

# Chapter 10

## Lifelong Education: Some Deweyan Themes

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### Introduction

John Dewey's *Pedagogic Creed* published in 1897 begins with the stirring words: 'I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual's powers, saturating his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions. Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together' (Dewey 1971, Vol. 5, p. 84). A little further on he says: 'I believe that education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living' (Ibid. p. 87). This notion of education as a continual process with the potential for growth remained a central part of his philosophy of education. It is interesting, however, that although these words seem a clarion call for what we now call lifelong education, Dewey seemed unable to draw this conclusion from his own philosophy. Thus, for example, the words which immediately follow the creed just quoted are: 'I believe that the school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighbourhood, or on the playground' (loc. cit.). To my knowledge, Dewey wrote nothing on education beyond the formal school years. Thus, despite the implicit significance of his philosophical position, John Dewey was the major philosopher of schooling rather than of education.

In this chapter, I pursue four major themes, each of which is implicit in Dewey's philosophy of education:

(1) The centrality of 'education' as distinct (but not separate) from 'training'; (2) the rejection of any dichotomy between liberal and vocational education; (3) the importance of the changing social situation; and (4) the centrality of critical thought in education.

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## Education and Training

Dewey argued that ‘The educative process is a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity for growth’ (Dewey 1916, p. 54). If the current movement for encouraging lifelong education is really to take root as a genuinely *educational* movement, it is important that the early years of formal schooling (if that organisational form is to be persisted with) need to be revised in the light of this commitment. Currently, educational policy in many countries is committed to the notion of ‘skills’ and ‘preparation for work’. The emphasis on skills ties the student to the concrete and the present: it does not enliven the mind by abstractions; nor does it necessarily relate the ‘skills’ to the interests of the child or to the wider society outside the school. Much of current policy making is dictated by the interests of business and schools are being made increasingly reliant on business sponsorship for resources. At the extreme, children are perceived primarily as consumers and, for the sake of income for the school, are subjected to advertising within the school and within the classroom. They are being taught to ‘think Business, think profit, think short term’ and are prevented from criticising the dominant ideology of the day-consumerism.

The emphasis on the vocational or job-related aspects of schooling further limits the child’s capacity for growth and development along the lines advocated by Dewey. There is an emphasis on the future rather than the present, and this future is seen as limited by the person’s capacity to fill some job or perform some service; the child is to be a functionary of the economic order. This of course has ideological purposes beyond a servile and uncritical workforce; the whole idea of the consumer society is to be accepted uncritically as a natural part of the world. This acceptance of controversial social arrangement as ‘natural’ is the prime purpose of an ideology.

If we are to turn (or return) to a conception of education more apt to meet the current needs of students and yet encourage them to take advantage of appropriate learning later on, formal education needs to be consciously structured towards two main purposes:

- (a) Providing the basic understandings required to continue to learn throughout life and the motivation to go on learning. As Dewey put it, ‘The criterion of the value of school education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective’ (loc. cit., p. 53). Schools should not create the impression that they can provide all that a child will need throughout her life; rather, they should engage her in activities which are both enjoyable in themselves and likely to provide a lifetime of interest. There is, of course, no one way of doing this, but certain school customs and social demands work against it. For example, the constant assessment can destroy the student’s current engagement and her future interest. Similarly, the emphasis on ‘a common curriculum’ which must be ‘covered’ fails to recognise the variant interests of children. If the principal aims are to engage the child’s current interest and to help her preserve that interest for life, it may sometimes

be preferable to allow the student to concentrate her energies on one aspect of the curriculum: from one point of view, it matters little whether this is music, literature, science, mathematics, computer studies or history, provided that it has the potential for 'growth'. Concentration on a limited range of studies can provide the motivation to go on learning and, arguably, the ability to learn in one can readily be transferred to another when that is required.

