

On the Uniqueness of “Good” in PBL

Reading Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*

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Abstract

In this short piece, I will dwell on two passages from John Dewey’s book *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922): the section entitled “Deliberation and Calculation” and the following section “The Uniqueness of Good.” In these passages, Dewey explains the crucial differences between utilitarianism and his own philosophy, and he elucidates how and why what is “good” happens only once: “In quality, the good is never twice alike. It never copies itself. It is new every morning, fresh every evening” (p. 146). I wish to dwell on these passages because they, as I see it, represent a major challenge to the utilitarian impulse in normativizing PBL and related approaches for the sake of learning or for some societal good. Dewey’s problem-based philosophy, while central to PBL, is also a critical resource for critiques of how we implement PBL programs and practice PBL pedagogies. In these passages, Dewey reveals his belief in the educational event as a unique situation, a happening, which purposefully imagines an outcome but in a fundamentally different way than what we today call outcomes-directed or evidence-based education.

Keywords: John Dewey, pragmatism, experience, the educational event, utilitarianism

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Introduction

There are some central contradictions in the reception of Dewey’s work, possibly also in Dewey’s work itself. Most would agree that Dewey’s work is crucial to the evolution of problem-based learning (PBL) in its many forms. Yet, it seems that core dimensions of Dewey’s thought, those which resist being set in a formula for good teaching and learning, are often overlooked. Crudely put, one outcome of Deweyan educational thought is highly programmatic. It seeks good and right ways to teach and learn. It contains a rather strong utilitarian impulse in the sense that Deweyan thinking and PBL inspired by Dewey are good for something else such as learning in general, for culture and society, and of course for individuals. It would be really good if we did more of it. And it would be great if we could prove that it worked. Another outcome of reading Dewey is deep scepticism towards programmatic and outcomes-based learning. In this latter reading, Dewey is situationist, committed to education and learning as an event, a happening, and his pragmatic naturalism places the flashlight on mutations, offspring which we did not know that we needed. This short essay will present discussions and passages from *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) which support the situationist Dewey. Being a passionate reader of Dewey for around 25 years, my reading is bound to be personal, biased, and probably somewhat idiosyncratic. I have taken the opportunity with this special issue on PBL to not curb my enthusiasm for particular sections and passages in what I find to be one of Dewey’s most poetic and heartfelt books. In the process of reading certain passages slowly and carefully, we will come across essential problems in PBL from a Deweyan perspective. In this way, we might find confirmation that Dewey’s thought is indeed essential for PBL but hopefully, we will also find equally essential mementos. Most importantly, that Dewey was deeply disdainful towards utilitarianism, and that he opposed the instrumentalization of “the good.” Here, Dewey can help us save PBL from strong impulses within its own evolutionary history.

Think about the radicality of this sentence: “In quality, the good is never twice alike. It never copies itself. It is new every morning, fresh every evening” (Dewey, 2008 [1922], p. 146). Nothing is ever the same. From an educational and pedagogical perspective, this is haunting. Every situation is its own unique situation. What worked yesterday might not work today. The students in front of you are not the same as the students you had yesterday. Your program, your tricks, your jokes, your profound comments about important texts played out beautifully yesterday but today they just linger helplessly in open space. Imagine groups of students following guidebooks about how to do PBL. How the books implicitly promise them good outcomes. Do this and you will get that. How easy it is to go through the motions while “the good” escapes us. Every student knows from experience how “the motions” of sitting through classes,

reading about theory and method, listening to tips and tricks, imitating phrases in the hope of decoding the discourse, can be menacing. Still, many students wish for exactly that and most of us as teachers want to provide the magical tools. But it is possibly as far away as you can get from authentic learning situations as Dewey saw them. In this regard, PBL can both enact itself like any other kind of teaching and learning through manuals and guidebooks, but it can also be something quite different insisting on the unique experiences of individual students. As Dewey writes elsewhere: ideas cannot be conveyed from one person to another. They must be had (Dewey, 1916, p. 166).

It can be hard to grasp that in a Deweyan sense there is no manual for facilitating authentic learning situations. When experience is the educator, and learning happens in situations as events where and when experiences are had, effectful learning can happen in unforeseen places as well as in situations we would not consider good pedagogy. Even the best and most well-planned and well-intentioned pedagogical design can be lifeless and numbing. We might even think that this is often the case. Dewey’s demand for authenticity, for concrete and real problems, his demand for “life” and genuine stakes in the given present is in many ways a critical challenge to well-designed curricula which gently and safely lead students towards learning goals. When experiences cannot be conveyed and the good can never repeat itself, everything is at risk. But the risk is also the promise. The promise of having meaningful experiences which change your ideas, your perception of things, your perception of yourself, and maybe even change your life. The enemy is indifference, ulterior motives, shallow performativity, primitive causalities (stimuli-effect logics), and particularly cynical calculation. And everything rests on the subject matter. In the absence of any issue, nothing will swirl together, nothing will gather itself as a situation to be learned from (Dewey, 2016 [1927], p. 76).

