

**John Dewey's Educational Philosophy:
Core Concepts
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The aim of education is growth. To live, the student must learn to conduct successful transactions with his or her environment. To grow, the student must create novel forms of recognition and response, which he or she must then refine in ways that make them more discriminating and in ways that integrate them into his or her experience (James Garrison, *John Dewey's Philosophy as Education*).

Information is an undigested burden unless it is understood. It is *knowledge* only as its material is *comprehended*. And understanding (comprehension) means that the various parts of the information acquired are grasped in their relations to one another—a result that is attained only when acquisition is accompanied by constant reflection upon the meaning of what is studied (John Dewey, *How We Think*).

As we went through life, some of us found adult literacy programs, a second chance in life, and because of the literacy programs we have taken our lives to a new level. This has given us a chance to be part of the American Dream. We as adult learners are past the window of opportunity (from four to ten years old) to learn to read well, but we do struggle and we learn to read better. We don't become Harvard professors or rocket scientists, but our lives are improved.

Literacy programs should be judged by how much growth, enrichment, and happiness is brought into peoples' lives and not by how many different levels of reading the student reaches. We should look to see how many leaders come out of these programs, how the adult learner gives back and expresses the joy of living life. The literacy regulations of our government should allow the programs to look to the adult learner's needs instead of saying this is what we will do for you and these are the things you need to do just to enter a literacy program (Archie Willard, former adult literacy student).

Introduction

The concepts in this document are inspired by the educational theory of John Dewey. Sometimes I have used Dewey's ideas as prompts for my own thinking. In other places, here, I have blended short quotes into my own text without providing a formal citation. The key Deweyan texts that I drew on are:

- ***Democracy and Education (1916)***
- ***How We Think, 2nd Edition (1933)***
- ***Experience and Education (1938)***

What follows merely scratches the surface of Dewey's substantial educational theory. However, it does draw on some of his core concepts, particularly, the importance of:

- Gradual student development or growth;
- Active engagement in the learning process;
- The capacity of students to make inferences and judgments as the precondition for the attainment of knowledge, in short, the necessity of actively working through what it is that they seek to learn;
- The vital role of the teacher in helping students to bridge the gap between what student's don't know or can't do independently and what they can come to know independently through supportive instruction;
- Linking instructional content to the life experiences, knowledge, and interests of students as the means of helping them expand into new areas of learning and knowledge acquisition;
- An integrative approach to learning, balancing basic skill development in reading and writing with engagement of meaningful content in a wide array of areas.

Instructional Materials and the Learning That Matters

Instructional materials are not ends. They are means toward the attainment of desirable ends.

- ◆ Ends range from improving reading ability to expanding knowledge about various topics of interest. The resources that stimulate this learning, *including* instructional materials, will depend on how they are used and what meanings people take from them.
- ◆ It is not necessarily the materials themselves that are significant. They represent important educational tools. What students accomplish *through* them is what is important, including their mastery as relevant and feasible.

The primary value of instructional materials is their symbolic importance in terms of what they mean or come to mean for students. The need is to link instructional materials to significant life purposes, including that of learning to read and write.

- ◆ Under highly specific circumstances, instructional materials in their own right may be important to students. More typically, it is less the materials per se, than what they come to mean to students. That meaning, in turn, will be partly determined by what they mean for the tutor, whose engagement with the topic at hand, will *partially* influence what the students perceive.

- ◆ Thus, what becomes symbolically important is often *created* through the learning process by the interactive work the students and the tutor do with the text.
- ◆ In short, materials become symbolically significant by the work that is accomplished through them. Learning is a discovery process and it is that *discovery* among students of their capacity to learn through texts of various types in ways that connect to what they're interested in, that needs to be stimulated.

Instructional materials represent working resources. They are valuable to the extent they accomplish the desired work.

- ◆ The materials can provide a powerful prompt in stimulating effective learning. That is their prime value.
- ◆ What prompts do the following lessons open up? What problems do they point to? In what ways might these be linked to situations in the lives of students? What are some lessons learned? In what ways might these materials stimulate the learning that matters? How would you incorporate basic skills into the lesson?
 1. My Neighborhood—Basic
 2. Black Man—Intermediate Beginner
 3. Papa's Graduation Speech—Intermediate
 4. Good-Bye Television—Intermediate Advanced
 5. Other instructional materials

Students' lives are organized in the practical realm of personal living. Subject matter is organized on the plane of formal content.

