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## John Dewey and the Idea of Experimentalism

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nians, Dewey is more than a philosopher and a great scholar. He is history and politics, and he is a friend of mankind and, as Plato would say, a friend of Gods.

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- Dewey, John and Evelyn Dewey. (c. 1925). *Scolile de maine*, translated by G. Simeon. This book is quite rare due, unfortunately, to the Communists' coming to power. Many libraries were burned, especially those with Western books, and many books of American philosophy, notably *Scolile de Maine*, were destroyed. Some people even burned their own books, afraid, much like those in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Also, "special libraries" were formed where books were deposited, never to be found again.
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## **John Dewey and the Idea of Experimentalism** by Peter S. Hlebowitsh, University of Iowa

Widely known as a philosopher of American democracy, John Dewey always possessed a strong interest in schooling. Philosophers historically have made their marks by writing their views on logic, ethics, religion, truth, aesthetics and even reality, but very few have exercised their analytical acumen on the topic of schooling. Dewey, however, could not escape the connection that schooling had to his philosophical views, especially in relation to the concept of democracy; he even directed his own laboratory school at the University of Chicago, a rare activity for a philosopher indeed! Dewey, it should be said, also had substantive things to say about the social currents of his time, including issues related to the suffragette movement, labor unions, birth control, world peace, social class tensions, and societal transformations in Mexico, China, and Russia (Dworkin, 1954). A complete collection of Dewey's works is contained in a thirty-seven-volume work edited by Jo Ann Boydston (1979).

In 1902, based on his work in his laboratory school, Dewey put forth what he believed to be the three crucial factors in the learning process: (1) the nature of the learner, (2) the values and aims of the society, and (3) the wider world of knowledge represented in the subject matter. This was his way of saying that all good teaching must be attuned to (1) the character of learners (their interests, problems, developmental nature), (2) the highest values of the society (democratic principles of cooperation, tolerance, critical mindedness, and political awareness), and (3) the reflective representation of the subject matter (the knowledge in the various disciplines that helps the teacher present material that resonates with both learner and society) (Dewey, 1902). These factors are not discrete, but work together as interrelated and complementary elements. Thus, the learner had to be seen in the context of the society, forcing a consideration of the needs and interests not just of the learner but also of the learner living in a democracy. Similarly, the choice of subject matter in the curriculum had to be made based on what was most worth knowing for a learner living in a democracy.

Dewey's ideas about the school curriculum can be cautiously classified as experimentalist-progressive (Tanner and Tanner, 1987). But how does experimentalism begin to represent a philosophy that identifies itself with democracy? And why the term "experimentalism," which seems to connote some strange association with specialized laboratory techniques? The answer to these questions starts with an understanding of what Dewey saw as the main basis of all education, which he described as that "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences" (1916, pp. 89–90). To understand experimentalism, one must understand this idea. To simplify matters, the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience" is really just a way of saying that one must learn from one's experience in a fashion that avoids repeating mistakes and that contributes to one's ability to make more informed decisions in the future. The implication is that learning is a process of experiential growth, always in the state of becoming and, if properly managed, improving, but never achieving completeness or finality. Such a view of experience, however, does not emerge idiosyncratically. Some method of thinking or a process of intelligence has to be used to help regulate it.

To Dewey, this method of intelligence could be found in the scientific method. The scientific method applied to learning in school has several advantages from the standpoint of an experimentalist. First, it holds all truth up to ongoing inspection, a principle running counter to the conservative belief in the eternal value and truths of the Western canon. The tentative nature of truth puts extra emphasis on the process of inquiry and the use of evidence and reasoned argumentation in decision-making. Second, the scientific method is designed to be responsive to the improvement of existing conditions. It is a problem-resolution method that tests new ideas in the interests of producing improvements. This makes it an elegant method for democracy because it poses problems as opportunities for new understanding and insight. Finally, a scientific method of thinking hones the very im-

portant skills of reflective thinking, a required condition for informed participation in a democratic society. Thus Dewey's insistence on seeing education as a "reconstruction of experience" could be seen as motivated by a desire to teach students a method of intelligence that gives them an effective handle on their personal and public lives. Inculcating students in the attitudes, habits of mind and methods of scientific inquiry could not only give students, as Dewey phrased it, "freedom from control by routine, prejudice, dogma, unexamined tradition, [and] sheer self-interest," but also "the will to inquire, to examine, to discriminate, to draw conclusions only on the basis of evidence after taking pains to gather all available evidence" (1938, p. 31).

