

Philosophers of Education

John Dewey's Growth Without End

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Past

John Dewey has been identified by some as the “bête noire of traditionalist educational reformers”¹ others as a profound thinker in the field of education.² Dewey was a leader in the progressive movement and a public intellectual with a worldwide presence for over 70 years from the 1880s until the 1950s.³ His philosophy of education was seen as progressive because it no longer expected the child to sit passively under the watchful, authoritarian eye of the tutor while memorizing archaic facts⁴ as the rod stood close at hand.

Like his predecessor John Jacque Rousseau, Dewey believes human beings are basically good, the curriculum should be child-centered, learning should be relevant, and books are not primary to the course of study.⁵ Despite these admirable ideas, he is accused of anti-intellectualism, watering down the curriculum and causing the downfall of education.⁶ Even with such disparaging claims, his numerous books have recently been republished for another generation to consider. Additionally, undeterred by criticism from individuals in the United States, Dewey's works are still being read internationally with resurgence in the 1980s.

¹ Edmonson, Henry T., *John Dewey & the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools has Corrupted Teaching and Learning*, (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006).

² Garrison, Jim, Neubert, Stefan, and Reich, Kersten, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: An Introduction and Recontextualization for Our Times*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), ix

³ Garrison, Neubert, and Reich, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Education: An Introduction and Recontextualization for Our Times*, xv

⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 360

⁵ Edmonson, *John Dewey & the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools has Corrupted Teaching and Learning*, 8-9

⁶ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 359

Dewey worked his entire life to develop a democratic education for all, which he defined as, “growth without end.”⁷ He was not intent on ridding the world of intelligence as he has been falsely accused, just the aristocratic system that allowed only the privileged to obtain it. Dewey also garners detractors by rejecting religion as supernaturalism while supporting a scientific, democratic, humanism.⁸ In his defense, it seems that with a true non-conformist attitude, Dewey was most interested in children questioning, reflecting, and coming to their own answers about life’s larger questions with as little outside sway as possible, even if that involved rejecting religion. As opposed to many educators of the day who valued religion as the basis of moral reasoning, Dewey believed that moral education would be learned at school via relationships with others as they worked and thought together;⁹ he also believed in saturating the student with the “spirit of service” as a moral guide.¹⁰ Shunned by some and lauded by others, Dewey is nothing if not controversial.

Present

Dewey’s educational philosophy deemed outdated and obtuse by many, is in fact very relevant in today’s technologically-driven world where the potential for growth is endless. His belief in the student-centered classroom, individualized student attention, hands-on learning, and practical application of knowledge deserves another look. With Dewey, the nature of the child guides education.¹¹ He believes in learning from experience and that intellectual and

⁷ Dewey, John, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916) 59-62

⁸ Edmonson, *John Dewey & the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools has Corrupted Teaching and Learning*, 21

⁹ Dewey, John, *On Education: Selected Writings*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 431

¹⁰ Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings*, 310

¹¹ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 369

applied sciences do not have to be separated. He never advocated for a directionless education¹² but believed the curriculum should be considered and revised often to reflect the child's desires.¹³ The separation of thinking and doing or a division between the leisured and working class were the very antithesis of a Deweyan education.¹⁴

Vocational education or skill development classes may have been inspired by Dewey but in some communities became a way to separate thinking from doing and helped to staff the assembly lines as industries boomed.¹⁵ In high schools today, career technical education (the old vocational) classes are offered as electives rather than as separate anti-intellectual pathways to graduation for non-college bound students. Programs in aquaculture, culinary arts, robotics, construction trades, child care, health care, and vehicular mechanics are but a few of the classes open to all students. Some of these classes no longer separate the thinkers from the doers; instead they offer an academic, skill-based, practical educational experience that is more reflective of Dewey's ideals.

Today's teachers are encouraged to use various techniques to meet the individual learning needs of each child. They perform testing, administer learning style inventories, use formative and summative evaluations, and give needs assessments to help identify methods of individualized instruction. Lesson plans abound with differentiated instructional methodologies. Dewey, writing almost 100 years ago, believes that though teachers have to plan the curriculum for the year, they should be flexible enough to incorporate student generated educational questions, ideas, or subjective learning needs into the daily plan. It is the school's duty to meet

¹² Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 374

¹³ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 376

¹⁴ Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 379

¹⁵ Crawford, Matthew B. *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 31

the individual needs of the child.¹⁶ “Since what the child already knows is part of some one subject that the teacher is trying to teach him, the method that will take advantage of this experience as a foundation stone on which to build the child’s conscious knowledge of the subject appears as the normal and progressive way of teaching.”¹⁷

Dewey found that in 1915, as today, many children did not know where milk or eggs came from, other than a store.¹⁸ He would want teachers to provide an opportunity for children to experience collecting eggs from chickens or milking a cow. Teachers capable of helping students see the connections among the subjects of study and personal experience, such as having milk and eggs for breakfast and learning about food production, are able to enhance the learning process. A simplistic example which demonstrates, “The true value of anything is most apparent to the person who knows something about it.”¹⁹ Far from being a blank slate, all students are seen as knowledgeable according to Dewey. It is the teacher’s task to assist the student to build upon that knowledge.

