

## John Dewey and COVID19

It seems interesting that although he was at the height of his intellectual influence in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there seems to be little commentary from John Dewey about how the H1N1 pandemic of 1918-1919 might impact education. However, were he alive today I think he would have a lot to say about the opportunities for educational reform brought about by the current COVID19 pandemic. As a philosopher looking for educational reform away from a traditional style of regimented, direct instruction from external sources, Dewey would find a lot of support for many tenets of his philosophy of education. By the same token, it would behoove those working to adjust to schooling without schools to consider Dewey's beliefs as guidance. As with many things, adversity can bring opportunity or harm, and the challenges facing educators today are no different. So, what guidance can we take a century later from educational philosopher John Dewey?

Currently the core teaching we are doing is helping families of learners to develop self-control guided by purpose. We need to provide guidance to help our learners and their families find educative purposes that will help them prioritize learning in a time of chaos. There are plenty of accidental and intentional circumstances to distract and to dissuade from pursuit of our goals, but we need to develop the skills, understanding, and attitudes to resist impulses and desires to move us from our aims. Dewey believed that the way to do this is to be guided by purpose. A genuine purpose, according to Dewey, always starts with an impulse with the purpose being the end-view and involves the foresight of consequences which will result from acting on the impulse. The crucial educational problem is that of securing the postponement of immediate action upon desire until observation and judgement have intervened, and that is very much the work our teachers are doing for themselves and are guiding for the families of our learners. Helping their students find the urges that lead to purpose is what our skilled teachers are doing effectively. As Dewey articulated, our teachers need to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of our students. Because this epic shift in circumstances occurred mid-year, our teachers are very aware of many capacities their students have as well as their past experiences, but what they are really learning about their students concerns their social-emotional needs and their capacities as individual learners. In addition, to this they are creating learning experiences through reciprocal and authentic give-and-take with their students. Together they are creating opportunities to learn from and in their context, be it a farm, an apartment, or a flophouse. As such collaboration continues, purpose grows with social intelligence and teachers may contribute to it in a more personalized way than prior to the pandemic.

Dewey argued that freedom is the ability to make conscious choices and comes from having goals and purpose. Freedom is "identical with self-control; for the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence" and no point, according to Dewey, is sounder than "the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities." (Dewey, 1938, p. 67) However, the formation of purposes is a rather complex intellectual operation having three parts: observation of conditions, knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, and judgment which puts together what is observed and recalled in order to see what they signify. In this, the teachers must guide the students to experiences and learning that helps them create educative purposes, and this is challenging. "The crucial educational problem is that of procuring the postponement of immediate action upon desire until observation and judgement have intervened." (p. 69) With much of the familiar removed due to the demands of physical distancing, self-

control is our greatest challenge. As we embark on our current learning journey, all parties are having to take what they observe and use what knowledge, understanding, and experience they have, in order to see what the significance of their observations are. Much of our experience is not particularly helpful as our situations have changed so dramatically, which is forcing us to use our intelligence far more than relying on our experiences and this is difficult. Daniel Kahneman talks about fast and slow thinking, with fast thinking being our quick responses and reactions and slow thinking being the hard work required to have good and accurate thinking. (Kahneman, 2002) With the changes in our learning environments, much more slow thinking needs to occur. This can generate innovation and change, leading to growth of adaptive skills. The students and teachers who are free, by Dewey's definition, are finding considerable success navigating the changed situation: those who are not free, by Dewey's definition, are finding considerable difficulty. Having said that, the changed situation has created a golden opportunity for teachers to help students develop the skills and attitudes necessary for defining and pursuing purposes and to do this, one needs to grow their intellectual freedom via educative experiences.

