

Experience Informed Philosophy

Tegan W. Nusser

Introduction

John Dewey normally requires no introduction to educators. Many are familiar with at least some aspects of his educational philosophy—child-centered education, inquiry-based learning, or more generally progressive education. However, knowing attributable ideas does not imply the understanding of their origin and original incarnation. Current prominent examples include Finnish and South Korean education—both widely renowned for their education systems, and both base some of their foundational beliefs and practices on Dewey’s philosophy.¹ Understanding this philosophy remains relevant even now, more than a hundred years past Dewey’s most popular publication, *Democracy and Education*. However, a reader of any of Dewey’s numerous writings is better informed by understanding how his ideas, his philosophy, is a result of his experiences. The experiences detailed below include his childhood in Vermont, his time at Johns Hopkins and the University of Michigan, and his renowned laboratory school at the University of Chicago. Throughout, I interpret Dewey’s experiences and maturing ideas with his philosophy as stated in *Democracy and Education* with a particular consideration to the alignment of theory and practice. Included are brief discussions of the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and the Vermont Transcendentalists to describe Dewey’s philosophical background. Additionally included are the contributions of Alice Chipman Dewey, Jane Addams, and Ella Flagg Young to the realization of Dewey’s philosophy in the renowned Dewey Laboratory School.

Burlington

Burlington, Vermont shaped most of the childhood of John Dewey. Burlington itself was home to a rather conservative school of philosophy deriving out of the thought of Kant and Hegel: the Vermont Transcendentalists. By contrast, the rest of Vermont was likely one of the most abolitionist states in the Union. Dewey’s father Archibald enlisted in the first call for volunteers during the Civil War, despite his advanced age, nearly fifty, and served throughout the entirety of the war.² In 1859, the year of Dewey’s birth, Burlington’s population reached around 10,000 citizens. Burlington had the feel of public spirit and grassroots democracy, at least within, and not necessarily between the relatively tribal mindsets of the two social groups.³ The social

¹ Pasi Salhberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland, 2nd Edition*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015); South Korea is used as an educational exemplar nation in Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s commitment to equity will determine our future*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010). For a closer look at praxis of Dewey’s philosophy in the classroom, readers should look towards Laurel N. Tanner, *Dewey’s Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

² Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 249-250. Menand includes more fascinating detail: of the 37,000 men, eligible for duty in Vermont during the Civil War, 34,000 enlisted; more men from Vermont died throughout the war than from any other Northern state. Dewey’s father sold his shop to enlist as a quartermaster and was eventually promoted to captain.

³ Jack Morgan, and S. Samuel Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 11, no. 1 (1970): 66, <http://www.jstor.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/stable/40640933>.

structure in Burlington consisted of two groups: Yankees of an upper class, and first or second generation immigrants of a lower social class—French Canadians and Irish. Generally, the Yankees were the employers, and the immigrants provided unskilled labor. Yankees lived in the same area of town, congregated at the same churches, and attended the same schools; the immigrants lived in the slums near the wharves, going to the same Catholic churches and schools. While the Dewey's did not come from money, Archibald was a grocer; they were more importantly of Yankee heritage. As a benefit of their Yankee heritage and parental friendships, John and his brothers Davis and Charles grew up as close friends of the sons of the president of Dartmouth University. They would have the privilege to experience the best that Burlington had to offer growing children.⁴

Family. John's parents, Archibald and Lucina, named him after his brother who tragically died after several tragic accidents resulting in burns, nine months before John's birth.⁵ Archibald possessed a witty and generous demeanor. Born to relatively humble circumstances from generations of farmers, Archibald chose a mercantile life instead. He was a man who "sold more goods and collected fewer bills than any other merchant in town."⁶ Literature fascinated Archibald, especially English classics, mostly for its verbiage and value in style. Around his shop, Archibald would quote Milton, and he loved to compose witty and whimsical advertisements for his goods. Lucina was a formidable woman who left her mark on Dewey's childhood. Lucina demonstrated her strength of spirit and sincere devotion when she moved the family to Virginia to be closer to her husband during the Civil War.⁷ Lucina came from a wealthier family of farmers than her twenty years' elder husband; her grandfather formerly a congressman in Washington, her father a lay judge, and her brothers' college graduates. Mrs. Dewey also exhibited religious zeal and more ambitious aspirations for her children than her husband, whose greatest hope was that one of his children became a mechanic. Her beliefs resulted in strict behavioral restrictions and constant questioning of her children: if they were "right with Jesus"—Lucina even wrote John's confession of faith to join the church at age eleven.⁸ Lucina's beliefs and words squared with her actions: she was a social activist "known in Burlington as a reformer and a person who looked after the interests of the poor."⁹ John did not inherit the playfulness and wit of his father, nor the boldness of his mother. His childhood behavior was not typical for an eldest surviving child; he was shy, timid, and mild-mannered; he was essentially a bookworm.¹⁰ John had two younger siblings, Davis and Charles. His brothers alternatively exhibited much different behavior than that of their elder brother: Davis "was sociable and a good conversationalist, and Charles was full of fun."¹¹

School. John enrolled late in school in Burlington at age eight rather than the typical age of five as a result of the family's travel to Virginia to be closer to his father Archibald during the Civil

⁴ Robert L McCaul, "Dewey's School Days, 1867-75," *The Elementary School Journal* 63, no. 1 (1962): 15-16, <https://doi.org/10.1086/460005>.

