



Democracy and Education

John Dewey

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In this book, written in 1916, Dewey tries to criticize and expand on the educational philosophies of Rousseau and Plato. Dewey's ideas were seldom adopted in America's public schools, although a number of his prescriptions have been continually advocated by those who have had to teach in them.

Democracy and Education Details

Date : Published February 1st 1997 by Free Press (first published 1916)

ISBN : 9780684836317

Author : John Dewey

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Education, Philosophy, Nonfiction, Politics, Teaching, Classics, Academic, Grad School, Theory, Sociology

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From Reader Review Democracy and Education for online ebook

Kamiya Kumar says

Recognizing the challenges that existed in larger society with regards to capricious activities outlined by the economic / industrial need and the duality of concepts such as subject matter and method, work and play, thinking and experience, individual and the world to name a few, Dewey philosophized the reconstruction of education. Having published this book in 1916, it's interesting to understand the socio-economic context in which he was writing. Almost a century after the industrial revolution and the advent of World War 1, the meaning and function of 'social efficiency' had been completely re-defined, infiltrating each facet of humankind's existence. Ironically and sadly, a century later, not much has transformed. The industrial / manufacturing / economic needs have only become more rigid, the gap between labor and leisure is stark, and as observed by Dewey, students are merely being prepared in schools to conform to the adult life that awaits them.

Imagining Dewey's world for a moment, where students as part of the miniature community commence solving problems posed by the teacher while finding solutions to issues that are new to them, begin to live for the present. Spaces are created where social occupations from society are weaved into the mini-community, and students begin to engage with material in an interdisciplinary manner, working as budding doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers, astronauts etc., instead of looking at disciplines in isolation. It is worth noting that concepts that we study "originally sprang up, not out of the ground, not out of nature, but out of human life and human needs" (Dewey, 1899a, p.191, as cited in Kliebard, 1995, p.56). And thus, literally beginning from basics where thinking and experience amalgamate, with students learning how to think and continually experiencing a 'diversity of energies'. However, designing such a curriculum and school would require ruminating through a blend of aspects such as the physical space, how the interdisciplinary curriculum would be designed, what would be the basis of the assessment, a teacher's facilitative role, whether a state/national board would certify the school, parent's trepidations, whether students would be considered prepared for higher education or get jobs with economic sustainability, issues that Dewey does not address in his book.

Working with the larger vision that "democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another" (DE, p. 330). In current schools, what seems to be in operation is the anti-thesis of democracy, where pupils are distracted, there is over-pressure, congestion of the course of study and narrow specializations (DE, p. 237). Closely correlated, is the disciplining and punishing of the students when they fail to perform, react, resolve or engage with the material at hand. So the question really is, how does one build meaningful democratic experiences for students? How does one introduce concepts of learning so that students are able to draw broader connections with their own experiences and the world around them?

Before I delve further into these questions, I would like to highlight different authors' definitions of democracy that helps me better understand a democratic school space. West (2004) views democracy as a collective, dynamic and striving movement rather than a static order of stationary status quo, insinuating that it is integral for schools to be inclusive spaces where each actor contributes to decision-making and knowledge construction. Further, Davies (2002) deems that the antithesis to democracy is authoritarianism, where the education system is characterized by minimal responsibility, critical enquiry, debate and participation with the indicators being teacher-centered discipline, rote learning and fear. Research demonstrates that teaching methods that encourage competition result in discipline and therefore, conflict.

When a student is faced with failure, it can lead to low self-esteem and frustration, predisposing the individual to tension or violence (Davies, 2005). Davies (2005) introduces the concept of “interruptive democracy” signifying interruption to the normalized processes of violence and exclusion. She elucidates that democratic education has to be open to handle difference, identity, and fear, as well as taking risks of allowing students to learn from mistakes.

With Dewey promoting democratic practices, collaboration and alternative viewpoints in curriculum, a limitation is the assumption that teachers would want to introduce democratic practices instead of current hierarchal structures or foster collaboration instead of competition that currently motivates students to compete against each other and perform better. It’s assumed that a teacher would want to encourage the development of alternative viewpoints. In a hierarchical structure, teachers’ roles have been validated by the authority and control that they exert. The nuances of student and teacher expectations therefore, would need to be clarified before attempting to establish democratic spaces, which otherwise could be viewed as threatening spaces by teachers.

Based on the previous class discussion and aiming to bring the lake into our classroom, I return to the earlier posed questions, how does one build meaningful democratic experiences for students? How does one introduce concepts of learning so that students are able to draw broader connections with their own experiences and the world around them? I would like to share a few models of schooling that are working towards building a community, with students optimizing their potential and their present.

