

# John dewey essay



For John Dewey, education and democracy are intimately connected.

According to Dewey good education should have both a societal purpose and purpose for the individual student. For Dewey, the long-term matters, but so does the short-term quality of an educational experience. Dewey criticizes traditional education for lacking in holistic understanding of students and designing curricula overly focused on content rather than content and process which is judged by its contribution to the well-being of individuals and society. Dewey's theory is that experience arises from the interaction of two principles; continuity and interaction.

The value of the experience is to be judged by the effect that experience has on the individual's present, their future, and the extent to which the individual is able to contribute to society. Throughout, there is a strong emphasis on the subjective quality of a student's experience and the necessity for the teacher of understanding the students' past experiences in order to effectively design a sequence of liberating educational experiences to allow the person to fulfill their potential as a member of society. John Dewey's Philosophy on Education " Education is a social process. Education is growth.

Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself" (Dover, 1958). Arguably the most influential thinker on education in the twentieth century, Dewey's contribution lies along several fronts; His attention to experience and reflection democracy and community and to environments for learning have been seminal. John Dewey was born October 20, 1859, in Burlington, Vermont. His father, Archibald, left the family tradition of farming, which had

been followed for three generations, to become a grocer in the small city of Burlington. Dewey's mother, Lucina, also came from a farm family.

Archibald sold the grocery business when he volunteered to join the Union Army in the Civil War, but after the war he became owner of a cigar and tobacco shop. John and his two brothers grew up in a middle-class household in a community that included "old Americans" as well as new immigrants from Ireland and French Quebec. Lucina Dewey carried out philanthropic work with poor families living in the industrial section of Burlington. At his mother's request, Dewey joined the First Congregational Church at age eleven, although he later sought a more liberal religious perspective than was evident in his mother's conservative church.

Dewey completed his grade-school work in Burlington's public schools at age 12. He selected the college-preparatory track in high school, starting in 1872 and completed his high school courses in three years. He began attending the University of Vermont, in Burlington, in 1875, when he was 16 years old. The classical curriculum was similar to Dewey's high school courses, emphasizing Greek and Latin, English literature, math, and rhetoric; however, the faculty "encouraged their students to be themselves and to think their own thoughts" (Dover, p. 0) and by his senior year, Dewey was immersed in studies of political, social, and moral philosophy. Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879. Through a relative, he obtained a high school teaching position in Oil City, Pennsylvania, where he was part of a three-member faculty for two years. Dewey returned to Vermont in 1881, where he combined high school teaching with continuing study of philosophy, under the tutoring of Dewey's former undergraduate

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professor, Henry A. P. Torrey. In September 1882, Dewey entered Johns Hopkins University to begin graduate studies in philosophy.

Johns Hopkins was one of the first American universities to offer graduate instruction that was considered comparable to the European universities, with emphasis on original scholarly research as an expectation for graduate students as well as faculty members. Dewey was cautioned by several advisors, including the president of Johns Hopkins, Daniel C. Gilman, that he would be unlikely to obtain a university teaching position in philosophy without advanced training in Christian theology. Nevertheless, Dewey continued to study philosophy, as well as history and political science as minors (Simon ; Schuster, 1997).

Dewey's academic mentor, Morris, also taught at the University of Michigan, and Morris recommended Dewey for a junior faculty position at Michigan. After the completion of his Ph. D. , Dewey received an appointment as an instructor of philosophy at Michigan, where he began teaching in September 1884. With Morris as department head, the Michigan philosophy department moved from the prevailing approach in American academic study of philosophy, which combined classical philosophy with Christian theology and was rarely critical of theological presuppositions.

Instead, the Michigan philosophy department emphasized studies of British and German philosophy, particularly neo-Hegelian German idealism. (Simon & Schuster, 1997) Dewey, like others in the department, taught a variety of courses and wrote a number of articles. Two articles published in the journal *Mind* in 1886 brought Dewey to the attention of the scholarly community. In

these articles Dewey attempted to bring together views of philosophy and psychology; he argued that philosophy did not need a special methodology, since it is an expanded or more comprehensive psychology.

