Having read this chapter you should be able to:

- understand Dewey’s major philosophical ideas
- be aware of his background as a person and as an educator
- consider his influence on later theorists and education today
- critically analyse his theoretical perspective
- create links between theory and practice.

**KEY WORDS**

democracy; reflection; learner-centred pedagogy; whole child; experimentation; active experience; social learning
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INTRODUCTION

It seems fitting that John Dewey is the first theorist to be considered in this book, since he has influenced many of the educational thinkers who follow. Although a prolific writer on topics such as philosophy and politics, Dewey’s impact on education was at the time, and arguably still is, profound, given the way in which he challenged more traditional notions of education and learning. He contended that learning should focus on practical life experiences and social interaction rather than the more traditional and staid manner of instruction and rote learning evident in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century schools. For Dewey, the individual was at the centre of the learning process. He reasoned that for genuine learning to take place learners needed to make independent evaluations based on their interests and that school should be a place where challenges and difficulties are met and resolved. In summary he promoted the idea of learning by doing and experimenting rather than it being a passive experience: experimentation based on a scientific and reflective approach rather than an indiscriminate process. These ideas, outlined in The School and Society (1899) and Democracy and Education (1916), caused considerable interest and controversy at the time, but despite this interest his ideas were not adopted by American schools, his intended audience. What is of interest is that many Western countries now embed Dewey’s philosophy in their curricula. The learner is seen as central to the educational process, an active participant in a socially interactive environment which celebrates experimentation and which encourages learners to make their own sense of the world.

In applying Dewey’s ideas to both the study of education and those working with learners, there are two important and interlinked issues to be considered. Firstly, the role of the teacher within this learner-centred philosophy and, secondly, the importance he placed on reflection for both learners and teachers. It could be suggested that advocating a learner-centred approach might devalue the role of the teacher; however, this was not Dewey’s viewpoint. He proposed that learners needed direction and that teachers have an important responsibility in facilitating learning by encouraging and channelling individuals’ curiosity and motivation so they can develop intellectually. In other words teachers should develop a learner-centred pedagogy in which learners are encouraged to experiment based on their own interests rather than adopting a didactic model of teaching in which the learner has only a passive role. In doing this Dewey felt that a learning-centred pedagogy would enable learners to engage with learning while at the same time preparing them to be active members of their communities and society as a whole. ‘To this end, Dewey viewed education and democracy as being intrinsically linked’ (MacBlain, 2014: 210). Such democracy came from reflecting on experience rather than relying on the repetitious and passive pedagogic models employed in schools, which were disconnected from the realities of the social world. Dewey also argued that teachers should look at learning as a cycle of experience where lessons are planned and executed based on observation and
reflection from their own and their learners’ previous experiences and interests (Woods, 2008).

**JOHN DEWEY, THE PERSON**

Born in Vermont in the United States in 1859, Dewey was brought up during a time of massive transformation in society, which lurched from rural subsistence to a more intricate system of commerce and industrialisation. The notion of society being democratic and just during this dramatic change in culture, brought about by the surge of industrialisation, was the focus of his philosophy throughout his life. Following graduation he taught both in high school and also as the only teacher in a small rural setting. He completed his doctoral thesis on the psychology of Immanuel Kant prior to embarking on academic posts at the universities of Michigan and Minnesota before arriving at the University of Chicago as the chair of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy. While at the University of Chicago he established an elementary-level Laboratory School to explore educational psychological ideas. Dewey’s last and longest academic post was at Columbia University, from 1904 until he finally retired in 1939 at the age of eighty (Apple and Teitelbaum, 2001).