⁵ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 235. Dewey's namesake fell into a pail of scalding water, and after his parents applied oil to his burns and wrapped him in cotton, the cotton caught fire eventually resulting in the child's tragic death.

⁶ McCaul, "Dewey's School Days, 1867-75," 16.

⁷ The Dewey's did not return to Burlington until 1867. McCaul, "Dewey's School Days, 1867-75," 18.

⁸ McCaul, "Dewey's School Days, 1867-75," 16-17; Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 237, 250-251.

⁹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 250-251.

¹⁰ Morgan, and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 66.

¹¹ McCaul, "Dewey's School Days, 1867-75," 17.

War. This late enrollment proved fortunate, as it reduced his time in poorly run district schools “suffering from cheap teachers, paucity of apparatus, squalor and dilapidation, and stinginess and neglect.”¹² In 1868, after John went through one year in District School No. 3, the community abolished the district system making improvements including better funding, new buildings, and more qualified teachers for their schools. He completed the normal eight years of elementary schooling in five years and entered the brand-new Burlington High School in 1872.¹³ Dewey once again moved quickly through a classical curriculum, intended to prepare students for college in three years instead of the expected four years. The education of these students mostly consisted of repetitious recitations of memorized answers without connection to real experiences.¹⁴ “According to his daughter Jane, school for him was a bore, and ‘its tiresomeness was mitigated only by the occasional teacher who encouraged conversation on outside topics.’”¹⁵ The boredom found in schools would be fundamental further on for the conception of the Dewey School.

Informal Education. Life outside of school was much more meaningful for the Dewey brothers. They assisted with household chores and performed other small jobs in Burlington: selling papers, working at the lumber yard, and helping their father at the store. “In summer they often went to their Grandfather Rich’s farm and spent many happy hours at the sawmill and gristmill, and they visited another Rich relative’s home near which there were lime kilns and a haypressing plant.”¹⁶ Other typical boyhood activities included hikes, fishing trips, camping, and boating. These fulfilling experiences provided a sharp contrast to the boring experiences during the school day. “Out-of-school life was exciting and real. It brought intimate contact with the whole round of simple household, occupational, and agricultural activities upon which the welfare and progress of the family and the community depended.”¹⁷ The meaning found in life outside of school would eventually provide inspiration for what school could be like if centered around occupations and the natural inquiry of children.¹⁸

Vermont Transcendentalism. James Marsh was the first of the Vermont Transcendentalists.¹⁹ Marsh, an evangelical Christian, wished to find a philosophy that was compatible with his religious beliefs. He believed he found that philosophy in discovering the work of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a man with a deep interest in, but incomplete understanding of German metaphysics. Coleridge believed that he had made faith and reason compatible by looking inward and reflecting on what he saw as innate human mental faculties that provide consistency not found in the empirical world of our senses.²⁰ When Marsh became President of the University of Vermont, Dewey’s undergraduate alma mater, he instituted many educational reforms based on this Transcendentalism: the unity and divine nature of knowledge. These reforms included: the first elective system, part-time students, a philosophy capstone course, less

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ McCaul, “Dewey’s School Days, 1867-75,” 19.

¹⁴ Morgan, and Shermis, “Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey’s Early Philosophy,” 65-67.

¹⁵ McCaul, “Dewey’s School Days, 1867-75,” 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 238.

²⁰ Ibid., 246. Menand cites this rationale as starting with Plato’s “world of ideal forms” and Kant’s a priori vs a posteriori reasoning: mental universals vs empirical understanding.

formal evaluations, and student-paced mastery of the material. Unlike Emerson, Marsh believed in “rigorous introspection and analysis” as opposed to the “feeling” of Emersonian thought. The introspection that Marsh advocated for aimed at preserving and justifying the existing social order and view of Christianity. Emersonian transcendentalism, ‘feeling,’ used personal interpretation and exegesis without deference paid to traditional religious thought. Vermont Transcendentalism was as previously mentioned, conservative and concerned with preserving existing institutions.²¹

