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Educational Philosophy of John Dewey and its relevance to current dilemmas in Education

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Abstract

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Key Words: Dewey; Democracy; Education; Child-centred learning

Introduction

John Dewey was and remains a divisive figure. He was referred to by some as 'worse than Hitler' because of his trenchant criticism of 'traditional learning'. But he was referred to by others as 'the saviour of American education' because of that very same criticism of traditional learning and because of his espousal in its place of a more 'child-centred' education (see Noddings, 2005). Decades later, he was accused by the former Secretary of State for Education in England, Keith Joseph, as the 'cause of all the problems in our schools'. And yet, on the other hand, he was praised by others for the influence on the then much lauded 'ideological orthodoxy' of the Plowden Report (1967).

I wish to argue that this radical opposition between 'traditional' and 'child-centred' arises from the deceptive dualism which characterises so much political advocacy in education. One is either the one or the other, without any clear analysis of what one means by these loosely used terms. One is forced into a false antithesis.

In what follows, therefore, I shall

- first, clarify Dewey's criticism of 'traditional learning' together with the criticism of those who, in criticising Dewey, remain its staunch defenders;
- second, clarify Dewey's defence of 'child-centredness', but also the mistaken interpretations of Dewey's position;
- third, show how the two (respect for 'traditional educational values', on the one hand, and a more 'child-centred learning', on the other) are reconciled in *Democracy and Education* and elsewhere;
- fourth, indicate how crucial it is to understand the nature of the 'social' in Dewey's account and his distinctive notion of 'democratic';
- fifth, examine the philosophical underpinnings of such a reconciliation, particularly in its theory of knowledge, philosophy of mind and political philosophy.

Traditional learning

In 1897, shortly after he was appointed to the University of Chicago and was establishing his University Elementary School (the Laboratory School), Dewey produced *My Pedagogic Creed*. Therein he set out his five core beliefs in reaction to the traditional conception of education. Such traditional education

- was disconnected from the experiences which the students brought from their homes and their communities;
- was disconnected from practical and manual activity through which they engaged with experience;

- ignored the interests that motivated young people to learn;
- treated knowledge as purely symbolic and formal – organised in textbooks, ‘stuck on’ to (but disconnected from) experience and to existing ways of understanding;
- maintained discipline through external authority rather than through engagement.

Dewey, in *School and Society*, chapter 2 (see Phillips, 2016) gives a graphic account of typical ‘traditional learning’.

... if we put before the mind's eye the ordinary schoolroom, with its row of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper, and add a table, some chairs, the bare walls, and possibly a few pictures, we can reconstruct the only educational activity that can possibly go on in such a place. It is all made for ‘listening’ – because simply studying out of a book is only another kind of listening; it marks the dependency of one mind upon another.

Perhaps in its detail this may be an exaggerated account of most American schools of the early 20th century, but no doubt it would have been true of some. But, more importantly, it portrayed in a very concrete way the presumptions which prevailed of how young people are expected to learn in school – passively in absorbing the ‘knowledge’ transmitted by the teacher, such knowledge being disconnected from the interests, concerns and experiences of the learner, ‘stuck on’, as it were, to minds whose real thoughts lay elsewhere. Furthermore, such passivity and disconnection are criticised not because of poor pedagogy (that is, ineffectiveness of this mode of teaching) but more significantly because it rests on a mistaken theory of knowledge. That will be developed later

Lest one thinks that such a portrait is too distant from the reality of today’s classrooms, one might reflect (certainly in England) on the intensive training which now takes place in English classrooms as pupils throughout their school careers are prepared for the *practice* tests, which themselves are a preparation for the real thing – or as the curriculum is geared to hitting targets imposed, first, upon the teacher, and hence upon the learners.. Understanding the world as it is experienced by the learner, or engaging the learner in the active search for solutions to problems faced or posed, play little or no place in the ‘transmission of knowledge’ which is disconnected from the modes of understanding of the world which the young learners bring with them into the classroom.