**DEWEY AND THE NOTION OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION**

Dewey’s influence on education is multifaceted and still retains an air of controversy. His works encompass humanism, values education, learner-centred pedagogy and reflection; each of which will be addressed in this section. Dewey was an avid campaigner for an alternative and, for the era, radical approach to education. This is exemplified in the opening chapter of his seminal 1938 text *Experience and Education*, which called for a shift from traditional to progressive education. His philosophy argued for a move away from the rigid approach of passive learning towards a more participatory and democratic model. Doubtless influenced by his own breadth of social networking, Dewey argued that by accepting pupils from different classes, cultures and abilities, schools would thereby lay the foundations for building notions of democracy for children. For Dewey, school was not merely a physical establishment but rather a democratic community of learning. This progressive notion was exemplified by his idea that school should not only be a good grounding for life but also ‘a representation of life itself … a purpose of improving and ameliorating the existing external world’ (Howlett, 2013: 187).

At this time traditional education was exemplified by closely monitored and didactic pedagogy with the teacher very much the active, front-of-class participant and the pupil the passive recipient of knowledge. What was taught was controlled by a rigid curriculum. According to Dewey:
The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. (1938: 18–19)

Progressive education, on the other hand, was much more of a liberal experience, with the child at the centre of the process. Learning was very much an active experience, typified by group discussions and activities, while the design of the curriculum should accommodate the needs of the individual learners rather than purely being shaped by subject-specific areas. These progressive ideas were paramount to Dewey’s principles of children being ready to take an active and confident part in society as a whole in order to be fulfilled. In his view, learning involves active discovery and the gaining of procedural skills rather than the passive remembering of facts and figures. As such, he advocated the need for a flexible curriculum which was focused on resolving problems with subjects interwoven within it. He contested the position of the child being a submissive character to the curriculum; his pragmatist and social constructivist philosophy called for individual pupils to be ‘actors’ and not ‘spectators’.

However, Dewey was critical about the notion that all experiences were equally beneficial to authentic learning. His stance that true learning is socially constructed permeates most of his educational philosophy. The significance of learning from and with others for the individual in the greater scheme of things is set out as follows:

In a word, we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. (Dewey, 1938: 39)

Dewey expressed that the interests of the individual child should be at the heart of active experience and this should be integral to the design of a flexible and integrated curriculum, together with teachers adopting learner-centred pedagogies. Active experience should be seen by the learner as a meaningful process of personal development rather than disjointed and separate silos of information, facts and activities. Active experience is nurtured by ‘habits of criticism and free inquiry’ as well as creating a trusting social environment for discussion and discovery without the shackles of traditional hierarchical boundaries between teachers and pupils (Carr, 2003: 223).

Although as a learner-centred educational thinker, who did not believe in the power of teachers imposing discipline and employing passive learning methods, Dewey did not accept that pupils could learn without the aid of the teacher. He believed their role was to create opportunities for active experience in the form of activities and resources which allowed pupils to construct connections between experiences. The role of the teacher, then, rather than being diminished becomes more multifaceted, intricate and learner-centred (Irwin, 2012). By adopting the socially constructed active experience, teachers needed to establish an environment that stimulated activities and opened
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debate within the ‘principle of making things interesting’ (Dewey, 1913: 24). From Dewey’s viewpoint, teachers were to become facilitators, helping pupils to develop skills and processes to solve problems at times of possible uncertainty – skills which could be transferable to other subjects – and for them to thrive and contribute to a democratic society. For example, instead of the passive rote learning of times tables teachers should help pupils to develop skills of practical measurement, which in turn could be employed for other subjects such as geography and science (Carr, 2003). Teachers, then, become the medium through which such ‘skills are communicated’ (Dewey, 1938: 18). Dewey spoke out about the need for teachers to have greater freedom in their interpretation of the curriculum. This freedom, he contended, was necessary not only to attract suitable candidates into teaching but also to help create learner-centred and socially constructed approaches. Additionally, he argued for a scholarly approach to teacher education. This scholarship included Dewey’s idea of education as a science, not just focusing on the curriculum and how to teach it but also developing a greater understanding of how education as a whole is perceived by society (Lagemann, 2002).

