My Reflections on Dewey

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EDAE 520

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December 4, 2010

Abstract:

EDAE 520 has addressed key philosophical, conceptual, and historical aspects of adult education and provided a foundation of understanding as each of us moves forward with our academic and professional careers. The teachings of John Dewey found in *Experience in Education* nicely tie together many of these aspects and afford me the opportunity to reflect on what I’ve learned this semester, think about my own learning experiences, how I’ve handled my career practices as a workforce adult educator up to this point, and how I’ll apply what I’ve learned in the future. In this paper, I will address those reflections.

My Reflections on Dewey

**Introduction**

EDAE 520 has been an enlightening academic journey. We’ve explored and discussed key philosophical, conceptual, and historical aspects of adult education. John Dewey’s landmark book, *Experience and Education* profoundly influenced educators when it was written over 70 years ago and continues to do so to this day. A critical premise of his work focuses on the role of experience, emphasizing that only through an understanding of the present gained through experiences of the past can one grow intellectually and prepare for the future. Consequently, it is only fitting to conclude this course by reflecting on Dewey’s teachings from the past; how they relate to our studies this semester of current trends in the field of adult education relevant to my background and primary career interest, workforce education; where I’ve been and am, both as learner and teacher; and how the implications of this knowledge will guide me moving forward in my career.

From the perspective of a workforce educator and learner, I feel that Dewey’s contributions are indeed significant and that certain principles expressed through Dewey stand out with particular relevancy to me. I believe that an understanding of the concept of experience and implementation of that concept should guide the teaching process whenever practical and possible. In addition, as an educator I believe it is important to understand each student as an individual; taking into account their unique past experiences, backgrounds, influences, and aspirations so that I can most effectively guide them to the learning objectives to which they aspire. I also believe that my role as an educator should be facilitating and shaping the learning experience through an understanding of the other factors that influence learning related to the class environment.

I do however diverge with Dewey on one key point. He implies throughout his book that while presenting a major challenge to the educator, a deep understanding of the concept of experience can and should be the basis for all learning in every situation. I believe this is neither practical nor possible, for there are times when external factors come into play that construct parameters limiting the scope of learning and dictate the implementation of the Traditional methodology over the Progressive, and others times when learner previous experience is void of any relevancy to the subject matter. However, through a thorough understanding of the dynamics of both Traditional and Progressive philosophies, I do believe as an educator I can apply in varying degrees many of the principles of the Progressive philosophy related to the concept of experience to those teaching situations that require an approach more in line with the Traditional philosophy. It is on these points, that I’ll begin my analysis.

**Traditional and Progressive Philosophies**

While Dewey’s *Experience and Education* was written in 1938 and addressed the subject primarily from the perspective of teaching children, the principles generally apply to modern Adult Education as well. As a starting point, Dewey provides an analysis of the Traditional and Progressive viewpoints. Dewey prefaces his commentary with implied disclaimers of impartiality, and rejects choosing one over the other or any form of compromise (Dewey, 1938). Yet throughout the book he clearly and strongly advocates the Progressive philosophy incorporating his ideas relevant to a deeper understanding of the concept of experience over that of the Traditional philosophy. I agree with his basic arguments. However, I would in turn argue that the Traditional philosophy should not and cannot be rejected outright and that some form of compromise is sometimes necessary, for not every facet of the Progressive philosophy applies perfectly to every learning situation. I believe strongly, that many of the adult learning scenarios inherent to workforce education, my subfield of adult education, should be addressed utilizing a combination and/or selective fusion of these seemingly contradicting philosophies.