University of Vermont. Upon John’s graduation from Burlington High School, he began attending the University of Vermont, the home of Vermont Transcendentalism, brought there as a philosophy and framework for pedagogy by James Marsh. Henry Torrey was Marsh’s academic successor, the chair of philosophy at the University of Vermont, and John Dewey’s teacher. The connections between Torrey and Dewey originated long before, his mother Lucina brings this connection: her best friend was Henry Torrey’s wife, Sarah Paine Torrey—both the cousin to her husband Henry Torrey and the daughter of then University President Joseph Torrey, who was James Marsh’s successor. It was at the University of Vermont where John Dewey’s first interest in philosophy originated: a biology class in which he read a textbook written by Thomas Huxley.²² This text provided the inspiration for seeing knowledge and the world as an interconnected whole; the view of knowledge that shaped the pedagogy at the University of Vermont. By the time that Dewey took Henry Torrey’s capstone philosophy course—known as “the Mansfield course” due to the name of the mountain the class viewed and examined as a philosophical concept—Dewey eagerly embraced the connection between faith and reason by way of the class experience, and the reading of James Marsh’s text *Aids to Reflection*. This text built off of Coleridge’s interpretation of Kant—it was essentially a primer on Vermont Transcendentalism. Upon graduation, Dewey taught as a public-school teacher, for one year in South Oil City, Pennsylvania and one year near Burlington in Charlotte Vermont, respectively. Returning to Burlington in 1881, Dewey once again became Torrey’s student in philosophy. In a romantic story of mentorship, Torrey taught Dewey to read German and discussed Kantian philosophy in walks through the woods.²³ In his time working and learning under Torrey, Dewey contributed two articles to the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* and decided upon philosophy as his future career. To pursue this endeavor, Dewey chose to apply for a fellowship at Johns Hopkins University, which he received in his second year there.²⁴ While Dewey went to Johns Hopkins as a Vermont Transcendentalist, its time as a philosophy had nearly run its course: even Torrey admitted that “Undoubtedly pantheism is the most satisfactory form of metaphysics intellectually, but it goes counter to religious faith.”²⁵

²¹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 248-250.

²² From our perspective, it is very interesting that a text on evolutionary psychology primed Dewey for Vermont Transcendentalism—a philosophy so intent on squaring the rational and the divine. One must remember, this is long before the conflicts of teaching evolution in public schools reached boiling points. For a great text on one such boiling point—the Scopes Monkey Trial, see Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

²³ My mind is brought to *Emile*’s natural education, away from society in nature, and to Thoreau’s journey of self-realization in *Walden*.

²⁴ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 251-253; Morgan, and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 67.

²⁵ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 252.

Dewey's time in Vermont provides a basis for his way of thinking, and developing philosophy; as is appropriate for the most formative years of his life. The town of Burlington itself provided a flawed ideal of community. Yankees and Immigrants represented separate social classes within the town of Burlington, associating within their group socially and even physically with the layout of the town itself. Dewey speaks of the need for education for social transmission—to bring together communities under like-mindedness, for continual self-renewal.²⁶ Dewey's experiences continued to build his argument further on, demonstrating that only schools can bring together the various aims that various communities have into a better common alignment.²⁷ Having grown up in a dichotomous community, Dewey would likely have later seen the potential that education would have to bring the two groups together by way of a common school system for the two groups.²⁸ Dewey's later desire to be involved in social activism could be tied to his mother Lucina's faith-based works, and his father Archibald's impressive service throughout the Civil War.²⁹ His experiences in the public school system presented an example of what education should not be, while the rich experiences outside of school presented real learning opportunities. Those rich experiences outside of school probably helped to provide the inspiration for a curriculum based out of real-world inquiry within his future laboratory school.³⁰ Dewey's immersion into Vermont Transcendentalism early on left a mark throughout his life.³¹ One can easily see the beginnings of his philosophy: from reading Huxley and being inspired by the interconnectedness of the human body, to the critical mentoring done by Torrey.

Johns Hopkins University

Johns Hopkins' founding benefitted from what at the time was the largest private donation to an institution—\$7 million for its initial endowment, with an emphasis on research and postgraduate education.³² German academia heavily influenced Johns Hopkins, specifically the German dedication to pure learning and academic freedom: “almost every one of Hopkins's fifty-three professors had studied in Germany.”³³ In 1882, Johns Hopkins University was only six years old and was still in its search for a philosophy professor. The conflict previously mentioned between faith and reason contributed to this extensive search, as well as the tenuous meaning of what philosophy was, as psychology was emerging as a separate field of study: the study of the mind.

²⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 5.

²⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, see chapter 2, “Education as a Social Function.”

²⁸ Dewey spoke of divisions in society, see *Democracy and Education*, 376-377, for one example and a short summation.

²⁹ Dewey would later be involved in the leadership and creation of the ACLU and the NAACP. See Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 235.

