

Education and the Reconstruction of a Democratic Society: Two Main Themes in Dewey's Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

Education and the reconstruction of a democratic society are two themes about which Dewey was especially concerned throughout his life. On the one hand, Dewey regarded education as growth, emphasizing that the end of education is nothing but itself. Dewey received a barrage of criticism for this, as some people saw it as a theory advocating the aimlessness of education. On the other hand, the growth in Dewey's theory is more than the growth of the individual: it also involves thinking from a social perspective, and thus is democracy-oriented growth. However, Robert B. Westbrook and Aaron Schutz point out that Dewey's method of starting with local communities to develop a Great Community has its problems, and his proposal to transform society through schools also faces enormous difficulties. This paper firstly clarifies Dewey's concept of growth. Then, it discusses the relationships among growth, education, and democracy in Dewey's thoughts. Finally, it analyzes the problems that existed during the development of a democratic society and argues for Dewey's ideal of a Great Community, which has been questioned.

Keywords

John Dewey – growth – experience – community – democracy

Education and the reconstruction of a democratic society are two key themes on which John Dewey focused. On the one hand, Dewey equated education with growth, believing that education is aimed at pursuing continuous growth. He defined the concept of growth by analyzing both the conditions that growth should meet and the relationship between experience and growth. For Dewey, growth was merely the reorganization and transformation of educational experience. On the other hand, Dewey proposed a unique perspective on democracy, that is, democracy as a way of life, and thus as a means of unifying communities. As Dewey's views of democracy and its relationship with growth and education revealed, growth is democracy-oriented, and education aims to imbue citizens with democratic ideals. The realization of democratic ideals is inseparable from the improvement of the citizens' intelligence, which entails education. As Robert B. Westbrook and Aaron Schutz (2001) point out, Dewey's method of developing a Great Community from local communities is problematic, and his social transformation by means of education also faces huge difficulties. In his later years, Dewey abandoned his effort to transform society through schools alone, and was more inclined to pursue his democratic ideal through social activities. By emphasizing the importance of "home education," this paper provides better connections between Dewey's school education and the transformation of democratic society, and between his local communities and the Great Community, in an attempt to overcome the difficulties Dewey faced.

1

Dewey maintained that a living organism obtained energy through its interactions with its surroundings, which constituted the process of life. However, the continuation of a species does not depend on a single organism, but on the reproduction of the species as a whole, one generation after another. During this process, individuals who cannot adapt to their surroundings will gradually decline and eventually become extinct, while new forms of life that can better acclimatize to their surroundings will emerge. Dewey used the word *life* to denote the entire range of experiences, both individual and in groups. Life, or experience, merely means to continue oneself through constant renewal. Therefore, the continuation of humans as a species refers to continuation not only in a biological sense, but also in some cultural sense. Thus, the continuation of humankind depends not only on procreation, but also on the communication and transmission of experiences within a group. The process of this communication and transmission within a group is the process of education. Therefore, education is a necessary outcome of human life.

As Dewey (1980) pointed out, the process of education is the process of the reorganization and reconstruction of experiences, that is, growth. Education is merely life, and the process of education is no more than the process of life. In this sense, there is no end beyond the process of education, and the end of education lies in education itself. Further, we accept education simply to develop the ability to accept further education.

It should be noted that Dewey's abovementioned philosophy was first recognized by Chinese scholars prior to the 1940s. For example, in 1934, Liang Shuming (2005, p. 685) pointed out that "Dewey's scholarship is linked up," and believed that the reason why Dewey's scholarship appeared to be so coherent was that although he is talking about "education", "society", "livelihood" and so on which in our view irrelevant concepts, but in fact is talking about the same thing: "life".

Dewey believed that growth was primarily based on the immature state of individuals. Immaturity has a positive aspect, in that it endows an individual with capacity and potentiality, "expressing a force positively present – the ability to develop" (1980, p. 46). For Dewey, immaturity was absolute, that is, both infants and adults were in this state. Meanwhile, in line with the continuous state of immaturity, growth was also seen as endless. Furthermore, the state of immaturity had two characteristics: dependence and plasticity. First, Dewey (1980, p. 49) pointed out that "From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence." Man is different from other animals; man's instinct develops slowly, which forces man to make up for the insufficiency of his inborn ability and maintain his own survival through exchanges with his social surroundings. Growth is accompanied by this positive form of dependence. As for plasticity, Dewey (1980, p. 49) pointed out that "It is essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation." Man can increase the meaning of an experience and fulfill the reorganization and reconstruction of experiences only when he is equipped with plasticity, for "plasticity is the capacity to retain and carry over from prior experience factors which modify subsequent activities. This signifies the capacity to acquire habits, or develop definite dispositions" (Dewey, 1980, p. 51). The most obvious outcome of the existence of plasticity is the development of various habits, and the subsequent adjustment to and of one's surroundings through these habits.

