John Dewey
U.S. Educator, Pragmatist Philosopher, & Psychologist

HDP Biography Series
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Joanna Christodoulou
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Education is life itself.

- John Dewey
Who was John Dewey?

- Tracing the footprints of a giant
  - Personal History
  - Professional Account
  - Implications of Work & Ideas
  - Legacy & Contributions
Contextualizing Dewey’s Influences

- **Periods of American Education**
  - Colonial Period, ~1600-1776
  - Early National Period, ~1776-1840
  - Common School Period, ~1840-1880
  - Progressive Period, ~1880-1920
  - Modern Period, ~1920-present

Source: (Berger, 2005)
A Personal History

- Born October 20, 1859 in Burlington, Vermont
- Lived until the age of 92

**Family**
- Parents came from farming families
- Middle-class household in a mixed community of "old Americans" and new Irish and Canadian immigrants
- 2 brothers (out of 3, 1 died in childhood)
- Married twice (1st wife passed away) and had several children

Source: (Ecker, 1997)
Dewey’s Early CV

**Education**
- Completed high school in 3 years
- Attended University of Vermont in 1875 at 16 years old
  - “Curriculum focused on Greek and Latin, English literature, math, and rhetoric”
- Explored topics of political, social, and moral philosophy
- Graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879

**Teaching Experience**
- 1879: 1st job as a high school teacher in Oil City, Pennsylvania
- 1881: High School teacher while continuing study of philosophy in Vermont

**Graduate Studies**
- 1882: Johns Hopkins University graduate program in philosophy
- 1884: Ph.D. with dissertation topic “The Psychology of Kant”

Source: (Ecker, 1997)
A Professional Account

- **Positions Held**
  - (1884) Michigan
    - Instructor of philosophy
  - (1888) University of Minnesota
    - Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy
  - (1889) Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Michigan
  - (1894) University of Chicago
  - (1904) Resigned at the University of Chicago, & joined Columbia University
  - (1930) End of teaching career
  - (1939) Retirement from University activities

Source: (Ecker, 1997)
A Professional Timeline

- **Early Publications**
  - (1886) Published 2 scholarly articles on philosophy and psychology that put him on the ‘map’
  - (1887) Published 1st book *Psychology*

- **Early Initiatives**
  - (1896) University Elementary School opened
  - (1900’s) Department of Education at Chicago

Source: (Ecker, 1997)
The School and Society

- Originally presented as a lecture in 1899
- Published 1900, revised 1915
- One of Dewey’s most popular publications
- Describes the rationale behind the University Elementary School that made his pedagogic approach famous

Source: (Brock, 2004)
The Child and the Curriculum

- Published 1902
- Remains a classic publication
- Argues against two extremes of educational theory:
  - subject matter should be emphasized at the expense of the child's individual peculiarities
  - personality and character of the child are more important than subject matter
- Integrates the best elements of each view

Source: (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2005)
Dewey: The Educator

- The University of Chicago Laboratory School
  - School as a scientific laboratory
  - A working model
  - Lab schools vs. non-lab schools
    - Educational experimentation
    - Feasibility issue
    - Generalizability issue
    - Financial considerations
    - “Privileged environment”

Source: (Dewey, 1956)
A Note on Alice Dewey

- (1902-04) 1st principal of the Lab Schools
- Jane Dewey (daughter): "She had a brilliant mind which cut through sham and pretense to the essence of a situation; a sensitive nature combined with indomitable courage and energy, and a loyalty to the intellectual integrity of the individual which made her spend herself with unusual generosity for all those with whom she came in contact."
  
  Source: (Walker, 1997)

- John Dewey: "My fundamental indebtedness is to my wife, by whom the ideas of this book were inspired, and through whose work in connection with the Laboratory School, existing in Chicago between 1896 and 1903, the ideas attained such concreteness as comes from embodiment and testing in practice . . . ."
  
  Source: (Garrison, 1999)
Democracy and Education

- Published 1916
- Describes how the ideas underlying a democratic society can be applied to educational practice
- Parallels processes of scientific inquiry and the growth of society

Source: (Dewey, 1944)

- “The teacher should be occupied not with subject matter in itself but in its interaction with the pupils present needs and capacities. Hence simple scholarship is not enough.”

Source: (Garrison, 1999)
The conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind.

