John Dewey's Democracy and Education: Questions for Education Today

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“It insists upon the old, the past, and passes lightly over the operation of the genuinely novel and unforeseeable” (DE 77).

Looking at the above quote, we can ask, What role should the past play in how we define education? And why is “the genuinely novel” and “unforeseeable” so important in education? Dewey’s answers to these questions are significant for understanding his view of education and teaching. In chapter six of Democracy and Education, Dewey provides us with his own definition of education, a definition that is significant for how we understand education today. This paper proceeds in three steps, briefly described below.

1. Education as Formation

In this section, I examine Dewey’s association of the term “formation” with a way of thinking about education as forming the individual by things “outside” the individual. On Dewey’s understanding, “formation” means that the outside environment works to determine how the individual thinks, and in turn, how he or she chooses to act. Dewey’s notion of “formation” was the common translation of the German concept Bildung, which nowadays is sometimes translated simply as education. Dewey connects the idea of formation of the mind “from without” with the thinking of German philosopher J.F. Herbart, and Herbart’s followers. Dewey’s central complaint with Herbart’s notion of mind, and its implications for education, is found in his statement: “The control is from behind, from the past” (DE 76). What does he mean by that? From this view of the mind, it followed that the environment of the learner—that is, the objects, resources, and ideas around him or her—and the teacher—that is, the person facilitating learning—both played a significant role in what the learner learned. The teacher had the responsibility of choosing which objects and ideas, or “subject matter,” should be included in the child’s environment, and also how (by which methods) this subject matter was to be presented to the learner so that he or she could learn from it.

For Dewey, in Herbart’s account of education, the old or “past”—that is, what the child has taken in from the environment and has therefore already learned (already knows and can do)—played too strong a role in shaping which new ideas or objects the child could take in. If we follow Herbart’s view, as Dewey argues, the teacher becomes all powerful.

2. Teaching as a Profession

Dewey does not want to entirely dismiss Herbart’s contribution to educational theory. Rather, he also highlights what he admires about Herbart. Specifically, he credits Herbart with conceiving of the teacher as a professional. What is it that makes teaching a profession?
Dewey points out that Herbart rightly placed the choices involved in teaching within the realm of conscious decision-making. Herbart’s theory ushered in a new conception of teaching that today we associate with the term “reflective practice”. This means that a teacher’s judgements about what to teach or how to teach cannot be a matter of following one’s “casual inspiration” or whim, nor should they simply be a matter of following “routine” procedures without consideration of the changing needs of learners (DE 77). On Dewey’s — and Herbart’s — view, the teacher is one who thinks and judges according to the aims and principles of the educational profession, and according to the needs of the learner.

Dewey also values Herbart’s emphasis on the importance of “content” or subject matter, even though he was critical of how it was formally presented in “steps”. Today, we talk about the teaching profession as requiring a special kind of knowledge about the content of learning called “pedagogical content knowledge.” Lee Shulman famously defines pedagogical content knowledge as an educator’s knowledge of “the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others […] and this includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult” (Shulman, 2004 p. 203). This means that teachers need to have knowledge beyond their disciplines, so a mathematics teacher not only has to know mathematics well, but also, has to know how to break apart mathematical ideas so that young learners can come to understand them.

Despite Dewey’s praise of Herbart, he believed that Herbart did not pay enough attention to how the teacher is also “a learner”; the teacher learns from the “genuinely novel and unforeseeable” that the child brings to the learning situation (DE 77).

3. Education as Reconstruction

Up to this point, Dewey has spent time making us aware of a central problem in how we educate that is still relevant today, namely, that there is too much emphasis in teaching as passing on knowledge as finished “products”, which we call today “teaching as transmission,” and too little emphasis on the process of learning by which knowledge becomes connected to learners’ lives. However, Dewey would view it as equally problematic if educators simply did the opposite and became passive observers, while the child directed his or her own learning situation. Dewey emphasizes on the teacher’s role in shaping the educational environment and making choices for each child which ensure his or her continued growth.

Bearing this in mind, we come to Dewey’s technical definition of education, a definition which sharply contrasts with what he called the “ordinary” definition of education found in Chapter 1:
Education “is that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which 1) adds to the meaning of experience, and 2) which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” (DE 82)

The individual, or the mind, reconstructs the experiences one has in interaction with the environment. Thinking of our interactions with people, rather than just objects, we start to see how Dewey’s notion of education has a moral meaning. If we learn to understand the consequences of our actions, we can better direct our interactions with others towards mutually respectful ends. As I will explain, the social and moral meanings of education comes through that is often forgotten in today’s understanding of teaching as transmission of knowledge.

