

IMPLICATIONS OF DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The major preoccupation of adult educators has been on how best to make adult learning more rewarding and efficient. To this end, a number of ideas, theories or propositions have been advanced aimed at promoting and advancing the course of adult learning activities. This also underscores the interest in exploring the ideas or propositions of notable scholars and their implications in relation to adult education practice in general. A proper understanding of the views of notable educationists like John Dewey is useful in helping practitioners in their endeavour to evolve a more efficient and effective continuing education theory and practice. This paper examines the educational views of John Dewey. It begins by taking a look at his personal profile or background which influenced his educational tenets or propositions. A critique of his ideas is also highlighted. The discussion climaxed with the implications of his educational ideas for continuing education practice.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a continuous debate on the issue of strengthening and reinvigorating adult education in general and continuing education in particular. This is because continuing education offers altruistic services in form of educational and community services that are very rewarding to the adults and society as a whole. One way of achieving this is to explore the idea of notable scholars. One major interest in studying the views of notable scholars or educational thinkers as they are often referred to, is based on the argument that such views or ideas must be fully examined for what they can contribute to our understanding of the theory and process of modern learning and education (Akinpelu, 1981). Furthermore, the question of what to teach, and who should be educated, and how the individual should be educated as raised by Plato some twenty-three centuries ago are perennial educational problems, which have remained with us till date. Hence, the major preoccupation of adult educators has been on how best to make adult education and learning more rewarding and efficient. The study of the educational thought or idea of great educational thinkers like John Dewey is aimed at providing an understanding of the principles of the solutions they prescribed and, how best, they can be applied to advance the course of modern theory and practice in the field. For example, the definition of education by Dewey as a continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and, which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences underscores the importance of continuing education. Dewey has shown that educational process has no end beyond itself. It must be seen as its own and as something that continue to grow. What Dewey is saying by extension is that just as life is characterized by growth so also education should be characterized by growth. Consequently, the value of school education should constitute the extent to which it creates a desire for continued learning and offer the opportunities of helping individuals realize their desire (Osuji, 2001). Dewey's proposition is that education should be a follow-up of life and that every person should therefore be given the opportunity to continue to learn as a means of actualizing himself. Education must, therefore, be conceived as lifelong in order to make for an optimal acquisition of knowledge for a meaningful and effective life. The individual must therefore, learn to live and live to learn. In seeking to provide a detailed explanation of the views of

Dewey, this paper takes a look at Dewey's ideas, or propositions and its implication for continuing education theory and practice.

DEWEY PROFILE

John Dewey, one of the most powerful influences on educational thoughts in the 20th century, was born on October 1859 at the small town of Burlington, Vermont. His father was the proprietor of a renowned local general store where, apparently local people would foregather from time to time to discuss with equal interest, affairs of both state and locality. He was of a modest family origin (Wikipedia, 2007).

The situation (ethos) of the small-town of Burlington in the 19th century played a very large part in forming Dewey's educational outlook in two fold perspectives: Negatively and positively. On the negative sphere, he was convinced and realized at very early stage that the traditional, formal desk-bound approach to schooling which was typified by the small town and rural schools of his childhood was futile. He found the situation inadequate for the growing United State of America. He was a very famous American philosopher, psychologists and educational reformer, whose thoughts and ideas have been greatly influential in the United States and around the world (Wikipedia 2007). He, together with Charles Sanders Pierce and William James established Philosophical School of Pragmatism. He also led the progressive movement in U.S. education during the first half of the 20th century. He attended the University of Vermont in 1879 and obtained his Ph.D from the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences in 1884 at the Johns Hopkins University. From 1904, he served at the Columbia University and teachers College, Columbia University as a professor of philosophy of education. He was a long-time member of the American Federation of Teachers (Wikipedia, 2007).

