

Understanding the Educational Philosophy of John Dewey

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Abstract

John Dewey published many articles and books on various evolutionary, psychological, and philosophical topics. His influence was evident in the fields of philosophy and educational thought, but the differences of opinion regarding the extent of his actual influence on educational practice, and he was even received throughout his life with very extreme views, ranging from admiration to ridicule and reprimands. Several concluding statements can be made regarding Dewey's influence on educators during the first half of the twentieth century. First, Dewey was often used by his contemporaries to reconcile positivist social science with pragmatist philosophy. Second, although Dewey's book *Democracy and Education* has been identified as the “Bible of the then-emerging educational reform,” there were many Dewey texts quoted, often without any reference to others. Third, Dewey's philosophy was used to support purposive reform agendas. To social control and social adjustment and also to social reconstruction and social justice.

Keywords: John Dewey, pragmatism, educational philosophy.

1. Introduction

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and educator, whose thoughts had a great influence in the United States and around the world. He is considered one of the founders of the philosophical school called pragmatism (alongside Charles Pierce and William James), a pioneer in functional psychology, and a leading representative of the progressive movement in American education in the first half of the 20th century.

John Dewey published many articles and books on various evolutionary, psychological, and philosophical topics. His influence was evident in the fields of philosophy and educational thought, but the differences of opinion regarding the extent of his actual influence on educational practice, and he was even received throughout his life with very extreme views, ranging from admiration to ridicule and reprimands (Ryan, 1995).

He dealt with almost all branches of philosophy but believed that the philosophy of education was the most important of them because everyone depended on it. He was a naturalistic philosopher in that he sought explanations in terms of natural phenomena accessible to the senses and rejected explanations involving supernatural sources. Therefore, among other things, he leaned more toward evolution than towards God. It is difficult to define his style: some have called him a behaviorist because he rejected supernatural explanations and focused on behavior, but this is not a very accurate definition; He was called a pragmatist and disowned it, and instrumentalism and experimentalism didn't catch on either. Recently, writers have compromised on pragmatic naturalism, which expresses the supernatural emphasis along with the focus on specific results.

The meaning of education and its goals – Dewey did not see the creation of an ideal person or a way of life as the goal of education, rather he saw education as a synonym for growth and saw growth as a goal in itself. Just as from the point of view of evolution, the purpose of life is to create more life, so from the point of view of Dewey, the purpose of education is growth that leads to further growth. This view of Dewey's was controversial in the eyes of many of the philosophers of education, who argued, for example, about a child who wants to learn mathematics more than anything, but only mathematics, or about a person who is focused on obtaining financial wealth only and not on intellect. Do they open doors and relationships for themselves? This caused Dewey to refine the preoccupation with the concept of growth not as an operational definition but as an actual goal, just as creating more life is not always the right thing to achieve the goal (for example, for fear of a population explosion).

In Dewey's eyes, the goal of education is more education, therefore it is both a means and an end alternately and by our choice. Sometimes it is possible to change the means to achieve a certain educational goal, and sometimes the right thing is to change it fundamentally. Peters refined Dewey's use of the words "intention" and "goal" and treated them differently – in his opinion, an intention is related to action, while a goal implies something distant to strive towards. Dewey believed that not only teachers are responsible for designing goals for student activities, but also the students themselves. This, in the spirit of Plato's words, is because "a slave is a person who carries out the intentions of another."

1.1 *Dewey's psychology*

Dewey strongly opposed the stimulus-response psychology advocated by behaviorists and showed in one of his articles that man not only responds to external stimuli but actively chooses responses that fit with his intentions and goals. He also showed this about the phenomenon of imitation in children and showed that children do not imitate everything they see but choose from it, and from this, he concluded that imitation promotes their current goal.

Dewey described four interests of children – to make things (build), to discover (to explore), to express themselves artistically, and to communicate – some argue that they can replace the format of dividing studies into subjects in elementary schools today (although some areas, such as mathematics, are necessarily incremental).

