

Book review

Experience and education

John Dewey
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91pp.

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John Dewey was a philosopher, psychologist and educator. *Experience and education* was published to honour Dewey as the Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series' 'first and tenth lecturer' (p. ix). His discussion is contextualised within the American education system of the 1930s. He advocates a philosophy of education based on quality, authentic and related experiences which develop learner knowledge to inform decision making during future experiences. His belief in authentic, active, experiential learning is a seminal cornerstone to my construct of applied learning pedagogy. Subsequently in this review I purposely focus on pedagogical aspects which are crucial to turn experience into education.

Dewey begins by unpacking the binaries between traditional and progressive education. He refers to traditional education as imposing knowledge already known on learners in a context controlled by the

teacher, while progressive education leverages possibilities from what is not-yet-known and promotes learner individuality and creativity. In arguing for a progressive approach to education he does not reject everything represented by traditional education, instead he acknowledges the difficulties in determining the role traditional knowledge has in developing learning which optimises the benefits of experience. The solution to this problem he says is 'a well thought-out philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience' (p. 9).

Dewey then goes on to discuss the need for a 'theory of experience' rather than learning which attempts to be progressive but operates 'blindly and in confusion' (p. 12). Dewey discusses some of the challenges he sees in education through experience and suggests how solutions might be formulated.

Among the challenges he identifies are challenging a belief 'that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative' (p. 13). Experience can easily become 'mis-educative' or a barrier to growth from experience. Likewise while an experience might be enjoyable this does not necessarily promote personal growth. Experiences that have no coherence or rational framework in which they are situated do not necessarily result in cumulative learning foundations for future learning. Subsequently while traditional schooling approaches may include learning experiences he is critical of their ability to connect to 'further experience' (p. 16).

He argues that 'the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of contemporary experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experience' (p. 17). These experiences are not random activities but thoughtfully constructed, taking into account content, teaching and learning approaches, logistics and the socio-cultural construct of the environment in which they will be undertaken. He emphasises that while traditional education might be seen as routine repetition of ideas and resources neither is progressive education 'a matter of planless [sic] improvisation' (p. 18).

Dewey then provides philosophical analysis to argue criteria, or principles, which impact on a theory of experience. His critical discussion compares and analyses the implications of traditional versus progressive approaches to education. He highlights the challenges in

defining a construct of growth as a result of experience due to the value of different experiences. He considers at length, through providing examples, the elements of interaction and situation which, he argues, are 'inseparable from each other' (p. 41). Interaction relates to both the interaction of the learner with their environment and also to the embedded cognitive interaction within the learner as experience changes and challenges the way the learner thinks and acts. Interaction also affects the philosophical element of continuity of learning; that is, how a learner's previous experience affects their future learning from experience. The principle of situation is a consideration because learning is an interaction between the learner and their environment (p. 41). The conditions which surround the learning experience will impact in some way on subsequent growth and continuity of learning. Teachers who use a theory of experience in their work have a responsibility to ensure the principles of continuity, interaction and situation are optimised for a 'worth-while' (p. 44, p. 51) learning experience to occur.

This section also considers the challenges and moral implications for teachers who need to ensure learner growth is positive without imposing control over the learners. In a model of education through experience, the teacher must be willing to establish a professional pedagogical relationship with the learner in which the educator might share, without imposing, personal insights and experiences. At the same time, it is necessary that teachers learn about the interests and needs of the learners who are in their care. Teachers need an ability to identify potential for learning outside the confines of classrooms and schools.

In the next section Dewey, although acknowledging exceptions to his reflections and the flawed nature of any attempt to propose generalisations, considers how social control might differ between traditional schools and progressive schools. He suggests that in traditional schools the need to maintain order may be forced on the teacher because the 'school was not a group or community held together by participation in common activities' (p. 60). It is more likely, however, that in progressive schools learning through experience is a 'social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute' (p. 61). Subsequently individual responsibility is promoted which optimises the likelihood of the learners developing the ability to moderate their own social behaviour, or at least growing an ability to do so. The binary to this, he says, is that many young people who may have behaviour

difficulties might be enrolled in progressive schools ‘as a last resort’ (p. 62). However, even if progressive schools have high numbers of students with challenging behaviours he believes that a lack of social control might not originate from student behaviour. The more likely origin being a lack of thoughtful and informed planning of learning activities which takes into account the importance of continuity, situation and interaction while allowing for individual creativity and agency. Dewey again refers to the changed role of the teacher in learning through social experience by saying ‘[t]he teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities’ (p. 66).

Having considered social control, Dewey then discusses the nature of freedom arguing that the two seemingly opposing forces are relational. He proposes that the ‘alternative to externally imposed inhibition is inhibition through an individual’s own reflection and judgement’ (p. 75). He highlights that while the ‘ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control’ (p. 75) the ‘mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control’ (p. 75). The brief section provides a connector to the following one concerning the meaning of purpose.

Dewey says that impulse initially drives formation of purpose. However in determining a purpose first an assessment of the conditions and understanding of the ‘*significance*’ (p. 79 italics in original) of the conditions is required. The assessment is informed by prior experiences. In order for students to assess conditions and understand the significance of learning Dewey continues to stress the role of the teacher to know students well so as to best support the development of an organised plan by a group of learners. In this way learning becomes ‘a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation’ (p. 85).

The book culminates in Dewey emphasising that to conceive education in terms of experience (p. 86) the subject matter must first ‘fall within the scope of ordinary life-experiences’ (p. 87). Then, in order to have continuity, the challenge for educators is to continually build on the original experiences in order to present ‘new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience’ (p. 90).

Importantly Dewey asserts that challenging a traditional view of delivering education requires the education setting to have an ‘articulate and coherent’ (p. 18) philosophy of education. The setting cannot rely

on mindless abstract words to justify contemporary use of habitual and historical educative approaches and ‘established routines’ (p. 18) of teaching and learning. Neither is it acceptable to promote a learning program based on experience and merely argue that ‘education is found in life-experience’ (p. 53). The need for progressive education to have a ‘philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience’ is much more urgent than for traditional education providers.

Dewey warns that implementing an order of education based on new conceptions is challenging when it goes against the grain of well-trod paths. Eighty years after Dewey’s address attempts are still being made to move away from the well-trod path of a mass initialised approach to schooling although there are signs of progress. For those familiar with the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) a senior years pathway in Victoria, it is clear that Dewey’s thinking about experience and education has seminally informed the theoretical foundations on which the program is based. Additionally authentic learning approaches have made inroads into pre-school and early years’ curriculum.

On a personal level, the thoughts and philosophies expressed in *Experience and Education* are vital ingredients in ongoing conversations with students and colleagues regarding learning through experience, what is learning and what is education. A book well worth re-reading or using as an introduction to the work of John Dewey.

About the reviewer

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