He was said to have founded the New school for Social Research along with a renowned historian, Charles Beard, and economists Therstein Veblen and James Harvey Robinson. His most significant write-ups included: *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* of 1896; *Human Nature and conduct* (1892); *The Republic and its problems* (1927); *Experience and Nature* (1929); *Art in Experience* (1934); *A Common Faith* (1934); *The Theory of Inquiry* (1938); *Freedom and Culture* (1939). Each of the writing focused on a specific or particular philosophical theme. His notable idea was 'Educational Progressivism' while his main interest was philosophy of Education with particular focus on 'epistemology' – the theory of knowledge. Having said that, let us now look at Dewey's major educational tenets/propositions.

DEWEY'S MAJOR EDUCATIONAL TENETS/PROPOSITIONS

Dewey's educational ideas were clearly and aptly described in his series of writings. As could be seen from his writing on 'Democracy and Educations' he sought to synthesize, criticize and expand upon the democratic or proto-democratic educational philosophies of Rousseaus and Plato. According to him Rousseaus overemphasized the individual while Plato overemphasized the society in which the individual live in the process of education. This distinction he feels was largely false. He opined that the mind and its formation is a communal process. Thus, the individual is only a meaningful concept when regarded as an inextricable part of his or her society, and, in the same vein, the society has no meaning apart from its realization in the lives of its individual members. As clearly shown in his 'Experience and Nature: Dewey harped on the importance of the subjective experience of individual people in introducing revolutionary and progressive ideas.

Dewey argued that education should not be the teaching of dead fact, but that the skills and knowledge which the individual learned should be fully integrated into their lives as persons, citizens and human beings. Thus emphasizing the fact that learning is better when it is done through the practical element of "learning by doing". This idea as expressed by Dewey sprang from his subscription to the philosophical school of pragmatism.

The central theme of Dewey's educational views is that greater emphasis should be placed on broadening the intellect and development of problem solving and critical thinking skills, rather than on simply promoting memorization of lessons. He believes in incorporating students experiences into classroom learning in the process of education. This was clearly espoused in his book entitled "Experience and Education", written in 1938. To him, the major task of the educator and caretaker is to fully integrate the learner experiences into learning in such a way that will enable him/her benefit maximally from learning. He argued that the quality of experience is a key in the development of progressive education.

Thus, without beneficial experiences growing off from ones prior experience, education would not be able to use these experiences to reflect on the past, work through the present and prepare for the future.

In the area of inquiry, Dewey believes that inquiry is concerned with objective transformation of objective subject-matter. Therefore, the inquirer must formulate his ideas on what is true and then test it on the hard and restive anvil of ontological reality to determine its anticipatory accuracy (Omatseye, 1992). At the end, only a tentative confirmation can be made because believing is not the same thing as knowing. This by extension, means that an inquiry must provide sufficient opportunities for the known and the object knowledge to interact in order to ascertain the validity of formulated and tested hypothesis. (Akinpelu, 1984; Omatseye, 1992). The tested hypothesis can thereafter be transformed into theories and guide for future action. It is therefore, expected that inquiry would yield pertinent data that can be used to establish a network of information necessary for our daily lives. Dewey accepted all ideas as working hypothesis, as proposed plan of action; that is, ideas are working hypothesis that are subject to change or modification in the light of new evidence warranting it.

Epistemologically, Dewey is interested in such steps as formulation of hypothesis, data-gathering and data analysis which are typical of empirical inquiry. On the other hand, the individual will go beyond this phase through logical reasoning in order to establish a conceptual pattern from which generalization could be made (Omatseye, 1992). This is required to establish a core knowledge to guide rational action. In other words, Dewey his other counterparts, believe that it is not sufficient to have unorganized brute facts because they form a basis for sound knowledge. The individual should also not be eager to base his decision on prior generalization from which direct experience of the world is excluded. The individual will have to go beyond mere facts to work out a pattern of thoughts that would enable him to develop what may be referred to as an adaptable self which would respond to life's challenges pragmatically.

