



JOHN DEWEY - PHILOSOPHER AND EDUCATIONAL REFORMER

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"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."

John Dewey

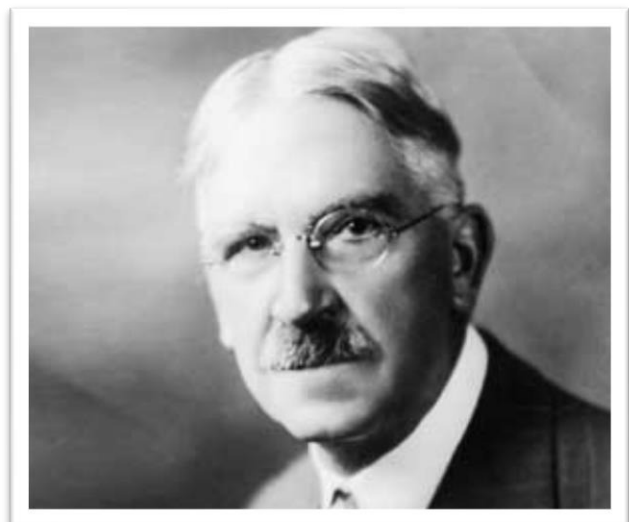
Abstract

John Dewey was an American philosopher and educator, founder of the philosophical movement known as pragmatism, a pioneer in functional psychology, and a leader of the progressive movement in education in the United States.

Keywords: John Dewey, educational reform, functional psychology, pragmatism

Introduction

John Dewey was born on October 20, 1859, in Burlington, Vermont. He graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Vermont in 1879. After two years as a high-school teacher in Oil City, Pennsylvania and one teaching elementary school in the small town of Charlotte, Vermont, Dewey decided that he was unsuited for employment in primary or secondary education. After studying with George Sylvester Morris, Charles Sanders Peirce, Herbert Baxter Adams, and G. Stanley Hall, Dewey



received his Ph.D. from the School of Arts & Sciences at Johns Hopkins University. His unpublished and now lost dissertation was titled "*The Psychology of Kant.*"

He started teaching philosophy and psychology at the University of Michigan in 1884. In time, his interests progressively moved from the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to the new experimental influences on psychology of G. Stanley Hall and the pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. Additional study of child psychology encouraged Dewey to develop a philosophy of education that would encounter the requests of a new dynamic democratic society.

In 1894, he joined the faculty of philosophy at the University of Chicago, where he further promoted his progressive pedagogy in the university's Laboratory Schools. In 1904, Dewey left Chicago for Columbia University in New York City, where he spent the majority of his career and wrote his most famous philosophical work, *"Experience and Nature"* (1925).

His succeeding writing, which comprised articles in popular publications, treated subjects in education, aesthetics, politics, and religion. John Dewey also wrote about many other topics including experience, nature, art, logic, inquiry, democracy, and ethics. He served as a major stimulus for various allied philosophical movements that designed the thought development of 20th century, including empiricism, humanism, naturalism and contextualism. He ranks among the highest thinkers of his age on the subjects of pedagogy, philosophy of mind, epistemology, logic and philosophy of science, social and political theory. Being one of the leading psychological and philosophical figures of his time, he was elected as the president of the American Psychological Association and president of the American Philosophical Association in 1899 and 1905 respectively. Dewey published more than 700 articles in 140 journals and approximately 40 books in his lifetime.

The main theme underlying Dewey's philosophy was his belief that a democratic society of informed and engaged inquirers was the best means of promoting human interests. As Dewey himself stated in 1888, while still at the University of Michigan:

"Democracy and the one, ultimate, ethical ideal of humanity are to my mind synonymous."

Known for his advocacy of democracy, Dewey believed that two fundamental elements, schools and civil society, to be major elements deserving consideration and reconstruction in order to encourage experimental intelligence and plurality. Dewey affirmed that complete democracy was to be gained not just by extending voting rights, but also by ensuring that among voters exists a fully formed public opinion accomplished by communication between citizens, experts, and politicians, with the latter being accountable for the policies they adopt.