Over the last thirty years reflective practice has been adopted as a tool for learning in a number of professional areas such as education, social and health care and the law. Dewey stressed the importance that, for reflective practice to be effective, each experience should be connected and reflected on holistically rather than being viewed in isolation. This in turn would build up a body of knowledge for the individual’s future development. Dewey appreciated the intricacies and complications of cases in which decisions were required but often in a challenging and complex environment, such as a classroom, where decisions and answers were not easily remedied. It was only, he offered, through careful reflection that problems encountered could be resolved. This standpoint is exemplified by Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism; a philosophy that through reflection knowledge is ‘produced by an adaptive process in which the human organism succeeds in understanding and manipulating its environment’ (Reynolds and Suter, 2010: 188). Thus, knowledge, through active experience and reflection, is created which will enable our practice to surmount problems encountered in the future within similar contexts.

What is important to note here in relation to Dewey’s pragmatist approach to reflection is that, for some, it could be construed as a very simplistic process of ‘learning by doing’. However, this disconnects the active experience of doing from thought and, as such, inhibits learning in a knowledgeable and forward-looking way. Furthermore, reflection requires the individual to respond creatively and imaginatively in times of doubt. Devout followers of Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy would maintain learners need to be receptive and reactive to cope with the fast pace of change of modern society. However, from a teacher’s point of view, responding to learner experiences and incidents through Dewey’s idea of reflective practice in the ‘messiness’ and diversity of the classroom environment would be a challenging task (Elkjaer, 2009).


**LINKS WITH OTHER THEORISTS**

Connections with other thinkers are many: mostly those who have been influenced by his progressive views on education and for the most part would come under the humanist and social constructivist umbrella. The scope of this section is not broad enough to consider the influence Dewey has had on all educational thinkers. His original philosophy was derived from Marx and Hegel. The links with Hegel, who championed the progressive concept of learners developing through creative and active experiences, is evident throughout much of Dewey’s writing (Lawton and Gordon, 2002; Kegan, 2009). Dewey emphasised that reflective practice was a cyclical process which looked to the future. This concept was later, in the 1970s, developed by Kolb in his Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Although Kolb was undoubtedly influenced by Dewey, especially in his adaptation of the ELT learning cycle, there are differences. Whereas Dewey makes direct connections between active experience and thinking, Kolb contests that, in his learning cycle, the individual’s learning styles are required for true active experience and thinking. Also, Kolb argued that active experience was not knowledge itself but only the groundwork for starting the knowledge-building process (Elkjaer, 2009).

Thinkers such as Froebel, Montessori and Piaget certainly related to Dewey, all maintaining that learners learn best when taking part in practical actions and by interacting with the environment. Piaget in particular is aligned with Dewey through his view of the teacher as a learning-centred facilitator. Dewey’s philosophy can also be associated with Malcolm Knowles and his concept of andragogy in adult education. This concept stresses both the importance of the learner-centred approach and the significance of the experience that individuals bring to education. Perhaps the links between the two are not altogether surprising as Dewey was Knowles’ first mentor in academia (Jarvis et al., 2003). Also undeniably inspired by Dewey’s progressive views on learning was Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, which develops the notion that each learner is distinct and espouses the idea that learning, and hence intelligence, includes a number of characteristics which are inherent in each of us and enhanced by experience.

The works of Carl Rogers and A.S. Neill, both humanists, were very much influenced by Dewey’s progressive and liberal approach to education. Rogers replaced the term ‘teacher’ with ‘facilitator’. This idea of mutual esteem between learner and facilitator was also very evident in the learner-centred and democratic ‘free’ school concept of A.S. Neill, the inaugural and long-term head teacher of Summerhill School, a famously democratic independent boarding school in England. However, Neill’s philosophy of learner freedom and resulting practice at Summerhill were perhaps even too radical for Dewey’s notion of progressive education, especially where the role and responsibilities of the teacher are concerned. Nevertheless, the work of both Dewey and Neill strived to develop ‘confident, self-assured and responsible young people capable of critical reflection’ (Carr, 2003: 226).
The ongoing importance of the influence of Dewey is also evident in the work of more contemporary thinkers. In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire warns against an information-giving or ‘banking’ approach and calls for a learner-centred education based on the needs and wants of individuals (Freire, 1996). Furthermore, the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' links with Dewey's term of 'habits', which explores the idea of learners being inducted and ‘forming habits of action in conformity with … rules and standards’ (Dewey, 1938: 18).