Dewey was very vocal in his criticism of learning based on repetitional principles. He like other pragmatists rejected all forms of behaviourism and emphasized on behaviour modification because of its authoritarian nature. He sees human self as a dynamic combination of feelings and reasoning which can yield an insight of our world. In essence, the individual value is a decision which an individual makes on the basis of personal experience. In this area Dewey in 1996 stated thus:

We may imagine a man who at one time thoroughly enjoyed conversing with his friend at another the hearing of a symphony; at another the eating of his meals; of another the reading of a book; at another the earning of money; and so on. As an appreciated realization, each of these is an intrinsic value. It occupies a particular place in life. It serves its own, which cannot be supplied by a substitute. There is no question of comparative value and hence none of valuation. In its own place, none is a means to anything beyond itself.

According to Omatseye (1992), some years later Dewey modified his position in an article titled "The theory of Valuation" where he argued that values should be epistemologically derived. In other words, for a person to decide whether a thing tastes good or not he should actually taste it himself. Dewey's aspiration and interest was to raise pedagogy to a respectable level as an academic discipline. This called for a scientific approach to teaching. Teaching was to involve a systematic investigation that would start with data-collection and devising methods and techniques to enable the teachers expand their frontiers of knowledge. The competence they gain will enable them take charge of the educational institution as experts. Dewey believes that a trained educationist should be fully in charge of matters concerning the school. He deplored a situation where people who are not in the field of education sit on school Board meetings dictating school curricula, choice of textbooks, procurement of furniture and making decision on other technical issues about which they cannot claim expertise. The old adage which states that the one who wears the shoes knows where it pinches; appears to be basic argument that Dewey has advanced here (Gordon, 1985, Omatseye, 1982).

Dewey was also interested in vocational education. He described a balance education as one which incorporates occupation along with the historical and social studies, science and communication coupled with expression. He emphasized vocational education because he saw it as a means of bringing classroom activities into meaning for relation with class experiences. Furthermore, they provide the child

opportunities of the exercise of such natural impulses as the constructive, the investigative and experimental, social and the expressive and also make the individual learner aware of the basic economic and social functions of the society and also the interplay of forces around him. Dewey believed that it takes a combination of vocational and liberal arts courses to produce a practice worker. His argument in favour of a combined programme stems from his conviction that it makes the individual more efficient and skillful in his/her occupation, while the liberal art will provide the sensitivity or political awareness which is expected of all citizens.

What Dewey intended to achieve in his efforts was to prove that learning depends on not only what poses a problem to the learner but his doing something that is of immense interest to him. To him, education is meaningful only to the extent it is related to the individual learner experiences. Therefore, experience is necessary to a learners learning because it facilitates his adjustment to the social, physical and cultural environment in which he/she lives.

Dewey's ideas and those of other of his contemporaries representing pragmatism produced the greatest influence on educational theory and practice in the twentieth century. This Akinpelu (1981), attributed to two basic reasons. First is that the twentieth century was predominantly the age of science and technology, and these two formed the solid foundations in which the philosophy of Dewey and other pragmatists were built. The second is that our age is one in which people are interested more in material benefits or practical usefulness of any activities that is undertaken. The consequences or the utility of ideas the 'cash-value of idea' as it is sometimes referred to is what Dewey's ideas emphasized on. In this sense, his ideas seemingly express the popular spirits and attitudes of his age. Let's now quickly turn to the implications of Dewey's ideas for continuing education practice.

A CRITIQUE OF DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

Dewey's educational ideas have not gone uncriticised. A number of critiques have been raised against his views or propositions. The major criticism initiated against Dewey's educational ideas revolve around the thought that progressive education failed. According to Wikipedia (2007), radical variations of educational progressivism were troubled and shortlived, a fact that supports some understandings of the notion of failure. It has also been alleged that Dewey's idea is full of controversies. He is sometimes associated with the worst excesses of so-called 'progressive education' a do-as-you-please approach – which it must be said exists more often in people's fearful imaginations than in actual classrooms. His project method was quite often misapplied. On this issue, he has this to say:

Some teachers seem to be afraid even to make suggestions to members of a group as to what they should do. I have heard of cases in which children are surrounded with objects and materials and then left entirely to themselves, the teacher being loath to suggest even what might be done with the materials lest freedom be infringed upon. Why then supply materials?

