
DEVELOPING A DEMOCRATIC VIEW OF ACADEMIC SUBJECT
MATTERS: JOHN DEWEY, WILLIAM CHANDLER BAGLEY, AND
BOYD HENRY BODE

Joseph Watras
University of Dayton

In the first half of the twentieth century, the ideal of democracy influenced the conceptions people had of the academic subject matters. A common criticism was that abstract academic subjects served aristocratic societies. Although most theorists considered the academic subjects to be important, they had differing views on the conception of democracy, the nature of the academic subjects, and the ways those studies served democracy. For example, John Dewey and William Bagley argued that knowledge of the academic subjects could enlarge the experiences of students, but they offered contrasting interpretations as to the ways this happened. Boyd Bode drew many of his ideas from both of these theorists; however, he combined their views in ways that corrected some of the problems he found in each of their views.

John Dewey set a pattern of thought similar to those Bagley and Bode followed. Dewey began this effort when he accepted the position of director of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago in 1894. The combination of the three fields offered practical opportunities for him to test his theories of knowledge and conduct because his position allowed him to create the laboratory school where he tested through practical experiences the ideas he presented in his lectures in the department of pedagogy.¹

Accordingly, Dewey claimed that the laboratory school could demonstrate the value of the pragmatic view. Dewey believed that people in active situations confronted problems. To solve the problems, the people worked through a series of steps. An important aspect of solving a problem was a test to determine if an idea was correct. Through these steps, people turned their thoughts into knowledge by using them. In the laboratory school, the teachers helped the students work through these steps to test their ideas.²

Dewey believed human thought centered on the concept of experience. For Dewey, an experience occurred when someone tried to do something to the environment. It involved an active and a passive phase. The active part came when the person tried to do something. The passive part took

¹ John Dewey, "The Theory of the Chicago Experiment," in *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago 1896-1903*, ed. Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards (1936; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2007), 463-477.

² *Ibid.*, 464.

place when the environment responded to the action. When the person formed a meaning of something in the environment by undergoing the results of an action, he or she could shape later activities to make those experiences more fruitful. It is from this point that the academic subjects could advance or enlarge the person's experiences by suggesting alternatives for action.³

When Dewey discussed the lessons in the laboratory school, he borrowed the aims and words of the kindergarten movement that was popular in the nineteenth century. Like the kindergarten teachers, he called the lessons occupations. The kindergarten teachers had children use symbols that they called gifts to carry out the occupations. Dewey asked the children in the laboratory school to engage in authentic adult activities. For example, in gardening, the children raised real plants. Nonetheless, Dewey retained the sense of the symbolic lessons from the kindergarten by saying the children did not learn a trade or make money from the garden.

Writing in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey noted that the occupation of gardening capitalized on students' instincts. For example, gardening built on the human instinct to provide food for the group. This meant that the children fulfilled their own aims in the occupations. Since the children realized their own aims, they became attentive about selecting the seeds, preparing the soil, or fertilizing the plants. They consulted texts when their crops failed, and they sought ways to solve the problems. In addition, the occupations had an intellectual function because they provided avenues to the subject matters. Dewey claimed this happened because the subject matters were the logical presentations of the experiences of people in previous generations. Since botany was the logical presentation of experiences people had with plants, students could turn to those textbooks as they tried to solve problems they encountered as they worked. In addition, the children learned ethical lessons, such as how to cooperate with other children to achieve goals they shared.⁴

In his explanation, Dewey acknowledged the importance of subject matters by defining the subjects as tools. Since textbooks presented the subject matters in logically organized ways, the students could consult those texts when they faced problems and wanted to advance their own activities. Similarly, teachers could consult texts to decide the proper direction of the students' activities. Further, Dewey expressed the hope that the ethical lessons learned in the school would enable the adults to form a harmonious society where people were self-reliant yet desirous of serving the common good. The subject matters served democracy because Dewey defined democracy as a

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1944), 139-140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-110. For an explanation of occupations, see also John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (1902; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6-29 and 179-209.