A Philosophy of the Present, a Philosophy of Being Present

In the section entitled “Deliberation and Calculation,” of *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey opposed his concept of deliberation to that of calculation. Derogatorily, he called utilitarianism “calculation theory,” thereby installing a fundamental difference between two ways of being present and two ways of thinking about the future. I suspect that one of the reasons for his harsh depictions of utilitarianism is the seeming similarities between the aims of utilitarianism and pragmatism. Utilitarianism’s fundamental notion of utility and good for as many as possible has similarities to pragmatism’s focus on the practical effects of actions. Dewey recognized that utilitarianism has basic commonsensical points about doing good but: “Its commendation of an

elaborate and impossible calculus was in reality part of a movement to develop a type of character which should have a wide social outlook, sympathy with the experiences of all sentient creatures, one zealous about the social effects of all proposed acts, especially those of collective legislation and administration. It was concerned not with extracting the honey of the passing moment but with breeding improved bees and constructing hives” (Dewey, 2008 [1922], p. 143).

Thus, we must gather that Dewey’s problem-based learning is not about educating improved bees or constructing hives. Deweyan bees do not work to improve themselves for the future or for the benefit of societal hives. They do it for the honey. “On the contrary, let the future go, for life is uncertain. Who knows when it will end, or what fortune the morrow will bring” (p. 143). It is hard not to think about how easily and how often PBL is also a utilitarian educational philosophy. A philosophy concerned with breeding improved bees and better hives for the benefit of future societies. We cannot write *carpe diem* on our universities’ webpages, or that we aim for our students to bathe in the honey of life, letting tomorrow go. Instead, we labor hard to convince students, employers, and politicians that our bees are indeed better bees. And the best thing would be if we could prove it through learning outcomes and employability statistics. That is the order of the educational world of today. But what do we do with the romantic and vitalist legacy inside Deweyan PBL?

One thing we could do is to reflect on the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. Experiences are always pasts. They happen as experiences when we reflect over past events. Experiences mark a difference between a before and an after. In his famous article on the reflex arc, Dewey explained that what moves (stimuli) and what is being moved (effect) is not known in the situation itself but it, the causal relation, happens as reflection on experience (Dewey, 1896). This thinking is the expression of a variation of presentism in which the past is (of the) present as experiences, marks of differences which find order through reflection. When new experiences are had, the past changes sometimes a little, sometimes dramatically. That the past in Dewey’s thinking is of the present, a feature of the present, does not minimize its impact. Rather the opposite. The past is a living reservoir of experiences, many of which have become habits, while others are present as problems with structuring duration. We can say that the problems of what is truth, beauty, evil, justice, or how we learn, are structuring problems which we have built institutions around. Such reflections on experiences and on organizing knowledge are central to many PBL pedagogies.

The future is also of the present in Dewey’s thought but in a different modality than the past. The future is a fictional drama. It is always ahead, not yet happened, and in principle the future cannot begin, paraphrasing Luhmann’s

catchy title (Luhmann, 1976). The key concept for Dewey in this regard is deliberation. "Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon (p. 133). [...] Deliberation is rational in the degree which forethought flexibly remakes old aims and habits, institutes *perception and love* of new ends and acts (my italics, p. 138)." Deliberation's rationality is not about choice. Rational, calculated choices are an illusion in Dewey's world because our choices are guided by habits and impulses. Many habits are invisible to us and impulses are impulses, emotions, not rational in the common sense. Deliberation pertains to the conditions of futurity-as-love, or a desire to understand and to act in the world.

The opposite, the enemy, of this kind of past-present-future relation is for Dewey utilitarianism. He wrote: "Some one may ask what practical difference it makes whether we are influenced by calculation of future joys and annoyances or by experience of present ones. To such a question one can hardly reply except in the words "All the difference in the world" (p. 140)." On Dewey's thinking, the calculated future regulates actions in the present based on profits and losses. It installs a real future toward which all actions in the present are directed. If our calculations are strong enough, we would know exactly what to do, and there would be no real need for deliberation. Desires, joys, love, impulses, dramas of life, all sorts of honeyed experiences would be disturbances misdirecting us from the right path towards the calculated future. For Dewey, this is a pathological problem. The richness of the present comes under the control of the calculated future which deafens life and creates "sickly introspection," an almost prophetic formulation we might say in the light of today's systemic focus on mental health and emotions. In his quarrel with utilitarianism, we find Dewey's romanticism and vitalism at its fullest expression.