The next question to be considered is, given that growth is the reorganization and reconstruction of experiences, how do we determine which among the great variety of experiences we are subject to deserve our attention? Dewey believed that education should involve experience or experiments. Experience is closely related to Dewey's philosophy of education. Contrary to modern

philosophers, who discuss experience in the domain of epistemology, Dewey viewed experience through the lens of existentialism. He held that the development of biology had changed the philosophy of cognition which dominated by perceptions, to the philosophy of experience emphasizing life and activities, and pointed out that experience is “an affair primarily of doing.” (Dewey, 1982, p. 129). Dewey agreed with William James’s interpretation of experience, suggesting that “it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality” (Dewey, 1981, p. 129). However, Dewey went even further by discriminating between two kinds of experience, that is, primary experience and secondary or reflective experience. The former is both the starting point and the end point of empirical naturalism. The objects of study in both philosophy and the sciences mainly belong to the category of reflective experience, and are full of the sense of experience. In Dewey’s view, experience (especially reflective experience) is characterized by interaction and continuance. With respect to interaction, Dewey (1982, p. 129) explained that “The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence, the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities.” Thus, experience is an outcome combining positive doing or attempting and passive suffering or undergoing. One can have an experience only by consciously relating an activity to the outcome of that activity. Therefore, “The standard to evaluate the value of experience depends on the relations and continuity caused by the experience” (Li, 2012, p. 65). Dewey (1988, p. 19) summarized the concept of continuity, stating that “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.” Contrary to traditional empiricists, who believed that experience was merely the acceptance and recording of perceptions, Dewey argued that the primary function of experience was its guidance of practice. The primary tendency of an organism is, through activities, to acclimatize to or transform its surroundings so as to enable its own development. Experience is based on the past, represented in the present, and oriented toward future.

Growth is the reorganization and reconstruction of experiences. However, this proposition is obviously not relevant to all experiences. As Hildreth (2011, p. 34) pointed out, the concept of experience referred to by Dewey can be divided into three types: non-educational experience, mis-educational experience, and educational experience. Specifically, non-educational experience is merely unreflective experience, that is, the primary experience referred to by Dewey. Mis-educational experience can be further subdivided into two kinds: one is practice, which involves little thinking, while the other must be analyzed

together with educational experience. First, continuity needs to be further defined. Dewey (1988, p. 19) stated that “It is when we note the different forms in which continuity of experience operates that we get the basis of discriminating among experiences.” In other words, the experience that an infant obtains at a particular point can enable him to gain more experience later, and offers him the opportunity to obtain experience in new directions, for the concept of growth must have universal applicability, rather than targeting a particular domain. Second, Dewey emphatically pointed out that interaction endowed the objective and internal conditions necessary for experience with equal importance. The combination of conditions in these two aspects resulted in a situation whereby experience was enabled. Thus, an educator should, in the light of his or her own experiences, determine the directions in which the present experience of an infant could lead and proactively create an environment that could either accommodate or trigger the curiosity of the child, while enabling the child to gain more valuable experience in the future. Thus, only experience that satisfies the strict rules of continuity can be viewed as educational experience. Interaction provides a guiding principle for the activities of educators, while it also appears as a characteristic of experience. Therefore, growth is the reorganization and reconstruction of educational experiences, that is, an organism enables the benign and continuous development of experience during the process of interaction with its surroundings.

2

Many people have misunderstood Dewey’s concept of growth, thinking that Dewey only cared about individuals while ignoring groups, and that he advocated an individualist view of education. Dewey did believe that education should devote itself to the reorganization and reconstruction of individual experiences, maintaining that this would enable everyone to attain the capability of studying continuously. However, this does not mean that Dewey did not care about the social dimension of education. As David Cohen (1988, p. 427) stated, many people thought that Dewey’s view of education was “child-centered,” but what Dewey aimed to achieve through the education of children was social, political, and cultural renewal. Therefore, Dewey stated emphatically that education should be oriented toward society.

