

Just what **did** John Dewey say about elementary education? About secondary education? About higher education? With particular regard to the study of history, philosopher Stone summarizes Dewey's positions for each area.

John Dewey on history in elementary and secondary education

By George C. Stone



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To John Dewey, one of the basic functions, if not the basic function, of the school is to make certain that by the time of graduation the student substantially understands his society. That is, upon graduation, students should be able to function in society, and be active, participating, contributing members in it. To be sure, this is no easy task for teachers or students. One difficulty is that at the beginning of the process the child is immature and the society he must understand is extremely complex. Dewey was keenly aware of this situation. He pointed out on a number of occasions that because children are not adults it is difficult for them to study a contemporary complex society. For instance, on one occasion he wrote,

Society, that is the social relations which the child has around him, are the child. He cannot tear them loose from himself, nor himself away from them. It requires a highly trained adult to do it with any success, it touches our feelings, interests, at every point, and to get an objective view of the thing is a matter of great difficulty.¹

Dewey is convinced that students should begin the study of society in early elementary education. He charges the school with the task of simplifying existing social life, of reducing it to an "embryonic form."²

He suggests that the most efficient method the school has of simplifying existing social life for the child is using what he called the "historical view." He explains, "The historical view . . . simplifies the social study; it reduces it to a number of simpler elements and forces; and in the second place it eliminates this element of too great personal contiguity, of too great personal attachment and interest."³ Dewey makes it clear that history, too, if it has any educational value, must be consistent with the general purpose of the "historical view." He wrote:

I believe . . . that history is of educative value in so far as it presents phases of social life and growth. When taken simply as history it is thrown into the distant past and becomes dead and inert. Taken as the record of man's social life and progress it becomes full of meaning. I believe, however, that it cannot be so taken excepting as the child is also introduced directly into social life.⁴

Dewey's statement of the educative value of history includes two significant principles which, on occasion, have been incorrectly interpreted. The first is that the educational

worth of history is primarily that of having the student grasp the contribution history makes to understanding social life, that is, the socialization of the consciousness. According to Dewey, "This at once fixes the principle that history is studied not for the sake of history considered as a record of something that happened."⁵ Unfortunately, many people, especially historians, have taken Dewey to mean that history, as history, should no longer be taught at any educational level. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. His reference is to history as it relates to the education of the **child**, especially the child in elementary school. Dewey does not mean to imply that the historian should or should not write history from his view of the educational value of history; neither does he mean to imply that the **mature** student of history should or should not study history from this point of view.

The second significant principle is a reference to the method which, when applied by the teacher, will present phases of social life and growth. Dewey is referring to the genetic method or "historical view" which he later claimed "was perhaps the chief scientific achievement of the latter half of the nineteenth century."⁶ Commenting further on it, he wrote:

Its principle is that the way to get insight into any complex product is to trace the process of its making—to follow it through the successive stages of its growth. To apply this method to a story as if it meant only the truism that the present social state cannot be separated from its past, is one-sided. It means equally that past events cannot be separated from the living present and retain meaning. The true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems.⁷

A common misinterpretation is that the history teacher should identify some contemporary problem occurring in the present and then assign students the task of tracing the origin of that problem. The key to the misunderstanding seems to be on the word "product" in the above quotation. That term has been identified as being synonymous with the term "problem." However, the two terms do not mean the same thing. Dewey did not suggest that some contemporary problem should be traced to its origin; he suggested that the way to get insight into any complex **product** is to trace the process of **its** making. Perhaps this can be made more clear by example. A logical example would be one in which Dewey employed the genetic method in an actual situation: the curriculum of the University of Chicago Laboratory School designed by Dewey.

It is important to remember that John Dewey believed the school as an institution had the responsibility of simplifying the existing social life for the child. To accomplish the goal, he decided that the genetic method or "historical view" could be employed in the school curriculum as a means to trace the process of society's making.

Children at the Dewey Laboratory School were placed in one of eleven groups, depending upon their age. The first

group, youngsters of pre-school age, were generally involved in the occupations of their contemporary world. There was a great deal of role playing and re-enacting the fundamental occupations of the home. Gradually their perspectives were broadened to include an understanding of the interaction of family and community. Such games as playing store, or playing mailman, or milkman, as well as playing house, were carried out. Wirth reports that "in these activities relevant questions would be raised which would lead to amplification and refinement in the later school years: Where does it come from? Where does it go? How does it work?"⁸

Historical study was not introduced until the child had progressed to Group IV, the seven-year-olds, at which time the study of history centered in the evolutionary development of civilization, beginning with an investigation of the occupational activities from their simplest origins. Dewey's position was that children working with and becoming personally involved in the present occupational and social life of their elders would naturally be interested in the historical evolution of those occupations.⁹

