

Analyzing John Dewey's Educational Philosophy and Its Implications in Today's Classroom

Abstract: Pragmatism is a philosophical perspective that originated in the United States about 1870 (Baert, 2004). Pragmatists promote that the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science and so on should be embodied in practice to verify their uses and successes. As one of the founders of pragmatism, John Dewey creates pragmatistic educational philosophy, which still has been positively affecting today's classroom. This article provides a further discussion of Dewey's educational philosophy (philosophical assumptions, focuses, and practices). Meanwhile, the implication in today's classroom and challenges are examined and analyzed. Hopefully, it could be viewed as guidance for relevant researchers in education.

Keywords: Educational philosophy, John Dewey, today's classroom

Introduction

John Dewey (1929) demonstrates that education does not begin or end in the classroom. In other words, "since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education" (Dewey, 1916, p.51). Based on Dewey's statement, education is a sustained process of growth that has no end beyond itself. In this sense, education is a continual and lifelong reconstruction of experience and realized in the interactions of learners within a changing and diverse world (Garrison, Neubert, & Reich, 2012). In other words, education should help learners develop democratic personal and social values. Because society is always changing, new ideas are vital to make the future better than the past. Accordingly, the statement embodies an imperative part in John Dewey's philosophical notions of education: Namely, instrumentalism relating to pragmatism. It is essentially a view of education that emphasizes the need to learn by doing. Dewey believes that human beings learn through a 'hands-on' approach rather than the rigid memory or the absolute freedom of learning. His educational philosophy not only changes the perspectives of traditional education but also improves the notion of progressive education (William, 2006). In this paper, Dewey's educational philosophy will be analyzed further, particularly, instrumentalism and democratic education based on Dewey's statement. Meanwhile, the practice's significance in today's classroom and the negative aspects of his theory will be discussed.

Analyzing John Dewey's Educational Philosophy

To be more exact, Dewey (1929) presents that educational process starts unintentionally at birth, and sustainably shapes learners' powers, and improves their consciousness. Meanwhile, the process takes shape for learners' habits, trains their ideas, and arouses their feelings and emotions. The process can be divided into two aspects, psychological and sociological. Of the two parts, the psychological part is the foundation. Therefore, children's instincts and powers offer the material and the starting point for all education. If educators ignore the psychological and sociological structure and power of children, the educational process will be unscientific and subjective. As Dewey (1929) thinks:

We must be able to carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of previous race activities. We must also be able to project them into the future to see what their outcome and end will be. In the illustration just used, it is the ability to see in the child's babblings the promise and potency of future social intercourse and conversation which enables one to deal in the proper way with that instinct. (p. 34)

Therefore, the classroom is not the site in which education begins or ends, but rather education permeates the entire lifetime of individuals. Individuals have been accepting education from their birth. Moreover, they will continue to be educated in and out of the classroom, namely, natural and social environment).

Furthermore, as Dewey (1916) in his *Democracy and Education* demonstrates, education is an accumulation of experiences that stimulates both growth and the capacity for further improvement. Dewey (1938) also mentions, "...the educative experience can be identified with growth" (p.36), and further clarifies that we must understand "growth...in terms of the active participle, *growing*" (p.36). However, he emphasizes that not all experiences are educative: "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience." (p.25). He goes on to say "...when and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing" (p.36).

According to Dewey, growth is a process of change or evolution. A learner without the restriction of age is supposed to possess the capability to adapt and grow (Brown, 2017). By developing sound learning habits, learners can engage in natural conditions, or the real world, continuing to grow. Moreover, they can change what needs to be changed (e.g. developing new methods and technologies), and adapt to what needs not to be altered such as the demands of a group or industry) (Brown, 2017). But, if learners grow in negative ways such as absolute freedom of learning and mechanical recitation, it can limit their ability to grow in the future. In traditional education, educators usually hold the fixed assumption that learners must abide by a specific mold, and the things to be learned are determined in number (Brown, 2017). On the other hand, progressive education is extremely free without really knowing how freedom can be most effective in education (Dewey, 1938). According to the explanation above, it clarifies further Dewey's statement that education is a process of increasing growth.

Based on what was mentioned above, it is necessary to analyze John Dewey's educational philosophy in detail. Dewey constantly seeks democratic education and criticizes the traditional methods of education hindering the implementation of his democratic notion (Garrison et al., 2012). Therefore, he actively probes how to make the connection between his democratic ideal and instrumentalism in education

Dewey (1916) argues that education should be democratic with a broader social purpose, which is to help people become more effective members of a democratic society, namely, favouring equal rights, freedom of speech and a fair trial and tolerating the views of minorities. Dewey argues that the one-side delivery style of authoritarian schooling does not provide a good model for life in a democratic society. Instead, students need educational experiences that enable them to become valued, equal, and responsible members of society (Dewey, 1916). He says that people are equal but they are not identical (Dewey, 1916). That is, democratic education should concentrate on the cultivation of individuality focused on difference and participation rather than individualism focused solely upon isolation and competition, and self-interest such as standardized exams (Brown, 2017). Moreover, Dewey's democracy would look at the school as a miniature society in which educators can help children adapt to new societal changes (Brown, 2017). Immaturity of children denotes the dependence and plasticity to grow so educators should have more respects to sympathetic curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, and openness of mind than the subject matters.

