

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION? DEWEY'S CHALLENGE TO HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Chapter Nine: Natural Development and Social Efficiency as Aims

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When Dewey articulated his “democratic conception of education” in Chapter Seven, he applied the standards it entailed to the educational philosophies of Plato, Rousseau, Fichte and Hegel. In his positive account of democratic education, coupled with his critique of these influential educational philosophies, Dewey had consciously staked a position in a conversation about the purpose of education that has spanned millennia. Then, after identifying the flaws in those historical accounts, Dewey outlined criteria for good educational aims in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Nine is pivotal in *Democracy and Education* because it offers the most robust engagement with and challenge to his contemporaries’ educational aims. Indeed, prior to Chapter Nine, Dewey had already teased out the key aims that he wished to counter – nature, social efficiency, and culture – by showing how, for example, Plato and the nationalistic ideals both subordinated the individual to the state in an effort to maximize social efficiency, and how Rousseau’s ideas about natural development emphasized interest, and how Fichte’s and Hegel’s idealism sought to reconcile the development of cultured personality with a civic cultural inheritance. In Chapters Ten through Twenty-three, Dewey will critique in greater detail his contemporaries’ arguments, reconstructing and appropriating natural development, social efficiency, and culture into his own account of education. Indeed, Dewey closes Chapter

Twenty-Three noting that he focused in the previous eight chapters on two questions:

“Whether intelligence is best exercised apart from or within activity which puts nature to human use, and whether individual culture is best secured under egoistic or social conditions” (p. 330).¹ How to employ nature and individuals’ interests in learning and living, what does it mean to be “cultured,” how does a “cultured” person emerge from society and then contribute to it? Dewey first outlines answers to these questions in Chapter Nine, and they continue to occupy him for much of the remainder of the work.

Dewey chose to address nature, social efficiency, and culture in Chapter Nine because these aims broadly capture the three most influential arguments in the educational debates in the decades preceding the publication of *Democracy and Education*. Dewey does not explicitly refer to his contemporaries by name, however, which somewhat obscures the context to readers one hundred years later. (The fact that he links the aims of Chapter Nine to the historical accounts of Chapter Seven further obscures their context.) In this chapter, therefore, I describe some of the individuals and ideas that Dewey challenges while explaining his criticism of them.² I shall also point to some of the other chapters in *Democracy and Education* in which Dewey returns to concepts he addresses in Chapter Nine.

¹ Dewey writes that he answered these questions in detail in Chapters 15-22, but he clearly also worked out the details in the second half of Chapter Seven and Chapters Nine and Ten.

² See “Further reading” section for more information about the historical context of these three educational aims.

1. Nature as Supplying the Aim

By the time Dewey began writing about education in the 1890s, some experimental schools were already in existence. The educational reformers and practitioners that formed these schools were “progressive” – and are now typically labeled child-centered, pedagogical, or romantic progressives – in that they rejected the traditional, fixed curriculum, and instead encouraged “active” and experiential learning, responded to students’ interests, and sought to make schooling relevant to students, among other things. At their extreme, teachers in these schools would hesitate to impose any ideas on students, or encourage any particular activities. Students would learn to read, for example, when they were motivated to do so. Until then, too much encouragement or pressure from the teacher might compromise the students’ desire and ability to read.

Psychologists in the emerging field of child study were simultaneously challenging the traditional education in similar ways – Dewey knew well both the child-centered practitioners and these educational scholars. The child-study developmentalists, people like G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924), viewed the traditional education as a failure because it inappropriately forced children into the adult world, failing to recognize the natural developmental stages at which they could be found. Developmentalists thus argued that you must begin education with an appropriate, compelling curriculum, rather than subject students to ideas about which adults were eager for them to learn. The child-study developmentalists also claimed that there were distinct differences in students’ abilities, and favored curricular differentiation for that reason.

(Dewey deals with this justification for curricular differentiation in the next section of Chapter Nine on “Social Efficiency.”)

Both the child study developmentalists and the romantic progressives emphasized the need for curriculum to connect with students’ experiences and interests. Interest, as Dewey argues in Chapter Ten, is a vital force in education, and teachers would be foolish to neglect it. But overemphasis on “interest” or the “natural development” of children was just as problematic as the traditional education’s dismissal of them, and Dewey used Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) to make his case.

