

# 1

## JOHN DEWEY

### A DEMOCRATIC NOTION OF LEARNING

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#### LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

experimentation; reflection; learner-centred pedagogy; democracy; active experience; habits

## 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), are closely aligned with the 'progressive education' movement which caused considerable interest and controversy at the time, but despite this interest his ideas were not adopted by American schools, his intended audience. However, the 'progressive education' movement enlightened UK educational philosophy in the 1960s, which was substantiated by the 1967 Plowden Report regarding the future of primary schooling. It is somewhat ironic that in the following decade teaching staff from English schools travelled to the USA to coach 'US teachers on the implementation of practices that had their source in the American philosopher's own educational writing' (Bridges, 2007: xi).

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). Moreover, the transformations he advocated for education were driven by his analysis of democracy as much as from his analysis of children (Olson, 2007). 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 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, along with his wife, an elementary-level Laboratory School to explore educational psychological ideas. His idea was to establish a shared learning environment where 'mechanical and repetitive drill methods of teaching would be replaced by learning through projects to do with real-life activity' (Thomas, 2013: 25). The school was fundamental in helping trainee teachers get ready for their future practice. His major writings while at the University of Chicago were *The School and Society* (1899), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902) and *How We Think* (1910) (published after he left Chicago). Dewey's last and longest academic post was at Columbia University, New York from 1904 until he finally retired in 1939 at the age of eighty (Apple and Teitelbaum, 2001). During his time at Columbia University his published works included *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) (Apple and Teitelbaum, 2001; Pring, 2007). Dewey passed away in 1952.

To understand Dewey's intellectual progress as a thinker, Finger and Asun succinctly itemise four major stages of his academic career:

His rural beginnings in pre-industrial Vermont and his philosophical and psychological studies at Johns Hopkins University where he gained his doctorate regarding Immanuel Kant's psychology.

This second stage, between 1889 and 1894, centred on 'organic democracy' focusing on religious and pre-industrial rural communities.

The third stage concerns his time in Chicago, between 1894 and 1904, where he absorbed himself in the academic field of social science. Dewey reflected upon his time at Chicago, and the previous two stages, to analyse how society worked.

The last stage relates to his research at Columbia University, where he drew upon previous experiences on education into an anthropological framework. Where education is not a technique or a pedagogical relationship; rather, it is a central function in the evolutive process of the human species.

(Finger and Asun, 2001: 30–1)

## 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). He called for a 'common school' which embraced and reproduced the similarities and differences found in the community. For Dewey the common school was a place where children from different religious faiths and social backgrounds could learn from each other in an environment of tolerance and understanding. A school should be a place where good society is nurtured and exemplified, where children could coalesce regardless of upbringing, culture, religious faith or capability – this, Dewey thought, was crucial for a democratic society. Indeed, Dewey's ideas about this afforded the substance 'for the dismantling of the selective system in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s and the introduction of the comprehensive schools' (Thomas, 2013: 49–51). However, the rise in the number of faith schools in England, along with the continued recourse to private education, seem to diminish Dewey's concept of the common school (Pring, 2007). Darling-Hammond contends that separate schools weaken Dewey's idea of democracy in keeping students apart because of religious and social backgrounds, 'by encouraging silence and separation where communication and connections are needed' (Darling-Hammond, 2010: 62).

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). For Dewey, habits were ways of making sense of things such as values, beliefs and views of the world at large. Particular habits are aligned with parallel environments. Habits transform them into actions. Dewey characterises between different sorts of habits:

... fixed, static, open and dynamic habits, which correspond to different types of cultures: the more open the culture, the more open and dynamic the habits. Open cultures enhance the capacity to learn from experience, and thus the potential to transform the environment according to human needs. Cultures with fixed habits prevent development and growth ... a more humanised environment means more freedom for individuals, thus a more open society. (Finger and Asun, 2001: 33–4)

Although 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 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). Dewey despaired at the way schools in the USA tried to function as businesses, and at the hierarchical manner in which they tried to resolve problems and create standard curricula. He contested the divisive way in which academic and vocational education were seen as separate entities, as well as the selection and separation of learners into different and streamed groups. He felt that learners should be listened to regarding the organisation of their learning, including curriculum content, methods of assessment, and resources to ensure they can make sense of their learning experience. Dewey would be despondent at the recent trend of reducing project and coursework in favour of submitting to more standard assessments of learning. As Pring states:

The 'high-stakes testing' that has enthralled the USA and England not only fails to reflect that struggle to understand, that engagement in inquiry and that making sense of experience, but also makes these impossible. It has become an end in itself, an instrument in accountability based on an impoverished idea of learning. (2007: 168)

Rather, the voices of the learners should be central to the choice of assessment methods and in creating curricula which reflect their experiences, interests and anxieties.