In order to implement the democratic ideal, Dewey promotes instrumentalism that "truth is an instrument used by human beings to solve their problems" (Sheerana , Brown, & Baker, 2007, p.96). "Since problems change, truth changes, and therefore there can be no eternal reality" (Sheeran et al., 2007, p.96). That is, a precise theory is supposed to consider initially how thoughts can function in the experimental determinations of future consequences. Dewey (1938) believes that knowledge and skills always are related to human experience and the real world in which individuals interact with the environment. Dewey calls these interactions experience. Moreover, one's present experience is a function of the interaction between one's past experiences and the present situation. The experience has not pre-determinate value. Thus, what may be a useful experience for one individual could be a detrimental experience for another individual. The value of experiences will be examined by the impact that experiences have on individuals' present and future. Therefore, learners need to be active and learn to solve problems by reflecting on their experiences. As Dewey (1916) concludes "the criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact"(p.58). As a result, educators should take up progressively organizing subject matter in a way that takes students' past experiences into account, and provides them with experiences that will help to display learners' access past future growth, thereby improving their likely contribution to society.

Therefore, as has been summarized (Brown, 2017), Dewey comes up with school-based reforms based on his instrumentalism and democratic ideal including two aspects as follows:

- Curriculum renewal
- The cultivation of progressive educators

To be more exact, in terms of curriculum innovation, the relating instruction should embody children's experiences and needs rather than only teach students to focus on a fixed goal, discipline, hard work and respect for authority. Dewey introduces the laboratory or experimental methods as an instructional strategy. The University of Chicago Laboratory School, founded in 1896, is one of the most typical practice of Dewey's educational philosophy. Dewey also promotes using field trips and excursions such as visiting zoos, art galleries, parks, and museums to instruct rather than focusing on textbooks and recitations. The method makes children have vivid feelings in the curriculum. Instruction can be related to broad social, political, and economic issues and problems. Finally, he advocates creating learning situations that encourage collaborative social interaction. The curriculum based on social interaction is reconstructed and centered on so-called "occupations" (Brown, 2017). That is, practical problems and activities are reproduced in typical situations of social and communal life.

These innovations encourage students to learn in social interaction and interdependency, which would trigger the society into a great democratic community.

Specifically, rather than learning reading, writing, arithmetic in classrooms, these lessons Dewey promotes focus on more actual life and the meeting basic human needs like food, clothing, and shelter. For example, in cooking, the students learn and practice reading when they look forward to learning cookbooks, write when they want to record their recipes, and calculate when they have to count eggs, weigh flour, and measure milk. In gardening, they can learn how plants grow. The occupations in cooking, weaving, sewing, and gardening, woodwork, and metalwork are lifelike, which motivates dramatically students' natural curiosity and interests in active participation (Phillips, 2000). Moreover, pedagogical opportunities still exist to develop various knowledge areas such as geography, literature, art, history, geography, chemistry, and physics.

Meanwhile, in the aspect of cultivating the progressive educators, Dewey (1904) believes that successful classroom teachers need to possess a passion for knowledge and intellectual curiosity in the materials and methods they teach. As he says, "nobody can be really successful in performing the duties and meeting these demands [of teaching] who does not retain [her] intellectual curiosity intact throughout [her] entire career" (as cited in Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 34). This capability is an inherent curiosity and love for learning. Also, Dewey (1904) thinks progressive teachers should have the ability to watch and respond to the qualities that her/his students display. Additionally, educators should have a desire to share their experiences with others. The qualities that progressive educators need to possess are not a set of superficially displayed mechanical skills. But rather, they may be internalized as the principles or habits which "work automatically, unconsciously" (Dewey, 1904, p. 15)

Practical Significance in Today's Classroom

According to the analysis above, it is more likely that John Dewey's educational philosophy still is effective and valuable in modern classrooms. In light of the situation of today's classroom, traditional education still occupies the dominant position, particularly in many Asian countries. The curriculum plan embodies four main features as follows:

- Standardized testing
- Teacher-led teaching and students passive learning
- Memory-based training and repeated skills
- Discipline forcing students' attention in the classroom rather than interest

