

Dewey's Idea of The Teacher as Artist

HUNTER MCEWAN

University of Hawaii at Manoa

(Please note that this paper is a report of work in progress. It is not intended as a final statement of my position on Dewey as further sections are to be added to offer an example of how Dewey's concept of teaching as art might be carried out in practice. Please do not quote.)

Abstract

In a recent work, "The Primitive Artist and the Lover" (Educational Theory, 2003), I argued that Dewey presents a view of teaching as an art—a power to combine aspects of informal and formal education into a new synthesis. This synthesis, I argued, involves engaging students as if they were participating directly in social life. I compared this activity to the work of the primitive artist whose task is the imitation of the primitive. The creative demand that this places on teachers, requires them to employ the educative power of the social environment within formal settings, such as the classroom. In this paper, I propose to explore this argument in more detail focusing my attention particularly on Dewey's Chapter on Interest and Discipline in Democracy and Education and on Dewey's aesthetics (Art as Experience).

Introduction

In *How We Think*, Dewey considers the claim that the true teacher is an artist. Dewey concedes that it is a popular saying, but he asks what it would take to make teaching an art? Dewey's answer lies not just in the kinds of actions that a teacher would take "in arousing enthusiasm, in communicating large ideas, in evoking energy..." but also in the way in which the means at the teacher's disposal are connected with aims and successfully carried into action. Teaching can be practiced as an art when it goes beyond mere technical skill in the use of means and materials. Teaching as an art requires the harmonizing of aims and means.

When attention to means is inspired by recognition of the ends they serve, we have the attitude typical of the artist, an attitude that may be displayed in all activities, even though not conventionally designated arts. (HWT, 220)

The idea of the teacher as an artist is dealt with in this 1910 work with tantalizing brevity, so how can this conception be developed more fully? Dewey does offer some further insights into this conception of teaching in *Democracy and Education*. And I also think that a reading of *Art as Experience* can help to throw further light on what Dewey means by the art of teaching. My aim then is to draw together what Dewey has to say on the matter of art and teaching to see if it is possible to get a more complete idea of what might be called a Deweyan theory of teaching as an art.

Dewey's Use of the Word "Art"

What does Dewey mean by "art"? By this I mean first to ask what the extension of the word is, because he applies it quite extensively to activities, which, as the above quotation indicates, may not be "conventionally designated arts." Thus "art," when we give it its widest scope, refers to a process of doing or making—not just to the fine arts such as poetry, painting, sculpture, and musical composition, but also to many other practical activities such as science, philosophy, public speaking, as well as what are often referred to as the "industrial arts" such as the making of utensils and carpentry. Many kinds of activities are arts in the sense that they involve aspects that they share with fine art. Dewey questions the customary

division of the arts into the fine art and the useful arts because “the customary distinction is based simply on acceptance of certain existing social conditions” (AE, p27). The reason for his opposition to this way of thinking is due to the main point of his aesthetics, which is to reconnect art with everyday experience.

If impulsion toward organization of material so as to present the latter in a form directly fulfilling in experience had no existence outside the arts of painting, poetry, music, and sculpture, it would not exist anywhere; there would be no fine art. (AE, p 83–84)

The task, then, of a philosophy of art is “to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (AE, p.2). In effect, it is we who have created these divisions among different arts for extraneous reasons and not for any reason that is intrinsic to the idea of art itself. The divisions are the result of the imperfections of our social life—the dull, mechanical routines of industrial society. In a better world we’d be drawn to the artistic in all its manifestations.

A better way to think about art is in terms of the processes involved in its production. “To be truly artistic, a work must also be esthetic—that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception” (AE, p 49). “The doing or making is artistic when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production” (AE, p 50). This perspective on artistic creation and its reception, therefore would appear to exclude mechanical processes in which prescribed techniques are employed in the production of preconceived ends.

Informal versus Formal Teaching

A useful point of entry in discussing the idea of teaching as an art is with a consideration of Dewey’s distinction between informal and formal education. Informal education is the kind of teaching and learning that takes place in the normal conduct of life. There is nothing planned or deliberate about it. “The very process of living together educates” (DE, p. 6). We don’t learn our mother tongue by going to school. Much of what we learn about values and social life is picked up it seems quite incidentally as we go about our business. Children learn a great deal from adults, quite incidentally, by being directly engaged in social life.

The conditions of the modern world, however, demand that we also make special provisions for people to learn important skills and knowledge of things that are less likely to be conveyed by direct sharing in social life. Many required skills and understandings are too important to be left to such informal arrangements. Complex societies need to adopt more formal procedures and develop special institutions so that education can be conducted in a planned way. Thus, “the task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons” (DE p. 8). Formal education because it is deliberative and can be carried out with thought, therefore, brings with it the potential for teaching to be conducted as an art.