It was as a result of this development that Dewey distanced himself from those who claimed to be his disciples. The most controversial of the views of Dewey for which he has been criticized is his concept of growth. He does not accept what are commonly referred to as teleological explanations of human effort. These are explanations which locate the significance of human effort in the distant future. They tend to explain previous events by future ones. In many cases, they invoke some future perfection both to explain what we are doing now and to stipulate what we should be doing now. Some educational theorists favour teleological explanations because they believe that from an idealized future, one can determine what the child should be taught in the present. He rejected these teleological explanations and instead supported an evolutionary account of human activity which freely acknowledges our ignorance of the future. To him, education is not simply a growth; it is the continuing reconstruction of our experience. It is not to be determined by any outside or independent aim or end. This explanation the traditional educators find very difficult to accept because they have always looked for the purpose and significance of education outside of the educational process itself.

According to Flanagan (1994), Dewey's contributions to the development of education in the 20th century has been incalculable if not without its controversies. His greatest contribution has been to liberate the education of children from the dead hand of tradition and from what he himself has called

'static cold storage ideal of knowledge'. Hence, Wikipedia (2007), opines that the notion of failure often ascribed to discredit Dewey's progressive ideas were perhaps too rare and ill-funded to constitute a thorough test, because several versions of the progressive education succeeded in transforming the educational landscape. For example, the utter ubiquity of guidance counselling was developed during the progressive period.

IMPLICATIONS OF DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS/TENETS FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION PRACTICE

As alluded to in the opening paragraph of this paper, the concept of continuing education is inherent in Dewey's philosophical ideas or tenets. His definition of education as a continuous reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. Dewey (1916), described the nature and focus of continuing education. When he stressed that education is itself growth and has no end in itself, he meant that education should be continuous so that the individual can continue to learn and acquire the means of making the desired effects. In essence Dewey was saying that education should be a corollary of life, and everybody should be availed the opportunity to continue to actualize himself/herself through education.

From the views of Dewey, we are living in a changing world and so education should prepare individuals for these changing circumstances. It is clear that the search for better alternatives in education is a process that never stops or end. One important implication or application in adult and continuing education is that the educational process should be learner centre. This means that in a way, the participants in adult and continuing education programmes should be encouraged to take active part in the decision on what they want to learn. The interest of the participants should be paramount or constitute a major factor in deciding what is to be learned. The facilitator should be able to persuade and not force the participants. Efforts must be made to get the participants involved in learning activities so as to increase their interest and motivate them. These ideas of Dewey seemingly corroborated the adult learners in programmes designed for them as rationale beings and self-directed learners. Learners centred learning can also be achieved through the facilitators ability to centre learning activities around the content of the subject-matter. Dewey also emphasized individual and group projects to engage learner's attention. These can take the form of group discussion or presentation, group study hour of class assignment, group reports of what is happening in the community or visits to historical sites or monument (Omatseye, 1992). This presupposes that the learner should be given the opportunities to relate their personal experiences or experiences acquired in the community to their classroom learning activities. The teacher is therefore, expected to create the necessary friendly atmosphere for learners to participate actively in learning activities.

In this regard Dewey has this to say:

When engaged in the direct act of teaching, the instructor needs to have subject-matter at his finger's end; his attention should be upon the attitude and response of the pupil to understand the latter in its interplay with subject-matter, his task, while the pupil's mind naturally should be not in itself but on the topic in hand (Dewey 1938:34).