³⁰ In chapter I of *Democracy and Education*, 1-11, Dewey speaks of the need for balance between informal and intentional teaching as society becomes more complex. More precisely, the need for schools to keep a balance of real life activity and formal educative experiences.

³¹ This idealist form of philosophy eventually evolved into a Hegelian idealism during his experiences at Johns Hopkins University. Dewey stated: “there has always remained that ‘Hegelian bacillus’ in his thinking.” John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” in *The Later Works 1925-1952*, Vol 5: 1929, Ed. JoAnn Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 154; as cited in James Scott Johnston, “Dewey's Critique of Kant,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 42, no. 4 (Fall, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1353/csp.2007.0004> .

³² Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 255. The other \$7 million Johns Hopkins left went to the hospital founded in his name.

³³ *Ibid.*, 257.

In his search, the President of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Gilman, hired three part-time lecture-philosophers recommended to him by William James: George Sylvester Morris, G. Stanley Hall, and Charles Sanders Peirce.³⁴ Dewey chose Morris as his mentor, a philosopher of the Hegelian school of thought—wherein practitioners of this school believe that they completed Kant’s theory in terms of a completed dualism. Instead of seeing *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning as separate, Hegel saw that the divine reveals itself in nature and in history and thus faith and reason were once again reconciled—somewhat similar to the institutional idealism of Vermont Transcendentalism. Dewey and Morris were well suited: “Dewey had become Morris’s prize student. . . At the end of his first year, Dewey got his fellowship. By his fourth semester, he was teaching Hopkins undergraduates.”³⁵ G. Stanley Hall also influenced Dewey’s emerging philosophy, but instead of the idealism of Morris, he engaged Dewey more on the side of psychology. Hall helped make connections between the two schools of thought more explicit to his students, which sparked an interest in empirical psychology, for Dewey.³⁶

Metaphysical Club. While Dewey’s primary mentor, Morris, came from a seemingly compatible school of thought with Vermont Transcendentalism, the third of the part-time lecturers, Charles Sanders Peirce, represented yet another influence on Dewey. Peirce was a scholar who helped to develop the philosophy of pragmatism alongside William James. When Peirce arrived at Johns Hopkins, he founded a Metaphysical Club, of which Dewey was an active participant.³⁷ Peirce’s deep interest was the question of the origin of chance and evolution. He was not satisfied with the idea of the Absolute or Divine found in the expression of the laws of nature. Peirce ended up believing he had resolved the problem of origin in crafting an argument to support the origin by way of absolute chance. In his eyes, he found the “uncaused cause” and had completed the system that the system builders of the Hegelian school continually sought.³⁸ Undoubtedly, this club presented an alternative perspective for Dewey, just as Hall’s empirical psychology presented a different view of philosophy to the Hegelian idealism of his mentor, Morris. Hegelian idealism still held sway for Dewey at Johns Hopkins as his dissertation used Hegelian system building to refute what he saw as limitations and gaps in Kant’s *Metaphysics*.³⁹ Upon graduation, Dewey held interest in two opposing schools of thought: the empirical psychology he learned from Hall and the neo-Hegelian idealism he grew into under Morris’s supervision.⁴⁰ While at Johns Hopkins University, the move from Vermont Transcendentalism to the neo-Hegelianism of his mentor George Sylvester Morris established Dewey’s philosophical foundation. G. Stanley Hall provided exposure to experimental psychology, an ongoing interest that would have implications at the Dewey School. It was here where Dewey first had exposure to the emerging philosophy of pragmatism by way of the Metaphysical Club and Charles Sanders Peirce. Around this time at Johns Hopkins University,

G. Stanley Hall was made professor of psychology and pedagogy. Morris, feeling slighted, returned to the University of Michigan and took Dewey with him. Dewey

³⁴ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 261-267; Morgan, and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁶ Morgan, and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 67.

³⁷ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 274-275.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁹ Johnston, “Dewey’s Critique of Kant,” 533.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 518.

became a member of the Michigan philosophy department; when Morris died, unexpectedly, in 1889, he succeeded him as chair.⁴¹

Michigan

In the time after Dewey's graduation from Johns Hopkins, he continued his journey into philosophy. "Increasingly, Dewey became concerned with the need to join philosophical speculation with practical activity. He read thoroughly of German idealists, English and Scottish empiricists, French rationalists and classical realists."⁴² Feeling the need to join his idealism with his actions, Dewey met with other activists and reformers who felt the same desire to fix what they saw as wrong in society: industrialism, the conflict between labor and capital, and patronage politics.⁴³ Dewey continued his active membership as a Congregationalist: lecturing and teaching various Christian organizations and Bible classes, which undoubtedly is a result of his religious upbringing. He and his mentor, George Sylvester Morris developed a pervasive "spirit of religious belief" throughout their philosophy department.⁴⁴ One of Dewey's colleagues and friends at the University of Michigan was economist Henry Carter Adams. Adams advocated for a "cooperative commonwealth of owner-workers that would 'realize socialistic aims by individualistic means,'" which echoes what Dewey would speak of in his classes: that the division of labor

is never complete until the laborer gets his full expression. The kind we now have in factories—one sided, mechanical—is a case of class interest; i.e. his activity is made a means to benefit others. It can't be complete till he does that for which he is best fitted—in which he finds the most complete expression of himself.⁴⁵

