

## FROM TRADITIONAL TO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: JOHN DEWEY'S REFORMATIVE APPROACH

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Education means teaching and learning, usually at school, college or university. Education probes mind that will be able to generate good thoughts and ideas. It allows students to do the analysis for making decisions of life and authorize children and adults to become forceful participants in transformation of the society. It is a universal truth that education plays a crucial role in moulding the minds of individuals and also forming a good society. However what education is, this question has been a matter of debate and discussion since ages. Traditionalists believe that the purpose of education is to pass knowledge to upcoming generations. On the other hand, progressives are of different opinion. Progressivism supports a new kind of education that was based on social change and the findings of behaviour. John Dewey was responsible for the success of progressivism. In this research paper, the two different approaches: Plato's traditional approach to education and John Dewey's progressive approach cum experiential approach to education are thoughtfully deliberated. This study aims to unfold a deep understanding of how transformation took place from traditional to experiential learning.*

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, Progressivisms, Philosophy of education, Traditionalists, Transformation

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1938, twenty-two years after *Democracy and Education* was published, Dewey published *Experience and Education*, which on the surface appears to be a short restatement of his earlier views on education. Philosophy and education are two different fields of studies but they are closely linked together, because without any rational thinking prior to education, the whole educational process is directionless. So, one can say that philosophy and education are closely related to each other and because of this close interconnectedness many philosophers in their writings tried to deal with the problems in education. As a result, ancient philosophers like Plato

and Aristotle in their works have developed different methodologies to investigate and answer various questions related to education. Their ideas about education still have profound impact on schooling. Keeping this idea in mind, the first part of this paper deals with Plato's traditional approach to education.

Education can be understood as the process of developing knowledge and skills in individuals. It can be understood as a continuous process which begins from the day we are born and continues till our death. Education plays a pivotal role in our lives in growing our minds and shaping our personality. The term education has been defined differently by various philosophers. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to explore two different approaches towards philosophy of education. The first and foremost difference between the two approaches has to do with how they conceive the idea of education. The first is traditionalist's approach, for traditionalists, schools are academic institutions with a more purely academic purpose where learners are passive receivers of information and teachers are sources of information and authority. On the other hand according to progressive education, learners are active participants, problem solvers and planners. Teachers are facilitators, guides who foster thinking; it believes schools as social service agencies that aims to prepare children for the social, political and economic realities of modern life. The Plato's traditional approach to education believes that the change is the law of nature, everything is constantly changing, it can be quoted in Heraclitus's words-

*'All things go and nothing stays...we could not step twice into the same river.'*

Similarly change in traditional approach to education was pre-requisite; possessing this idea of change in mind John Dewey along with other philosophers gave rise to progressive theory of education. In order to bring the desired change in society or in the existing education setup, a very pre-planned philosophy should be behind that kind of reformation and this task was well established by Dewey's progressive approach to education. The progressive theory of education advocates for a new kind of education based on social change. The second part of this paper deals with John Dewey's criticism of the traditional approach to education, followed by his progressive approach.

## **Plato's Philosophy of Education**

Though Plato's main pre-occupation was on a political question, he spent considerable amount of energy discussing educational matters. On education, Plato was primarily concerned with the role of education in bringing up people who were sensitive to the service of their society in which everyone was usefully deployed in accordance with his/her status and abilities. In the dialogue called *The Republic* (Plato, 1943) he argued that the character of a state depends on the quality of its citizens and their rules. In this regard, Plato saw education as an essential vehicle for the state to establish well-ordered governance. This kind of governance necessarily entailed the presence of skillful rulers who would usefully engage the various groups within the society in a manner that, depending on the status and abilities of her citizens, would reach the highest social virtue, namely justice. To achieve this ideal, a society required a sound political system. As Plato claimed 'a good education system would guarantee a sound political system.'

Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and many more have given significant contribution in the field of education and are also known as educational thinkers. Plato's theory of education emphasizes the social role of education in preparing individuals to serve society in different capacities in accordance with their aptitudes. For Plato education is the chief function of the state and a prime source of the individual. According to Plato, education should not only be in place when children are young, but it should be upheld until adulthood. Its goal was to educate men to be just and nurture the soul. He believed in compulsory primary education, following which a test shall be administered to everyone. All those who fail to clear the test were sent to do labour related work. Those who clear the test were sent to join armed forces where training will be imparted to them for the period of next ten years. This will again be followed by a test where the successful will be sent to join the government. This governing class will be subjected to further education in science.