However, in advocating learner centred education we must guard against a situation where the learning is left entirely in the hands of the learners while we allow them to do all they like and let them manipulate the learning activities without any focus. It is the duty or task of the instructor to direct the affairs so that they do not become like sheep without a shepherd. Nevertheless, the culture of arrogance, the attitude of being harsh, dominance, unfriendly, less intimate, portraying oneself as 'alpha and omega (i.e. authoritarian style of learning) must be done away with in order to promote learner-centred activities or learning.

John Dewey believed that the cardinal aim of education is growth and development of intelligences and the quality of participation, and the subsequent decision that is democratically taken, depends almost entirely on the quality of intelligence of the participating members.

Adult and continuing education programmes must be seen to focus on problem solving. In other words it must develop in the learner the ability to solve their day-to-day problems. To this end, they must seek to develop the intellect of participants, since Dewey emphasized that knowledge is a product of the

interaction of a living organism with its environment. He saw it as the experience gathered from social living and processed by the individual and applied to solve problems. The individual is intelligent only in so far as he is able to handle his problems in a scientific way. Thus, to be intelligent is to think out and use ways and means of effectively resolving our present problems. This means using the method of reflective thinking in our daily life.

Based on the foregoing, adult and continuing educators must use problem solving method in the course of seeking to educate the adults. In this regard, teachers must adopt the scientific approach to problems. In line with this advocacy, Fafunwa (1974) has this to say:

It will be largely through adopting a scientific approach to problems that Africans will be able to join a world where science has already become a dominant cultural factor. With the desirable scientific attitude of mind on the part of Africans, a successful war would be waged against superstition, aptitudes would be developed for vocational pursuits, the ... and the adult would be able to manipulate simple gadgets through the work of hand and eye which should buttress or supplement mind and heart (1974).

The point being made here is that since knowledge comes from the processing of experience by intelligence using problem-solving method, the aim of continuing education should be to develop the learner's ability to deal with future problems, that is, the development of his intelligence to solve problems. Continuing education should be seen as the process of developing the habit of problem-solving, and there should be no limit to the development of this ability. The problem solving approach should conform with the scientific process of solving problems. The first step begins with the recognition of the existence of the problem. This is the identification of the problem.

The second step is our active thinking of what the probable cause could be, which would help us to determine the solutions to apply. This according to Akinpeluu (1984), is a mental process comprising of making theoretical suggestions, considering the possibility of each idea or suggestions as the cause, and arguing within ourselves which of the ideas or suggestions has the highest probability of resolving the problem in hand. This is the stage involved in hypotheses formation. This stage also involve a mental consideration of the possible effectiveness of each suggestion and the consequences that may follow each of the suggested solutions.

Once the hypotheses have been formulated, the next thing is to begin to collect appropriate data or whatever tools are needed to try out each hypotheses. This is followed by the fourth step which is testing each of the hypothesis, starting from the one we think is most likely to solve the problem. We must begin to test the hypotheses until we find the correct solution and apply it to the problem. Once the problem is solved we are relieved of our anxiety and life can go on again smoothly. This is, however not the end of it all. The experience we gained in the process of solving the problem at the end of it all becomes a unit of knowledge which constitute the new experience that has been processed and refined and stored in our memory or sub-conscious to be recalled and used on identical or similar problems in the future.

Another area of interest is our institutions where adults learn, the curricular content and its organization. To Dewey, our institutions must become an extension of the home or the participant socio-economic and political milieu so that their experience both at home and the learning environment can be intimately related and continuous. Continuing education centre must be seen as agency established by society to facilitate acquisition of experiences by the learner by making the process of learning more economical, faster and more thorough. As a social process, it must be seen as that form of social life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the learner to share in the inherited resources of their race, and to use his own power for social ends.

Our programmes and institutions or centres should not therefore isolate the learners from the community nor should it remove them from the community in whose life they are expected to participate. The centre must become mini-community in which the adult learner is to experience group-living and co-operative learning activity. The learning content must equip the learners with social intelligence by holding up the ideals of the life in the society.