In 1886, Dewey married one of his students, Alice Chipman, a social reform-minded woman. Soon after his arrival at the University of Michigan, he became involved in education: joining the Schoolmaster's club as a result of his assigned duties at the University of Michigan: "visit(ing) public high schools throughout the state to determine their competency to send students to the University."⁴⁶ Public awareness of education increased at that time due to Dr. Joseph Rice's renowned survey of school systems and their deficiencies. Overall, Dewey's work in Michigan primarily functioned as an extension of his work at Johns Hopkins, integrating psychology, evolution, neo-Hegelianism, and Christianity; while on a more public level he became involved in social reform, coincidentally or not, around the same time that he married Alice Chipman.⁴⁷ One crucial work in consideration of his time at Michigan includes a theory of democracy entitled "The Ethics of Democracy" wherein he argued that

⁴¹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 283.

⁴² Morgan, and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 68.

⁴³ Robert B. Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats: The Social Origins of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *American Journal of Education* 100, no. 4 (August, 1992), 401-419, <https://doi.org/10.1086/444023>. Westbrook details the views of Social Christians and their support of labor in the many conflicts between labor and capital during the Gilded Era.

⁴⁴ Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats," 405.

⁴⁵ Dewey, lecture notes: political philosophy, 1892, pp. 44-45 as cited in Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats," 407. Adams' quote is found on page 406.

⁴⁶ Morgan and Shermis, "Origin, Theory and Practice: Dewey's Early Philosophy," 68.

⁴⁷ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 289.

“Society in its unified and structural character is the fact of the case, the non-social individual is an abstraction arrived at by imagining what man would be if all his human qualities were taken away. Society, as a real whole, is the normal order, and the mass as an aggregate of isolated units is the fiction.”⁴⁸

People, in other words, are social creatures interested in cooperation: improving their condition through the improvement of the condition of the community. In Dewey’s years at Michigan, he began to articulate the importance of putting theory into action both in his *Psychology* and *Outline of Ethics*, a concept which would come to fruition during his time in Chicago.⁴⁹

Dewey’s time at Johns Hopkins provides further direct development towards his philosophy. Under Morris’s guidance, Dewey moved from his Transcendental beginnings into the systematic field of thought of the Hegelians. At the same time, his interest in psychology, inspired by G. Stanley Hall, kept part of his emerging philosophy grounded in experimental science. The balance of these two ideals—the connection between theory and practice is both a phenomenon found in educational thought and at that time, the emerging philosophy of pragmatism. Dewey’s increasing involvement as a social activist and connections with other social reformers demonstrates the connection between theory and practice. At Michigan, Dewey became more well-read of the classics of European philosophy and felt the need to become more involved as a social activist. Dewey’s marriage to Alice Chipman strengthened any existing tendency towards social activism, and their union benefitted him greatly later on in his years at Chicago in helping to administer his famous laboratory school, which provided the testing ground for his philosophy. Dewey’s discussion of “Education as Unfolding” demonstrates his deepening understanding of classic educational literature. In “Education as Unfolding,” he contrasted and compared the educational implications of Froebel and Hegel—who advanced beyond Rousseau’s educational thought—with the contrasting beliefs of strict organization of “devices” to promote development, and assimilation or conformity to existing social institutions respectively.⁵⁰ Dewey’s lectures at the University of Michigan preview some of what he would say later on about self-realization, in this case, “the most complete expression of himself,” is self-realization within one’s labor or profession.⁵¹ Visiting schools in his duties at the University of Michigan surely began to arouse interest in education by some measure, and one can easily see the growth of his belief in democracy in the excerpt referenced from “The Ethics of Democracy.” A reading of said work previews the ideals of democracy described in *Democracy and Education*.

⁴⁸ John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888), *The Early Works, 1882-1898*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-72), vol. I, 232; as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 304-305.

⁴⁹ Catherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), 445-446.

⁵⁰ Froebel’s devices remind one of teacher proof curricula, or any form of programmed instruction. Hegel thought of the Absolute as having shown its will throughout history, and so existing institutions show the will of the divine. Thus, assimilation to the existing form of society is paramount to the purpose of education. This discussion can be found here: John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 65-80. Dewey goes on to discuss German idealism more in “The Democratic Conception in Education,” 110-116.