But such concerns are rejected by the defenders of ‘traditional learning’, for example by the philosopher (former adviser to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and ardent critic of Dewey)

Professor Anthony O'Hear, who in his paper entitled 'In defence of traditional learning', argued strongly that

education ... is irretrievably authoritarian and paternalistic ... imparting to a pupil something which he has yet to acquire ... The transmission is inevitably between unequals. (O'Hear, 1987, p.5)

Therefore, elsewhere, O'Hear argues that

it is highly plausible to see the egalitarianism which stems from the writings of John Dewey as the proximate cause of our educational decline. (O'Hear, 1991, p.28)

Michael Oakeshott (1975, p.25) defends the traditional school (with its key task of transmitting the modes of thinking and of appreciating which we have inherited) as

monastic in respect of a place set apart where excellence may be heard because the din of worldly partialities is no more than a distant rumble. They are places where a learner is initiated into what there is to be learnt.

He and other defenders of 'traditional learning' see education as the initiation into that 'conversation between the generations of mankind' in which the learner is introduced to those cultural achievements (the voices of history, of poetry, of science, of religion, of the arts) which we have inherited. Little room, it would seem, for a focus on the limited and limiting activities, experiences, domestic cultures, and interests of the neophytes waiting to enter. Indeed, such a focus, it was claimed by Allan Bloom (1987), has led to the 'closing of the American mind'.

How then might we see the defence by Dewey of a more child-centred education against the persuasive account of education as an initiation into the traditional modes of experiencing the world and against the dismissal of Dewey's alternative vision which has been called 'the proximate cause of our educational decline'? Is it a 'false dualism'?

Child-centred learning

In *School and Society* (p.103), Dewey says

Now the change which is coming into our education is the shifting of the centre of gravity ... In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the centre about which they are organised.

Such a sentiment is echoed in the Plowden Report which rejected full-class teaching as the norm in preference for an emphasis on the individual child's activity and on group work, in what was referred to as 'the informal classroom'. There was the assumption that children,

given the chance, were generally self-motivated and curious, such self-motivation and curiosity being the basis (assisted by the teacher) for further exploration and growth in understanding. What was referred to as 'the Plowden ideal' was described by sympathetic commentators as follows.

The children are active, engaged in exploration or discovery, interacting both with the teacher and with each other. Each child operates as an individual, though groups are formed and reformed related to those activities which are not normally subject differentiated Class teaching is seldom used, the pupil's work and the teacher's attention being individualised or 'grouped'. (Galton, *et al*, 1980, p.49).

One can see how this became referred to as 'child-centred', evoking the virulent criticisms already referred in which John Dewey, through the influence of his *Democracy and Education*, was seen to be 'the proximate cause of our educational decline'. The battle-lines could be seen to be drawn partly over the role of 'traditional subjects' – the extreme importance, on the one hand, of a curriculum divided into clearly demarcated and logically different kinds of knowledge, and, on the other hand, the stress upon 'activities which are not normally subject differentiated'.

That criticism should be seen at two different levels.

At one level, given the difficulties in the teacher responding constructively to each child's individual interests, experience and activity, the 'informal classroom' so easily failed to develop those interests constructively, or to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences which the children brought into the classroom. Neville Bennett's (1976) research, *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress*, purported to show the superiority of formal over informal classrooms in producing good results. Moreover, letting the children pursue their interests could shift the informal classroom into a permanent playground. An extreme example was that of the William Tyndale school in North London, which generated a major report chaired by Lord Auden heavily critical of the informal approaches to teaching in the post-Plowden era. Efforts had been made in some areas to introduce 'the project method' (for example, Goldsmiths College Curriculum Laboratory's Interdisciplinary Enquiry or IDE), as pioneered by Dewey's follower, W.H.Kilpatrick. But too often teachers' understanding and skills were not up to the task.