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 broad-spectrum interest in philosophy included Darwin's evolutionary theory: he felt that humans were a higher form of living beings who could grow and develop in environments which nurtured social collaboration and culture (Pring, 2007). Firstly, Dewey was influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant, who maintained that the purpose of education was not simply to prepare young people for 'roles allotted to them by the larger society but rather to help them become all that of which they are capable as persons' (Olson, 2007: 66). His underpinning philosophy was further influenced by Marx and Hegel – although he was later to denounce 'Marxism as "unscientific utopianism"' (Apple and Teitelbaum, 2001: 181). The link with Hegel, who championed the

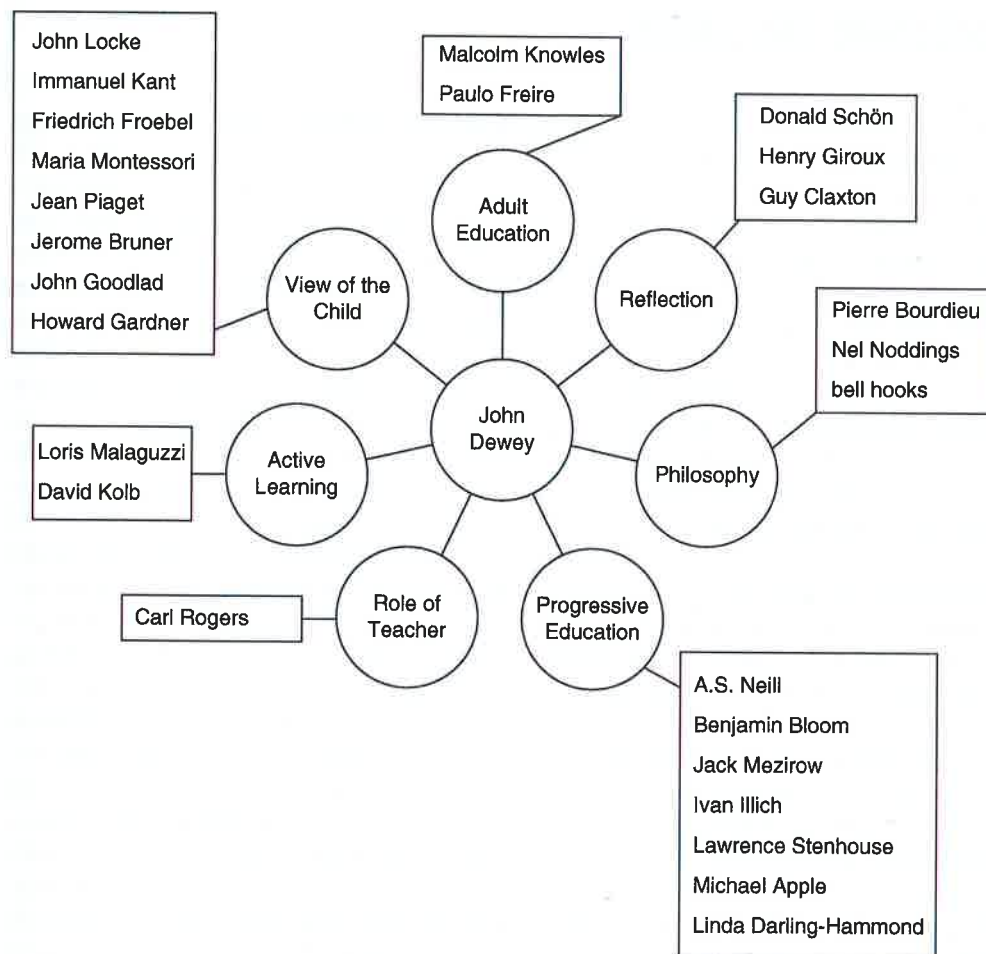
progressive concept of learners developing through creative and active experiences, is evident throughout much of Dewey's writing (Lawton and Gordon, 2002; Kegan, 2009). His more specific educational thoughts mirror those of John Locke from some two centuries earlier, as he advocated the notion of the child as a natural scientist as well as nurturing critical and independent thinking (Thomas, 2013). 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 adaption 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, Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner and, more recently, Guy Claxton 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, include a number of characteristics which are inherent in each of us and enhanced by experience. Benjamin Bloom's involvement in the 'Eight Year Study' which ran from 1934 and 1942 was similar to Dewey's laboratory school in that it also provided room for schools to act as laboratories. Dewey's work regarding classroom practice can be seen to have influenced Loris Malaguzzi and the principles involved in the Reggio Emilia school practice where children were encouraged to have a voice.