The Green School, Bali: “Green School’s mission of “a community of learners making our world sustainable” sets the core philosophy of why and how the School educates. The “Green School Way” is to prepare for the real world by being involved in it now; to have impact now; to take responsibility now; and to model and practice the skills and mindsets that we will need later on, now”, <https://www.greenschool.org/>
Krishnamurthy Schools: Krishnamurthy advocates that change is only possible “through a complete transformation of human consciousness” (Thapan, 2001, p. 1) leading to the cultivation of reflective, active and moral citizens. <http://www.kfionline.org/education-ce...>

Tagore’s Shantiniketan School: <http://newlearningonline.com/new-lear...>

Inspired by Sri Aurobindo, who contends that the education system should create individuals who realize their responsibilities towards society by being committed to social justice, secularism, democracy, equality of opportunity and most of all to a welfare state (Bora & Sirwal, 2011), is the model of Mirambika: <http://www.mirambika.org/Pgcw01.htm>

Re-imagining a school space based on Dewey’s vision, I would like to play a ‘what if’ game... What if students were re-aligned beyond classes, abilities and age? Acknowledging each child’s individual strengths and interests, what if the time engagement on varied tasks was unique for each student. Rather than being in a particular class or subject, what if the students got an opportunity to design their learning time in collaboration with the teacher as a guide, as part of their individual learning contract. In a week, what if they could choose which areas or fields they would like to engage with, each spread across a number of hours, and through their school years the aspiration could be to explore all possible spaces of the community. A facet that Dewey couldn’t taken into consideration back then was technology and I am highly intrigued by how technology can be leveraged in re-imagining school spaces, where praxis/participatory, dialogical and problem-posing methods are posed; varied, multiple and alternative content and viewpoints are encouraged; and flattened organizational structures, which instead of promoting compartmentalization and hierarchy could encourage connection and collaboration (Hantzopoulos, 2011).

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annette says

about MUCH more than democracy and education. still incredibly relevant and insightful, despite having been written in the early 20th century. arguably dewey's best and most sweeping work. one of the most satisfying reads i've had, fiction and nonfiction. seriously, seriously good. seriously.

dewey would be at my dream dinner party, no doubt.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

"In praise of Dewey: He knew how to protect democracy – not by rote and rules but by growing independent-minded kids. Let us not forget it" by Nicholas Tampio ::
<https://aeon.co/essays/dewey-knew-how...>

Let's not forget what it is that makes America great. Or how to.

Christine Dantas says

This book, written in 1916, is rich, insightful, and yet completely alive today. It is not only a book on pedagogy, but also on philosophy and social science. Well written, objective, offering the fundamentals of the construction and maintenance of a democratic society based on the free sharing of knowledge (as a continuous process) and thought. Not only educators and parents are strongly recommended for reading, but in fact everyone.

Wood Duck says

Surprising how progressive and oddly naive (almost offensive at times). Worth studying still.

Sophia Small says

I'll be honest - this book was hard to read. I found myself reading it as if I was in a lecture, sitting and taking notes along with it so that I can pay attention and understand what he was saying. I also had to find online summaries of Dewey's beliefs to figure out what he was really meaning to say. However, I still find that I enjoy a lot of Dewey's philosophies. Dewey was brave to put out such strange ideas and it is wonderful how it is changing society. However, some people do take Dewey's ideas a bit too extreme.

Aaron Crofut says

Dewey has a great deal of practical advice for educators who wish to form functioning adults capable of enjoying their lives. As a history teacher, I particularly like his comments on the necessity of teaching material with actual purpose to the students now rather than trying to convince them this stuff will be important later down the road. Let them learn the stuff that's important later, well, later. Use their interests natural to their age to push education forward rather than trying to damper that force. Rather than dividing subjects, combine. Let's talk about, say, hydrofracking by discussing both the science and the social implications rather than putting those things in different classrooms (or, more likely, none at all, since it won't be on the state test). He, like I, would be appalled by our educational system today. One size fits all, here's a test to prove your intelligence...ugh.

That said, his utopian socialist stuff kept getting in the way. I don't disagree with wanting everyone to find "meaningful" vocations in life, but I'm not sure how it's any different than what Dewey calls in chapter 22 the English School (aka classical liberalism) except that the latter doesn't deliver on perfect results and still has inequalities. Maybe he's dealt with the social and economic problems elsewhere, but an explanation as to how everyone could even achieve such meaningful vocations isn't present here. Even in a world of perfect property equality, some people are going to be calling the shots and others are not; that's just how things work in large social groups.

Much can be gained from this book, but like all books, one must read it with a critical eye. Have a conversation with the author rather than sit down for a written lecture.

