Towards a Flexible Curriculum
John Dewey's Theory of Experience and Learning

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Introduction

In the history of curriculum we see lines of divergence into two separate schools. On the one hand, we can find a view that emphasizes the school-based distribution of selected knowledge. "Education" is conceptualized as intervention, (i.e. the transmission of a bulk of tradition-given, indisputable knowledge), in which the experiences of the learner (inside or outside the school) only count in relation to externally defined objectives. The success of education is primarily measured in terms of 'qualification,' that is meeting up to predetermined, 'objective' standards. We might call this a technological, product-oriented outlook on education and curriculum. Its keywords are transmission and control.

On the other hand there is a tradition in which the pupil/learner is in the center of the educational process. 'Education' is conceptualized as Bildung, which includes the articulation of needs and interests as part of the individual’s personality or identity. Education is seen as process; the standard of its success cannot be determined a priori, nor outside of the personhood of the learner. We might call this the Bildung or process-oriented outlook on education and curriculum. Its key words are freedom and self-education.

If we summarize these positions from different angles we get the next overview shown on the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>technological approach</th>
<th>Bildung-approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>method</td>
<td>transmission of knowledge by means of external control</td>
<td>self-education and growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status of knowledge</td>
<td>autonomous objective traditions (selections)</td>
<td>result of social-cultural co-construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status of experience</td>
<td>in service of external objectives</td>
<td>starting point of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>means and ends</td>
<td>separated</td>
<td>connected</td>
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<tr>
<td>position of teacher</td>
<td>representative</td>
<td>facilitator</td>
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<tr>
<td>institute school</td>
<td>internal communication; monopoly on knowledge</td>
<td>part of larger educative 'field'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curriculum</td>
<td>'Festlegungstext'; instrument of transmission and control</td>
<td>flexible and sensitive toward personal experiences of learners</td>
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In what I call the technological approach some traits from the teacher or subject-centered tradition can be recognized and in what I have named Bildung some traits from the child-centered tradition can be discerned.

Looking at contemporary educational theory, of which curriculum theory is an essential part, one can see that the first school has become the dominant one, as a sort of 'standard-view' of curriculum. Summarized, its main features include:

1. a conglomeration of atomistic, cognitivistic, desocialized, de-personalized and de-contextualized 'fillings', mostly defined as 'subject matter' or studies;
2. a catalogue or canon, that is an autonomous, almost unpersonal entity, isolated from and a priori to the (social) experiences of the learners;
3. the primacy of educational objectives;
4. the idea that curriculum embodies 'transferable' culture;
5. the general idea that learning is produced by formalized didactical input.

This type of thinking on curriculum has found its best formulation in the so-called Tyler 'Rationale' (Tyler, 1949). In this type of thinking, curriculum development follows a
prescribed path on the basis of what Tyler calls ‘four fundamental questions’ (1949, 2), the first and most fundamental being that of the educational goals to be achieved. As Kliebard (1975) has shown, this ‘model’ of curriculum has in the past served in the process of the bureaucratization and methodization of education (for a critique of this perspective see Hlebowitsh, 1996). Along side this we find that the communicative process is conceptualized as an unproblematic sender-receiver affair, in which as Garrison (1995, 727) says “... psychic entities (e.g. ideas, schemata, and scripts) are conducted from one talking head to another by means of physical symbols and sounds.” In this uni-directional affair, the receiver is conceptualized as passive. Education has indeed become equated, in the mind of the general public anyway (if not in that of many educationalists) with a curriculum that support the model smooth transmission of a specified selection of what Michael Apple calls ‘official knowledge.’ Questions such as ‘why?’ and ‘what for?’ become superseded by questions of ‘how?’ (Berding, forthcoming). Tanner and Tanner (1988), however, claim the Tyler rationale to be the ‘paradigm’ for the curriculum field. They state:

In essence, Tyler’s syllabus proved to be an orchestration and systematic elaboration of the key elements, sources, determinants, processes, and principles that had been advanced for curriculum development and evaluation by leading experimentalists during the first half of the 20th century. (p. 54)

In spite of a factual dominance of this technological-rational model, there still remain other views which, be it in many varied ways, belong to the Bildung-tradition. When one searches for such views, the work of the American philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey (1859-1952) cannot be overlooked. Positively stated, a reconceptualization of curriculum will most certainly have to take its cue from this versatile thinker and doer. His work in philosophy and education is one great attempt to overcome dysfunctional dualisms like between the child and the curriculum, freedom and discipline, the individual and the society, body and mind. I will use my reconstruction of his theory of experience and learning to challenge the claim made by the Tanners (Tanner and Tanner, 1980, 1988; D. Tanner, 1982; L.N. Tanner, 1982) that Dewey must be regarded as the ancestor of ‘modern’ curriculum theory as formulated in the Tyler rationale.3 In the next part of my paper I will go into Dewey’s attempt to reconceptualize the concept of experience as a way out of the dilemma of technology against Bildung. After that I will talk about Dewey’s curriculum theory as a theory of ‘planned experience.’