- (b) There must be a move away from isolated information and studies carried out in isolation from other studies. It is a moot point whether an integrated curriculum is the best means of achieving this, but certainly in some way or another, knowledge has to be integrated in the life of the learner. Although, in the final analysis, the student herself must do this, the teacher should take every opportunity to establish links between bodies of knowledge. After all, the student is a growing person and not a congeries of information and skills.

We are frequently told that this is the computer age, and Information Technology will rule the future in education. To some degree, this seems to be likely. It is important, however, to ensure (from school days onwards) that the computer is seen as a tool of education, and I mean to stress both the words: seen as a *tool* for achieving certain human ends and not a kind of drug which forestalls thought; and seen as a tool for *education*, not for gathering lots and lots of discrete bits of information which do not add up to a process of growth or development of the person. Rob Watts has persuasively argued that in the movement to more use of technology in education, two serious matters are at stake: the first is 'the contest between incommensurate understandings of knowledge and ... 'education'. The second is the danger of losing the 'thick texture' of face to face encounters between human teachers and human learners and replacing it totally by 'thin texture' encounters with virtual reality (1999, p. 3).

Watts argues that there are two basic models of education: an Information Theory (IT) model and an Action-Reflection Theory (ART) model. Following Habermas, he characterises the IT model as 'an instrumental-rational constitutive interest that shapes a distinctive kind of knowledge and praxis' (loc. cit. p. 7). These interests are exemplified in the activities of corporate culture and the military and, hence, constitute a further limitation of the growth of the person. This model can be followed in any classroom (by emphasis on authority, by slavish use of text books, by assessment in terms of memory, by stress on 'right' and 'wrong' answers and by the rejection of criticism). But, the growth of Information Technology brings added dangers of this model dominating. More positively, however, it can provide further opportunity to reflect on the nature of knowledge and of education.

According to Watts, the ART model stresses the importance of interpretation in our daily lives; we impose patterns on our experience and we are shaped by social, economic and political forces of which we are often unaware. In this model, what is stressed are conversation rather than information imparting; the centrality of the learner as a critical, self-conscious being; the recognition of the historical and sociological contexts of all forms of understanding; the importance of the right question rather than the right answer and the awareness of some of the 'canons' of

human thought and action (loc. cit, p. 19). Watts believes that while these can be endangered by Information Technology, awareness of their importance can enrich our use of that technology for teaching.

## Vocational and Liberal Education

I have already drawn attention to the excessive emphasis on ‘vocational education’ on the part of today’s policy makers and the ideological role this plays in social life. It is important, however, to recognise that while ‘liberal’ and ‘vocational’ and ‘skills’ and ‘knowledge’ can be conceptually distinguished, in practice, they converge and overlap; discussions of the curriculum of lifelong learning should not pit one against another. Dewey is again very helpful here. As is typical of his philosophy, he rejects unhelpful ‘dualisms’ or dichotomies. He writes: ‘A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish’ (1916, p. 307). For Dewey, therefore, a person’s vocation is not limited to her paid or unpaid employment (‘job’) but extends to all those aspects of a person’s life in which she carries out tasks and performs roles. While our vocation will include our job, it will also embrace our roles as parent, spouse, friend, community member, churchgoer, club member, community member, rate payer, citizen and member of the ‘global village’. There is then, no contradiction between vocational studies and liberal studies. Good vocational studies *are* liberal: they free people from blind conformity and rigid habits and release people to be agents of their own lives in all their richness and diversity.

