

A Book Review of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*

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John Dewey was regarded by his peers (e.g., Irving King, University of Iowa [King, 1917], C. S. Gardner [Gardner, 1917]) as being one of the most advanced educational theorists of his time, enriching educational theory and calling for a change in educational practice—focused on the guidance of learning, rather than directed studies based on a purely intellectualized approach (Gardner, 1917). Over 100 years after the publication of *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Dewey's teachings continue to influence education. Dewey's message is the growth of democracy with developments in science and industry—these changes influenced his philosophy of education presented in this book. As a result, Dewey provides a philosophy of education that is adaptive to society's growth, which is inextricably linked to the growth of the individual. The age-old structure of learning curriculum by books and not personal experience continues to dominate school curriculum presently. Dewey's insight into systemic issues in the educational system provides an opportunity to revisit his book in the twenty-first century, as new scholars embark on their journey investigating education and curriculum theory.

Dewey's motivation for writing *Democracy and Education* addresses two core ideas in democratic societies and the problematic structure of learning in education. The first of these ideas concerns organizing members of society with the purpose of sharing common interests. Dewey's second idea is that democratic societies generate more interaction among social groups. Dewey's ideas of democratic societies remain prevalent today in science and industry, and the education system. For example, technology has advanced online learning over the last 20 years, allowing democratic principles to spread more freely such as the "participation in its good [society] of all its members on equal terms" (p. 99) and the "liberation of a greater diversity" (p. 87). Social groups have formed in international education platforms, and the internet has created opportunities for students to seek out social groups internationally by registering in educational programs abroad. With a globalized society that is rapidly moving towards an intellectualized approach, the physical experience of interacting with people and environments is often missing. A mind-body approach to learning is a key theory in Dewey's work. Dewey's philosophies present specific ideas, including social life, growth and direction, in which education can be effective in democratic societies and these philosophies remain true today—100 years later—in the presence of innovations in technology and industry.

Dewey's Philosophies

Social Life

Dewey believes that the environment contributes to education and social life. Dewey explains that an environment represents a distinct continuity of surroundings that supports an individual's education. The entirety of one's experience in society is educative and subjective. Even though Dewey supports the use of schools and formal education for complex societies; he believes that it is important to have a balance between formal and informal education because informal education is a necessary part of one's social environment. Dewey cautions the reader against putting too much significance on formal schooling in lieu of experience—experiential knowledge transmitted in education and social life is vital to one's education and equally important to formal education. Irrespective of education, Dewey states that the transmission of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge is indirect. One cannot transmit an emotion, and an environment is needed to support an individual's learning because "we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (p. 19). In addition to the school environment, an individual's social life through their personal environment contributes to the complex and indirect nature of instilling knowledge. Social life has changed since Dewey's time with the introduction of social media and the disintegration of the physical environment—resulting in reduced physical interactions in one's social life and learning environment.

Growth and Direction

Dewey asserts that growth is an essential factor in a student's learning process. According to Dewey, "The criterion of the value of school education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth" (p. 53). Dewey believes that

growth is dependent on one's need for others as having connections with others supports social and personal growth. Dewey further states that having social connections is the ability to learn from experience. In conjunction with Dewey's views on the formation of social life, indirect education teaches another form of growth—adaptation. Adaptation materializes skills through collaboration and experience with others. Growth and plasticity are foundational concepts that are not only relevant in today's discourse on education, but plasticity has also worked its way into modern neuroscience, for example, in describing the brain's ability to adapt to an environment (Hayes & Stratton, 2022).

Dewey cautions on the use of directions in training individuals. Directions such as commands, prohibitions, approvals, and disapprovals can result in exaggerated efforts for control, instead of organization. Focusing on results by directing individuals is a form of control. Dewey, however, recognizes that such an approach also leads to social control and astutely summarizes “the common understanding of the means and ends of actions is the essence of social control.” (p. 39). Dewey's understanding of social control can be seen in marketing and mass media. Facebook is an example of how marketing and media can be used to influence consumers. Companies spend millions of dollars to influence consumer choices using Facebook ads. Total spend on advertising on Facebook in 2023 was \$131 billion U.S. dollars (Dixon, 2024). Dewey asserts that it is the business of education to understand control through the lens of the individual, and it is the responsibility of schools to acquire a social sense of their influence in directing individual learning.

Social Aims in Education

Dewey argues that an educational aim must be linked to activities and needs of the individual. A social aim must provide an overarching approach to organizing activities for structure and guidance. Dewey criticizes the education system—students are taught the same exercises irrespective of their unique personalities and interests, creating a “dull uniformity” (p. 116). He contends that educators must nurture individuals to develop their natural talents. His solution is to introduce the concept of social efficiency—a means of utilizing individual capacities in occupations that have social meaning (i.e., occupations that contribute to society). Social efficiency organizes individuals based on shared interests and occupations by allowing them to participate in relevant activities. By sharing interests, individuals are provided opportunities to learn from each other, providing an educative environment, which leads to individual growth.

Interest and Discipline

Dewey believes that individuals need interest, willpower, and clarity to learn effectively. Dewey raises the argument that it is difficult, if not pointless, to teach someone if the person does not have an interest in the subject matter: “It makes no difference what you teach a boy so long as he doesn't like it” (p. 134). Active participation is thematic in Dewey's philosophy of growth and experience. Dewey warns that students who undertake a spectator view distance themselves from actively participating in education and present an attitude of indifference to their education. The mind has an important role in the reflective process of understanding the educational experience. Moreover, one's attitude to education informs one's approach as being either intellectual (e.g., spectator) or an integration of mind and body (e.g., participant), for example.

Dewey believes that knowledge is subordinate to thinking and that the ability to problem-solve is inherently of greater value. According to Dewey, students need reflection and good habits of thinking to become fully developed individuals. He explains that the measure of experience is in denoting value and not purely cognitive because the body has a role in educational experience (e.g., in its physical constitution and reactions to stimuli, its vigour, its natural development). Dewey discusses the role of the body in educational experience as originating in the philosophies of education in Ancient Greece. In spite of a 2000 year discourse on the importance of the body, Quinn (2015) describes today's society as a non-body culture—a term especially relevant given social media's influence and impact on the body and mind. Dewey's theory, while very relevant, has not presented ways to prevent the evolution of the non-body culture and the need for a mind-body culture society.

Conclusion

Dewey's philosophies provide insight into problems in educational settings. Even though Dewey recognizes the value of social efficiency, the philosopher reflects on the challenges of supporting individual educational aims within a complex society. Dewey's legacy continues to encourage individuals to embrace their interests and incorporate experiential learning

through beliefs, emotions, and knowledge. He reviews the systemic challenges facing educational institutions in democratic societies and provides solutions to education within an individual context.

While Dewey advocates an ideal approach to education, he does not provide solutions to the systemic issues that continue to persist in today's society, including mind-centered learning, imposed direction, and manipulation through marketing and mass media. While Dewey advocates for a mind-body approach in education, over the last 100 years people have become increasingly mind-centric due to the large-scale adoption and reliance on technology. He opposed the assimilation of individuals. Dewey worked within the education system to address the issues he saw as important and influential during his time. His insight into the functioning of democratic societies and the core ideas such societies uphold provide a strong rationale for understanding how our contemporary societies and educational systems are influencing the development of education to this day.

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