Dewey’s Theory of Experience

The concept of experience is a central one in Dewey’s overall position in the philosophy of education. Already early in his career, in 1892, Dewey’s gives his perhaps most concise definition of experience: ‘Our experience is simply what we do’ (1892; LW17:154). The fact that there is experience and that there is a ‘we’ who experience, need not lead us to construct an ontological split-up between on the one hand experience, and on the other hand a ‘we.’ Dewey criticizes the fact that what he calls ‘mobile distinctions’ are made into rigid separations (idem, 156). Dewey’s struggle with dualisms is evident in his critique of the reflex-arc concept in psychology (1896; EWS:96-110). To Dewey, experience is one of the core concepts of his pedagogical outlook, especially his curriculum theory (see a.o. 1902; MW2:271-291 and 1897; EWS:84-95). In Democracy and Education (MW9) Dewey placed the emphasis on experience as the combination of trying and undergoing. The connection between education and experience is made in Dewey’s effort to define education as the continuous reconstruction of experience (see 1897; EWS:91; 1916; MW9:76; also see Archambault, 1966, 115) a view that receives its most concise treatment in one of his last statements on public education (1938; LW13:1-62). In this text I will focus on Dewey’s thoughts from a somewhat limited time perspective, namely his work around the turn of the century.

There are three major, and in a sense, traditional problems that Dewey tries to solve by re-conceptualizing the concept of experience. For each and every solution other thinkers have given, Dewey presents an alternative view. First of all Dewey criticizes those who break experience down into fragmented and atomized ‘bits.’ This becomes especially clear in Dewey’s critique of the reflex-arc concept (1896; EWS:96-110). There Dewey criticizes contemporary psychological thought that burdens what Dewey perceives as continuous human conduct with artificial discontinuities. Dewey aims his critique especially at the separation construed by the adherents of the reflex-arc theory, which on the one hand upholds an independent stimulus and on the other a dependent response. By making such a separation, psychologists neglect the wholeness and continuity in conduct. Thus, Dewey argues that the reflex-arc concept is inadequate to understand conduct as it is, namely a continually moving, dynamic affair. It is not the stimulus that constitutes the response, nor the response that constitutes the stimulus. It is the wholeness of the situation, or in Dewey’s words, the ‘co-ordination’ between stimulus and response that determines what will be experienced by the individual as stimulus and response.
Dewey's conclusion makes the claim for a 'functionalistic' approach in psychology, namely that

... the distinction of sensation and movement as stimulus and response respectively is not a distinction between what can be regarded as descriptive of anything which holds of psychical events or existences as such... [Stimulus and response] are strictly correlative and contemporaneous. (idem, 109)

Stimulus and response are "inside a co-ordination and have their significance purely from the part played in maintaining or reconstituting the co-ordination" (idem, 99). Stimulus and response are not distinctions of existence, but functions in the continuation of conduct. They are a division of labor in order to achieve a certain end. Dewey proposes to see conduct as a continually moving process, the proper metaphor not being an arc but a circle.

The second major problem, related to the first one, that Dewey tries to solve is the inadequacy of experience as an exclusively intellectualistic concept. In some theories, experience is seen primarily as a phenomenon of the intellect; that is of the 'mind' as an individualistic, 'higher' category for and by its own sake. Dewey attack's this claim on two points. First of all, and I think this is crucial from an educational point of view, he sees experience primarily as a down-to-earth and bodily affair. This point is also stressed in the reflex-arc critique. Dewey says that the conceptualization of 'sensation-followed-by-idea-followed-by-movement' must be seen all the way round and must be replaced by that of a 'sensori-motor-co-ordination'... 'the movement of body, head, and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced' (idem, 97). Dewey says that 'e)xperience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive' (1916; MW9:140). Dewey demonstrates the many evils that result from the separation, or 'dualism' as he calls it, between mind and body (idem 141-144). First, bodily activity is suppressed and divorced from the acquisition of meaning. Anyone, I might add, who has ever observed an infant or a toddler exploring the world around him, knows the vital importance of the body. A second evil is that acting becomes isolated from meaning or purposes. And third, separation of mind and body leads to an emphasis on things rather than on relations or connections. For Dewey, the human condition is that humans exist as 'body-minds', a term... which designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication, and participation' (1925; LW1:217). The second argument against a view of mind as an independent category is that in older theories 'mind' or 'cognition' is narrowed down to a one-sided rationalistic intellectualism. Dewey stresses throughout his work that there are many ways to experience, to learn and to know and that the intellect, be it a very important one, is only one of them. With Dewey, the case is for what I would like to call 'multiple rationality' and this again has important educational consequences.