- ◆ The most effective tutors incorporate student experience and knowledge in the structuring of the lesson, while helping students gradually move *toward* the goal of increasing mastery of formal subject matter in areas of interest and relevance to them.
- ◆ Sometimes mastery of the specific subject matter will be very important (such as learning the steps of an effective job search).
- ◆ At times, a deepening of the symbolic significance of the topic (such as what a job may come to mean to a person) will be uppermost.
- ◆ Sometimes it is best to start with student interest and knowledge in a working toward a grasp of the topic matter. At other times it's more effective to start with the topic and gradually incorporate student knowledge and interest. That's a decision that has to be made on a case-by-case basis. The critical point is the importance of stimulating an interactive learning climate that links student knowledge and interest to whatever the subject at hand may be.
- ◆ This interaction is greatly enhanced by keeping instruction focused on the edge between what students cannot do independently, but what is within their

range to accomplish and ultimately master independently, with the support of the tutor.

The critical challenge is to link subject matter with some question or problem with which the student is concerned while incorporating basic skill work with core content.

- ◆ Key questions for the tutor are the choices that go into the selection of a particular lesson. What do you want the students to get out of it? How does it contribute to or impact in some way on important areas that they're interested in? What tools of learning does the lesson open up and what does it provide the tutor by way of resources needed to accomplish the goals at hand?
- ◆ In the broadest of terms student interests are usually found in the areas of:
 1. Goal setting, personal development, and self-reflection
 2. Basic skill development in reading, comprehension, and writing
 3. Learning to learn
 4. The realm of work
 5. The realm of family and parenting education
 6. The realm of citizenship, including awareness of current social issues, community involvement, and cultural-historical themes
 7. Aesthetics, particularly short fiction and creative autobiographical writing and poetry
 8. Health and wellness

Enhancing the Learning Process

The tutor establishes the learning environment that stimulates focused student engagement in the work of moving toward desirable ends by:

- ◆ Selecting materials and learning activities that are within the range of their students to work with, but somewhat challenging, so that they can master the content with the support of the tutor *and* the other students;
- ◆ Giving students plenty of opportunities to actively participate in the learning, keeping them engaged and focused throughout the lesson. This could include a peer tutor role for more advanced students;
- ◆ Helping students to develop the tools of the trade of becoming effective readers by deliberately teaching reading, comprehension, and word recognition strategies.

It is much easier to swamp a student with subject matter than to work it into his or her direct experiences.

- ◆ The amount reading material is of little importance—the more the better, *provided* students have a need for it and can apply it in some situation of

their own. The key isn't the amount of text covered, but the quality of the learning in terms of what students are able to learn in a given period of time and how that learning is significant to what they need and want to know.

- ◆ Less is better than more if it is thoroughly worked through and results in a satisfactory learning experience. Making sure students *clinch* the learning at hand is the key. Anything less is not an effective learning experience no matter how much material is covered.
- ◆ The goal is to work through some problem or challenge that (a) is interesting to the students; (b) within their range with minimal needed support from others, whether the learning task is mastering sounds and words, vocabulary development and spelling, examining the meanings of texts they are studying, or writing.
- ◆ The teacher's role is to supply suggestions, possible meanings, tentative explanations—in short, ideas that stimulate student thinking by providing various minimal prompts so that students can make their own inferences and draw their own conclusions.
- ◆ A satisfactory learning experience depends on the quality of learning, and that means what students actually internalize. Effective learning *only* occurs when such internalization takes place. As Dewey expresses it, "Nothing is really known except in so far as it is understood."

The goal of teaching is to expand the knowledge base of the students in those areas of literacy learning that are important to them. In short, it is growth. Key learning goals include:

- ◆ New learning related to basic skills acquisition;
 - Word mastery—phonics, sight words
 - Spelling
 - Rate and fluency of reading
 - Writing—copying, dictation, filling out exercises and worksheets, sentence and paragraph writing
 - Word meanings
- ◆ Comprehension of various types of texts, particularly linking the relationship between the information within them to the students' situation and knowledge base;
- ◆ Building texts from the situation of the students' lives and connecting them to texts that expand upon their base of relevant knowledge;
- ◆ Progress in moving from one level of understanding to the next in a manner that students can assimilate is the goal rather than mastery of content material, per se. That is, the text is a tool in the facilitation of this growth—growth in learning and in useful and meaningful knowledge acquisition as determined by the students.