In addition, Dewey developed a model of thinking or problem-solving. According to him, a thought begins with a disturbing feeling, and an initial examination of the situation gives rise to a hypothesis that requires testing. Now the thinker prepares a plan to test the hypothesis and considers alternatives for implementing it. He then reviews the results formulates his conclusions, and constantly examines the process.

Beyond dealing with thought processes, Dewey placed experience in a central place in education. According to Dewey, there are at least two important characteristics to experience: one is the emphasis on meaning and emotion in the person experiencing it. The second, experience is social and cultural. Dewey believed that the experience should be built on previous experience, and even today teachers make sure that they know the previous experience of their students and start from where they are, but at the same time direct their students towards a more sublime goal than the one they have already reached. Beyond the importance of continuity, as mentioned, meaning is required for experience, which is achieved by interaction between the students and the object of their study – something that is a weak point in traditional and old education.

He is seen as leading "child-centered education," but this is not very accurate. On the one hand, he strongly supported interactive activities, and on the other hand, he wanted to make sure that the internal and external aspects of each experience were achieved and were not satisfied only with activities to bring pleasure or amusement to children (Caspary, 2000).

1.2 Dewey's theory of knowledge

Many have dealt with the theory of knowledge. Socrates claimed that a knowledge claim involves the truth of what is claimed, that is, the group of claims that we claim to know is a subset of all true claims, and in particular the truth precedes human inquiry and knowledge in terms of time, which simply discover an existing truth and add it to the pool of human knowledge.

Dewey, on the other hand, stated that knowledge is greater than truth. He argued that knowledge is the collection of skills and information we use when investigating, and that the final product of the investigation, after testing all our hypotheses, is something resembling the truth. Knowledge, in his eyes, was the material that guided the investigation.

His approach was, as usual, the object of objections, but it must be remembered that he came with a naturalistic approach and sought to avoid unobservable entities, including the absolute truth. Now the question arises, will the knowledge remain intact even if some of it turns out to be wrong? The answer is that there is no need to name it because we will simply delete it from our databases, and it will stop being used by us for investigating the truth. This means using previous experience (and growth) to increase our knowledge, and it is important here to fully investigate the conclusions by the learner, without shortcuts in the experience itself.

It is important to note that many teachers are against allowing their students to use incorrect rules, fearing that this will lead them to practice applying their mistakes. This is especially true in physical skills (playing the piano or tennis, for example) (Ward, 1977).

1.3 Democracy and education

Dewey also delved into the study of democracy and education as part of social philosophy. Dewey believed that humans desire to communicate which leads to the creation of shared values (after all, in his naturalistic view primary shared values can't exist), and this leads to a very different position from the traditional positions, which claimed the existence of a universal culture. On the other hand, as mentioned, Dewey claimed that shared values and knowledge are created from investigation and social interactions, and we build them and do not start with them. Therefore, the schools should not be required to inundate the students with the values of culture and knowledge, but rather encourage them to communicate and investigate so that they can build values and knowledge on their own (Dewey, 1916).

The "language as a whole" approach is a good example of a contemporary pedagogical method that implements Dewey's ideal – we do not deal with teaching segments such as sound, spelling, etc., but help children realize their goals in communication and understand each other at the given moment. Similarly, according to Dewey, to learn about democratic life it is necessary to experience it in practice – in cooperation, evaluation, etc. Participation is both a means to achieve a mature democratic life and an end in itself.

For Dewey, democracy was not just a system of government but a way of life in which decisions were made. Not a state, but a process subject to change and re-creation. Democracy was defined by him as one that "has many common interests that pass between the members of the association consciously, and also that there are varied and free points of contact with other forms of association," where in his eyes the second rule is the more significant.

Dewey also believed, in contrast to Rousseau, that between the individual and the state, there is an ideal relationship of mutual support, and there is no need to match each other. This is also how he saw the relationship between the student and the school and therefore wanted to create a democratic mini-society in the school, where the children would learn a way of doing things to promote the growth of society as a whole.

The place of study subjects – Dewey defined “study subjects” as the materials used to solve problematic situations. He did not recommend abandoning the traditional subjects in the curriculum (remaining from Plato’s time) but asked to deal with them if they are used by the students in practice in research, in the curriculum that is collected and built during the year. He saw, among other things, geography, and history as important subjects of study from the understanding of human activity and social relationships and not as a set of facts to be memorized.

