

Topic Page: [Dewey, John \(1859 – 1952\)](#)

Definition: **Dewey, John** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US educator and philosopher. Influenced by pragmatism and utilitarianism. Dewey proposed a philosophy of **instrumentalism**. He regarded intelligence as an instrument to overcome problems. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey emphasized the importance of experimentation and practical application in education and was leading figure in the development of progressive education.

Summary Article: **Dewey, John (1859–1952)**

From *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education*

John Dewey was a highly influential twentieth-century American philosopher and perhaps the nation's foremost educational theorist. Along with Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) and William James (1842–1910), he forged an American philosophy known variously as pragmatism, experimentalism, or, as he preferred, instrumentalism. He also helped create an educational theory known as progressivism. In addition to being a prolific author and a philosophy professor, he was socially and politically active in seeking to improve children's schooling, secure professors' academic freedom, outlaw international war, protect workers' rights, extend women's civil liberties, and enact immigrant and minority political freedoms.

Dewey was born into a middle-class evangelical Congregational Church family in Burlington, Vermont, and pursued his undergraduate education in his hometown at the University of Vermont. After earning his bachelor's degree in philosophy and spending several years as a high school teacher in Pennsylvania and Vermont, he pursued his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University and later taught at the universities of Michigan, Minnesota, and Chicago, as well as Columbia.

During his lifetime, he wrote approximately one thousand articles, ninety poems, and forty books. With the exception of his poems, which were edited by Jo Ann Boydston in *The Poems of John Dewey* and his essay "What Psychology Can Do for the Teacher" in Reginald Archambault's *John Dewey on Education*, all of his published writings are in *The Collected Works of John Dewey*. The books for which he is best remembered are *The School and Society* (1899); *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902); *How We Think* (1910); *Democracy and Education* (1916); *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920); *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922); *Experience and Nature* (1925); *The Public and Its Problems* (1927); *The Quest for Certainty* (1929); *Individualism, Old and New* (1930); *Ethics* (1932); *Art as Experience* (1934); *Logic* (1938); *Experience and Education* (1938); and *Freedom and Culture* (1939).

Although his books have made a lasting impression on students of his philosophy, Dewey wrote many significant essays, too, such as "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896); "Professional Spirit Among Teachers" (1913); "Nationalizing Education" (1916); "The Prospects of the Liberal College" (1924); "Progressive Education and the Science of Education" (1928); "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930); "Why I Am Not a Communist" (1934); "Democracy Is Radical" (1937); "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth" (1941); and "Has Philosophy a Future?" (1948). Ironically, both his first major scholarly work—his doctoral dissertation—and his last virtually completed volume—a book-length manuscript that was tentatively titled *Naturalism*—have been lost.

From the titles mentioned, however, it is easy to see that the scope of his scholarly interests was

extensive, including, but not limited to, education, psychology, aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, logic, religion, politics, and democracy. These diverse motifs were linked in his thought and may be approached through one of several entry points, such as his social, political, educational, ethical, or aesthetic theory. Conversely, his ideas may be entered via ideas that are associated with his philosophical assumptions and methodology, such as naturalism, pragmatism, experimentalism, or instrumentalism.

In this entry, Dewey's ideas are woven or melded together to form a cohesive pattern of reflections. That is to say, the flow of his reflections and emphases are commingled in order to highlight his thinking during his post-Christian and postidealism philosophical stages. In particular, the entry examines his naturalistic philosophy rather than his early supernaturalistic philosophy. As a proponent of naturalism, Dewey rejected his earlier ideas of a personal God, a revealed religion, a predetermined self, and a transcendental meaning system. Instead, he argued that everything, including religion and ethics, is better understood from a Darwinian, naturalistic perspective.

The universe, humans, and society are best understood as naturally evolving dynamic entities that interact with and influence meaning making and purposive living. Natural development, however, provides opportunities for intelligent experimentation and choices. Dewey's experimentalism, rooted in his broad view of science, led him to stress the connection between thinking, learning, and teaching. His pragmatism influenced him to conclude that thinking, learning, and acting are merely different aspects of a single process or experience.

The nonlinear facets of scientific or reflective thinking that Dewey identified, if his ideas may be overly simplified, occur first as a person encounters a genuine problem or develops personal doubt or uncertainty. The person, in essence, is perturbed, disconcerted, or nonplussed because of some experience she or he has had. If the person is guided to escape this disequilibrium intelligently, she or he may, second, start finding facts, attempting to synthesize them, searching for ways of interpreting them, and identifying the basic problem that stimulated the initial confusion.

Next, the person continues to think, reflect, and learn as she or he seeks a solution to the problem and, perhaps unconsciously, to regain equilibrium. Deweyan thinking and learning, at this juncture, involves developing hypotheses and narrowing them down to one that will be tested. After this hypothesis is chosen, a fourth facet of thinking develops: the actual testing of the selected hypothesis. This need to test or experiment—and so, the term *experimentalism*—includes going through empirical data intellectually, looking for connections among the facts, considering the strengths and weaknesses of the hypothesis, and taking into account the potential or probable results or consequences when evaluating the hypothesis.

