

From the book *Philosophy of Education: an Encyclopedia*, edited by J. J. Chambliss, published by Garland Press, 1996, pp. 146_153.

DEWEY, JOHN (1859__1952)

American philosopher and educator widely regarded as the "father of progressive education" and one of the most influential educational philosophers of the twentieth century. Born and raised in Burlington, Vermont, Dewey attended the University of Vermont. After a brief period as a secondary school teacher, he enrolled in the new graduate school at Johns Hopkins University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1884. During the next decade Dewey taught at the University of Michigan and, briefly, at the University of Minnesota.

While at Michigan, Dewey's interest in secondary education was stimulated by his membership on a committee that evaluated the state's high schools. But it was not until his move to the University of Chicago in 1894 as head professor of the department of philosophy, which included psychology and pedagogy, that he turned his attention to the philosophy of education in a systematic way. Shortly after his arrival he helped establish a separate department of pedagogy, which he also chaired. Dewey also founded the University Laboratory School, which opened in 1896 with 16 pupils and two teachers and later became known informally as the "Dewey School."

The Laboratory School was a laboratory in fact as well as name. Dewey never intended for it to be a model that other schools should follow. It was instead to be a place where experiments in educational thinking could take place. It was, he wrote, a place where "the student of education sees theories and ideas demonstrated, tested, criticized, enforced, and the evolution of new truths." (MW1:56) It was to be a place where the education of children could be viewed "in the light of the principles of mental activity and the processes of growth made known by modern psychology." (MW1:67) Drawing on the results of his experiments, Dewey published several highly influential works on education during his Chicago years. These include "Interest in Relation to Training of the Will" (1896), "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), *The School and Society* (1900), and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902).

In these works Dewey attempted both to set out his practical pedagogy and to explain the wider psychological and philosophical insights on which it was based. He discussed matters such as stages of development and learning in children, the relation of the native interests of the child to the subject matter of the curriculum, and the importance of history and geography as tools for helping pupils to recognize and develop their interests. Dewey's educational theories were colored by his insight, rare among philosophers of his time, that late nineteenth and early twentieth century America was rapidly evolving from an agricultural society to one dominated by industrial technology. He argued that the nation's schools must reflect this change. Schools devoted entirely to the transmission of vocational skills or to the development of discipline were no longer adequate to the new milieu. The new schools, he argued, must be places of interaction with the life of the new technological culture. To this end, the actual interests of the child must be nurtured and developed: interests in communication, in finding out about things, in making things, and in artistic expression. There must be a reciprocal relation between the school and the wider society. What goes on outside the school must be the subject of education, and what goes on inside the school must be applicable within the society beyond its walls.

Dewey also argued that improved educational practice must rest on an improved psychology. Breaking with mainstream psychology of his time, Dewey rejected the prevailing idea of mind as a "purely individual affair." He viewed mind instead as a function of social life. He also rejected the idea that psychology deals only with knowledge. Taking his cue from philosopher and psychologist William James (1842__1910), whose groundbreaking work *The Principles of Psychology* had appeared in 1890, he argued that emotion and action also play an important role in learning. Mind, then, should not be regarded as a fixed thing or entity, but rather as a process by means of which the organism can continue to grow and develop.

Another of Dewey's enduring insights was that pedagogy tends to oscillate between two extreme positions. Educators at one extreme are preoccupied with the subject matter of the curriculum. There is consequently little concern for the development of the child's own experiences. This view holds that education involves the rote memory of facts and formulae and that the goal of education is little more than training for the professional or commercial activities of adult life. "Discipline" is both means and end of this view of education.

Dewey was highly critical of this view. What such "passive absorption of academic and theoretic material" (LW8:153) lacks, he argued, is the active experimentation that allows the child, working with a teacher, to discover his or her own individual talents and his or her own best techniques for learning. At the other pedagogical extreme is the view that it is the independent self-expression of the child, and not mastery of subject matter, that is the main goal of education. In its extreme form, as Dewey describes it, this view holds that "almost any kind of spontaneous activity inevitably secures the desired or desirable training of mental power." (LW8:153)

In his rejection of this view, Dewey argued that the teacher must play an active role in the educational process. The task of the teacher is to guide the child in his or her own quest, to direct the energies of the child away from what is debilitating or destructive, to focus the attention of the child on important themes and problems, and to help her or him develop the tools needed to play a full and productive role in society.