At another level, the criticisms focused on the underlying theoretical basis of Dewey's (and thereby Plowden's) advocacy of more child-centred approach. This critique harked back to that aspect of 'traditional learning' which emphasised the key importance of subjects, representing the organised bodies of knowledge, and of appreciation which we have inherited and which need to be passed on to the next generation. Such criticisms emerged in Robert Dearden (1968, p.125)'s *Philosophy of Primary Education*

[Dewey] thought [mistakenly] that you could start with ordinary practical situations, such as kitchens, gardens ... and grow outwards by the unbroken continuities to the more structured experience we have called theoretical understanding

This criticism was in line with those who contributed to the book edited by Richard Peters (1969), *Perspectives on Plowden*, Education is an initiation into the various 'forms of knowledge' (or, as Philip Phenix (1964) spoke, 'realms of meaning') with their own distinctive concepts and modes of enquiry. Such forms or realms have been achieved over centuries and do not emerge through the child following a particular interest or activity. The child needs to be inducted, finding such forms or realms to be of value only from when that induction has taken place. There is a disconnection between the child's natural interests, experiences and activities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the forms of understanding we have inherited which give greater insight into the practical world we inhabit.

Dewey, therefore, should not have been worried (as expressed in *My Pedagogic Creed*) about the 'disconnect' of school knowledge from experiences brought from home or from the practical tasks and activities which the learners were normally engaged with. The learners were still to be initiated.

Reconciliation

Some attention needs to be given to the idea of 'child-centredness' as it enters into educational thinking and has shaped educational practice. Perhaps, as with most dualistic thinking, there are significant differences within the term being used, which ought to be, but which are not, acknowledged. There were several different aspects which were referenced in Plowden and which entered into 'child-centred practice' more broadly. Here one thinks of Rousseau in the education of Emile, of Pestalozzi in *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, of Froebel in *The Education of Man*. Key ideas were those connected with 'growth' as an aim of education, of development arising, as with a plant, from the natural growth arising from the freedom of the children as they were encouraged to pursue their interests. Central to such child-centred educationalists would be the respect for the experiences of the child since it is from these that growth emerges.

However, especially in *Experience and Education*, where Dewey sought to respond to his critics, he distanced himself both from those practitioners who over-emphasised the pursuit of interests as the road to self-fulfilment and from the theoretical presuppositions of the exponents of such a view.

First, he was highly critical of the Froebelian idea of growth as a kind of 'unfolding' of what was already there. As he says in *Democracy and education*, (ch.5, Section 2) it

Represents a vague sentimental aspiration rather than anything which can be intelligently grasped and stated.

Second, theoretical understandings (or what are embodied and codified in the text-books and in their transmissions through school subjects) are the distillation of ways of understanding the world which we have inherited. They cannot be ignored. They have arisen from generations of critical enquiry, research, and conceptual creativity. However, within science particularly there is often no obvious connection between the experiences of the child and the scientific formulation of what is the case or what is happening, as when, for example, one speaks of atoms, electrons and neutrons. There is a conceptual gap. Hence, the central task of the teacher is to bridge that gap. In so doing the teacher needs to identify those interests and activities which, with appropriate questioning and promoting, lead the learner to a deeper understanding – a learner centred approach though steered by the teacher who values highly the interests and experiences of the child and who sees how those personal interests and experiences could be enhanced by the insights of the public understanding and forms of knowledge.

In *Democracy and Education* (p.200), Dewey gives the following illustration.

Gardening, for example, need not be taught either for the sake of preparing future gardeners, or as an agreeable way of passing the time. It affords an avenue of approach to knowledge of the place farming and horticulture have had in the history of the race and which they occupy in present social organisation. Carried on in an environment educationally controlled, they are means for making a study of the facts of growth, the chemistry of soil, the role of light, air and moisture, injurious and helpful animal life, etc.. There is nothing in the elementary study of botany which cannot be introduced in a vital way in connection with caring for the growth of seeds. Instead of the subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany, it will then belong to life, and will find, moreover, its natural correlations with the facts of the soil, animal life, and human relations.

I remember well how Rural Science once flourished in rural schools!

It is interesting to note that in the year 2013 the subject 'botany' finally disappeared completely from universities in England, almost 350 years since the first Chair of Botany was established at Oxford University. Admittedly there is the study in several universities of 'plant science' with a focus on genetics, molecular studies and biotechnology. But Dewey would have been horrified to know that, as a leading botanist said, it would be possible to study such a subject without being able to identify a single British wild flower. A matter of theory disconnected from experience.