mode of associated living wherein each individual strove to achieve his or her own goals in ways that blended with the efforts of other people.⁵

Although Dewey may have had a modest influence on William Chandler Bagley, they shared a pragmatic approach to questions of education. When Bagley conducted classes for schoolteachers, he sought to organize the methods of teaching on a rational basis. Writing in 1911, he quoted Dewey in reference to the ways language advanced a person's thoughts and in reference to the educative influence of the daily activities in a classroom.⁶

Despite the few references to Dewey, Bagley adopted the notion that school subjects were a means by which students learned to modify their behavior. This implied that subject matters were tools that modified the students' instinctual tendencies. Accordingly, Bagley repeated the admonition that students had to recognize the practical applications the subject matters had to life. Nonetheless, he did not think about school activities in the same way that Dewey did. Bagley claimed following lessons in classrooms with textbooks could cause students to shape their behavior if teachers made judicious selections recognizing which habits the students developed from which lessons and which habits served the ideal of social efficiency.

According to Bagley, teachers should recognize the natural instincts of children they could use. He called them adaptive instincts, and he noted they included play, curiosity, imitation, and repetition. He thought that teachers could direct these instincts to control children's behavior; other instincts, such as cooperation, appeared late in children's development or, such as aggression, posed problems.⁷

Bagley urged teachers to select those instincts that could become socially useful habits and direct them toward that goal. The useful habits could include such tendencies as to spell a word automatically, and the instinct to imitation might provide the basis for this habit. Beyond instincts, Bagley divided the important sources of controls of conduct into four different categories. The first was the collection of ideas that people used to adjust to the environment. The second was ideals that provided direction or purpose to actions. The third was prejudices or tastes that influenced the ways people perceived situations. The last group included attitudes that lacked the emotional content of prejudices but which defined the ways people interpreted situations. According to Bagley, this rubric could help teachers organize instruction in socially worthy ways.⁸

As Bagley went through his list of categories, he tried to determine how schools could use each type of control, ideas, ideals, prejudices, and attitudes, to enhance social efficiency. For Bagley, a socially efficient

⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 86-88.

⁶ William Chandler Bagley, *Educational Values* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 35 and 242.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 73-77.

individual could provide for himself economically, would willingly contribute to the economic efficiency of other people, and should sacrifice his or her own desires when they impeded social progress. In defining such progress, Bagley borrowed an idea from Thorndike declaring that human progress came from improving the environment.⁹

When Bagley looked for the ways academic subjects could control conduct, he found they had little value because they did not apply directly to situations the students met in their lives. Among the useful subjects, arithmetic had the most utility. Some grammatical lessons had practical value, but most subjects, such as the knowledge of geography or history, would not improve the students' lives. He held that even practical studies, such as music, drawing, and manual training that included woodworking and cooking, had little direct application in daily life.¹⁰

While Bagley dismissed the practical value of many academic subjects, he found they had other important uses such as inspiring the students to hold socially valuable ideals or enhancing recreational functions by improving their aesthetic sensibilities. In this regard, Bagley thought the social significance of general education was to free children from superstition. In this way, schools might free the children's instincts to learn in ways that expanded scientific explorations of the world. In the social realm, education could free people to evaluate institutional practices to determine how they could better serve people. In a similar manner, teachers could examine the daily practices in schools to ensure that they strengthened the ideals of democracy and equality of opportunity, which the society's national life had developed.¹¹

Important to this essay, Bagley made two contributions to the ways academic subjects could serve democracy. The first was that he argued teachers would enhance democracy by presenting the school subjects in traditional fashions if they made themselves aware of the social functions of those lessons. The second was that he introduced Bode to the study of education, and Bode applied Bagley's insights to progressive education in ways Bagley could not.

Boyd Bode began his scholarly career in philosophy and moved into education. He earned a Ph.D. from Cornell in 1900 and began teaching philosophy at the University of Wisconsin where he developed an interest in the pragmatic theories of William James and John Dewey. Bode is famous for raising an objection against William James's suggestion that reality to a person was experience. Bode pointed out that when James claimed experience was what a person experienced at any moment, James could not explain how anyone could be aware of anything beyond what he or she experienced. For example, the first time a baby touched the flame of a candle it burned his or her finger. According to James, the second time the child saw the candle it represented pain. What produced this change in perception if experience was

⁹ Ibid., 107-116.