Life and works

In 1894, Dewey joined the newly founded University of Chicago (1894–1904) where he developed his belief in Rational Empiricism, becoming associated with the newly

emerging Pragmatic philosophy. His time at the University of Chicago resulted in four essays collectively entitled *Thought and its Subject-Matter*, which was published with collected works from his colleagues at Chicago under the collective title *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903).

During that time, Dewey also initiated the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where he was able to actualize the pedagogical beliefs that provided material for his first major work on education, *"The School and Society"* (1899). Divergences with the administration ultimately triggered his resignation from the University, and soon thereafter, he relocated near the East Coast.

In 1899, Dewey was designated president of the American Psychological Association. From 1904 until his retirement in 1930, he was professor of philosophy at both Columbia University and Columbia University's Teachers College.

In 1905, he became president of the American Philosophical Association. He was a longtime member of the American Federation of Teachers.

Along with the historians Charles A. Beard and James Harvey Robinson, and the economist Thorstein Veblen, Dewey is one of the founders of The New School. Dewey's most significant writings were *"The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology"* (1896), a critique of a standard psychological concept and the basis of all his further work; *"Democracy and Education"* (1916), his celebrated work on progressive education; *"Human Nature and Conduct"* (1922), a study of the function of habit in human behavior; *"The Public and its Problems"* (1927), a defense of democracy written in response to Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* (1925); *"Experience and Nature"* (1925), Dewey's most "metaphysical" statement; *"Art as Experience"* (1934), Dewey's major work on aesthetics; *"A Common Faith"* (1934), a humanistic study of religion originally delivered as the Dwight H. Terry Lectureship at Yale; Logic: *"The Theory of Inquiry"* (1938), a statement of Dewey's unusual conception of logic; *"Freedom and Culture"* (1939), a political work examining the roots of fascism; and *"Knowing and the Known"* (1949), a book written in conjunction with Arthur F. Bentley that systematically outlines the concept of trans-action, which is central to his other works. While each of these works emphasizes on one particular philosophical theme, Dewey included his major themes in most of what he published.

Reflecting his immense influence on 20th-century thought, Hilda Neatby, in 1953, wrote:

"Dewey has been to our age what Aristotle was to the later Middle Ages, not a philosopher, but the philosopher."

At the University of Michigan, Dewey published his first two books, *"Psychology"* (1887), and *"Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding"* (1888), both of which expressed Dewey's early commitment to British neo-Hegelianism. In *Psychology*, Dewey attempted a synthesis between idealism and experimental science.

While still professor of philosophy at Michigan, Dewey and his junior colleagues, James Hayden Tufts and George Herbert Mead, together with his student James

Rowland Angell, all influenced strongly by the recent publication of William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890), began to reformulate psychology, emphasizing the social environment on the activity of mind and behavior rather than the physiological psychology of Wundt and his followers.

By 1894, Dewey had joined Tufts, with whom he would later write *"Ethics"* (1908), at the recently founded University of Chicago and invited Mead and Angell to follow him, the four men forming the basis of the so-called "Chicago group" of psychology.

Their new style of psychology, later dubbed functional psychology, had a practical emphasis on action and application. In Dewey's article *"The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology"* which appeared in *Psychological Review* in 1896, he reasons against the traditional stimulus-response understanding of the reflex arc in favor of a "circular" account in which what serves as *"stimulus"* and what as *"response"* depends on how one considers the situation, and defends the unitary nature of the sensory motor circuit. While he does not deny the existence of stimulus, sensation, and response, he disagreed that they were separate, juxtaposed events happening like links in a chain. He developed the idea that there is *"a coordination by which the stimulation is enriched by the results of previous experiences"*. The response is modulated by sensorial experience.

Education and teacher education

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). Several themes repeat throughout these writings. Dewey recurrently claims 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.

The ideas of democracy and social reform are continually discussed in Dewey's writings on education. Dewey 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 opinion, the main 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"

(My pedagogic creed, Dewey, 1897)

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".

In addition to his ideas regarding what education is and what effect it should have on society, Dewey 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"* (1902, 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 encouraged for an educational framework that strikes a balance between distributing knowledge while also considering 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, 1916/2009, pp. 217–218)

Dewey's ideas went on to influence many other influential experiential models and advocates. Problem-Based Learning (PBL), for example, a method used widely in education today, incorporates Dewey's ideas pertaining to learning through active inquiry.