The curriculum of the learning programmes must therefore, be the social life of the community supplied and translated into classroom learning activities. The centres and organizer should select what to

include in the curriculum based on the interest, aspirations, problems and needs of the learners. Furthermore, the learning must start from the present experience of the learners and gradually lead to new experiences. In essence, the contents will be those that involve the learner in exploring and discovering knowledge by himself; aided by the teacher.

In all of these, the teaching method is the most important. The first principle as aforementioned is that teaching must be learner-centred and focus more on the present needs, interest and ability of the learners. In addition, it must involve the learner in the activity through learning by doing. Hence, what is taught must involve practical application of the knowledge acquired. The examples used must be drawn from the existential conditions of the learners and the language must be selected from their vocabulary. In this wise the group method or cooperative learning and project methods must be employed. These methods have the advantage of allowing the learners to display their free initiative and native intelligence in solving the problems that confront them. In this situation, the fact facilitator or instructor becomes an interested but passive observer of the learners learning activities using the analogy of the Gardner who watches while the learners natural abilities unfold on their own. (Akinpelu, 1984). Therefore, the teacher must not be the authoritarian and fearful figure as presented in the traditional learning or education and also not the dispensable element. He is essentially, an organizer and a moderator of the learning activities. By reason of his superior cultural experience and expert training, his principal role should be that of guiding the learners learning activities. He is expected to be thoroughly familiar with the psychology of adult learning, their needs and interests, and the greatest type of experience that are of greatest use to them in the society in which they live. He is expected to select the learning tasks on the basis of these, and arrange them in logical order according to the ability of the learners. He is also the resource person to whom the learners refer those problems which they could not solve themselves. He is to arrange the social and group learning and moderate the interaction between members of the group for the best gain or maximum benefit of learners. He is thus a participant in the learning activity and not a spectator. He/she should be seen sharing his experience with the learners, encouraging their problem-solving abilities and promoting and development of intelligence. There is no doubt that the views or educational tenets of Dewey have far reaching implications for adult and continuing education. The relevance of his tenets perhaps was more concisely summarized by Peters when he wrote;

There are two respects in which Dewey's ideals speaks very much to our condition. First, the plea for the use of practical intelligence, backed by the use of science, to tackle social and economic problems, is as pertinent today as it was at the time at which he was writing. Second, his emphasis on shared experiences' and communication and his attack on the relies of old individualism are opposite in a society dominated by frustration of the desire for material gain (Peters, 1977).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we had examined the educational ideas of John Dewey with particular reference to its implications for continuing education practice Dewey's devastating attack on discipline-centred and teacher-dominated traditional education is no doubt similar to Paulo Friere's criticism enunciated in the Banking System of Education. The views as expressed by Dewey are still relevant today in our condition, just as it was in his time. His advocacy is tailored towards the principle of androgogy which focus on the learners as self-directed learners as proposed by the renowned adult educator, Malcolun Knowles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of Dewey's ideas and views, it is recommended that continuing education programmes must be learner-centred by focusing on their needs, interest and aspirations. The learning centres must help learners to reconstruct their level of intelligence and ability to solve their own problems themselves. Instructors in this situation must become a guide and leader whose primary task is to moderate and direct the learning activities in a manner that the participants can benefit maximally from it and apply the knowledge gained without any difficulty. His views are amenable to views expressed and upheld by adult educators to the effect that adults must be involved in what they learn if they are to benefit maximally from it and show genuine interest in learning activities. This appears to be the most important

characteristics of adult and continuing education programmes. Furthermore, adult and continuing education programmes are expected to be learner-centred and need-oriented in order to help motivate and sustain the interest of the learners. There is also the emphasis on the learners native intelligence, or personal experience which must be fully tapped by integrating it with the classroom learning activities. Dewey's educational idea no doubt, represents the present areas of advocacy for the proper organization and development of adult and continuing education which emphasizes learner-centred and need-oriented learning can promote immediate effective application of the knowledge gained or acquired.

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