¹⁰ Ibid., 139-155.

¹¹ Ibid., 229-259.

what a person experienced at one moment? The answer for Bode was that James implied the external concept of consciousness even though James wanted to avoid mentioning such a mechanism.¹²

This question of how people form meanings or how they move from concrete examples to abstract thought continued to bother Bode. A couple of years after Bode criticized James on this point, he reviewed Dewey's book, *How We Think*, and he found Dewey had made a logical error. The point came up in an example of how a person would know how a pump works. The explanation was that water rises in the pump through suction. The question Bode raised was whether suction was a force that a person could experience or an abstraction, such as progress or gravity, requiring some other form of knowing. Despite this shortcoming, Bode praised Dewey's book. He claimed it would assist teachers who wished to help students learn to think.¹³

When Bode moved to Illinois, he published his book on logic. Reviewers praised the book because it followed the accepted methods of teaching logic, but focused on reasoning in everyday life.¹⁴

While Bode was at the University of Illinois, education was growing into a field of serious study. Bagley invited him to teach a course on the philosophical basis of education. Bagley and Bode had studied together at Cornell. More important, Bode found the material about education sufficiently interesting to maintain the seminar after Bagley left for Teachers College. In 1921, Bode accepted the appointment to become head of the Department of Principles and Practice of Education at the Ohio State University. Eleven years later, Bode opened a laboratory school that was part of the Progressive Education Association's Eight Year Study. According to Lawrence Cremin, when Bode was at the Ohio State University, he made the university a center for graduate study rivaling New York's Teachers College in quality and importance. Cremin added that Bode's work closely resembled the spirit of Dewey's work.¹⁵

When Bode began his work in education, he followed many of the ideas of Bagley. In fairness, these theorists followed related ideas. For example, Bagley, Dewey, and Bode defined the purpose of education in similar ways. In 1911, Bagley defined the ultimate goal of education as social efficiency, and he considered this as the capacity for achievement as measured by improvements

¹² B. H. Bode, "Pure Experience and the External World," *Journal of Philosophy and Scientific Methods* 2, no. 5 (1905): 128-133; B. H. Bode, "Realism and Pragmatism," *Journal of Philosophy and Scientific Methods* 3, no. 15 (1906): 393-401.

¹³ B. H. Bode, "Review of *How We Think*," *The School Review* 18, no. 9 (1910): 642-645.

¹⁴ Philip H. Fogel, "Review of *Outline of Logic*," *The Philosophic Review* 20, no.1 (January 1911): 89-91.

¹⁵ Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 215-220.

to the environment.¹⁶ For his part, Dewey wrote that education had no aims except to inspire growth. In making this statement, Dewey sought to go beyond fixed aims, such as preparing the child for the future. Nonetheless, Dewey defined growth in a manner similar to Bagley's capacity for achievement. That is, Dewey wrote that growth took place when students acquired the habits they could use to shape the environment.¹⁷

Although Bode followed Dewey's idea that education had no aims except to inspire growth, he borrowed ideas from Bagley to correct a problem that he found in Dewey's notion. Writing in *Fundamentals of Education*, Bode acknowledged that conceiving of growth as an educational aim took advantage of the view of life as a continuous process that enlarged and changed as each achievement moved toward further achievement. In addition, Bode noted that holding growth as an aim avoided the problem of making schools serve fixed aims because life did not observe such limits. Unfortunately, growth could not provide any direction. Bode suggested that growth could be an aim if it implied how a school subject could appear in a social context. For example, he suggested that physiology could suggest ways to preserve health.¹⁸

In a similar way, Bode resisted the tendency of Dewey's idea of occupations to exclude subject matter instruction. In making this correction, Bode took an approach from Bagley. It was Bagley's view that schools should present the subject matters to the children as collections of information and skills that children should learn.

