

Reflection Paper

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EDU 5210: Philosophies of Education

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Chosen Reading

Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and Education* (Chapters 1 - 6; pp. 17-72). Collier.

One of the core concepts of ecology is that of ecosystems — communities of individual organisms that are all linked together via interactions. Each individual is part of a species, and every species has their own set of relationships with other species (e.g. as prey, predators, or decomposers). Further adding onto the complexity, the make-up of ecosystems is constantly fluctuating (e.g. some individuals die, natural disasters destroy parts of the ecosystem). Given this dynamic nature, it would be difficult for any two individuals to somehow have the same network of associates, let alone the same experiences.

Would this not also apply to humans? After all, the places we live and work in are basically like ecosystems in that they are filled with different individuals interacting with different sets of other individuals in different ways, leading to everybody having different experiences.

Accordingly, such experiences in the human ecosystems of schools are what Dewey is concerned with in *Experiences and Education*, specifically in regard to the debate of whether educators should choose traditional or progressive education. For the former, the accusation is that its followers are so preoccupied with just relaying a structured, pre-set checklist of information that they pay no regard to the experiences (both past and present) of students. Consequently, students whose experiences may disadvantage their ability to learn whatever is being taught will be left behind. On the flip side is progressive education, which essentially rejects traditional education and focuses instead on having students learn through experience.

However, while implementing traditional education practices is intuitive even for novice educators like myself (i.e. just teach the textbooks), the same cannot be said for progressive education. To be specific, “learning through experience” is such an abstract concept that I will require guidance on how to facilitate it.

Luckily, Dewey discusses what such a phrase entails, presenting two principles that lead to educative experiences for learners: continuity and interaction. The former places importance on experiences that can influence future ones, which makes sense to me. From the standpoint of the present, what would be the point of doing something like teaching if it does not change anything (in the future)? In regard to the past, educators would need to take note of how previous experiences influence present ones. For example, students in grade school may be put off of a subject due to having a terrible experience with the teacher for a certain grade. In the next year, they are forced to reacquaint themselves with it, meaning their next teacher will need to be able

to work with an audience that already hates what is being taught and may thus resist learning (e.g. by not participating). What can educators do in light of such scenarios?

According to the principle of interaction, educators need to be aware of each learner's internal conditions (e.g. their pre-existing attitudes and past experiences) as well as the external conditions (i.e. the learning environment). The two sets of conditions will interact with one another to form unique experiences that ultimately drive how each student changes/learns so educators should take care to adjust the environment in accordance with learner needs. This idea also makes sense to me. Returning to ecology, each species in an ecosystem has gradually adapted (via evolution) to fulfil a role based on their interactions with both the environment (e.g. growing fur so they can survive in a specific climate) and others (e.g. having stronger leg muscles so they can hunt better), and these adaptations can be psychological (e.g. changing their behaviour so they avoid eating poisonous plants/animals). Would this process of psychological evolution not be analogous to students slowly learning something throughout their experiences?

Now that I have a frame of reference for what "learning through experiences" actually means, is it time for me to make a choice on whether to become a disciple of traditional or progressive education? To this question, I will have to agree with Dewey and his resounding answer of "no". As an outsider, what I do not understand is why educators need to adhere completely to only one philosophy. If we acknowledge that everybody has their own unique experiences, it should carry over to educators, right? Would it not make sense to have a philosophy that recognizes the complexity and dynamicity of the school ecosystem and is consequently flexible, combining traditional and progressive aspects and harnessing them when appropriate? For example, educators who have been forced to take on too many students to the point where they cannot reasonably keep track of everyone's internal conditions may have to follow traditional education's one-size-fits-all approach, but they could at least try to provide a more personalized learning for a smaller subset of students whose internal conditions mismatch with external conditions (e.g. non-native English speakers who cannot keep up with English modes of instruction) to the point where they require extra teacher attention/support.

Admittedly, my philosophy is leaning towards progressive education as it ties into my ecosystem-oriented mindset, but I do have one concern that I am not sure was answered by the reading. While progressive education is learner-centred, Dewey mentions that educators are still involved as figures who have to evaluate and ensure that their students' learning experiences

influence them to develop in an appropriate direction. While certain directions are obviously inappropriate (Dewey brings up those that lead to criminal lifestyles as an example), what dictates whether a direction is actually appropriate? For example, environmental educators like myself push to develop learners into environmentalists as we see preserving the planet as important, but why exactly is it appropriate for education? What about other values that might be seen as appropriate (e.g. economic ones that prepare students for profitable careers) but run counter to environmental ones (e.g. economic values entice students to over-exploit natural resources for profit)? Given my inability to address such subjectivity, I cannot in good faith fully commit to progressive education. Accordingly, my decision falls in line with Dewey and his rejection of the traditional vs. progressive question.