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ARE 6049 – History of Teaching Art

Independent Project – John Dewey's Influence on Art Education

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Introduction

John Dewey (1859-1952) lived 92 years. As an American philosopher, educator, and scholar his work helped shape and reform education during times of significant cultural and societal flux. Through periods of conflict and poverty, shifts in political power and economics, changes in diversity of peoples and cultures, advancements in science, research, and innovations, Dewey's writings supported ideas of democracy and social reform. Dewey's complete writings fill 37 volumes, subdivided into three sets: The Early Works (1892-1898) in five volumes; The Middle Works (1899-1924) in 15 volumes; The Later Works (1925-1953) in 17 volumes; also available, a collection of Posthumous Works (1956-2009)¹.

A focused review of Dewey's work related to art and education includes a sampling of his life experiences with exemplary writings to support the depth of his contributions. Dewey believed and demonstrated that education is capable of reforming past doctrines into new intellectual developments for individuals and society. By envisioning the school as *society*, Dewey considered teachers and students as individual citizens actively sharing and participating in collaborative roles for learning, living, and advancing through education and life as a societal whole.

Dewey's experiences and writings on aesthetics, philosophy, and education influenced developments in three conceptual areas: progressivism, constructivism, and reconstructionism. Dewey experimented with his theories for alternative practices in education and social reform; this was progressive. In theory and practice he supported a fundamental belief that students as individuals could learn by experiencing and actively building on knowledge through the work of living; this was constructive. He believed and exemplified the role of educator as one who guides learners in participatory and shared processes that attend to and amend past with present knowledge for understandings as a society; this was reconstructive.

John Dewey's Experiences as Education

Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879. He taught elementary and high school for a few years before pursuing graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University where he received his doctorate in philosophy in 1884. Dewey served as faculty at the University of Michigan (1884-1894) during which time he wrote in the areas of psychology, philosophy, and education. In 1894 he accepted a faculty position at the newly established University of Chicago to work in the department of philosophy. In 1896, while at the University of Chicago, Dewey established the Laboratory School as an alternative site for learning with new practices aimed to change conservative attitudes about traditional education.

The Laboratory School² (1896-1904) began with 16 students and two teachers and quickly grew in participants, capacity, and curriculum (Efland, 1990, p. 169). By 1902 it accommodated 140 students and 23 instructors in expanded facilities for manual training, art, and textile. Through scientific methods of observation, evaluation, analysis, and reflection, Dewey aimed to address problems and questions in education (Efland, 1990): How can other subjects (history, science, and art) be introduced to result in positive experiences? How might first-hand experiences with life skills enable students to express in artistic ways? In trying to answer these questions, instructors guided active learning with students using real life instruments and materials to carry out “intrinsically interesting occupations” (p. 170) like carpentry, sewing, and cooking. Through experiences, the process of making art had meaning that connected the child’s mind with active doing; pupils learned by doing the common activities of daily life. “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 neighborhood, or on the play-ground” (Dewey, 1897, p. 3).

During this time Dewey wrote “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), *The School and Social Progress* (1899), and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902). After his years at the Laboratory School, he continued his professorship (1903-1930) at Columbia University and Columbia University’s Teacher’s College. He traveled to new places, lived and learned through new experiences, and documented his reflections. He wrote *Democracy and Education* in 1916, *Art as Experience* in 1934, and *Experience and Education* in 1938. Within the years between two World Wars, differing perspectives in

art and education drove attempts to break free from tradition, social inhibitions, and repression: child-centered schooling, expressive ideologies, scientific methods and technology, and avant-garde art (Efland, 1990).

In 1924 Dewey began his work as the first president for a new art education program at the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania (Johnson, 2012). Dr. Alfred Barnes believed that “students could be taught to see art objectively and that doing so would greatly enrich all aspects of their lives” (Glass, 1997, p. 91); he therefore sought Dewey for this leadership position. Dewey’s “socially instrumental, scientific approach to learning was the educational method at the Barnes Foundation” (Johnson, 2012, p. 45). Curriculum for the art program focused on intelligent and methodical thinking based on similar scientific practices that Dewey implemented at the Laboratory School: observation, reflection, and testing for success of application (Johnson, 2012). Dewey’s use of words such as “appreciation” and “experience” translated to acts of learning through direct viewing of the art in collections.

The “sustained and fruitful relationship with regard to aesthetic experience and scientific theory as applied to education” (Johnson, 2012, p. 44) between Barnes and Dewey was evident in their works. Dewey acknowledged Barnes’ perspective in *Art as Experience* (1934). Dewey’s views on aesthetics inspired Barnes to expand his painting and sculpture collection to include decorative arts, with items such as “wrought iron, furniture, and pottery” (Johnson, 2012, p. 49). By strategically placing “well-designed utilitarian objects in everyday life” (p. 50) in rooms and wall ensembles, these items and their arrangements served educational purposes for students to appreciate art and community culture. Barnes and Dewey worked to bring art and aesthetic education to the masses through ongoing experiences at the Barnes Foundation³.