Corey says

A philosophical text on the relationship between democracy and education written at the turn of the last century. Dewey discusses the role of industrialization in forming our educational system, and how this cannot hold up in a democracy. We cannot build cogs for a machine if we want a real democracy, he argues, we must have thinking participants.

Also, what he says applies even more today as tech moves so fast it is impossible to train children for it. What we need to teach, he argues is thinking skills, not rote. Excellent reflections here. Densely packed.

Jackson Cyril says

In his "Autobiography", Mill notes that his father recognized that the purpose of a good education was not to simply stuff the mind with facts, but to teach the mind to reason, to inquire and to question. This, it seems to me, is Dewey's ultimate point also: the point of a good education should be to create minds prepared to engage critically with the world. It hardly needs to be noted that our current system of system fails in this regard; but a critic of Dewey may, with justice, note that since our desire to survive outweighs our desire to live critically, the student who approaches her studies as simply a pathway to a job is fully justified in her approach. It seems to me therefore, that for a Deweyan system of education to be implanted, our society must first radically be changed, especially with regard to the redistribution of wealth, which would allow more people to treat education as a way to acquire the critical-thinking skills which Dewey lauds, and not just a way to acquire a living.

Rhonda says

I first read this book for a graduate course on Pragmatism. While we used two other of Dewey's books for texts, the *Logic and Experience* and *Nature*, I chose this one to read for my oral presentation. I chose this because I was sure that I could certainly poke holes in the great man's views on something as apparently subjective as education. AS it turned out, I was once again wrong.

Dewey expounds on a theory of society and education which explores the possibility of searching after the perfect medium between the individual and society. Progressive education, at least in Dewey's way of promoting it, was all about rearing the individual to become cognizant of the societal needs and then both providing for those needs and extending them into areas in which they will be required in the future.

One of the most unique features of Dewey's thought was that education goes far beyond some formal idea of learning a subject matter in a structured setting. Society must prepare itself to provide for the individual's instruction as to where it is and where it has come from, but the individual closes the loop in providing farther reaching consequences by extending the greater evolution of the present towards the future. It is in this sense very similar to the principle by which one transcends the present through the dialectical argument. While some may argue that these ideas are simplistic (and Dewey himself recognized that he was misunderstood,) the greater part of his misunderstanding comes from some language difficulties, in my opinion. For example, I was ultimately surprised to find such a difference of opinion throughout the members of my class on what I thought were very well explained issues. I can only suppose that it is the difference between what we would have liked him to say and studying what he really did say: to read something of this caliber requires the true suspension of belief, at least until one understands the bigger picture.

In short I was pleasantly surprised to discover that this work provided an introduction into the thought of *Experience and Nature*, a book I regard as his seminal work. While his views on education have been pushed aside for something far less forward thinking, I suppose that the idea of its creativity and positive connectivity of individuals to the society in which they live just seems preposterous. It makes one wonder if we were really afraid of what would happen if we let education fulfill its own destiny. The fact that someone placed this on the Worst Books list is a kind of inane irony on this point. After all, nothing says alienation and societal estrangement more than our present age.

Athena says

The book itself was quite factual and informative to what I was generally looking for. Even though it is not something that I would read for leisure, it is great for finding information that I would need for my essays and presentations.

Nick says

One of the best books I've ever read. In this classic, John Dewey lays out the principles of the philosophy behind education and its importance and impact on society. He does it so clearly and concisely that I am surprised this wasn't ever required reading for me in any college course I had ever taken. This book should be required reading for every human. Dewey's other classic, *Art as Experience*, is on my short list of what I need to read next.

Seth says

TO begin with, I am unashamedly a fan of Dewey's work. This book covers so much ground that I was a bit stunned at how far-reaching it was. Being that it is just over 100 years old at the time of this review, I can say that it was likely waaaaaay ahead of it's time. The notion that education is an unfolding process that must incorporate the whole person, mind and body, is very different. in fat, even by contemporary standards Dewey's ideas are not the norm. There were some wrinkles. The book at times veered off into some ideological points that didn't really receive much elaboration, for example implementing any of his ideas. I would recommend this book for anyone that has even the slightest interest in education, or anyone that has an interest in social philosophy.

Jen says

Every educator in primary and secondary education should read this. Dewey was clearly ahead of his time. If education would implement more of his notions of educating for the whole person and connecting learning to life all students would likely be better prepared for navigating the world's complexities and solving complicated social problems.

