Q. How many teachers can dance on the horns of the same dilemma?

A. Just about all of them.

Since the “permissive” sixties brought back the cry of “relevance” — once thought to be buried with the “progressive” education preached early in the century by John Dewey — teachers have been struggling with what I believe to be a core teaching question: how much curriculum and how much student interest? That is, how much of what I do should pass along the Wisdom of the Ages, and how much should connect to the students’ personal lives and milieu? If learning does not connect to students personally, they will have merely passed through school unaffected by the facts and concepts that make up the curriculum. But if the focus is entirely on their personal lives and environment, they will end up navel-staring and their lives will grow smaller rather than larger. The tensions between teaching one’s subject and teaching one’s students underlie every course outline and lesson plan we create.

A new book, John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice, by philosophy professor Stephen M. Fishman of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte and composition and literature professor Lucille McCarthy of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, takes on the challenge of putting Dewey’s theories of education for real life into actual practice with students in an introductory college philosophy class. Fishman and McCarthy have worked together for several years, have published a number of classroom studies in several journals, and have won the prestigious James N. Britton award for inquiry in the English language arts. In this book, Fishman’s role is teacher, and McCarthy’s role is outsider researcher, devising methods of inquiry and analysis to help Fishman look at his own classroom. The authors alternate sections, then write a joint conclusion.

Fishman and McCarthy’s book is important on a more than one level. First, it the clearest explanation I have encountered of the ideas of John Dewey, and beyond that the book also allows readers to participate vicariously in a great teacher’s life with his students. Teachers trying to work through the “relevance dilemma” will find themselves in good company.

Having known Steve Fishman for some of the years he has struggled with this problem, and having struggled with it myself for almost as long, I was drawn into this book and — literally — could not put it down. I started it in the post-Christmas doldrums, isolat-
ing myself from family so that I could tangle with the (I thought) muddled theories of Dewey once again. Finding instead the chapters on Dewey’s theory to be clear and vibrant when filtered through Fishman’s mind and voice, and utterly swept up by the narratives of his own educational and teaching miasmas, I was soon reading through New Year’s Eve, skipping the ball drop in Times Square on television and even the Cherryville New Year’s Shooters down the street.

Part One explains, in terms of “nested dualisms,” John Dewey’s complex educational philosophy. Fishman presents it as a yin/yang of chicken/egg recursive processes focused on the goal of student growth — growth of the whole person: cognitive, emotional, and ethical. This goal underlies all that Dewey said and did, and it underlies all that Fishman says and does as a professor of philosophy and as a teacher. Central to that goal is one of those “nested dualisms” or oppositions, which I am calling the central dilemma of education and to which Fishman has applied his attention: the curriculum vs. student interest dualism. Having pursued the same goal and grappled with the same dualism in high school English classes for almost as many years as Fishman has in college philosophy classes, I plunged into Part Two, which Fishman and McCarthy entitle “Deweyan Classroom Experiments.” Here theory and practice connect.

In these chapters, Fishman explores how the student vs. curriculum problem emerged in his own early life as a student and in the lives of his students. Fishman had already recounted how, following a life-changing experience at a Writing Project retreat in 1983, he had worked for several years with free, personal writing as a central pedagogical technique, focusing more on students’ personal lives and interests than on formal, direct instruction in philosophy, hoping to engage students with philosophy through their own life concerns. However, even though student interest and engagement were high, he had become discontent with that approach because he “...began discovering that, as Dewey warned, student self-expression is not the be-all and end-all of education ... the readings — the sources of new subject matter — just were not seen as important” (p. 78). [A student] “pointed out in his journal that, since class conversation was more vigorous when I gave up attempts to discuss assigned texts, the obvious solution was to eliminate these readings altogether. At that moment, I decided to change...” (p. 86).

So, in reaction, he reverted to some of his earlier techniques — teaching techniques more like his own professors had used — emphasizing curriculum, assigning rigorous texts, all the while continuing to encourage free and open student writing and classroom discussion and trying to tie the ideas of the great philosophers to the students’ own lives and questions. But he found that student essays were no more grounded in the philosophic subject matter of the course than they had been when he focused less on “curriculum.” He was not seeing the integration between personal lives and curriculum that he wanted. But by focusing on curriculum, he lost student interest and engagement. Fishman had danced on the horns but not between them, and he was not content. He says, “It was time to examine my pedagogy again” (p. 88).

Analyzing his quandary in Deweyan terms, he concluded that in neither previous mode had he effectively integrated his
students and his discipline but had alternated between the two. He decided that he needed to pay more attention to the dualisms of classroom activities: "teaching and studenting, questioning and answering, homework and class work, students and their classmates" (p. 93). At that point Fishman began an experiment, outlined in Part Two, which Fishman calls "teaching for disciplinary integration" (p. 90) and "teaching by indirection" (p. 92).