**PAPER 2:**

**Dewey on Vocational Education**

From a contemporary perspective, it is not easy to orient oneself to Dewey’s writing on vocational education. Dewey did not use the term ‘vocational education’ in the established contemporary sense, to denote a form of education or training preparing individuals to take part in particular occupations or professions. Dewey’s understanding of the term does indeed cover this usage but is much more wide ranging. For Dewey, a vocation is life itself, which includes what we currently understand by ‘vocational education’, but also other aspects of life such as leisure, domesticity and citizenship. In effect, Dewey is appealing to the etymological origins of the term ‘vocation’ as a calling and interpreting it as a particular individual’s life calling, or what one is to do with one’s life considered as a certain kind of unity. However, the term ‘vocation’ in this broader sense has a significant resonance in broader concerns of contemporary philosophy of education as an issue sometimes addressed through the concept of *autonomy*. However, there still remains some confusion about the term ‘vocational education’ which affects our understanding of Dewey’s proposal. It is possible to distinguish at least three distinct senses relevant to Dewey’s account.

The first is that of a vocational education as preparation for a *Beruf* in the German sense. The term ‘Beruf’ is narrower and more specific than the English term ‘occupation’. In contemporary Germany it is defined in terms of recognized spheres of employment activity, the attributes of know-how, character and knowledge needed to practice them. It is also a marker of social identity. In this sense, a *Beruf* is much more than either a *trade* practiced traditionally (Clarke, Winch and Brockmann 2013) or an *occupation*, considered as a bundling together of tasks for a particular purpose. But German vocational education also has, as an aim, the making possible of further and indefinite individual development sometimes known as *allgemeine*
Menschbildung [general education] (cf. Benner 2003) as well as development as a citizen. Such a conception of vocational education can be traced at least back to the work of the German educator and philosopher of education Georg Kerschensteiner and has some affinities with the Deweyan expansive concept of vocational education, although there are also significant differences, as we shall see (Kerschensteiner 1901). Like Dewey’s expansive concept it focuses on vocation as a calling. One’s Beruf is in a sense a life project, partly constitutive of who one is, chosen freely and authentically, within self-knowledge of one’s interests, abilities and character. Unlike the Deweyan concept, however, the Germanic idea of berufliche Bildung is more focused on the economic and work element of an individual’s life, rather than on other aspects, although it is important to note that a typical contemporary German Ausbildung (vocational education) programme will include elements of preparation for individual cultivation, character development outside the workplace and citizenship.

The second conception is the Deweyan conception of vocational education as education for autonomy. Dewey’s idea is that a vocation is a calling in life in the fullest sense.

“A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates.” P.307

And he immediately goes on to explain:

“Occupation is a concrete term for continuity. It includes the development of artistic capacity of any kind, of special scientific ability, of effective citizenship, as well as professional and business occupations, to say nothing of mechanical labor or engagement in gainful pursuits.” (DE, p.307)

Dewey thus makes a similar move with ‘occupation’ as he makes with ‘vocation’. One’s occupation is what occupies one in life, in all its aspects and forms a continuity or something not arbitrary and capricious, but containing elements that hang together to bind one to one’s fellow citizens and to help one to make sense of one’s own life. The two quotations above also make it clear that Dewey believes that an occupation in his broad sense is something worthwhile, both to the individual and to his fellows. This is an important point in contemporary discussions of autonomy. To summarise, one’s occupation is what occupies one in life and education is vocational in the sense that it prepares individuals to choose and to pursue a worthwhile course in life (DE, p. 307).

The third conception of vocational education is the one best known in the Anglophone societies as industrial training or the preparation of individuals for specific trades or tasks. Perhaps the most ancient of conceptions of vocational education, it can be found for example in
the work of Plato, in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In essence, this is the conception of vocational education advocated by Dewey’s American contemporary, David Snedden (see Snedden, 1914). Neither Dewey nor Kerschensteiner would have been sympathetic to Snedden’s conception of vocational education as industrial training. Both would emphasise the necessity of an occupation or a *Beruf* being freely chosen and would recognise that having employment was only one element in a balanced and worthwhile life. They did, however, differ on the medium through which the capacity for autonomy should be developed.

**Concluding Remarks**

Dewey’s expansive conception of vocational education has much in common with contemporary accounts of education for autonomy – preparation for a self-chosen worthwhile form of life, which includes paid employment. In this sense, Dewey is an advocate of education for ‘weak autonomy’ or the ability to make a choice from worthwhile alternatives (Winch 2005). He has little to say about industrial training, apart from suggesting that it had little to offer individuals in terms of the possibility of personal growth; nor does he say much about the conditions needed to provide young people with fulfilling careers. It could be maintained, however, that one cannot discuss vocational education seriously without raising questions about economic organisation and one cannot advocate radical improvements in vocational education without at least an implicit critique of how the economy and labour markets are configured.

