

Extracts from John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916)

Negating Extraneous Aims in PBL

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Abstract

In this article, I present selected extracts and formulations from John Dewey's seminal book *Democracy and Education* (1916) that speak to the question of the educational purpose of PBL. Dewey's work, and in particular this book, is in many ways foundational in regard to arguing for PBL as an educational approach. However, in contemporary discourse, PBL is predominantly tied to what Dewey argued against, namely extraneous aims. Rereading Dewey might help us recover PBL as a form of education 'worthwhile in its own immediate having' (p.109).

Keywords: John Dewey; educational aims; employability; means and ends

Introduction

When you survey the contemporary presentation of Problem-based Learning (PBL) on university websites and in the literature, there is almost no end to what it is good for. Acquiring knowledge and skills, developing solutions to professional problems, cooperating with the business community, teamwork abilities, project management skills, 21st century skills, etc. In numerous instances, these outcomes are tied to labour market readiness/employability as

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the ultimate outcome (see e.g. Wyke, et al., 2022; and Siddamal & Despande, 2021). While we might be swayed by all this, and while these outcomes may well be desirable, I wonder what it means to continuously constitute and measure PBL's merits in this way. What are the implications of speaking about and evaluating an educational approach this way? More generally, how is it possible to justify an educational approach in our day? What is the scope of possibilities? Which rationales and outcomes are deemed sensible and convincing, and which seem preposterous or downright irresponsible?

Thinking about these questions has led me once again back to John Dewey and his landmark book *Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy of education* (1916). Not only is John Dewey considered to be, if not *the* or a founding father, then a significant influence on the development of PBL (see e.g. Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Savery, 2006; Kwan, 2009; Dar, 2021) but in this book, he also specifically discusses the outcomes and aims of education in a way that may help us to reflect on the questions posed above. What was his understanding of the aims and outcomes of education, and what ideas and practices did he warn us against? Is there something in his philosophy of education that we need to bring back into the conversation about the merits of PBL?

Democracy and Education

John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), introduces several ideas that were considered novel at the time and have had a lasting impact on educational theory and practice. Dewey proposes that education is "a necessity of life" and the means to the "social continuity of life", through "a communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger" (p. 3) – where learning and growth occurs through interaction with others and with the environment. This was a shift from the traditional view of education as a process of transmitting fixed knowledge from teacher to student. At the forefront for Dewey is a concern to safeguard a democratic society. Dewey views democracy as more than just a political system however, it is a way of life that requires the active participation of all members of society. Democracy will not happen automatically but must be cultivated by the individual's ability, will and willingness to participate. Dewey envisions educational institutions as democratic communities where students learn through decision-making, deliberation and active engagement, rather than passive absorption of given information. As such, democratic participation is both the means and the ends of what Dewey considers to be 'true' education.

Educational aims

While the book clearly puts a direction to our educational efforts – democratic participation – Dewey introduces some important distinctions in regard to how we think about educational aims/purposes and outcomes. His thought challenges us to consider or reconsider what a purpose might be and what might be a more or less desirable side-effect. Fundamentally, Dewey believes that all human action is guided by what he calls 'ends-in-view', but these are not predetermined, fixed, or final. Instead, they are provisional and subject to change based on the circumstances, the environment, and outcomes of the actions taken (Dewey, 1922). While educational efforts should be guided by aims, to be considered both 'intelligent' (analytical and based on situated observation) and 'conscious' (purposeful and deliberate), it transpires that this way of thinking about human action should be carried over into pedagogy.

So, Dewey argues for the importance of formulating educational aims "to be aware of what we are about" (p, 104). Meanwhile, not any aim will do. He offers some criteria for what he calls 'good' aims (pp. 104-106). First the aim set up "must be an outgrowth of existing conditions", that is, based on "a consideration of what is already going on" and take account of resources and obstacles. Second, as mentioned above, the aim as it "first emerges is a mere tentative sketch. The act of striving to realize it tests its worth". An aim must therefore be "flexible; it must be capable of alteration to meet circumstances". The aim, in short, should be *experimental* (p. 105). This resonates with the notion that all human action is experimental and outcomes to some degree unpredictable, in that every activity "leads out indefinitely into other things" (p. 109). Third, and quite intricately, "the aim must always represent a freeing of activity". In other words, perhaps also intricate, the "doing with the thing, not the thing in isolation, is [the] end" (ibid.). As Dewey explains,

"In contrast with fulfilling some process in order that an activity may go on, stands the static character of an end which is imposed from without the activity. It is always conceived of as fixed; it is *something* to be attained and possessed. When one has such a notion, activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account. As compared with the end it is but a necessary evil; something which must be gone through before one can reach the object which is alone worth while." (p. 106, emphasis in original)

Here Dewey cautions that we do not sever ends and means and thereby relegate the activity itself to mere hoop-jumping. "Every divorce of ends from means diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to drudgery from which one would escape if he could" (p. 106). As he continues,

"The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; these authorities accept them from what is current in the community. The teachers impose them upon children. [...] The latter receive their aims through a double or treble external imposition and are constantly confused by the conflict between the aims which are natural to their own experience at the time and those in which they are taught to acquiesce. Until the democratic criterion of the intrinsic significance of every growing experience is recognized, we shall be intellectually confused by the demand for adaptation to external aims." (p.108-109)

General and handfast aims that are formulated in advance become anything but experimental, rather they are abstract or detached from specific context,

"And such abstractness means remoteness, and throws us back once more, upon teaching and learning as mere means of getting ready for an end disconnected from the means. That education is literally and all the time its own reward means that no alleged study or discipline is educative unless it is worth while in its own immediate having." (p.109)