⁵¹ With regards to realization within education see Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 271-279. This section of the chapter “Educational Values” is entitled “The Nature of Realization or Appreciation” and provides an idea of what is meant by realization. Realization in terms of learning is the connecting of an idea to a real experience, as Dewey was skeptical at best towards second-hand knowledge. If it had no meaning to a student, no relation to experience, no understanding or knowledge truly existed for that student.

Chicago

In 1889, the University of Chicago reopened due to the patronage of John D. Rockefeller. William Rainey Harper, the first University president following the reopening, ambitiously recruited scholars in an attempt to make the University of Chicago well renowned. In searching for a chair for his philosophy department, Harper eventually was referred to Dewey by James Tufts, a man who had worked under Dewey in Michigan as an instructor and coincidentally studied with Harper at Yale. Dewey arrived in Chicago in a pivotal time in American history, especially for a man interested in social reform: the Pullman Strike.⁵²

Pullman Strike. George Pullman was an excellent engineer, entrepreneur, and businessman. In a time where the fastest and most efficient mode of travel was via train, he came up with the Pullman sleeping car, a luxurious way of traveling. Pullman leased the cars to railroads, providing their crews and maintaining the interiors. The Pullman Palace Car Company became wildly successful off of this model, taking fifty cents from every fare in one of their leased cars. This success provided excellent eight percent annual dividends to stockholders. In Chicago, Pullman developed a model town for his workers, and in turn controlled prices and rents. Following a stock market crash in 1893, Pullman had to modify the business model, wanting to still deliver the consistent annual dividends, despite the reduced demand for the company's products. This modification included cutting wages, laying off a fifth of his workers, but still keeping the rents the same in his model town. As a result, the annual dividends continued to go out to stockholders.⁵³ The response by his workers was the Pullman Strike, which now had the assistance of the American Railway Union, founded by the infamous Eugene Debs. This strike influenced John Dewey's initial travel to Chicago, and an excerpt from a letter to his wife tells of his reaction:

I don't believe the world has seen but few times such a spectacle of magnificent, widespread union of men about a common interest as this strike evinces. . . The gov't is evidently going to take a hand in & the men will be beaten almost to a certainty—but it's a great thing & the beginning of greater.⁵⁴

This prediction rang true with President Cleveland sending in federal troops in support of the Pullman Palace Car Company to ensure that the railroads continued operation, which also supported capital in their conflict with labor.⁵⁵ Dewey recognized hostility towards the strike by both an influential minister in Chicago and his colleagues at the University of Chicago while being entertained by a wealthy businessman, Aldophus C. Bartlett. A letter to his wife and children shows Dewey's reaction to this hostility:

It was interesting, to see how much more violent the minister was on the Strike than the businessman. . . I think professional people are probably worse than the capitalists themselves. . . The Univ. is evidently in very bad repute with "Labor."⁵⁶

⁵² Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 289.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 289-293. 2.5 million in dividends in 1893, 2.88 million in dividends in 1894.

⁵⁴ John Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, July 2, 1894, John Dewey Papers, Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 295.

⁵⁵ Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats," 408

⁵⁶ John Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey and children, July 4-5, 1894, John Dewey Papers; as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 296.

While intellectually speaking, opposition to laissez-faire thinking already existed in Chicago—the University after all had one of the first sociology departments—Harper, the University President, was still quite squeamish about criticism of capitalism. After all, the massive endowments given to the University of Chicago were out of the pocket of the most ubiquitous robber-baron of the era, Rockefeller. The Pullman Strike evinced more thought for Dewey concerning the makeup of society for democracy. A feminist thinker and activist, Jane Addams, challenged some of Dewey’s notions and ideas at that time with her interpretation and reaction to the Pullman Strike. Her sociological laboratory, the Hull House, provided inspiration for Dewey’s future endeavors.⁵⁷

The Hull House. The Hull House was a neighborhood center and a sociology laboratory. The inspiration for the Hull House came from Addams’, and co-founder Ellen Gates Starr’s trip to England, where they visited Toynbee Hall. The inspiration for Toynbee Hall partially stemmed from Christianity: that contact with the poor was good for the soul, and partially stemmed from a desire for social reform—an uplift of the poor by way of “exposure to literature and art.”⁵⁸ Addams and Starr fundraised to open the center in a neighborhood primarily consisting of immigrants. Hull House would provide aid for those out of work, but it primarily functioned on the other inspiration for Toynbee Hall: uplift of the poor via education.

