

Literatur Review: John Dewey's Lectures in China (1919-1921)

This article is presented the literature view and reflection in three parts: the summary of literature view of John Dewey's *Lectures on education in China*, his influence and my reflection.

When I have read the articles and books of John Dewey, some vocabulary and sentences make me feel so difficult to understand. However, they still attract me strongly. The reason not only is because he is a very important philosopher and great educator in modern history in U.S, but also is because from my childhood I have found his name mentioned negatively in textbooks and university lectures and some reading books . I have never read any his original articles and books in China. When Professor Beck introduced John Dewey and his works in class, I instantly draw my attention. When I am searching his information online and reading his books, I am asking my self : why is he a so big influenced person in China? What did he say in his lectures when he was in China? What influence was it produced in educational reformation at that time? Why was he negatively commented by the existing mainland government ? In Chinese modern history, most important artists, scientists, writers, philosophers and educators lived during 1920s -1940s. However, for political reasons, very limited information is found in mainland. Therefore, I borrowed books on John Dewey' lectures in China to study intensively, try to find the answers.

Literature Review

Between 1919 and 1921, John Dewey spent two years in China lecturing to Chinese intellectuals on the nature of education and democracy, many of which were published or reported in various local newspapers. His educational philosophies were respected and valued, and were even taken as the theme for China's Educational Conference in 1922. His lectures included political science, social science, philosophy and education. In those lectures, Dewey clarified the democratic way of thinking, doing and living to the Chinese people. In his

speeches, he enlightened his listeners about the importance of reflective thinking and reasoning in constructing human intelligence, inquiries and democratic education.

There are twelve lectures. (John Dewey 1919-1921) The following is the summary of the main ideas, as well as some points which I am interested.

1. Education is indispensable to human life. We need a Philosophy of education.

Each of us goes through the gradual processes of infancy, childhood, and adolescence before reaching maturity; education is the means of the qualitative improvement of this process. However, after schools become preoccupied with education for literacy there was a tendency for education to become more and more remote from ordinary everyday human activities.

This alienation and isolation could cause three dangers: First, formal schooling, with its emphasis on the literary aspects of education, will produce an elite, a special social class enjoying intellectuals, literary men and scholars, who are out of touch and out of sympathy with the great mass of the people. Second, education will become overly preoccupied with the conversation and transmission of the cultural heritage. Third, school is becoming an independent institution, isolated from the real needs and interests of the society which supports it.

These three dangers enable us to formulate some of the problems which must be discussed as we consider a philosophy of education.

- How can we popularize education, and make it universal?
- How can we bring about a balance between literary education and education for ordinary human activities?
- How can we make school enable to conserve and transmit the best of our traditional cultural heritage, simultaneously to cultivate personalities which can successfully cope with their environment?

We organize our guiding principles into a philosophy of education which will help us make our lives what we want them to be and make less mistakes. We value education because it is the

means by which we can avoid walking in the dark and submit to whatever fate brings our way. For this reason education is the business of the public, of the whole society.

2. The Misuse of Subject Matter

When subject matter is treated as though it were independent of the practical activities of the child's life, three ill-effects can be observed.

- subject matter and practical living become separated
- subject matter tends to become superficial, with no correspondence to life situations
- subject matter becomes so remote that there is not even the possibility of applying it to our living.

The process of education must always take account of all three reference points.

In order to set up goals for education, educator must know a great deal about the society, possess a reasonably well articulated social philosophy, have insight into social situations and problems, appreciate changing trends in and the needs of the society, have a depth of vision which can enable us to postulate the changes.

To be effective, teachers must have considerable knowledge about the child, about the subject matter they use, and about the society in which they operate.

3. The Cultural Heritage and Social Reconstruction

- The reconstruction of society depends upon the school.

His following words about China make me think.

It is perhaps true that up to now contact with the West has brought China more disadvantages than advantages, more ill than good. But it is also true that the chaos and confusion in morality and economy have reached a point in China at which it would be ill advised, if not fatal, for China to isolate herself from the influences of Western culture. The only method by which China can remedy the present sad state of affairs is to speed up cultural exchange between East and West, and to select from Western culture for adaption to Chinese conditions.

4. Three objectives of education of democracy

Socializing students, making them into contributing members of their society, and causing them to be interested in social endeavour.

He explains that the aim of education, especially in democratic countries, is to create good citizens. The purpose of the school must also be to educate useful citizens for the total society, to cultivate habits of associated social living, to develop respect for social virtues and social welfare, to acquaint students with the structure and operation of government, in its legislative, administrative, and adjudicative functions. the school has to be a living society itself, and the children in the school must become functioning members of the society, building an awareness of the needs of their society.

