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A Broad Tent of Learning: John Dewey's Philosophy of Education

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"John Dewey," according to Levinson (2004), "was, perhaps, the most influential thinker with respect to the development of educational philosophy in the twentieth century" (p. 1). He wrote extensively on the subject, a fact to which one "bibliography of his writings on education" spanning sixteen pages can attest (Bickman, 1994, p. 394). Further, his theories regarding progressive education were well-received. They "were never broadly and deeply integrated into the practices of American public schools," though, partly because Dewey's dense and compact writing style rendered him "unusually susceptible to misunderstanding" ("John Dewey," 2005). His habit of approaching a definition from many different angles provides trouble for the critic as well; a 1959 collection of Dewey's choicest phrases, *Dictionary of Education*, includes no less than fifteen different meanings for the titular term. Indeed, none of his definitions can truly be considered complete without the others—though Dewey wrote volumes about the purposes and methodologies of education, he seemed incapable of coming up with an all-inclusive definition for the word. One must therefore examine the many uses that he thought education has before one can truly understand his philosophy regarding it.

Perhaps it would be easiest to open a window into Dewey's mind by discussing the debate between traditional and progressive education from his point of view. A self-defined progressive, Dewey found many things to criticize in the traditional education format. It was far too strict and autocratic, focusing far more on content delivery than on student comprehension: "[The students' job] is to do—and learn, as it was the part of the six hundred to do and die." Much of the content base was classical in nature, forcing students to grapple with material to which, in some cases, they could barely relate. Perhaps most offensive to Dewey, the curriculum presented its subject matter as

"essentially static…a finished product, with little regard [paid] either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that would certainly occur in the future" (Dewey, 1938, pp. 4-5). Such a staunch progressive could hardly fail to criticize undemocratic, unchanging lessons in "eternal" verities.

Yet Dewey also felt disquiet over some of the symptoms evident in the progressive philosophy of education. He feared that in rejecting wholesale the traditional philosophy, experience-nurturing progressives had fallen into an equally grievous error: dispensing with the sound foundations upon which the traditional philosophy of education had been built, such as well-defined order. "[They] will tend to suppose," Dewey (1938) wrote, "that because the old education was based on ready-made organization, therefore it suffices to reject the principle of organization *in toto*, instead of striving to discover what it means and how it is to be attained on the basis of experience" (pp. 7-8). While Dewey heartily agreed with the idea of allowing students to have an active participation in their learning and their classroom community, as opposed to being forced to digest large blocks of entirely foreign material, he did not approve of education being turned into "a matter of planless improvisation" (p. 18).

Clearly Dewey had sympathies with both camps. Progressivism's experience-based teaching and democratic ideals were far more favorable to student development than its counterpart. Education, after all, "is all one with living; education is experience; it is growth" (Baker, 1955, p. 130), something that progressive education was designed to foster. Yet without a system of organization and order as efficient as that which the traditional philosophy had evolved, students would learn a series of disconnected lessons that would "artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits" (Dewey,

1938, p. 14)—completely unsuitable if one wished to fashion them into whole individuals and productive members of society. Dewey's (1938) response was to propose the development of a theory of education that eschewed as many of what he termed the "mis-educative" (p. 13) experiences—those hurtful to educational growth—as possible, instead utilizing progressive philosophy packaged inside the best methodologies (suitably modified) inherent in traditionalism.

Dewey's ideal classroom must live up to a number of extraordinarily high ideals, some of which place its management plan at odds with more traditional methods. Dewey (1938) didn't simply want to foster good students; he wanted to foster good *democratic citizens* as well: "…democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more accessible and widely enjoyed…" (p. 25). Therefore, his standard includes a heavy component of social interaction between students, to foster an environment that could "[call out certain responses. The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on" (1916, p. 11). This standard goes hand-in-hand with Dewey's attitude about what a student actually learns in the classroom: "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical failures is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes…often is much more important than the…lesson…" (Dewey, 1938, p. 49). For a student to become a good citizen, they must practice it daily, in the classroom.

As to classroom discipline, Dewey (1938) stated that the good teacher acts as the "representative and agent" of the best interests of his charges, and "reduces to a minimum the occasions in which he or she has to exercise authority in a personal way" (p. 59).

