

# “I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

—An Interview Series with John Capps—

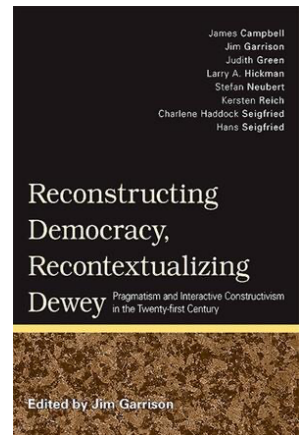


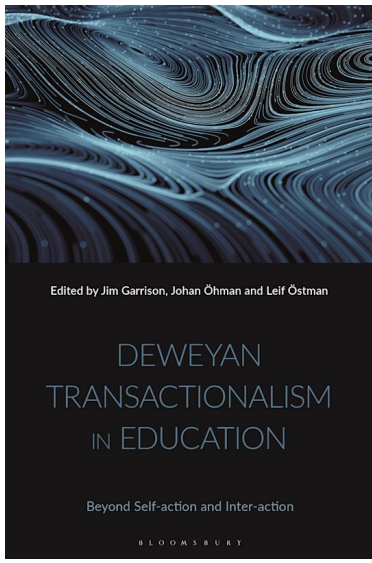
**JIM GARRISON** is emeritus professor of education in the School of Education at Virginia Tech. He is the author or editor of 16 books including *Deweyan Transactionalism in Education* (2022), *Democracy and Education Reconsidered* (2015), *Living as Learning: John Dewey in the 21st Century* (2014), *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (2010) and *Reconstructing Democracy, Recontextualizing Dewey* (2009). He is also the author of nearly 275 articles and book chapters. A past president of both the John Dewey Society and the Philosophy of Education Society, he received SAAP’s Herbert Schneider Award in 2023.

## What does American philosophy mean to you?

Etymologically, philosophy refers to love, affection, or friendship for wisdom, which requires knowledge but far exceeds it. Extending Emerson’s essay “The American Scholar” suggests that American philosophy must mean what happens when those who colonized the Americas begin to think for themselves while pursuing wisdom beyond their inheritance. It must also mean that those who were colonized and were already thinking for themselves preserve their wisdom heritage while striving to extend it. This will involve engaging creatively with the colonizers’ wisdom while critiquing their folly and sharing their traditional and emergent wisdom.

The future of American philosophy will depend on the ability of the colonizers to overcome their colonial legacy and on everyone looking for and contributing to the wisdom of the Americas. Of course, American philosophy is now international, with its pluralistically rich possibilities undergoing reinterpretation in diverse cultural contexts. Although I find clues in the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy and elsewhere, I need help adequately articulating American philosophy’s still nascent meaning.



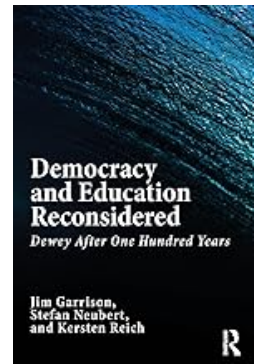


## How did you become an American philosopher?

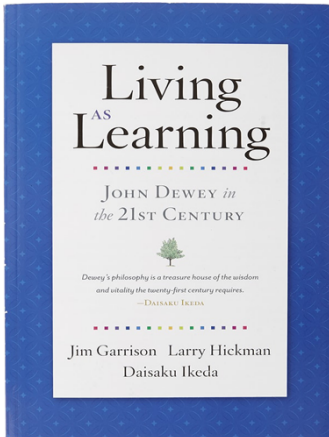
I stumbled into it while stumbling into philosophy. After earning an undergraduate degree in physiological psychology, I worked as a night watchman while exploring process philosophy by reading Teilhard de Chardin, Goethe, and evolutionary theorists. I became enamored with A. N. Whitehead but was stumped by *Process and Reality*. I also thought science was ruining the world, and I had to master it to save myself. I decided to pursue a doctorate in the philosophy of science and another undergraduate degree in physics. (I later realized I was mistaken about science.) Having never taken a philosophy course, Florida State accepted me provisionally.

Arriving in the summer, I took an independent study on Whitehead and was required to take Introduction to Philosophy, where I received a C on my first paper. I eventually eked out an A and, in the fall, found my affinity for philosophy. My major professor, David Grunder, was a Peircean. Later, Jaakko Hintikka, another Peircean, arrived and was added to my committee. I was lured into analytic philosophy and away from myself by doing well in my graduate logic and set theory courses in the philosophy and mathematics departments. I read quite a lot of phenomenology, so I encountered William James. My dissertation was titled "Geometry as a Source of Theory-Ladenness in Early Modern Physics." Peirce's impressions of sense, percepts, percipuum, and perceptual judgment were indispensable.

With undergraduate degrees in neurophysiological psychology and physics, a master's in humanities, and a doctorate in mathematical logic and the history and philosophy of science, I left to stay with friends, where I worked in a warehouse. Returning to Tallahassee, I drove a truck for the Public Broadcasting radio station, eventually becoming the station's secretary. I would have had a different career if Hintikka and C.J.B. Macmillan, an analytic philosopher of education, had not written me into an NSF grant in erotetic logic.



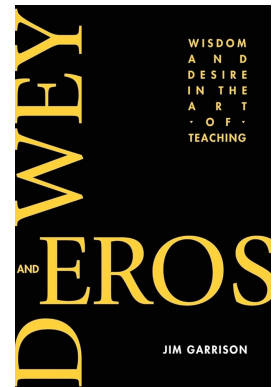
I discovered Dewey early in the grant. I had been reading Nietzsche when drawn by the title, I found *Experience and Nature* in the philosophy department library. Fortunately, it was the 1925 edition with the original Introduction. I quickly realized Dewey had a better artistic/aesthetic solution to nihilism than Nietzsche, partly because it involved social self-creation. I soon published on Dewey in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. I also published the usual philosophical stuff but began publishing in the philosophy of education



with Macmillan. When, in the fall of the second year of the grant, a vacancy opened in the philosophy of education in the School of Education at Virginia Tech, Macmillan urged me to apply. Amazingly, I secured the position. The field of education became a comfortable home for my diverse interests, including pragmatism. I expanded my reading on Dewey, Peirce, and James in the coming years while adding Mead. I also read quite a lot of neo-pragmatism and feminist pragmatism. Reading books on Native American “philosophy,” taken etymologically, opened my mind.

### How would you describe your current research?

Inspired by Tom Alexander’s “Potentiality and Naturalism: Dewey’s Metaphysical Metamorphosis,” I am exploring Peirce and Dewey on potentiality to reconsider Dewey’s metaphysics. Serving as an advisor on two European sustainability grants (Belgium and Sweden) has allowed me to co-author on that topic.



### What do you do when you’re not doing American philosophy?

I am struggling with my decaying basketball game. It is not going well. I enjoy East Asian philosophy, poetry, especially Whitman, and sometimes magical realism. I just finished Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*.

### What’s your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

*Experience and Nature* altered my life. I cannot keep up with all the exciting new work in American philosophy.

(December 2024)