5. Learning must be connected with living environment

When he talks about student's learning in school, he claimed that the most serious weakness of school is that it so often sets for its pupils aims that are remote from their present experience, and tends to look upon education as preparation for the future.

When this theory is applied, the result is that learning is isolated from living, and students have no opportunity to apply what they learn in school. It is disastrous outcomes.

We must persevere in our determination that the living environment of the child—including his needs, his interests, and his physical surroundings— must be employed as the starting point of the educative process.

6. The Influences of the Development of Modern Science

Education

- our ways of thinking and knowing
- changed our way of looking at life : law in nature and energy.
- the concept of energy encouraged man to force nature into his service

Man's oral life.

- the creation of new hope and new courage.
- produced new honesty

- men have become confident of the power of their intelligence to pursue truth and to solve the problems with which they are confronted. Science has enabled men to discover facts, and to identify the real problems of life, and then to seek for solutions to these problems.

Man's intellectual development.

- the nature of the scientific method in the pursuit of knowledge.
- what is the scientific method?
- the influence of this experimental method on education

7 Learning Approach of Geography and History

The approach which concentrates on a few special problems or areas is much more effective educationally than the one which tries to cover everything—and which succeeds only in being superficial and meaningless. When students concentrate on the study of an identifiable problem, they will acquire a great deal of knowledge applying to the problem, and in doing so will develop the ability to think critically and to judge independently. For example, they focused on the river study, which run through their city. Students could collect any information and history, or even stories about the river.

Dewey's contribution to China

The most significant influence Dewey theory had on China was due to his promotion of civilian education. The major influence of Dewey's theory on Chinese Modern education are the reformations during 1920s to 1930s. One of those was the restructure of new school system in 1922. *The New School System* and Seven Educational Principles were published by the Education department in (January, 1922) It was based on Dewey's theory. We can see this from the following description of the issued document:

“ Chinese educational aims were changed to “the cultivation of perfect personality and the development of democratic spirit” (p, 22);

The principles of the national school system reformation in 1922 were described as:

(a) to adapt the education system to the needs of social evolution; (b) to promote the spirit of democracy; (c) to develop individuality; (d) to take the economic status of the people into special consideration; (e) to promote education for life; (f) to facilitate the spread of universal education; and (g) to make the school system flexible enough to allow for local variations”

Dewey in his first lecture claimed:

“ We organize our guiding principals into a philosophy of education which will help us make our lives what we want them to be and make less mistakes. We value education because it is the means by which we can avoid walking in the dark and submit to whatever fate brings our way. For this reason education is the business of the public, of the whole society.”

A child-centered curriculum was developed, experimental schools following the model of Dewey’s Chicago Laboratory School were set up in some provinces, and textbooks written in the common vernacular were used.

Dewey’s belief influence extended from higher education to middle and elementary schools. His three Chinese graduate student, Tao Hsing-chi, Hu Shih, Jiang Men-lin, who studied from him at Columbia University, were the presidents of three most important teachers colleges, National Nanking Teachers College, Teacher’s college of Peking University and Zhong-nan University. Many Chinese teachers studied and were inspired by Dewey’s lectures and began to teach by using Dewey’s pragmatic educational philosophies.

My Reflection

John Dewey lived in 100 years age, but some of his theory are still great valued for today.

In his first lecture, he asked why we needed a philosophy of education because “it help us making right decision when we meet some problems and help us avoid walking in the dark.” It is true. In my teaching practice, I often encounter some issues and difficulties. I have to think and try to explore and find solutions. Sometimes my experience and observation tell me some practices are not right, even which is authority. Teachers should have their own philosophy of education, it keep me balance to make judge, maintain my career passion, avoid to make less mistakes, having vision and pig picture when I design curriculum and teaching syllabus.

His question “how we can make school enable to conserve and transmit the best of our traditional cultural heritage, simultaneously to cultivate personalities which can successfully cope with their environment” enable me to rethink how to study my program in OISE. My study should be connected with my teaching experience, my professional career. Individualization and flexibility are extremely important when I select course, reading material and thesis.

His opine about the approach of study geography and history is interesting and also very practical. He said that

“The approach which concentrates on a few special problems or areas is much more effective educationally than the one which tries to cover everything. When I concentrate on the study of an identifiable problem, I will acquire a great deal of knowledge applying to the problem, and in doing so will develop my ability to think critically and to judge independently.”

John Dewey’s lectures are easier for me to understand. This is start point to guid me to read his books. These reading experience could be as an introduction to guide me to study this course, curriculum foundation.

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