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A Hundred Years On Dewey's *Democracy and Education* Revisited

1. Introduction

For the past hundred years or so, sound education has become widely equated with “progressive education”. The emblematic philosopher of progressive education in the 20th century was John Dewey. This paper will begin with an overview of the essential ideas of Dewey’s pathbreaking essay “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), as well as those set forth in his *The School and Society* (1899), and in his main work on pedagogy and social progress, *Democracy and Education* (1916). In section 2, “Progressivism: A Blind Alley?”, I will continue by drawing attention to Dewey’s brief 1930 piece “How Much Freedom in New Schools?”, and will point out that it took Dewey quite a time to mature, both as a thinker and as a person. His long and happy first marriage, with his wife an early and very extreme feminist, holding, also, at that time extraordinary views on child upbringing, clearly had a problematic effect on Dewey. By 1930, however – a widow, and past seventy – he became ready to repudiate the idea of “progressive education”. In the third section, coming to *visual education*, I will attempt to demonstrate that Dewey practically never understood the fact – and this makes revisiting his work, in the present framework, especially urgent – that there is, beyond merely *verbal* thinking, which he was so critical of, and thinking embedded in *actions*, which he so very much espoused, such a thing as *visual thinking*. No sound education is feasible without a recognition of the significance of the visual: mental images, physical pictures, moving images, the logic of the pictorial. In contrast to his mentor William James, or say to James’s colleague Thorndike, Dewey did never really grasp what the visual dimension amounts to. And, as I will suggest in section 4, “Blindness Persists: The Visual after Dewey”, it is striking how all

milestone 20th-century writings on education, in the wake of Dewey and of course under the impact of the linguistic turn, lost sight of the visual. I will mention Paul Goodman's *Compulsory Mis-Education* (1964), Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971), Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Seymour Papert's *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap* (1996), Don Tapscott's *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (1998), all of them unaware of the issue of visual learning, and will especially try to come to terms with Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), a book in which the rise of the image is taken to amount to a cognitive collapse for those growing up in the late 20th century. By way of conclusion, in section 5, I will briefly sum up why educational theory and practice today – call them progressive, call them conservative – are badly in need of taking note of the pictorial turn now happening.

2. The Essential Dewey

Dewey's two main educational ideas are unmistakably spelt out in his early brief piece "My Pedagogic Creed".¹ The first: it is the "child's own instincts and powers" that "furnish the material and give the starting-point for all education", but the child's powers should be stimulated, as Dewey puts it, by "the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself".² The second: in our complex modern society children cannot directly mature into the world of adults. They need to be educated in special institutions – *schools* – which as it were represent life in a simplified form. Dewey stresses that schools should maintain a continuity with the child's home life, with the neighbourhood, with the playground, that education should begin with "manual training" like cooking, sewing, etc., and that the child's introduction into "the more formal subjects of the curriculum"

¹ Published in a booklet with two articles, the first one written by Dewey. New York and Chicago: E. L. Kellogg & Co., 1897.

² "My Pedagogic Creed", pp. 3 f., cf. also p. 13: "The law for presenting and treating material is the law implicit within the child's own nature."

should occur essentially “through the medium of these activities”. Fundamentally, the school should be conceived of as “a form of community life”, not as “a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned”. And this is, then, the perspective from which the school teacher’s role is to be understood. “The teacher”, writes Dewey, “is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.”³

In *The School and Society*⁴ the emphasis is again on the educational consequences of the radical transition from a preindustrial society to the industrial one having emerged in 19th-century America. “Those of us who are here today”, writes Dewey, “need go back only one, two, or at most three generations, to find a time when the household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation”, but by now “concentration of industry and division of labor have practically eliminated household and neighborhood occupations – at least for educational purposes”.⁵ To re-introduce these occupations, in a specially selected form, into the life of the child, is what the modern school should be there for.⁶

The idea Dewey is here putting forward he will formulate in a rather more well-balanced way in his *Democracy and Education*. The classic passage:

To savages it would seem preposterous to seek out a place where nothing but learning was going on in order that one might learn. – But as civilization advances, the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of adults widens. Learning by direct sharing in the pursuits of grown-ups becomes increasingly difficult except in the case of the less advanced occupations. Much of what adults do is so remote in

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 7, 11, 8, 9.

⁴ Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1899.

