

Democracy and Education: Dewey and Adult Learners Today

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In our conference presentation, we sought to emphasize that in his well-known book, *Democracy and Education* (1916), John Dewey's goal was to describe an education appropriate to a democracy. Certainly, he also believed that that his approach was a more humane way of teaching and, as many have argued since (e.g., Paley, 1992; Rogers, 1969, 1983), a more effective way for students to learn. However, his primary goal was to argue for a form of education that allowed students to be their own free agents in learning. (For a contemporary restatement of this viewpoint, see also Biesta, 2017.) Although he wrote about education for children, his ideas are easily applied to education at all stages of life. (Dewey is sometimes credited with being one of the first to advocate "life-long" learning; see e.g., Cross-Durant, 1987.)

As we think about Dewey's philosophy of education, two key components stand out:

- his emphasis upon creating independent and free-thinking individuals who, working with others, are flexible enough to respond productively to new developments in the modern age and
- his determination to maximize diversity by supporting individual student interests, talents, and purposes.

In other words, he strongly opposed a model of learning that assumes information must be poured into empty brains. And, he stood firmly against standardization as an appropriate goal or outcome in education. As presented in the first few chapters of *Democracy and Education* (and also in his later book, *Experience and Education*), he uses the insights he gained from observing informal learning in everyday life as the basis for the school-based pedagogy that he proposed.

Today, many writers have noted that a substantial number of American citizens seem to be showing an increasing preference for autocracy in our government (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Rebell, 2018). We would argue that this preference may be due, at least in part, to our failure to educate students in the ways proposed by Dewey. Surely, as Dewey would understand it, our current educational purposes and methods—with their emphasis upon learning from lectures and textbooks, or pre-written online courses, in order to reproduce established knowledge on standardized tests—are more in tune with an autocratic society than a democratic one.

Most students today graduate from high school poorly prepared to be effective participants in a democracy. They have not been taught to follow their own train of thought, to entertain doubt or uncertainty, or to appreciate the value of diverse perspectives that inevitably emerge when they work with each other. It is not simply that students are insufficiently educated; they have been taught the wrong skills. Without doubt, they been thoroughly exposed to vast quantities of information, but when they graduate, instead of welcoming the challenges of the future, they desperately look for the security of authority in an already-known world. Thus, college instructors who do want to encourage critical thinking, open-mindedness, imaginative approaches to ill-defined or as yet undetermined problems find themselves being forced into trying to undo 12 years of prior education rather than what they may have expected to do—to strengthen students' capacity to think for themselves.

Older college students, however, are quite interesting. They also come to college similarly anticipating that they will learn about the right authorities to look to in obtaining information they are expected to ingest and feed back onto tests. Yet as adults, many years out of school, they have been learning on their own to make decisions and choices, to acquire skills needed at home or at work, to improve life for others, and to contribute to their communities. In short, in the many years out of school, adults typically have acquired an impressive set of work skills along with personal knowledge of importance in their lives. They have reared children, made a living, managed a household, dealt with complicated human relationships, all of which have resulted in a considerable amount of knowledge they acquired on their own and considerable skill in dealing with problems, raising questions and assessing options.

Those of us who have worked in the area of prior learning assessments (PLA; where students request academic credits for what they learned outside the academy) are regularly impressed with the depth and breadth of our adult students' non-academic knowledge (e.g., Smith, 2010, 2018). Most relevant to our argument and presentation, we have also noted that when they are encouraged to seek credit for this knowledge (the extent of which they often fail to fully appreciate), they are far readier to approach their academic studies in the ways Dewey recommends than are traditional-aged students without this extended period of learning on their own.

Thus, it seems to us, given the current rather rigid state of education (e.g., its domination by textbook companies, testing industries, government bureaucracies, and demands for credentials), that the best place to begin rethinking current-day educational practices, which we believe may be helping to undermine our democratic institutions, should be with our adult college students.