Dewey argues that in the school years, vocational education in the narrow sense will merely predestine some students to a life of drudgery and will in general not promote the ‘freeing of activity’ which education should involve. This point should be well taken by those making policy for schools. It is, however, very likely that in the future, a good deal of post-school education will be centred on a person’s trade or profession. In our society, a person’s job occupies an increasingly large part of her time and energy. There is also much talk of the short-lived nature of skilled knowledge, the need to upgrade credentials and often to re-train for quite different work. That need not be of concern provided that the wider sense of vocation is taken into consideration. In the dominant ideology, the worker’s work IS her life. Those providing in-service training should realise not only that the worker has other central roles in society (which all, including employers, rely on) but also that the full flowering of a person can itself contribute to a better quality employee. Thus, all lifelong education should be ‘liberal’ in the sense in which Dewey meant it; it should provide context and criticism and seek to upgrade not only skills but also background theory and other relevant matters. As an example, it is becoming common to include in MBA programmes for middle management a course or module on business ethics: rightly taught these deal not only with day to day issues such as insider trading, sexual harassment and honesty in advertising but also broader issues of the role of business in developing countries, the morality of multi-national dominance and the

rights of the worker. I suggest that regardless of the trade or profession a broad view can and should be taken on on-going education: the nurse would be exposed to analysis and critiques of health policy; the programmer to the social role of IT; the caterer to the sociology of tourism and the sportsperson to the issues relating to sport as a business.

I would like to illustrate the major points made so far by reference to the education of teachers.

As a result of the current ideology in New Zealand (and, of course, elsewhere), there have been strong moves to de-professionalise teaching and to increase competition in teacher training. As a result, pre-service courses have become shorter, cheaper and (arguably) less demanding. More significantly, the contextual studies needed for a full profession have tended to be reduced. The history, philosophy and sociology of education have been downgraded and often excluded altogether. Thus, teacher education is producing technicians who will be uncritical of their important role in society and subservient to the business interests which are trying to control schools. The 'formal' further education of teachers is generally no better: narrowly technicist, it does not even try to provide senior teachers with an analysis of educational policy or a wide understanding of the tasks confronting teachers in the society.

If Dewey's notions of growth were taken seriously, pre-service education would concentrate less on 'techniques' and narrow methodologies and more on ensuring that students had a sound theoretical grasp of the issues to be faced and the means to solve the problems which will arise. In their formative years, they would become aware of the limitations of their knowledge and hence be motivated to continue with lifelong education and, having been exposed to basic understanding of, for example, social science and ethics, they would have the skills to constantly upgrade their knowledge and skill. *Lifelong education* for teachers would mean just that.

## The Wider Society

Dewey was well aware (it was central to his whole philosophy) that education is always carried out in a particular social setting: we grow up as social beings moulded by the kind of society we are in. But he did not mean that schools should simply prepare young people for the current social system with no regard to its quality. For one thing, as already shown, he was opposed to the notion of education as preparation: education IS life not a preparation for life. But more than that, he refused to allow that education should reproduce the dominant forms of thought and action. Writing in the early part of this century, he recognised that schools could so readily simply conform to the dominant groups. He worried lest education become 'an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society, instead of operating as a means of its transformation' (1916, p. 316). In this light, we might have the same deep worry about the role of education in the current environment of trade, enterprise and profit. It is also important that those engaged in lifelong education emulate Dewey in trying to understand the social

order and have a sound analysis of it. They must also learn to work within it without being subservient to it.

One way of trying to envisage world we might well be entering is to follow Gee et al. (1996) in thinking about 'fast capitalism' ('new capitalism' or post-capitalism.) They write that fast capitalism's 'visions and values have deeply informed contemporary calls for reform both in adult education and training and in schools across the developed world' and points out that 'the new-capitalist educators stress education and learning as a lifelong enterprise and thus do not concentrate just on children and schools' (loc. cit. 1998, p. 164). Thus, this analysis seems peculiarly relevant to our theme.

According to these authors, where old capitalism relied on the mass production of relatively uniform goods by large and hierarchically structured organisations, new capitalism involves the design and production of diverse high quality goods for a saturated market. In the former, the worker concentrates on one aspect of the task and does not see the whole. In the latter, the worker has to be a fully active learner. The front-line worker will have to be as knowledgeable as the manager. 'Workers will be transformed into committed "partners" who engage in meaningful work, fully understand and control their jobs, supervise themselves, and actively seek to improve their performance through communicating clearly their knowledge and needs' (loc. cit. p. 29).