James Campbell (2010, p. 24) noted that Dewey saw human individuals as inherently social creatures for whom a sense of community was natural. Again, for Dewey, communities were essential: we needed to form groups to become human. In Dewey’s view, an individual lived in a relationship with others first:

“Apart from associations with one another, individuals are isolated from one another and fade and wither; or are opposed to one another and their conflicts injure individual development” (Dewey, 1982, p. 187). One individual is connected with another, which constitutes a social group or community. Dewey believed that a good social form certainly pointed toward a democratic society, and proposed a unique way of looking at a democracy: “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of joint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1980, p. 93). Therefore, “Democracy should be a social democracy, it should be integrated into one’s personality, and become a way of life. That is to say, the democracy claimed by Dewey is a participatory democracy that is linked with daily life” (Tu & Hu, 2011, p. 28).

In short, a democratic society has two major characteristics. First, it has internality and homogeneity, that is, it advocates the sharing of common interests and experiences as abundantly and pluralistically as possible, and depends on this to maintain social control. Second, it has externality and heterogeneity, in other words, a member of the community should have as many exchanges as possible with others to enable the community to maintain an open attitude (Dewey, 1980, p. 89). Dewey maintained that a democratic society was one in which every member participated in activities that benefited others, and that everyone should refer to the activities of other members of the community when acting, aware of the results that his own action might yield, making his action meaningful for the life of the community, and reasonable in the context of the overall direction of the community. “One of the ideals of Dewey’s political philosophy is to seek and build the Great Community, and the democratic community is the ideal form of the human community” (Zhang M. & Zhang L., 2011, p. 72). A point that deserves noting is that a community does not have to adhere to monotonous conformity, even though a democratic community suggests shared interests or common objectives to a certain extent, because such conformity can only be regarded as collectivism. A democratic society allows for the existence of a pluralistic view, and enables people to maintain their individuality. Dewey reminded us of the value of differences, or the other way round it would case continuous losses.

Education is necessary for any community that wants to continue, and therefore it cannot separate from certain processes of society. Dewey reiterated that education, especially school education, could not adopt the position of an onlooker, remaining detached from society and only providing a service in terms of knowledge transfer. Instead, it should apply itself to the development and transmission of a democratic way of life and to the rediscovery of democratic forms. Education should be oriented toward democracy and guided by the democratic way of life to produce democratic citizens. As Dewey

clearly asserted, “unless education has some frame of reference it is bound to be aimless, lacking a unified objective. The necessity for a frame of reference must be admitted. There exists in this country such a unified frame. It is called democracy” (Dewey, 1987, 415). A democratic society can stimulate everyone in an open and pluralistic way to maximize their capabilities, extending their experience as many directions as possible. Directing education through the framework of democracy can help to fulfill the purpose of education, that is, to maximize growth. As Dewey pointed out, it is necessary for each participant in democratic life to constantly rediscover what democracy as a way of life is like: “The trouble, at least one great trouble, is that we have taken democracy for granted: we have thought and acted as if our forefathers had founded it once and for all. We have forgotten that it has to be enacted anew in every generation, every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions” (Dewey, 1987, p. 416). We often claim that “The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact” (Dewey, 1980, p. 93). That is because the constant discovery of the particular meaning and form of a democratic way of life requires the participation of every individual in the educational process.

In his work *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey pointed out that given the great volume and complexity of social affairs, the public¹ gradually come to be ignored, remaining in a state of obfuscation and unconsciousness. In brief, formerly small communities have turned into a great society, and previous patterns of association between individuals have been dismantled, but no new form has yet come into being, and the Great Community that Dewey envisaged is still not evident. In Dewey’s philosophy, a Great Community is a democratic community consisting of local communities of varying sizes and shapes. Dewey believed that the construction of the Great Community entailed the transmission of knowledge about the social sciences, and required the improvement of the intellectual level of the citizens. In Dewey’s view, each member of a community should participate in democratic activities by means of intellectual (scientific) exploration to guarantee the development of democracy in a favorable direction.