**PAPER 3:**

**John Dewey’s Philosophy of Education**

*Democracy and Education* is a major work in the philosophy of education, and yet it is not until chapter 24, after 320 pages, that Dewey finds it necessary to give ‘explicit consideration’ of the nature of philosophy – that is, of what he is doing. It is as though he has been arguing philosophically all the time as he sets out his educational ideals, but only towards the end feels the need to indicate what he means by this. Philosophy is not itself a system of thought (as in ‘idealism’ or ‘empiricism’) which is independent of educational thinking but then applied to it as a kind of enrichment. Rather, as he asserts mysteriously the most penetrating definition of philosophy which can be given is, then, that it is the theory of education in its most general phases (DE, p.331), or, put elsewhere,

“Philosophy might be defined as the general theory of education.” (DE, p.328)
Therefore, philosophy is not just another intellectual discipline along side sociology and psychology which sheds light on education and enriches theory. Indeed, it would seem to be a misnomer even to talk of the philosophy of education. Rather is it the very activity of thinking, engaged in systematically and seriously, about those activities and engagements which constitute an educational activity.

1. Experience

It is useful in understanding this to begin with Dewey’s notion of experience, since for him all knowledge and understanding derive from experience and must relate back logically to experience. He refers to a ‘new philosophy of knowledge and experience’ (DE, p.273). Indeed, he argues that

“An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance.” (DE, p.144)

Hence, he was critical of those ‘traditional educationists’ who valued theory disconnected from its experiential roots (of which there are many examples in education courses), thereby transmitting little but verbal formulae, or who, in disdaining the practical and experiential, denied such practical and experiential activities to students thought to be more capable of reasoning and abstract thinking. Traditional education (one of ‘transmitting knowledge’) was not just boring and inefficient; it was philosophically mistaken.

Dewey, in developing this philosophical position, was influenced by the theory of evolution in Darwin’s Origin of the Species. Thus, as he explains in Chapter 27, he refers to the intrinsic connection between mental activity and the nervous system. The failure to recognise this leads to the false dualism between mind and body – reflected in the separation of the practical and experiential curriculum from the academic and theoretical.

Initially the biological adjustments of human impulses and instincts adjust to the ‘state of affairs’ experienced through sense organs. But that response re-shapes further reception of sense experience, thereby reshaping how further experiences are developed. The biological instincts have to be adapted to new circumstances, and these adaptations become internalised. Thus, the young child grows through this constant adaptation, and thereby reconstruction of what further encounters with the physical and social worlds signify.

The doctrine of organic development means that the living creature, far from being a ‘spectator’ of the world,

“is part of the world, sharing its vicissitudes and fortunes and making itself secure in its precarious dependence only as it intellectually identifies itself with the things about it, and, forecasting the future consequences of what is going on, shapes its own activities accordingly … knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree
in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator.” (DE, pp.337-338)

2. Philosophy: a mode of thinking

Philosophy ‘is the theory of education in its most general phases’. Why? It was explained that, to be engaged in educational thinking, one is implicitly thinking about the aims of what one is trying to pursue, for example, in deciding why one course of action or one kind of learning is worth pursuing. Answers to such questions raise further questions as to why that aim is worthwhile, until one is questioning what sort of life is worth living and how the learners might be helped to find such potentially worthwhile interests.

Philosophy is this constant effort to understand and make sense of this evolution of experiences, overcoming contradictions between their different conceptions, seeking a unified view of the different elements – for example, the partial understandings put forward in science and exposed in religion (DE, p.326). Philosophy is this but it is something more, namely, thinking which has become conscious of itself. To such self consciousness there is no end.

Such an understanding of philosophy is contrasted with traditional systems of philosophy such as ‘idealism’ or ‘empiricism’. Such ‘schools’ provide a comprehensive account of the relation of human beings to reality. In the case of idealism, the mind is essentially a mental construction, and reality is the product of ‘mind’, for Hegel, “Giest”. In the case of empiricism, by contrast the truth lies in correspondence between the elements of propositions and the elements of the real world existing independently of those propositions – language reduced to basic descriptions which corresponded to a world constituted of basic or atomic facts. Both philosophical systems, each with its own distinctive problems, arose, according to Dewey, from the false dualism between mind and body and the inevitable difficulty in explaining how mind and body can possibly interconnect.

3. Education today

Dewey was suspected by many for his criticism of education as the ‘transmission of knowledge’ – the handing-out of already digested summaries of history or science, which bore little meaningful connections either with the enquiries to which they were related or to the experience of the students at the receiving end. No doubt such hand-outs could be learnt for the sake of examinations. But they would largely leave the learners where they were in their thinking about themselves, the society to which they belonged and the wider world. There would be no enrichment of the experiences through which they were developing a comprehensive account of their lives and the social context in which they lived.
To achieve such an educational outcome it was necessary to connect where they (the ‘human organisms’) were, in their adaptation to the physical and social worlds they inhabited, to the possible experiences which might help in that adaptation – in enriching their understandings of where they were and the dispositions needed. That lay at the basis of the particular stress on ‘developing the child’s interests’. Furthermore, this growth of understanding would be best achieved in the ‘common school’ where the diversity of backgrounds provides a rich environment for the interactions and challenges which leads to further growth.