. Workforce education differs from other branches of adult education in key ways. First and foremost, employer-sponsored workforce education is funded and made available by the employer primarily to benefit the employer in some way economically such as increased productivity, better customer relations, or employee retention. From a historical reference point, it was designed originally to only benefit the employer. “As a more humanistic focus on learning continued to surface, the perspective began shifting toward an understanding that professional development for performance and personal development for individual gain need not be mutually exclusive objectives (Bierema, 1996; Dirkx, 1996; Peterson & Provo, 2000 as quoted by Peterson, 2010). Hence, the intellectual growth of the individual participating in the workforce education, while a desired outcome, is subordinate to the overall program objectives designed to benefit the organization as a whole. With the interests of the organization taking a primary position in the decision whether to implement and how to implement workforce education, the organizational educator must plan and execute training and education programs accordingly taking into account factors like cost, time away from production, and the ability to report quantitative benefit for conducting the learning. Time is money. Hence workforce education is inherently a time-sensitive activity. Within those constraints, learning objectives must sometimes be narrowly defined and limited.

Consequently, some learning scenarios in workforce education are best suited primarily utilizing the Traditional philosophy education model as opposed to the Progressive. Why? Because by its very nature, the Traditional methodology takes less time to execute than the Progressive. The subject matter is pre-set, communication is primarily one way, and learning is passive. In contrast, learning using the Progressive methodology, learning is inherently a slower process. It takes more time to develop and carry out because the entire learning group is involved in its content, direction, and outcome.

The objective in many workforce education scenarios that I’ve been involved in is presenting material in a straight-forward, concise way, typically via lecture, PowerPoint, video, or some combination thereof that can be digested by the learner and produce the desired outcome for the organization in a cost and time effective manner. Job-specific training commonly is an example of this type of learning. In these situations, not only do business constraints dictate utilization of the Traditional methodology, learners often are being exposed to information for the first time that bears little or no relevancy to their past experiences.

I’m experiencing this very scenario from a learner’s perspective right now. I’ve been hired for a temporary position as a call center customer service representative for a government contractor that handles the Federal Student Aid Information Center. In that position, I’ll be assisting those applying for federal student aid to navigate the process and answer questions they may have. Neither I nor any of my new co-workers have experience in this area. Consequently, our training is primarily lecture based, in keeping with the traditional model. In addition, we are being taught uniformity of operation and customer contact, not freedom of expression or thought. Consistency is the desired outcome.

Without prior knowledge of the material, this is the only way to learn the job requirements quickly. However, we have been and will be utilizing elements of the Progressive philosophy as well through structured discussion of the material and on the job training, where we will be learning by doing. Other job specific workforce education I’ve experienced followed a similar combination of activities.

Some workforce education in which I’ve been involved as a learner has placed a higher emphasis on the Progressive methodology, in particular management training, leadership training, and teambuilding exercises. These learning activities were less structured by design, encouraged the free-flow of information, learner participation in defining and setting goals, and the development of critical thinking skills. Typically, time allotment for these activities was expanded to accommodate the process.

As an educator in the homebuilding field, I now recognize that I have utilized elements of both philosophies separately and occasionally combined them when possible. In some cases, such as other job-specific training, I’ve utilized a more rigid format and primarily introduced employees new to the business and the company to the necessary vernacular and trade-related knowledge necessary to perform their jobs using a lecture, or presentation based teaching format. However, in these classes I’ve also strived to engage the learners into active participation whenever possible. If the topic lends itself all to the sharing of personal experiences either via me or my learners, I’ve always encouraged it. I’ve challenged them with pertinent opened ended questions. I’ve tried my best to get them to think critically about their jobs and how best to perform them.

In other classes that I’ve taught, I’ve structured the learning activities to be more Progressive-based, heavily utilizing Dewey’s philosophy of experience.

**Experience and Learning**

We spent a great deal of time and effort examining different types of learning this semester, including Somatic Learning, Affective Learning, Transformative Learning, and Indigenous Learning, which are all linked to Experiential Learning and Dewey. As previously discussed, the concept of “experience” is a key premise in Dewey’s thoughts regarding the Progressive approach to learning. Our intellectual growth, from birth on is defined, evolved, and driven by what Dewey calls “continuity of experience.” According to Dewey, “…the principle of continuity of experience means 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, p. 35). Each past experience modifies our current experiences and helps shape our future ones.