Believing that his previous attempts to integrate curriculum and student interest had not succeeded because he had gone at it directly, Fishman worked on how to teach indirectly. To do this, he instituted a modification of an idea from Art Young: student letter exchanges in which they explained their understanding of a reading and set out questions about what they found puzzling in it, to which another student would respond. In addition, he set up small groups to develop text-based questions, exchange with other groups, and generate answers. He audio-taped his responses to students' drafts of their essays, and required that homework be brought in typed so that it could be exchanged for cooperative interactions between students and their classmates (pp. 94-96). (In the appendix of the book Fishman provides detailed descriptions of these techniques, and of assigned writings.)

Since Fishman is also the researcher into his own practice, the book's two parts do not divide neatly into theory and practice at all but are a recursive yin/yang, a Deweyan book about Deweyan practice. But Fishman steps aside at the beginning of Part Two for Lucille McCarthy to outline the qualitative research methods they used to analyze what happened in Fishman's classroom as he attempted once again to resolve the dilemma and to report on the findings. They used qualitative research, as McCarthy says, "... the type of social scientific methodology Dewey himself believes most appropriate for studying progressive classrooms" (p. 99). Their questions were: "Did Fishman succeed in helping his students connect philosophic subject matter to their personal lives? If so, what did this expansion of interest and integration look like, and what were its consequences for students?" (p. 107).

How much of what I do should pass along the Wisdom of the Ages, and how much should connect to the students' personal lives and milieu?

The data collection methods used were threefold: from the teacher, a reflection log, interviews, taped responses to student drafts, and audio-taped teacher-student conferences about papers; from the students, reflection logs, interviews both during and after the semester, "think-aloud" tapes, and student writing; and from the outside researcher, class observations and observations of teacher-student evaluation sessions (pp. 110 - 112). Data analysis procedures constructed themes and patterns by transcribing audio tapes, refining analytic categories, and composing drafts which reduced the raw data (p. 113).

The working and writing partnership between the two authors is close; it, too, is a kind of "nested dualism," a seamless weave of personal narrative and scholarly erudition. While Fishman experiments with teaching techniques, and McCarthy devises research methodology to probe the results of his work, McCarthy says, "We... engaged in a complex theory-practice dialogue" (p. 113).

The final four chapters of the book report the findings. By focusing in detail on five students from the class, in these chapters McCarthy and Fishman are able to shine a clear light on what we might look for in such an inquiry. As one might expect in such a complex and subtle undertaking — seeking to identify when, where, how, and whether students integrated philosophic study with their own lives — there were successes and failures and a range between.

Probably the authors' most important effort though, is the attempt to assess what Dewey called "residues" or dispositions toward future learning, and there Fishman's experiment shows a solid base of success. As McCarthy says, "The test of Fishman's class... is its ability to generate student habits which promote enriched experience or continued learning and growth" (p. 182). Four dispositions which Dewey considered necessary for intelligent thinking and ongoing education are: open-mindedness and careful listening, self-discipline and initiative, intellectual
responsibility, and courage. Fishman’s students “left his class having practiced these habits” (p. 188).

In their conclusion, Fishman and McCarthy point out Dewey’s relevance to contemporary education: to the present educational climate of debate over schools, what they do and how, to teacher development, and to student learning through indirect teaching.

This book, although about a college class, is applicable to all teachers of all students, reminding us of what education really is, encouraging us that we can still choose what to teach and how to teach it, even though the brain-bashing we get over test scores encourages us not to believe this. We complain that “they won’t let me,” but this isn’t really true. We have the freedom to grapple with the same dilemma that Steve Fishman has, which is also our dilemma. And we can and must become our own researchers in our own classrooms in order to make any real change.

This is a practical book, but it is not a book of pat formulas. Rather it makes its points by probing to the heart of teaching and learning. Fishman, like other teachers, longs to see immediate growth in his students, but he knows too that what we call “education” is a lifelong process with long-range results, and no research methods can capture exactly what is going on in a classroom or say much about how these experiences will affect students. Only our students’ lives, stretching out into the future, will tell the final tale.

Yet, it is wonderful to participate so deeply in the thoughts of a great and deeply caring teacher as he grapples with his teaching concerns, his work aided by a wise and skillful colleague. We all would want to be able to put our lives between covers — to let others know why we have lived, and what we have done with our minds on this earth. This book holds Fishman’s life. I love it for that. I believe John Dewey would love it, too.