PAPER 4:

Democracy and Education and the Analytic Paradigm in the Philosophy of Education

In this paper, I examine Dewey’s concept of education as well as R.S. Peters’ own proffered concept of education. It turns out that the gulf between their two concepts is motivated by different concerns about the use and abuse of education in a democratic society. But this leaves us with a dilemma: which concept should one go for, Dewey or Peters? Rather than choose one concept over the other I point to some potentially fruitful common ground.

1. Dewey’s Concept of Education: A (Very) Brief Conceptual Analysis
   1. The analytic philosopher of education, R.S. Peters, undertakes a conceptual analysis of Dewey’s use of the term ‘education’. From the analytic point of view, clarity regarding concepts is going to be anessential focus, so it should come as no surprise that Peters hones in on Dewey’s idea of education as growth. The phrase “education as growth” may not seem clear on the surface. Growth, yes, but in what direction? The analytic philosopher will therefore want to know: how does such a concept of education allow us to clearly distinguish between “good” and “bad” growth? Without such criteria almost anything could be “educational”. Imagine a racist community that grows in its ability to invent new ways to exclude minorities.

   However, Peters stresses that Dewey’s concept of education does not suffer from this ambiguity because it is anchored in a democratic ideal through which desirable and undesirable forms of growth can indeed be picked out (Peters, 1977, 104). Peters notices that Dewey goes even further by translating these criteria into a “technical definition” of education: “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” (DE, 76; Peters,
Peters further argues that understanding Dewey’s concept of education as social growth helps to better explain why he sees his ideal community (diverse shared interests; free interaction) as a democratic way of life (Peters, 106).

Is Dewey’s Conception of Education Worthwhile?

What to make of Dewey’s concept of education and its criteria? The most informative, and concise, way to understand where they depart is to juxtapose Dewey’s concept of education with Peters’ own concept. For the purposes of brevity I will focus on the place of knowledge and understanding within each concept.

One of Dewey’s important insights is that in a democracy the only legitimate means to bringing about positive change is through knowledge and understanding. While force and control may bring about similar changes such means are illegitimate and probably superficial (328-329, ch. 24). Knowledge and understanding, however, changes our human condition in ways that allow us to freely live better lives. In a democratic community we become increasingly open to new possibilities as we come up with new and inventive ways to deal with the world and our social and political problems. Peters diverges from Dewey on this matter. According to Peters, for an activity to be educational it must meet the three following conditions/criteria:

1. Worthwhileness. Education involves the transmission of what is worth-while and involves the engagement of the learner with activities that leave them better off.
2. Understanding and care for what is worthwhile. Educationally worthwhile activities should not be taken up in a way that leave the learner indoctrinated or brainwashed. Further, education ensures that the learner appreciates what is learned for what it is. The educated person is one who is capable of pursuing, say, science or philosophy just because of their intrinsic value, not only because of what use they can be put to.
3. Breadth and depth. Education also involves activities that change (and broaden) the learner’s perspective. Education cannot focus on learning a lot about just one thing. Learners should be exposed to a variety of forms of knowledge because, when taken together, they promote a broader perspective.

A clear point of divergence appears to lie within Peters’ second criterion. For Peters, to see knowledge and understanding as being worthwhile only in relation to some notion of usefulness (no matter how widely conceived) is to treat it as “inert” (1966, p. 31). What he
means is that the educated person must be capable of having a “non-instrumental attitude” toward knowledge and understanding. While knowledge is useful – and is in many ways deeply connected to our nature as social beings - it must also be possible to see it as intrinsic, valuable simply for its own sake.

2. Which Concept of Education?

Which of these two overlapping, but undeniably different, concepts of education best explains the value of education in a democracy? If there is common ground I suspect that it is to be found within Dewey ans Peters’ shared interest in communication. If citizens are better off in sharing some form of common life together, they need to be able to communicate with one another. If they are to communicate with one another, they need to be aware of, and sensitive to, the conceptual distinctions at play within different communities and the various interests suggested by those conceptual distinctions. But our society is more diverse and complex than either Dewey or Peters likely ever imagined. What, then, would a project of conceptual analysis directed at promoting communication in a diverse society like ours look like and, further, what democratic ideals best express the aspirations of such a project? It seems to me that there is something in both Dewey and Peters that could importantly contribute to such a venture.

All References:


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