As Dewey, points out though, our experiences do not necessarily lead to growth or sometimes lead to growth in undesirable ways. “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of future experience” (Dewey page 25).

I saw examples of this during my agency visit this semester observing a GED class and discussing the program with its manager. Many of the students in that class were there because they found their previous school experience to be boring. Consequently, they dropped out and only later decided to return to their education when they had experienced the consequences of not having an education. With a thorough understanding now of Dewey, I believe that their post-high school experiences out of school were more educative to them personally then their high school experiences in school, and that is the growth they obtained from those post high school experiences, however negative and counterproductive they may have been, that led them to go back to school. From my perspective, as a student of adult education striving to become a more learned, knowledgeable educator, this was a valued lesson.

This leads me to the question, what can I do as an educator to foster educative learning experiences, but also avoid practices that will produce mis-educative experiences in the classroom?

In classes I’ve taught in the past, I’ve tried to make the learning fun and enjoyable by interjecting humor when appropriate and pertinent because I felt that doing so would enhance the experience of those I taught, which would in turn foster a more receptive learning environment. Dewey seems to validate that viewpoint: “Everything depends on the quality of experience which is had. The quality of experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences” (Dewey, page 27). By facilitating a more desirable learning experience, I’d like to think my students learned more and derived a greater future benefit than they might have otherwise. Two other classes I’ve previously taught come to mind that illustrate these points.

I taught a customer service class composed of people from different builders all charged with performing customer service for buyers who’d recently moved into their new homes and had issues to be resolved. The majority of these students were not only new to their jobs, but new to the industry as well having little or no previous job specific training. As an introduction to the class, I split them into small groups and asked them to think about and discuss with one another their own previous customer service experiences as consumers, both good and bad. I also asked them to jot down what happened in their interactions during these situations that made the experiences good or bad. After giving them time to complete the first half of the exercise, each group shared their findings with the entire class. After each told their stories, the class as a whole discussed the experiences, and drew conclusions, which I posted for all to see. We then discussed how these experiences could be applied to their jobs as well.

I also addressed homebuilding-specific customer service and contact situations with that same group and a superintendent class that I taught. Based on my own real experiences in both positions, I made a list of 50 Difficult Customer Questions and Scenarios. From that list, I divided each onto a separate piece of paper and asked two volunteers (or selected volunteers) to come up for a role playing exercise. One student was asked to play the role of the homeowner and one the builder representative. The list was not given to them ahead of time. Without being given any time to prepare a response, the scenario was drawn from a fish bowl then acted out in front of the class. Depending on the nature of the specific scenario and the performance of the homeowner role player, the interaction was often quite humorous. Following each role play, the class critiqued the overall response of the builder representative role player, reinforced their confidence when they judged that the situation had been well handled, and provided suggestions for improvement when applicable.

In each of these examples, continuum of experience was used to prepare the workers for their jobs. In the first, the learners applied their own past experiences to achieve a better understanding of the classroom experience and how to approach their jobs when dealing with future professional experiences. They also benefited from the experiences of others in the same way. In the second example, their classroom experience, although artificial was realistic, plausible, and even likely to occur sometime in the future. By rehearsing the proper way to handle the situation and observing others do the same for similar situations, they could then be more prepared if and when those situations came up later in real life. In both these examples, student growth was achieved.

**Learner Individuality**

Another important aspect of adult education that has influenced me which we discussed early on in the class and throughout the semester is the diverse nature of adult learners. “There are no ‘typical’ adult learners. Instead, adult learners represent ‘a diverse set of individuals with distinct demographics, social locations, aspirations and levels of preparation’” (Pusser et all., 2007 as quoted by Hansman and Mott, 2010, p. 16). Although in some ways, I was always cognizant of this reality, prior to this class I never fully appreciated its implications as an educator of adults.