Dewey's own view of the relation of the child to the curriculum holds that education should emphasize both the child and the curriculum. Wherever one element is emphasized at the expense of the other, he argued, education remains one sided and out of balance. Neither the child's interests (the psychological side of the educational process) nor the teaching of subject matter that enables the child to understand the present and the prospects of civilization (education's sociological side) should be neglected at the expense of the other. Dewey wrote that these two aspects of education are "organically related and that education cannot be regarded as a compromise between the two, or a superimposition of one upon the other." (EW5:85).

Following a series of disagreements with University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper (1856__1906) concerning the administration of the Laboratory School, Dewey resigned his position in 1904 and accepted a joint appointment on the faculty of philosophy and the faculty of Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City. He continued to develop his educational theory in a series of works that included *Moral Principles in Education* (1909), *How We Think* (1910), *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915), *Democracy and Education* (1916), *Experience and Education* (1938), and dozens of essays and reviews.

Dewey was a strong advocate of professional teachers' unions. He helped organize the Teachers League of New York and encouraged its alignment with the American Federation of Labor. Educational leaders throughout the world sought his advice. He was a frequent speaker at the meetings of educational societies and he traveled widely, visiting schools in the Soviet Union, Turkey, South Africa, Mexico, Japan, and China. He died at his home in New York City on June 1, 1952. In Dewey's philosophy of education, as well as in his wider philosophy, several important and recurring strands are notable. One of them is his deep intellectual debt to the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770__1831). Even though he had abandoned most of the tenets of Hegelian idealism by the time of his arrival in Chicago, Dewey's earlier devotion to the works of Hegel had nevertheless left what he later termed a "permanent deposit in his thinking." His reading of Hegel had convinced him that cultures and societies are in continual flux and that progress, when it occurs, is the result of a reconstructive synthesis of trends and ideas that are often fiercely opposed to one another.

As his own thought matured, however, Dewey rejected Hegel's view that progress occurs on a grand scale and as a result of historical forces that are the work of an Absolute or World Spirit. He argued instead that when progress occurs it tends to be piecemeal and that it results from the work of individuals and groups who are engaged in a conscious reconstruction of their situations. Dewey thought that the most basic tool available to a society for such reconstruction is the education of its children.

It is by means of education, he argued, that "the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together. He becomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization" (EW5:84), and an active participant in the formation of its future. Sound education is thus for Dewey the most effective means of effecting social progress.

Dewey's thought was also strongly influenced by the naturalism of Charles Darwin (1809__1882). It was from Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, that Dewey got his concept of the human being as a highly complex natural organism that continually accommodates itself to some enviroing conditions and alters others to meet its needs. Dewey conceived of education as virtually synonymous with this evolutionary process.

Education is evolutionary in that it is an ongoing experiment in which the teacher leads the student to discover ways in which he or she can actively adjust to novel circumstances. Consequently, there can be no set rules for education. Dewey did think, however, that there are sound methods for

educational experimentation and that those methods themselves evolve as they are applied in an intelligent fashion.

Not everyone interpreted Darwin in the way that Dewey did. Some, including the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie (1835__1919), had interpreted Darwinism as a justification for the predatory treatment of workers. "Social Darwinism," as their view was known, held that the rich are the product of natural selection. Financial success was thus viewed as a mark of individual fitness, and poverty as a sign of individual failure. In one form or another, Social Darwinism has remained a durable residue within American social and political life.

Dewey rejected Social Darwinism as both self_serving and anti_democratic. He wrote that the "rugged individualism" advanced by Social Darwinists was dangerous, especially when applied to education. Instead of an individualism of "everyone for him or her self," a new concept of individualism was needed. This would be an individualism in which social cooperation would liberate the child from the constraints that prevented him or her from developing as an individual. The principal instrument of such liberation would be schools in which children were guided to develop their own latent talents and capacities and thus to sharpen their own unique instruments of adjustment within the life of the wider society.

Dewey's Darwinian naturalism led him to adopt several views that were highly controversial. The first was that manual training should be an integral part of primary and secondary education. This is so, he argued, because learning involves coordination of all of the capacities of the living organism, not just the "intellect." Children should be taught weaving, carpentry, cooking, and gardening not only as examples of problem_solving, but also because such skills involve the embodiment of knowledge and provide tools for further discovery and learning. If education is adjustment within an environment, as Dewey thought, then it is the whole person that adjusts, and not just the function or aspect of the organism we call the "intellect."