Dewey (1984, p. 116) stressed that intellectual inquiries are scientific inquiries, and that such a form of inquiry requires trust in the process of experience, the “faithfulness to whatever is discovered and steadfastness in adhering to new truth.” This methodology reminds us that although the world is constantly

1 People indirectly influenced by personal activities result in the public. When they realize the indirect influence that they receive and thus consciously unite themselves, they found the State, which is just the politically organized public.

changing, we still need to believe that the experience gained in the process of our interactions with the world is full of connections, and can be used to direct practical activities. In Dewey's opinion, the method of intellectual inquiry had been fully utilized in the field of sciences and obtained good results, and the social conditions necessary for intellectual inquiry to be universally applied in the social domain had been achieved.

With the abovementioned philosophy as a prerequisite, Dewey redefined the meaning of intellectual inquiry, holding that it was an experimental method that considered social issues in terms of both means and results. It was also a method of cooperation and communication that aimed to publicize various views and interests, and solve problems through mutual understanding and discussion. Democracy implies a way of life within a community, as well as an intellectual approach to inquiry. Therefore, to enhance each person's capacity for intellectual inquiry through education is simply to develop democratic citizens.

3

Dewey argued that democracy as a community lifestyle had no unchangeable forms or essential meanings. Democracy has a variety of forms, which vary in accordance with specific situations and historical stages. Therefore, Dewey did not predict an ideal form of democracy, discuss specific issues in relation to democratic practice, or propose any particular method for the realization of the Great Community. Rather, he simply described some vague characteristics, for example, the Great Community had a variety of free forms, was vigorous, flexible, and stable, local communities were no longer isolated, and the community would provide endless and constantly changing meaning (Dewey, 1984, p. 370).²

In this regard, Robert B. Westbrook maintains that Dewey deviated from his own principles, failing to turn the fulfillment of the Great Community into a "working end." The so-called working end is not just imagination or ideal;

2 Generally speaking, philosophers in China have discussed in detail the philosophical significance of John Dewey's idea of community and its role in the revival of Dewey's thoughts since the end of the twentieth century. See Yang, Shoukan and Wang, Chengbing (2014), *Pragmatism's Trip in China*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp. 231–234, Wang, Chengbing (2010), *On John Dewey's View of Community and the Contemporary Significance of Dewey's Philosophy*, *Man and Ideas*, 22(12), pp. 111–129, and Wang, Chengbing (2002), *How to Understand the Revival of John Dewey's Pragmatism*, *Academic Forum*, 25(12), pp. 23–27.

instead allows actors to study the conditions of action and to give the ideal something that is fulfilled by reality. In Westbrook's view, Dewey's ideal of the Great Community is similar to the too distant end that he himself had criticized for being unable to guide our actions. Dewey did not describe what the Great Community would be like once it was achieved, nor did he specify how the Great Community was to be achieved. Therefore, Westbrook (1980, p. 239) argued that Dewey's theory of democracy was problematic in that it separated democratic ends from democratic means. Meanwhile, Dewey opposed the faith of a transcendent ideal in the religious sense, but claimed that the faith should be a revisable tendency to action. The latter is the faith in experience itself. In Dewey's theoretical framework, democracy is based on experience, and he embraced the conviction in experience, therefore, democracy gained its legitimacy. However, the theory of democracy needs to be tested in practice to verify whether it is leading us in the right direction. At this point, Westbrook holds that Dewey's conviction in democracy is merely the transcendent faith in the religious sense that he had rejected because he ignored the various historical failures in the practice of his theory of democracy (for example, the Port Huron Statement and the New Left movement), as well as the failures of his own practices (for instance, the League for Independent Political Action and the founding of a Third Party), but persisted with his belief in the form of democracy that he had advocated. Thus, Westbrook came to believe that Dewey's work on democracy did not rely on the positive existence and growth of a democratic community.

In this regard, we propose a different view. As Michael Eldridge has pointed out, Westbrook's opinion regarding Dewey's theory of democracy is tilted too far toward the political realm, possibly because of Dewey's political activities. However, the political dimension was not central to Dewey's view of democracy. Moreover, Eldridge argues that if the concept of a democratic community includes elements such as society, the church, and the neighborhood, Westbrook went too far in asserting that the community was near death. Eldridge (1996, p. 20) points out that Dewey's faith is the action depending a modifiable tendency. This refers to his belief in experience, that is, that all theories, views, and convictions need to be put into practice through actions and tested in the world of experience, and then revised to guide the activities that follow. The so-called truth or falsity, the good or bad of democracy, depends upon the outcomes of social actions. Dewey (1987, p. 61) was not an absolutist in political terms; he did not oppose particular forms of representative government, and even admitted that under certain conditions, the force can be intelligently employed. Dewey believed that in the practice of democracy, one must follow a scientific pattern of inquiry and make corresponding decisions