Dewey recognized this important point as vital to the link between attitude and experience in his writings, “…he, (the educator) must…be able to judge what attitudes are conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning” (Dewey, p.39). Attitudes are formed through experience, which in turn affects future experience.

This semester we touched on a number of concepts new to me related to the diversity of the adult learner that has enhanced my appreciation of viewing each learner as an individual including marginalization, social justice, cultural imperialism and social capital; all of which have a bearing on attitude and experience. Coming from a background in workforce education, not academic instruction, if these issues touched my students they were transparent to me. My focus was elsewhere.

However, my agency visit and the chance to sit in on the GED class helped me see first-hand how these issues impact the students and how a teacher effectively takes these factors into account in the classroom. By definition, this group of learners was marginalized. The majority of the students were minorities, and I would guess among the socio-economically deprived. The teacher was careful to treat them as individuals and understood them.

The teacher also empowered them as individuals, by allowing them a voice in the selection of the next learning activity, a form of social control of the classroom that is another key element of the Progressive system and Dewey’s teachings. “The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control” (Dewey, page 56). This kind of empowerment links the concept of individuality with the final factor I’ll address, the learning environment.

**The Learning Environment**

A final meaningful concept I’ve derived from Dewey and our class is an appreciation of the importance of the class environment, redefined to include both the intellectual and physical environment. Some environments are conducive to the learning process and some are not.

In terms of the intellectual and physical environment, Dewey believed that freedom of movement was a factor influencing freedom of thought. A learning environment that facilitates both in turn facilitates learning. A major criticism of the Traditional philosophy is that learner freedom is largely non-existent. Students lack any social control, freedom of movement and are seldom afforded the opportunity of self expression. This is stifling to intellectual growth, but also makes it difficult or impossible for the instructor to gain an understanding of each student’s individuality

The Progressive philosophy advocates a learning environment where freedom of movement and thought rule. In Dewey’s words, “The amount and the quality of...free activity as a means of growth is a problem that must engage the thought of the educator at every stage of development” (Dewey, page 63).

In class we discussed other ways that the physical environment can positively and negatively influence learning. Chair configuration, room size, room temperature, and other external influences can have bearing on learning. In the training class I’m currently attending for my new job, the lighting is poor and I’m attending it in the evening. Throughout each class session, what lighting that is available is turned down because of the use of a projector. Consequently, by the end of each session, my eyes are so strained I can barely take notes. Interestingly, the other students my age are also having trouble seeing well enough to write notes, while the younger participants do not seem to mind. In effect, the environment is negatively impacting the ability of myself and other older participants to learn the material.

When I taught at the Homebuilders Association, we had a real classroom to conduct our programs, but when I did workforce education for a builder, we conducted classes wherever we could, including vacant homes, model home garages, and other less than ideal learning environments. We’d do classes in 100 degree plus environments with power tools being used nearby and construction traffic going on all around us. In retrospect, these conditions certainly did not facilitate the learning process, however this example again provides illustration of the challenges I’ve faced as a workforce educator.

**Conclusion**

The vast array of information I’ve gained through EDAE 520 and the teachings of Dewey provide me with a much broader understanding of adult education, and ideas I can implement as an educator as I move forward with my career in or out of the workforce education . The reflections I’ve offered are but some of the key concepts I’ve learned. Should I remain in workforce education, there will still be many factors out of my control, but armed with the knowledge I’ve gained, I can certainly approach my tasks with an elevated sense of professionalism.

Whenever possible, I will utilize the teachings of Dewey related to the concept of experience and apply those teachings to a Progressive teaching agenda. If and when circumstance dictates the use of a Traditional framework, I can still apply many of Dewey’s principles at least in part. I have a much greater appreciation of the adult learner as an individual and the environmental factors, both intellectual and physical that affect the learning process. This has indeed been, an enlightening academic journey.

References

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