

# John Dewey and the Reconstruction of American Democracy

John Dewey was perhaps America's most famous philosopher. He devoted his life trying to reform the public schools and reconstruct American democracy to increase citizen political participation.

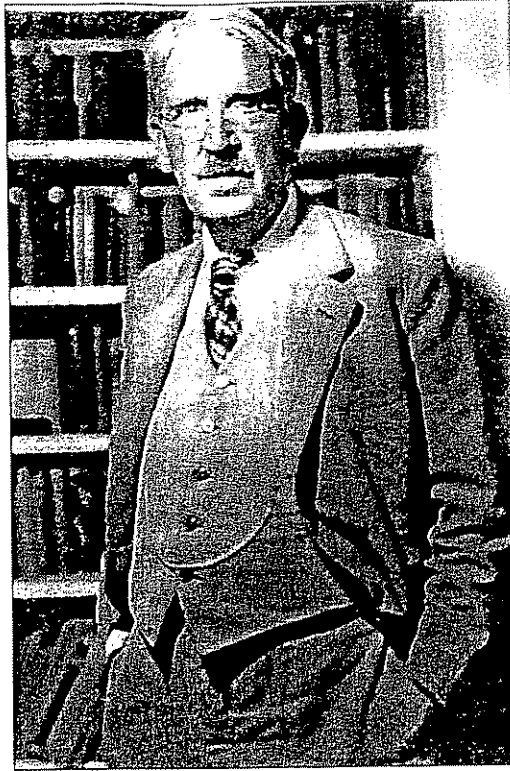
John Dewey was born in 1859 in Burlington, Vermont. His mother came from a family with a strong New England Christian tradition emphasizing service to others to improve society. His father was involved in business ventures.

Dewey attended public schools in Burlington. The prevailing teaching method stressed memorization and recitation of facts. He was a shy student who did not like school.

Dewey's intellectual life bloomed, however, after he entered the University of Vermont, which had a reputation for being strong in philosophy. At this time, philosophy in most American colleges was heavily religious in nature and mainly prepared students for church ministry.

Although the classic curriculum at the University of Vermont stressed Latin, Greek, ancient history, and religion, Dewey read books and journals from the college library on many other subjects. He was especially interested in new developments in the natural sciences and in European philosophers such as Herbert Spencer, who tried to apply Darwin's theory of evolution to economics.

After graduating in 1879, Dewey was unsure what he wanted to do in life. He taught high school for a while but was not good at it. Then after the leading U.S. philosophy journal published an essay he wrote, Dewey decided to pursue a career as a philosopher.



*John Dewey (1859–1952), writer, philosopher, educator, and social activist, worked to reform American education and democracy. (Morris Library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale)*

## Becoming a Philosopher

In 1882, Dewey entered Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to study philosophy. Unlike most American university philosophy programs, the one at Johns Hopkins emphasized new German scientific research methods rather than religion as the best way to arrive at the truth. Dewey also embraced the "new psychology," then being practiced in Europe, which focused on observing human behavior and on scientific experimentation.

After he received his PhD from Johns Hopkins in 1884, Dewey began his career teaching philosophy at the University of Michigan. His students welcomed his new emphasis on science and psychology. Dewey became increasingly convinced that to be a philosopher one also had to be an experimental psychologist.

In 1886, Dewey married Harriet Alice Chapman, whom he called Alice. A former teacher, she was majoring in philosophy at the University of Michigan. She was a freethinking feminist who fought for women's rights all her adult life. She also turned Dewey's thinking around to use philosophy to help solve real social problems.

In 1894, Dewey moved to the new University of Chicago to become head of the department of philosophy and psychology. He based his department on scientific research, using experimentation and other laboratory methods.

Over the next 10 years, many called Dewey and the other philosophers in his department the "Chicago Pragmatists." Pragmatism meant they relied heavily on scientific experimentation to solve social and ethical problems (see page 13). Soon after Dewey began teaching at the University of Chicago, he launched a bold experiment in education that he hoped would transform American democracy.