**CRITIQUING THE THEORY**

Although Dewey’s influence is still very much evident in educational thinking and practice, his ideas raise some very pertinent and questionable issues which need consideration. Firstly, it may be interesting to reflect on the reason why his notions of progressive and learner-centred approaches to education were not readily acted upon in the United States. This could be because his left-leaning ideas were at odds with the majority of the American public, especially the policy makers, who traditionally shunned any suggestion of radical politics. This was certainly the case during and after the Cold War where a ‘no-nonsense’ approach to education in which the acquisitions of skills to compete globally meant there was little room for Dewey’s ideas to make progress (Howlett, 2013). The pursuit of a skill-based and economically driven education system in many countries is even more appealing for government policy makers during the recent years of global recession. Many governments are now turning to more traditional approaches to the curriculum and assessment, with performance and attainment at the fore. It is doubtful whether Dewey’s idea of learners taking part in the common good of society is truly possible in an increasingly commercial, market-driven and unfair world (Apple and Teitelbaum, 2001). However, despite the impact of market-focused education policy, models of progressive pedagogy continue to thrive in a number of schools (Bates and Lewis, 2009). This is surprising, as policy is increasingly resulting in content-heavy and subject-specific curricula with teachers constrained to a standardised and performance-driven culture.

There are some convincing arguments opposing Dewey’s concept of devaluing the use of theories and facts. For some this is a misconception, because learners need to have an understanding of the point of their active experience to make sense of their subsequent investigations. Hence subject-specific facts and the basis of theory are necessary for learning to be created and built; it cannot take place just by active experience. Dewey’s pragmatism therefore could be seen as somewhat naïve. There is then an argument that suggests knowledge and understanding are both detached from individual beliefs and preferences (Carr, 2003). Pragmatism focused on active experience, learner-centred, learning by doing and catering for individual interests have been transformed by some critics into: playing rather than learning, lacking focus, poor levels of literacy and
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numeracy and overall ‘exaggerated subjectivizing’ (Geiger, 1958: 8). Reflective practice is still very much a part of teacher education today. However, from an educator’s point of view, responding to individual learner experiences and incidents through reflective practice in the ‘messiness’ and diversity of the classroom environment would be a challenging task (Elkjaer, 2009). This is particularly so in the current climate of an increasingly standardised curriculum and teacher performativity. In short, the overarching criticism which possibly fits Dewey best is that he had ‘modernist (and romantic) faith in human reason and democratic community’ (Irwin, 2012).

APPLYING DEWEY IN THE CLASSROOM

When considering the application of Dewey’s theory to practice one of the biggest challenges perhaps lies in the lack of any specific acknowledgement of his work in classroom practices. In contrast to the work of his contemporaries, such as Steiner and Montessori, where an explicit approach to classroom procedure has been developed in their names, the same cannot be said for Dewey, and there is no ‘Dewey system of education’ which can be adopted or replicated in schools today. That said, in probing education systems, past and present, it is not difficult to identify where Dewey’s theory and philosophy might have influenced practices, which perhaps explains why Carr and Hartnett (1996) refer to him as the philosopher who has had the greatest influence on education in the last century, and why Seigfried states: ‘Dewey has been called the last of the great public intellectuals because his own practice informed his theory and his theory was carried out in practice’ (2002: 2).

Dewey’s application of theory is manifest throughout his writing and it is quite impossible to doubt his convictions and sincerity in developing democratically minded and inquisitive young learners for the future. Although he championed the cause of teachers’ freedom so that they could facilitate his progressive style of education, his main focus was on learners and promoting the significance of their experience. Consequently, when considering applying theory to practice here it can really only be viewed from Dewey’s learner-centred perspective.

