PHILOSOPHY 12

John Dewey (1859-1952): Philosophy of Education

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Dewey was active in education his entire life. Besides high school and college teaching, he devised curricula, established, reviewed and administered schools and departments of education, participated in collective organizing, consulted and lectured internationally, and wrote extensively on many facets of education. He established the University of Chicago’s Laboratory School as an experimental site for theories in instrumental logic and psychological functionalism. This school also became a site for democratic expression by the local community.

5.1 Experiential Learning and Teaching

Dewey’s “Reflex Arc” paper applied functionalism to education. “Reflex” argued that human experience is not a disjointed sequence of fits and starts, but a developing circuit of activities. Learning deserves to be framed in this way: as a cumulative, progressive process where inquirers move from the dissatisfying phase of doubt toward another marked by the satisfying resolution of a problem. “Reflex” also shows that the subject of a stimulus (e.g., the pupil) is not a passive recipient of, say, a sensation but an agent who *takes* it amidst other ongoing activities in a larger environmental field.

Cognizance of such fundamental facts entailed, Dewey argued, that educators discard pedagogies based on the “blank slate” model of curriculum. Rather, in *The School and Society*, Dewey wrote, “the question of education is the question of taking hold of [children’s] activities, of giving them direction” (MW1: 25). Dewey’s *How We Think* (1910c, MW6) was intended, primarily, to instruct teachers how to apply instrumentalism; education’s intellectual goals could be advanced by acquainting children with the general intellectual habits of scientific inquiry.

The native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind. (*HWT*, MW6: 179)

Given Dewey’s different approach to psychology, teaching roles would need revision. While teachers still had to know their subject matter, they also needed to understand the student’s cultural and personal backgrounds. Learning as an activity which incorporated actual problems necessitated a careful integration of lessons with specific learners. Traditional motivational strategies, too, had to change; rather than relying on rewards or punishments, Deweyan teachers were called to reimagine the whole learning environment; they must merge the school’s preexisting curricular goals with their pupils’ present interests. One way to do this was by identifying specific problems able to bridge curriculum and student and then create situations in which students have to work them out.[[31](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/notes.html#note-31)] The problem-centered approach demanded a lot from teachers, as it required training in subject matters, child psychology, and various pedagogies capable of interweaving these together.[[32](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/notes.html#note-32)]

5.2 Traditionalists, Romantics, and Dewey

Dewey’s educational philosophy emerged amidst a fierce 1890’s debate between educational “romantics” and “traditionalists”. *Romantics* (also called “New” or “Progressive” education by Dewey), urged a “child-centered” approach; they claimed that the child’s natural impulses provided education’s proper starting point. As active and creative beings, education should not fetter growth—even instruction should be subordinated to content if necessary. *Traditionalists* (called “Old” education by Dewey) pressed for a “curriculum-centered” approach. Children were empty cabinets which curriculum fills with civilization’s lessons. Content was supreme, and instruction should discipline children to ensure they are receptive.

In many articles and books (“My Pedagogic Creed”, 1897b, EW5; *The School and Society*, 1899, MW1; *Democracy and Education*, 1916b, MW9; *Experience and Education*, 1938b, LW13, etc.) Dewey developed an interactional model to move beyond that debate. He refused to privilege either child or society. While Romantics correctly identified the child (replete with instincts, powers, habits, and histories) as an indispensable starting point for pedagogy, Dewey argued that the child cannot be the *only* starting point. Larger social groups (family, community, nation) also have a legitimate stake in passing along extant interests, needs, and values as part of an educational synthesis.

Still, of these two approaches, Dewey tilted more strongly against the high value placed by traditionalists on discipline and memorization. While recognizing the legitimacy of conveying content (facts, values), Dewey thought it paramount for schools to eschew indoctrination. Educating meant *incorporating*, with a wide berth for personal freedom, unique individuals into a changing society which—this had to remain clear—would soon be under *their* dominion. This is why *who the child was* mattered so very much. Following colleague and lifelong friend G.H. Mead, Dewey argued that any child’s “self” was an emerging construct of social and personal experiences, so no child’s deeds, words, or interests could be isolated from *their* social context. Insofar as these were facts of social psychology, schools had to become micro-communities to best reflect children’s growing interests and needs. “The school cannot be a preparation for social life excepting as it reproduces, within itself, the typical conditions of social life” (“Ethical Principles Underlying Education”, 1897a, EW5: 61–62).[[33](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/notes.html#note-33)]

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