Reflections on John Dewey’s *Experience and Education*

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December 5, 2010
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In the United States in 1910 only 13% of 25-year-olds had attained a high school education; the average student’s education was considered complete after 6 or 8 years of schooling, and many had less (Roberts, 2001, p. 203). Given that John Dewey wrote his seminal work on education, *Democracy and Education*, in 1916, it appears evident that his philosophical musings were pertinent to students of a young age. His later work, *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938), clarified and expanded these theories on the topic of education, contrasting his “progressive” school with the more “traditional” school of that era. Do the theories of John Dewey bear significance and implications for the adult learner? How do his ideas, so radical at the time, address the issues facing education today? These are the questions I will address in this paper.

Progressivism, as Dewey’s theories have come to be called, can best be summed up as instruction that is based on a student’s needs and interests, i.e. instruction that is learner-centered. While most of us can probably agree that any informal learning undertaken by an adult is most likely learner-centered, I’m not so sure that much of the formal learning taking place in our universities and community colleges is. If we exclude the traditional, immediate post-high school-aged learners, adults pursuing higher education are generally doing so at their own behest. While their motivations for being there may vary, adult learners are typically self-directed. However, once they enter the formal learning environment, whether that means enrolling in a course or seeking degree-completion, the learning in which they engage is most often teacher-centered and teacher-directed.

In most American institutions of higher learning, a curriculum is determined by the instructor. Then “textbooks and teacher talk are the primary means of delivering this curriculum;
learning consists of recalling what texts and teachers say; and tests measure how much of this students have learned” (Labaree, 2005, p. 278). This was the educational norm when I pursued my bachelor’s degree in 1973; to a large extent, I believe it persists today. Courses taught by an institution’s school of education may be the exception, as evidenced by my current coursework in ADAE 520. In this course I have been repeatedly questioned about my personal objectives; efforts have been made to address each student’s individual goals; the curriculum has been formulated in such a way as to allow choices in the readings and assignments, based on personal interests; and assessments have been holistic and qualitative. In short, this course is very learner-centered. One would expect that courses offered by a department whose principal focus is “education” would offer material employing pedagogically sound practices. But is this the case in other areas of study?

My only other recent experience with higher education involved a 2-year course of study to pursue an A.S. degree in dental hygiene, which I completed in 1996. These classes were heavily weighted with instructor lectures and hands-on practicums that allowed little variance from the prescribed curriculum, and certainly seldom considered the learner’s interests. In short, they were not very learner-centered. As a subsequent instructor in this very same dental hygiene program, I must ask the question – Can a vocational-type program such as this ever be learner-centered? When an outside accreditation board dictates the course requirements and essentially governs what the student must learn, how can there be room for the flexibility necessary to accommodate individual needs and interests?

Dewey (1938) states, “Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. . . .There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences” (p. 27). As an educator in the dental hygiene program, my
task should be to provide the students with learning experiences that will engage their interest and promote further learning. Simply because my goals and objectives are already established does not imply that the means by which I promote the learning of these goals must lack creativity, organization, and an element of fun. Nor does it dictate a failure to consider personal differences, interests, and motivations. Because the profession of dental hygiene demands that its practitioners employ evidence-based procedures, students must be ever vigilant to stay current in their learning. Thus the instructor must know not only how to provide the information, but how to spark the joy of learning.

One of the problems I see in the field of adult education is that so many of our educators enter through the back door, never having studied John Dewey, theories of learning, and adult development. This lack of awareness helps preserve the status quo in education. We teach the way we were taught. Perhaps this is more a reflection of my age, but my initial reaction, after reading Dewey’s (1938) *Experience and Education*, was why have we not heeded the call? Where is the reform? I just don’t see it. If it’s there, it’s found in small pockets of transformation – whole language learning, schools without walls, multiage approaches to learning, and cooperative learning – methods which all have their philosophical roots in Dewey’s progressivism. Today’s schools still seem dominated by standardization and mechanization. Why?

I believe the answer lies in efficiency and practicality. One year, when my children were still young and attending a public elementary school, a charter school was proposed in our school district, called “The Lab School”. Being unfamiliar with John Dewey at the time, I didn’t realize that the school’s learning style would be based on his theories of education, though I’m sure this was mentioned in their literature. I simply liked what I heard about the school and
enrolled my two youngest, in the first year of operation. It was a leap of faith for this rather traditional parent, as the format for the school followed some unconventional practices. The school utilized a multi-age approach, numerous cooperative learning situations, and a non-graded form of learning assessment, to name but a few. My children thrived in this environment, though they have always been successful students. After a year we chose to place them both back into the traditional school system, for various reasons, all unrelated to our satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the school’s emphasis on experiential learning.

The Lab School, now known as the Lab Elementary School for Creative Learning, is still in operation, with an enrollment of 120 K-6 students and an average class size of 12.9. Records show that the students performed significantly worse than many other elementary school students across the state of Colorado on CSAP exams in the subjects of math, reading, science and writing (Lab elementary school for creative learning, 2010). I was dismayed to see these results, but not surprised. Schools like this, which offer an alternative to the traditional learning environment, tend to attract students who are already struggling academically.

What I find significant is the student-teacher ratio. No other traditional elementary classroom can afford to offer a 13 to 1 ratio like that – and still not show results. I believe that providing experiential learning that is child-centered, of the kind prescribed by Dewey, requires more teachers, more time, and more money. Particularly at the pre-collegiate levels, it is simply more practical to streamline the education process, which results in standardization and mechanization.

Dewey (1938) speaks of the ‘continuity of experience’ – how an experience changes the learner and subsequently changes any future experiences (p. 35). With this in mind, he declares that it is incumbent upon the educator to be cognizant of “the responsibility for understanding the
needs and capacities of the individuals who are learning at a given time” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 45-46). In practice, how is this possible? While we, as educators, can empathize with our students and seek to learn as much as possible about their history of learning, the task of truly understanding who they are and how they came to be that is simply daunting and essentially impossible, not to mention, perhaps, an invasion of their privacy. This is particularly true with the adult learner.

Another issue facing adult education today is that of social justice, for which Dewey stood strong and firm. Labaree (2005) notes that progressivism “means promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality” (p. 277). Surely, if we could employ Dewey’s principles of progressivism we could transform the world. As Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner and Bowles (2010) note, these principles include: “(a) education extends beyond schooling to socialization, (b) education is lifelong, (c) education should include the practical and pragmatic, (d) experience is central to the learning that occurs in the educative process, and (e) learning should be student-centered (Lindeman, 1926/1989)” (p. 341). One can see that if educators were to adopt these principles in toto, we could advance “the belief that the purpose of education is to develop democratic citizens who possess a strong sense of agency, able to ask critical questions, derive their own conclusions, and engage in participatory processes to the betterment of society” (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2010, p. 340).

In summary, I believe that John Dewey was a man ahead of his time. While his theories are still relevant and applicable to today’s learner, both young and old, we still struggle to implement them into a workable model for learning. I think it’s an effort still worth pursuing, and one which I hope to cultivate as I continue my journey toward teaching excellence.
References