Trevor says

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/852>

If we were to pretend for a moment that we wanted to live in a democracy – that is, a democracy in deed rather than merely in word – what actually would that mean? The word, of course, has become so abused as to effectively mean nothing. Is there a nation on earth now that doesn't call itself a democracy? There was a

joke once that the easiest way to tell if a country was a democracy or not was to see if it had 'democracy' in its name and if it did that was a sure sign it was not. But such jokes are designed to make us feel smug – and if there is one law to the universe it is that whatever makes us feel smug is invariably bad for us.

Democracy means that the people get to rule – but how do we go about making the people worthy of such a responsibility? To Dewey that is the point of education – and not just any kind of education, but one that allows people to think for themselves, that teaches them first and foremost to be inquirers.

This week in the city where I live a video was released on YouTube that has gone viral of some asshole abusing a French woman for the infinite crime of singing a French song on a bus. In response to the French woman singing a group of passengers started chanting Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi. This is now the Australian national song – notice it has one word followed by a meaningless grunting noise, just enough for the all-too-average Australian to learn nearly by heart (after prompting, obviously). I can understand why the assholes on that bus became upset with the French woman – imagine her being able to remember the words of a song more than one word long? What a bloody show-off! Two of the men on the bus wanted to cut her with a box cutter, one wanting to cut her breasts off. He also called her a motherfucker. The Freudian nature of this racist rant is hard not to notice.

These are people that have not been served well by our education system, although it would be unfair to blame everything on education. The problem is that we presume that an entire section of society are basically incapable of any meaningful education or if they are capable then they ought to receive an education that will provide them with the best hope of getting a job. So, we focus on things that are easy to test – reading, writing and figuring (as he refers to them here – which made me wonder when 'the three Rs' became the thing to say). We don't really wonder if these are enough to ensure a properly functioning democracy – we don't really consider the role that education might play in forming a democracy. Education is much more likely to be seen as something related to human economic considerations, rather than our social ones. But Dewey's arguments have become more urgent with time, rather than less so. When he was writing these arguments (for ensuring an education that would enable people to think for themselves) were more a 'moral' necessity than a literal necessity. Moral in the sense that if you are running a democracy it is questionable to have an education system that is primarily concerned with reproducing social classes – in the ways that the education systems in most of the first world do. Today these arguments have much more than mere moral weight.

The problem is that today it is very hard to know what kinds of jobs are going to be available in ten years time. It is also the case that our world is becoming much more complex – all of the things that the right-wing of politics deny (global warming, ecological crisis, equality crisis) are very likely to become increasingly pressing. The problems we will face in a decade or two are going to need us to be able to think and respond in ways that require much more sensitivity than was displayed by the grunting mob on that Melbourne bus. You know, Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oy, Oy, Vey just isn't going to cut it anymore.

Dewey's point is that we need to stop thinking about preparing kids for the future, and think about how to educate them so that when they leave school they don't see that as the end of their education, but rather that they have been empowered with the tools that will allow them to continue their education for the rest of their lives. It is hard to imagine that this book was first published in 1916. Life-long learning – who'd have thought. But the complexities of living in a democratic society demand being able to respond to change. And change – or development, rather – are good things. For Dewey the point of life is to keep growing and that is only possible if we keep learning. So, the point of education is to encourage people to grow throughout their lives by continuing to be able to learn.

This book is structured so that each chapter ends with a summary paragraph. Really, even just reading over the summary paragraphs is worthwhile in itself. But Dewey writes so clearly and so forcefully that there is really no hardship in reading this. And the force of his arguments make it very hard to argue with him. He is logical, smart and keenly focused on providing the best possible education for people so that they can fully participate in a democratic society and so that we can reap the benefits of their participation. This is an excellent book and one that is well worth reading.

Jeff says

The summaries at the end were pretty helpful, as I thought the text somewhat dense and meandering. Great ideas overall, though.

David Schaafsma says

I have read and taught this book several times. I first read it in 1974 (! True! I know! I look so youthful for my age!) when I was myself preparing to become an English teacher. It was work I read in a Philosophy of Education class, where Dewey's progressivism/experimentalism was opposed to essentialism (a more conservative approach to the classroom). And here we still see Dewey read by millions of future teachers to help them envision a classroom connected to student experience, to local communities and contexts vs. the more standardized approach we see today. His view is responsive to actual human beings and their needs vs. paternalistically assuming what "everyone needs".

He wrote something like 90 books, and many of them, including this one, written as they are by a philosopher--even if a pragmatist philosopher--more than a century ago, are rather dry, meticulously crafted, but sometimes a little boring, I'll admit it, a little creaky, and sometimes problematic in his conceptions from time to time (i.e., he talks in the abstract of "savages" in a couple of places, which would not have been shocking in his day but would now be unacceptable).