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. Throughout the history of American schooling, education's purpose has been to train students for work by providing the student with a limited set of skills and information to do a particular job. The works of John Dewey provide the most prolific examples of how this limited vocational view of education has been applied to both the K-12 public education system and to the teacher training schools who attempted to quickly produce proficient and practical teachers with a limited set of instructional and discipline-specific skills needed to meet the needs of the employer and demands of the workforce.

In *"The School and Society"* (Dewey, 1976) and *"Democracy of Education"* (Dewey, 1980), Dewey claims that rather than preparing citizens for ethical participation in society, schools cultivate passive pupils via insistence upon mastery of facts and disciplining of bodies. Rather than preparing students to be reflective, autonomous and ethical beings capable of arriving at social truths through critical and intersubjective discourse, schools prepare students for docile compliance with authoritarian work and political structures, discourage the pursuit of individual and communal inquiry, and perceive higher learning as a monopoly of the institution of education (Dewey, 1976; 1980).

For Dewey and his philosophical followers, education stifles individual autonomy when learners are taught that knowledge is transmitted in one direction, from the expert to the learner. 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.

For Dewey,

"The thing needful is improvement of education, not simply by turning out teachers who can do better the things that are not necessary to do, but rather by changing the conception of what constitutes education"

(Dewey, 1904, p. 18)

Dewey's qualifications for teaching—a natural love for working with young children, a natural propensity to inquire about the subjects, methods and other social issues related to the profession, and a desire to share this acquired knowledge with others—are not a set of outwardly displayed mechanical skills. Rather, they may be viewed as internalized principles or habits which “*work automatically, unconsciously*” (Dewey, 1904, p. 15).

Turning to Dewey's essays and public addresses regarding the teaching profession, followed by his analysis of the teacher as a person and a professional, as well as his beliefs regarding the responsibilities of teacher education programs to cultivate the attributes addressed, teacher educators can begin to reimagine the successful classroom teacher Dewey envisioned.

Professionalization of teaching as a social service

For many, education's purpose is to train students for work by providing the student with a limited set of skills and information to do a particular job. As Dewey notes, this limited vocational view is also applied to teacher training schools who attempt to quickly produce proficient and practical teachers with a limited set of instructional and discipline skills needed to meet the needs of the employer and demands of the workforce (Dewey, 1904). For Dewey, the school and the classroom teacher, as a workforce and provider of a social service, have a unique responsibility to produce psychological and social goods that will lead to both present and future social progress.

As Dewey notes:

"The business of the teacher is to produce a higher standard of intelligence in the community, and the object of the public school system is to make as large as possible the number of those who possess this intelligence. Skill, ability to act wisely and effectively in a great variety of occupations and situations, is a sign and a criterion of the degree of civilization that a society has reached. It is the business of teachers to help in producing the many kinds of skill needed in contemporary life. If teachers are up to their work, they also aid in production of character"

(Dewey, TAP, 2010, p.p.241-242)

According to Dewey, the emphasis is placed on producing these attributes in children for use in their contemporary life because it is:

"...impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now"
(Dewey, MPC, 2010, p. 25)

However, although Dewey is steadfast in his beliefs that education serves an immediate purpose (Dewey, DRT, 2010; Dewey, MPC, 2010; Dewey, TTP, 2010), he is not ignorant

of the impact imparting these qualities of intelligence, skill and character on young children in their present life will have on the future society. While addressing the state of educative and economic affairs during a 1935 radio broadcast, Dewey linked the ensuing economic depression to a *“lack of sufficient production of intelligence, skill and character”* (Dewey, TAP, 2010, p. 242) of the nation’s workforce.

As Dewey notes, there is a lack of these goods in the present society and teachers have a responsibility to create them in their students, who, we can assume, will grow into the adults who will ultimately go on to participate in whatever industrial or economical civilization awaits them. According to Dewey, the profession of the classroom teacher is to produce the intelligence, skill and character within each student so that the democratic community is composed of citizens who can think, do and act intelligently and morally.

