

The Risks of Education: Dewey and the Kansas School Board

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In Experience and Education, Dewey poses an interesting question with regard to education, the question of “why we prefer democratic and humane arrangements to those which are undemocratic and harsh.”ⁱ He responds by stating that these arrangements result in a “higher” and a “better” “quality of experience.”ⁱⁱ At a descriptive level, Dewey is right, of course. We do prefer progressive education because we think that it promotes better or higher experience. Why else would we prefer it? Indeed, this is exactly what we tell ourselves and our students as we engage in open discussions, utilize the Socratic method, and encourage our students to learn in a non-traditional, progressive manner. It is better for students to figure things out for themselves, despite their reluctance and their expectation that knowledge and skills are something they can learn passively. This commitment to openness, participation, activity, and democracy extends throughout American educational institutions and are the legacy of Dewey’s philosophy of education. The question remains as to whether progressive education actually does result in better experience.

Recently, we have seen trends that indicate the limits of the Deweyan ideal. The view that more democracy means better experience has begun to look naïve and dangerous. Can there be too much of a good thing? It seems that with an increase in democracy, especially an increase in democratic control over education, we have found a lower quality of experience. Democratic education has seemed to offer the bulk of our society nothing “higher” or “better” than Jerry Springer, MTV, and Monday Night Football. This denigration of experience, it could be argued, actually leads to the subversion of democracy as citizens lack moral and intellectual resources to rule themselves properly. This is the irony of democracy, noted by many, including Plato in the Republic, that democracies easily give rise to demagoguery and despotism. Both the charges of

the sullyng of culture and the practice of demagoguery have been leveled against Dewey and his followers. Dewey is seen by some on the far right as the god-father of all that is wrong with American culture. Dewey has desecrated the hallowed traditions of Western culture, his critics claim. He has introduced, by manipulative un-democratic means, an agenda that speaks the language of democracy but which actually leaves American citizens unable to criticize this very agenda. Critics on the far right blame Dewey for taking God out of the schools and for opening the permissive door that eventually leads to the catastrophe of Columbine Colorado.

“Progressive” education, by failing to teach the virtue and correspondence theory of truth, leaves students unable to fully participate in democratic society.

Such criticisms seem to result from a complete misunderstanding of what Dewey means by such key terms as experience, freedom, and education. Clearly, progressive education does not mean that we should encourage our students to retreat to ignorance, vice, and Jerry Springer. Nonetheless, an emphasis on democracy in education is not without its perils. Indeed, I shall argue that democratic education must walk a tightrope on the edge of disaster. There is only a subtle difference between democracy and anarchy, between freedom and license, between toleration and ignorance. I shall examine a few examples of these problems, examples which indicate the limits of democratic education. I will then try to explain the way in which these examples can be avoided if we are careful about the key concepts of Dewey’s philosophy of education: experience, freedom, and education. Nonetheless, I will conclude that there are always risks within this process. Risk is part of the nature of experience and of freedom. Education asks us to make decisions about the nature of experience within the context of risk.

Examples

1.) **Kansas and Evolution.** Recently the Kansas school board effectively declared that evolution could not be taught in the schools. This anti-scientific pronouncement seems to be the result of democratic control over our educational institutions. Indeed, the Kansas school board’s rationale is based explicitly upon a more democratic conception of science education. The report, “Kansas Science Education Standards,” states that one of its goals is “Teaching with Tolerance and Respect.”ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, this is the title of one of the subsections of the document. This section begins by acknowledging that “some scientific concepts and theories may conflict with a student’s religious or cultural beliefs.” The report then goes onto clarify tolerance as the

practice of avoiding dogmatism in teaching. “Compelling student belief is inconsistent with the goal of education. Nothing in science or in any other field of knowledge should be taught dogmatically.” This section concludes: “No evidence or analysis of evidence that contradicts a current science theory should be censored.”