However, the move to formal education and to more intentional forms of teaching and learning carries with it some dangers because in making these new arrangements education can lose its vital connection to social life. Schooling can become a matter of mechanical routines and drills and subject matter can become isolated from the conduct of life. It can become, in other words, a list of topics to be studied, so many facts and figures to be memorized. The problem of formal education, then, is one in which subject matter becomes disconnected from method. Thus “the problem of education” (DE p. 9) related to the “problem of art”—the tendency to isolate art from experience: “Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement” (AE p.2).

The task of a philosophy of education is to “keep a proper balance between the informal and formal, the incidental and the intentional, modes of education” (DE p. 9). The task of a philosophy of art is to “restore

continuity” between art and everyday events. These tasks are twin aspects of Dewey’s larger project which is to heal the split between mind and body, between thinking and doing, between process and product, and as well as other related dualisms that afflict us as a result of our theoretical commitments and biases. Art and education are, in his view, distorted by divisions, which tend to separate them from everyday life. Dewey’s philosophy of art and philosophy of education are therapeutic—efforts to get our thinking back on track and avoid the damaging consequences of our dualistic habits of mind. Conceiving of teaching as an art is therefore a part of this therapeutic package—a way of reconnecting teaching, learning, and subject matter.

Teaching as an Experience

The aim of the teacher, in Dewey’s view, is the “reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (DE p. 76). The efforts of the teacher are directed to the production of educative experiences. This closely parallels the aims of the artist whose activity is also embedded in experience and who, in effect, aims at the transformation of experience. Dewey’s discussion of the concept of **an** experience in his philosophy of art is therefore an important one to consider in relation to his understanding of the idea of teaching as an art. An experience, as opposed to the general idea of experience, possesses unity.

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing in a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is **an** experience. (AE p.37).

The opposite of **an** experience is a succession of happenings without any order or outcome. **An** experience is a structured or patterned set of occurrences. It involves intellectual and emotional engagement.

The aim of teaching is an educative experience—the reconstruction of experience in the direction of growth. From the perspective of society as a whole the aim of education is “the provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests. And this means a democratic society” (DE p. 100). The aim of art is “a remaking of experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity” (AE p. 84).

It appears from this that artistic experience can usually be construed as educative, but is it the case that educative experience is artistic? Not in all cases. Dewey dismisses dull repetitive routines—teaching methods that are mechanically applied and ingrained as habits.

But what is the nature of the activity of the teacher that make it possible to understand teaching as art?

General and Individual Teaching Methods

In order to understand Dewey’s claim that teaching can be practiced as an art it is essential to have grasp of what it is that teachers do. A useful beginning is with a consideration of what Dewey understood by method. Herbart had been the first to develop an idea that the act of teaching followed a general procedure. Dewey is complimentary about Herbart’s contribution in “taking the work of teaching out of the region of routine and accident” and bringing it into “the sphere of conscious method” (DE p.71); but he is critical of Herbart’s theory in other respects. Herbart’s important contribution was to formulate a general procedure for teacher to follow in the process of planning and instruction. His general method of recitation, as he referred to it, is comprised of five distinct phase or steps—preparation, presentation, comparison, generalization, and application. In *How We Think*, Dewey uses the idea of lessons on the topic of rivers as an illustration of

Herbart's methods. Preparation involves what we might now refer to as the activation of prior knowledge—the teacher might ask the pupils to relate their own experiences of small streams or even of the “running of water in gutters” (HWT p 203). Dewey had referred to this procedure as a cardinal principle of teaching—to begin with what the pupil already knows. But as we will see later, his formulation of methods interpreted this principle in an entirely different way. Presentation is the phase of direct instruction—the teacher might show the pupils pictures of rivers, or make a short presentation, or have them read a short passage about rivers in a textbook. Comparison provides the pupils with an opportunity to refine their concept of a river, by discarding inessential elements—streams do not fit the idea of a river because they are too small. Generalization helps pupils gather the central aspects or characteristics into a general conception that can be applied to other instances of rivers. In the final stage, the teacher invites the pupils to apply their developed concept of a river in new situations so that it can be tested on fresh examples.

In Dewey's view, the flaw in Herbart's approach is that it ignores the role of the student as an active agent. “The theory represents the Schoolmaster come into his own...reflects the pedagogues view of life” (DE p.71). What is significantly different in Dewey's account is the way that it fits the different terms of the relationship—teacher, pupil, and subject matter—into a functioning whole. Herbart's method assumes that subject matter and method are separate affairs—the *what* of instruction is distinct from the *how*. But his temptation to conceive of subject matter as distinct from method is to be avoided, as it is one of the main reasons for the kind of rigid, mechanical forms of instruction that Dewey deplored as it suppresses the intelligent action of the teacher and reduces the opportunity for adaptive thought.

