

John Dewey

Experience and Education Reflection Paper

Jami O'Connor

Colorado State University

John Dewey is one the most recognized and outspoken education theorists of the twentieth century known for his dedication to education. In the book titled, “John Dewey Experience and Education” he points out ideas and problems with education from his past fifty years of experience in the profession. In this reflection paper I will discuss my thoughts; reactions to Dewey’s ideas on traditional and progressive schools, and discuss how it relates to my own personal experience in adult education. In addition, I will include how the information in the book relates to the chapter review on distance education and my agency visit to Sarasota County Technical Institute.

One of the central ideas that I noticed throughout the book is the struggle between traditional and progressive styles of education. Dewey states in the opening of the first chapter, “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites...formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities” (Dewey, 1938. p.17). I think Dewey pinpoints the issue of traditional versus progressive education that he saw happening over his span in education and that is still occurring today. On one side there is traditional education where facts are memorized, structure, and discipline take place and students are treated almost like sponges absorbing as much information as they can. On the other side is progressive education that takes the extreme opposite of anything traditional and provides an unstructured, free, and student directed curriculum. Dewey hit the nail on the head in terms of how educators can take aspects from traditional and progressive education and incorporates that into a valuable student learning experience that leads to positive growth.

In reading the book it made me think back to my own personal experiences in education over the last twenty-five years. I think most of my educational experience has been taught from the traditional education standpoint. I remember sitting in class listening to lectures and

memorizing information for a big test or quiz. My educational experience started to change in college when distance education progressed and I began to take more online classes.

Through distance education I began to experience education in a new light where I would learn via the online classroom environment and then practice and use those skills in my job. One example that I remember was I needed to take an accounting class for my job and also because it was a requirement to finish my associate's degree. I struggled in accounting and withdrew from two previous courses because it was boring and there was no connection between the teacher and the material that was being presented. I then enrolled in a distance education class and the experience was so different, the information was relevant and I wanted to continue learning in this manner because I connected to the experience. As Archer and Garrison point out in the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*, is that teaching and learning normally occur in different places (Archer & Garrison, 2010). I was learning the process of accounting through distance education and applying what I learned in real life situations on the job and with my own personal finances. As Dewey points out, "Everything depends on the quality of the experience which is had" and my experience with distance education was positive and it made me want to continue learning in this manner.

The next section of the Dewey book that struck me as an important concept in education was the aspect of the nature of freedom in social control. Dewey talks about the traditional classroom and how students are arranged in their desks in rows like a military regime and only instructed to move when the bell rings (Dewey, 1938). Dewey suggests there are benefits to increasing outward freedom like teachers gaining knowledge of who their students really are and that outward freedom is found in the very nature of the learning process (Dewey, 1938). In reading Dewey's ideas about freedom and how it can benefit the learning process it made me

think of the agency visit that I conducted with Sarasota County Technical Institute. This technical school embodies freedom because there are so many programs that require hands on experience that you cannot get from sitting still in a classroom. I focused on the business program but as I toured the school I walked through the kitchen of the culinary program and observed many students learning hands on beside their instructors in a free and open environment. I also walked through the veterinary technician program and witnessed students in the lab setting working hands on with animals. This made me think how valuable education can be with the liberty of movement and hands on experience in addition to the traditional classroom setting. This section of the book made me realize that as I grow as an educator in the field of adult education I would like to incorporate the nature of freedom when possible to enhance the learning environment.

In addition to traditional versus progressive education and the nature of freedom in social control the overall message that I took away from the book was to find a balance. What I mean by this is that Dewey wrote this book after a long and successful career in education and I think he saw value through experience in both the traditional and progressive style of teaching. In return Dewey's thoughts on education has taught me that I want to provide learners with experience which is the key to knowledge and a positive learning environment that incorporates elements of both styles of education. I agree with Dewey's statement that, "The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power (Dewey, 1938, p. 58).

In this reflection paper I have discussed my thoughts, reactions, and what I learned from John Dewey's book on "Experience and Education." There is no doubt why John Dewey has been coined one of the most influential educational theorists of the twentieth century because of this

futuristic thinking on traditional and progressive education. As an educator it is my duty to learn and in Dewey's words, "devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality not just a slogan (Dewey, 1938, p. 91). This book gives insight and perspective about how education is evolving and changing and I think all educators, experienced and newly entering the profession should read this book.

References

Archer, W. & Garrison, R.(2010). *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. (2010 ed.).

Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.