At Michigan, Dewey also was involved in founding and supporting a number of student organizations, including the Philosophical Society, the Students' Christian Association, and the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, which studied the issues and connections between public secondary schools and universities. At the time Dewey helped found this organization (1886), the University's policy of "open admission" to all Michigan high school graduates with diplomas from "approved" high schools had been in operation for only 15 years. Dewey's first book, *Psychology*, was published in 1887.

In it, he explained a single philosophical system that was based on connections between the scientific study of psychology and German idealist philosophy (p. 50). The book was well-received by some scholars and was adopted as a textbook at several universities, but it was criticized by Dewey's former professor of psychology, G. Stanley Hall, and by Hall's mentor, the philosopher William James. Dewey's growing reputation as a scholar and teacher led to an offer to join the faculty at the University of Minnesota. Dewey accepted the position of Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy in 1888.

He remained at Minnesota for only one year, and then returned to Michigan in 1889 to serve as Chair of the Department of Philosophy, after the sudden death of his mentor, George Morris. Dewey continued to teach, write, and be

involved in campus and community issues. As one biographer notes, the early 1890s was the time when “ democracy in all its phases; political, economic, social, cultural, came to claim Dewey’s strongest allegiance and to command his deepest loyalties; interest in social aid and social reform groups began to replace his interest in the Church” (Dover, p. 3). Dewey remained at Michigan until 1894, when he was recruited by William Rainey Harper to join the faculty at the four-year-old University of Chicago. Like Johns Hopkins, the University of Chicago was founded explicitly to stress graduate research and scholarship, with faculty members expected to publish outstanding scholarly work as well as demonstrate excellence in teaching. With Harper’s encouragement, Dewey added several faculty members to the Philosophy Department, including former Michigan colleagues James H.

Tufts, George Herbert Mead, and James R. Angell. Dewey’s department was intended to bring together philosophy, psychology, and the study of pedagogy, focusing on relationships between elementary and secondary school teachers and university educators. Dewey argued that pedagogy should be a separate department which would train its students to be specialists in education. Harper endorsed Dewey’s proposal, and appointed Dewey to head the new pedagogy department as well as the philosophy department.

In the late 1890’s, Dewey’s writings began to reflect his break from his neo-Hegelian idealist view and his movement toward a new philosophical stance, which would later be recognized as pragmatism. Also at this time, Dewey expended much energy in developing the curriculum of the Department of

Pedagogy. By 1900, 23 different education courses were available at Chicago. In 1896, the department's experimental school, called the University Elementary School, opened. By the early 1900s, Chicago's program (now called the Department of Education) was considered "the most rounded and comprehensive in the country" (Prometheus, p. 1) and included association with two elementary schools as well as the high school level Chicago Manual Training School. Eventually, Dewey's writing about education made him the acknowledged leader in American educational philosophy. Dewey resigned his position at the University of Chicago in 1904 (after considerable political wrangling about various issues in the Department of Education). He was soon offered a professorship at Columbia University, with appointments in Philosophy and the Teacher's College.

Dewey remained at Columbia until the end of his active teaching career in 1930, and his most noted works in philosophy and education were completed while he was associated with Columbia. He continued his teaching as an emeritus professor until 1939, and then retired completely from university activities. Dewey continued to write and speak about intellectual and social issues until shortly before his death on June 1, 1952. Dewey's educational theories were presented in *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897), *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938).

Throughout these writings, several recurrent themes ring true; Dewey continually argues that education and learning are social and interactive processes, and thus the school itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place. In addition, he believed that

students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning. Dewey's theory is that experience arises from the interaction of continuity and interaction.

The most common misunderstanding about Dewey is that he was simply supporting progressive education. Progressive education, according to Dewey, was a wild swing in the philosophical pendulum, against traditional education methods. In progressive education, freedom was the rule, with students being relatively unconstrained by the educator. The problem with progressive education, said Dewey, is that freedom alone is no solution. Learning needs a structure and order, and must be based on a clear theory of experience, not simply the whim of teachers or students.