The goals of tolerance and respect espoused by the Kansas “Standards” and the democratic procedures by which this report was approved (the school board is elected and voted among themselves to approve the “Standards”) all seem laudable. We should applaud and attempt to introduce respect and tolerance into the classroom and we should be grateful for democratic control over educational standards. It seems plain that both dogmatism and censorship should be avoided. It is bewildering, however, that the democratic values of free speech and tolerance could be used to defend the anti-scientific ideology of the report. The problem here is that if we treat “science” as a static body of knowledge which must be learned by rote, we fail to affirm the progressive ideal, necessary for democracy, that encourages students to question such static truths. It seems that to encourage judgment, we have to leave open the possibility that students’ judgments will not agree with the accepted view of the majority of scientists. Progressives remain hopeful that openness will eventually lead back to scientifically accepted consensus.

One way of resolving this problem is to recognize that while the scientific method seems to require tolerance of the type espoused by the Kansas board of education, the educator’s job is to clarify acceptable and unacceptable types of “evidence or analyses of evidence.” Spurious evidence and analyses need not be admitted into the debate. This is not to say that educators ought to ignore the creationist account of geological and biological data. Rather, it is to claim that educators must make judgments about whether the creationist account is worthy of consideration. This judgment cannot be legislated into existence without destroying both the integrity of the scientific method and the very autonomy of educators. Education is inevitably a trickle-down process in which we rely upon the autonomous judgment of experts to properly filter and funnel information for us. To interrupt this process of judgment is to reject the fact that those who are to be educated need to be educated about how to make judgments about the data. According to the rationale of the Kansas school board, however, this begs the question. Our democratic principles, indeed the very toleration espoused by the scientific method, seem to allow for disagreement about the validity of the scientific method. Within our pluralistic society,

however, the progressive hope that we could reach consensus about the nature of science is naive. Our multi-cultural society includes those who are dogmatically opposed to the scientific method itself. The democratic ideal of education seems to require that the anti-scientific dogma be taught alongside of science.

It is important to remember, in considering this example, that the Kansas Board of Education's ruling is not without precedent. Indeed, evolution has been on trial by democratic forces since Darwin first reluctantly published his "Origin of Species." The most famous of these trials is perhaps the "Scopes Monkey Trial" of 1925 in which the state of Tennessee tried to prohibit evolution education. Lest we think that this is ancient history and that Kansas is stuck in the dark ages, recall that in recent years there have been democratic attempts to ban evolution by other states including Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, and Nebraska. Kansas appears to be the first instance in which this democratic movement has finally succeeded. The critique of democratic education that is modeled in this example is best understood in terms of the failure of democratic control over the administration of education to result in good educational policy. When educational policy is determined by elected officials, these officials may be tempted to use their power to manipulate education to advance ideological ends, including subverting the scientific method in order to serve the interests of their constituency.

2.) **Moral Education.** It seems as if our students are not receiving a proper moral education. The shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado are only the tip of the iceberg. Cheating is rampant on college campuses, as are binge drinking and sexual assault. Education ought to be part of the solution to these problems of moral turpitude. Unfortunately, critics of progressive education see progressivism as part of the problem that leads to the general decay of the moral fiber of American society. A recurrent complaint lodged against progressive educators is that they treat their pupils as consumers with the goal of empowering the pupil to choose for him/herself among a variety of possible values. As Christina Hoff Sommers states it, this approach is "a little like putting them [students] in a chemistry lab and saying, 'discover your own compounds, kids'."^{iv} The problem is that pupils require guidance in order to develop the faculty of judgment. The moral conscience must be carefully nurtured. It cannot develop on its own. The tradition of consumerism in moral education, which Sommers criticizes, is known as the "values clarification" approach. Critics of this approach pin the blame for it ultimately upon John Dewey by way of his follower Louis Raths.^v Proponents of this approach gladly accept the

Deweyan legacy and claim that this approach dates back to the Socratic method of helping students to “think through values issues for themselves.”^{vi}

The goal here is to allow students to develop moral judgment by encourage them to think moral problems through on their own. The problem raised by critics of this approach is that students cannot develop a moral sense entirely on their own. Conscience needs the guidance and care of moral teachers. It is thus not only the scientific method that requires judgment as to what should be tolerated within the educational process. Moral education, even more so than science education, demands proper judgment on the part of educators. Moral educators can not assume that their pupils possess proper moral judgment. Indeed the very process of moral education is supposed to help pupils develop moral judgment. The need for education arises from students’ lack of a developed faculty of moral judgment.

