

# *John Dewey and Progressive Education*

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**ABSTRACT:** John Dewey has had a profound influence on education in America. His indelible mark on progressive education is still infused within American higher education to this present day and will likely continue to influence this system in the future. This paper illustrates Dewey's contributions to tertiary education in the United States by reviewing his various motivations and philosophies for marshaling progressive education while keeping in mind market forces. Although many argue that progressive education permanently transformed the higher education landscape for the better, this paper also illustrates multiple critiques of this unique way of learning.

**Keywords:** progressive education, higher education, Dewey

**RESUMÉ:** John Dewey a eu une influence considérable sur l'enseignement américain. Il y a laissé une marque indélébile et l'enseignement supérieur en est encore imprégné et qui continuera de l'être. On rappelle ici les contributions de Dewey dans l'enseignement supérieur aux Etats-Unis en analysant ses motivations et ses philosophies diverses pour canaliser l'enseignement progressif tout en gardant à l'esprit les tendances du marché. Même si ceux qui ne sont pas d'accord sur le fait que l'enseignement progressif a amélioré d'une façon permanente le paysage de l'enseignement supérieur sont nombreux, beaucoup de critiques de cette manière unique d'apprendre, sont aussi apportées.

**Mots-clés:** enseignement progressif, enseignement supérieur, Dewey

## *Introduction*

John Dewey has had a profound influence on education in America. His many accomplishments include the founding of functional psychology, the development of the philosophy of pragmatism, and the development of progressive education. Although there have been the likes of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Francis Parker, and Charles W. Eliot who helped cultivate progressive education, many have claimed John Dewey as the

“Father of Progressive Education” (Dewey did not accept the title of father of progressive education as he knew of the complex origins (Reese, 2001). The focus of this paper is on John Dewey’s influence of progressive education on American higher education and how the development of progressive education continues to shape higher education in the United States in the present day.

### *History*

Reviewing the education of John Dewey helps to uncover the partial impetus for his advocacy for progressive education. In 1882, John Dewey was admitted to the Ph.D. program in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University and was awarded his degree in 1884. After receiving his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, a university which tended to focus on scientific experimentation, Dewey created the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago from 1896 through 1904 where he and other teachers experimented with various strategies to advance the idea of progressive education (Schutz, 2011). Dewey also regularly contributed to *The New Republic*, an American magazine of politics and the arts, where he would advocate his new way of thinking about education.

Concurrently while John Dewey was advancing his philosophy on a new way of thinking about education, there was a growth of a new middle-class professionalism in America at the end of the nineteenth century and extreme social change following the Gilded Age with mass urbanization across the country. These circumstances are important to note because they are major reasons why progressive education emerged and was adopted (Schutz, 2011). These societal changes and needs created a ripe arena for progressive education. Progressive education in the early twentieth century moved away from the traditional, literature-based education into a more socially-conscious curriculum (Jackson, 2008). Dewey said that higher education must meet “public needs” and that “culture” had no meaning unless it could function “in the conditions of modern life, of daily life, of political and industrial life” (Veysey, 1965, 115). Dewey advocated that higher education be adapted to the main role of human life vocation (Veysey, 1965).

### *Philosophy*

Progressive education in the late nineteenth century was extremely different than the traditional curriculum being used in colleges and universities. Whereas the traditional curriculum focused on memorization and mental discipline, progressive

education's main goal was practical relevance. Reese (2001) mentions that the advocates of progressive education had invented a whole new vocabulary, curriculum and purpose of schools. Two main components of progressive education are learning by doing so that understanding and meaning can take place and advancing social responsibility and democracy.

John Dewey pushed for course instruction to include projects, field work, and inquiry instead of memorization and recitation (Lattuca and Stark, 2011). He even urged that general (versus specialized) education be based on experience with the present-day personal and social problems (Lucas, 2006). Dewey believed that teaching traditional knowledge and beliefs promoted close-mindedness since the contemporary world and the knowledge to be gained from this contemporary world (which was greatly due to scientific advances) was being ignored (Webster, 2009). Stallones (2006) states that religious sentiment was one of the main forces behind the educational progressive movement and that Dewey revised the theological notion of truth with human reason using a scientific process to reveal knowledge. Dewey argued that if religion was made 'free from dependence upon the supernatural', it would encourage individuals to question, experiment, and discuss the validity of this knowledge by using their intellectual freedom (Webster, 2009).