The third and last problem Dewey tries to solve has to do with the conceptualization of experience in relation to its status within human existence. For Dewey, experience is a 'natural' phenomenon, not outside of the human species but completely inside of it as part of our evolutionary make-up. Experience denotes the way living organisms interact with their environment. For humans, the environment is social, cultural and political. Experience, although it goes on within and 'on' individuals and their bodies, is by no means an individualistic affair. It is mediated through culture, through the active engagement or participation in common undertakings of the younger and older members of society. Experience is something that in first instance follows from our being on an earth that must be 'known' in order to be inhabitable. This process of 'getting to know the earth' is a joint undertaking in which people's actions must be coordinated in order to reach this common goal. In this process, language becomes so important a tool that Dewey calls it 'the tool of tools' (cf Garrison, 1995, 721). Out of the coordination of conduct, in which linguistically something is 'made in common' (1938; LW12:52), meaning arises, and the communication of meaning (as a process of sharing and developing meaning) is at the heart of culture, and of education (cf Biesta, 1995).

In Democracy and Education (1916; MW9) Dewey conceptualizes experience as a twofold affair, namely as 'an active and a passive element peculiarly combined' as he calls it (MW9:139), the active element being 'trying' and the passive being 'undergoing':

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return. (ibid)

There is an intricate relationship between experience and learning as Dewey points out:

To "learn from experience" is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction -discovery of the connection of things. (idem, 140)

Clearly, on this point Dewey makes the philosophical, the psychological and the educational conceptualizations of experience all fall in one line. This becomes even clearer when Dewey connects experience and learning to the concept of reflection. 'Thought or reflection... is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in...
consequence' (idem, 144). Here there are two types of experience, one being the well-known ‘trial-and-error,’ the other being the deliberate testing of a hypothesis, (in other words conducting an experiment). New insight is revealed and the experience undergoes what could be called a ‘quality leap’ and becomes reflective. When reflection becomes cultivated, experience, learning, and reflection pass over to thinking as the deliberate or “intentional endeavor to discover specific consequences which result, so that the two become continuous” (idem, 145). Reflection and thinking make planning possible, by the anticipation of certain outcomes or ends-in-view (idem, 146). The function of thinking becomes apparent in situations where ‘things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic’ (idem, 148). Therefore,

thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating’. (. . .) (A) If thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is still looking for. (ibid)

Thus, to Dewey, the child is an inventor before he is a consumer and a creator before he is an imitator, a philosophical statement with vast educational implications. The conclusion of thinking is called knowledge, which is a tentative result used in further action-planning (idem, 149).

The above can be summarized by pointing at the central concepts within Dewey’s theory of experience. They are functional coordination, cultural context and continuity in conduct. There we have, in a nutshell also the key concepts of Dewey’s position in curriculum theory to which I will now devote my attention.

Curriculum Theory: Dewey’s ‘Plan’

Dewey says:

Unless experience is so conceived that the result is a plan for deciding upon subject-matter, upon methods of instruction and discipline, and upon material equipment and social organization of the school, it is wholly in the air. (1938; LW13:13)

From the beginning of his career in education Dewey did not want to leave experience ‘wholly in the air.’ He had in mind a ‘plan’ of how to organize education. That is why I want to speak of Dewey’s idea of curriculum as ‘planned experience.’ I will give the outlines of this plan by using the 1895 publication ‘Plan of Organization of the University Primary School’ (EWS:223-243) and some related publications. These show how around 1900 Dewey was testing his answer to what he felt was the problem of education in his laboratory school.4

I will show that with the concept of ‘planned experience’ Dewey creates a way out of the false dilemma between technology and ‘Bildung.’ The ‘Plan’ opens with a core statement on education: “The ultimate problem of all education is to co-ordinate the psychological and the social factors” (idem, 224). This means that in the center of the educational process is neither the development of the individual learner nor the adjustment to the demands of society; in the center is an ever renewed balancing of individuals (with their needs, demands, capacities, learning styles, and so on) and the society (a group of people with a certain socio-cultural and political makeup). Dewey’s ‘Plan’ consists of two connected steps. The first is to find an answer on a theoretical level to the problem of education (cf Baker, 1955). The second is have a course of inquiry emerge to test the hypothesis formulated on this problem. Both steps constitute a circular process of curriculum development that is guided by reflective intelligence, that constantly deals with changes in the environment.

