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## Dewey Re-visited: with Implications for Teacher Education

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### Abstract:

*This paper touches on John Dewey's view of the purpose of the process of formal education, particularly its social dimension in relation to the environment, which for Dewey means 'those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being'. Dewey is concerned with communication and the conditions of growth of the child from every point of view. He was very opposed to those who see education as preparation for something else: he focused on what he saw as the existential needs of the student. Some of Dewey's views are contrasted with those of Jacques Maritain, another philosopher, who wrote about the same issues from a different point of view.*

**Keywords:** Empiricism, immanence, Dewey, Maritain, epistemology, metaphysics, communication, culture, formal education, scholasticism, enlightenment, environment

### 1. Introduction

We live in times of changing societal goals and confusion about the scope and limits of science (Franklin, 2009). Even political parties seem to be split more within themselves than between each other. The sandwich in these divisions seems to be education at all levels, where the contradictions confuse parents and teachers, children and politicians.

Sources here will be the seminal works of Dewey (1916) and Maritain (1943) who, though poles apart in many ways, treated similar educational issues but from completely different standpoints: Dewey a philosopher turned pragmatic empiricist, Maritain a scientific empiricist turned philosopher!

Both writers though distinguished opinions and information, information and knowledge, knowledge and wisdom. These seem to be confused in our information age where so many of the products of mass education react as though they have been misled and manipulated. The communication aspects of technological innovations are excellent, and the intentions of their developers have been benign (Singer and Brooking, 2019), but the opportunities they now present for cowardly bullying, both personal and intellectual, and for invasion of privacy, both individual and national, warrant a re-examination of some aspects of the foundations of education. In many respects this paper complements the suggestions in Abubakari (2020).

### 2. Renewal of Education

Dewey begins *Democracy and Education* with what he calls 'the most notable distinction between living and inanimate things... the former maintains themselves by renewal' (Dewey, 1916:1). This is true, but it stops short of the *proper* object of the living being which is that it moves itself. This is not just transient movement but immanent movement which can be observed in a single living cell with its nutrition, growth and multiplication.

The point of Dewey's analogy though is to emphasize that 'society exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life' (Dewey 1916:3), because it has the characteristics of a living being. Just as the living cell conserves itself individually through nutrition, achieves its own specific perfection by growth, and conserves itself by species by multiplication, so too will society have an analogous three-fold role for education. This leads to Dewey's endorsement of the place of education in conserving 'all the technological, artistic, scientific and moral achievements of humanity' (Dewey, 1916:4). Not that education should only conserve. Indeed, the threefold division above suggests otherwise, but if society and its members are to live intellectually and culturally, then the heritage of humanity must be preserved, appreciated and enriched.

Thus, the education of teachers should include the study of 'the natural metaphysics of the human intelligence' (Bergson, 1909:352). Any discussion on the foundations of education must begin with the nature and end of human beings. The answers to the questions 'What is a human being?' and 'Why do humans exist' are the anthropological basis of education. That is, the education of teachers should include the study of 'the natural metaphysics of the human intelligence' (Bergson, 1909: 352). Metaphysics deals with the most fundamental questions of epistemology. Its proper object encompasses the whole of reality, and so it is only natural that particular sciences which limit themselves to the study of particular aspects of reality depend upon metaphysics in some way (Gödel, 1931).

### 3. Communication

Dewey rightly observes that schools, while an important educational agent, are not the only ones. He links the words 'common, community and communication' to stress the role of communication within society and hence as a goal of formal education. Nor does he limit communication to the transmission of data and information, but defines it functionally:

'The communication which ensures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions – like ways of responding to expectations and requirements' (Dewey, 1916:5).

Dewey's followers have used this limited basis to emphasize the experiential and affective at the expense of the intellectual and cognitive aspects of communication. This was foreseen by Dewey himself: 'you resort to expletives and ejaculations (Dewey, 1916:5) – a not uncommon phenomenon among those who have much formal schooling but little genuine education! (Shannon, 1961). Consequently, one might suggest for teacher education a solid course in communication which utilizes modern means (technology) and builds on solid foundations (the nature of language) as a *sine qua non* for all prospective teachers. After all, language is, or should be, the expression of thought.