Dewey’s approach regarding the participation of students in democratic frameworks as well as the postponement of absolute goals and achieving certainty in short periods – are still supported today among many educators. However, even today there is controversy and fog about its basic concepts (Westbrook, 1993).

2. Pragmatism in education

The principle that Dewey proposes is called pragmatism. According to this view, the content of the concepts is not achieved only through the senses (Rousseau) nor through the purely intellectual intellect (Plato), but that intellectual knowledge is intrinsically linked to physical activity. You learn by doing, learning through experience. Knowing the world in this sense is not based on observation but on experience. This is how you learn the connection between things and understand the world. Knowledge is fundamentally related to activity. There must be a connection between the criteria of abstract concepts such as truth and justice and the criteria of activity (examples below). The more the concept is based on rich and practical experience, the truer and richer the concept becomes (Galily, 2023).

Pragmatism is a basis for educational action. Dewey has an almost biological view of life - a process of continuous internal renewal that takes place in interaction with the environment. Life has an inner value – and it is the renewal. This is the essence of life and should be the essence of educational activity – a process of constant development and growth. Hanukkah has a self-sustaining purpose – there are no external goals just as life has no external goals. Education should continue as long as a person lives. The question is what the criterion for a successful experiment will be, and the answer is – an experiment that encourages further experiments and even a higher order – and this process is dialectical – the goals get stronger as they progress. Where does this put secondary education in today’s normal schools, where after the matriculation exam the children swear by their mother It’s theirs and that they won’t touch that stuff again? It doesn’t make them want more. The targeting method is a practice that kills curiosity and desire. The kids who hate school are followers of the Dewey method.

If experience is the most significant internal element of the educational action, what is the best space for the establishment of the educational action as an action of experience?

Yes, Dewey introduces the element of democracy and inaugurates in this spirit – progressive education.

Dewey talks about democracy in the good American sense, not only as a system of government but as a way of life. It should be remembered that Dewey worked in an era where democracy was seen as outdated – fascism and communism were modern. Today, democracy is much less challenged.

Dewey talks about how democracy is based on faith in human nature – the same faith that individualization is based on (children are good and curious and want to learn). Democracy allows everyone to develop according to his ability, detached from a priori restrictions of class affiliation and attribution – the American ethos. Dewey says that democracy is an anti-static system – it is constantly in motion, changing and progressing according to concrete needs (=pragmatism). If you understand that the political tensions of democracy are immanent to it,

then legislations that are considered anti-democratic (reduce diversity) harm the dynamism of democracy. The best thing about a dynamic method is that it increases human experience, and consequently human development. The opposite of utopian concepts, assumes that a theoretical criterion of truth can be reached and then everything will be perfect, and there will be no movement. According to Dewey, this point is death (Rudd, Garrison & Stone, 2009).

3. Traditional education versus progressive education

The fundamental dichotomy in education theory: progressive education - advocates a natural development from within the student; Traditional education – advocates overcoming natural tendencies by external pressure. The basics of traditional education: (1) Transferring knowledge and skills that were formed in the past; (2) Passing standards and rules of conduct that were formed in the past; (3) The unique institution of the school. These three features determine the goals of education (training young people to accept responsibility and success in life), the teaching methods (imparting knowledge, skills, and rules of conduct), and the discipline of the school (obedience to teachers who carry on the tradition).

Progressive education's main criticism of traditional education is that it is based on external coercion. The adults force the adult world on the children, a world they are not yet ready for. Since the children are not yet ready for the world of adults, they purchase their creations as finished and signed products.

The characteristics of progressive education are: (1) Cultivating the individual's personality; (2) Free activity; (3) Learning from experience; (4) Acquisition of skills within the framework of achieving purposes of essential and direct interest; (5) Taking advantage of the present opportunities; (6) The recognition of a changing world. Dewey points out that the formulation of the above principles was done by negating the following principles of traditional education respectively: (1) Coercion from above; (2) External discipline; (3) Learning from books and from teachers; (4) Acquisition of skills in isolation; (5) Preparation for a distant future; (6) Static targets and materials exist.