But some of the insights and ideas about progressive education are still astonishing and feel in present in the "Common Core" world of today's schooling, revolutionary.

Learning by doing? That's Dewey. He largely invented that phrase, that approach with respect to schooling (though others historically have approached learning in this way, of course).

The democratic classroom. His idea. When he was close to the end, he was asked to summarize his career, and he uncharacteristically pithily said, "Democracy is conversation." So people can't ONLY learn by being the repositories of Great Professorial Lecturers (though we can all name great ones we learned from); we have to talk. Learning is social, the self you are continually becoming is social and growing, socially constructed and not prefigured completely by genetics.

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." Dewey!

"Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination." Dewey!

"Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another." Dewey!

"Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked." Dewey!

"We only think when we are confronted with problems." Dewey!

"All genuine learning comes through experience." John Dewey

Vladimir says

This is the most accessible of Dewey's books I have so far had the chance to read. His ideas are usually fascinating, but his writing style extremely boring. For example, *Experience and Nature* is filled with brilliant ideas, and I consider it a very important book in my personal hierarchy, but I managed to fall asleep reading it... more than once. *Democracy and Education* is significantly different in this respect. Highly recommended for those who want to start studying Dewey.

Peter says

I found the book very worthwhile. Dewey works hard to say something about education and this is not easy to do. There are a lot of general comments about political systems that seem somewhat canned but in general his discussions of experience, aim (telos) and various modes of education are all fresh and interesting.

Don says

Early in my presidential career, a colleague intent on giving me a finer appreciation of higher education recommended I read some of John Dewey's works. I dutifully purchased a couple his books. They sat on my dresser, unread, reproaching me, until this weekend, when I picked up "*Democracy and Education*." Written in 1916, Dewey's thesis speaks to the issues of career and liberal education.

There is a tension between the wish to prepare students for careers and educating them in the liberal arts. The discussion is often presented as a choice, an either/or that will put a student on one path or the other. In my earlier post about Wake Forest University, we see them trying to complement liberal arts studies with a gloss of career training.

Underlying these discussions is a concern that training students for careers is short-changing them, or somehow inferior to preparing them for civic life. Taylor Branch, in his first book about Martin Luther King, Jr., "*Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*," discusses the tension between W. E. B. Du Bois' goal to educate an African-American elite and Booker T. Washington's emphasis on educating a wider group of African-American's in the trades as a path toward the middle class. When I worked at Chicago Public Schools, I saw a similar tension among those advocating for Career and Technical Education (CTE) and those who wanted every student to go to college, as if the two were antithetical.

Dr. David Potash, my colleague at Wright College, touches on this debate in his latest blog post, "High Expectations for Higher Education." Dr. Potash critiques Anthony Kronman's view that Higher Ed is straying too far from the pursuit of wisdom. In Potash's words, "If a college education can help a student to think seriously and then choose, whether this takes place in philosophy or accounting or nursing, then we have a successful education."

Dewey brings the weight of philosophical argument to the debate. I regret not having read him sooner. In Dewey's view, the role of education in a democracy is to prepare the young to take part fully in preserving and growing society. Vocational training is an important part of that education. In Dewey's words,

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.

Dewey, John (2013-09-10). *Democracy and Education (Illustrated)* (Kindle Locations 5219-5221). Kindle Edition.

Dewey's affection for "gainful pursuits" is in part informed by Aristotle. In the debate between vocational and liberal arts training, Dewey points out that Aristotle considered training in the fine arts vocational training. Dewey takes a broad, positive view of career training. In Dewey's view, preparing students for careers is not the opposite of preparing them for participation in civil society. Instead, he sees it as the opposite of sloth.

The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture, but aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement in experience, on the personal side, and idle display, parasitic dependence upon the others, on the social side.

Dewey, John. Kindle Locations 5218-5219.

He believes that too narrow a preparation is undesirable. He says that providing a career orientation to education will "make school life more active, more full of immediate meaning, more connected with out-of-school experience." (Kindle Locations 5370-5371.) He admits that it will not be easy to do this. We are dealing with this challenge at HWC, where industry partners are telling us that in addition to the 'hard' industry skills, they want students who think critically and write well.

Our efforts will be worth it. If we can successfully synthesize the liberal and vocational arts, we can prepare our students for rich lives where they continually learn and adapt in their careers. Again, in Dewey's words,

It signifies a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living, and which accordingly makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible— which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. It denotes a state of affairs in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent: based upon its congeniality to his own aptitudes.

Dewey, John. Kindle Locations 5376-5379.

To my forgotten colleague who pressed Dewey upon me, thank you for the suggestion. I spent a rewarding

weekend immersed in the philosophical support for College to Careers.