The child-study developmentalists were not associated as closely with child-centered progressivism as was Rousseau and his *Emile: Or, on education*.³ Rousseau was frequently invoked by both pedagogical progressives and their critics alike. While Dewey was writing *Democracy and Education*, he was simultaneously writing with his daughter Evelyn *Schools of To-Morrow*, which featured several experimental progressive schools (published in 1915, a year before *Democracy and Education*). Indeed, the Deweys returned to Rousseau throughout *Schools of To-Morrow*; they noted in the conclusion that “most of these points of similarity [of the schools described in the book] are found in the views advocated by Rousseau, though it is only very recently that they have begun to enjoy anything more than a theoretical respect.”⁴ Because of the influence of Rousseau’s ideas, and “since no one has stated in the doctrine both its truth and falsity better than Rousseau” (p.119), Rousseau receives sustained treatment in

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or, On education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1762/1979).

⁴ John Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, in *Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1915/1979), p. 389.

both Chapter Nine and *Schools of To-Morrow*. Perhaps, too, Dewey was eager to distance himself from the kind of Rousseauian educational theory that inspired many progressive educational reformers, for in his critique of Rousseau, Dewey is uncharacteristically forceful and clear.

Dewey credits Rousseau for recognizing that physical activity and engagement is educationally valuable, and that the child's faculties and abilities ought to guide our educational practice. Further, natural development as an aim requires that we recognize differences among individual children, and respond to them accordingly. Finally, educators ought to acknowledge and be guided by the evolution of children's interests. But Dewey argues that Rousseau posited that children's activities are separable from their engagement with the environment or with others. Dewey countered that the three must occur together – we interact with others, in a particular space and time, making use of our natural faculties. If we maximize the quality of these interactions by exploring rich, complex ideas and environments alongside others, they will be profoundly educational.

Dewey writes that Rousseau was correct to argue that “the structure and activities of the organs furnish the *conditions* of all teaching of the use of the organs; but profoundly wrong in intimating that they supply ... the *ends* of their development” (pp. 120-1). This latter statement, in a nutshell, is the idea that Dewey sees as so problematic in child-centered progressive education: that the child is equipped by nature to grow and flourish, to enjoy “spontaneous development,” and that the educator ought therefore simply to get out of the way, just as one might let an acorn grow into an oak tree.

And this idea is so deeply flawed that Dewey calls it “pure mythology” (p.121) and, as he put it in chapter seven, “merely to leave everything to nature was, after all, but to negate the very idea of education” (p.99). Natural development cannot be an adequate educational aim because it cannot appreciate and accommodate the value of a social environment in which the students’ interests, activities, and native powers can flourish. Rather than fear the correlative forces of social interactions, teachers should create better social environments for learning, and living.⁵

2. Social Efficiency as Aim

Whereas Dewey criticizes his contemporary child-centered progressives indirectly through Rousseau, he is more direct in his attack on social efficiency progressives. Social efficiency progressives (sometimes called administrative progressives), rejected the traditional education on similar grounds as the child-centered progressives. Both groups were “progressive” in the sense that they sought to offer students an education that was suited to their needs and interests, and connected to their lives outside of the school. But whereas the child-centered progressives thought it best to let students take the lead on planning and selecting their projects, the social efficiency progressives argued that schools ought to offer a

⁵ Before turning to social efficiency as an aim, Dewey offers a footnote explaining that Rousseau does not accept that all societies would necessarily corrupt the young and, indeed, calls for the creation of a better society. Dewey does not pursue this note in detail, but Rousseau did offer different educational prescriptions for a more just society. Rousseau outlined an extreme nationalistic education – a common system of schooling for all, with an explicitly patriotic curriculum – in the fourth chapter of *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, an excerpt of which is awkwardly included in the middle of the selections from *Emile* from which Dewey quoted in *Democracy and Education*, and with which Dewey must therefore have been familiar. (The edition Dewey referenced was R. L. Archer, ed. *Rousseau on Education* [London: Edward Arnold, 1912]. Dewey’s brief concession that Rousseau did not simplistically advocate for natural, spontaneous development, demonstrates that Dewey, as he signaled at the beginning of the chapter, was less interested in critiquing Rousseau than he was in using Rousseau to critique his contemporary pedagogical progressives.

principled fusion of the needs and interests of the students *and* those of society. What could be more “progressive,” argued the social efficiency progressives, than the enlightened development of schools that would prepare students for a life and a career in a society which flourished precisely because of their contributions?