For example, in China, everyone's development is expected to comply with the same model. When it comes to measuring whether a person is successful or not, a unified standard (i.e., academic achievement) usually is used. Curriculum contents are based on the need of the *College Entrance Examination*. Due to the examination only including the accumulation and extraction of old knowledge, students have to recite and repeat old knowledge and skills. Not exaggeratedly, the teaching contents of primary schools have been permeated into early childhood education (Chan, 2012), which hinders the development of children's creativity, curiosity, and individuality to large extents. Hence, Dewey's educational philosophy is playing a vital role in Chinese educational reform nowadays. The core of Dewey's educational philosophy is respecting students' interests and personal growth, and the unification between the mind and body of students. Chinese educational institutions have been infusing dialogic teaching into the curriculum. The characteristics of dialogue in the curriculum are embodied in three aspects: the dialogue between students and teachers, the dialogue between students and textbooks, and the dialogue between students. The dialogues respect personality, freedom, and equality. Curriculum design reflects the principle of students' subjectivity. Moreover, the multiplicity focusing on human development would provide students sufficient space for development in a lively, vivid, independent and equal teaching environment (Aoki, 1993). Additionally, some intelligent games such as puzzles and riddles and traditional games such as sandbags, hopscotch, and dropping handkerchief without any auxiliary and additional equipment have been employed as a practical curriculum in some schools (Zhou & Hu, 2008). Furthermore, in China, there is a large rural area. According to Dewey, education should be beyond the classroom. Thereby, based on rural geographic conditions, schools attempt to design appropriate rural family games so that parents can learn to care for children properly, and children can learn to exchange with parents. Teachers always take children into the woods to pick up leaves, branches, and mining rattan grass and make handmade stuff, which helps children improve self-invention skills (Zhou & Hu, 2008).

Meanwhile, in the classrooms of Western countries, Dewey's philosophy of education is pervasive. For instance, in Saskatchewan, Canada, many children possess memorable camping experiences to be close to the magical big nature. Grant Road School in Regina often organizes the learning conferences, namely, demonstration of learning and skill-building club in which children are as hosts to display their schooling experiences. In terms of Aboriginal children's education, it tries to follow cultural compatibility theory (Preston,

Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2012) encompassing respecting cultural uniqueness, giving Aboriginal parents rights, and training high-qualified Aboriginal pedagogy (Preston et al., 2012). Relevant stakeholders have framed the First Nations and Métis education programs, and the curriculum development and learning supports, which attempts to provide appropriate educational resources and opportunities. Furthermore, these policies can be interpreted to be as conservation and revitalization of Indigenous language and culture (Government of Canada, 2017). An illustration can be made that Aboriginal Head Start is an approach to preparing Aboriginal children for school and life (Aboriginal Family Service Center [AFSC], 2015). The Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) Program as a national community-based program mainly focuses on early intervention for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and their families living off-reserve pertaining to Indigenous culture and language, education and school readiness, health promotion, nutrition, social support, and parental involvement (Government of Canada, 2017). Indigenizing curriculum aims at helping integrate Indigenous rituals into Aboriginal children's education (Armstrong, 2013). Through camping, fishing, hunting, storytelling, art, and environment research, Aboriginal children can obtain scientific knowledge such as biology and animal life cycle (Government of Canada, 2017).

Challenges

On the other hand, dialectically speaking, Dewey's educational philosophy also has disadvantaged factors (Brown, 2017). Initially, Dewey claims that "truth" is discovered through the experimental process and "truths" are judged by their consequences (Dewey, 1938). Russell (1945) notes that Dewey's consequential view of values results in confusion. If an action is to be judged by its consequences, how do we know whether the consequences themselves are good or bad? Since there is no objective way to judge consequences, the outcome of the process-oriented assessment is individualism that measures everything by subject preference. Therefore, based on Dewey's educational philosophy, it is hard for educators to have directed and skill-based strategies to assess students because there is no standard method for teaching and learning in pedagogic practices, particularly when it comes to teaching subjects on the humanity's and critical reading.

Secondly, for Dewey, the classroom teacher, as the provider of social service, has a unique responsibility to produce psychological and social goods that will trigger both present and future social progress (Simpson & Stack, 2010). In this sense, it requires something considerably different from just following and implementing institution-wide policy and curriculum changes, instead, it requires training educators to a higher standard so that they can effectively judge and adjust to the needs of different situations and lessons in their classrooms. However, most teachers have accepted their role in traditional classrooms, namely, teacher-led teaching so it is difficult for them to transform into student-centered classrooms.

Finally, in student-centered classrooms, the chaos and noisiness of the classroom could not be addressed by one teacher because of the large number of students in the public education system. It is a lot more works for the teacher to plan a lesson objective and a variety of activities in order to make the chaos more organized.

Conclusion

To conclusion, John Dewey's educational philosophy is a milestone in the history of educational research because it not only breaks through the restriction of traditional education but also improves the completely free and student-driven education in which students often do not know how to structure their own learning experiences (Neill, 2005). As one of the advocates of progressive education, he stresses the child-centered approach that learning should be considered to be active instead of passive and teaching should mainly focus on the different needs and interests of every child. He promotes that children should live in a democratic community that gives them real, guided experiences that foster their capacity to contribute to society. Moreover, Dewey advocates instrumentalism related to pragmatism. Precisely, education is an increasingly growing process without ending. Accordingly, there is a necessary connection between the process of actual experience and education. In this respect, Dewey's theory of experience rests on two central principles: continuity and interaction (Neill, 2005). What is more, Dewey's theory still has important implications in today's classroom because his theory overthrows teacher-led teaching and students' passive learning in traditional education. However, it is worth noting that Dewey's educational philosophy also has adverse aspects pertaining to the difficulty of teaching evaluation, poorly prepared teachers, and time-consuming and expensive budgets and so on. Even so, the educational business would be triggered to a more profound and scientific stage in the future based on Dewey's educational philosophy.

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