Step 1. The Problem of Education

When Dewey says that the ultimate problem is to co-ordinate the psychological and social factors he means that experience is neither a purely individualistic affair nor a purely social one. Rather it is the interplay or coordination of individual and social factors that constitutes experience. Dewey makes it clear from the outset that the central problem in education is how to avoid an artificial antagonism between these aspects. On Dewey’s view the problem of education ultimately is ‘the harmonizing of individual traits with social ends and values’ (Mayhew & Edwards, 1966, 465), because both constitute the organic unity of individual and society which together form the ‘conditions of education’ (Archambault, 1966, 33). In education the individual and the social factors have to be coordinated, whereby

[the] psychological requires that the individual have free use of all his personal powers; and . . . must be so individually studied as to have the laws of his own structure regarded. The sociological factor requires that the individual become acquainted with the social environment in which he lives, in all its important relations, and be disciplined to regard these relationships in his own activities. The co-ordination demands therefore, that the child be capable of expressing himself, but in such a way as to realize social ends. (1895; EWS:224)

The individual and the society are organically connected: ‘Society is a society of individuals and the individual is always a social individual’ (1897; EWS:55). On the individual side, we have the ‘how’ of conduct, on the social side we have what the individual does and needs to do from the standpoint of the larger community of which it is a member. So the
educational process "... has two sides—one psychological and one sociological;... neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following" (1897; EW5:85). The communities to which the child belongs, be it the neighborhood, the city, or the nation as a whole, are in constant change. Therefore, one must not expect education to focus exclusively on today’s needs or whims. “It is an absolute impossibility to educate the child for any given station in life (1897; EW5:59). The school as a vital social institution should rather “educate for change.”

It is worthwhile to quote Dewey at length now because of the subtle and well-balanced way he speaks about this complicated subject:

I do not mean ... that education does not centre in the pupil. It obviously takes its start with him and terminates in him. But the child is not something isolated; he does not live inside himself, but in a world of nature and culture. His experience is not complete in his impulses and emotions; these must reach out into a world of objects and persons. And until an experience has become relatively mature, the impulses do not even know what they are reaching out toward and for; they are blind and inchoate. To fail to assure them guidance and direction is not only to permit them to operate in a blind and spasmodic fashion, but it promotes the formation of habits of immature, undeveloped, and egotistic activity. Guidance and direction mean that the impulses and desires take effect through material that is impersonal and objective. And this subject matter can be provided in a way which will obtain ordered and consecutive development of experience only by means of the thoughtful selection and organization of material by those having the broadest experience — those who treat impulses and inchoate desires and plans as potentialities of growth through interaction and not as finalities. (1930; LW5:632)

In Dewey’s view, education is a matter of finding a balance between freedom and control, and between the child as an individual and as a social being. This involves an element of guidance and giving direction to the process of growth.

When Dewey says: “I believe that education ... is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (1897; EW5:87) he hits one of the most disputed subjects in the philosophical-educational field: the goal of education. Dewey takes the ‘strong’ position that: “... the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end” (1916; MW9:50). “Education” and “life” are one and the same thing. This expresses itself in growth: “the cumulative movement of action toward a later result” (idem, 41). The individual, who lives in an environment that appeals to its innate powers uses the environmental conditions to get better adjusted to the ever more complex demands of that environment. At the same time that environment is constantly reshaped by the coordinated actions of the individuals.