These new organisations are characterised by 'flat structures' of management. Every worker is an entrepreneur. To bring this about, either (1) visionary leadership or (2) shared core values and sense of purpose are required. Thus, the world of business is in competition with church and school in creating a vision and a set of values. Dewey is turned on his head: work is no longer a part of a person's life; rather, life is part of a person's work. Business colonises our minds and rules our lives; workers are never really off duty (loc. cit. p. 35).

There are several problems with this account and with the educational significance that might flow from it.

- It is not clear how much this is a well-founded prediction or an attempt to construct our reality for us. As the authors points out, new capitalism deals with the manipulation of symbols and new uses of words. These are devised to present a particular view of reality and to exercise power over people's minds. It is not simply that education will have to deal with a set of phenomena. It will have to 'decode' or 'de-construct' the words used to convey the vision, the values and the ideology. The current talk of 'the Knowledge Society' masks fast capitalism's intent in using this expression: to make all knowledge and all values subservient to the world of work. Unmasking the words used to deceive and to persuade is clearly a task for lifelong education.
- It is far from clear that this is an adequate account of what is likely to happen to the world of work. On the face of it, the modern world seems more to be tending towards a polarised or segmented workforce. Some will have highly paid, secure and pleasant jobs; a huge army of others workers will be poorly paid, insecure (often part time) and they may work in poor conditions. If this is

a likely picture, the education system will be expected to reproduce this structured workforce. It is plausible to argue that ‘choice’ policies in education are aimed at producing just the segmented work force required. Those with cultural capital desert less-favoured schools and go to those attended by other motivated students, leaving the lower classes and the less motivated segregated in schools which, deprived of the social mix, become worse and worse. Some call this ‘social cleansing’. Lifelong education will have an uphill battle to remedy this sort of situation.

- The fast capitalists claim to want ‘knowledgeable’ and even ‘critical’ people, but they cannot allow their employees to criticise the goals and values of the organisation or the system in which it operates. Workers’ ‘growth’ is restricted as anyone’s is when allowed control only over means and not, as Dewey would have, over the ends as well. It is interesting to observe the ways in which teachers have been de-skilled in recent years and are being seen as technicians serving other people’s ends. And if teachers are deskilled, their students are likely to be also. As in teaching, so in other areas of business and professional life: people are encouraged to ‘pull together’ and ‘develop process values’ but are not allowed to criticise the goals or the ideology.

It is very clear that those involved in lifelong education must re-examine their aims in just the way Dewey (1916, pp. 104–105) advised:

- The aim set up must be an ‘outgrowth of existing conditions’. Before we devise high sounding goals, we need to examine carefully what forces are at work and what the contextual situations are. Analysis along the lines of the work on fast capitalism is essential.
- The aims must be flexible and tentative. Aims can never be static because neither the social world nor the growing person is static. Aims must, to a large extent, be derived from the stated concerns of the learners and from the conditions of their lives.
- Aims must ‘liberate activity’. That is to say, each successful achievement must open out to further possible achievement. The solution to a problem is, at once, a further problem. Hence education involves the continual reconstruction of experience. It must be lifelong indeed.

## Critical Reflection

The arguments I have developed so far indicate that the major aim of lifelong education is to promote the autonomy of the individual and her readiness at all times to be involved in critical thinking and liberating action. This was, of course, a major conclusion of Dewey: ‘All which a school can or need do for pupils, as far as their *minds* are concerned...is to develop their ability to think’ (1916, p. 152). For Dewey, this was connected to the respect he had for the methods of science

which he took to be clear and uncontroversial. Of course, good Pragmatist that he was, he did not subscribe to a realist world of 'pure facts' or to the discovery of timeless truths. For him, 'warranted assertability' was all that could be hoped for. It is also true that he did not subscribe to the individualism of the empiricist tradition: all knowledge comes about by joint efforts within a social context. In these, and many other ways, Dewey was ahead of his time. Yet, the methods of science were accepted uncritically; he thought that they needed only to be implemented and imitated.