It is interesting that Dewey is seen as both the nemesis of moral education and as the legitimate heir to the Socratic method. Does the Socratic method of education espoused by Dewey lead to moral anarchy? We must consider whether democratic tolerance in moral education leads to moral anarchy, as critics like Charles Sykes contend.

The problem of a democratic methodology in moral education seems to result in too much tolerance and not enough education. Here the problem is that democracy seems to require a commitment to tolerance that becomes permissive to the point of licentiousness, and anti-authoritarian to the point of anarchy. I mentioned above Sommers criticisms of the “values clarification approach.” It is interesting that the blame for this is pinned upon John Dewey. Indeed, Dewey was not unaware of the problem. He discusses it in a 1930 article, “How Much Freedom in the New Schools?” Here he clarifies the problem of progressive schools that have rejected a teacher as dictator model and have turned to a student as dictator model. When this is the case, freedom and individuality become anarchy and egoism. Indeed Dewey recognizes that the move toward open classrooms and interdisciplinarity results in a lack of intellectual control that is antithetical to the goals of education. He says, “ultimately, it is the lack of intellectual control through significant subject matter which stimulates the deplorable egotism, cockiness, impertinence and disregard for the rights of others apparently considered by some persons to be the inevitable accompaniment, if not the essence, of freedom.”^{vii} Dewey clarifies the issue here nicely: it is a matter of a proper definition of freedom. The criticism modeled here and found in the “values clarification” approach to moral education defines freedom negatively as freedom

from constraint. This negative definition of freedom seems to go hand in hand with the democratic ideal of American life. We want to give individuals the greatest freedom from constraint that is possible without infringing upon the same freedom of others. Within such a free society, individuals are supposed to be able to choose to define themselves and their ends however they like. This democratic view, however, has the negative consequence of giving freedom of choice to those who have not yet developed the capacity for moral choice. The conclusion seems to be that democratic education which emphasizes the negative freedoms of the child, results in anarchy and immorality.

3.) **The Problem of Philosophy.** Democratic control over education seems to result in censorship of critical thought. We can see this most easily in democracy's rejection of philosophy as a discipline. Socrates was not the only philosopher to be put on trial and convicted by democratic procedures. The struggle continues, as seen in recent attempts to do away with philosophy as a major and as a budgetary unit at a number of universities. At my own new university, the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, philosophy was very nearly axed as a discipline. In a university wide evaluation process, known as CAPE (Comprehensive Academic Program Evaluation), the University concluded that five disciplines should be "phased out" including nutritional sciences, physics, philosophy, geography, and sociology. What this meant was that the university would no longer offer majors in physics, philosophy, sociology, and the rest. The conclusions of this report were based upon cost-effectiveness of these no longer viable programs. The majors selected for "phasing out" had low retention rates and low enrollments in upper-level class needed for the major: these disciplines were not earning their keep at the University. Thanks to the efforts of philosophy professor Gilbert Null and the impassioned action of philosophy students, the philosophy major was allowed a reprieve. All four of the other programs were eliminated, however. This occurrence is part of a trend to treat education as a product to be consumed. Universities want popular majors that are more cost-effective for the universities.