Step 2. Planning Experience: Structure and Emergence

As the long quotation above shows, Dewey is by no means an advocate of uncontrolled liberty. He is not a child-centered pedagogue, no matter what his adversaries have made of his ideas. On the other hand the quotation makes clear that Dewey is neither a subject or teacher-centered pedagogue. The first step in the development of any curriculum is not located in the formulation of goals (outside the educational process itself) but an analysis of exactly the relation between child and subjects. Dewey begins with the identification of the starting point of the educational process; it is located in the child:

The starting point is always the impulse to self-expression (and) (1) the educational process is to supply the material and provide the conditions so that the expression shall occur in its normal social direction. (1895; EW5:229)

Then a connection is made between the child’s impulses and experiences with what through a process of thousands of years of cultural evolution has been handed down to us:

Consequently the beginning is made with the child’s expressive activities in dealing with the fundamental social materials — housing ... clothing ... food. (idem, 230)

These “occupations” (a term borrowed from Froebel; cf Berding, in press A) are the fundamental ways in which people have kept themselves alive as they give opportunity to constructive work for the child of today, in relation to ‘the most important activities of the everyday outside world’ (1899; MW1:62). Dewey (idem, 92) describes ‘occupation’ as “a mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work carried on in social life.” With the occupations as the nucleus, other activities (and all the ‘traditional’ subjects) in the school fall into their proper place: geography, history, science, and the 3R’s are derived from them and are placed in a certain ‘functional’ relationship to them.6 The structure of the curriculum then is made up of four major parts: house-keeping, wood-work, foods, and clothing (cf Mayhew and Edwards, 1996:1936; cf Hendley, 1986; Westbrook, 1991).

Now, the idea that Dewey uses the analysis of the problem of education as a means to select from an existing reservoir of knowledge those parts that solve the problem best is a false way to picture his point of view. In fact there is no ‘reservoir’ as such. This is precisely the point where Dewey breaks with technological approaches to curriculum. The fact that Dewey uses labels like ‘history’ or ‘geography’ might suggest that in spite of his criticism of traditional education
he still uses the old subjects. This however is not the case. Dewey is skeptical of logical considerations with regard to studies and subjects. To him psychological considerations come first as we have seen. 'Contents' or subjects as such do not exist, or perhaps better put, do not exist as 'given.' Dewey is clear about the point that

... only as we ask what kind of experience is going on, what attitude some individual is actually assuming, what purpose or end some individual has in view, do we find a basis for selecting and arranging the facts under the label of any particular study. (1897; EW5:169)

Because, as Dewey says, "(t)he true centre of correlation of the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities" (1897; EW5:89). The curriculum is not put before those activities, but emerges out of them. But they are not left to themselves. They are guided towards goals that are socially desirable. In order to achieve this, a certain structure is required; a structure that is not externally imposed upon the pupils. It is out of deep sense of confidence in the potentialities and capacities of learners that Dewey has this structure and discipline emerge out of the activities themselves. The control is inside the process not outside of it. Freedom and control are not opposed. Subject matter need not be 'sugar coated' (in order to be 'swallowed' by the pupils), but is 'psychologized' (1902; MW2:286), which means translated into the immediate and personal experience in which its original meaning is located.

Main Points and Conclusions

In Dewey's theory, what goes on as 'curriculum' (cf Doll, 1995 who speaks of 'currere' to emphasize the practical-active character) is characterized by the functional coordination of individual and social factors, which means that the child and traditions are not put over against each other but have a common denominator in the concept of experience. In this sense traditions are 'the accumulated experience of the race,' and it becomes the school's business to bring 'the child to share in the inherited sources of the race' (1897; EW5:87). In education, not transmission and control but sharing is the key word.

Experiencing and learning are activities that affect individuals (especially in and 'on' their bodies) but they are socially mediated by the educator's invitation to the pupil to participate in communal undertakings and projects. In this process experiences are connected like an eternal chain. When an experience enables the child to better control and guide his "body-mental" activities towards desired ends, there is continuity in conduct and we might call this growth. Again, in education not transmission and control but invitation is the key word.

Experiencing and learning take place in socio-cultural and political contexts. Although the school is part of a larger educative field, it is still vitally important. The school should be aware of the societal changes that take place and that have a profound influence on the preconditions of education, especially public education. A school can be a place of practice where there is real participation along with an emphasis on interactions and communication between individuals and groups on all levels. We might call this democracy. Schools have a distinctive function [because the school is a 'special environment' (1916; MW9:18-22)] to provide the learners with the means to intelligently go about their ways. A school curriculum should be so (re)constructed to serve this purpose. Again, not transmission and control but participation is the educational key word.

And so we arrive at a final statement of Dewey's that there is no antagonism between the child and the curriculum. Rather the child and the curriculum are 'two limits which define a single process (1902; MW2:278). It is the concept of experience that makes them stick together.

Dewey's curriculum theory is founded upon anthropological, psychological and social-philosophical (political) views that conceptualize the nature of 'child' as an active organism in search of stimuli that will promote its growth. The experiential nature of learning as problem solving and the political nature of schooling as embedded in community structures maximize active participation in learning (cf Berding, in press B).