Thus, Dewey proposed that education be designed on the basis of a theory of experience. We must understand the nature of how humans have the experiences they do, in order to design effective education. In this respect, Dewey's theory of experience rested on two central tenets; continuity and interaction. Continuity refers to the notion that humans are sensitive to (or are affected by) experience. Humans survive more by learning from experience after they are born than do many other animals that rely primarily on pre-wired instinct.

In humans, education is critical for providing people with the skills to live in society. Dewey argued that we learn something from every experience, whether positive or negative and ones accumulated learned experience influences the nature of one's future experiences. Thus, every experience in



some way influences all potential future experiences for an individual.

Continuity refers to this idea that s each experience is stored and carried on into the future, whether one likes it or not.

Interaction builds upon the notion of continuity and explains how past experience interacts with the present situation, to create one's present experience. Dewey's hypothesis is that your current experience can be understood as a function of your past (stored) experiences which interacting with the present situation to create an individual's experience. This explains the "one man's meat is another man's poison" maxim (Prometheus, p. 20). Any situation can be experienced in profoundly different ways because of unique individual differences e. g. one student loves school, another hates the same school. This is important for educators to understand. Whilst they can't control students' past experiences, they can try to understand those past experiences so that better educational situations can be presented to the students. Ultimately, all a teacher has control over is the design of the present situation. The teacher with good insight into the effects of past experiences which students bring with them better enables the teacher to provide quality education which is relevant and meaningful for the students.

Let me draw an example so you can understand why I believe in John's philosophy of Education; my experience of a lesson will depend on how the teacher arranges and facilitates the lesson, as well my past experience of similar lessons and teachers. It is important to understand that, for Dewey, no experience has predictable value. Consequently, what may be a rewarding experience for one person could be an unfavorable experience for another. The value of the experience is to be judged by the effect that

experience has on the individual's present, their future, and the degree to which the individual is able to contribute to society.

Dewey states that once we have a theory of experience, then educators can set about gradually organizing our subject matter in a way that it takes accounts of students' past experiences, and then provides them with experiences which will help to open up, rather than shut down, a person's access to future growth experiences, thereby expanding the person's likely contribution to society. The ideas of democracy and social reform are continually discussed in Dewey's writings on education. Dewey (1897) makes a strong case for the importance of education not only as a place to gain content knowledge, but also as a place to learn how to live.

In his eyes, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. He notes that " to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (p. 6). In addition to helping students realize their full potential, Dewey goes on to acknowledge that education and schooling are instrumental in creating social change and reform.

He notes that " education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (p. 16). In addition to his ideas regarding what education is and what effect it should have on society, Dewey also had specific notions

regarding how education should take place within the classroom. In *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), Dewey discusses two major conflicting schools of thought regarding educational pedagogy.

The first is centered on the curriculum and focuses almost solely on the subject matter to be taught. Dewey argues that the major flaw in this methodology is the inactivity of the student; within this particular framework, “the child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened” (p. 13). He argues that in order for education to be most effective, content must be presented in a way that allows the student to relate the information to prior experiences, thus deepening the connection with this new knowledge.

At the same time, Dewey was alarmed by many of the “child-centered” excesses of educational-school pedagogues who claimed to be his followers, and he argued that too much reliance on the child could be equally detrimental to the learning process. In this second school of thought, “we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him; it is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning” (Dewey, 1902, p. 13-14). According to Dewey, the potential flaw in this line of thinking is that it minimizes the importance of the content as well as the role of the teacher.

In order to rectify this dilemma, Dewey advocated for an educational structure that strikes a balance between delivering knowledge while also taking into account the interests and experiences of the student. He notes that “the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single

process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction" (Dewey, 1902, p. 16). It is through this reasoning that Dewey became one of the most famous proponents of hands-on learning or experiential education, which is related to, but not synonymous with experiential learning. He argued that "if knowledge comes from the impressions made upon us by natural objects, it is impossible to procure knowledge without the use of objects which impress the mind" (Dewey, 1916, p. 217-218). Dewey's ideas went on to influence many other influential experiential models and advocates. Many researchers even credit him with the influence of Project Based Learning (PBL) which places students in the active role of researchers. Dewey not only re-imagined the way that the learning process should take place, but also the role that the teacher should play within that process.