But, as Dewey goes on to argue, actual or potential interests in other areas of social life provide similar opportunities for advancing learning – cooking, for example, or practical design and technology. In the 1970s and 1980s there developed in England what was referred to as the ‘pre-vocational curriculum’ based on student’s potential occupational interests. These were not training for particular employments, but a harnessing of deeper understanding to significant interests at a time when minds were focused on what they would do when they finally left school. Through the pursuit of an occupational interest the students would not only acquire important social skills but also insight into the world outside the school into which they would soon be entering – a widening of horizons in which better informed choices could be made.

A good example of Dewey-type thinking is that given by the renowned medieval historian, Dr. Marjorie Reeves. Writing in her memoirs about her teaching of history to girls in the East End of London in the late 1920s, she reflected that

the prevailing idea of history teaching wavered between lists of facts and dates which children ‘ought to know’ and a series of semi-historical anecdotes which constituted ‘our heritage’, for example, Alfred and the cakes, Elizabeth and Raleigh’s cloak, (Reeves, 2012) .

Where, she asked, was there any genuine *experience* of history – that is entering as far as possible in imagination into the real lives of people in the past? She argues that

To be deprived of such experience is to be limited to a two-dimensional world.

It is important to keep in mind this central notion of ‘historical experience’ – seeing the world, not as an abstraction or as a formula or set of words to be learnt, but as something meaningful to you personally, as in some way transforming other experiences as they occur, as experiencing oneself, others, and events differently. One’s understanding and appreciation evolve. In so arguing she railed

against the prevailing text books ‘covering’ a longish span of time in generalised statements drained of all detail, dehydrated abstractions from historical realities

It was with this correction to the prevailing views of history – historical experience rather than historical information, opening up the ‘three-dimensional perspective of depth to one’s own past and to one’s understanding of others’ ideas and points of view, that Marjorie Reeves produced her series of *Then and There* books, which were still being used in schools half a century later – flesh and blood accounts of real happenings with which the learners could associate.

These learners included the future hair-dressers of Tower Hamlets, for whom she developed a history course, blossoming out into a cultural history from Egypt to the 18th century and involving the imitation of hairstyles of ancient Egypt – a surprising sight at that time in Tower Hamlets.

The educational purpose, the moral driving force was that of enabling students to understand who they are, where they are positioned in time and space, what it means to be a person (and to be one more fully), how they are part of a larger community, and what they might commit themselves to be. Learning was not to be a dry, analytic, fragmented, theoretical activity – a purely intellectual exercise – but an understanding of things as a whole in which there could arise a commitment, based on deliberation and argument, to a better society.

Dewey would surely have endorsed Dr. Reeves' account of history teaching for, far from finding (as his the defenders of 'traditional learning' accusers asserted)

sentimental talk of the value of experience of the child, of the intrinsic significance of every growing experience ... the teacher no more than a provider of 'suggestions', a 'facilitator in today's jargon. (O'Hear, 1991, p.26)

he would have warmed to that bridge, which the knowledgeable teacher can and needs to make, between the traditions of knowledge which we have inherited and the interests and experience of the learner, which themselves are encouraged and promoted by the experienced teacher as the basis for such learning.

Thus, as explained by Dewey in *The Child and the Curriculum*, p.129,

..instruction ... is a continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organised bodies of truth that we call studies.

Put simply, Dewey condemns 'traditional learning' which ignores the experience and interests of the child and, at the same time, those progressive and child-centred exponents who ignore 'the organised bodies of truth'. It is a false dualism. The teacher is the one who has a deep grasp of the inherited knowledge, a personal knowledge of the learners and their interests and motivations, and the pedagogical skills to bring the two together. The art of the teacher is to make connections between the inherited way of interpreting experience (in science for example) and the less mature and less powerful interpretive schemes of the young learner. A tough job – no wonder Dewey refers to the teacher as 'the high priest and the usherer in of the Kingdom of God'

Democracy and Education

That interaction between experience and knowledge requires interaction with the criticism and views of others and interaction with the voices from the past as those are embodied in the 'organised bodies of truth'. That growth of understanding, that building on experience (which is always limited to some degree) requires openness to others' viewpoints and to what is argued in books, research and the media. Democracy for Dewey, therefore, is not identified with a system of voting but with the free interactions of people and with the openness to sources of information and criticism.