Discussion

As I suggested at the outset the ways in which the worth of PBL is asserted and measured these days is predominantly with reference to useful and sensible skills that lead to employment in the future. These are precisely the kind of remote treble or double external impositions that Dewey warns us against. Employment is a somewhat abstract end, a remote future, the reward for undertaking the series of skill-accruing activities asked of you in the present. In the course of this then, we might not be so surprised if students become instrumental and disengaged. Of course, many of those who use PBL as an 'activity' tie the problem very closely to the field of practice that ultimately will employ the graduate. This is a way of reducing the distance between means and ends. The question is, though, if the problems posed by practice, may also not feel like a remote imposition. To remove the distance entirely would mean to situate the entire educational program as workplace learning.

Those of us involved with PBL in practice continue to see it do its 'magic' almost in spite of the ways it is framed in institutional discourse and in study regulations with their preconceived learning outcomes. With regular occurrence students, especially those who are invited to define their own problem, become engrossed due to the intrinsic significance of the activities. We all forget about learning outcomes and the labour market for a while and experience education "worthwhile in its own immediate having" (p. 109). This

is why educationalists 'believe' in PBL beyond the marketing hype. They can see it happen, even if the approach is never measured on engrossment.

From this we could surmise that it is insignificant how we assert and measure PBL as an educational approach; the Deweyan 'magic' happens regardless so why quarrel? Here we have to consider two issues. First, PBL advisors report that the magic does not, in fact, happen by itself. They explain how they continuously have to intervene with what seems to be preconceptions about 'how to school' that students bring to the table. 'How to school' is predominantly about cracking the code to a good grade towards a smooth completion of a degree. In this, the PBL-activity becomes construed as just another hoop to jump to achieve an external and remote reward. This suggests that the external imposition has now become internalised. That this is so does not change the fact that the activity becomes a 'necessary evil' and not as such immediately significant. Faculty intervention is about trying to turn the attention to the worthwhileness of the activity itself, i.e. the *interested* inquiry, where to

"be interested is to be absorbed in, wrapped up in, carried away by, some object. To take an interest is to be on the alert, to care about, to be attentive. We say of an interested person both that he has lost himself in some affair and that he has found himself in it. Both terms express the engrossment of the self in an object." (p. 126)

What Dewey notes, though, is that

"When material has to be made interesting, it signifies that as presented, it lacks connection with purposes and present power, or that if the connection be there, it is not perceived. To make it interesting by leading one to realize the connection that exists is simply good sense; to make it interesting by extraneous and artificial inducements deserves all the bad names which have been applied to the doctrine of interest in education." (p. 127)

So, if students have internalised the extraneous argument of value we consistently offer to them, PBL advisors are in a precarious position: to make the PBL activity 'interesting' they may feel that they need to connect with 'bad inducements' – good grades or job market relevance – simply because the 'magic' argument is weak and a bit ridiculous in the context. "In education, the currency of these externally imposed aims is responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish" (p. 110). So, if we accept the extraneous reasons for PBL, they will become further normalised, potentially making it increasingly difficult for the 'magic' to happen.

The second issue relates to the question of who has the responsibility to create or even uphold an alternative discourse for the worth of PBL education? Could we not expect educational institutions and researchers to do so? If institutions continue to see for instance disengagement, instrumentalism, or strategic learning from students, perhaps they need explicitly intervene in un-educational discourse and offer education worthwhile in its own immediate having? In doing so, we might borrow the language and philosophy Dewey depicts here:

“Gardening, for example, need not be taught either for the sake of preparing future gardeners or as an agreeable way of passing time. It affords an avenue of approach to knowledge of the place farming and horticulture have had in the history of the race and which they occupy in present social organization. Carried on in an environment educationally controlled, they are means for making a study of the facts of growth, the chemistry of soil, the role of light, air, and moisture, injurious and helpful animal life, etc. There is nothing in the elementary study of botany which cannot be introduced in a vital way in connection with caring for the growth of seeds. Instead of the subject matter belonging to a peculiar study called botany, it will then belong to life and will find, moreover, its natural correlations with the facts of soil, animal life, and human relations. As students grow mature, they will perceive problems of interest which may be pursued for the sake of discovery, independent of the original direct interest in gardening—problems connected with the germination and nutrition of plants, the reproduction of fruits, etc., thus making a transition to deliberate intellectual investigations.” (p. 208)

Concluding remarks

The intention of the above has been to dust off some important insights that originally sparked the interest in and employment of PBL and affiliated approaches. PBL became a vessel for and a practical manifestation of some ideas about education, key amongst which is the relationship between ends and means. It has been an approach that seeks to negate extraneous interest for the simple reason that it stands in the way of true education. The last three decades of outcomes-based education discourse, the graphic language of learnification (Biesta, 2010) and skillification of education, and the prevalence of human capital ideology have all but stamped out alternative ways of arguing for the purposes of education (see also Sarauw, 2011). They have formed a hegemony that makes other notions appear almost ridiculous or embarrassingly nostalgic (e.g. ‘education for education’s sake’). Resurrecting Dewey, and understanding

his philosophy and arguments, will help us to strengthen an alternative way of insisting upon the role and purpose of PBL and to remind us to protect its magic. It will also make us reflect on whether our 'innovations', such as setting the problems students should solve, rather than working with their experiences, powers and interests, may in fact be unhelpful perversions that contribute to the instrumentalism and disengagement we otherwise lament.

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