during different stages, but the most important thing was that the decision had to be based on the interests of the community and on open communication (Eldridge, 1996, pp. 22–27). Therefore, as Campbell pointed out, Dewey's theory is "*melioristic, not optimistic ... His assumption is not a belief in the eventual triumph of reason in history, but in the worthwhileness of efforts to try to advance the common good*" (Campbell, 2010, p. 261). Therefore, democracy is a way "which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; ... which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past ... the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (Dewey, 1988, pp. 229–230).

Here, we return to the issue of democratic practices. In his work *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey identified two prerequisites for the fulfillment of the Great Community, that is, the popularization of social inquiry and local communities. Regarding the former, Dewey pointed out that research should not be confined within academic institutions, but instead should be combined with popular media, turning the results of the specialist academic researchers into tools for each actor's intellectual inquiry. However, as Westbrook (1980, p. 301) pointed out, and Dewey also admitted, there were significant difficulties in disseminating professional knowledge through the popular media. Westbrook (1980, p. 510) noted that Dewey set rigorous conditions for the public's process of discovering themselves, and thus shaping the Great Community: "in laying out the 'infinitely difficult' conditions for the emergence of the Great Community and offering little guidance for overcoming them, he [Dewey] inadvertently and ironically made almost as good a case as Lippmann had that the phantom public would not materialize."

The second prerequisite that Dewey advanced was the construction of the Great Community by starting with local communities. However, Aaron Schutz (2001, p. 302) holds that "the most fundamental problem with Dewey's idea of the Great Community is that it was essentially derived from experiences of interaction in small, face-to-face, local communities." Within a local community, everyone is acquainted with each other, and the experience is so lively that it provides the best environment for intellectual inquiry and democratic life. However, when life extends from a local community to the Great Community, things change. It is not so much a problem of how to improve the accuracy of communication and the speed of transmission, but one of the extent of communication. In this case, more communication may make things worse.

In relation to education, a school is also a local community, and some educators who have been deeply influenced by Dewey still follow the path he advocated for teaching in schools by encouraging students to acquire the habits of communication and collaboration. However, as Schutz (2001, p. 312) pointed out, this form of cooperation is not popular in society today, and society does not operate in this way. Therefore, Dewey came to be aware in his later years that “the defects of schools mirrored and sustained the defects of the larger society and these defects could not be remedied apart from a struggle for democracy throughout that larger society” (Westbrook, 1980, p. 510). This also led him to expend considerable energy participating in a range of social activities with a view to disseminating the democratic spirit throughout society.

It is difficult to solve the problem of the relationship between local communities and the Great Community, and this issue is itself a part of the process of democracy. The solution to this problem requires not only the efforts of scholars and governments, but also those of each individual, and thus the improvement of their inquiry capability and democratic spirit. Even more importantly, it is necessary to create the cultural circumstances with which most people identify and that entice them to act. As for whether this problem can be solved, and if so when, we have no idea. Here, we are merely trying to understand this issue by emphasizing the importance of family education.

Local communities are still a key starting point, because as Dewey pointed out, only through face-to-face local communication can dialogue be held between individuals. Dewey (1984, p. 368) also noted the importance of families, stating that “Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.” We all live within families from birth, and thus families have a primariness that other community groups lack. Meanwhile, the family is also a bridge connecting individuals and the Greater Community. The surroundings created by communities indirectly foster our habits. Moreover, Dewey (1983, p. 88) notes that a habit that has been established has inertia: “No matter how accidental and irrational the circumstances of its origin, no matter how different the conditions which now exist to those under which the habit was formed, the latter persists until the environment obstinately rejects it.” Therefore, it is very important for the family to foster good habits among children in their early days through family education. The training of democratic citizens should start with families, and the everyday activities of parents and children. There are still difficulties, of course, because not all parents are aware of the importance of family education. We have the necessary mechanisms to evaluate the capabilities of each staff member in the work situation, but have no way of determining whether a parent is suitably qualified. However, this does

not mean that the situation is beyond our control, and we cannot simply sit back and wait until all of these problems have been solved. The spirit of pragmatism tells us that taking action is the top priority, because we can only solve these problems through action and participation.

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