A teacher's knowledge

Dewey believed that the successful classroom teacher possesses a passion for knowledge and an intellectual curiosity in the materials and methods they teach. For Dewey, this propensity is an inherent curiosity and love for learning that differs from one’s ability to acquire, recite and reproduce textbook knowledge.

“No one, can be really successful in performing the duties and meeting these demands [of teaching] who does not retain [her] intellectual curiosity intact throughout [her] entire career”

(Dewey, APT, 2010, p. 34)

According to Dewey, it is not that:

“...the teacher ought to strive to be a high-class scholar in all the subjects he or she has to teach,” rather, *“a teacher ought to have an unusual love and aptitude in some one subject: history, mathematics, literature, science, a fine art, or whatever”*

(Dewey, APT, 2010, p. 35)

The classroom teacher does not have to be a scholar in all subjects; rather, a genuine love in one will elicit a feel for genuine information and insight in all subjects taught.

In addition to this propensity for study into the subjects taught, the classroom teacher:

“...is possessed by a recognition of the responsibility for the constant study of school room work, the constant study of children, of methods, of subject matter in its various adaptations to pupils”

(Dewey, PST, 2010, p. 37)

For Dewey, this desire for the lifelong pursuit of learning is inherent in other professions (e.g. the architectural, legal and medical fields; Dewey, 1904 & Dewey, PST, 2010), and has particular importance for the field of teaching.

As Dewey notes:

"...this further study is not a side line but something which fits directly into the demands and opportunities of the vocation"

(Dewey, APT, 2010, p. 34)

According to Dewey, this propensity and passion for intellectual growth in the profession must be accompanied by a natural desire to communicate one's knowledge with others.

"There are scholars who have [the knowledge] in a marked degree but who lack enthusiasm for imparting it. To the 'natural born' teacher learning is incomplete unless it is shared"

(Dewey, APT, 2010, p. 35)

For Dewey, it is not enough for the classroom teacher to be a lifelong learner of the techniques and subject-matter of education; she must aspire to share what she knows with others in her learning community.

A teacher's skill

The best indicator of teacher quality, according to Dewey, is the ability to watch and respond to the movement of the mind with keen awareness of the signs and quality of the responses her students exhibit with regard to the subject-matter presented (Dewey, APT, 2010; Dewey, 1904).

As Dewey notes:

"I have often been asked how it was that some teachers who have never studied the art of teaching are still extraordinarily good teachers. The explanation is simple. They have a quick, sure and unflagging sympathy with the operations and process of the minds they are in contact with. Their own minds move in harmony with those of others, appreciating their difficulties, entering into their problems, sharing their intellectual victories"

(Dewey, APT, 2010, p. 36)

Such a teacher is genuinely aware of the complexities of this mind to mind transfer, and she has the intellectual fortitude to identify the successes and failures of this process, as well as how to appropriately reproduce or correct it in the future.

A teacher's disposition

As a result of the direct influence teachers have in shaping the mental, moral and spiritual lives of children during their most formative years, Dewey holds the profession of teaching in high esteem, often equating its social value to that of the ministry and to parenting (Dewey, APT, 2010; Dewey, DRT, 2010; Dewey, MPC, 2010; Dewey, PST, 2010; Dewey, TTC, 2010; Dewey, TTP, 2010). Perhaps the most important attributes, according to Dewey, are those personal inherent qualities which the teacher brings to the classroom. As Dewey notes, "*no amount of learning or even of acquired pedagogical skill makes up for the deficiency*" (Dewey, TLS, p. 25) of the personal traits needed to be most successful in the profession.

According to Dewey, the successful classroom teacher occupies an indispensable passion for promoting the intellectual growth of young children. In addition, she knows that her career, in comparison to other professions, entails stressful situations, long hours and limited financial reward; all of which have the potential to overcome her genuine love and sympathy for her students.