It was on precisely these grounds that Dewey rejected the two_track system of education proposed by some educators during the period immediately prior to World War I. Their suggestion was that children should be tested at an early age and then routed on the basis of aptitude into either "vocational" or "academic" schools. Dewey replied that such a system would undermine democracy by sanctioning the separation of "bookish" from "mechanical" education and creating a social chasm across which communication would be difficult. In his view, the two_track strategy would serve to reinforce the worst practices of the industrial system rather than reform them. "I object," he wrote, "to regarding as vocational education any training which does not have as its supreme regard the development of such intelligent initiative, ingenuity, and executive capacity as shall make workers, as far as they may be, the masters of their own industrial fate." (MW8:412)

Dewey also rejected the notion that intelligence tests should be used as a justification for two_track education, let alone a criterion for its application. Intelligence tests, along with other types of tests, might serve as tools of analysis for educators. But they should not be used to compare one child to another any more than should medical tests. "The notion that intelligence is a personal endowment or personal attainment," Dewey wrote, "is the great conceit of the intellectual class, as that of the commercial class is that wealth is something which they personally have wrought and possess." (LW2:367)

Dewey's target in these remarks was most likely one of his colleagues at Columbia, the educational psychologist E. L. Thorndike (1874__1949). Like Dewey, Thorndike thought that traditional notions of education were inadequate and in need of reform. But unlike Dewey, he argued that human children learned in much the same mechanical way that he thought laboratory animals are conditioned to perform rote tasks. He also held the view that intelligence was more or less innate and that precisely quantifiable tests afforded the educator the means of separating more educable pupils from those that are less so.

Dewey also rejected another form of two_track education. During a time when many educators considered women intellectually inferior to men and co_education was thought to do serious damage to the education of boys and young men by distracting them from their work and lowering instructional standards, Dewey mounted forceful arguments in defense of both equal education for women and co_educational classrooms.

Underlying Dewey's rejection of any form of two_track educational system was his revolutionary stance with respect to the problem traditionally known to philosophers as the "mind_body problem." His Darwinian naturalism is nowhere more evident than in his view that "body" and "mind" are just ways of

describing different functions of a whole organism, and not separate entities between which there exists some unbridgeable gap or mysterious relation. When human beings examine their experiences of themselves, he argued, they find no immediate experience of body and mind as separate. When such a distinction is made, it is only the result of an inference that differentiates among features of experience for some specific purpose. An important consequence of Dewey's naturalism was that he rejected arguments for the existence of a transcendent or immortal "soul." This position put him at odds with some of the more conservative religious thinkers of his time.

It was Dewey's view that most of the philosophers who have taken up the "mind_body problem" have tended to get matters backwards. Since the time of Plato there has been a tendency to accept the result of inquiry ___ in this case the differentiation of two functions of the whole organism, mind and body ___ as what must have existed as separate substances or entities prior to inquiry. Because of the prevalence of this fallacy in the history of philosophy, Dewey termed it "the philosopher's fallacy."

In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey coined the term "body_mind" to help express his own view of the "mind_body problem." "Body_mind," he wrote, "simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation." (LW1:217) Mind was thus for Dewey a function of highly complex and evolved organisms, and not, as it was for Plato (427?__347 B.C.) and Descartes (1596__1650), a substance or entity somehow separate from or locked up inside the body. Dewey sometimes used the verb "to mind" in place of the noun "mind" to refer to the mental functions of the organism.

Dewey's philosophy of education also represents a continuation and development of themes first advanced in the work of the American pragmatists Charles Sanders Peirce (1839__1914) and William James (1842__1910). One of the central themes of pragmatism was the view that inquiry should be undertaken in a controlled and experimental manner. Peirce had argued that all other methods of settling belief, such as just holding fast to old ideas, reliance on authority, or the acceptance of whatever seems amenable to reason, are inferior to thought that is experimental and thus self_corrective.

Because of his high regard for the experimental method, some of Dewey's critics accused him of espousing "scientism," or the view that the methods of physical sciences should serve as standards for all other types of thinking. But Dewey replied that this was a mistaken reading of his work as well as that of the other pragmatists. For Dewey, inquiry within the arts, history, and law, to take just three examples, is also experimental and by no means inferior to scientific inquiry. Inquiry in each of these fields contributes to and is in turn nourished by an over_arching "general method of intelligence." It is by means of their participation in this general method of intelligence that the various disciplines and subject matters are able to communicate with one another. Dewey thought that logic is best characterized as the study of this general method of intelligence.

Together with the other pragmatists, Dewey argued that all inquiry is initiated by doubt. Doubt is best described as an uneasy state of the organism in which equilibrium is lost and irritation is felt. The pragmatists thus rejected the claims of Descartes (1596__1650), that it is possible to doubt everything except one's own existence and that it is possible to doubt just by deciding to do so. Dewey presented his version of the pragmatic theory of inquiry to teachers in his widely read book *How We Think* (1910). In this work he advanced a five_step analysis of effective learning. In the first phase, there is an organic, emotional response to a situation that is unsettled or perhaps even threatening. What would be a normal course of action is inhibited due to one circumstance or another. But since something is at stake, the organism leaps to various suggestions for alleviating the irritation and regaining equilibrium.