Conference Approach

We began our session by giving a brief description of Dewey's philosophy of education and his belief that schools should reflect the society in which the education they offer takes place. We also noted the extent to which our current methods of education seem better suited for autocratic societies and that, alarmingly, many our citizens today do indeed seem drawn to autocratic leaders (or at least leaders who claim to know the truth). We then asked the adult educators in attendance whether our current methods of teaching need to be reconsidered. We posed the following two basic questions:

- Can we as teachers break away from the standardization so prevalent in colleges today at least with our older students?
- Could prior learning assessment be used more intentionally as a tool for helping students recognize the value of their natural learning methods and increase their appreciation of freedom in learning as critically important in a democratic society?

Conference Outcomes

Approximately 20 teachers and graduate students participated in the discussion. All were deeply concerned about the current challenges to democracy in everyday life; most were receptive to the important role of education; and at least half of those present were eager to share their relevant

teaching experiences. Six or seven teachers described in detail some of the innovative methods they introduced to either encourage students to think creatively about the subject area, to be substantively involved in shaping the course itself, to identify their own relevant interests and experiences, or to work collaboratively on open-ended issues. Without exception, these examples were drawn from face-to-face classes. The few online courses that were mentioned were “blended” versions; thus, it may be that a focus on independent thinking is most easily accomplished in brick-and-mortar classrooms. For the most part, the classes described were at the advanced (or graduate) level, and the students were older.

Surprisingly, no one took up prior learning or its assessment as a potential area for intentionally advancing student independence and freedom of thought. Time was too short to investigate reasons for ignoring this topic. We can speculate, however, that those present were not personally involved in or knowledgeable about PLA. At most institutions, the award of credit for prior knowledge is largely a process for undergraduates, and many of the conference attendees represented graduate programs. Also, it is our impression (and somewhat contrary to our own personal experience) that prior learning requests are increasingly the outcome of a course taught by an expert in the field; thus, the only individual faculty who would come to know about this process are those few called upon to do formal assessments. It’s also the case that in many institutions, PLA itself has been shaped around standardized exams, thus undercutting its openness to student efforts to identify knowledge they have gained on their own. If these speculations are correct, we should not have been surprised to find no one interested in pursuing this possible area. One of us has argued elsewhere (Coulter, 2017) that if prior learning assessments could encompass any form of college-level learning and include all faculty in its assessment, the college itself—and faculty attitudes toward the nature of knowledge—would be greatly enriched. To that argument, we can add here that such a broad approach might also enhance students’ understanding of and appreciation for the freedoms a democratic society offers. How that might take place is clearly a subject for a future presentation.

In seeking to better prepare our students to live democratically (and to resist the attractions of autocracy), we are faced with the near-impossibility of empirically testing whether graduates who experience so-called progressive (i.e., Dewey-inspired) education are better able to navigate the messiness of democracy than those who experience more authoritarian methods of education. It might, however, be possible to at least measure student attitudes about freedom and democracy before and after individual classroom experiences that do or do not emphasize student independence, or to engage in other ways of investigating the impact of student autonomy in the classroom on their readiness or willingness to engage in democratic behaviors in other settings.

Thus, we conclude this presentation summary by urging faculty who teach adult students to reconsider their dependence upon lectures, textbooks, and standardized exams. If we want our students, particularly undergraduates, to value and thrive in democracy, we urge the reader to study Dewey and other progressive educators in order to try out more democratic ways of teaching. Note, for example, current interest in the so-called “flipped classroom” (Reidsema, 2017) or ways technology, rather than spawning pre-set online courses, can also help promote independence, creative thinking and collaboration (e.g., Collins & Halverson, 2018). We would argue that if ability to navigate in a diverse, complex and question-filled world is our ultimate goal rather than high test scores and

soaring grades, we *can* find ways to determine whether that goal can be advanced by what we do in our individual classrooms if we make the effort to do so.

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