The problem is that if we allow universities to be governed solely by the laws of economics, we may end up eliminating much of what is valuable in education. This seems especially true of disciplines that are critical of the status quo: philosophy and sociology, for example. It is interesting that much of this results from ostensibly democratic decision-making processes. Democratically elected committees, ultimately responsible (in public universities at

any rate) to the faculty at large, to the legislators, and to voters of the state, occasionally end up advocating universities without either philosophy or physics. Part of the problem here is that decision making processes, guided primarily by economic concerns, do not see the value of these sorts of foundationally critical disciplines.^{viii} My colleague, professor Null's defense of the philosophy program was based upon a critique of the pragmatic, economic emphasis of the CAPE report. The University report emphasized that the goal of the university was to produce "better employees" and not better persons. Null defended the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake as follows:

Our graduates are in fact better employees, but that is a side benefit of their having accomplished the goals of higher education. They are better employees because they are better persons. They are better persons because they are more intellectually competent, sensitive, empathic, fair, honest, committed to the good of others, and more successful as citizens, as fathers, as mothers, as friends, etc. Our graduates are better persons because they are beneficiaries of the unrestrained pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, in whatever area they elect, which is the crux of higher education.^{ix}

Professor Null eloquently states the problem, which is an ancient problem exacerbated by complex modern economic issues. Socrates argued that philosophy was ultimately good for the city and that it ought to be supported by the city, despite the city's rejection of philosophy. The city, following a democratic decision procedure, rejected these claims, both that philosophy was good for the city and that the city ought to support philosophy. The same conclusions haunt philosophy in our universities: philosophy is not of use to the university and even if it is good-in-itself (as some administrators will reluctantly admit) it need not be funded at public expense. In the current intellectual climate, we sell our universities on the open market as mere tools towards economic success. But this belittles the self-concept of almost every discipline within the university, i.e., the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The market-oriented bias of university administrations is itself the result of "democratic" processes both within the university and in its relations with the legislatures who fund it. The criticism of democratic education modeled here is that democratic processes inevitably reduce decision-making to economic cost-benefit analysis that cannot respect the intrinsic and critical value of foundational disciplines.

Let's assume that university administrators and the Kansas board of education have the best of intentions and are not driven by self-interest or other ideological interests. The conclusion seems to be that the public rejects philosophy and physics in the name of utility and

popularity (as adjudged according to enrollment statistics and the like, i.e., students “voting with their feet”) and that the public rejects scientific theory in the name of tolerance and respect. It seems that when education is governed by democratic concerns, there is no room for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Nor is there room for disciplines, majors, or theories that are not “popular” or that conflict with popular belief. Is this a necessary result of that type of instrumental/economic rationality that is characteristic of democracies?

We have seen three risks of democratic education. 1.) Democratic control results in ideological battles being waged in the name of education. 2.) Democratic educational practices leave us unable to produce in students a mature faculty of judgment. 3.) Democratic governance results in a rejection of the idea of knowledge as intrinsically valuable and the use of a supposedly “neutral” economic model of curricular decision-making.

Weighing the Risks

The question we must ask in conclusion is whether these risks are real and whether they are worth taking. Does a commitment to democracy mean that we must be willing to sacrifice the scientific method, training in the virtues, and the intrinsic value of knowledge? I argue, in conclusion, that these risks are real if unlikely and that the advantages of democracy far outweigh the risks. The hopeful solution is to claim that democracy will overcome, with time, its blindness and will see the value of science, virtue, and philosophy. Nonetheless, democratic values cannot be subverted to attain these ends, for these ends are of more value to a democratic society than they are to an authoritarian society.

Such hope is not blind. There are reasons to believe that democracy can sustain science, virtue, and philosophy. We are still a long way away from the completion of the democratic, industrial, and intellectual revolutions of the last few centuries. It remains to be seen whether the scientific method, a traditional education in the virtues, and foundational disciplines such as philosophy will remain useful into the 21st Century but it is more than likely that they will. The dynamic economic and political transformations of the 19th and 20th Centuries have resulted in an “intellectual revolution” that required the services of science, morality, and philosophy. As Dewey claimed 100 years ago (in *The School and Social Progress* of 1899), while knowledge had once been the sacred possession of a privileged few, knowledge has now become a social activity useful and open to all. Dewey writes that with the industrial, political, and intellectual

revolutions of the last couple of centuries, “learning has been put into circulation... Knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself.”^x His point here is that in an industrial economy, with easy access to technology and information, knowledge is needed by and is open to all. This demand will continue to be true as our economy and society undergoes even more profound transformations in the 21st Century.