In these matters, there is a vast gulf between Dewey's intellectual world and ours. The possibility of both autonomy and critical thinking has been under profound attack in recent years under the general heading of 'post-modernism'. Luntley (1998, pp. 15–17) provides a useful summary of the basic epistemological tenets of post-modernism by setting out its four basic theses:

- All experience is based on interpretation.
- There are no secure foundations for knowledge.
- There is no single language suitable for reporting all the things we want to say about the world.
- All languages are local, perspectival human languages.

These seem to cut the very ground from under the feet of any conception of critical thinking. Any thinking which a person does will be limited, personal and 'perspectival'; it cannot discover the truth; my 'critical thinking' will be no better (or worse) than yours. Hence any educational aims which set out to develop critical thinking will be in vain. We can only teach someone to think in a particular way, and this will be, by definition, simply one way among many equally valid ways of thinking. The Deweyan endeavour is particularly compromised by post-modernism's rejection of science as a privileged way of knowing.

Luntley argues that while all the theses of postmodernism are true, they do not eliminate truth, rationality or critical thought. He argues that there are two fundamental questions about knowledge. (1) Can we know which of our beliefs are true? (2) Is there truth at all? To the first question, he answers 'no': there are no criteria by which we can assess knowledge claims. On some interpretations of 'critical thought', this would be disastrous for it seems to be linked with the possibility of an answer being right or wrong. The second question, however, casts a different light on the matter. That we cannot know which of our beliefs are true (and constitute knowledge) does not entail that none of them *are* true (loc. cit, p. 95).

Turning to the second question, Luntley argues that although post-modernists reject the idea of truth, notions of truth remain in their philosophy. Confronting Rorty (1989) head on, he asks what it means to say, as Rorty does, that some of our beliefs are 'better' than others in serving human interests. According to Luntley, they can be better in this way only if they are 'true'. In this 'very humble' sense of truth, apples were falling long before Newton noted the fact. Luntley is at pains to show that while the post-modernists are right to reject any overarching story about truth they are wrong if they carry on to become



irrationalist as well. What has to be retained, he argues, is the notion of 'simple truth'. This underlies all our actions: money in the bank decreases as I cash cheques; seat belts protect us from some serious injuries; dentists can cure our toothache and so on.

It is, of course, a long way from this 'simple truth' and the critical thought which it allows ('am I over-spending?' 'might I be worse off in some accidents if I do wear a seat belt?'; 'can I relieve the pain without the expense of a dentist?') to the criticism of economic and political views with which we are surrounded. This is what critical thinking is normally thought to be about, and it is this that is regarded as crucial to democracy. Nevertheless, there is a link and it is an important one. For one thing, the recognitions that there are 'paradigms' and 'perspectives' none of which can be said to be true in any deep sense should give us confidence in questioning those which are set out as if they are undoubtedly true. At present, New Right economics and the political judgements which follow from it are presented as if they are obviously correct ('there is no other way'). Proponents fail to see (or decline to see) that theirs is one point of view among many; start from one set of assumptions about ownership and private property and you will end up with a particular conclusion; start with a different set and you will end up with a very different conclusion. Post-modernism suggests that neither can claim to be true. Nevertheless, each will contain numerous claims to 'simple truth' (e.g. that the existence of welfare creates dependency), and these can be contested by data. Critical thinking is possible and, to some extent, made possible by the basic claims of the post modernist.

To my mind, critical thinking is not primarily a skill but an attitude of mind: a disposition not to take statements for granted, not to accept dogmatic beliefs no matter how sanctioned and not to go along with the dominant simply because they are a majority. It is this attitude which should be encouraged in lifelong learning. Of course, we now have to acknowledge that our individual selves do not emerge ready made. We are the results of the social world in which we have been brought up and our knowledge, as Dewey saw (though less clearly than is possible in the post-modern age), is inevitably social. We cannot critically examine all our beliefs at once; but we can examine some of them at any time and all of them over a period of time. And even the assumptions on which they rest can, at least to some extent, be challenged by ourselves. This IS critical thinking and it has not been overthrown by post-modernism.