In Bagley's model, the teachers should stress the practical value of the academic subjects. For example, mathematics taught important principles, such as percentages, that teachers should stress. Bagley lamented that teachers spent inordinate time imparting a mastery of arithmetic facts that did not require judgment even though students should learn this skill.¹⁹

Bode followed a similar idea of subject matters. For example, he urged teachers to recognize that every subject had a broad meaning for social life. For example, mathematics teachers should show students how the abstract relations of numbers could influence practical affairs. Students should learn how mathematicians have offered new ways to think about the universe. History should show the motives and the circumstances that moved people to shape modern civilization. In this way, teachers could weave the contents of the subject matters into the experiences of the students and encourage them to appreciate the things that enrich life. Bode contended that such teachers blended the logical organization of the subject matters, social insight, appreciation, information, and skill in the process of learning for their students.²⁰

¹⁶ Bagley, *Educational Values*, 114-115.

¹⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 53.

¹⁸ Boyd H. Bode, *Fundamentals of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 11-13.

¹⁹ Bagley, *Educational Values*, 139.

²⁰ Boyd H. Bode, *Modern Educational Theories* (New York: Vintage, 1927), 213-214.

Although Bode wanted teachers to present subject matters in socially relevant ways, he defended subject matter instruction against critics who felt there was no reason to teach subjects as such. In this regard, Bode seemed to criticize Dewey without mentioning his name.

In the 1920s, educators such as William Heard Kilpatrick extolled the project method as a means of teaching. Bode acknowledged that problems arose when teachers focused excessively on the logical organization of subjects matters, and he noted that educators wanted to bring life to studies when they advanced the idea of allowing students to work on practical things that interested them. The problem was that the project method depended on thinking of the subjects as instrumental. For example, a child growing corn might see botany as an instrument and pick those aspects that related directly to raising the corn. Thus, while the students might learn something about mathematics by playing store, they could not gain enough insight into mathematics to use it fruitfully. For this to happen, the students should develop a love of numbers for their own sake because students had to separate knowledge from its immediate application if they were to apply it elsewhere.²¹

Despite his defense of the academic subjects, Bode did not think they had any magic about them. Like Bagley, he warned that people could place excessive faith in the subjects as traditionally taught. The problem Bode saw was that people thought that particular subjects achieved some aim automatically. For example, teaching science would teach students to think clearly. Bode thought this faith in subjects to convey educational aims was misplaced. If the people wanted businesses to serve democracy, he wrote, they should not expect a school subject to teach this attitude because this would make education into propaganda. Instead, schools could ask students to decide whether business should be a means of personal advancement or a type of shared life.²²

As time passed, Bode moved away from Bagley's views. This may have happened because in 1938 Bagley endorsed a movement called the Essentialist Committee for the Advancement of American Education that opposed the soft pedagogy of progressivism. Bagley complained that the academic standings of American students lagged behind that of students in other countries because teachers catered to students' interests and refused to impart the discipline needed to master academic skills. Bagley concluded that teachers should prepare students for life in a democratic community by teaching them a common core of principles, ideas, and meanings they could draw from the traditional subjects. The result would be a common curriculum for all schools in the country.²³

²¹ Ibid., 141-167; Bode, *Fundamentals of Education*, 137-139.

²² Bode, *Modern Educational Theories*, 80-83.

²³ William Chandler Bagley, "An Essentialist's Platform for the Advancement of American Education," *Educational Administration* 24, no. 4 (1938): 241-256.