John Dewey’s Writings about Education

Dewey’s earlier writings of “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897) and *Democracy and Education* (1916) addressed theories and practices at the Laboratory School. His later writing *Art as Experience* (1934) shaped and reflected on the art program at the Barnes Foundation. He emphasized the roles of school as society, student as individual learner, teacher as guide, and their interactions collectively as a community. Throughout his

works on education, Dewey focused on democracy and social reform to connect the work of learners with their teachers in school and society.

In “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897) Dewey wrote, “I believe that education...is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 3). In place of the traditional aims of schooling to meet future goals, Dewey believed that the child’s present social life and related activities held center position in connecting the subject matters within curriculum. He believed that psychological and social factors work together in the educational process, with language and art as instruments for instruction. Dewey stressed that the teacher had to carefully observe for childhood interests as representative of developing capacities and intellectual curiosity of her students. He wrote, “I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (Dewey, 1897, p. 1). Beginning with the child’s own instincts and powers, she is a social individual who lives and learns to interact with other individuals within a society. Dewey wrote

I believe...the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life...every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling...[as] a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth. (p. 12)

Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* in 1916. Regarding this book, Fott (2009) commented on “growth” as progress common to individuals and societies. Fott noted that Dewey “does not assume the inevitability of progress with the rise of modern science and technology. Regress is possible as well as progress, and human beings have a responsibility for the promotion of the latter, or growth” (p. 9). The idea of growth through education as process differs from the traditional intent of growth towards preparation for a final goal or a predetermined end. Fott reviewed the four parts of Dewey’s book to address democratic and social needs, principles and methods of democratic education, practical and philosophical impediments to the democratic ideal, and reflections on the nature of philosophy.

Glass (1997) wrote about Dewey’s time and efforts at the Barnes Foundation with connections to *Art as Experience* (1934). “The philosophy of John Dewey has had

a far-reaching effect on the formulation of the theory and policies of the Barnes Foundation,” (Glass, 1997, p. 102). Glass described how Dewey’s concepts were embedded in the philosophy and practices of the Foundation; courses focused on the idea of “learning to see” to replace old habits with new understandings through active processes and experiences. The Foundation believed that the “aesthetic experience” between the artist and his environment, or the viewer and the painting, must be developed through active processes of “seeing” new aspects within art and art making in order to appreciate beyond the passive response of “mere enjoyment” (p. 93).

John Dewey’s Influences on Education

During the later years of the 19th century, demands of industrialism motivated restructuring of education to include drawing and other forms of art making. Efforts towards social reform played out in rural America as the populist movement, labor strife between workers and trade unions, settlement houses for immigrants, women’s suffrage, and other issues (Efland, 1990). Moving into the 20th century, in addition to societal factors, science affected change in schools with new theories about child development.

Progressivism

The concept of progressive change and the movement of progressive education deserve clarification. When looking at the events of history, progressive change results from thinking and practices that move old (traditional) into new (progressive). In reference to Dewey’s work, his progressive changes moved traditional practices of passive learning from teacher to student within the limitations of a classroom into progressive practices of active learning *between* teachers and students that took place in many rooms within the Laboratory School. He also supported the progressive teachings at the Barnes Foundation, with learning by seeing, observing, and appreciating art and artifacts within a community.

Dewey’s progressive views made room for other types of progressive changes in education. Regarding child-centered schools Cremin (1959) wrote, “one had to comprehend the historic battle of the artist against standardization, the superficiality, and the commercialism of industrial civilization...the key...was the triumph of self-expression, in art and in education” (p. 165). The child study movement gave new

direction for art and education to focus on child-centered practices as focus for progressive education. However, Dewey remained scientific, critical, and reflective with his focus on connecting the strengths of individuality and society.

At the turn of the 20th century, Dewey's experimental approach at the Laboratory School shed light on social reform and early progressive education. Efland (1990) noted Francis Wayland Parker and John Dewey as "forerunners of the movement" (p. 167). Parker's work showed his strength primarily as an educator; his nature study curriculum supported observational drawings and hands-on activities to connect studies in science and language. Dewey's practices at the Laboratory School took similar steps to integrate art with other subjects. Efland (1990) wrote

Before World War I educators had been imbued with the idea of achieving social efficacy through scientific methods of administration, curriculum development, testing and surveys. Though such methods were supposed to improve education, they also resulted in a standardization of educational practices and a concurrent stifling of innovation in public education. (p. 189)

The scientific movement motivated school reforms in new directions based on research, which led some progressive educators to look for evidences in testing, standards, and measurements. Efland (1990) noted Parker and Dewey as other progressive educators who implemented scientific strategies by experimenting in private settings.

Various progressive strategies surfaced as alternative practices during the progressive education movement (1915-1952). In describing progressive legacies, Stankiewicz (2001) wrote, "They struggled against the overemphasis on technique...and tried to respond to the individual needs of their students, apply research on children's developmental needs, and develop their own best practices" (p. 41). In essence, progressive education practices developed with goals to provide more individual attention for students in smaller classes, with flexible schedules, and in private settings outside of public schools.