4. The need for a theory of experience

Experience and education are not identical. An experience can even damage the nature of continuing to learn from the experience, and this is if it develops indifference, insensitivity, idleness, narrowing the experiencer's world, splitting his power, and more. Dewey emphasizes even in traditional schools there are trials (after all, trials exist always and everywhere), but these trials are of a bad and flawed nature – “flawed and bad in terms of their effect on the experience that will follow” (p. 22). A good experience is tested by two tests: the immediate test – and the immediate effect on the student. If a student shies away from the experience, he will not be able to benefit from it. The immediate effect should be one of pleasure, interest, and attraction. However, one should not be satisfied with immediate pleasure, but rather examine the experience in terms of its effect on future attempts (= “the principle of continuity” or: “the principle of the continuity of the experience”) – on the attempts to activate the student's talents and stimulate him towards creative and fruitful dealing with additional attempts. If so, the educator must “produce” good experiences for his students in both above-mentioned respects.

If indeed “education means development in the field of experience, by experience and for the sake of experience” (p. 23) it is important that educators deeply understand what experience is. Based on this understanding, the characteristics of the education components can be determined: the study material, the teaching methods, the discipline, and the school pattern. In other words: based on the philosophy of experience it will be possible to build the philosophy

of education. Dewey emphasizes that the people of progressive education sinned in that they believed that if they changed the principles of traditional education that would be enough to create a different education. From his words, it appears that innovative education must be structured in an infrastructural, systematic, and coherent manner, out of an awareness of problems and a conscious formulation of solutions.

5. Standards of experience

Progressive education with a democratic tone (as opposed to traditional education with an oppressive autocratic tone) better fulfills the principle of the continuity of experience: democratic social arrangements help the existence of a better human experience – the person who experiences is placed in a sequence of experiences that build him significantly. Every attempt is influenced by the previous attempts, affects the person and his subsequent attempts.

Dewey identifies the educational process with growth, not only physical but also mental and moral. It is also possible to grow in “negative” ways, therefore Dewey claims that only a process that helps long-term and multi-directional growth will be considered education. From his words, it appears that one should pay attention to whether the attempts are good or negative, whether one develops curiosity, initiative, abilities, etc., or one develops laziness, spoiled Ness, reduction of abilities and interest, etc. The role of the educator is to anticipate in advance which direction this or that experience will have an effect. This is not an easy position and therefore it is simpler to maintain the autocratic traditional education system.

The experience is not something completely private. The experience operates within some kind of environment: primitive, modern, in some geographical space, etc. Therefore, the educator must distinguish which environments are conducive to the acquisition of growing experiences. He must use the factors of the environment to achieve beneficial attempts. Considering the environment is not important in traditional education. This is another reason why progressive education is more difficult to manage.

Traditional education emphasized the external (objective) conditions – the teacher, the books, the equipment, and everything that represents the experience of the adults, but it sinned by underestimating the importance of the internal conditions – the immediate inclinations and feelings of the young. Progressive education emphasized the internal conditions but sinned by underestimating the importance of the external conditions. According to Dewey, there must be an interaction, a reciprocal action, between the external conditions and the internal conditions (= principle of reciprocity). The meaning of the interaction is some sort of balance between them. Dewey gives an example of raising a baby: there must be a balance between the baby's demands and the determination of his habits from the outside. The external conditions are those under the control of the educator. The external conditions must be determined considering the strengths and abilities of certain students at certain times. No study material is good if it is not related to the particular stage of the student's growth.

The meaning of the principle of continuity is that at every stage of the educational process, the future must be taken into account, but it does not mean that preparing for the future is a guiding and practical purpose (studying certain contents as preparation for the future). The intention is to extract from the present all that it has to offer.

So, in conclusion, the two criteria by which it is possible to distinguish between nurturing and educational experience and non-educative and anti-educational experience are the “principle of the continuity of experience” and the “principle of reciprocal action” (Dewey, 1916).