An examination of curriculum developments in England in recent years reflects the influence of Dewey’s philosophy, particularly in primary education, where a shift from a more traditional knowledge-based system to a more learner-centred one has been a key focus of education policy. Perhaps the most significant period, in which a move to a more progressive education system can be seen, is during the 1960s when British education was influenced by the government-endorsed Plowden Report (1967). The Plowden philosophy reflected Dewey’s work, showing progressivism through advocating that ‘activity and experience, both physical and mental, are often the best means of gaining knowledge and acquiring facts’ (Plowden Report, 1967: 195), and emphasising the importance of teaching the skills of reading and writing in the context in which they might be used by the children. Indeed, the most significant similarity between
Plowden’s findings and Dewey’s philosophy is the learner-centred approach advocated by both. While Dewey explains this in metaphorical terms:

the change which is coming into our education is the shifting of the centre of gravity. It is a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical centre shifted from the earth to the sun. In this case the child becomes the sun about which the appliances of education revolve; he is the centre about which they are organised. (1899: 151)

Plowden applies a more practical approach, stating that, ‘at the heart of the educational process lies the child’ (Plowden Report, 1967: 7) and reinforcing that any change in policy and acquisition of resources must be in harmony with and acceptable to the child. While a more progressive approach to education was perhaps inevitable at the time – a period in which people were looking towards a more optimistic future following the post-war years – this was very much a honeymoon period lasting just a decade till the advent of the right-wing Conservative Thatcher government in 1979, which quickly reaffirmed the more traditional subject-based curriculum in the education system. Nevertheless, the appeal of a learner-centred approach to learning did not completely disappear and in subsequent revisions of curriculum policy a learner-centred approach to learning continued to make a significant contribution to the pedagogical framework. In the early 2000s, for example, a drive towards a creative curriculum which applied a thematic approach to teaching subjects began to gather pace following the Rose Review of the Primary Curriculum (Department for Children, School and Families, 2008); however, this was not embraced by the 2010 coalition government whose most recent iteration of a National Curriculum, the 2014 National Curriculum in England, was a return to a subject-based approach. Interestingly, the most recent revision of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (2012) does however embrace the unique child and the importance of teachers’ planning experiences, which start from the child and their own unique experiences. This is reflective of Dewey’s theory in which he proposes a curriculum in which ‘the child and the curriculum must interact’ (Noddings, 2010: 269).

It could be assumed, then, that the application of Dewey’s theory in practice is very much dependent upon the political position of the country at the time, since this undoubtedly will influence educational policy and its intentions. Dewey’s assertion that learners become collaborators with other learners and teachers to create their own understanding by solving problems they encounter in a variety of situations is perhaps seen as a risky approach to pedagogy in the results-driven environment which currently typifies the English education system; and the view of teacher as facilitator and co-collaborator calls into question the role of the teacher and their responsibility in terms of achievement and attainment of the learner. This may also explain why this aspect of Dewey’s philosophy was only fully embraced in early years education, where the stakes were deemed lower than in secondary education when education ‘began to count’.
In reality, then, subject-based facts and theories are fundamental to learning, especially in secondary and tertiary education, and in the content-driven curriculum we see today. However, this is not to say that educators cannot consider ways of developing learners’ reasoning proficiencies, which individual subjects look to cultivate, and encourage activities which are pragmatic and true to real life. Petty offers pertinent practical examples of this, although he also states that planning and managing such activities is not an uncomplicated undertaking:

Your subject is a way of thinking, not just a body of facts … So set tasks which require your students to reason. Get them thinking like real scientists, historians or social scientists. It is important to recognise that delivering the content and ideas on your topic is not enough. You are not a petrol pump attendant filling the students’ empty tanks! A closer analogy is that you are an athletics coach, developing your students’ abilities through the students’ own exercise and practice. You may be structuring the exercise programme, but like athletes, it is the students who must do the practice, provide the effort, and create the gains. (1998: 358–9)

Therefore, even within a subject-driven curriculum it is conceivable that the skilful teacher can deliver subjects in a manner which still reflects the learner-centred approach which so impassioned Dewey. Indeed, despite a curriculum which is firmly rooted in a subject-led approach, the most recent National Curriculum for England still states that:

teachers [should] develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils’ knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum.
(Department for Education, 2013: 5)