Part of the mission of social efficiency progressives was simply to make schooling more – perhaps unsurprisingly given the label applied to them – efficient. John Franklin Bobbitt’s seminal paper’s title aptly captures his concern: “The Elimination of Waste in Education.”⁶ Bobbitt sought to use principles of management to, for example, make more efficient use of the school building (making continual use of the playground, and all classrooms, rather than leaving them empty for parts of the day). But Dewey was concerned with another aspect of “social efficiency.” For Bobbitt and others, the traditional education was wasteful because it offered the same academic training – in a broad range of academic subjects – to all students, despite the fact that students participated in a broad variety of occupations after they finished school. The academic training of the traditional education prepared students for college, which in turn prepared them for a narrow range of professional careers. But in the early twentieth century, only a small minority of students attended high school, and only few of them continued on to university. Why shouldn’t the school offer them training for the kinds of jobs they would likely hold? Further, from the standpoint of economic efficiency, would it not make sense for schools to coordinate their efforts with local businesses, so that they could better enable students to make meaningful, lasting, and immediate contributions to the industries in which they worked?

⁶ John Franklin Bobbitt, “The Elimination of Waste in Education,” *The Elementary School Teacher* 12, no. 6 (1912).

The social efficiency progressives called for some schools to continue to offer an academic training to prepare future professionals, while others should prepare carpenters, machinists, or agriculturalists. Further, social efficiency progressives took the relatively new science of child study to be very promising for diversifying the curriculum. One could identify students who were, they alleged, incapable of keeping up with a traditional academic curriculum. Then the progressive, scientifically-minded educational administrators and reformers could sort students into schools and programs that would best suit them.

Thus a significant debate over vocational education emerged during the period Dewey was writing *Democracy and Education*. Dewey had been drawn into the discussion directly with David Snedden, a leading social efficiency progressive, in the pages of *The New Republic*.⁷ And Dewey included in *Democracy and Education* much of the same argument that he presented in those magazine articles. Indeed, Dewey viewed social efficiency as so harmful that he returns to the subject of vocational education in a full chapter later in *Democracy and Education* (twenty-three, "Vocational Aspects of Education).

Dewey worried that a narrowly vocational education would ill-equip students to adjust to changing circumstances when an industry evolved. But Dewey is more concerned that vocational education would relegate the students who receive it to the same social status as their parents. Dewey writes, "It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them... there is danger that industrial

⁷ John Dewey, "Education vs. Trade-Training: Reply to David Snedden," in *Middle Works, 1899-1924, Vol. 8*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1915/1979); David Snedden, "Vocational Education," *The New Republic*, no. May 15 (1915); John Dewey, "A Policy of Industrial Education," in *The middle works, 1899-1924: Vol. 7, 1912-1914*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1914/1976).

education will be dominated by acceptance of the *status quo*" (p. 126). Dewey basically accuses the social efficiency progressives of endorsing America's social inequality.

Dewey makes a typically Deweyan move: he reconstructs "social efficiency," offering a new understanding of what it ought to entail. Narrowly, social efficiency *qua* vocationalism implied subordination of the individual to society's needs. Dewey argues that social efficiency is indeed important, but we would better secure it by "utilization" rather than "subordination." (p. 125). When education enables individuals to develop their interests and capacities in enlightened contact with other people, society will become more efficient, in that each individual's capacities will be fully developed and directed at activities to which they are best suited. When employees have been educated in such a way that they see broader scientific, economic, and cultural effects of their work, society will become more efficient. And when citizens have been prepared to adapt to new inventions, new ideas, and new needs, social efficiency will be secured. At the most basic level, Dewey counsels, "social efficiency means neither more nor less than capacity to share in a give and take of experience. It covers all that makes one's own experience more worth while to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others" (p. 127). Good citizens, those who create "civic efficiency," share experiences, benefit others through their experiences and benefit from contact with others' experiences. For Dewey, social efficiency is the result of the democratic ideal he articulated in Chapter Seven – it is secured through shared interests with others, and the freedom with which citizens interact with one another.

3. Culture as Aim

In the chapter's title, Dewey lists only the first and second aims he addresses, omitting "culture." (Perhaps Dewey's fondness for rethinking dualisms inclined him to select a pair, rather than a trio.) Yet culture is no third wheel; it was just as prominent an educational aim among Dewey's contemporaries as nature and social efficiency. Further, Dewey returns to it just as frequently throughout the rest of *Democracy and Education* as he does the other aims, and arguably more than he does natural development as aim.

If social efficiency progressives emphasized the utility of the individual for the good of the state, advocates of "culture" emphasized the development of individual personality. But unlike the child-centered progressives who valorized the instincts and interests of students, those who emphasized "culture" believed that a cultured personality only emerges through an encounter with the preeminent products of human civilization.