Despite the challenges that have come since Dewey, we can still support his basic idea that the major function of education is to challenge students to critical thinking. This can be done in many ways: by presenting all knowledge historically (the history of science or technology would lead to a more critical approach to those subjects); by examining the philosophy of various human endeavours (the philosophy of art would enliven the study or art) and by presenting alternatives in all areas (the presentation Marxist economics might balance the one sidedness of modern economics teaching; work on creationism might help students to see modern science in perspective.)

## Institutional Support

I have presented a case for lifelong *education* as distinct from training and indoctrination. I am very aware, however, that given my own analysis of the ways in which those with power operate, it is quite unlikely that the institutions and organisations which provide lifelong education are likely to follow the critical path I have mapped out. Dewey reminds us that if an aim is to be more than an idealised and futile hope, it must be ‘an outgrowth of existing conditions’ (1916, p. 104). It is here that most difficulties arise for, as I have indicated, existing conditions are far from ripe for any genuine lifelong education to take place, and if fast capitalism comes to be, the situation for lifelong education will be even bleaker, since the ideology of the entrepreneur will rule in every aspect of life.

It would be naive to hope that business firms will provide re-training courses which allow, much less encourage, criticism of business itself. Perhaps, there are some developments which can be built on: the growth of Business Ethics provides a niche for a more critical study of the role of business in the world.

Very likely, however, lifelong education will have to be found in ‘independent’ situations. Libraries, in planning and displaying their holdings and in providing ways of gaining access to the knowledge, can move beyond the very practical and domesticating. The churches, theoretically committed to a critique of all social situations, might more consciously take up the challenge of providing scriptural and, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, papal support for in depth study of the economical and political worlds. In New Zealand, for example, the Catholic Bishops’ conference has recently published their many statements over the past 20 years on social, political and ethical issues (Orsman and Zwart 1998). Political parties will have an important part to play; they have normally a strong point of view, and it is in their interests to make it known. Small parties might indeed (since almost by definition they represent a less orthodox view) make education a priority. The popular press has a part to play, though in the recent years, it has by and large abandoned any pretence of impartiality and has enthusiastically supported the dominant ideology.

It goes without saying that universities and other tertiary institutions should be to the fore in promoting a critical view of social life. But, sadly, they too seem to have been ‘bought’ by the powerful. Forced to compete with each other, they tend to adopt the ethos of business and so seek to satisfy rather than to challenge their students. They may yet recover their heart; certainly, there are many within them who hanker for a more critical role for their institutions; they should organise to challenge the status quo.

Without doubt, however, the most successful form of education, particularly for adults, is that which involves praxis, that is to say ‘a dialectical movement which goes from action to reflection and from reflection on action to a new action’ (Freire 1972, p. 31). The activities which in many countries surrounded the opposition to the Vietnam war and the Apartheid regime in South Africa did much to educate people politically, but the memory of these events is fading. What issue would motivate today’s young people? It is difficult to tell. They are ‘children of the

market' and the uncritical support of the status quo is being written into their minds and hearts; even their own burden of debt for their education does not seem to have led to mobilisation for action. The growing popularity of 'Green' parties might suggest that the environment could be a focus for action and reflection.

## Conclusion

Little will be done, it seems to me, unless there is concerted effort by organisations which co-ordinate and fund lifelong learning to develop a careful philosophy of education which transcends mere factual learning, updating professional credentials and providing hobbies and entertainment. As Dewey reminds us again and again, there need be no conflict between these activities and education; they can all be used to educational effect. What is needed is a clear understanding of education in its broadest sense and the will to follow it through. I submit that Dewey has provided us with the understanding; the will must come from ourselves.

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