## Schools for Democracy

Most U.S. public schools resembled the ones Dewey had attended as a boy. They were "curriculum-centered," stressing memorization and recitation of traditional subject matter, much of which had little connection with

merica's rapidly changing industrial society. Fear and humiliation seemed to be the most common methods teachers used to motivate their students.

Others in favor of "progressive education," however, were exploring new ways to teach children. Some of these education reformers promoted a "child-centered" type of schooling. Supporters of this approach believed nothing should interfere with the natural development of the child. Thus, students should study whatever interested them.

Dewey rejected both approaches. He criticized the "curriculum-centered" schools for ignoring the interests and experiences of the child. He faulted the "child-centered" schools for failing to adequately teach history, math, science and the other traditional school subjects.

Dewey developed a hypothesis that the interests and experiences of children should be the starting point for learning subject matter. As a pragmatist, however, he wanted to test his hypothesis in a laboratory setting.

Soon after Dewey became chairman of the philosophy and psychology department at the University of Chicago, the school's president asked him to also organize a new department to train teachers. Dewey agreed to do this, but insisted that the department have a strong experimental laboratory component.

Two years later, the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, soon called the "Dewey School," began operating. This was an elementary school on the grounds of the university. Dewey's vision was to create a miniature cooperative community of teachers and students to educate children for active participation in a democratic society.

### The "Dewey School" Experiment

The Dewey School opened in January 1896 with one teacher and 16 pupils, aged 6-9. They were mostly the children of university faculty members and their friends. Dewey tried teaching children of mixed ages, but found that did not work well. He finally organized them into 11 age groups. By the time the school closed in 1904, it had grown to include 140 pupils, aged 4-13, 13 teachers, and 10 assistants.

Dewey designed an elementary school curriculum that went far beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. The students also learned science, art, history, methods of investigation, tools of communicating, physical

education, shop skills, and habits of self-discipline and service to others.

But what made the Dewey School far different from traditional and even most other progressive schools was *how* the students learned the subject matter. After first trying a curriculum based on the stages of human history, Dewey and his teachers developed an "Occupation Theme" that combined "hand and mind."

Dewey's teachers created problem-solving activities. Each activity duplicated occupational problems that people had to solve throughout human history. The students had to figure out how to solve the problems themselves. The youngest children, ages 4-5, worked at cooking, weaving, carpentry, and other occupations linked to their homes and neighborhoods. In doing these things, they also had to learn about the past, scientific proof, measurement, and other subject matter.

Older children planted a garden. They learned about botany, soil chemistry, the role of farming in human history, the physics of light and water, and how these subjects related to animal and human life.

Dewey's occupation-oriented curriculum enabled students to experience how human knowledge evolved. They made a cave to study prehistoric life and processed animal skins and cotton to learn the history of clothing.

Dewey used occupations not to train children to become cooks and gardeners but to motivate them to learn the traditional academic disciplines. As the students progressed from year to year, the curriculum became more complex and abstract. The oldest group, comparable to eighth grade, concentrated on such things as scientific experiments and economics.

Dewey rejected the idea that elementary school teachers should teach all subjects. At the Dewey School, they each specialized in a certain area and collaborated with one another to plan activities and projects.

The teachers used a variety of methods rare in public schools. Students participated in shop and art projects, field trips, science lab experiments, games, storytelling, and discussions. They even prepared a gourmet lunch as part of a French class. Teachers often took on the role as a helper or guide in the classroom. But they were still in charge and decided what and how the students would learn.

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Beyond the subject matter, Dewey wanted the students to learn how to cooperate in solving problems, as they would need to do in a democratic society. Each child had a share in the work. The students learned to accept responsibility, lead, help others, and think.