By the late nineteenth century, the closest thing to a defender of the "traditional" education were the humanists (influenced by Hegelian idealism) who believed that the cultivation of the individual's aesthetic, moral, and intellectual capacities occurs through encounters with great works of literature, art, languages, and history, among other things. When Dewey contrasts interest with effort (or discipline), or the child with the curriculum, as he did routinely in his educational works, he has in mind the developmentalists and the child-centered progressives, on the one hand, and the humanists, on the other.

The humanist educational policy is perhaps best represented by two documents. Reports by the Committee of Ten in 1893 and the Committee of Fifteen in 1895, argued that

schooling will best serve students by offering a broad liberal arts curriculum. Charles Eliot and William Torrey Harris were prominent defenders of these reports (to which they contributed). The curriculum outlined in these reports was quickly attacked by developmentalists, child-centered progressives, and social efficiency progressives as conservative and traditional; they argued that the liberal arts curriculum was basically the same remote, isolated curriculum already present in American schools.⁸ And that curriculum was not meaningful to students and did not serve society (except as preparation for the few college attendees).

The humanists defended the liberal arts curriculum. It may not have been immediately gratifying for students, but the fact that it was taxing was to its credit. Perseverance in the study of a liberal arts curriculum cultivated a disciplined character they believed. The liberal arts were also seen as the best way for a person to develop refined thinking, aesthetic taste, and moral character. Therefore, the liberal arts were not a mere preparation for college – they were an education for life. And, more generally, the liberal arts initiated the student into her community and, indeed, all of human civilization. For the humanists, we become more fully human, more cultured, through the encounter with carefully selected artifacts of human civilization. We become better able to make the most of engagements with others and ideas. What educational aim could be more important?

Dewey, in large part, joined the humanists' critics, arguing that culture as an educational aim indeed led to remote, isolated schooling and therefore failed to utilize the students'

⁸ These reports were also criticized by "traditionalists" who recognized the reports as reform documents to the traditional curriculum. The Reports embraced modern languages, for example, and some traditionalists believed that these lacked the value of Greek and Latin for cultivating students' mental discipline.

interests and capacities. As Dewey writes later in *Democracy and Education*, the educational aim of culture valorizes the past, and turns one away from the needs of the present: “An idealized past becomes the refuge and solace of the spirit; present-day concerns are found sordid, and unworthy of attention” (p. 369). Throughout *Democracy and Education*, Dewey continuously noted that the educational aim of transmitting culture is generally understood to be opposed to social efficiency, utility, or vocationalism (e.g., pp. 143, 264, 269, 298, 316). But just as Dewey reconceived of social efficiency as the potential product of a more democratic education, he made a case for “culture” to be not the acquaintance with the products of the past but the flourishing of the individual who has made the most of her capacities through interaction with others. The student who turns to the cultural products of the past because of a motive to satisfy present inquiries is the student who genuinely benefits from the past, and can contribute to the present: “The study of past *products* will not help us understand the present, because the present is not due to the products, but to the life of which they were the products. A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise” (p. 81). Our encounter with the past must serve the present, Dewey argues, and thus, in essence, a cultural education is tantamount to social efficiency. If we let the individual flourish, if she becomes cultured, she will best serve the society – she will utilize the past, to improve herself, and her community. Thus, Dewey concludes, “social efficiency and personal culture are synonyms instead of antagonists” (p. 130).

Summary

Dewey's challenge to his contemporaries does not, in the end, show that their educational aims are without merit. Rather, their understanding of the purpose of education is partial. His conclusion is that the right kind of education, a democratic education, will be guided by nature, students' interests, and an understanding of natural development; it will allow individuals to flourish, utilizing their skills and interests to secure social efficiency; and it will lead to an enlightened citizen, a genuinely cultured one. By the end of Chapter Nine, there remains much to be said about the reconciliation of these three aims, and Dewey continues the discussion by returning to "interest" and "discipline" in the next chapter, and how to better understand "efficiency" and "culture" in Chapters Fifteen through Twenty-Two.

Further reading:

Kliebard, Herbert M. 2004. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. 3rd ed. New York: RoutledgeFalmer. [An excellent overview on the various contested educational ideas in the years preceding the publication of *Democracy and Education*. Chapters 1, 2, 4 & 5 describe succinctly and clearly the developmentalists, social efficiency progressives, and the defenders of culture, with whom Dewey is so deeply engaged in Chapter Nine.]

Ravitch, Diane. 2000. *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [A clear, engaging and sympathetic account of the humanists' defense of the liberal arts.]

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