Educative experiences, says Dewey, need to draw from what has already been learned and use that learning to modify, in some way, that which comes after. In addition to this, the development along this line must fuel continuing growth in universal ways, not just for specific applications. That is, as we look at supporting student learning from a distance, we need to be very mindful to build from where the students are and help them grow the pertinent skills and understandings for continuous learning, focusing on those skills and understandings that can be adapted for different contexts and purposes. To do this, we must have a very real understanding of who our students are and what they need to develop in order to be successful learners, and Dewey gives guidance in this area as well. He believed that the artificial, regimental approach to traditional education prevented teachers from knowing their students; therefore, how could they possibly provide learning experiences that were valuable to their students? Over the past three weeks, teachers have been connecting with their students in the students' most familiar habitats. Teachers have had conversations with parents, seen their students' work environments via video chats, and had more individual conversations with their students than before. They have also been forced to connect with them in a digital world that is comfortably inhabited by most of their students. Therefore, by connecting with their students and families, teachers are getting a more accurate sense of what challenges to learning their students face outside of school and what opportunities also exist for those students. Schools and classrooms are artificial constructs that we force youth to conform to; however, without these constructs our students are influenced by many other factors that we do not control. Many of these factors have not changed; however, our teachers have become more aware of them and are using this new knowledge to plan by taking these factors into consideration.

As our teachers work with their students, increasingly they are working to find sound educational experiences that are meaningful to their students. They are helping develop reading skills through on-line chat links and articles of interest. The use of the internet requires reading and critical thinking skills and our students are naturally drawn to areas that interest them, thus they are reading far more than they would be in a class full of others reading the same prescribed things. Teachers are using this rekindled interest to move students to sites and sources with appropriate readability levels for their students. Through this, many of our learners are going deeper and more broadly in their areas of interest, creating educative situations. Some are pursuing passions connected to the natural world

around them, such as farm animals; others are exploring viruses, implications of immunity, and global connectivity. Dewey would feel very vindicated by this finding and he would encourage the teachers to use these interactions to help their students to develop outlooks, attitudes, skills and understandings that build on what the students have already learned; to capitalize on their interactions to continue their learning journeys.

He would, however, caution our teachers about mis-educative experiences for the students. Mis-educative experiences, according to Dewey, are those experiences that have “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) Dewey believed that the quality of learning experiences has two aspects: immediate agreeable or disagreeableness; and its influence upon later experiences. Our students will take care of the first aspect, as they will not, in this environment, participate in disagreeable experiences unless they understand the longer-term benefits of engaging, the purpose. However, because our teachers support personalized learning journeys for their students, they need to filter out those experiences that could inhibit growth in the future. They need to continue to provide guidance to experiences that will broaden and grow student learning with applications beyond the immediate lessons, rather than allowing their students to stagnate and take the lines of least resistance.

Dewey would be concerned about the impact of “social isolation” on learning as he recognized that all human experience is ultimately social, and learning is no different. For Dewey, in a democracy, education is a fundamentally social activity and physical distancing has put those social elements in considerable jeopardy. However, I think he would recognize that as human beings we are creating new ways to contact each other and to communicate effectively. Also, Dewey put a lot of faith in a social organization that gives everyone the opportunity to grow (Dewey, 1937) and the current context has thrust us all into the role of active learners. Our students and teachers are working together developing skills and attitudes for positive digital citizenship. He would, rightfully, be concerned about how we connect learners with their experiences as our propensity to rely on the technology is significant, and technology can only provide a representation of the real thing. Some teachers are using electronic platforms to deliver traditional lessons and rote learning; however, there is increasing pressure on them to cease their old practices out of necessity. Students are expecting more. According to Dewey, the educator gains social control when the actions of participants are “affected by the whole situation in which individuals are involved, in which they share and of which they are co-operative or interacting parts.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 53) Teachers have become visible learners with their students which is forcing them to build expectations and experiences in collaborative ways. In doing this, all parties must be aware of the context, or situation as Dewey would say. Desires, purposes, and capacities all need to be considered by the teachers, students, and parents as the learning experiences are generated. This seems to fit the type of socially constructed democracy Dewey imagined education to be. Skilled teachers are taking those situations and leveraging them for meaningful interaction and continuity of learning with the students and parents creating and controlling the contexts.

For Dewey, the opportunities present in the current context should be used for the development of democracy. Everyone has the opportunity, and necessity, to grow. Teachers, students, and families are working collaboratively to create educative learning opportunities. The opportunities are there for purposeful, educative, development of purpose, democracy, and growth; however, it is incumbent upon individual skill, commitment, and desire to capitalize on these opportunities: this is not equal nor is it ubiquitous, and that is problematic. How would Dewey address this disparity?



## References

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