Dewey explained that an experience between an individual and their environment results in learning as the individual tries to make meaning upon the experiential learning. Making meaning and solving practical problems are two key components of educative experience (Ord and Leather, 2011). Another important feature within the meaning realm of progressive education is that students are to perceive knowledge naturally with teachers serving more as facilitators in the process of scientific discovery (Jackson, 2008).

Democracy is also a fundamental point of Dewey's philosophy of progressive education. Dewey wrote thirty pieces in which "democracy" is in the title (Stone, 2002). Dewey believed that too much bureaucracy versus focusing on an individual caused an individual to get trapped in routines and conformity (Schutz, 2011). And closely associated with a person's individuality is their sense of freedom and ability to express their individuality in a democracy (Weiler, 2004). Dewey strongly opposed totalitarian regimes and adherents of traditional religion as he felt that both of these situations made a person passive and unquestioning with customary practices to prove their loyalty and devotion. This caused oppression to an individual's freedom, especially their

intellectual freedom (Webster, 2009). This freedom to discover knowledge was a safeguard against manipulation by traditionalists ignoring the contemporary world around them (Webster, 2009).

Dewey saw the university function as a way to improve the democratic community by effectively using academic freedom against the power of convention. Dewey condemned the lack of due process when several university teachers were dismissed (Stone, 2002). In response to these dismissals, John Dewey and Arthur Lovejoy founded American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915 for the purpose of protecting and preserving academic freedom. In his role with AAUP shortly after its founding, John Dewey emphasized the development of professional standards for the faculty versus being the middle-man in faculty-administrative disputes at the institution level (Schuster and Finkelstein, 2011). However, Dewey did acknowledge that artful communication was necessary when exercising academic freedom so that the various viewpoints would be at least heard, reflected upon, and respected instead of instantly being tuned out or shunned because it went against conformity (Ivie, 2006).

### *Critiques*

Although it may be argued that progressive education permanently transformed the higher education landscape for the better, there are also multiple critiques of this type of education. Dougherty (2007) states that progressive education stresses experience at the expense of the inherited education such as the truths about human nature and fulfillment that are found in the Greek poets. However, it can be argued that new societal needs surface which dictate new strategies and inquiries which progressive education filled. Another argument is that the secular outlook of Dewey leads to moral and intellectual standard decline and that education based solely on utilitarian principles does not allow for a broadly educated class with wisdom to handle uncertainty (Dougherty, 2007). With regard to limitations on progressive education, Schutz (2011) contends that the progressive education model doesn't take into account the less privileged classes which limits its ability to support social transformation and power. Therefore, if middle-class progressives would put themselves in lower-class shoes, their perception would undoubtedly be altered and they would realize that a public democracy is not reality for many as there are many constraints to keep in mind.

### *Current Applications*

John Dewey, in line with the social responsibility component, strongly believed in using schools to also help educate the wider community (Weiler, 2004) which can still be seen today as evidenced by many college and universities' mission statements. This is particularly true of land-grant universities which were created to provide tertiary education to society as a whole versus the upper class elites at private universities (Schuh, 1986). Besides providing a more socially just society by creating more access to higher education, the land-grant university embodies many other progressive education tenets. For example, the goals of teaching, research, and extension at these types of universities are to create new knowledge which can be imparted on stakeholders outside of academia and applied to current societal problems (Schuh, 1986). These principles are evidenced below when reviewing a sample of land-grant university mission statements:

#### *University of California:*

The distinctive mission of the University is to serve society as a center of higher learning, providing long-term societal benefits through transmitting advanced knowledge, discovering new knowledge, and functioning as an active working repository of organized knowledge. That obligation, more specifically, includes undergraduate education, graduate and professional education, research, and other kinds of public service, which are shaped and bounded by the central pervasive mission of discovering and advancing knowledge (Regents of the University of California, n.d.).