Bode complained that Bagley's essentialist stance denied democracy rather than protected it. Taking the example of basic principles, Bode asked how those students could follow principles in all situations. Bagley had asserted that honesty was a principle or value that would always be true. In contrast, Bode pointed to a scene in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* where Jean Valjean stole bread to feed starving children. Although Valjean acted dishonestly, he seemed to follow a more important principle. The point Bode made was that history did not offer simple, eternal principles. It offered competing ideals that students had to judge in light of changing conditions. Social living was not a matter of adapting, Bode insisted. He claimed the pragmatic view showed that life required continual reconstruction.²⁴

Because Bode was a logician, he could devise ways around problems in otherwise beneficial educational views. For example, Dewey thought that gardening interested the students because it capitalized on their instinct to provide food for the group. Thus, Dewey considered the occupations as means that built on students' natural instincts and directed those interests in ways that liberated their capacities and enhanced the group within which they lived. Bagley used instincts as the basis for forming habits that were socially beneficial. Although Bode offered a way to retain Dewey and Bagley's ideas, he thought the source of student interest was closer to an idea from behaviorists. According to Bode, people acquired their interests from their environment. He recounted his experiences in a rural school in which he taught children to read, to write, and to count. Other lessons about social life came from home. Although the children learned to work hard on the farm, they did not fulfill their chores because they were interested in doing the tasks. Feeding the pigs and milking the cows were parts of a way of life. This meant that the children's motivation to fulfill their obligations came from their identification with their community. Bode noted that in modern urban societies, the lives of adults and children had grown apart, and the children did not identify with a wider community. This condition caused teachers problems. The teachers did not have a solid notion of students' interests. When they tried to build lessons on student interest, they allowed students to plan things themselves. This reduced the teacher's role to facilitating games and improvisations because the teacher lacked the notion that the children's interests arose from their membership in a community.²⁵

If teachers wanted to involve students' interests, Bode advised them to reinforce those interests by searching for a unified way of life. This was not easy. It meant the teachers and the students should reinterpret other beliefs that hinder educational growth. Because he was writing to progressive educators during the Great Depression, he thought the problem was that they had sought to liberate individual children rather than to use the schools as a source of

²⁴ Boyd Henry Bode, *How We Learn* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1940), 293-294.

²⁵ Boyd Bode, *Progressive Education at the Crossroads* (New York: Newson, 1938), 45-59.

social reform. Thus, among the beliefs requiring reinterpretation, he listed the tradition of individualism in business that undermined efforts to provide social security for all people.²⁶

Bode made beliefs and meanings important in a somewhat different way than Dewey had. For Dewey, meanings derived from undergoing some action. Flames meant burn to a child who stuck a finger in a fire. Bode claimed that the perception that a flame was hot could control behavior without the child having to experience the relation between flames and burns. Bode noted that meanings referred to the quality of an experience. He added, as an example, that people avoided onrushing automobiles because the cars meant danger. The dangerous quality of the vehicle was part of its appearance.²⁷

Since Bode thought people could apprehend meanings apart from experience, he thought that schools could help students reconsider the meanings of social relationships in ways that enabled them to form the best possible society. To explain how schools could help students change the meanings they held, Bode had to weaken the view that people formed habits through associations cultivated by stimulus response bonds. In place of this notion from behaviorists, Bode applied Dewey's definition of education as the reconstruction of experience. When Dewey had used the term *reconstruction of experience*, he meant that the children would reconstruct their own experiences in the occupations by moving into the experiences of the human race as found in the subject matters. In this process, the children would reconstruct the subject matters around their own activities. Although Bode maintained Dewey's pattern of continuous activity, he added the notion that the student had to reconstruct the background of experiences he or she brought to school. In this way, the problems would be real for the child and they would lead to a reconstruction of society along utopian lines.²⁸

The social life that afforded the best hope for increased social cooperation was democracy. Although Bode expressed such a faith in democracy, he acknowledged that the standards of value and conduct were flexible. Nonetheless, he offered a criterion with which people could judge the appropriateness of the standards. This was whether such changes enriched human life; however, it would require reconstruction of many social values. The task of education was for people to realize the problems. Teachers could not impose a view on students because indoctrination contradicted the democratic spirit. The best that teachers could do was to help the students reconstruct experiences for themselves. Given this opportunity, the students would choose democracy. At least, this was the faith that Bode believed was essential to fulfill the promise that education and democracy offered.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 55-56.

²⁷ Bode, *How We Learn*, 241-247.

²⁸ Ibid., 247-252.

²⁹ Ibid., 279-298.