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). Along with Neill, Dewey's notions of democracy and the regimentation of schools are echoed by Jack Mezirow,



John Goodlad, Linda Darling-Hammond, bell hooks, Nel Noddings, Michael Apple and Ivan Illich (Aubrey and Riley, 2021). Henry Giroux also made comparable links between his notion of critical pedagogy 'with its insistence on critical deliberation, careful judgement, and civil courage' and Dewey's notion of democracy in education and society (Giroux, 2012: 8). Basil Bernstein's democratic rights of education also emphasise the need for inclusion, participation, community and civil practice among other rights. Furthermore, there are also strong connections with Lawrence Stenhouse's process curriculum model with its aim of empowering and emancipating learner and teacher alike by fostering critical reflection (Stenhouse, 1975).



**Figure 1.1** An overview of thinkers who have associations with Dewey's notion of a democratic education

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). See Figure 1.1 for an overview of thinkers who have associations with Dewey's notion of a democratic education to view the scope of connections, and the influence he has had on a range of educational thinkers.

## 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 and emphasis on the acquisition 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 has been 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 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). Finally, although Dewey produced a high volume of influential work, unfortunately the repetitious and leaden writing at times lacked clarity. Regrettably, this lack of clarity was also evident during his oral communications (Thomas, 2013).

## 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 center 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 center about which they are organized. (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 until 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, Schools 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'. It is understandable that such matters as children's compulsory attendance in school, and the need for teachers to comply with the set curriculum and assessment requirements, are seen as constraints in applying Dewey's ideas in the classroom. However, Goodson (2005), referring to Dewey's notion of pedagogy, argues that these limitations should not encourage the use of a transmission mode of teaching; rather, teachers should endeavour to adapt a learner-centred approach to their practice wherever possible.

In reality, subject-based facts and theories are fundamental to learning, especially in secondary and tertiary education and in the content-driven curriculum we see today. Nevertheless, as argued by Goodson above, 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 the planning and managing of 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 that 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. His 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). He believed that education should be embedded within

society and it should encourage students to become good and active citizens. This too links with his 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, 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. However, apart from the introduction of citizenship and the greater level of student influence in higher education, writing in 2012, Coffield and Williamson in their book *From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery: The democratic route* portray a different view of UK government intervention in education. For them the British political discourse about the position of education in bolstering democracy is very subdued, and is more focused on subjects which are perceived to advance economic gain. In their argument they refer to Dewey's philosophy:

An education defined by economic goals is not only wrong in its neglect of the arts and humanities, it is also dangerous for democracy. It is not that a liberal arts education makes good democrats; it is that a good critical education, which enables people to think for themselves and to debate with others, to respect them and to engage with political life of their societies and not merely their own local communities, is a necessary requirement of a healthy democracy. (Coffield and Williamson, 2012: 22)

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 of 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 the 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. As a summary to this section, Pring outlines four skills and qualities that teachers require in order to facilitate Dewey's philosophy:

First, the teacher has to know the child very well, the interests that engage his or her attention. ... Second, the teacher must be knowledgeable of the cultural inheritance (embodied formally in various subject matters) that illuminates and enriches those interests. Third, the teacher is able to link the two through the process of inquiry, helping to identify the problem, to formulate hypotheses, to suggest possible solutions and to test these out in experience. Fourth, the teacher is to coordinate such inquiry among those belonging to the community of young people, respecting the different ways in which the various interests interact and the subject matter is interpreted by these individuals. (2007: 124–5)

#### OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION: DEWEY'S IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Many of the points below are recognised as accepted, and are indeed good classroom practice. They are included in an attempt to be true to Dewey's practical ideas for a democratic education. The ideas are not exhaustive, neither should they be used as a checklist to be ticked – rather offered as thoughts for practical consideration, which perhaps you could add to from your experience. The overarching aim is to adopt a democratic and learner-centred approach to practice by considering the following:

- Know your children and plan the learning according to their interests and individual needs, so the child becomes the centre of the learning process.
- Promote active learning experience which involves discovery and, where appropriate, discovery play.
- Create and use resources which are in tune with, and acceptable to, learners.
- Seek opportunities to make cross-curriculum connections in the learning process.
- Use differentiation to engage all learners.
- Employ strategies which encourage learners to use reasoning to find things out for themselves.
- From the outset develop a positive and trusting learner-teacher relationship which fosters open and equal communication rather than use predominantly teacher talk.

(Continued)

- Encourage collaborative activities such as project work and problem-solving tasks which, where possible, involve more than one subject.
- Foster reflection and criticality to develop individual thought.
- Encourage participation in areas where learners can make changes to their studies and their environment. For school pupils this can include involvement in school councils. For college and university students this can take the form of being a student member of a committee which involves engaging with students from different programmes as well as academics; or extra-curricular such as the student union.

## 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. For Dewey democratic schools were places where children learnt and contributed together equally regardless of their religion, faith, culture or ability. 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 was very much influenced by the work of Immanuel Kant, along with the general philosophical ideas of Darwin, Marx and Hegel. He in turn influenced others, in particular Malcolm Knowles and the concept of andragogy in adult education. His ideas are in tune with other like-minded learner-centred educationalists who advocated active discovery learning, such as Froebel, Montessori, Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner. There are also associations with the humanists such as Rogers and A.S. Neill's approach to democracy at his Summerhill School. His ideas for democracy and his notion of challenging the curriculum and the school 'system' is particularly taken up by contemporary progressive thinkers, including Freire, Bernstein, Apple, Illich, Giroux and Stenhouse. As we have seen, 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. Although there are no Dewey-specific practical systems for classroom practice, his work offers considerable food for thought in developing social justice, and in creating democratic learning opportunities in classrooms, particularly in the present-day over-regulated schools.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### Active experience

Learning as an active process which involves the interests and experiences of the individual children rather than being restricted to single subject teaching sessions. In active experience teachers act as facilitators, enabling the learners to make connections between different experiences through socially interactive techniques such as discussions and debates which stimulate enquiry and discovery.

### Democracy

For Dewey, democracy in society and democracy in education were naturally connected. Giving children choices in how and what they learned, which reflected their interests and experiences, helped prepare them to become inquisitive and critically active members of a democratic society.

### Experimentation

A scientific, reflective and interactive approach whereby children learn by discovery and enquiry to make sense of their worlds rather than being docile receivers of information. The children then become active contributors in a social and cooperative learning environment.

### Habits

Habits are a way of making sense of things, for example values, beliefs and the way people view the world. Specific habits are aligned with their parallel environments, and ultimately translate into actions. Habits can be fixed, static, open and dynamic. The more open the culture the more open and dynamic the habits. However, cultures with fixed habits inhibit development and growth (Finger and Asun, 2001).

### Learner-centred pedagogy

Teachers empower children to explore their interests and experiences in depth as part of their learning process. In doing so, the teacher facilitates the learner to follow their curiosity and enthusiasm so that they can develop intellectually and as a whole person.

### Reflection

Dewey felt the use of meaningful reflection was an important acquisition for both teachers and learners alike, that reflection was more than 'learning by doing'; it was a deeper phenomenon based upon observation and deliberation from experience. Reflection is closely aligned with experimentation as they both combine to make learning forward-looking and can be used to solve problems, particularly in times of uncertainty.

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