By most accounts, the Dewey School experiment was successful, although it was limited to a rather special group of children. The school closed in 1904, however, when Dewey resigned from the university following a dispute over his appointment of Alice as principal of the school. This ended his laboratory experimentation in education.

Dewey continued to write and lecture on school reform. He published his most well-known book in this area, *Democracy and Education*, in 1916. The book harshly criticized the still common practice of forcing students to memorize masses of disconnected facts.

### **"The Great Community"**

After leaving Chicago, Dewey accepted a position to teach philosophy at Columbia University in New York City. He began to write and lecture more on reconstructing American democracy for greater citizen participation. He realized that this could not occur in school classrooms alone. Philosophers and other intellectuals, he believed, needed to step forward and push for democratic changes in all areas of American life.

In the years leading up to World War I, Dewey spoke out for worker and women's rights. He also helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the New York City Teacher's Union.

Dewey reluctantly supported President Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I. He worried, however, about increasing government restrictions on free speech and academic freedom during and after the war. In 1920, he helped organize the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Disillusioned by the weakness of the League of Nations to enforce world peace, he joined the movement to outlaw war and establish a world court to settle international disputes. Meanwhile, his fame as a philosopher and progressive educator led to invitations for him to lecture and teach in Japan, China, Turkey, Mexico, and the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s, critics began to question Dewey's idea about more citizen participation in American

democracy. Liberal journalist Walter Lippman wrote that ordinary citizens lacked the intelligence, knowledge, and time to think about and decide important public issues.

Lippman favored a democracy in which experts supplied information to elected professional politicians who would decide what laws and policies were best for the American people. The role of the citizen, Lippman said, should be limited to voting in occasional elections: "To support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly."

In 1927, Dewey answered Lippman and other critics in his book, *The Public and Its Problems*. Dewey argued that American democracy should be reconstructed so that government would be "by the people" not just "for the people," as Lippman believed.

Dewey said that the most important thing about democracy is what comes before voting: the thinking, discussion, and debate. He proposed that groups such as local unions, professional organizations, and business associations should meet regularly to deliberate on public questions. Elected politicians would follow their lead since only the ordinary citizens knew what was best for them.

Dewey agreed that Americans were often uninformed and easily manipulated by the wealthy and powerful. Thus, he repeated his ideas to make schools emphasize problem solving, thinking skills, and other knowledge necessary for democratic decision making. In addition, he assigned a key role to the media (then mainly newspapers, journals, and books) to pass on accurate facts from the experts to the people.

Dewey concluded that the result would be a more democratic society, which he called "The Great Community." Governing the nation, he said, would be everyone's business, not just that of an elite class of experts and politicians.

### **Dewey as Social Activist**

Alice, Dewey's wife and inspiration for transforming philosophy into a useful instrument for social progress, died in 1927. Two years later, at the peak of his international fame, he celebrated his 70th birthday. The following year he retired from Columbia.

He soon began a new career as a social activist. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Dewey harshly criticized capitalism for "stunting" workers by

## Pragmatism

William James, America's leading psychology scholar in the 1890s, was the first to use "pragmatism" to describe his philosophy. James once said, "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good." The reliance on what works and what is useful based on experimental trial and error provide the foundation for the philosophy of pragmatism.

Pragmatists value experimental proof over religious faith, the wisdom of thinkers in the past, or human reasoning to discover truth and knowledge. Pragmatists want to know what works as a practical matter in such areas as law, politics, and education.

Many associate John Dewey's philosophy with pragmatism, but he preferred to use the term "instrumentalism." He argued that ideas were instruments or tools to experimentally investigate and solve social problems. His most famous experiment, the Dewey School at the University of Chicago, attempted to find out the best way to educate American children for life in a democracy.

Denying them any share in controlling their work. But he also condemned Marxism, Stalinism, and government-planned "state socialism" for going too far in taking away the freedom of individuals. In addition, he thought President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism did not go far enough in its reforms.