⁵ *The School and Society*, pp. 6 and 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36 f.

space and in meaning that playful imitation is less and less adequate to reproduce its spirit. Ability to share effectively in adult activities thus depends upon a prior training given with this end in view. Intentional agencies – schools – and explicit material – studies – are devised. The task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons. – Without such formal education, it is not possible to transmit all the resources and achievements of a complex society.⁷

However, Dewey still warns of schools not allotting sufficient weight to practical activities.⁸ And in the chapter “Education as Conservative and Progressive” he especially warns of the idea that “education is essentially retrospective; that it looks primarily to the past and especially to the literary products of the past”.⁹

3. Progressivism: A Blind Alley?

As I indicated by way of introduction, Dewey in his later years became critical of the progressive education movement. He now spoke about “the one-sidedness of the idea of the ‘child-centered’ school”, criticized schools that “indulge pupils in unrestrained freedom of action and speech, of manners and lack of manners”, and raised the question “whether the tendency of progressive schools has not been to put emphasis upon things that make schooling more immediately enjoyable to pupils rather than upon things that will give them the understanding and capacity that are relevant to contemporary social life”.¹⁰

⁷ *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, p. 9.

⁸ “...when the schools depart from the educational conditions effective in the out-of-school environment, they necessarily substitute a bookish, a pseudo-intellectual spirit for a social spirit”, *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ John Dewey, “How Much Freedom in New Schools?”, *New Republic* 63 (9 July 1930), pp. 321 f. and 324.

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Should the quality of being enjoyable really be the main aim of schooling? Dewey's early comrade-in-arms William James did certainly not think so.¹¹ In his 1899 *Talks to Teachers* he wrote: "Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, be systematically heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than its difficulty... [inure yourself to] self-denial..."¹² It might be proper to cite here two remarks by that great admirer of James, the Austrian elementary school teacher and Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In 1948 he jotted down:

I think the way people are educated nowadays tends to diminish their capacity for suffering. At present a school is reckoned good if the children have a good time. And that used *not* to be the criterion. Parents moreover want their children to grow up like themselves (only more so), but nevertheless subject them to an education *quite* different from their own. – Endurance of suffering isn't rated highly because there is supposed not to be any suffering – really it's out of date.¹³

And the second remark, one Wittgenstein made in a conversation in 1950: "When you say NO to a child, you should be like a wall and not like a door."¹⁴ But recall also another Austrian, Robert Musil, to whose protagonist in *The Man Without Qualities* the following wis-

¹¹ For a devastating description of Dewey's pathetic attempts to pretend James belonged to the liberal camp, see Richard M. Gale, "William James and John Dewey: The Odd Couple", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXVIII (2004), pp. 149–167.

¹² William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, (1899), New York: Henry Holt, 1916, pp. 75 f.

¹³ MS 168, p. 2, entry dated 30.5.48, here quoted from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, transl. by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 71e. – In the volume *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, eds. Peters and Stickney, Singapore: Springer, 2017, the passage is quoted on p. 45 with the comment: "Wittgenstein's rather Nietzschean views of education appear untimely now."

¹⁴ K. E. Tranøy, "Wittgenstein in Cambridge 1949–51: Some Personal Recollections", *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, vol. 28, nos. 1–3, p. 15.

dom appeared as an “extraordinary new thought”: “a man’s possibilities, plans, and feelings must first be hedged in by prejudices, traditions, obstacles, and barriers of all sorts, like a lunatic in his straitjacket, and only then can whatever he is capable of doing have perhaps some value, substance, and staying power”. Contemporary educational theorists would hardly agree with Musil. One exception I am aware of is Paul Tough. Telling about his young son, he wrote: “I found, as countless parents had found before me, that he needed something more than love and hugs. He also needed discipline, rules, limits; someone to say no.”¹⁵ Quoting a teacher, Tough writes: “Our kids don’t put up with a lot of suffering. They don’t have a threshold for it.” Yet what they need more than anything is “a little hardship: some challenge, some deprivation they can overcome...”¹⁶

4. Blocked View: Dewey and the Visual

Throughout his career as an educationalist Dewey was sharply critical of “mere bookishness”¹⁷, the extreme reliance on linguistic symbols. As he put it in *Democracy and Education*, there is a “danger that instead of really calling up the absent and remote in a way to make it enter a present experience, the linguistic media of representation will become an end in themselves”.¹⁸ For Dewey the contrast to bookishness is *thinking embedded in activity*, but occasionally he seems to get a glimpse of thinking as bound up with the perceptual, and indeed the visual. There is an intriguing, perhaps important, passage in “My Pedagogic Creed”, where Dewey writes that we tend to “present the child with arbitrary symbols” – the symbols of written language. Symbols however, though “a necessity in mental development”, are merely “tools” which should serve to give rise to mental images. As he formulates it: “the image is the great instrument of

¹⁵ Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Confidence, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), London: Arrow Books, 2014, p. 183.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. *Democracy and Education*, p. 272 (see also note 8 above).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it". The task, Dewey says, is to train "the child's power of imagery" and "seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience".¹⁹