The Love of Nature, the Nature of Love

Most often when Dewey used the word nature, he meant nature in its scientific sense. When he wrote about human nature, he did not mean human cultural habits. Even today, this is a radical thought, and it enters into our current discussions about human-culture-nature relations. Dewey's naturalism can be understood as a to many chimerian construct of Hegel and Darwin. Coming to terms with Dewey's naturalism might be one of the hardest challenges for Deweyan educational thought. How can we think about something as constructed, normative, powerful, discriminating, and instrumental as education on such a backdrop? With our critical tools, it is easy to construe the

idea that humans are also organisms which adapt to the environment seeking their own “growth,” their survival, as any other living thing does as fundamentally problematic and uncritical. And what can love possibly mean for a naturalist?

Towards the end of this paper, I will very tentatively probe at possibilities for understanding Deweyan naturalism without falling into the utilitarian trap of thinking that it explains best ways to learn most in concordance with human nature. This demands a reconsideration of what nature meant as a social ethics for early pragmatists. Dewey was part of a circle including C.S. Peirce, William James, Jane Addams, G.H. Mead, and others, who read Darwin as *the* watershed of modern thought. They considered the Darwinian universe to be ever-expanding, diversifying and regularizing, at the same time, ever seeking more life. The engine, the prime mover, was experiments, mutations, within trained habits, leading to a regularized pluralism. Spontaneous regeneration, or in Peirce’s phrasing “evolutionary love” (Peirce, 1893). Objects in the way of the flow might provoke an experiment, but sometimes mutations just happen, offspring we did not ask for might appear and we would have to consider its existence. Objects are in this way concrete, material problems. Not in a value-laden negative metaphysical manner but in a matter-of-factish, pragmatic, manner as what we are facing in front of us.

In my reading, *Human Nature and Conduct* is permeated with this sentiment. Paradoxically, the sentiment is tragic. Actions are reactions and reactions are actions. Experiences cannot really be planned. The social ethics have a, to some, dark tinge of Hegelianism in the sense that all life forms carry with them some right, but they will die or disappear anyway despite being justified. There is no redemptive horizon, except perhaps as reflected by Dewey’s friend Horace M. Kallen who could find comfort in Jahve’s indifference to man (Kallen, 1918). Then something beautiful arises such as the good which is new every morning and fresh every evening. Then learning is a mode of being instead of a calculus or a design. Then the future is that drama which can never happen while the present is where our deliberations play out, where the plane of the possible might expand. All of this on a minor scale, mostly, in the mess of our habits and impulses.

Conclusion

John Dewey’s philosophy, particularly as articulated in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), offers mindboggling queries into what we can call the other nature of problem-based learning (PBL). Dewey’s critique of utilitarianism, which he derogatorily terms “calculation theory,” underscores his belief in the

uniqueness of educational events and the value of unconveyable experiences. He argues that “the good” is never the same twice, emphasizing the importance of situational and experiential, “evental,” learning over standardized, outcomes-based approaches. Dewey’s concept of deliberation, as opposed to calculation, highlights the role of imaginative rehearsal in understanding and acting in the world. This perspective challenges the current educational focus on measurable outcomes and employability statistics, advocating instead for authentic learning experiences with a strong taste for romance, life excess, and honey.

The essay also highlights Dewey’s naturalism, influenced by Hegel and Darwin, as a core dimension of his presentism which views humans as organisms adapting to their (immanent) environment. This perspective raises critical questions about how to understand the role of education in fostering growth and survival in a pragmatic, non-instrumental, yet ethical manner. Dewey’s romantic and vitalist legacy, valuing the richness of present experiences, stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian focus on future benefits. Moreover, Dewey’s emphasis on the unplanned and spontaneous aspects of learning challenges well-designed curricula that aim to safely guide students towards predetermined learning goals. His demand for authenticity and genuine stakes in education underscores the potential for meaningful, transformative experiences that can change one’s ideas, perceptions, and even life. Perception and love being the keywords, earlier in the essay summated as “futurity-as-love”.

Ultimately, Dewey’s philosophy as he presented it in *Human Nature and Conduct* offers a critical and constructive lens through which to view PBL through its other nature, advocating for a more nuanced and experiential approach to education that values the present moment and the unique, unrepeatable nature of each educational event. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of PBL legacies broadly speaking but also provides a necessary critique of the utilitarian impulses that often drive contemporary educational practices including PBL.

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