she recommends that

teachers assist their students in thoughtfully considering the question “Could I be wrong?” periodically throughout the inquiry process and that they create ample opportunities for students to practise respectful disagreement. At the end of each inquiry cycle, teachers should support their students in “trying out” the action steps they have crafted in response to their inquiry and in evaluating their impact (p. 71).

Given my experience as an elementary and early childhood educator, I wholeheartedly agree that children should “do democracy” in relation to their lived experiences and the issues that matter most to them. Like Stitzlein, I also believe that even young children are capable inquirers and are often more eager than adults to consider the ways in which their beliefs and thinking might be wrong. While I am excited about the prospect of pragmatic inquiry being a regular component of civic education in preschools right through to places of higher education, I worry about some of the adults positioned to guide children through the inquiry process. One context in which I am particularly concerned about the inquiry process breaking down is in communities of learning in which the beliefs of more powerful and potentially less open-minded adult facilitators are heavily influenced by certain interpretations of religious, spiritual, and/or moral doctrines and/or claims of supernatural experiences. Some educators posit, with and without direct experience, that certain events (e.g., surviving a severe illness, overcoming a momentous obstacle, the evolution of species) are influenced, if not caused, one or more unobservable superior beings. Despite the pragmatist norm that all truths are falsifiable, I worry that if student truth seekers are guided by an educator to conclude that scientifically unverifiable experiences are true and, when making decisions, to weigh those experiences more than contradictory scientific evidence that they have sincerely considered (but might not equally value), the actions they take and/or policies they generate or support (e.g., denying the efficacy of vaccines, denying life-saving abortions) may do significantly more (preventable) harm than good.

At some point, a continuous cycle of pragmatist inquiry may correct misinformed policies, as Stitzlein suggests; however, is it not more advantageous for society to correct the course sooner rather than later? I understand that the cultivation of honesty that Stitzlein forwards is intended to spur pragmatist inquirers to regularly and truthfully review the actions they take, but we must acknowledge that long-held religious, spiritual, moral, and other beliefs could interfere even with people’s most sincere efforts to honestly engage in pragmatist inquiry. It is for this reason that I argue that the pragmatic-inquiry-process guardrails that Stitzlein begins to flesh out in the book should be expanded upon and should include clearer guidance on the role that empirical evidence should play (compared to anecdotal evidence) in determining truth and making decisions that impact others.

Without such guidance, it is conceivable that well-meaning people might more easily fall prey to a version of pragmatist inquiry that privileges “truths” rooted in scientifically unverifiable supernatural accounts. The truth-seeking that Stitzlein advocates for use in schools appears to both require and assume that educators can readily and regularly evaluate the soundness of their beliefs and adjust them in light of new evidence. Assuming that it works in the way she suggests it does, the cultivation of pragmatist honesty better positions us to recognize where some of our deepest core beliefs and supporting arguments fall short of being rooted in verifiable events and evidence. For example, many who identify as religious but do not subscribe to a fundamentalist religion might agree that the existence of God, even if it is not denied, cannot currently be proven by natural world scientific processes. And they might therefore conclude that in theory it makes good sense to work on solutions to pressing problems using approaches that are likely to work given the natural-world evidence that we have.

However, assuming that all group members come to accept this conclusion, I suspect that some mature adults who have held certain core beliefs for long periods of time might be less willing and/or able to consider, advocate for, and/or take – and/or assist others in considering, advocating for, and/or taking – certain empirically well-supported actions in part due to the entanglements of these actions with long-held supernaturally-supported beliefs. When such entanglements are associated with a strong fear that endorsing certain actions – no matter how likely to improve societal conditions (e.g., vaccines produced with aborted fetal cells, the harvesting of genetically-engineered drought-resistant crops) – might result in them or others paying a penalty in an afterlife that is neither proven nor unproven, it

seems even less likely that people would themselves consider, or support others in considering, such actions.

So, while Stitzlein posits that pragmatist inquiry by means of acknowledging the fallibility of ideas can “head off forms of extremist dogmatism,” I question the degree to which this is possible even in less extreme cases in which mature adults have long committed themselves unquestionably to certain beliefs and norms, and/or may be motivated by what they understand to be a need for themselves or others to end up in the “right” place after death (p. 30). Assuming there are and will continue to be adults who fall into this category and are positioned to guide children through pragmatic inquiries (I am thinking specifically here of my late grandmother, who was a religious school teacher), it seems imperative that teachers be offered clearer guidance about the role that empirical evidence should play in determining truth and making decisions in relation to it. It is beyond the scope of this review to consider what such guidance might include, and it might prove particularly difficult if not impossible to offer a set of one-size-fits-all rules for weighing empirical evidence across pragmatic inquiries. In lieu of this type of guidance, a collection of examples of successful pragmatic inquiries describing the processes that inquirers have taken for gathering and weighing empirical evidence alongside other forms of knowledge could go a long way. Exemplars of pragmatic inquiry could support teachers in better understanding the fundamentals of the process while simultaneously conveying Stitzlein’s standards for methodological rigour and integrity. It might also make good sense for teachers to examine these exemplars in publics that are representative of a range of legitimate perspectives. The varying viewpoints in combination with the methodological standards represented in the exemplars could promote the facilitation of less biased and more honest pragmatic inquiries in classrooms. In closing, this worthwhile civic project has and will continue to influence my thinking, teaching, and scholarship for years to come, and I sincerely look forward to the generation of truth-seeking pragmatic inquiry methods likely to sprout from it.

References

- Fazio, L. K. (2020). Repetition increases perceived truth even for known falsehoods. *Collabra: Psychology*, 6(1): Article 38. <https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.347>
- Sforza, L. (2024, January 8). Grisham: Trump “knows he can basically say anything and his base will believe.” *The Hill*. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4394676-grisham-trump-knows-he-can-basically-say-anything-and-his-base-will-believe>