One important principle Dewey relied on was that the curiosity of the child would grow out of some present situation. Then the question "How did it all come about?" would lead the child back to the study of primitive man. Dewey believed it would be possible, and, for that matter, desirable to go back to primitive man because that was man's simplest stage of development. He wrote:

The value of primitive history is in simply reducing everything to its simplest elements; it gives us the problem of society in its lowest and fewest terms, and therefore in a way most easily grasped, particularly by the imagination of the child.¹⁰

An interesting and important reason for having children study the primitive stage, and, for that matter, all the stages between primitive and contemporary, is that it shows the child the situations man faced in that period are in **kind** like those he faces today. To achieve this goal, Dewey suggested that the child use his imagination to conjure up the primitive environment and attempt to solve the kinds of problems man faced at that time. Particularly he was to

realize how the fundamental problems of procuring subsistence, shelter, and protection have been met; and by seeing how those were solved in the earlier days of the human race, form some conception of the long road which has had to be traveled, and of the successive inventions by which the race has been brought forward in culture.¹¹

Arthur G. Wirth reports that Groups IV and V, for seven- and eight-year-olds, were pivotal years, and were thoroughly and systematically developed. Where Group IV concentrated on the laying of "sociohistorical" foundations, Group V moved to study a world that had been expanded by migration, exploration, and discovery. Psychologically, it was believed that this was the period "in which to shift from

direct to 'derived modes of activity.' "12 It was felt that when the child reached the age of eight he had a psychological need to acquire skills in reading, writing, and number tools in order to progress.

Group V began the study of history by concentrating on the study of the Phoenicians. Study of the Phoenicians as traders rather than farmers or hunters was emphasized because that led to the study of a new kind of man with new kinds of problems. Later in the year students began the study of great explorers. The voyages of such men as Magellan, Marco Polo, and Columbus were studied in some detail. This led to questions about oceans, meteorology, astronomy, the use of the compass, and astrology. Thus, by the end of the year the child had greatly enlarged his perspective from occupations around the house to the beginning of a civilized human experience.

Groups VI through X, for children aged nine through thirteen, turned their attention to the history of the United States. A real effort was made to introduce the child to American history through an examination of "the exploration and conquest of the continent, the establishment of the Colonies, and the founding of the republic."13 When colonial history was studied, children in the textile studio actually used spinning wheels and looms. Other children reconstructed typical industries of the colonial period. Children studied the home life of the colonials in some detail while one group planned, built, and furnished a colonial room. The goal was "to show how occupations and industries grew out of real needs, how individuals and communities became experts in making or growing certain things, and how trade between the colonies began."14 Gradually the study of history became more specialized; historical accounts were read and written and oral reports were presented.

Group XI, for fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, was in operation only two years. Records are sketchy and it appears that the staff never got beyond a tentative program.

This brief example of the genetic method shows that Dewey intended it to be used only as a means of simplifying contemporary society, thereby making it possible for the child to study phases of social life and growth. The genetic method was useful for identifying the various stages of man's development but was not used to trace the origin of some contemporary problem. However, as pointed out, once the child was studying a particular stage of development, certain problems man faced in that stage were identified and solved. It is now possible to examine Dewey's writings concerning problems that confront the history teacher and some of his suggestions concerning methods that will achieve the desired goals at the elementary and secondary education levels.

At the Dewey Laboratory School, history was approached primarily in terms of its industrial, economic, and social aspects throughout the curriculum. This approach is an important concept in Dewey's writings in the teaching of history because it establishes his approach to the general goals of the history teacher in the public schools. However, the relationship between the general goals of historical in-

struction and the approach to those goals by emphasizing mainly the economic and industrial aspects of history has not been made clear. That will be done at this point.

Dewey made a most cogent statement on the relationship between the aim of historical instruction and the industrial and economic aspects of history in Monograph No. 8 of the *Elementary School Record*. He wrote:

If the aim of historical instruction is to enable the child to appreciate the values of social life, to see in imagination the forces which favor and allow men's effective co-operation with one another, to understand the sorts of character that help on and hold back, the essential thing in its presentation is to make it moving, dynamic.¹⁵

Dewey went on to say that when history is taken as dynamic, as moving, its economic and industrial aspects are emphasized. For Dewey, "economic" and "industrial" were only technical words "which express the problem with which humanity is unceasingly engaged; how to live, how to master and use nature so as to make it tributary to the enrichment of human life."¹⁶ He explained this concept well in *Democracy and Education* when he wrote,