In books, political journals, and speeches, Dewey took out a middle ground between unregulated capitalism and state socialism. He envisioned a decentralized "planning society" where workers and consumers would participate in decisions affecting their lives and communities. But Dewey never developed a clear plan for what he called "democratic socialism."

Dewey rejected revolutionary rhetoric and violence to achieve his ideas for reconstructing American democracy. He also did not have much faith in either of the two major political parties. In the midst of the Depression, he declared, "democracy has joined the unemployed." He tried to organize a third party, but finally abandoned that effort after Roosevelt's landslide re-election in 1936.

### Dewey's Impact

By the time Dewey celebrated his 90th birthday in 1949, he had published about a thousand books, essays, articles, and other writings and had given countless lectures and speeches. Dewey was 92 when he died in 1952 after careers as a philosopher, educator, and social activist, spanning 70 years.

Widely honored throughout the world at his death, Dewey may have been America's most famous philosopher. But he had limited impact on future generations of American philosophers. Some have followed Dewey and pragmatism, but most American

philosophers have adopted the methods of British language philosophy. They debate abstract problems rather than using ideas pragmatically as Dewey did to further social progress.

Dewey's greatest impact was on education. While few schools adopted Dewey's experimental curriculum, his ideas helped move schools away from recitation and rote memorization and toward discussion and problem solving.

Progressive school reformers, however, often misused Dewey's ideas about schooling for a democratic society. Even today, many critics unfairly blame Dewey for ruining the schools with "progressive education."

Americans never adopted Dewey's ideas for reconstructing American democracy. Yet, he always considered our democracy a pragmatic experiment and once wrote, "the experiment is not played out yet."

### For Discussion and Writing

1. Why was the Dewey School an example of Dewey's pragmatism?
2. Do you think the curriculum and methods used in the Dewey School over 100 years ago would work in today's elementary schools? Explain.
3. How did Walter Lippman and John Dewey differ over how American democracy should work? Who had the better idea? Why?

### For Further Reading

Martin, Jay. *The Education of John Dewey*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Westbrook, Robert B. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

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# A C T I V I T Y

## "The Great Community"

Meet in small groups to evaluate the relevance of John Dewey's "Great Community" for American democracy today.

1. Each group should discuss the following key components of Dewey's "Great Community" and then decide whether they are both *pragmatically workable* and *desirable* in the United States today:
  - a. Elected politicians should follow the lead of the citizens who meet regularly in all sorts of local groups to discuss and decide public issues.

- b. The media (now including TV, radio, and the Internet) should provide accurate expert information to citizens.
  - c. The schools should be cooperative mini-communities where students will learn the knowledge and thinking skills they will need in order to participate more fully in American democracy.
2. The groups should then report and debate their conclusions.
  3. Finally, each student should write an essay on this question: Should we reconstruct American democracy along the lines of John Dewey's "Great Community"?

## Sources

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## Standards Addressed

### China

National High School World History Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world. (13) Understands how global political change has altered the world economy.

California History-Social Science Content Standard 10.9: Students analyze the international developments in the post-World War II world. (4) Analyze the Chinese Civil War, the rise of Mao Zedong, and the subsequent political and economic upheavals in China.

### The Jungle

National High School World History Standard 20: Understands how Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption. (1) Understands the origins and impact of the Progressive movement. (2) Understands major social and political issues of the Progressive era.

California History-Social Science Content Standard 11.2: Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large-scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. (1) Know the effects of industrialization on living and working conditions, including the portrayal of working conditions and food safety in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

### Dewey

National High School Civics Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals. (1) Understands how individual participation in the political process relates to the realization of the fundamental values of American constitutional democracy.

California History-Social Science Content Standard 12.2: Students evaluate and take and defend positions on the scope and limits and obligations as democratic citizens, the relationships among them, and how they are secured. (4) Understand the obligations of civic-mindedness, including voting, being informed on civic issues, volunteering and performing public service, and service in the military or alternate service.

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