Speech has a two-fold purpose: expressive and communicative. Here one must make the Aristotelian distinction between *voice*'emission of sound proceeding from a certain imagination' (Aristotle, 1928:499) and *speech*. The latter is the use of voice-sounds which are conceptual (and not merely passional), descriptive (and not merely indicative), syntactic (not asyntactic), conventional (not natural), and applied by will to their significate as sign to significand, not proceeding from their significate as effect from cause; with apologies for the Latinized English but gerunds and gerundives convey the precise sense.

These go together with Jakobson's (often disputed) language functions: referential (context), emotive (addresser), conative (addressee), phatic (contact), metalingual (code), poetic (message). (Jakobson, 1960), because speech has a twofold function: expressive and communicative. This view of language is that it not only reflects the acts of the intellect, but also those of the will: commands, resolutions, feelings, desires (Copi, 1954: 22-49). Communication in a formal sense could be studied more in teacher education in order to sensitise the students to the scope of the issues involved when it is fine-tuned (Shannon, 2020). Merely to expose such students to the bare minimum of classroom management is to limit their intellectual growth in their continuing professional development and to fall into the trap of underestimating the intelligence of the neophyte teacher. There are limitations in many Western countries to what can be done by academics to improve quality and standards in the higher education sector. The problems are partly external and partly internal for teacher education.

Externally there is an issue with the regulating and accrediting bodies. For example, 'The T.E.F.<sup>1</sup> review (preceded a while back by Q.A.A. (Quality Assurance Agency) audits), all too predictably, confounds a concern for standards (that is, quality) with an appetite for standardisation (assured by measurement) which bulldozes the sector towards a bland state of homogenisation where knowledge is diluted to the level of nothing more than information (undemocratic, fascistic and anti-pluralistic dictators understand the implicitly the usefulness of this, as did Orwell)' (Larcombe, 2020).

Internally there seems to be a lack of commitment to scholarship across all its forms, partly fuelled by an anti-intellectual approach pitting teaching against research (Shannon, 2018). Yet even though 'good researchers are often poor teachers; bad researchers are almost always poor teachers. The reason that you have poor teachers is that you have poor persons: undeveloped, ignorant, intellectually poverty-stricken individuals who have nothing to offer their audience except the subject matter itself. They have no joie de vivre, enthusiasm, or curiosity for learning. They'd be poor in any profession (Page, 2019: 294).

#### 4. Formal Education

Dewey posed the question of the value of formal education but only answered it by citing its limitations: 'there are conspicuous dangers attendant upon the transition from indirect to formal education ... formal education ... easily becomes remote and dead – abstract and bookish ... there is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life experience' (Dewey, 1916:8).

Such an attitude is mirrored by Maritain when he refers to the worst excesses of scholasticism. However, Dewey's ideas seem to be based on a narrow view of experience; not that that was Dewey's intention. He was reacting to an emerging situation, at least as he saw it. Democracy was a major concern of Dewey's educational theory because democracy can flourish only in a society where all citizens can benefit equally from the education on offer. It was not happening in 1916, and it is not happening now!

By the beginning of the Second World War Dewey recognized that many teachers used this rubric to justify all sorts of anti-rational activities. In the year before his death he launched an attack on pseudo-progressives in his introduction to Tenenbaum's biography of William Heard Kilpatrick (the protagonist of the project method). (Tenenbaum, 1951: viii). 'The phrase 'progressive education' has been and is frequently used to signify almost any kind of school theory and practice that departs from previously established scholastic methods. Many of these procedures, when they are examined, are found to be innovations, but there seems to be no sound basis for regarding them as progressive. For progress is not identical with mere change, even when the change may incidentally here and there involve some casual improvement over what previously existed. Still less is it identical with a happy-go-lucky process or flashy, spur-of-the-moment improvisations'.