#### *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech):*

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) is a public land-grant university serving the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world community. The discovery and dissemination of new knowledge are central to its mission. Through its focus on teaching and learning, research and discovery, and outreach and engagement, the university creates, conveys, and applies knowledge to expand personal growth and opportunity, advance social and community development, foster economic competitiveness, and improve the quality of life (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2016).

*University of Minnesota:*

Research: We seek new knowledge that can change how we all work and live. At the University of Minnesota, students do research alongside top professors in all major issues (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2016).

Education: We prepare students to meet the great challenges facing our state, our nation, and our world. As a U of M student you'll engage with your professors and fellow students from the very beginning. And you'll develop your strengths with beyond-the-classroom experiences issues (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2016).

Outreach: We apply our expertise to meet the needs of Minnesota, our nation, and the world. We partner with communities across Minnesota to engage our students, faculty, and staff in addressing society's most pressing issues (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2016).

With this social responsibility goal of progressive education in mind, progressive education can also be applied to help engender a more heterogeneous higher education student body. As progressive educational reformers pushed for courses in language learning and civics courses in schools at the turn of the twentieth century to aid immigrants, this is also extremely relevant in today's global society (Checkoway, 2001). With 1.3 million foreigners moving to the United States and the immigrant population representing 13.3 percent in 2014, there is a significant opportunity to engage this population to participate civically (Zong and Batalova, 2016). By responding to diverse needs of a more diverse student population with progressive education, courses can be offered in politics, economics, and social subjects which can foster the integration of this population to provide for a more socially responsible, participatory, and democratic United States.

Practical relevance, another main goal of progressive education, also continues to pervade the higher education institution. Since 1971, the majority of four year graduates are graduating with degrees in practical arts versus liberal arts (Brint, 2002). This pivotal shift shows an interest in obtaining practical knowledge which can be applied to an occupation. With the university sticker price continuing to rise dramatically, selecting a field of study with plentiful job opportunities can benefit the graduating student financially as many students finance their tuition through student loans. While critics espouse that aligning the curriculum too closely to industry can cause a conflict of interest, utilitarianism is being demanded by students nonetheless.

And practical relevance is needed in the knowledge economy which poses new challenges for college graduates entering the

workforce. These challenges will be complex and will require many different skillsets to be addressed and solved. Newell and Davis (1988) suggest interdisciplinary opportunities in combination with progressive education techniques to create an empowered society with the ability to handle complex issues. Although there is a propensity for the silo effect on university campuses, interdisciplinary studies can encourage students with various interests and experiences to collaborate and understand the issues of other sectors (Dymond et al., 2015).

Pragmatism, another principle of progressive education, can also be seen in today's university with the increase of service learning opportunities. With student internships providing a better connection between academia and industry as well as inspiring students to open new businesses, these types of opportunities are providing experiential opportunities and solving practical problems (Weible, 2009). Community service and volunteer opportunities also abound as a way to learn experientially and address the social responsibility component of progressive education which John Dewey espoused. Furthermore, service learning can provide a new perspective and create more open-mindedness from interacting with others with different home, town, and school experiences (Lane, 2008). This learning by doing in both types of experiences facilitates the process of understanding and meaning.

In regards to the notion that teachers should serve more as facilitators in the ethos of progressive education, the flipped classroom is one contemporary pedagogical approach which can be applied to implement this concept. Although the flipped classroom is a relatively new term, the influence of progressive education on the flipped classroom concept can be easily gleaned (Abeysekera and Dawson, 2015). With a flipped classroom, which moves the direct instruction out of the classroom and an interactive environment into the classroom, the instructor acts as a guide where students creatively engage and apply the subject matter during the classroom experience (Flip Learning, 2014). A learner-centered approach is employed to create rich learning opportunities which supports competency of the student upon entering the workforce (Flip Learning, 2014; Lemmer, 2013). This competency can increase the probability of success in solving practical problems.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the influence of John Dewey on progressive education is still infused within American higher education to this present day. The concepts of social responsibility, practical

relevance, learning through experience, and teachers as facilitators can be seen throughout the college curriculum as the trend toward specialization versus liberal education still reigns king (Dougherty, 2007). Although there are multiple critiques of John Dewey and progressive education, progressive education continues to influence today's American higher education system and will likely continue to influence this system in the future.

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