Plato's Academy represented a new type of education in Athens that was necessary during that type that allowed admission of new classes and groups to Athenian citizenship. This new type of education aimed at training and preparing citizens for life society. This education was essentially liberal, theoretical and individualistic. Plato saw the sole purpose of education as service to society. This purpose would be attained by the all-round development of the child, body and soul through a class division of society, in which individuals were to be educated according to their specific

level and intellectual ability. The ultimate aim of education according to Plato was to provide nurture to the soul by attaining knowledge. He saw education as a key for society. Its goal was to educate men to be just. Plato believed that attaining knowledge was for the interest of the society and the individual. According to Plato, the purpose of education is to free the soul and turn it towards the truth. Now one can question- how does education turn the soul 'towards the light?' Plato suggests that the 'eye of the soul', which is the organ of intellect must be turned towards light but this cannot be done without turning the entire body. According to Plato, the soul had three distinct parts- appetitive, spirited and rational. The rational part of the soul seeks to find the truth, judges what is true and false to make rational decisions. It is also wise and rules the appetitive and spirited part of the soul. The appetitive part of the soul pursues bodily desires such as food and it accepts the rules from the rational part. Lastly, the spirited part of the soul shows emotion and uses reason. It is also courageous, obeys the rational part and rules the appetitive part. A just soul is where the rational part of the soul rules the body, the spirited part of the soul supports the rule, and the appetitive part of the soul follows and obeys the rule. For the 'eye of the soul' to function properly, the entire soul must turn towards the light and be in harmony.

In developing his educational theory, Plato pointed out that an educational theory worth its name must of necessity be found on the following philosophical bases. The first is the nature of human beings since it is they who are learning. Second is epistemology, theory of knowledge which defines what knowledge is and the process of acquiring knowledge. Third is the human society whose challenges and aspirations education seeks to address while fourth is the relationship between a certain kind of person and a certain kind of society since education trains an individual to serve the society as well as to adapt in the life of his/her society.

According to Plato 'the most important part of education is right training in the nursery. The soul of the child in his play should be trained to that sort of excellence in which, when he grows to manhood, he will have to be perfected.' For Plato the aim of education is the welfare of both the individual and the society. Plato believed that education plays a significant role for society; he claimed that the skills of children should be identified so that they can become a suitable member of the society. For him, from birth and up until the age of three, children should be sheltered from any kind of pain and distress. From the age of four through seventh, the character of the child must be formed. This means that the child should no longer be spoiled and any wrongful action should

result to punishment. Plato regards education as a means to achieve justice, both individual justice and social justice. For him, individual justice can be obtained when each individual develops his or her ability to the fullest. To put it in Plato's words-

'The object of education is to turn the eye which the soul already possesses to the light. The whole function of education is not to put knowledge into the soul, but to bring out the best things that are latent in the soul, and to do so by directing it to the right objects. The problem of education, then, is to give it the right surrounding.'

Plato claimed that it is through proper education, one can be converted into a virtuous man and the principle of justice can be properly maintained. Education was the positive measure for the operation of justice in the ideal state. Plato supported strong state-controlled education for both men and women. He was of the opinion that every citizen must be compulsorily trained and education must be imparted to all in the early stages without any discrimination.

For Plato education must begin at an early age. In order to make sure that children study well, Plato insisted that children be brought up in a healthy environment and that the atmosphere implant ideas of truth and goodness. He believed that early education must be related to literature, as it would bring out the best of the soul.

According to Dewey, the traditional education focused on curriculum and heritage rather than on student's interest in the area of their choice. For Dewey, the fundamental error characteristic of both Greek and modern thinking is the artificial bifurcation of our thoughts, feelings and actions from the natural world. With the aim to bring change to the traditional account of education, Dewey developed experiential theory of education. The upcoming section of this paper deals with Dewey's experiential theory of education.

### **Bridging the Gap between Traditional and Progressive Education**

The philosophical basis of modern theories of education is encompassed by the naturalist education movement of the 19th century. It came as a reaction to the 18th century movement called enlightenment and had three basic objectives namely- education according to nature, the preservation of natural goodness of the human person and society based on the natural, individual rights of the human person. One such philosopher with an interest in education in this category is

John Dewey. According to Dewey, education aimed at a return to the state of nature wherein the child would develop according to his/her own nature independent of authority or any other influence.

Dewey criticized Plato's educational theory stating that 'while [Plato] would radically change the existing state of society, his aim was to construct a state in which change would subsequently have no place. The final end of life is fixed; given a state framed with this end in view, not even minor details are to be altered.'

He discusses traditional and progressive education as two distinct poles of philosophy of education. For traditionalists, Dewey recognizes, learning is the 'acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders.' He asserts that the traditional way of education focuses more on the subject matter rather than learning. In such way of teaching he claims-

'The child is simply the immature being who is to be matured; he is the superficial being who is to be deepened; his is narrow experience which is to be widened. It is his to receive, to accept. His part is fulfilled when he is ductile and docile.'

Traditional education, Dewey maintains, is 'fixed and rigid' which brings about the 'attitude of listening'. Since listening is the act of receiving, Dewey believes that this translates individual into passive receivers. For Dewey traditional education is imposed on students in a way that it makes learning difficult and concepts hard to understand. He argues that the main aim of traditional schools is to transmit information to the students.

Unlike traditional education, Dewey valued the opportunity progressive education provides learners to think and grow but believed that progressivism forced younger generations to enact adult standards, producing an environment where learners would be encouraged to think on their own without understanding the reasoning behind their thinking.