For Dewey,

"One of the most depressing phases of the vocation is the number of care worn teachers one sees, with anxiety depicted on the lines of their faces, reflected in their strained high pitched voices and sharp manners. While contact with the young is a privilege for some temperaments, it is a tax on others, and a tax which they do not bear up under very well. And in some schools, there are too many pupils to a teacher, too many subjects to teach, and adjustments to pupils are made in a mechanical rather than a human way. Human nature reacts against such unnatural conditions"

(Dewey, APT, 2101, p. 35)

It is essential, according to Dewey, that the classroom teacher has the mental propensity to overcome the demands and stressors placed on her because the students can sense when their teacher is not genuinely invested in promoting their learning (Dewey, PST, 2010). Such negative demeanors, according to Dewey, prevent children from pursuing their own propensities for learning and intellectual growth. It can therefore be assumed that if teachers want their students to engage with the educational process and employ their natural curiosities for knowledge, teachers must be aware of how their reactions to young children and the stresses of teaching influence this process.

The role of teacher education to cultivate the professional classroom teacher Dewey's passions for teaching—a natural love for working with young children, a natural propensity to inquire about the subjects, methods and other social issues related to the profession, and a desire to share this acquired knowledge with others—are not a set of outwardly displayed mechanical skills. Rather, they may be viewed as internalized principles or habits which "*work automatically, unconsciously*" (Dewey, 1904, p. 15).

According to Dewey, teacher education programs must turn away from focusing on producing proficient practitioners because such practical skills related to instruction and discipline (e.g. creating and delivering lesson plans, classroom management, implementation of an assortment of content-specific methods) can be learned over time during their everyday school work with their students (Dewey, PST, 2010).

As Dewey notes:

"The teacher who leaves the professional school with power in managing a class of children may appear to superior advantage the first day, the first week, the first month, or even the first year, as compared with some other teacher who has a much more vital command of the psychology, logic and ethics of development. But later 'progress' may with such consist only in perfecting and refining skill already possessed. Such persons seem to know how to teach, but they are not students of teaching. Even though they go on studying books of pedagogy, reading teachers' journals, attending teachers' institutes, etc., yet the root of the matter is not in them, unless they continue to be students of subject-matter, and students of mind-activity. Unless a teacher is such a student, he may continue to improve in the mechanics of school management, but he cannot grow as a teacher, an inspirer and director of soul-life"

(Dewey, 1904, p. 15)

For Dewey, teacher education should focus not on producing persons who know how to teach as soon as they leave the program; rather, teacher education should be concerned with producing professional students of education who have the propensity to inquire about the subjects they teach, the methods used, and the activity of the mind as it gives and receives knowledge. According to Dewey, such a student is not superficially engaging with these materials, rather, the professional student of education has a genuine passion to inquire about the subjects of education, knowing that doing so ultimately leads to acquisitions of the skills related to teaching. Such students of education aspire for the intellectual growth within the profession that can only be achieved by immersing one's self in the lifelong pursuit of the intelligence, skills and character Dewey linked to the profession.

As Dewey notes, other professional fields, such as law and medicine cultivate a professional spirit in their fields to constantly study their work, their methods of their work, and a perpetual need for intellectual growth and concern for issues related to their profession. Teacher education, as a profession, has these same obligations (Dewey, 1904; Dewey, PST, 2010).

As Dewey notes:

"An intellectual responsibility has got to be distributed to every human being who is concerned in carrying out the work in question, and to attempt to concentrate intellectual responsibility for a work that has to be done, with their brains and their hearts, by

hundreds or thousands of people in a dozen or so at the top, no matter how wise and skillful they are, is not to concentrate responsibility--it is to diffuse irresponsibility"

(Dewey, PST, 2010, p. 39)

For Dewey, the professional spirit of teacher education requires of its students a constant study of school room work, constant study of children, of methods, of subject matter in its various adaptations to pupils. Such study will lead to professional enlightenment with regard to the daily operations of classroom teaching.

As well as his very active and direct involvement in setting up educational institutions such as the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools (1896) and The New School for Social Research (1919), many of Dewey's ideas influenced the founding of Bennington College and Goddard College in Vermont, where he served on the Board of Trustees.

Dewey's works and philosophy also held great influence in the creation of the short-lived Black Mountain College in North Carolina, an experimental college focused on interdisciplinary study, and whose faculty included Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning, Charles Olson, Franz Kline, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Paul Goodman, among others. Black Mountain College was the locus of the "*Black Mountain Poets*" a group of avant-garde poets closely linked with the Beat Generation and the San Francisco Renaissance.

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