Finally, thinking and learning move to testing the hypothesis in a real experiment or situation. If the actual experiment results in the predicted outcomes, then the person solves the problem and has her or his equilibrium restored. If not, the person begins to review his or her prior thinking to search for additional data, other explanations for them, and alternative hypotheses. This approach to thinking and experimenting is, on one level and to varying degrees, a normal part of living and professional life.

When Dewey added his teaching theory to his thinking and learning theories, the responsibilities of the school and teacher emerge; school staff and individual teachers are responsible for fostering the thinking and learning of students. From his viewpoint, their responsibilities are best accomplished by designing, creating, renewing, and reconstructing school and classroom environments so that they

continue to cultivate each child's thinking and learning in ways that eventually lead to adult ways of understanding the multiple forms of inquiry and creativity.

As children enter school, however, the teacher does not begin with the teaching of adult forms of understanding of chemistry, history, mathematics, language, and so forth. Instead, the teacher begins with the learning that students bring with them to school and extends this understanding wider and deeper into the various subjects studied, enabling students to better see the connections and usefulness of what is learned.

In addition, Dewey argued that students are born learners with natural and cultivated impulses that need to be directed and transformed into reflectively developed desires and purposes. Thus, he was very interested in a progressive rather than a traditional approach to education and curriculum. Hence, his views—although frequently distorted by his admirers and detractors—became associated with educational progressivism. For him, progressivism involved focusing on understanding students' interests and impulses; engaging them in well-planned and stimulating learning activities; developing their understanding into adult forms of inquiry and creativity; cultivating their abilities to think and to solve problems for themselves; and nurturing their dispositions to work together democratically toward personal, professional, and social goals.

He was highly critical of progressive educators who allowed students to be directed only or largely by their unreflective impulses and developed individualistic students who had little understanding of their democratic social relationships and responsibilities in schools and society. Thus, he objected to their idea of an individualistically oriented and child-centered school in preference for a democratically oriented and socially centered one that meets the needs of each student.

In the process of learning, Dewey thought that students should come to understand that knowledge claims are, at their best, warranted assertions, conclusions that are the most reliable that can be reached with the available theory and data. Some opinions are without any support but harmless and, on occasion, even meaningful. Others may be unwarranted and harmful, or at least counterproductive. Still others may have no more warrant than dozens of other opinions or interpretations because the evidence and arguments that support them are inadequate, insufficient, or partial.

A study of history reveals that some opinions are increasingly discredited and others are progressively corroborated by scholars, researchers, and experts. Some opinions are so well supported that they may be acted upon with a very high degree of confidence. As he noted in *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey believed that a high level of confidence or warrant meant that people can be secure but not certain about many claims that are made in a variety of realms of inquiry, such as chemistry, mathematics, history, and even ethics. Certainty is unwarranted because the universe is a dynamic, changing entity, and personal knowledge of it is both partial and problematic.

In his instrumentalist view of knowing, it was important to note that determining the warrant of a claim is a public, social, and ongoing process, never an individual, private, and completed matter. Consequently, students need to learn that when they make choices and pursue related actions, their commitment to these selections and endeavors should be in proportion to the public warrant that exists. The most highly warranted beliefs ought to be understood as they are in scientific experimentation or as instruments for producing new ideas, theories, hypotheses, and, notably, findings.

Dewey's instrumentalism extends to all realms of understanding. Historical findings, religious experience, aesthetic criticism, chemical studies, moral judgments, and statistical analyses are increasingly warranted or secure when theories regarding them are powerful, data are substantial, and arguments are cogent. But more is involved in claims of knowing. The consequences or outcomes of inquiries are related to his democratic philosophy of valuation. Are the consequences of acting on the knowledge we have for the common good of society, both in the present and in the future?

In summary, then, his view of instrumentalism is not only a way of examining knowledge claims and determining warranted assertions but also a means of providing grounds for learning, thinking, choosing, behaving, and living, both individually and collectively. So, his theories of learning, thinking, teaching, and knowing are connected for students and teachers in schools as well as for citizens and leaders in communities and societies. He believed that a democratic society should be increasingly a part of every facet of life, including families, schools, communities, social agencies, religious institutions, and private businesses. Democratic values and reflective thinking should permeate the thinking and actions of politicians, communities, businesses, schools, and individuals.