According to Dewey, the teacher should not be one to stand at the front of the room doling out bits of information to be absorbed by passive students. Instead, the teacher's role should be that of facilitator and guide. As Dewey (1897) explains it; the teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences (p. 9). Thus the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, guiding students to independently discover meaning within the subject area.

This philosophy has impacted education and become an increasingly popular idea within present-day teacher preparatory programs today. Why do so many students hate school? It seems an obvious, but ignored question.

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Dewey said that an educator must take into account the unique differences between each student. Each person is different genetically and in terms of past experiences. Even when a standard curriculum is presented using established pedagogical methods, each student will have a different quality of experience.

Thus, teaching and curriculum must be designed in ways that allow for such individual differences. For Dewey, education was also a broader social purpose, which was to help people become more effective members of democratic society. Dewey argued that the one-way delivery style of authoritarian schooling does not provide a good model for life in democratic society. Instead, students need educational experiences which enable them to become valued, equal, and responsible members of society. The paradigm war still goes on.

On the one hand, fairly structured, disciplined, and ordered instructive tradition education vs. relatively unstructured, free, student-directed progressive education. Dewey passes judgment on traditional education for lacking in holistic understanding of students and designing curricula excessively focused on content rather than content and process which is judged by its contribution to the well-being of individuals and society. On the other hand, progressive education, he argues, is too intransigent and takes a free approach without really knowing how or why freedom can be most constructive in education.

Dewey argues that we must move beyond this paradigm war, and to do that we need a theory of experience. Hence, Dewey argues that educationalist

must first understand the nature of human experience. There is a strong emphasis on the subjective quality of a student's experience and the obligation for the teacher of understanding the students' past experiences in order to successfully design a series of liberating educational experiences to allow the person to perform their potential as a member of society.

Growth, experience, and activity are the preferred terms by Dewey to describe the tying of learning to social, communicative activity that allows a community to prosper successfully. While studying education as an undergraduate, I simply read Dewey's articles to prepare for class discussions. His views on education and learning were interesting but I never really gave them much thought. After gaining some educational experience, however, Dewey's perspectives seem more relevant and I find myself comparing his theories to modern issues.

While reviewing *Democracy and Education*, several points caught my attention as theories that still ring true today: " Any education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group" (Dover, 1958, p. 90). This idea guided schools to create curriculums with learner outcomes in mind. " Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought" (Dover, 1958, p. 56).

Using different modes of instruction is one way to keep the brain active, as shown in modern brain scans. Travel, economic and commercial tendencies, have at present gone far to break down external barriers; to bring peoples and classes into closer and more perceptible connection with one another"

(Dover, 1958, p. 45). Many universities require or encourage travel abroad programs to give students a broader perspective of the world.

School facilities must be secured of such amplitude and efficiency as will in fact and not simply in name discount the effects of economic inequalities, and secure to all the wards of the nation equality of quipment for their future careers”(Dover, 1958, p. 44). Inequality is still a major issue plaguing our schools today and there is much debate over the best way to fix this issue. In conclusion, after reviewing John Dewey’s works I have a deeper understanding of Dewey’s legacy on the field of education. John Dewey had a profound impact on education and his influence is still evident in schools today. He was an educational reformer, teacher, activist, philosopher and many other things.

His works spanned several areas including education, logic, ethics, politics, war and religious experience. I believe education is a social process and school is a method for preparing students to function as members of a society. As we venture into a new country St. Maarten, it will be interesting to see the changes that occur in the field of education. John Dewey offers amazing insights into the nature of learning and the role of socialization throughout history. His perspectives on education could serve as a foundation for the future methods of the learning process.