Reflections on Two Pieces by John Dewey

Samuel Otten

Michigan State University
Reflections on Two Pieces by John Dewey

The educational system, like all other social institutions, has mechanisms of self-preservation in place. Parents, for instance, are often suspicious of instructional programs that differ substantially from their own school experiences; new teachers are likely to teach in the same manner that they themselves were taught, even after completing a teacher education program; and experienced teachers frequently form teaching habits that are increasingly stable over time. These and countless other factors contribute to the propagation of the educational status quo.

But the educational system, like all other social institutions, is not perfect—in fact, some would say it is deeply flawed. The mechanisms mentioned above, however, make it difficult for the imperfections—and the deep flaws—to be addressed and improved. This does not mean, however, that people do not try. The current reform movement in mathematics education, spearheaded by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, is an example of a concerted effort to improve educational practices. The work of John Dewey in the early part of the 20th century is another such example. Though my thought and work usually reside within the context of the former, this paper deals with the latter because of its historical and foundational significance.

The first section contains a summary of Dewey’s general critique of “traditional” education and an introduction to his underlying principles of education. The next two sections present the notion of “psychologizing” the subject-matter and the subsequent development of the concept of experience and what it means for an experience to be educative. The final section looks to implications of Dewey’s work for teaching.

1 There exist references for several of the assertions in this introduction, but since this is a “short paper” I did not take (nor did I have) the time to look them up and include them.
Traditional Philosophy and Dewey’s Philosophy

Traditional education, Dewey wrote, is built upon the notion of vast bodies of knowledge that exist and must be transmitted to students through the schooling process (1938, p. 17). School subjects are compartmentalized and particular content is transformed by intellectuals within that particular discipline, it is packaged via a logical process that substantially separates the facts and ideas from their origins in human experience (1964, p. 341). An example of this can be found in a traditional calculus course where students are led through the concepts of limits and continuity to the abstract definition of the derivative, which they are expected to ingest and then apply to a litany of derivative exercises. The emphasis is on the subject-matter itself as organized by the discipline of mathematics, and this is transmitted in its completed form to the students. Attention is generally not given to the impetus behind the development of the derivative, nor to the international competition between Newton and Leibniz over its formulation, nor to any aspects of the students’ past experiences that might help them relate to the notion of the derivative (Cirillo, 2007).

Furthermore, traditional education promotes in students docile, receptive, and obedient attitudes (1938, p. 18). Indeed, “the child’s individual peculiarities, whims, and experiences” should be minimized because they conflict with the “stable and well-ordered realities” as set forth by the curriculum (1964, p. 342). The teachers, under the traditional education philosophy, are the communicators of knowledge and the enforcers of social codes (1938, p. 18).

2 In this paper I have attempted to cite not only direct quotes but also important paraphrases so that I or any other interested party may easily look back to the relevant passage of the original Dewey text. I hope, now and in the future, to remain close to the primary source. All citations are Dewey unless otherwise specified.
Dewey rejected this traditional philosophy on the grounds that it is too far removed from the experiences of the child, and thus outside his or her “universe” (1964, p. 341). The methods of learning that stem from the traditional philosophy are “foreign to the existing capacities of the young” (1938, p. 19), thus the content must be “imposed” with the result being that many students associate learning with “boredom” and “dull drudgery” (1938, p. 27). In contrast to the traditional approach, Dewey asserted that “education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual” (1938, p. 89). Let us delve further into what Dewey actually means by this statement. Specifically, what does it mean to base education upon experience?

Psychologizing the Subject-Matter

According to Dewey, the difference between the organized course of study (what he calls the logical aspect of subject-matter) and the child’s experience (the psychological aspect of subject-matter) is not categorical, it is merely a difference of degree (1964, p. 344). Yet traditional education tends to overemphasize the logical at the expense of the psychological. Recognizing this, Dewey urged the following:

Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child’s experience; cease thinking of the child’s experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process… It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child’s present experience out into that
represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. (1964, p. 344)

Dewey termed this process of “moving from the child’s present experience” toward the organized and accepted content, of striking a balance between the logical and the psychological, as *psychologizing* the subject-matter (1964, p. 351). We now begin to see what he meant when he wrote that education must be “based upon experience.” The various studies must be reinvigorated with experience; they must be rendered so that they connect with the “immediate and individual” experience of the students (1964, p. 351).

At this point it is important to note that the organized and formal subject-matter is not experience-barren in need of a psychological infusion, rather it is in need of a psychological reminder, so to speak. All of the disciplines are the result of human experiences, the net result of human efforts of understanding and organization over centuries (1964, p. 345). The problem is that, as in the example of calculus above, the human elements of the studies are often stripped away in favor of a sterile, finished product which is presented to students (1964, p. 352; see Lakatos, 1976, for the case of mathematics). To psychologize the subject-matter is to move away from this stripped-away approach in favor of a subject-matter that is a “total and growing experience” with an eye toward its relation to the child’s present “needs and doings” (1964, p. 352; two examples of teachers who psychologized their subjects can be found in Smith & Girod, 2003).

It is clear that *experience* is the central notion of Dewey’s developing philosophy, and thus it is important to investigate this concept further. What are principles by which experiences can be interpreted and their quality judged? To what educational ends should
experience be oriented? Dewey addresses these and other questions in *Experience and Education*, wherein he works from the same foundation as the ideas presented above and expands his philosophy to attend to issues of control, freedom, and purpose. In this paper, however, attention will be focused on the material as it relates to the preceding two questions.