It sponsored classes, lectures, dietetic instruction, athletics, and boys’, girls’, men’s, and women’s clubs. It had a kindergarten, a playground, a nursery, and a day-care center, a drama group and a choral group, a Shakespeare Club and a Plato Club.⁵⁹

Another aim for Hull House included a careful exposure to American culture—assisting with assimilation, but with respect paid to their ancestral heritage.⁶⁰ The uniqueness of the Hull House did not stop there, Addams

found that the people she was trying to help had better ideas about how their lives might be improved than she and her colleagues did. She came to believe that any method of philanthropy or reform premised on top-down assumptions⁶¹

The Hull House greatly impressed Dewey. In a letter to Addams, he wrote: “My indebtedness to you for giving me an insight into matters there is great. . . Every day I stayed there only added to

⁵⁷ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 305-306.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 307. There is a tremendous amount of literature on the Hull House including Edith Abbot, “The Hull House of Jane Addams,” *Social Service Review* 26, no. 3 (1952): 334-38 <https://doi.org/10.1086/638883>; Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Hull House in the 1890s: A community of women reformers,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 4 (1985): 658-677, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494177> ; For a firsthand account see Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House with autobiographical notes*, (University of Illinois Press, 1990); Eleanor J. Stebner, *The Women of Hull House: A Study in Spirituality, Vocation, and Friendship*, (State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 308. For more on some of the activities and their relation to Addams see J. O. C. Phillips, “The Education of Jane Addams,” *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 55-57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/367605>.

⁶⁰ It was not, in other words, intended to force assimilation as the American Indian Boarding Schools did. See David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875-1928*, (University Press of Kansas, 1997).

⁶¹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 311.

my conviction that you had taken the right way.”⁶² Addams herself fascinated Dewey, especially in an argument the two had about conflict—stemming from the Pullman Strike. In Addams’ view, antagonism, or conflict always arose from a conflict of values, and that the antagonism “was only misunderstanding, a tension in the progress toward a common outcome.”⁶³ Dewey’s reaction is crucial in demonstrating his changing philosophical thinking in a letter to Alice Chipman:

I can see that I have always been interpreting the [he wrote “Hegelian,” but crossed it out] dialectic wrong end up—the unity as the reconciliation of opposites, instead of the opposites as the unity in its growth, and thus translated the physical tension into a moral thing.⁶⁴

The opportunity for opposites in society to reconcile and grow together fascinated Dewey, and the potential for reconciliation is found not only in neighborhood centers aimed at the uplift of the poor: there exists no greater neighborhood center with the potential to bring together individuals and communities than the most frequently occurring neighborhood center, public schools.

The (Chipman) Dewey School. Dewey conceived of this Laboratory School not as a trainer of teachers, or experimental psychology, but as a laboratory of philosophy. The laboratory idea began with exposure to the Hull House, a laboratory of sociology. Dewey’s interest turned from philosophy towards education partially because of the potential to test his philosophy in action, but also because of the development of his children—especially his gifted son Morris, named after his mentor at Johns Hopkins, who tragically died at two and a half years old.⁶⁵ The question “what is the meaning of life?” shows the connection between philosophy and education. In this case, life is all about growth and change, and so is the education of an individual. Education is life, and education is growth.⁶⁶ In a letter to Chipman, Dewey made the aforementioned ideas explicit:

I think I’m in a fair way to become an education crank, I sometimes think I will drop teaching phil—directly, & teach it via *pedagogy*. . . The school is the one form of social life which is abstracted & under control—which is directly experimental, and if philosophy is ever to be an experimental science, the construction of a school is its starting point.⁶⁷

⁶² John Dewey to Jane Addams, January 27, 1892, Jane Addams Papers, Rockford College Archives, Howard Coleman Library, Rockford College; as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 310.

⁶³ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 313-314. Jane Addams explained her ideas by using examples from the play *King Lear* in unsuccessfully publishing “a Modern Lear”—Dewey called it “one of the greatest things I ever read” in a letter to Addams. John Dewey to James Addams, January 19, 1896, Jane Addams Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 316.

⁶⁴ John Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey, October 10-11, 1894, John Dewey Papers; as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 313.

⁶⁵ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 318-320. Originally named the University Elementary School of the University of Chicago, Ella Flagg Young actually coined the term “Dewey School”; Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 446.

⁶⁶ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 447. Indeed, Dewey viewed education as growth, continuing throughout life. See *Democracy and Education*, “Education as Growth,” 49-62.

⁶⁷ John Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey and children, November 1, 1894, John Dewey Papers; as cited in Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 319-320.

In 1894, Dewey became the head of philosophy at the University of Chicago and in January of 1896, the Dewey School opened its doors headed under the auspices of the Department of Pedagogy, Philosophy, and Psychology. In that same year, Dewey released a paper entitled “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” in which he criticizes an early version of behaviorism— isolating stimulus and responses—for its discontinuity and false dualistic thinking.⁶⁸ The consequence of this idea proved instrumental in the Dewey School, for students learned by way of educative experiences—when we experience something and then reflect upon it for growth, it is educative. There was no separated dualistic thinking there as there was in reflex-arc classrooms with recitations and memorized answers; it was an ideal of growth. Learning in the Dewey School was focused on achieving this ideal by way of collaborative inquiry.