Dewey believed, too, that if schools, communities, and societies are to become educational and democratic entities, they must examine reflectively and shape democratically the experiences that children, youth, and adults have throughout school and life. In *Experience and Education* and other writings, there are probably two major ways of conceptualizing experiences—the paradigmatically different and the developmentally distinct. At least three paradigmatic kinds of experiences drew his attention. Among the various experiences that exist, Dewey argued that they fall into three categories: miseducative, noneducative, and educative. These three paradigms of experience vary from the least desirable (miseducative) to the most desirable (educative). In between these two categories falls a type of experience that may be neither harmful nor helpful, detrimental nor fruitful per se in the life of a person or society. Erasing boards, sharpening pencils, putting paper into a printer, surfing the Internet, changing television channels, answering the telephone, planting a flower, eating an orange, and so on may fall into this category much of the time. On the other hand, any one of these activities might be miseducative or educative when certain other criteria or conditions are in force or met. What are these distinguishing criteria or conditions? How did Dewey distinguish miseducative and educative experiences?

The concepts of personal and societal growth are the main criteria that distinguish miseducative and educative experiences for Dewey. Conspicuously, growth for him involves community, not just individual, development and is the never-ending goal of both formal and informal education. By growth, he suggested several subcriteria, such as an increasing awareness of facts and ideas; a connecting of new learning with prior learning; an understanding of more sophisticated ideas and experiences; and a refining of the abilities to reflect, solve problems, and make intelligent choices. According to *Democracy and Education*, growth also has liberating qualities in that it enhances and expands a person's and society's understanding and choices. Thus, growth is intrinsically connected to values, particularly democratic and intellectual ones.

So, what does growth suggest for miseducative and educative experiences? Although some experiences may be either at times if circumstances are conducive, others are more likely and more consistently miseducative and others educative. For example, poorly conceived and executed teaching of writing or trigonometry may be quite miseducative. So, too, would be the learning of stereotypes and misinformation. On the other hand, learning about the issues, complexities, and beauties of art,

astronomy, and Mexico would ordinarily be educative, expanding, and liberating. Schools—but also families, communities, and societies—are responsible for ensuring that learning is focused primarily on educative activities and experiences.

Designing, fostering, and delivering of relevant environments and experiences become the arts of teaching and living in a democratically oriented school and country. Of course, some room for noneducative activities is important if they do not undermine or overwhelm the importance of educative ones. Miseducative activities and experiences cannot always be avoided for numerous reasons, but they can be diminished, minimized, or neutralized to an extent in reflective schools and societies if Dewey is correct.

The second major way of conceptualizing Dewey's theory overlaps with the idea of educative experiences and entails looking at them as developmentally distinct matters. The development of experience coincides with and accompanies the development of students. From a developmental perspective, experiences fall along a continuum of authentically labeled experiences, extending to embrace his conceptions of (1) "experience," (2) "an experience," and (3) "aesthetic experience." Although not literally a part of this continuum because they are only honorifically described by the word *experience*, two other categories of thought illuminate Dewey's thinking on this broad topic, that is, what may be called the courteously labeled experiences of (1) the anesthetic and (2) the nonaesthetic. When these five categories are combined, they range from deadening activities (anesthetic) to enlivening experiences (aesthetic).

The courteously labeled experiences are dulling and numbing (anesthetic) or, perhaps, disconnected and aimless (nonaesthetic). The authentically labeled experiences include those activities that involve interactive and connected learning and reflection (experience); enhance experience to make it memorable, fulfilling, and complete (an experience); and enrich an experience by stimulating the enjoyable processes and outcomes of making sense, perceiving holistically, and feeling consummated (aesthetic experience).

In summary, Dewey's ideas about learning, thinking, teaching, knowing, and acting form an intellectual gestalt that is founded on his naturalistic, pragmatic, experimental, or instrumentalist philosophy. To the extent that his ideas are warranted, they offer the educator important considerations for her or his theorizing and practice. To the degree that they are unwarranted, the educator is advised to search for different grounds and support.

Further Readings

- Martin, J. (2002). *The education of John Dewey*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ryan, A. (1995). *John Dewey and the high tide of American liberalism*. New York: Norton.
- Simpson, D. (2006). *John Dewey primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Simpson, D.; Jackson, M.; Aycock, J. (2005). *John Dewey and the art of teaching: Toward reflective and imaginative practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Douglas J. Simpson

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Simpson, D. J. (2009). Dewey, John (1859--1952). In E. F. Provenzo, *Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dewey_john_1859_1952

 Copyright © 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.

 Copyright © 2008 by Sage Publications, Inc.

APA

Simpson, D. J. (2009). Dewey, John (1859--1952). In E. F. Provenzo, *Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dewey_john_1859_1952

Chicago

Simpson, Douglas J. "Dewey, John (1859–1952)." In *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education*, by Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr.. Sage Publications, 2009. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dewey_john_1859_1952

Harvard

Simpson, D.J. (2009). Dewey, John (1859--1952). In E.F. Provenzo, *Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dewey_john_1859_1952 [Accessed 14 October 2019].

MLA

Simpson, Douglas J. "Dewey, John (1859–1952)." *Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education*, Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2009. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/dewey_john_1859_1952. Accessed 14 Oct. 2019.