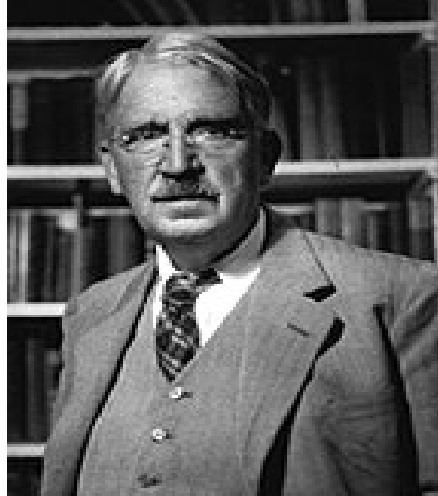


# John Dewey



**John Dewey 1859-1952**

**John Dewey, who was to become one of the most powerful influences on educational thought in the 20th Century, was born in the town of Burlington, Vermont, in 1859. His father was proprietor of the local general store where, apparently, locals would foregather from time to time to discuss, with equal interest, affairs of both state and locality. According to one apocryphal story the store window carried the legend:**

**Hams and cigars: smoked and unsmoked.**

**The intimate small-town ethos of 19th century Burlington played a large part in forming Dewey's educational outlook in two ways: one negative, one positive. On the negative side he was convinced at a very early stage that the traditional, formal, desk-bound approach to schooling which was typified by the small town and rural schools of his childhood was futile. This kind of schooling was inadequate for the growing USA: a new society being born out of a simple agricultural economy which was being transformed by unprecedented industrialisation, immigration, rapid population growth, and drastic social change.**

**(The old education) was predominantly static in subject matter, authoritarian in methods, and mainly passive and receptive from the side of the young. ... the imagination of educators did not go beyond provision of a fixed and rigid environment of subject matter, one drawn moreover from sources altogether too remote from the experience of the pupil.**

**On the positive side Dewey was convinced that the ordinary contacts of day to day community life, be they social, economic, cultural or political, provided real and significant learning situations. For Dewey politics was not just a matter of national importance removed from the concern of the ordinary citizen but a matter of vital and immediate interest to the community. He believed that the school should prepare the child for active participation in the life of the community: he believed that education must break down, rather than reinforce, the gap between the experience of schooling and the needs of a truly participatory democracy:**

**The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends.... education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.**

**Dewey graduated from the university of Vermont in 1879. After a period spent teaching high school he went to John's Hopkins University where he gained his Ph.D. degree in 1884. By his middle thirties he was Head of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago. It was here, in 1896, that Dewey established his famous 'laboratory school' .**

**Dewey's laboratory school was not intended to implement a structured pedagogical plan. It was intended as a laboratory in two senses: *firstly* it was intended to facilitate research and experimentation into new principles and methods and *secondly*, it was designed to allow the children to take an experimental approach to their own learning.**

**The laboratory school was to be the testing ground for Dewey's philosophical ideas and their implementation:**

**education is the laboratory in which philosophical distinctions become concrete and are tested. ... If we are willing to conceive of education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education.**

**The furniture of the traditional school tells the story of traditional education; it is a story of submission, immobility, passivity and dependency.**

**Just as the biologist can take a bone or two and reconstruct the whole animal, so, if we put before the mind's eye the ordinary school room, with its rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper, and add a table, some chairs, the bare walls, and possibly a few pictures, we can reconstruct the only educational activity that can possibly go on in such a place. It is made for listening - because simply studying lessons out of a book is only another kind of listening; it marks the dependency of one mind upon another ... it**

means, comparatively speaking, passivity ...

**Dewey's approach was not a matter of whim or of arbitrary convictions about school design but a central feature of his philosophy. He wanted the laboratory school to provide learners with the opportunity to create their own experience; to experiment, to enquire, to create. He wanted a classroom where children could move about, form groups, plan and execute activities, in short, learn for themselves under the direction and guidance of the teacher.**

**A society of free individuals in which all, through their own work, contribute to the liberation and enrichment of the lives of others, is the only environment in which any individual can really grow normally to his full stature.**

**In the old system it was the function of teachers to motivate the child - against his/her immediate interests - to learn the established subjects:**

**I know of no more demoralising doctrine than the assertion that after subject matter has been selected, *then* the teacher should make it interesting.**

**In Dewey's pedagogy the teacher has two main functions. The teacher must guide the young through the complexities of life and give them opportunities to learn in the natural way, that is, by solving relevant problems. The teacher must also enable the young to cope adequately with contemporary conditions and to cope with the new tasks which an unpredictable future will bring.**

**The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences. ... the teacher's business is simply to determine, on the basis of larger experience and riper wisdom, how the discipline of life shall come to the child.**

**The old model of education placed a premium on assignments, on private, isolated study, and on recitation. The mission of the laboratory school was to find more effective ways of learning and teaching, to find ways of breaking down barriers between schools and their local communities and to find subject matter which would break the hold of traditional rote learning and symbol interpretation:**