Democracy and Education, 1916
Democracy, Science, and Education

- A democracy is more than a form of government; it is a way of life.
- Recognizing diversity of opinions breeds broader understanding.
- Character traits in a democracy:
  - Open-mindedness
  - Single-mindedness
  - Sincerity
  - Breadth of outlook
  - Thoroughness
  - Assumption of responsibility for developing the consequences of ideas which are accepted.

Source: (Elgin, 2005)
Dewey: The Philosopher

Thinking is the accurate and deliberate instituting of connections between what is done and its consequences.

The phrase "think for one's self" is a pleonasm. Unless one does it for one's self, it isn't thinking.

- Societies reproduce biologically and culturally
- Cultural reproduction via education
- Theory of education describes what is culturally valuable enough in thought, feeling, and action as to deserve transmission to the next generation

Source: (Dewey, 1956 & Garrison, 1999)
Dewey: The Psychologist

*We can have facts without thinking*

*but we cannot have thinking without facts*

- Active engagement with surroundings
- Driven by interests and natural instincts
- Logic of scientific inquiry

Source: (Garrison, 1999)
Logic of Scientific Inquiry

*We only think when we are confronted with a problem.*

- Did not separate thinking and feeling from acting
- **Step 1: Occurrence of a problem**
  - Starts with a genuine doubt
  - The "general method of intelligence" was practical reasoning
- **Step 2: Specification of the problem**
  - A problem well put is half-solved
  - “Data is selected, structured, its conditions specified, operations carried out, and consequences noted.”
  - Habits of inquiry that Dewey espoused:
    - Curiosity
    - Orderliness
    - Alertness
    - Flexibility

Source: (Garrison, 1999)
Logic of Scientific Inquiry

- **Step 3: Introduce a hypothesis**
  - Requires use of imagination to develop possible solutions and careful analysis of data
  - Must be testable

- **Step 4: Elaboration on hypothesis**
  - Exploring possible consequences

- **Step 5: Testing hypothesis experimentally**
  - Truth = processes of change so directed that they achieve an intended outcome

Source: (Garrison, 1999)
Implications of Work & Philosophy

Why haven’t Dewey’s ideas been fully realized?
- An expanding educational system could not accommodate the ideas
- ‘New technology’ needed to support ideas
- Practices too demanding for teachers
- Psychological principles too abstract to guide teachers

Source: (Dewey, 1956 & Elgin, 2005)
Dewey’s Educational Legacy

- Philosophy of education for U.S.
  - Scientific inquiry-based experimentation
  - Democratizing principles
  - Gap between ideologies and application

- Child-centered vs. teacher-centered education
  - Confusions of Dewey’s view
  - Importance of “psychologizing” child

- Chicago Lab Schools

Source: (Westbrook, 1999)
Dewey remains part of mission statement, as do elements of his ideologies:

- Experience-centered education
- Recognizing that students have a variety of needs at each developmental stage and learn in different ways
- Learn to think critically and creatively
- Gain a sense of personal and community responsibility
- Develop a life-long love of learning

“In pursuit of this mission and in keeping with John Dewey’s legacy, the Schools strive to exemplify educational practice at its best.”

Source: (University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, 2005)
Interesting Facts

- (1919 to 1921) Lectured in Japan and China
  - His educational theories remain influential today
  - Also visited Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, and Russia

  Source: (Garrison, 1999)

- (1937, at age 78) Led the Commission of Inquiry of the Moscow Trials on behalf of Leon Trotsky, which exposed Stalin's attempts to frame and execute dissenters during the Moscow trials of the mid-1930s

- Defended fellow philosopher Bertrand Russell against an attempt by conservatives to remove him from his chair at the College of the City of New York in 1940

  Source: (Field, 2005)

- Programs including Outward Bound grew out of Dewey's philosophy on educational experiments and Dr. Ted Sizer's (Dean at HGSE, 1964-1972) ‘essential’ schools related to progressive reforms in public education

Key Points About Dewey

- **U.S. Educator**
  - Progressive Education
    - Lab School

- **Philosopher and Psychologist**
  - Pragmatism
    - Active engagement with environment

- **Social Activist**
  - Democracy
  - Civil rights and responsibilities
  - Teachers Unions
John Dewey reading from "Art as Our Heritage" in 1940

"Creation, not acquisition, is the measure of a nation's rank; it is the only road to an enduring place in the memory of mankind."  (LW.14.256)

Source: (Center for Dewey Studies, 2004)
John Dewey on Happiness:

- “Such happiness as life is capable of comes from the full participation of all our powers in the endeavor to wrest from each changing situations of experience its own full and unique meaning.”

- “To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.”
## Sites of Interest

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