Second, there is an intellectual response to the confused situation. There is an attempt to gather the strands of emotional response and immediate suggestions into a precise formulation of the problem at hand. Certain facts and the principles of their interpretation are selected as appropriate to the case under review, and others are rejected as irrelevant. In most cases there are no rules for the selection of facts and principles. Children may be taught to judge the relevance or irrelevance of data and their interpretation, however, even in the absence of rules. This is accomplished by teaching them good habits of inquiry. Dewey lists alertness, flexibility, and curiosity as tools that are essential to this phase of inquiry.

Third, after the problem has been clarified, some hypothesis or guiding idea must be produced which, if true, would lead to the resolution of the problem. This hypothesis is much more definite than a simple suggestion. It must be formulated with care and based on the analysis undertaken in the previous phase of inquiry. Unlike a mere suggestion, it must be testable. Dewey thought it of the utmost importance that children be taught the distinction between a suggestion based on an emotional response

and a carefully formulated hypothesis. The former is haphazard and unregulated. The latter is a tool whose use requires control and skill.

In the fourth stage of inquiry, the hypothesis must be subjected to reasoning, or "thought experiments." It must be elaborated, its possible consequences worked out, and its value relative to competing hypotheses calculated. Inferences must be drawn and connections made. Dewey thought that quantitative analysis often plays an important role in this stage of inquiry. This is because quantification often permits generalization to and from other, better known cases. But it is also important, he noted, that quantitative measurement be understood as a tool that leads to further results. If quantification becomes an end in itself, as is often the case in teaching to a test, for example, then full reach of inquiry is prematurely terminated and education suffers. Once the hypothesis is tested by thought experiments or reasoning in the fourth stage of inquiry, then the fifth and final stage of inquiry is devoted to tests that involve overt action. As Dewey put it, "conditions are deliberately arranged in accord with the requirements of an idea or hypothesis to see whether the results theoretically indicated by the idea actually occur." (LW8:205) If results turn out as predicted, new habits of action are produced and the irritation of doubt ceases. But even if the experiments fail, the exercise may still prove instructive.

Dewey thought that some form of this five-step experimental method of inquiry is apparent wherever true thinking and learning occur. Because it is the only self-corrective method of inquiry so far devised, it forms the basis for sound educational theory and practice and it serves as a primary tool for the development of democratic institutions.

Dewey exhibited a life-long concern with the problems and prospects of democracy as a form of social organization. He was aware that democracy is sometimes fragile and that it has many detractors. Nevertheless, he tirelessly advanced democracy both as a means to more effective and harmonious social arrangements and as a goal to be worked for.

There is perhaps no one book in which Dewey's philosophy of education is presented more clearly, and its connections to his wider philosophy and his concept of democracy made with more precision, than *Democracy and Education* (1916). A decade and a half after its publication, in a brief autobiographical essay, Dewey declared that it was the one book in which his philosophy was "most fully expounded." He added that it is in the philosophy of education that "other problems, cosmological, moral, logical, come to a head." (LW5:156) Dewey contended that all social life rests on communication, and that all communication is a form of education. But informal communication, and therefore informal education, tends to be haphazard. In order to control more effectively those enviroing conditions that are not what we wish them to be, especially the ever-changing technological environment, education itself must be carefully thought out and systematically undertaken. This means that it is no longer sufficient to teach children "The Great Books," or the accumulated knowledge of a society. They must also be taught to develop new tools for discovery and learning that will enable them to work together with other members of their society toward the goals of ascertaining and realizing common goods. Dewey's naturalism is evident in his characterization of education. Human life, like all other forms of life, is concerned with growth. Education is just the most efficient means of effecting growth. Its goal is the enrichment of the capacity for continuing renewal. Dewey explicitly rejected the view that education is just preparation for some future occupation. He likewise denied that its proper concern is the absorption of accumulated knowledge or the unfolding of capacities that already lie dormant in the child.

For Dewey, education is both a tool and an outcome of democratic practice. Education equips individuals for full participation in social life, and in its finest form it is the result of free and open social interaction. It is by means of education that individuals come to have a stake in society, and it is by means of the strengthened democratic institutions that result from education that the tools and techniques of education are improved. In education, just as in other forms of democratic practice, means and ends are continually adjusted to one another and are made to stand in a relation of cooperation with one another. Where means dominate ends, life becomes menial. Where ends dominate means, rigid ideologies and dogmas stifle creative thinking and learning.

