

Dewey Personal Reflection

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Abstract

This semester's EDAE 520 Adult Education has allowed its participants to learn many new theories, explore educational philosophies as well as research historical lessons from the beginning of Adult Education to the present day. Each learner was able to share his/her thoughts during the discussions, reflecting on their own diverse environments, backgrounds and cultures. John Dewey identifies some of these key influential aspects in his book, *Experience and Education* and this text and the class itself have allowed me to reflect on my own learning experience during this semester.

Dewey Personal Reflection

This first Adult Education class has definitely been an interesting and informative journey. It is, for most of the students, the first class toward a Masters of Education degree. Together, we have learned key theoretical and historical concepts about the topic, and we have also learned about each other and our own individual learning paths. Each of the students (including the instructor) brought something different to the class based on age, gender, ethnicity, culture, background, environment and experience. It is the inclusion of this deeply personal experience that John Dewey considered important in learning activities. He believed that learners need to understand their past and present experiences in order to grow and prepare for the future: "We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future." (Dewey, 1938, p. 49). This brings me to reflect on the learning experience of this semester and how it will impact the future of my education and career.

John Dewey was an American philosopher, psychologist, and an educational reformer. He impacted education greatly. In 1938, he published "*Experience and Education*" and in this book, he argues that education and learning are social and interactive processes, and thus the institution is not only a learning space but also a social institution. In addition, he believes that students thrive in an environment where they are allowed to experience and interact with the curriculum, and all students should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning.

Dewey presents two types of learning environments: Traditional and Freedom. The

traditional is based on pushing students to absorb information by repeating concepts and learning the rules to apply to problems. Students are expected to recall the facts of specific issues throughout their lives. The learning is rather passive, ineffective, boring and teacher centered. "Traditional education tended to ignore the importance of personal impulse and desire" (Dewey, 1938, p. 70). On the other hand, freedom learning is based on allowing the student to be more engaged with a less authoritarian approach. Dewey believed that learning is active and students should be actively involved in real-world tasks & challenges and be invested in what they are being taught. Dewey's education philosophy helped create the progressive education movement. He understood that learners need to assimilate fundamental concepts and important information for their future careers. However, he argues that the environment should be guided by the teachers/instructors to expose the learners to key learning experiences, hands-on interactions and exchanges of knowledge and experience to foster better learning. He believed that the lessons with measurable outcomes done in a democratic manner (common exchange) would lead to positive growth. The key is to have an instructor who personally engages the learners in the lessons by conducting classes at their pace and also encouraging them to understand and assimilate the concepts rather than to force-feed information. The Montessori schools use this progressive learning approach. Each student will learn at their own pace with an instructor guiding them through their learning experience.

However, Dewey understood that there is a divergence in teaching pre-school children versus older students. The young learning experience is different and therefore the teaching activities require a different approach. "Those who deal...with the boy and girl of the early primary years do not have much difficulty in determining the range of past experience or in

finding activities that connect in a vital way with it” (Dewey, 1938,p. 75). In addition, children do not understand the meaning of learning experience. However, later on adult learners understand the importance of it for life improvement. It is one of the key elements that motivate them to move forward.

During this semester in Adult Education, we switched positions as the learner and teacher several times and experienced the progressive method of learning. Our curriculum and course materials were defined by our instructor; however during our discussions, the learning became democratic. The discussion board was an excellent tool for this process. During these conversations, we were able to exchange our thoughts and concerns, and help each other understand each topic as it was read or presented—with the instructor redirecting the discussion or expanding it. Topics were shown using different methods such as Powerpoint, Prezi or papers, thereby making the environment varied and engaging. Some of us brought additional course materials such as videos or articles to add to the exploration of various topics. Chapter reviews and historical topics were fully based on the progressive learning style. Each student had to learn about a specific topic in order to experience what it is like to present material to the other students and to direct the discussion board. The Agency paper was again a progressive learning exercise, yet guided by the instructor who approved each program. Even if most students in the class were aware in general of the Adult Education (AE) topic, key concepts were totally new for us. We examined what AE really means and discussed different types of learning, its theory and practice, its globalization and its diversity. The breadth and comprehensiveness of this process left us with a better understanding of the topic and with what Dewey calls the *continuity of experience* which he defined as the fact “that every

experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.” (Dewey, 1938,p. 35)

Learning activities that are mainly based on experience are evident in the leadership sessions that I coordinated at my organization. Our education department hosts about three events every year for our management team. Some are lecture based but most are a mix of lecture and hands-on activities. The learning activities are developed to push critical thinking, team building and goal setting. These are usually popular as managers appreciate the interaction and exchange of information. Dewey argued that experience is needed to lead to positive growth. Not all learning can be positive. For example, for the agency report this semester, I visited the Clinical Nurse Assistant (CNA) program at J.F. Drake State Community and Technical College. It was obvious that some of these students didn't experience positive growth during their high school education which led them to decline further education. It seems that the high school faculty (or maybe the student environment itself) failed to forge the connection between the group of students, the various topics and the importance of education. For the learners following the CNA program, I saw a real desire to grow positively and learn a skill that would help them in the future. I see a direct correlation between the desire to learn and the topic of interest. As we discussed in class, motivation is a key element to successful learning.