Education needs to be socially useful. Dewey implicitly argues against the whole idea of “knowledge for its own sake.” One might mistake him as advocating the elimination of philosophy and other foundational disciplines. He concludes, “Academic and scholastic, instead of being titles of honor, are becoming terms of reproach.”^{xi} Dewey’s greatest fear is that education should remain “remote and dead—abstract and bookish.” “There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the school, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience. The permanent social interests are likely to be lost from view.”^{xii} Education ought to be useful for social progress. When it is not so useful, it is moribund. Dewey’s social-use theory of education is based upon his positive evaluation of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution showed that human intelligence leads to social evolution. For this evolution to continue, we need more useful education and less bookish scholasticism. Dewey thus does not argue for an elimination of philosophy, for example; but rather for a reconstruction of philosophy in order to bring it into line with its social function.

The industrial revolution also showed that knowledge itself was historical and subject to evolutionary pressures, a sort of survival of the fittest with regard to fields of knowledge. In part, Dewey traces this theme back to Darwin and his revolutionary idea that species have an origin and evolve. Dewey claims that Darwin completed a revolution-- begun with Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo-- against the Platonic/Scholastic view that species were unchanging and eternal. “The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life.”^{xiii} Darwin’s theory allows us to consider that human being itself has evolved over time and is continuing to evolve. This has a profound impact upon philosophy, morality, and politics. We must now admit that knowledge evolves as do political institutions and indeed morality. Dewey concludes that, after Darwin, “philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific

conditions that generate them.”^{xiv} Philosophy and science are limited inquiries directed toward some social goal. While certain disciplines such as philosophy or physics claim that they are of value in themselves, Dewey rejects this claim by appealing to evolutionary reasoning. Knowledge is selected according to its usefulness. Thus fading disciplines like philosophy and physics fade because they have ceased to be useful. The goal is not to eliminate them but to reinvigorate them to make them useful again.

Ironically, Dewey’s appeal to a social-Darwinist theory of the evolution of knowledge seems to leave him open to the possibility that society could evolve in a direction in which evolutionary theory (and indeed Dewey’s own theory) would no longer be useful. If knowledge is fluid and if it responds to social need, there is no reason the evolutionary paradigm couldn’t be replaced by the creationist story, provided that the creationist account fulfilled a social need. In order to explain how this fluidity of knowledge occurs, Dewey appeals to an ideal of science as social inquiry. Although modern scientific practice has gradually attempted to divorce itself from any particular interest, it is still connected by way of language and by the fact that it is a human practice, to the interests of humankind in general. “There is no such thing as disinterested intellectual concern with either physical or social matters.”^{xv} Truth itself is tied up with interest. Dewey defines truth as “processes of change so directed that they achieve an intended consummation.”^{xvi} A true theory is one that leads to a social use.

This poses a problem for education. If it is true, as Dewey claims that “science is made by man for man”^{xvii} and that “aside from mathematics, all knowledge is historic,”^{xviii} then education becomes a social and historical enterprise. In other words, education is guided by particular social interests and historical contexts. Education can claim to be “scientific” according to Dewey’s definition if it serves the interests of the social group. It would seem, then that Dewey would want to allow the possibility that a society (a state or even a school district) could decide that a once hallowed scientific theory such as the theory of evolution could be rejected as un-scientific, i.e., as not serving the interests of the society. Indeed, this is just the sort of reasoning that the Kansas school board gave in its judgment. As Dewey states, as early as 1897 in his “Pedagogic Creed,” “all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race.”^{xix} If the social consciousness of the race were to “evolve” in a direction that ironically does not accept the theory of evolution, moral education, and the discipline of philosophy as proper for education, then it would seem that we would have

to permit such a development. This is the very real risk of democratic education. I am not arguing that Dewey would reject evolution, moral education, and philosophy. Rather, I am arguing that if we are to affirm democratic practices of education, we must admit that these risks exist. Indeed a commitment to democracy seems to demand that we allow communities to determine which theories they are willing to teach their children.