Dewey has been criticized for not using books in the classroom²⁰ but in fact, Dewey does not eschew books instead he believes that the student learns best from experience and activity. It is true that books do not hold the preeminent position any more than the teacher plays a predominate role in the classroom. The book and teacher become guides for the student but hands-on activities do not take the place of books.²¹ According to Dewey, “If textbooks are used

¹⁶ Dewey, John, and Dewey, Evelyn, *Schools of Tomorrow*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1915), 44

¹⁷ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 72

¹⁸ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 98

¹⁹ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 95

²⁰ Edmonson, *John Dewey & the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools has Corrupted Teaching and Learning*, 9

²¹ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 74

as the sole material, the work is much harder for the teacher, for besides teaching everything herself she must constantly repress and cut off the impulses of the child towards action.”²²

Also seen in many classrooms today, experiential learning is vital to Dewey’s educational philosophy. Using tools, varying work, and solving problems in a cooperative setting are part of the learning.²³ When large projects are in progress the classroom will look messy, disordered, and confused to an outsider; “Of course, order is simply a thing which is relative to an end.”²⁴ Instead of having a still, quiet, passive student, Dewey wants the student’s whole body engaged in learning.²⁵ Dewey equates uniformity with conformity which he does not think is the best interest of the student’s education.

Parents today might question teachers who do not assign homework. They may feel short-changed or fear their child will be less able to compete for the top schools unless hours of study also continue after school.²⁶ With its questionable value to learning and its time-draining commitment, some schools are decreasing homework. In one of the early Dewey schools in Missouri, the professor also did not assign homework because he believed it was not fair to ask students to do school work at home. Students were to look at school as a pleasurable activity and if work was also assigned in the home, it was thought to lessen the interest in school.²⁷ The purpose of the Dewey school is to, “give the child an education which will make him a better, happier, more efficient human being, by showing him what his capabilities are and how he can

²² Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 73

²³ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 89

²⁴ Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings*, 302

²⁵ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 74

²⁶ Greenfeld, Karl Taro, “My Daughter’s Homework is Killing Me”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2013.

²⁷ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 56

exercise them, both materially and socially, in the world he finds about him.”²⁸ What more could society want?

How does Dewey influence me in the classroom? After teaching for three years in a secondary health science classroom, I was beginning to prepare for National Board Certification and wanted a philosophy to guide my responses to the board questions. I studied William James and John Dewey in preparation for the exam. It was Dewey that lent support to my pragmatic, experiential style of teaching that had intuitively developed from my years as a registered nurse and college teacher. Based on Dewey’s philosophy, I came to believe that knowing without doing is as equally ineffectual as doing without knowing. Also, supported by Dewey’s ideas, I believe in the learner-centered classroom and that students must see the utility of their education. If they sit passively in a classroom taking notes, memorizing facts, and then expelling these facts on standardized tests, students have little belief that learning has occurred. What is it that students can do but pass a paper and pencil test? Students must know information but then must be able to apply that information to real world problems before its worth can be pragmatically assessed. Dewey believes experiences should be educative when used in the classroom he recognizes that not all experiences are equally educative. Teachers must question why they are teaching what they are teaching and the way in which they are teaching it, then, seek out genuinely educative experiences to inspire students. They must help to meet the needs of our society by determining what students will be able to do with the information they are teaching. Dewey says, “To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.”

²⁸ Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of Tomorrow*, 58

How else is Dewey relevant today? Many of his ideas are supported by a popular book about the art and craft of motorcycle repair, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, by author Matthew Crawford who argues for intellectual and manual competence.²⁹ With a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Chicago and five months experience at a lucrative job with a Washington think tank, Crawford quits to open a motorcycle repair shop. During his time in the white collar world as a writer of abstracts, teacher, and head of a think tank, he was stifled and tired. Much of what he did at work felt artificial and of questionable value. Once he entered the manual trades as a full-time career, he found the intellectual challenge, manual skill, and moral value that were missing from the abstract world of a job he could little explain. According to Dewey, “The world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation, something to do.”³⁰ Crawford found his calling in a bike shop.

An underlying theme in Crawford’s book is that the best education is experience. He argues that the manual trades can offer engagement and nourishment to the soul. Crawford goes on to describe how the very experienced doctor or motorcycle mechanic can assess a situation and come to a correct diagnosis about a problem seemingly intuitively. Dewey would have correlated this ability with deep learning rather than the cursory skimming of knowledge which occurs when learning does not involve experience. In fact Dewey says, “...the only training that becomes intuition, is that got [sic] through life itself.”³¹

Musingly, Crawford asks, “Given the intrinsic richness of manual work --- cognitively, socially, and in its broader psychic appeal--- the question becomes why it has suffered such a

²⁹ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*

³⁰ Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings*, 306

³¹ Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings*, 302

devaluation as a component of education?"³² He continues to reflect on this disconnect between thinking and doing and the detrimental impact it has on society throughout the book. In early education, the skills classes were not always separated from academics. Crawford mentions the positive impact of the *Smith-Hughes Act of 1917* which federally funded skills training for general as well as vocational classes so that all children could participate in manual training.³³ These skills classes could be used by the children for enrichment or industrial arts education. In a thought almost taken straight from Dewey, Crawford says, "The best sort of democratic education is neither snobbish nor egalitarian. Rather, it accords a place of honor in our common life to whatever is best."³⁴

Crawford bemoans the fact that today too many people know very little about how things work or how to repair them when they cease to do so. Crawford's defense of the manual arts reflects Dewey's desire for students to understand the actual work for it to have meaning to them.³⁵ As a pragmatist, Dewey might look at today's job market and proclaim that learning manual skills and developing social interactions in school are even more relevant in a technological world still separated into blue-collar and white-collar workers.

In the closing chapter of his book, Crawford says, "... real knowledge arises through confrontations with real things"³⁶ ... for thinking is inherently bound up with doing, and it is in

³² Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, 27

³³ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, 30

³⁴ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, 32

³⁵ Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings*, 306

³⁶ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, 199

rational activity together with others that we find our peculiar satisfaction."³⁷ Dewey could not have articulated his own philosophy better.

³⁷ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft*, 208

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