**The old, subject centred system subdivides each topic into studies; each study into lessons; each lesson into specific facts and formulae. ... emphasis is put on the upon the logical subdivisions and consecutions of the subject matter ... subject matter furnishes the end and it determines method. The child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his is narrow experience which is to be widened. It is his to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile.**

**This approach to schooling sets the pupils' experience at nought against the accumulated knowledge of the race: the pupil is made into a passive receptacle whose only function is to receive the structured subject matter which scholars have codified.**

**The studies as classified are the product, in a word, of the science of the ages, not of the experience of the child ... we violate the child's nature and render difficult the best ethical results by introducing the child too abruptly to a number of special studies, of reading, writing, geography, etc., out of relation to this social life.**

**By contrast to the traditional approach Dewey put the pupil at the centre of education as a wilful, purposive and active agent in the learning process.**

**The child is the starting point, the centre, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. ... To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character, is more than subject matter. Not knowledge or information, but self-realisation, is the goal. To possess all the world of knowledge and lose one's own self is as awful a fate in education as in religion.**

**The laboratory school operated on three simple principles which informed Dewey's educational philosophy:**

**The first principle was that the business of the school is to train children in co-operative and mutually helpful living - to help them to grow into community:**

**the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.**

**The second principle was that the foundation of all educative activity must be in the instinctive, impulsive activities of the child, and not in the presentation and application of structured, external material.**

**The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education. ... It is the child and not the subject matter which determines both quantity and quality of learning.**

**This learning is rooted in the community. The individual and society cannot be considered in isolation one from the other:**

**The individual who is to be educated is a social individual, and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left**

**only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert mass.**

**Finally the laboratory school promoted the child's *individual* tendencies and activities. These were to be organised and directed to promote the idea of co-operative living. The learning process would take advantage of the child's individual tendencies and activities to reproduce on the child's plane the typical doings and occupations of the larger, maturer society into which the child is finally to emerge.**

**To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community. ... education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction.**

**In 1904 Dewey was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and it was from this base that he articulated and spread the educational ideas which he had developed at the Chicago laboratory school. They were to make him the most famous and influential educator of the 20th century. He wrote, lectured and travelled extensively. On his retirement in 1930 he became Emeritus Professor at Columbia. It is one of the difficulties that Dewey presents to anyone who would present a short précis of his career that he lived to the age of 93: active to the end - he married for the second time and started a second family at the age of 87.**

**Although education may be, or should be, practical it is not the practicality of a narrowly vocational preparation:**

**It is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgement may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.**

**A central concept in Dewey's philosophy of education, and to this day perhaps the most controversial, is his concept of growth. Dewey does not accept what are called 'teleological' explanations of human effort. These are explanations which place the significance of human effort in the distant future. They attempt to explain present events by future ones: such as the eventual dictatorship of the proletariat, the eventual attainment of the beatific vision, or whatever. In all cases they invoke some future perfection both to explain what we *are* doing now and to stipulate what we *should* be doing now. Teleological explanations are especially favoured by educational theorists: from a definition of some manner of idealised future you can determine what we should be teaching our children in the present. Dewey rejects teleological explanations. He prefers an evolutionary account of human activity which freely acknowledges**

our ignorance of the future.

**In Dewey's account education is *not* a preparation for some idealised future. It is simply growth: the continuing reconstruction of our experience. It is not determined by any outside or independent aim or end.**

**Progress (in education) is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience. ... education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing. To set up any end outside of education, as furnishing its goal and standard, is to deprive the educational process of much of its meaning, and tends to make us rely on false and external stimuli in dealing with the child.**

**This is difficult for traditional educators to accept because they have always looked for the purpose and significance of education *outside* of the educational process itself. But the growth of which Dewey speaks is not growth towards some predetermined and externally imposed ideal or end:**

**There is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth; there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education. The educational process has no end beyond itself - it is its own end.**

**There is no limit, in principle, to the possibilities of change, development and evolution - we simply do not know what the future holds.**

**The child's relation to the curriculum is not the subordination of the child to the existing established knowledge, nor is it the abandonment of established existing knowledge for an anarchic child centred approach.**

**The young child is not conscious of subject barriers; he views knowledge as a key to life and his questions concerning the world around him range over the whole field of knowledge. The curriculum should reflect this attitude of the child and be seen more as an integral whole rather than as a logical structure containing conveniently differentiated parts.**

**But later the child must come to learn the ways in which human knowledge has been structured into subjects or disciplines. But this is not the starting point - it is a development on the journey.**

**There must first be something in the child's experience which requires or demands this or that symbol, this or that discipline, this or that subject *before* these mean anything to the child. The child's use of language, for instance, must spring from the child's own experience - whether this be actual or imaginative.**

**[T]he child's life is an integral, total one. He passes quickly and readily from one topic to another, as from one spot to another, but is not conscious of transition or break. There is no conscious isolation, hardly conscious distinction. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along. Whatever is uppermost in his mind constitutes to him, for the time being, the whole universe. That universe is fluid and fluent; its contents dissolve and reform with amazing rapidity. But, after all, it is the child's own world. It has the unity and completeness of his own life.**