6. Social control

Social supervision exists on every person and citizen and yet a significant part of this supervision is not seen as limiting individual freedom. Social control is created by a situation shared by several people and within which they influence each other. In the family, for example, there is social supervision, but it does not arise from one personality but from the “living spirit” of the group. Even on those occasions when the parent directly determines what happens in the family, this is directed to the benefit of the family and not to his benefit. Social supervision that is not directed to the benefit of the group but to the benefit of the supervisor and stems from the will of the team is considered an arbitrary action, while social supervision that is directed to the general good is considered a just and fair action. The teacher in the traditional school often acts arbitrarily and this fact is due to an objective reason, namely that in the traditional school the focus is not on a group that works together. The progressive school is a social enterprise whose essence is a group working together and this fact allows for just and fair social supervision. In cases where social supervision fails, individual action must be taken. Weakness in supervision (perhaps better: the failure of social supervision) does not result only from exceptional students (problematic students), but also from the fact that the teacher did not plan the activity in such a way as to create social supervision. Dewey emphasizes that in planning the educational activity, the educator must strive for social activity within the framework of which social supervision will be exercised. He must consider the needs and abilities of his students and give them an answer. Planning must be intentional but allow freedom.

7. The essence of freedom

The significant freedom according to Dewey is the freedom of thought. Physical limitation leads to mental limitation. The traditional schools are limited physically and therefore limited intellectual, spiritual, and moral freedom. External freedom is a means and therefore its existence is not enough we must find out to what purpose it leads, that is, what are its results. If external freedom is seen as a goal, there is a danger that it will be a negative thing. The advantages of external freedom: (1) Allows students to discover their true nature and thereby allows the teacher to adapt his work methods to his students; (2) A means for the health of the body and mind and a means for inner freedom (thought, judgment, aspiration, fulfillment). True freedom includes the reshaping of the immediate impulses and aspirations, that is, the exercise of discretion over the impulses and aspirations. External freedom is not enough to carry out this redesign, but internal consideration must be exercised. A person who does not exercise internal consideration on his immediate impulses and ambitions is not free.

8. The meaning of purpose

There is a close connection between freedom and the ability to design purposes and realize them – a person is not free if he does not design purposes for himself and works to fulfill them. Dewey emphasizes the importance of the student's participation in creating purposes that guide his activities. In this section, Dewey clarifies what purpose is since this meaning is not self-evident. Purpose originates in impulse, but the purpose is not impulse. The impulse becomes a purpose when three conditions are met: observing with the help of the mind the objective circumstances of the action; knowledge of what happened in similar situations in the past by personal recollection or from the information of another; judgment that combines observation and recall understanding their meaning. The purpose translates the drive into a plan of action. The educational problem is how to postpone the action according to the impulse until observation and judgment also intervene. Acting on impulse is not freedom. The impulse must be translated into a purpose and only then act wisely to achieve it (Rockefeller, 1994).

9. Advanced organization of the study material

The teaching material of experience-based education should initially derive from facts that appear in the field of ordinary life experience. Next, the experience must be developed, that is, the experience must be expanded and organized systematically. The educator must expand the student's field of experience in such a way that there is a connection between the previous experience and the new experience, a connection that will lead to the development of the student's ways of observation and judgment. The educator must be interested in long-term vision. Education must maintain a connection between the past, the present, and the future: the goals of education are in the future. The learning material is the present experience. "Experience can grow towards the future only if it is expanded to include the past as well" (p. 73). Traditional education placed the past as an end in itself: the child must know areas of knowledge that were effective for people who lived in the past. Dewey suggests instead that the past is an important means of understanding the present. Only in this way will it be possible to deeply understand the present, its problems, and their solutions. Another important characteristic of the study material is its organization: learning based on experience includes many unexpected opportunities. The opportunities must be taken advantage of while maintaining a clear line of activity. "The basis for the study material should not be collected randomly and arbitrarily" (p. 75). The experience should lead to an unknown field that will cause problems since these are the real stimulus for thought. The problems must be adapted to the students, that is, problems that the students can overcome with the power of their minds, and the problems must also arouse in the students a desire to learn and create. Dewey gives as an example the studies of science: it can be based on the daily experience of the students in the present; They are related to the past and clarify the present and its problems; Based on the understanding it is even possible to influence the future - solving the problems of the present; Present experience can be systematically organized into science. In learning that is based on experience, organized knowledge should not be presented, but the contents of the experience should be organized. Dewey especially emphasizes the need to organize the contents of the experience, otherwise the activity will cease to be educational and will become a blind activity.