That Dewey's ideas could have been applied differently can be seen in the use made of Deweyan insights in the Proposal of the Paideia Group of 22 chaired by Mortimer Adler. This group was concerned that not all participants benefit from formal education, that there is still so much social wastage, not to mention insufficient mastery of individual life. The Paideia Proposal aimed to seek satisfactory solutions so specific aspects of these educational problems. It was dedicated to Horace Mann, John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins, who, it was claimed, would have been the leaders of the Paideia Group if they had been alive in 1982 (Adler, 1982). Thus, 'In his overall achievement, John Dewey reminded us of the close union, deep in western culture, between philosophy and education. This marriage, as old as Plato, was broken in the

<sup>1</sup> Teaching Excellence (and Student Outcomes) Framework in the UK.

nineteenth century when philosophy abandoned wisdom for specialization and when education itself tried to achieve status as a separate science' (Smith, VE, 1960: viii).

## 5. Education as a Social Function

In an ecological-conscious age we like to think that we appreciate the significance of the 'environment'. For Dewey, education is achieved 'by means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses ... those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being' (Dewey, 1916:11). This is a comprehensive description but nowhere does Dewey try to determine the nature and end of humans, which are the subjects of his pragmatic study.

'With such a philosophy of pragmatism, a great thinker like Dewey is able to maintain an ideal image of all those things which are dear to the heart of free men; but outside of the ideological system, the historical impact of this philosophy upon culture will naturally lead to a stony positivist or technocratic denial of the objective value of any spiritual need' (Maritain, 1943: 115). Yet the overwhelming problem of the twenty-first century is materialism. It not only limits vision, but it is also behind our assaults on the environment, whether ecological or spiritual. It was summed up by the physicist Carl Sagan when he said: 'I am a conglomeration of water, calcium and organic molecules called Carl Sagan ... For me it is a sublime truth that our universe allows the evolution of very intricate and subtle machines like ourselves' (Sagan, 1980: 127).

This is a form of reductionism whereby reality is reduced to those aspects which can be empirically determined. It shows the role that philosophy should have in the empirical sciences since they necessarily presuppose the notions of substance and accident, even if practising scientists are unaware of this (Eddington, 1938;15,308). This role of philosophy in scientific issues, especially in the relationship of humans with the environment is beginning to be acknowledged in problems ranging from genetic engineering to nuclear waste disposal (Jaki, 1974:39-53). The link among work, the environment and technology, all issues visited by Dewey in relation to education, is culture, in the sense of 'man is not a natural, but a cultural being. He is at once the creator and the creature of culture'. (Mondin, 1979:191-205).

'The environment in which human beings live, act and enquire, is not simply physical. It is cultural as well' (Dewey, 1938: 42). Dewey was a child of the Enlightenment in that he believed that natural perfection was attainable for both individuals and society; he firmly rejected any supernatural dimension to human existence. (Dewey, 1967: 14). Dawson, on the other hand, put a view of culture as receiving 'its form from a rational or spiritual element which transcends the limits of racial and geographical conditions (Dawson, 1961:14). Not that culture is some sort of ornamental accessory for the life of virtue (Ortega y Gasset, 1944:67), though André Malraux provocatively claimed that 'there have been agnostics before [Christianity], but there has never been an agnostic culture' (quoted in Mortensen, 1994:14).

## 6. Concluding Comments

To complete the circle one must return to the original United Nations' view of the parents as the first educators of their children both chronologically and in terms of responsibility, so that the dictum of T.S. Eliot must hold, namely, that 'the primary channel of transmission of culture is the family' (Eliot, 1972:45). Eliot was a Christian and a poet. The role of the Christian religion is problematic for the agnostic who generally finds it difficult to appreciate that Christian belief is an intellectual, not an emotional, assessment of evidence, though the Christian would say that it depends more on grace from God than nature and logic. The atheistic Bertrand Russell even called religious faith 'certainty without proof' (Anscombe, 1981: 15), though his idea of proof was more in the sense of formal logic than a convergence of probabilities in the sense of Saint John Henry Newman's so-called 'illative sense' (Newman, 1985).

We close this paper by revisiting Dewey with another reference to the moral environment, one of his foci. 'Surely being modern means finding *new* solutions, not jury-rigging old failures ... More and more

- Being modern means regarding the welfare of children as being paramount;
- Being modern means seeing the failure of commitment as a tragedy, not an accident;
- Being modern means being convinced that some desires must remain unacted for the sake of other's happiness.
- Being modern, in other words, means learning the first lesson of moral ecology: one person's pollution jeopardises everyone else's environment' (Cook, 1995).

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