Constructivism and reconstructionism

Dewey's progressive education combined the strengths of individuals and society through constructivism and reconstructionism as strategies. Stankiewicz (2001) defined

constructivism as “the belief that knowledge and learning are actively acquired, socially constructed, and created or recreated” (p. 58). Constructivism in education requires that teachers and students reflect on the process of contextualized learning, reconfiguring the elements of past and present knowledge in order to make sense of the world. Efland (1990) wrote, “In Dewey’s view the individual does not experience the world with an empty mind but perceives it through a screen of previous knowledge acquired through previous encounters with the world” (p. 159). With each new experience that individuals face, their preconceived realities and knowledge undergo reconstruction to form new understandings. And through it all, Dewey (1897) believed that “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (p. 8).

Embedded in his views about social reform, Dewey believed that art education should encompass experiences through social activities and understandings of aesthetics and appreciation; through the experience of art and the processes of making art, social consciousness between teachers and learners would grow. By enriching social life, individual students learned to appreciate art and art making within the context of experiences; thus, learning by doing meant learning by living within the context of Dewey’s progressive education practices.

Conclusion and reflections

Dewey envisioned the school as a society for the mutual work of educators and learners as collaborative citizens, rather than “as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed” (Dewey, 1897, p. 4). Evidenced by his own experiences and explained through writings, Dewey believed that individuals within communities could participate and share in the search for ideas, experimentation of methods, and construction of understandings, such that reconstruction of the past with new knowledge and intelligence leads to educational and social reforms to understand the present.

I believe the essential ingredient common to progressivism, constructivism, and reconstructionism is flexibility. When we view flexibility as a “give and take” process, we are able to give up elements that may no longer apply in order to take in new considerations; this allows for further thinking, additional knowledge, and new

experiences. Without flexibility, we eliminate possibilities and potential for progress and growth.

Today, hints of Dewey's progressivism exist as ghost practices within contemporary settings, carried forward in time with flexibility. A visit to the Laboratory School website² reveals the curriculum choices for learners, nursery through grade 12, with yearly half-day tuition beginning at \$17,832. The website's history page includes several chapters that detail "100 years of learning" including Dewey's contributions to its establishment and growth. Here is its mission statement: "The Laboratory Schools are home to the youngest members of the University of Chicago's academic community. We ignite and nurture an enduring spirit of scholarship, curiosity, creativity, and confidence. We value learning experientially, exhibiting kindness, and honoring diversity," (retrieved from <http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/about-lab/mission-statement/index.aspx>). A visit to the Barnes Foundation website³ informs viewers of its establishment with no mention of Dewey's role as the art program's first president. The collections remain open to the public at a cost of \$22 for one general non-member adult admission ticket; its founding mission remains "the promotion of the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts" (retrieved from <http://www.barnesfoundation.org/about/mission>). Although post-Deweyian society has moved these learning sites into the hands of privatization with self-selecting price tags, curricular concepts appear to support remnants of progressivism regarding art and art education.

It is unclear whether constructivism and reconstructionism live on as conceptual aims for experiences within the environments at today's Laboratory School and Barnes Foundation. Nevertheless, Dewey's application of these concepts supported progressive thinking and strategies towards a new movement in education and social reform. Dewey's progressive work allows for growth when we construct and reconstruct knowledge gained through meaningful and additive experiences as individuals and society. Teachers must attend to practices that support the freedoms of individual learners with careful guidance and intelligence that could only come from our own ongoing construction of knowledge.

When we remember the crux of Dewey's philosophy on education and art, the concepts of progressivism, constructivism, and reconstructionism may be applied to

contemporary curriculum in traditional and nontraditional settings. Cremin (1959) reminds us of Dewey's cautionary remarks regarding a truly progressive education as one that "requires a searching study of society and its moving forces" (p. 167). In closing, the following reflection from *Experience and Education* (1938) may guide us with progress and growth: "when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan...this reason...[is] the need for a sound philosophy of experience" (p.68) and "a body of knowledge needs to be understood...[with] progressive organization of subject-matter" (p.12). Traditional and progressive elements are needed in order for teachers and learners to have continuity and extension of significant knowledge to gain meaningful understandings of our environment.

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ John Dewey. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dewey on February 16, 2014.

² History and ongoing practices of the Laboratory School is detailed on its website. Retrieved from <http://www.ucls.uchicago.edu/about-lab/history/index.aspx> on February 16, 2014.

³ Information about the Barnes Foundation makes one minor reference to John Dewey as influence. Dr. Barnes' wife Laura Leggett is credited as succeeding president upon her husband's death in 1951. Retrieved from <http://www.barnesfoundation.org/about/history/albert> on February 20, 2014. Johnson (2012) wrote about Violette de Mazia (1899-1987) who contributed significantly to the curriculum and carried on as educational director (1950-1987) of the art program after Barnes death in 1951 and Dewey's death in 1952. There is no mention of Violette de Mazia within the historical content of Barnes Foundation website.