Educative and Mis-Educative Experiences

Dewey identified two primary dimensions along which the value of experiences\(^3\) can be measured. The first of these is the principle of continuity (1938, p. 33). This principle refers to the impact that an experience has on future experiences (1938, p. 27). All experiences have an impact, an element of continuity, so the question becomes: what kind of impact? Dewey argued that experiences in traditional education have largely negative influences on future experiences; for instance, students experiencing traditional education are often “rendered callous to ideas” and lose “the impetus to learn” (1938, p. 26). Experiences with such continuity Dewey referred to as mis-educative.

There are many experiences which can be classified as mis-educative, with the underlying similarity being that they discourage or restrict further experience (1938, p. 25). An experience that promotes callousness toward learning, as mentioned above; a repetitive experience that places a student in a “groove or rut”; an experience that leads to carelessness; experiences that are individually enjoyable but utterly disconnected such that they lead to an inability to make sense of future experiences—all of these Dewey would call mis-educative. In contrast, an educative experience is one that promotes the

---

\(^3\) It is important to note that in this section “experience” will often refer to a present and singular experience of a student; whereas, in other parts of the paper, “experience” refers to the collective past experience of a student.
growth and desire of the student toward further experiences—here we can see the importance of the principle of continuity in evaluating whether or not an experience is educative. The cultivation of a “desire to go on learning” is one of the most important benchmarks of educative experiences (1938, p. 48).

The second dimension relating to the value of experience is that of interaction (1938, p. 42). Is there a balance between the objective and the internal factors of experience? (Here we see a strong connection to the balance of the logical and psychological aspects of subject-matter as discussed in the previous section.) Traditional education, Dewey stated, is significantly askew in the direction of the objective (1938, p. 42). He also warned, however, against progressive education violating the principle of interaction in the other direction—of focusing only on the child’s internal factors, their immediate wants and desires, at the expense of the objective features of the experience.

If the principles of continuity and interaction form a basis for evaluating experience, the question still remains of the educational ends toward which the experiences should aim. Dewey answered this in several ways. First, with respect to subject-matter, we have seen that Dewey believed fundamentally in connecting the subject-matter to the child’s experience as a starting point, but he also wrote that the organized (logical) subject-matter “represents the goal toward which education should continuously move” (1938, p. 83). Second, he felt that a positive attitude toward further learning is more than just one end of the experiential continuum, but should be a primary

---

4 The “desire to go on learning” is often a sort of collateral learning (1934, p. 48). I am interested in thinking more about the connection between collateral learning and the notions of educative and mis-educative experiences. If we think within schools, for instance, and assume that the intentional learning is generally positive, then perhaps educative experiences are those where the collateral learning is positive and mis-educative experiences are those where the collateral learning is negative.
goal of education as well (1938, p. 48). Third, Dewey wrote that the “ideal aim of education is creation of power and self-control” (1938, p. 64). Here Dewey is referring to the ability of an individual to direct his or her thoughts and actions, to master his or her impulses, via reflection and judgment.

Applying Dewey

Thus far I have tried to articulate, as I understand them, some of the basic pieces of John Dewey’s philosophy of education. Now, a fair question to ask is this: How is the philosophy useful for today’s classroom teachers? We have seen portions of Dewey’s critique of traditional educational practice, but that does not tell us what to do instead. We have seen his fundamental principle that education should be based on the child’s experience, but that does not tell us how to base education on the child’s experience. We have been introduced to the idea of psychologizing the subject-matter, but have not seen what that process looks like. We have learned of his criteria for experience, but have not learned of any specific guidelines for developing educative experiences.

Dewey, as I see it, responded to these concerns in at least two ways. First, he admitted—especially in *Experience and Education* (p. 33)—that his work was largely philosophical. He pointed out, however, that without such a philosophical foundation the field of education would be destined to oscillate back and forth between undesirable extremes: from the strict organization and logical emphasis of the traditional school to the chaotic freedom and psychological overindulgence of the progressive school and back again (1938, p. 31; 1964, p. 340). By theoretically identifying the ideal middle path, by warning of the difficulty and necessity of following this path, Dewey hoped to lay the intellectual groundwork that would stop the pendulum.
Second, Dewey outlined the role of the teacher in general (rather than specific) terms. Teachers must work to keep alive the channel between the personal experience of their students and the logical subject-matter (1964, p. 352); they must “survey the capacities and needs of the particular set of individuals with whom [they are] dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject-matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities” (1934, p. 58). Since problems are the “stimulus of thinking” (1934, p. 79), teachers must incorporate problems that connect to the present experiences of the child, that are within the reach of the child, and that stimulate thinking on the part of the child.\(^5\) Teachers must build an educative educational community, and must come to know each of their students to the extent that they may understand the student’s present experiences. Of course, the teachers must also know the discipline of study to the extent that they can honestly lead the class in the direction of its logical organization.

The task that Dewey laid out for the teacher is daunting, and one may still say that he does not provide practical guidance toward its actualization. But it is possible that the true application of Dewey’s philosophy is an application of awareness. Perhaps with his thoughts and words in mind, educators can become more aware of the place that their students are in the present and can better see how to build upon it. Perhaps, for each of us, this awareness is the important first step toward improving our educational practices. And perhaps it is left to us, those studying Dewey’s work, to take the next steps of developing more concrete applications of his philosophy and of disseminating images of what these may look like.

\(^5\) It is significant that these calls refer to a singular “child.” It is a highly nontrivial (and perhaps impossible) task on the part of the teacher to try and do these things in a way that works for all individual children.
References