It is important to remember that this last result is a risk and not a necessity. Freedom may go wrong, even if it is unlikely that it will. Dewey clearly thinks that democratic education would favor evolutionary theory, moral education, and philosophy. The criterion according to which Dewey evaluates education is growth. He asks, with regard to an educational process: “Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth or does it set conditions that shut off the person, who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” He answers: “When and only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.”^{xx} Implicit in Dewey’s accounts of education is the claim that the scientific method, moral education, and a reconstructed form of philosophy foster growth. I think we must admit however, that this conclusion remains ultimately a matter of faith. The problem indicated by all three of our current examples is that growth remains an undefined notion. Within our pluralistic society, growth continues to be the object of acrimonious disagreement. In Kansas, evolutionary theory is seen as being antithetical to proper human growth; virtue ethicists see progressive methods in moral education as stunting moral growth; economic thinkers see foundational disciplines such as philosophy as useless to the process of social development. Within an open society, these issues are not yet resolved. The very idea of growth must be defined in more detail. Indeed, this is the virtue of our own democratic educational practice. We are able to decide for ourselves exactly what constitutes the criterion of growth. We could stifle this process of self-creation by way of education in order to avoid the risks enumerated above. To do so, however, would be to deny the value of democracy in education. One may argue that the real values we ought to be defending are God the creator, a sacred set of moral truths, or even a foundational discipline such as philosophy. One may also argue that these foundational beliefs result in that higher and better form of experience which, Dewey claims, ought to be the goal of democratic education. Such a claim, from a Deweyan perspective, tends to view science, virtue, and wisdom as stultified results and not as fluid social

activities. It seems opposed to intellectual freedom which Dewey claim is “the only freedom that is of enduring importance.”^{xxi} But can there be freedom without risk? I argue that there cannot. The interesting conclusion is that democratic education must be prepared to allow for its own subversion, if social activity and experience lead in this direction. These are the risks of democracy. Whether the progressive ideal will actually subvert itself in the 21st Century remains to be seen. Dewey at least remained hopeful that it would not.

ⁱ Dewey, Education and Experience (New York: Collier Books, 1967), 34.

ⁱⁱ Dewey, Education and Experience, 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ The following quotes are from “Kansas Science Education Standards” http://www.ksbe.state.ks.us/cgi-bin/science_stds, p. 5 of 78.

^{iv} Christina Hoff Sommers, “Teaching the Virtues” in Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life 4th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 684.

^v Cf. Charles Sykes, “The ‘Values’ Wasteland,” in Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life.

^{vi} Cf. Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum, “The Values Clarification Approach” in Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life, 662.

^{vii} Dewey, “How Much Freedom in the New School?” in John Dewey, Education Today (New York: Greenwood Press, 1940), 220.

^{viii} The conjunction of philosophy, physics, and sociology in the programs singled out by UWGB is telling. These three disciplines, at least, (I am not so sure about the other two disciplines, geography and nutritional science) seem to be models of critical discourse. Physics is the critical analysis of foundational issues in the sciences. Sociology is the critical analysis of foundational issues in the social and human sciences. Philosophy is the critical analysis of all of the above.

^{ix} Gilbert Null, “Memo to D. Larmouth, D. Galaty, J Cohen, G. Greif of 18 September, 1996,” p. 5.

^x Dewey, “The School and Social Progress” in The Philosophy of John Dewey ed. By John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 465.

^{xi} Dewey, “The School and Social Progress” in The Philosophy of John Dewey, 465.

^{xii} Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 8.

^{xiii} Dewey, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” in The Philosophy of John Dewey, 31.

^{xiv} Dewey, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” in The Philosophy of John Dewey, 38.

^{xv} Dewey, “The Pattern of Inquiry” in The Philosophy of John Dewey, 236

^{xvi} Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York: Dover, 1958), 161.

^{xvii} Dewey, Experience and Nature, 382.

^{xviii} Dewey, Experience and Nature, 163.

^{xix} Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed” in The Philosophy of John Dewey, 443.

^{xx} Dewey, Experience and Education, 36.

^{xxi} Dewey, Experience and Education, 61.