Dewey claims that in traditional schools everything is decided by the educators. This, therefore, Dewey asserts, limits 'the intellectual and moral development of the young.' He blames the traditional education for placing emphasis on studying 'facts and ideas [...] bound up with the past'. He stresses that this does not help the student 'in dealing with issues of present and future.'

He acknowledges that although the ‘knowledge of the past and its heritage is of greater significance’, the past should, he emphasizes, ‘be seen as the past of the present, and not as another and disconnected world’. To put it in other words, for Dewey environment plays a vital role in educating an individual. Dewey claims that we should ‘never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment.’ For Dewey ‘the environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhabit the characteristic activities of a living being’. Dewey also recognizes that education is a social function, for him ‘a being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account. According to Dewey, the traditional education system fails because ‘it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life’. The traditional education focuses mostly on the ideals of competition, not cooperation, which does not align with democracy. Dewey argues that since education ‘is a process of living and not a preparation for future living’, education needs to promote cooperation – a key component of his education for democracy.

He claims that the traditional education system does not contribute in student’s growth, for it imposes its standards of teacher knows all and that students know less than the teacher. For Dewey, education does not end when students graduate from schools or universities. Education and learning is a lifelong commitment. Only through such an education we can help the students to grow, for him only ‘new’ education ‘is in harmony with principles of growth. In order to be active learners, experience, communication and reflective things plays a vital role. For Dewey, progressive education offers students the opportunity to grow by offering them the ‘expression and cultivation of individuality’, ‘free activity’ and ‘learning through experience’. Progressive education also builds on their experiences and as a result forms ‘later experience of a deeper and more expansive quality’, but fails to make learners think rationally.

Dewey regarded the physical universe a real and fundamental. He also claimed that the one constant truth about the universe is the existence of change. For Dewey, change was not an uncountable force; rather, it could be directed by human intelligence. He explained that as we alter our relationship with our environment, we ourselves are made different by the experience. He argued that education should be focused on the quality of the experience more than it focused on the information being presented.

For Dewey people are social animals who learn well through active interplay with others and that our learning increases when we are engaged in activities that have meaning for us. Book learning for Dewey, was no substitute for actually doing things. Dewey's epistemology is the notion that knowledge is acquired and expanded as we apply our previous experiences to solve new, meaningful problems. Education, to Dewey, is a reconstruction of experience, an opportunity to apply previous experiences in new ways.

Dewey believed that the traditional education was too strict on the other hand progressive education was too spontaneous and too individualized. As a result, Dewey highlighted on a new theory – experiential theory of education. Experiential theory is based on two prime principles namely continuity and interaction. Continuity refers to how both past and present experiences influence the future. While interaction refers to how current situation influences experiences. Dewey combined these two experiences stating that one's present experiences are a direct result of how their previous experiences interact with and influence their present situation. He claims the human experiences past, present and future influence the capacity to learn.

He applied pragmatism in a special way by using a scientific approach to solve problems in education. Education is an instrument for Dewey, and an important feature of this instrument must be the use of intelligence. The main tool used for the clarification of new ideas, for problem solving, is human intelligence. One of the central goals of education, for Dewey, is the development and maturation of human intelligence and to cultivate the ability to find a pragmatic resolution to problems.

Experience, for Dewey, always bears upon education. Dewey felt that education is life itself, and in life one is always responding to conflicts, adapting to problems, identifying problems and seeking to solve them. Thus, education is the perpetual reconstruction of experience. However, what is always taking place in experience is the constant growth and development of habits or different modes or structures of dispositions in order to restore continuity to action. Education for Dewey is the mediation of experience. However, Dewey's philosophy of education must be understood to be like the natural development of a plant; it is never static, never stable.

John Dewey's aim of education is to empower the youth with the necessary tools so they can play a positive and productive role in their communities. Effective communication cannot take place

without the ability to think. He says ‘thinking enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view, or to come into command of what is now distant and lacking.’ Dewey claims we reorganize our experiences, when we share them with other members of the community of ‘free learners’.

In speaking of the importance of attitude towards learning, Dewey cautions that the most damaging and dangerous attitude to form or adopt towards learning is one that accepts learning as a static thing. Dewey asserts-

‘Collateral learning in the way for formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning. If impetus in this direction is weakened instead of being intensified, something much that mere lack of preparation happens’.

## **CONCLUSION**

The traditional account of education is based on the fact that students are like empty vessels, passively receiving things coming from the teacher. But it is a point of argument that no educational system should start with such a myopic point of view. The basis of our educational system should be one of love, respect, care and cooperation. In the absence of such ideas, it becomes impossible for oneself to learn and explore new ideas. Humans are rational beings so in order to have healthy society, cooperation and love for each other are essence of life. And essence can be achieved through proper learning from the very early age. The students should be active learners rather than passive receivers of knowledge. Keeping this ideology in mind an effort has made to unfold Dewey’s philosophy of education. He argued for education system where students are not mere spectators rather act as active participants in the classroom. He also believed that it is only through active learning that a democratic society can be ensured. As it is well said by Dewey- ‘Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is, not a preparation for life; Education is life itself.’

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