As an educator, it is important to make the connection between all student experiences and the topic being taught. It is crucial to be able to connect the student (despite his or her individual experiences) with the topic presented. This is not an easy task. I particularly recall an experience I had as an undergraduate. One class that I was required to take was Astronomy. Personally, I had no interest in the topic. (As I recall I was not the only one who was taking the

class merely to fulfill a science requirement). However, most of the class was taking this course with genuine enthusiasm because they were working toward a science major. At the beginning of the class, the professor gave us an assignment: observe the moon over the course of a month and write a paper about what we noticed. I found myself becoming more and more interested in the planetary system and enjoyed attending observatory presentations during non-scheduled class time! The professor had reached his goal of making the topic interesting to me and expanding my range of experience. Today, every once in a while, I like to reach for my telescope, look at the sky and recall the lectures that I attended.

My experience not as student but as teacher is limited but I have encountered a somewhat similar situation to that of my astronomy teacher. I am the administrator of our Learning Management System (LMS) at my healthcare facility. Our LMS is used to track continuing education for clinicians including nurses and physicians. In addition, the system also tracks the hospital's annual education requirements for all employees. Educators or managers can become users of the LMS and assign, track and report education for their specific employees. In the past, when a manager would ask to become an LMS manager or "Superuser", I would ask them to sign up for a class and at the beginning of the class, I would give them their logon and move to the lesson on the mechanics of an LMS and how to use it. It became obvious very quickly, that I had two issues to deal with. Frequently the educator or manager would become confused with the process as he/she began the class. They had no overview of the LMS system, how to use it and what they would gain by participating. By the end of the class, the learners were more at ease with the technical aspects of the system but didn't fully grasp the concept about what, specifically the system could help them within their

everyday work life. The second issue involved computer skills. I had employees who were technically fluent but others who were not computer literate. It became clear that I had to change my teaching method. Now, as soon as I'm aware that an educator or a manager needs access to the system, I give them their logon and then recommend that they sign up for a class. The great majority of them will go into the system and try to figure out on their own how to use it. By the time they get to one of my classes; they understand the basics and have become familiar with the system. We usually spend 1/3 of the class on the technical aspects of the system and the rest covering their specific needs, explaining how the system helps them and how they can improve their educational reports. The learners are definitely more engaged. They can make the link between their needs and the LMS. As far as the instruction itself, I have enjoyed my teaching experience more fully as the excitement of the students becomes obvious to me.

It is definitely important to connect with adult learners and note their diversity. In the historical topics, we read and discussed key adult education movements. These movements came from educators recognizing a need for better educational methodologies to reach the specific needs of groupings of learners. The connections made between these educators and their learners led to several educational methods. A few examples are Junto, Lyceum, Chautauqua and Moonlight schools. As we read about globalization and diversity, we also recognized that it is important to consider these topics as part of the learner experience. What comes to mind is the example that one of the students, Cynthia Wynbush formulated during our discussion. She explained that she was teaching a class which included eight traditionally dressed Muslim women and the class had an initial reaction to their presence. As Mrs. Wynbush

taught her class, she made sure to include these women with the whole group and this allowed a full understanding of what experience all about. As we read on the Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education, "Diversity is important for generating new ideas and tapping into valuable perspectives and capabilities that are especially important in light of globalization and demographic shifts" (Watkins & Marsick, 2010, p. 66).

One additional point that Dewey makes in his book is that the learning environment is important to the experience. The physical and intellectual environments should promote the learning process. As he stated for traditional education, "the school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard, was supposed to suffice. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources." (Dewey, 1938, p. 40)

Dewey believed that a learning environment that exposes its students to freedom of movement will allow them to express themselves and lead to freedom of thought. The structured environment that was employed during the traditional schooling was stifling student growth. During my agency visit, I was able to appreciate the learning settings that were available for the students following the CNA program. Their classroom had two different areas with a classroom style setting and a skills lab. The room was surrounded by clinical equipment which allowed the instructor to refer to it as she was presenting her topics. The classroom was clean and was equipped with audio/visual equipment. It was helpful for the instructor to change her presentation style from lecture to viewing a video making it more interesting for students and more interactive.

Conclusion

Throughout the semester, without at first knowing it, we were using Dewey's philosophy. He states that we need to reflect on our past (both positive and negative) experiences to improve and appreciate our future experience. As learners, we were asked to reflect on chapters read, historical topics presented, agencies visited, etc. and reflect as well based on each of our experiences and with such developing our full potential . I have truly enjoyed learning this semester not only from the Adult Education readings and presentations materials but also from my professor's knowledge and classmates' experiences. Early in the course, we familiarized ourselves with the barn raising concept presented in "The TAO of Conversation" (Kahn, 1995) and this concept was similar to Dewey's group democratic approach, with individuals helping each other to build a lifelong learning process.

As we continue in our self-fulfilling education journey, it will be important to choose instructors that provide progressive education to promote meaningful human experiences so we can, when the time comes, perpetuate this teaching experience and help positive changes flourish in a student's life .

References

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