The practical consequence of positioning the "reconstruction of experience" in the center of the school experience is a problem-focused curriculum that highlights the importance of inquiry-based learning. This obviously calls for a very different conception of subject matter than what one might witness in a more conservative philosophy. There is no single body of content that claims to have a warrant on intelligence among experimentalists. In fact, traditional subject matter lines are dissolved and are reconstituted topically, according to the problems and the purposes of the educational situation. Because life problems are not easily placed in disciplinary subjects, a premium is put on the interdisciplinary construction of subject matter. The cliché that "knowledge is power" has very definite meaning among experimentalists. The power is not in the contribution that knowledge makes to one's mind, but in its contribution to one's behavior. To know that the act of smoking, for instance, carries certain side effects that increase the odds of contracting serious illness can be interpreted as mindful knowledge (one could know it, but still smoke) or as knowledge that exists in the actions of life (one knows it and acts accordingly). The experimentalists stake their claim with the latter.

The focus on behavior is especially important, because as a philosophy of democracy, experimentalism ultimately judges the effects of schooling against some standard of betterment or progress in the life experience. This is a principle associated with the roots that experimentalism has in a broader philosophical tradition known as pragmatism. The pragmatist's prejudice is to affect the here and now, to look at life as a matter of present significance, and not as a matter that has some ultimate judgment at the pearly gates of heaven or some other transcendental place. This is a way of keeping focused on experience and on the kind of intelligent conduct that will produce the prize of progress. The whole child must be educated, not just his or her mind. The curriculum, as a result, is comprehensive in its ambition, is interdisciplinary in its overall organization, and is activity-based in its sense of experience. And because the school is the engine of democracy, considerable emphasis is placed on the value of the shared experience and the communion of values, outlooks and problems that helps to amalgamate the nation as a people of democracy. To Dewey, democracy was less a political concept than a moral one. Dewey, in this sense, became the chief voice for the values and morals of American pragmatism, a role that likely led George Herbert Mead to observe

that “in the profoundest sense John Dewey is the philosopher of America” (Morris, 1970, p. 8).

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## **Some Thoughts on John Dewey**

**by Daniel Tanner, Rutgers University**

“It should be a commonplace, but unfortunately it is not, that no education—or anything else for that matter—is progressive unless it is making progress.”

So wrote John Dewey in his last piece of published writing before his death on June 1, 1952 (Clapp, 1952). Dewey proceeded to review some of the successes of progressive education, but he also noted the lack of progress in many quarters, and the difficult road ahead for the democratic transformation of school and society.

### **Fallacies and Failures of Dualistic Thinking**

For Dewey, the progressive education movement, as part of the wider democratic social movement, can never rest as long as it is committed to the improvement of the human condition. Throughout his life, he exposed the contradictions and conflicts of dualistic thinking, which impeded the method of intelligence and prevented problem resolution and solution. He prophetically exposed the Soviet fallacy in holding that democratic ends would emerge from undemocratic means. He exposed the fallacy in the belief that restrictions on civil liberties are necessary to protect American democracy and that gains in social welfare are made at the expense of individuality. In the present-day wake of international terrorism, the American public is led to believe by its leaders that security can only be protected through sacrifices in civil freedoms. But Dewey made it clear that democracy is the best guarantor of freedom and security.

Dewey advanced the needed interdependence of knowledge and exposed the hazards of knowledge dualism—such as the divorce between the sciences and hu-