At this juncture it would be erroneous not to acknowledge the influence of Dewey’s democratic ethos on education, and here we can see his theories influencing many aspects of education, but perhaps most significantly in aspects of higher and further education. Dewey’s view of democracy was not one that reflected a political perspective, but rather was associated with ‘a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience’ (1916: 93). Dewey believed that education should be embedded within society and it should encourage students to become good and active citizens. This too links with Dewey’s approach to learning, since he suggested that students who were active and engaged within society could more readily bring their experiences to their learning. This mode of learning is embodied in ‘Citizenship Education’, which can be seen in Key Stages 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum in England and aims to ‘provide pupils with the knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society’ (Department for Education, 2013: 201). A lighter touch, but no less important, approach to democracy in education is the rise of student councils in education settings, which present pupils with the opportunity to have their say in how their school is run.

However, perhaps the most significant area in which Dewey’s democracy in action can be seen is in higher education, where universities are becoming increasingly
influenced by student feedback and input. It is common for universities to have staff–student committees, which work at both departmental and institutional level, and there is an increasing focus on the results of the National Student Survey to inform and develop practice, all of which suggests that the democratic ethos of Dewey’s work is a way of life in terms of higher education structure and procedures.

This section has touched upon a number of areas where Dewey’s philosophies could be transferred into practice in the classroom, workshop or other learning environments. All these areas for practice aim to achieve the learner-centred and active experience espoused by progressive education. There is one further, central, aspect to Dewey’s thinking to be considered by educators and that is inclusivity, which comes from his overarching principle of democracy. His standpoint on inclusivity came from him witnessing the damage done by privilege and elitism. He argued for all learners contributing what they could and building knowledge for the shared benefit of all, despite perceived levels of abilities, in an environment which celebrated difference. This is achieved by setting differentiated tasks and objectives for all learners and is enabled through open-plan classrooms and workshops which encourage participation and dialogue by all. All of these areas covered here require reflection, effort and in some cases courage to put into practice. Skills and qualities Dewey was trying to nurture in his philosophy of progressive education.

**REFLECTIVE TASK**

You will not find a ‘Dewey Curriculum’ or ‘Dewey Approach’ to learning; however, look into any educational system or curriculum and you won’t have to look too hard to find where the work of John Dewey has influenced both theory and practice.

Look for policies and curriculum frameworks in your own setting. Can you find any influences of Dewey’s philosophies?

Are there any aspects of the curriculum and policy which reflect Dewey’s progressive notion of education or do they follow a more traditional route? Why do you think this?

**SUMMARY**

It could be argued that John Dewey was a philosopher who was ahead of his time. A philosopher and educator, his humanistic views of individual self-worth and self-determinism, set in his democratic notion of education, challenged the traditional view of education and encouraged a more radical way of thinking in terms of putting the learner at the heart of the educational system.
Dewey questioned the traditional model of the educational system, in which pupils were the passive recipients of knowledge, instead championing a more participatory and democratic model, yet despite presenting a strong case for an educational setting that was a democratic community of learning in which the curriculum began with the learner, his ideas were not immediately endorsed. In fact, it could be argued that his vision for education is reflected on much more now than when he first presented his ideas, over a century ago.

Dewey's work is far-reaching, not just in terms of the development and organisation of school settings, but also in relation to the role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner, which was seen as a cyclical process designed to enable practitioners to develop and improve their practice – theories which were later developed by Schön and Kolb respectively.

Dewey also acknowledged the importance of experiential learning, which in itself was influential in curriculum development, particularly in the arena of the lifelong learning sector and vocational education. Dewey did not view these as separate entities, but viewed every experience as fundamental to what follows in an individual's learning journey, emphasising the importance of a vocational and academic curriculum to be delivered side by side in the best interests of the learner.

**FURTHER READING**


**REFERENCES**


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