

DEWEY'S THEORY OF EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

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Cornell's Dwight Giles, Jr. relates John Dewey's concepts about education and experience to service-learning. Giles suggests a dialectical interaction between service and learning, which had implications for ensuring quality in service learning programs and for defining service-learning as a philosophy rather than as a type of program. The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education is pleased to give reprint permission of this chapter from Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service, 1990. Published by NSIEE, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609. Members of the Cooperative Education Association are eligible for a discount. Please see the acknowledgment at the beginning of the volume or the enclosed brochure. This chapter originally appeared in Experiential Education, National Society for internships and Experiential Education, Vol. 13, No. 5, November December 1988, pp. 3, 10.

It is difficult to do a brief analysis of John Dewey's educational philosophy in regard to any one of the many dimensions of his theory, and it may also be somewhat speculative to attempt a brief analysis of the implications of Dewey's central theory for an area of education about which he did not write. However, as an earlier discussion of these ideas illustrated,¹ the importance of Dewey's theory of experience is critical for informing our current efforts to develop further the theoretical bases of service-learning and experiential education in general. What I have attempted here, then, is a limited exposition of Dewey's theory of experience, drawn mainly from his later work, especially *Experience and Education* (1938), and then a brief analysis of what the implications are for the theory and practice of service-learning.

Primacy of the Concept of Experience

Central to Dewey's early writings on children's learning during the period of his work at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago (1896-1916)

¹ This article is based on remarks prepared for the panel "Developing a Common Language for Community Service Programs" presented at the 16th annual conference of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, Smugglers Notch, Vermont, October 15, 1987. I am indebted to the panel moderator, Dick Couto, for encouraging me to develop these thoughts and to Debbie Cotton and Bob Sigmon, my fellow panelists, for helping me refine my thinking.

and to his later and revised thinking about education in a broader context is the *primacy of the concept of experience*. The fundamental characteristic of this central element of Dewey's educational (and social) philosophy was the "... organic connection between education and personal experience." (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) This connection was not a simple or direct one, as his critics often charged. Rather, Dewey postulated that while "all genuine education comes about through experience (this) does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative." (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) This conviction that many experiences were mis-educative led Dewey to develop criteria for defining the educative quality of experience. Dewey elaborated on these criteria as the two fundamental principles of experience which are described below. They are derived from the dialectical stance that shaped his entire philosophy. As this dialectic had earlier linked school and society, the child and the curriculum, democracy and education, it now linked experience and education by two other sets of linkages. Dewey called these linkages the Principle of Continuity (also called the experiential continuum) and the Principle of Interaction.

The Principles of Continuity and Interaction

The Principle of Continuity provides the first criterion by which the quality of experience can be assessed for its educative value. This assessment goes beyond the present quality of the experience in order to determine its effect on growth and development, the value of future experiences, and the direction in which the experience is leading. According to Dewey, the task of the educator is to determine the effects of the present experience upon future experiences and to ensure that experiences will be educative by specifying the direction of growth.

The Principle of Interaction provides the second criterion by which the quality of experience can be assessed. Dewey said it is necessary for the internal or subjective elements of experience to be balanced with the external or objective aspects. Application of this principle interprets the educational value of an experience by considering both elements of experience and by demanding that there be a goodness of fit or a "transaction" between the two. This interaction forms what Dewey called a "situation" which is a given of experience and which is also the result of the educator ensuring that both the internal and external aspects of experience are attended to in the educational task. Because the interaction is part of the situation, the concept is a dynamic one. It leads to the corollary that the determination of the quality of an experience involves the interaction between the subject and the environment.

The power of Dewey's theory of experience is that these two principles

operate in interaction with each other, taking into consideration the temporal dimension in both the internal and external aspects of experience. The pedagogical task that results from this theory involves a large and complicated set of factors that needed to be identified and structured for both the individual and for society if experience is to be truly educative.

Implications for Service-Learning

Several implications seem readily apparent for service-learning, the first of which is a dialectical and multi-dimensional conceptualization. Indeed, a Deweyian conceptualization would be expressed as “service and learning” in order to reflect the dialectical interaction between the two. This conceptualization would move beyond the “Either-Or” educational philosophy that Dewey found so unproductive and that has hindered our own theoretical and practical efforts in service-learning. Furthermore, this conceptualization calls for additional development of the model that Sinclair Goodlad has proposed for service-learning where the dimensions of theory and practice, and of individual and society, are held in tension in curriculum development (Goodlad, 1988).²

A second implication, or set of implications, is derived from the application of Dewey's two principles to service-learning programs as a means of ensuring quality. Specifically, this means that attention must be given to the interaction between the server and the served, between past and present experiences, and to the service learning transactions that are part of the learning. A true situational learning approach helps to ensure the quality of the service (Sigmon, 1979, 1987) and also helps to ensure rigor for the learning derived from the experience of service. Understanding and acting upon the situation in its micro, macro, and interactive components leads to a broad, ecological approach to service and learning.

A third implication, and perhaps the most fundamental one, is for the very definition of service-learning. The question of the definition and location of service-learning within the broader educational endeavor has been posed by Stanton as “Is service-learning a form of experiential education which can stand beside internships, field study and cooperative education? Or, is it a philosophy of experiential education which suggests methods and practices that should inform all programs?” (1987, p. 4) The answer from Dewey's theory of experience - with its understanding that experience is ultimately social and communal and that education is interactive and reciprocal - suggests the latter view of service-learning as a philosophy of experiential education rather than the former and more restrictive definition.

² For another multi-dimensional model that reflects the Deweyian dialectic, see Richard A. Couto's illustration of the tensions and relationships between community service and education (1987).

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