But such democracy does not come naturally. Our temptation is more often than not to defend our views against opposition and to fear contrary views. The basis therefore of a democratic society (and thus the circumstances for proper understanding of the social setting in particular) is mutual respect and shared purposes, freedom of action and 'freed capacity of thought'.

All that however requires the development of particular virtues – those of respect for the other, of humility in accepting another's informed judgment, of openness to criticism. It requires the recognition of the good of the community in which one lives and has one's being.

The development of such skills and dispositions needs therefore to be a central aim of education. They are a pre-requisite of personal growth and public participation, and too often absent (as is clear from the present public debate, in England at least, over whether or not we should remain in Europe). It requires recognising, as Dewey argues in *Experience and Education* that

in spite of their varying character and capacities, men possess in their common humanity a quality which is worth cultivating and ... a community is most likely to make the most of that quality if it takes into account in planning its economic organisation and social institutions – if it stresses lightly differences of wealth and birth and social position, and establishes on firm foundations institutions which meet common needs, and are a source of common enlightenment and common enjoyment. (pp.55-6)

Philosophical basis

Until recently John Dewey has had a rough ride from philosophers of education – and indeed from philosophers in general, although Bertrand Russell (1946, p.774) referred to him in 1946 as 'generally admitted to be the leading living philosopher of America'. And yet, to my knowledge, he does not appear on reading lists of undergraduate philosophy courses in Britain.

The reason for this, at least until recently, is the underlying theory of knowledge which is seen to underpin his educational thinking – underpinning particularly his criticism of the passive nature of pupils' educational experience and of their reception of so-called knowledge which is transmitted or handed on by the teacher in a formal setting.

By contrast, Dewey's criticism argued for the centrality of 'doing' as the source of knowledge and understanding. It is a matter of 'I do, therefore I am', rather than 'I think, therefore I am'. Dewey referred to the prevailing epistemology as the 'spectator theory of knowledge', where thought, expressed precisely in propositions, mirrors the world as it really is. A proposition is true if the experience verifies the truth-claims made in the proposition. Moreover, such experience can be analysed into the sensations which we passively receive from the external world

But for Dewey we never know the world as it is except through the experiences which we have. Those experiences are not the passive reception of sensations but rather a constant interpretation and transformation of the sensations we receive. Any experience embodies a particular way of seeing and of understanding the physical and social world. 'Knowledge' (embodied within the experiences brought by the learners into school) is, therefore, always evolving through yet further experiences, and through 'what works'. Our experiences are understood from a particular angle, being conceptualised in a particular way. As such, our understanding of experience – that is, how we make sense of it – is constantly 're-constructed', as current ways of understanding, in the light of further experience, need to be revised. That further experience could be the criticism given by someone else, or what one reads in books, or the opening of one's eyes to a different historical account of events.

Such a form of 'pragmatism, where knowledge is always practical, provisional and open to further reconstruction, requires respect for the learners as practically engaged with the world, constantly enlarging their way of seeing the world. The teacher's job is to encourage such active learning, introducing new situations, new experiences, new and more profitable ways of seeing the way ahead through the understandings (referred to as the different forms of knowledge) which we have inherited.

Indeed, those different forms of knowledge have themselves been attained through the active learning and experimenting of others, and are themselves constantly evolving as a result of further criticism and scholarship. Such learners are thereby participating in 'the conversation between the generations of mankind' (to borrow a metaphor from Michael Oakeshott), which conversations arise from practical engagement with the world as it is provisionally understood.

The metaphor of 'conversation' is an important one, because it entails the social context in which the individual learner's experience is enriched – conversation with the traditions of thought we have inherited and conversations with one's co-learners as one is introduced to different perspectives and criticisms. And through the group or social context the learner acquires the norms of appropriate behaviour – whether those be the rules of playing a game, the standards of scholarly research, or the precepts of the community's morality. All experience has a social and practical dimension.

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