Dewey's remarks in *Democracy and Education* also represent a further development of his concept of the place of values in education. He held that education requires no specific subject matter within the curriculum designated as "values," since the entire educational process is permeated with values. One of the principal aims of education is the development of critical tools that can be used to advance the growth and refinement of the student's appreciation of values.

It is the business of education, Dewey thought, to teach the child to appraise what is just "valued" with a view to determining what may prove to be "valuable." These terms, he suggested, are analogous to

"eaten" and "edible." Just as it is the case that some things that have been eaten do not prove to be edible, some things that are valued do not prove to be valuable. What is merely "valued" remains private and personal. It is subject to the vagaries of subjectivistic or egoistic interpretation. As such it tends to cut short interchange between individuals. On the other hand, what is "valuable" is what has been experimentally tested and proven to be of value. Since the very notion of experimental proof depends on communication within a democratic community of inquiry, what proves to be "valuable" will have been worked over, debated, refined, and reconstructed in a public forum.

It was Dewey's contention that one of the most important issues in education is the relation of knowledge to conduct. Knowledge that does not affect conduct is of little or no value. Education is thus a training of character and a training for citizenship. Character, for Dewey, is built up as the individual comes to understand and appreciate the consequences of his or her conduct and the relationships that such conduct involves. The school, as a miniature community, serves as a laboratory in which relations and connections can be explored. Good citizenship is one of the expressions of character. Because of his belief that education develops the capacities of the student to share effectively in social life, Dewey argued that all meaningful education is moral education.

By the 1920s, a generation of Dewey's students had become teachers and administrators in primary and secondary schools throughout the United States. In their zeal to reform the traditional "fundamentals and discipline" approach to education, however, an approach that Dewey had sharply criticized, some went to the opposite extreme. In their eagerness to construct a new "child_centered curriculum," focus was sometimes lost and the academic side of education dangerously diminished. "Progressive education," a term that had once described Dewey's own moderate and inclusive pedagogical views, came to be used to describe an education of "self expression," an extreme view that Dewey had sharply criticized. During the 1920s Dewey was put in the position of criticizing some of his own former students for what he regarded as their pedagogical excesses.

This situation grew even worse as the economic and social upheavals brought about by the Great Depression of the 1930s precipitated major debates concerning the role and function of education in society. Polarization between educational theorists on the competing extremes became acute. On one extreme there was a call for a return to the fundamentals of the "Three Rs," religious training in the public schools, the curtailment of academic freedom, and the dismissal of educators with "radical" views. On the other extreme, some educators argued that the traditional division of the curriculum into subjects was antiquated and counterproductive, that the child should have complete freedom to decide what to study, and that students should have extensive liberty of behavior so as to prevent "personality maladjustment."

As he had done since his years at Chicago, Dewey continued to criticize both of these views as one_sided and extreme. He argued that the proponents of the "discipline" or "fundamentals" approach were in danger of substituting indoctrination for education. He added that their program would have the effect of de_democratizing education by splitting off one religious community from another and by graduating students who were ill equipped to assess the wider context of their lives in a technological society and to contribute to its reform. In addition, he thought that the proponents of the "fundamentals" approach had placed themselves in an untenable position. Not only are fundamentals of any subject precisely what is most difficult for the beginning student to grasp; they are also the things that are the most disputed.

Dewey also criticized the other side, or what he termed the "would_be progressive teachers." (LW9:198) He charged that their pedagogical lassitude treated the raw materials of the child's interests in ways that "fixated" those interests in their primitive state. Such teachers tended to overlook their own responsibility for providing guidance for their pupils. Their desire to respect the "individuality" of the child, though admirable as an ideal, often had the effect of stunting development. Like the good gardener or the good metal worker, Dewey argued, the good teacher is one who cultivates and develops potentialities. The raw materials of the child's interests require skillful reconstruction and refinement.

The most succinct formulation of Dewey's educational theory is found in "My Pedagogic Creed," published in 1897. In that essay he stated his belief that education is the development of the child's capacities in ways that enable her or him to become an active and constructive participant in the life of society. The school is thus a form of community life, and not merely a preparation for something further. The subject matter of the school should involve the gradual differentiation of disciplinary studies out of "the primitive unconscious unity of social life." (EW5:88) Educational methods should aim at developing the child's capacities and interests. Finally, education is "the fundamental method of social progress and

reform." It is therefore the most basic moral duty of a community to provide its educators with the requisite resources to perform their tasks. In return, a community should demand that its educational system be a primary agent of social progress.