This section can be summed up in one sentence by Dewey in which he characterizes teaching and learning as "an ongoing process of reshaping experience" (p. 85). The process begins with the daily experience of the student and moves to the systematic organization of the experience. This process is possible out of an essential connection between the past, present, and future. The teacher must direct the student to the organization of the experience by finding unknown problems that are according to the student's strength and stimulate him to continue the sequence of organizing experimental learning.

10. Experience is a means and an end of education

Dewey points out what is the great danger of the new, progressive, experience-based education: "The greatest danger facing, in my opinion, its future is the perception that this path is easy to follow; so easy, that its course can be determined – if not without any preparation, After all, at least almost from one day to the next and from week to week" (p. 87). If I understand correctly, Dewey here comes out as a buffer against educational approaches of "let the child experiment and don't interfere." The acceptance of such an approach can indeed led to an education that is easy to operate, but according to Dewey, its failure is certain. According to Dewey, experience-based education is much more difficult to implement than traditional education. Experience-based education is not amorphous and open: "You have no discipline in the world more severe than the discipline of experience, which is subordinated to the test of intelligent development and guidance" (Dewey, 1916).

11. Dewey's main conclusions following his philosophical discussion:

- The educator must check the nature of the experience for the first time from two points of view, from the immediate point of view, namely whether its effect arouses interest and pleasure, and from the point of view of the positive effect of the experience on the continuation of the student's educational experience.
- The educator must constantly check whether the experience is positive or negative. A positive experience is an experience that contributes to the growth of the student: and develops curiosity, initiative, abilities, etc.
- The educator must anticipate what the effects and results of the educational experience will be.
- The experience will only be positive if there is a balance between the external conditions (the environment the student is in) and the internal conditions (the student's current strengths and abilities). The educator should adapt the environment to the student.
- The educator must design collaborative activities in such a way that just and fair social supervision is created.
- External freedom is a means and not an end. Its purpose is to bring inner freedom – freedom of thought. With the help of freedom of thought, the student will be able to reach true freedom – shaping the immediate impulses with consideration and turning them into workable purposes.
- The educational process is an ongoing process of reshaping the experience of the present in an organized and systematic manner, by harnessing the past to understand the present to plan the future (Martin, 2003).

12. John Dewey's influence on educational research

Determining the exact influence of John Dewey on civics and social education in the early twentieth century is one of the most perplexing issues facing historians of curriculum. In general, interpretations of Dewey's work and influence are plagued by four recurring methodological limitations: First, historians tend to interpret Dewey's work philosophically rather than historically. Second, they use this philosophical interpretation of Dewey to test the fidelity of past educators against the scale of Dewey's "true" vision. Third, historians assume that since they read all of Dewey's major and obscure works on education, the reformers of the past must have (or should have) done so as well. Fourth, historians assume rather than demonstrate Dewey's direct influence on others.

To overcome these limitations, historical studies trace John Dewey's influence on civics and social education during the formative years of the progressive education movement by focusing on the conventional Dewey. By examining how Dewey's ideas were used by his contemporaries and peers, scholars show that Dewey's words were often used in different and contradictory ways to support several different curriculum agendas. Some argue that the divisions between advocates of social justice and social utility, which play such a central role in the historical literature of progressive education, were not necessarily apparent to Dewey's contemporaries who quoted him. Dewey's philosophy is often used specifically to bridge the gaps between these seemingly conflicting educational goals and objectives.

Several concluding statements can be made regarding Dewey's influence on educators during the first half of the twentieth century. First, Dewey was often used by his contemporaries to reconcile positivist social science with pragmatist philosophy. Second, although Dewey's book *Democracy and Education* has been identified as the "Bible of the then-emerging educational reform," there were many Dewey texts quoted, often without any reference to others. Third,

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