Although we can, says Dewey, distinguish method and subject matter in thought, just as we can many other ideas, it is an error to carry these distinctions into the realm of action.

Dewey's Account of Method

In spite of his criticisms, Dewey was struck by the resemblance of Herbart's conception of general method to his own analysis of a complete thought (HWT p. 203). Like Herbart, his approach to method resolves into five steps— problem, data collection and analysis, projection and elaboration of tentative hypothesis, and application.

What is significantly different in Dewey's conceptualization of method is that procedurally it invites the participation of the pupils to become active in the processes of problem solving. The teacher's task is itself a problem-solving one. How can I actively engage my students, get them into a state of perplexity so that they will become engaged problem solvers. This can be clearly understood when we try to think applying Dewey's method to an example. Obviously, the concept of river is a poor candidate as a starting point. What has to be brought to consciousness is a problem and this has to be a problem for the pupils. The problem for the teacher may be quite different. What can I do to get them inquiring? (Unless teacher and pupils engaged in co-inquiry). The problem for the teacher is to find out in any particular situation what an educative experience is for the pupils.

I'd like to consider how this procedure of Dewey's might be carried out in a particular example, but before I do I'd like to make some general comments about how Dewey conceives of the idea of method.

The first point is that teaching demands a familiarity with practical knowledge and skills of past practitioners. To be a teacher is to be part of a tradition of practice in which the skills and knowledge of previous practitioners can be studied and made part of a teacher's own repertoire. Dewey refers to a “cumulative body of fairly stable methods for reaching results, a body authorized by past experience and by intellectual analysis, which an individual ignores at his peril” (DE p.170). It is the duty of the teacher to become familiar with methods that have been shown by experience to work in given situations. However, what is authorized by past experience should not be rigidly applied in every situation. The present situation

may be like one in the past, but it is not identical with it. This difference is particularly critical in understanding the need for flexibility in the application of methods because of the considerable complexity of the conditions that apply in instructional situations. Novelty in the context of instruction authorizes flexibility and intelligent action on the part of the teacher to adapt methods to new situations. It is this aspect that makes it possible to understand teaching as an art. In effect, art is the intelligent adaptation of skills, knowledge, and method to new situations. Art is creative problem solving, and this applies in the fine arts as much as it does to teaching and other activities (the work of the scientist, physician, engineer, carpenter, and so on). Method is important to the degree that it can be applied intelligently—with flexibility and initiative. It is a danger when it is applied rigidly and without consideration for an eye to the unique aspects of the situation.

Obviously, skill in adapting one's methods to new situations is not something that can be reduced to a formula, but Dewey does have some useful things to say about how this ability can be fostered. Dewey suggests that there are dispositions or traits of individuals that enable them to pursue teaching and other activities as an art. He refers to them as "the traits of individual method." They are: directness, single-mindedness, open-mindedness, and responsibility.

Directness implies a sort of emotional commitment to any problem—a desire to get on with business without being deflected from the matter at hand. Open-mindedness is the opposite of stubbornness, narrowness, and dogmatism. It is, says Dewey, the retention of a child-like attitude" in dealing with problems (DE p. 75). By "single-mindedness" Dewey indicates that the problem solver should possess "completeness of interest, unity of purpose, the absence of suppressed but effectual ulterior aims for which the professed aims are but a mask"(DE p. 176). Finally, responsibility is "intellectual thoroughness"—the disposition to see things through to the end.

The Problem of the Educative Experience

I indicated above that the problem for the teacher to solve is different from, though connected to the problem that will challenge the pupil. The problem for the teacher is to come up with what is the appropriate educative experience in any given case—an extremely challenging, one might say almost impossible requirement given difference in standpoint between the teacher and the pupil, the complexities of different learners, and the variety of contexts of instruction.

Where to now?

In this section I propose to show, by means of a hypothetical case, the thinking of the teacher might be construed in the way that Dewey outlines. What I want to do is explore the idea that the art of the teacher lies in solving the problem in a given situation of coming up with an educative experience. First, I want to do this by drawing on Dewey's *Art as Experience*, especially the idea of **an** experience developed in that text. This is analogous to the problem of the fine artist, which is to produce an aesthetic experience. Dewey makes an important point about problem solving in fine art—he says that the "artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works" (AE p. 50). Might we equally claim that the teacher/artist embodies in herself the attitude of the learner in the process of working out a suitable educative experience?

References

- Dewey, J. (1997) (1910) *How We Think* (NY: Dover Publications).
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education* (NY: The Free Press).
- Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as Experience* (NY: The Berkeley Publishing Group).