In *The School and Society* Dewey manages to refer to the topic of children's drawings. He even prints four such, but his focus is not on the visual; what he stresses is how instruction can induce children to actually observe, and thus more correctly represent, the objects they draw.²⁰ In his 1910 *How We Think* there is a very brief discussion of the subject, with Dewey registering that "the child's interest is not in pictorial representation, but in the things represented".²¹ Many other scattered remarks on drawing in the context of education can be found in Dewey's writings, but altogether it is fair to say that he did not attach importance to the topic, and did not in any depth pursue the idea of a close connection between thinking, visual mental images, and children's cognitive evolution. Still, he was not entirely unaware of the significance of the visual. In *How We Think* he remarks: "we must recall that language includes much more than oral and written speech. Gestures, pictures, monuments, visual images, finger movements – anything consciously employed as a sign is, logically, language."²² In *Democracy and Education* he mentions "so-called expressive movements to which others are sensitive; blushing, smiling, frowning, clinching of fists, natural gestures of all kinds".²³ And in his volume *Human Nature and Conduct*, written some years later, there occurs the formula: "Language grew out of unintelligent babblings, instinctive motions called gestures, and the pressure of circumstance."²⁴ Now if one thinks of the huge literature

¹⁹ "My Pedagogic Creed", pp. 14 f.

²⁰ *The School and Society*, pp. 39–47.

²¹ Chicago: D. C. Heath, pp. 123 f.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 170 f.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

²⁴ *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York: Henry Holt, 1922, p. 79.

on the fundamental significance of gesture language as the primordial language of mankind, especially of Wundt's work and the attention Dewey's close collaborator G. H. Mead paid to Wundt, if one thinks of the role of James I alluded to above by way of introduction, the very full analysis he gave of the problem of visual thinking in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), the subsequent parallel summaries provided by Edward Thorndike,²⁵ or indeed the leading turn-of-the-century American psychologist Titchener's crucial investigations into the nature of mental imagery,²⁶ then Dewey's rare pronouncements on the subject seem insufficient to say the least.

5. Blindness Persists: The Visual After Dewey

In his book *Compulsory Mis-Education*²⁷ Paul Goodman allots quite some space to summarizing, appreciatively, Dewey's overall pedagogical position. That position involved cautioning against an excessive focus on written texts – against “bookishness”. Goodman goes further. He suggests that in the age of movies, TV and radio, with “less literacy, there would be more folk culture”, and that much “suffering of inferiority” would be avoided if young people did not have to meet the “perhaps unnecessary standard” of literacy. What Goodman does not see, and none of the authors I here list do, is that it is not word language at all, but the language of visual signs, which is the primordial language of humanity, and that, consequently, it is the pictorial that should form the basis of elementary instruction.

Certainly Ivan Illich in his *Deschooling Society*²⁸ did not see this, though in some other respects he sharply differed from Dewey. While Dewey attached special significance to the school system, Illich simply wanted to demolish it, and rely, instead, on informal

²⁵ I am indebted to András Benedek for having drawn my attention to Thorndike.

²⁶ See my *Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, esp. pp. 14–16, 26, 134 and 136. The volume is available online.

²⁷ New York: Horizon Press, 1964.

²⁸ New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

learning webs. To Allan Bloom it never occurred that the “closing of the American mind” might not be entirely independent of American educationalists’ eyes being closed to the significance of the visual. Neither did Seymour Papert, in his *The Connected Family*,²⁹ come to see that significance, even though he dwelled, repeatedly and at length, on the topic of video games.³⁰ Tapscott does touch on images, but has nothing of interest to tell. By contrast, Neil Postman, in his *The Disappearance of Childhood*, provides an extensive survey of the history of communications technologies, from pictographic writing through alphabetic writing through book printing to film and television, referring to some of the most famous authorities on the topic (and sadly misrepresenting the work of that pioneer of the theory of visual thinking, Rudolf Arnheim)³¹, only to reach the conclusion that the return of the image amounts to a cultural decline.

6. The Pictorial Turn in Education

Children these days are surrounded by physical and digital pictures; indeed working with pictures, and communicating pictures, forms a fundamental dimension of their life-world. Contemporary educational theory and practice still have to catch up with what our children by now do and know. Progressive education, whatever that means, today has to look into a future that in one essential aspect definitely resembles humankind’s distant past: it is a world dominated by visual communication and consequently by visual thinking. Progressive education, it seems, now has to take a conservative turn.

²⁹ *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap*, Atlanta, Georgia: Longstreet Press, 1996.

³⁰ To be fair, on p. 122 he *almost* says something about images (referring to the possibility of weaving together, on the computer, pictures with texts), and in his *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas* (New York: Basic Books, 1980) on p. 96 there is a reference, albeit dismissive, to Jerome Bruner’s path-breaking work on the place of images and words in cognitive growth.

³¹ New York: Vintage Books, 1994 (1st edition 1982), pp. 72–80.