We do not need to go into disputes regarding the economic interpretation of history to realize that the industrial history of mankind gives insight into two important phases of social life in a way which no other phase of history can possibly do. It presents us with knowledge of the successive inventions by which theoretical science has been applied to the control of nature in the interests of security and prosperity of social life. It thus reveals the successive causes of social progress. Its other service is to put before us the things that fundamentally concern all men in common—the occupations and values connected with getting a living. Economic history deals with the activities, the career, and fortunes of the common man as does no other branch of history. The one thing that every individual **must** do is to live; the one thing that society **must** do is to secure from each individual his fair contribution to the general well being and see to it that a just return is made to him.¹⁷

It is little wonder, then, that Dewey would say that the fundamental history of man is economic and industrial history. Little wonder, too, that given his general aim of historical instruction, his suggestion for achieving those aims would emphasize economic and industrial aspects of history. With this background it is now possible to examine Dewey's general pedagogical principles as they relate to history in elementary education.

Dewey pointed out that there are two major problems confronting the history teacher in the elementary school. One is centered on how to secure adequate simplification of the material and yet have it retain its salient points; the second is concerned with the proper amount of historical detail to be studied.

Dewey suggested two methods, both popular at the time he was writing, to meet the demands of the first problem. The first method is the biographical and story view, the principle of which is that history should be approached in the "form of

biographies of great historical characters and heroes and leaders, and through the medium of anecdotes and stories associated with these great characters."¹⁸ There is, however, a drawback to this method. Dewey was concerned that some teachers using the biographical method might have a tendency to reduce history to a number of interesting stories of great men, and, thereby, practically eliminate the element of growth, continuity, and development. He wrote:

These social leaders are always representative, each one representing a center, a focusing of a large number of social conditions and problems and forces; and so far as elementary education is concerned, it seems to me that the ideal should be to remain true to the historical point of view, that is, to that of growth, of development, by discussing the development quite largely as typified and summed up, as represented in individual characters.¹⁹

The second method that Dewey suggested to simplify the study of historical material is the "institutional approach." The view is that the study of history should center about institutions. "The idea is that by taking the family in various parts of the country, or some other social form, and by having the child become acquainted with it as it existed in different ages and countries, a systematic view of society as a whole can be built up."²⁰ Dewey seemed to have his doubts about the use of the institutional method at the elementary level. He stated that it was in use in a normal school in Michigan, but that it might be too analytic for use in the elementary school.²¹ Beyond that he mentioned little else about it in any of his writings.

The other major problem confronting the history teacher at the elementary level centers on the proper amount of historical detail and the relationship of historical details to one another. The teacher can create confusion on the one hand by attempting to give practically all the facts, and on the other by dwelling on too few facts. Therefore, the effective history teacher must find a medium between the two extremes.

Unfortunately, the history teacher does not receive much help from textbooks. The typical American history textbook is organized chronologically and riddled with detail. Dewey was generally critical of this approach to history. He wrote:

When it is attempted within the limits of the textbook, it is obvious that there are a great number of particular persons, battles, campaigns, etc., spoken of. The result of that multiplicity of details is that details of another sort are inevitably crowded out. That is, the circumstances and conditions which really give one of the points discussed its meaning, which drive it home to one, make it capable of translation over into living terms, are almost of necessity left out.²²

Furthermore, Dewey suggested that if the child simply memorizes facts concerning, say the Pilgrims' landing in New England, his mind is left with only a little information. But he believed that,

If a child spends two or three months even on that subject, working out the reason why those people came over, how

they lived, and in getting acquainted with the various individuals in such a way that they mean something to him, working out how the town was laid out and how the people managed their affairs, the thing at once becomes a vital whole. It is obvious that you cannot do that and attempt to cover everything from 1492 to 1899 in one year. You must pick out things which are really representative and typical and work them out with a great deal of elaboration.²³

This means that Dewey's answer to the two major problems confronting the history teacher in elementary education is one and the same, the representative topic method. Thus, it is now possible to state a basic pedagogical principle of his in the area of history: "In history the pedagogical demand is more and more for typical cases, for representative topics which will be worked out in a great deal of detail, with a great deal of accompanying circumstance."²⁴

By way of summary, Dewey would say that it is desirable for history in the elementary school to result in the power to imagine, to sense social relationships, and to have in mind some of the chief historical embodiments of the working out of these forces. He was convinced that,

The child should be left with a sense of these historical embodiments of the social forces in such a way as to feel the momentous continuity and progress, although unable philosophically in any way to define them. But if the child does not get a sense of momentum, a sense of moving on into a higher state of things at each stage, a sense of advance, he is losing one of the most important points in the study of history.²⁵

Dewey wrote little about teaching history in the secondary schools. One reason may be that he never got beyond the preliminary stages with his secondary programs at the Laboratory School. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that he believed secondary level problems occur in connection with the ethical and practical value of history. He was interested particularly in the idea that history, in the ethical and practical sense, should be considered in relation to civics. He wrote:

If the knowledge of history does not somehow relate itself to existing problems and conditions, if the student does not get something out of it which makes him more intelligent in dealing with current problems of social life and of politics, he certainly does not get the full benefit of it, and it is the study of civil government, now generally called civics, which has been particularly urged of late as a means of enabling the student to get practical value and application out of his history.²⁶

Dewey suggested that students of secondary school age should begin the study of history with the study of social functions, or civics, rather than governmental forms. That is, students should learn first what the community must do for its various citizens. Although he did not state this absolutely, he did seem to believe that a sufficient background in civics can be acquired by the end of the first or second year of high school.

Dewey made clear that once the student has learned what the community must do for its various citizens, he is ready to

begin a more definite study of institutions. This phase begins not so much with the direct study of institutions as it does from the purposes which are meant to be realized. Also, at this point, the teacher can begin instruction in comparative and historical study. Dewey suggested students might deal with such questions as:

What was the institutional organization of Greece, Rome or feudalism? What has been the struggle of modern times to secure what kind of institutions, and why? Why do democratic institutions conserve the public welfare and also individual freedom more fully than those other institutional forms that have previously been studied?²⁷

It is clear that Dewey's plan for the study of history in secondary education included a comparative institutional study with reference to the ethical value of ends. He explained that when he used the term ethical, he meant "the enlargement of the freedoms of the individual and the sphere of common interests and mutual services."²⁸ He also acknowledged that history continually presents ethical problems as to why people did certain things, whether they should have done them, and what their motives were. In addition to the general aspects of ethical problems in history, there are the individual aspects of ethics: "the study of character, for which no rules can be laid down in advance, but to which it is desirable to have a great deal of incidental attention paid."²⁹

Dewey said little beyond these brief remarks about the teaching of history in secondary education; these writings indicate that he never got beyond the tentative planning stages with his suggestions.

Dewey suggested that in the transition from secondary school to higher education the student would naturally get a philosophical view of history.³⁰ For the most part, his writings on this subject, limited to 1898-1899, include only a brief reference to causation—hardly enough to understand fully what he means by a philosophical view of history. In fact, his remarks about causation are so general that it is difficult to know what he means by it. For instance, he stated that causation in the narrow sense can be used in the physical sciences but cannot be applied to history. However, he said, causation in a larger sense, in the sense of philosophy of growth, of movement of historical evolution, should be the culmination of a strictly historical study. It would appear that this is a different concept of causation from that found in later works, notably *Logic*. However, it is apparent that Dewey believed that if students in higher education would study history from a philosophical view, both extreme conservatism and radicalism would be impossible.³¹

Dewey made a few other general comments about history in higher education, as in his suggestion that the professional man, for instance in science or medicine, ought to know the history of his profession as it relates to the general process of civilization.

If Dewey did not fully develop his views with regard to history studies in secondary and higher education, he nevertheless had a strong sense of their place in a sequential

program. As succinct a summary of his contextual perspective as any is his declaration that

When the curriculum is organized so that the elementary period takes up its proper material and does its due work with it, giving the training of instinctive imagination and insight into the forces, and a certain amount of positive information in regard to the way these forces are crystallized, and in the secondary period gives an insight into the development of institutions in relation to the fundamental purposes of life, then the ground will be covered leaving room in the higher period for the philosophical view of history, and also for the professional view.³²

FOOTNOTES

1. John Dewey, "Lecture XXVI: History," *John Dewey: Lectures in the Philosophy of Education, 1899*, Reginald D. Archambault, editor (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 262.
2. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *School Journal*, vol. LIV (January 1897), pp. 77-80.
3. Dewey, "Lecture XXVI: History," *op. cit.*, p. 262.
4. Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *op. cit.*, p. 10.
5. Dewey, "Lecture XXVI: History," *op. cit.*, p. 261.
6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 214.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Arthur G. Wirth, *John Dewey as Educator: His Design for Work in Education, 1894-1904* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966), p. 138.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
10. Dewey, "Lecture XXVI: History," *op. cit.*, p. 263.
11. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
12. Wirth, *John Dewey as Educator*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
15. John Dewey, "The Aim of History in Elementary Education," *Elementary School Record*, vol. 1, no. 8 (November 1900), p. 199; see also John Dewey, "History for the Educator," *Progressive Journal of Education*, vol. 1 (March 1909), p. 1; see also John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Edition, 1956), p. 151.
16. Dewey, *School and Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
17. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
18. Dewey, "Lecture XXVII, History: General Pedagogical Principles," Archambault, editor, *Lectures, 1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 265.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 268-69.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-72.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 273.