**The child's education, the child's growth, is a gradual differentiation of this organic experience into what is represented by the traditional categories of knowledge such as geography, history, mathematics, literature etc.**

**[T]he child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organised bodies of truth that we call studies... To oppose one to the other is to oppose the infancy and maturity of the same growing life .. it is to hold that the nature and destiny of the child war with each other.**

**As well as growing up the child grows *out into* the world mediated by structured human knowledge.**

**Dewey's pragmatist philosophy stresses the priority of experience over theory. We learn to think and reason by thinking and reasoning, by tackling real problems which arise in our experience. When we think, we become conscious of a problem or obstacle to our development; we analyse the situation; we identify possible solutions; we compare the implications of the different solutions and select the best course of action; we implement this in practice.**

**Dewey's philosophy is about dealing with problems which arise out of real situations. It aims at control. It stresses that solutions to problems are tentative and to be judged by their usefulness. Its method is the method of science. It aims at the control of the environment and improvement of the environment by creative and reflective thought. The educational manifestation of scientific method is the project method associated with Dewey and his close follower William H. Kilpatrick.**

**The project method certainly does *not* mean the transcription of 'information' from encyclopaedias and other sources of second-hand information, accompanied by illustrations to be hung on the classroom wall to impress important visitors. The principal value of a project is the experience of doing it, not the end result. In more general terms the practical importance of the result of thinking is subsidiary to the *process* of thinking.**

**The control and direction of inquiry is central in Dewey's theory of education. Knowledge**

**begins in doing, it is active. It is in the course of putting ideas to the test of experience that growth occurs. Dewey requires that pupils be given wide opportunities for purposive inquiry. This is as seen in the project method. The pupil learns only by thinking about problems and trying to solve them for himself:**

**If he cannot devise his own solution (not of course in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and the other pupils) and find his own way out he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct answer with one hundred per cent accuracy.**

**It is like the difference between studying a map and making a journey: while the map is a useful guide for the traveller it is not a substitute for the experience of travelling.**

**[Inquiry is] the controlled or directed transformation of an intermediate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.**

**That is to say that solving a problem is making an incoherent situation coherent and integrated. When we solve a problem we take a selection of apparently incompatible experiences and transform them into a unified whole - this unified whole is the solution to the problem.**

**The value of any fact or theory as bearing on human activity is, in the long run, determined by practical application - that is by using it for accomplishing some definite purpose. If it works well - if it removes friction, frees activity, economises effort, makes for richer results - it is valuable as contributing to a perfect adjustment of means to end. If it makes no such contribution it is practically useless, no matter what claims may be theoretically urged on its behalf.**

**Dewey is sometimes associated with the worst excesses of so-called 'progressive' education: a do-as-you-please approach - which it must be said exists more often in people's fearful imaginations than in actual classrooms. He was, however, forced to distance himself on a number of occasions from those who claimed to be his disciples. Referring to the misapplication of the project method he wrote:**

**Some teachers seem to be afraid even to make suggestions to members of a group as to what they should do. I have heard of cases in which children are surrounded with objects and materials and then left entirely to themselves, the teacher being loath to suggest even what might be done with the materials lest freedom be infringed upon. Why, then, supply materials?**

**Dewey's contribution to the development of education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been incalculable if not without its controversies. His greatest contribution has been to liberate the education of children from the dead hand of tradition and from what he himself has called the 'static cold-storage ideal of knowledge'. He forged a theory and practice of education which can be relevant to contemporary industrial and social progress without becoming the slave of either.**

---

© Frank M. Flanagan 1994

**This paper formed Programme 7 of 'The Great Educators', First Series, which was broadcast on May 9, 1994, RTE, Radio 1. A repeat broadcast of the programme took place on March 13, 1995.**

**Other Programmes in the 'The Great Educators', First Series were: *Socrates* (broadcast: March 28, 1994, RTE Radio 1; Repeat: January 30, 1995); *Jesus* (broadcast: April 4, 1994, RTE Radio 1; repeated, February 6, 1995); *Comenius* (broadcast: April 11, RTE, Radio 1; repeated, February 13, 1995); *Rousseau* (broadcast: April 18, RTE, Radio 1; repeated, February 20, 1995); *Froebel* (broadcast: April 25, RTE, Radio 1; repeated, February 27, 1995); *Montessori* (broadcast: May 2, 1994, RTE, Radio 1; Repeat, March 6, 1995); *Pearse* (broadcast: May 16, 1994, RTE, Radio 1; Repeat: March 20, 1995).**

**Frank M. Flanagan is a member of the Education Department, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.**

**[Mail to: Frank Flanagan](mailto:Frank.Flanagan@ul.ie)**

---

**[Return to Minerva \(Volume 1\) Main Page](#) [Return to List of Papers](#) [Go to Top of This Page](#)**