With Dewey we are not held prisoner by either the technological or the Bildung approach. Dewey is most critical of technology in the way it has monopolized rationality and has put method before experience, and has split up things that belong together, like means and ends. But nevertheless Dewey knows that forms of technology are needed. It's the way society deals with that this counts. On the other hand, Dewey corrects the Bildung-tradition on a certain blindness for societal developments that have a great impact on education, like technological developments. With Dewey we have educational theory in its utmost political sense: the shaping of a society in which the common goods, among which are knowledge and social intelligence, are distributed fairly among all who participate in that society. In that process different forms of technology and planning are demanded so that it can be controlled and guided toward desired ends.

Lastly, Dewey stands quite alone in his conceptualization of curriculum as non-teleological, non-technological, guiding, and experiential (cf Doll, 1995). Nevertheless his position can be fruitful for the movement toward a more flexible curriculum if we are willing to conceive of education as a process of communication, participation, dialogue and sharing.
By John Dewey.

I have used the collected works of Dewey, published by The Southern Illinois University Press at Carbondale and Edwardsville. Abbreviations: EW = Early Works; MW = Middle Works; LW = Later Works. All are under the general editorship of J. A. Boydston.

1892 Syllabus Introduction to Philosophy; LW1:153-160.
1895 Plan of Organization of the University Primary School; EW5:223-243.
1896 The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology; EW5:96-110.
1897 Ethical Principles Underlying Education; EW5:54-83.
1897 My Pedagogic Creed; EW5:84-95.
1897 The Psychological Aspect of the School Curriculum; EW5:164-176.
1899 The School and Society; MW1:1-111.
1901 Educational Lectures before Brigham Young Academy; LW1:211-347.
1916 Democracy and Education; MW9.
1925 Experience and Nature; LW1.
1938 Logic: The Theory of Inquiry; LW12.
1938 Experience and Education; LW13:1-62.

Other references.

TOWARDS A FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM


Notes

1. This text is a slightly edited version of a paper presented under the same title at the international conference 'Problems of Education at the End of the 20th Century: International Dialogue.' Kursk, Russia, April 8-13, 1996.

2. Elsewhere I have reconstructed Dewey’s critique of philosophies of education such as Herbart’s in which the child is seen as a passive receiver of what I call ‘coagulated culture’ (Berding, 1991). According to Dewey, ‘(t)he child is not waiting passively to take in experience. He is looking for experiences, and in every moment of his waking life, he shows this original and spontaneous eagerness to get more experience, and become acquainted with the world of things and of people about him’ (Educational Lectures before Brigham Young Academy: 1901; LW17:215).

3. This is the main thesis of the Tanners, and also the subject of an exchange between them, Jickling (1988) and others. Also see Kliebard (1995) versus Hlebowitsh (1995), and Berding (1992).

4. As Dewey’s laboratory school had two ‘main purposes: (1) to exhibit, test, verify, and criticize theoretical statements and principles; and (2) to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line’ (Mayhew and Edwards, 1966, 3).

The central problem outlined above diverged into four sub-problems (The School and Society: 1899; MW1:59-61). They were:

a. What can be done, and how can it be done, to bring the school into closer relation with the home and neighbourhood life . . . ?

b. What can be done in the way of introducing subject-matter in history and science and art, that shall have a positive value and real significance in the child’s own life . . . ?

c. How can instruction in (the) formal, symbolic branches—the mastering of the ability to read, write, and use figures intelligently—be carried on with everyday experience and occupations as their background and in definite relations to other studies of more inherent content, and be carried on in such a way that the child shall feel their necessity through their connection with subjects which appeal to him on their own account?

d. Individual attention.

Although with some reluctance, Dewey accepted the label of an ‘experimental school,’ because ‘(w)he have attempted to find out by trying, by doing . . . whether these problems may be worked out, and how they may be worked out’ (idem, 61).

5. The term ‘emergent curriculum’ is inspired by Doll (1995).

6. This way of ‘co-ordinating’ the different school subjects means an emancipation from the Herbartian position that placed history and literature at the core of the curriculum (cf Berding, 1991). It also meant a radical departure from practices which displayed an atmosphere of ‘sit-stilleries’ and drudgery (see Rice, 1893).

7. From this point of view Dewey’s ideas and practices very much resemble those of the Polish pedagogue, writer and doctor Janusz Korczak, whose ‘pedagogy of respect’ (cf Berding, 1994, 1995) knows this same sensitivity for the daily ‘life and strife’ of children.