This teacher's authority, unlike the autocratic traditionalists, would be "capable of directing and utilizing change" (Dewey, 1959, p. 6). Social control should proceed, not solely from the teacher to the students, but from the students to the environment as well, creating an environment "in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility" (Dewey, 1938, p. 61). If education was not allowed to be, as Dewey put it, "essentially a social process" (p. 65), then the progressives would have done nothing to address the shortcomings of the traditionalists; they would themselves have become autocrats.

With regard to what attitudes teachers were supposed to cultivate in their classrooms, Dewey (1938) suggested three: freedom of intelligence, finding one's own purpose, and application of knowledge to one's everyday life. Traditionalism, "with its fixed rows of desks and its military regimen of pupils" (p. 70), stifled all three. Without the freedom to express themselves, students are forced into an "artificial uniformity" where aberrations "were disclosed to the teacher only when some untoward act led to their detection" (pp. 70-71). Without a visible effort on the part of the instructor to "secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying," learning becomes a godly decree to be handed down from on high instead of an approachable and enjoyable activity. And of course, without applying the lessons they had learned in their everyday life to the study of their academic subjects, students quickly achieve a total disconnect between these two vital areas: "…the achievements of the past provide the only means at command for understanding the present" (p. 93). The traditional system, therefore, effectively deprived the class of each individual's valuable contribution and curtailed each individual's learning process (Dewey, 1959, p. 62.)

So, what is the ultimate goal of Dewey's system? As previously stated, Dewey (1959) came up with no less than fifteen definitions of education that were judged worthy of being included in a compendium of his greatest quotes. The one which most completely captures the ultimate goal of his philosophy of education for the individual, however, appears near the bottom of the list: "The best thing that can be said about any special process of education…is that it renders its subject capable of further education: more sensitive to conditions of growth and more able to take advantage of them" (p. 33). One of Dewey's main objections to the traditional methods of education, after all, was that truth is not a constant; something judged to be true at one period in time may prove false when tested later. If truth must constantly be relearned, therefore, it is the duty of any proper philosophy of education—when applied—to instruct their young charges in the process of self-education.

On a broader societal scale, Dewey obviously thought that education could aid in the continuation of democracy. His philosophy is determined to delve deeper than the "superficial explanation" that a body politic which relies on its people to select and empower their rulers must of necessity be educated, though he certainly believed in the truth of such a statement (Dewey, 1959, p. 22). Rather, as previously seen, it focuses on the empowerment of the individual: "A democratic criterion requires us to develop capacity to the point of competency to choose and make its own career" (Dewey, 1916, p. 119). This redefinition takes the more modern tack of positing not the conditions necessary for the existence of a democratic society—already firmly established in Americana by that point—but instead of what such a society owes each of its members to ensure his or her empowerment. Such an individual, with an educated mind and

cultivated morals, is far better equipped to assist a fluid democratic society than a tradesman who is at a master's level in one practical skill but possesses less than an apprentice's knowledge of a thousand others. Dewey's vision for American education, according to Baker (1955), was to have a system where "the standard of social value [could] be applied to [vocations] in a complete way and its isolation from the life of the child…can be overcome" (p. 104)—in other words, to have a system where how we work and how we live are no longer placed in separate spheres, and every product of the American educational system was capable of achieving their maximum level of success both as a person and as a member of society.

This definition of Dewey's philosophy of education is quite abstract. Then again, so is the philosophy itself: it does not purport to assist in developing methods of teaching a rigidly defined subject, and it will not be of any help for those seeking a step-by-step guide to classroom management. Instead, it offers a series of desirable goals that its creator believed would produce generations of success stories. It is up to the individual teacher to craft a system for his/her students and classroom that adheres to his principles, and then—as no system of this kind can truly survive unchanged from year to year—to make adjustments as needed throughout their instructing life. One can thus see Dewey's philosophy as a broad tent under which many strange bedfellows may make their camp, adhering only to Dewey's (1938) "simpler" progressive philosophy. But, as the master himself said in warning to those who believed in the simplicity of such an undertaking: "The easy and the simple are not identical" (p. 20).

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