In the Dewey School, children learned through doing, through experiencing occupations and problems that occurred throughout history, and through science as a method of interpreting the world around them.⁶⁹ At the Dewey School, the curriculum came by way of three subjects: History, Science and Art. The typical educative emphasis of reading, writing, and arithmetic would come from encountering problems that they needed to be able to use those skills to investigate. Their desire and need for those skills would prompt their development despite the ‘late’ start for the children learning those skills. Encountering problems cooperatively, students could collectively develop knowledge through careful negotiation of problems of their interest. These problems were intentionally planned by their teachers to be suitable for their method of inquiry in a continually growing, and improving curriculum.⁷⁰ This curriculum, the set of problems, was developed collaboratively between experts of the University, Dewey himself, the teachers, and their supervisors—Alice Chipman Dewey, the Principal, and Ella Flagg Young, the supervisor of instruction.⁷¹ The paramount contributions of these two women to the successful running of the Dewey School, are only matched by their subsequent influence on Dewey’s educational ideas. Young in particular, “exercised more influence on his educational ideals, especially ‘his ideas of democracy in the school,’ than anyone else except his wife Alice Chipman Dewey.”⁷²

Ella Flagg Young. When Ella Flagg Young first worked with Dewey as a student and colleague, she was fifty years old with experience as an educator for thirty-one years: a teacher for eight, a

⁶⁸ John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” *The Psychological Review* 3, no. 4, (July 1896), <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0070405> . In my eyes, some of the same thinking and reasoning exhibited this article can also be found in *Democracy and Education*, and the chapter entitled “Theories of Morals,” 402-418. The deliberate and continuous nature of thinking and action speaks to the continuity of consciousness, and not alternatively halted or discontinuous.

⁶⁹ For an exhaustive and incredibly detailed history of the Dewey School see the following account written by two sisters who taught at the Dewey School and wrote this text with Dewey’s cooperation. Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago*, (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936). The theme of occupations to learn, or by learning history via the development of civilization came from two of Dewey’s graduate students: Frederick W. Smedley and Daniel P. MacMillian. Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 389.

⁷⁰ Mayhew and Edwards, “Experimental Basis of Curriculum” in *The Dewey School*, 20-36.

⁷¹ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 10; Tanner, *Dewey’s Laboratory School*, 20.

⁷² Jane M. Dewey, “Biography of John Dewey,” In *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp, 2nd ed, (La Salle: Ill: Open Court, 1951), 29; as cited in Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, “Experimenting with Education: John Dewey and Ella Flagg Young at the University of Chicago,” *American Journal of Education* 104, no. 3 (1996): 173, <https://doi.org/10.1086/444127> .

principal for eleven, district superintendent for twelve years. In 1899, she resigned in protest when the superintendent of all Chicago schools was attempting to centralize control of the curriculum in Chicago schools. “As a student in Dewey’s seminar at the University of Chicago, Young was the undisputed star. One of her peers remembered the class as a two-way conversation between Dewey and Young that pretty much excluded everyone else.”⁷³ Ella Flagg Young and Chipman-Dewey contributed significantly to the structure and organization of the Dewey School, making the testing of teaching methods and curricula more methodological, partially by adapting a departmental structure.⁷⁴

Young had a strong belief about the importance of freedom of professional expression for teachers. Her dissertation, *Isolation in the School*, exemplifies this belief. *Isolation in the School* described what should happen to improve education; one of the fixes included: social equality between all in schools—teachers, administrators, students, and university alike. A prominent example of this social equality included issues of gender inequality in schools. Social equality and faith in the experience of teachers were exemplified by the collaborative effort that developed the curriculum and pedagogical methods of the Dewey School. Dewey’s statement that he was “constantly getting ideas from her” shows the breadth of Young’s influence.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the productive collaboration between Young and Dewey was to come to an end with the end of the Dewey School. She eventually became the superintendent of the Chicago school system, while Dewey moved onto his last University position in New York City at Columbia where he would remain for the rest of his life.

Exit Chicago. The conflict ending Dewey’s work at the University of Chicago started with University President Harper’s worries over funding the experimental school. Young was able to assuage some of these worries, as she had earned Harper’s respect as a result of her stellar reputation as a principal among Chicago teachers. The conflict over funding did nothing to help the relationship between Dewey and Harper, who wanted to keep Rockefeller happy—a somewhat difficult task with Rockefeller monitoring the use of his money at the University of Chicago. Dewey viewed his laboratory worth funding, just like any other laboratory, but Harper pushed for the Dewey School to be supported by tuition and donations. Harper soon acquired another elementary school for the University of Chicago, whose explicit purpose included teacher training; this was Colonel Francis Parker’s school. Parker’s school had a similar approach to that of the Dewey School in using hands-on pedagogy. Funding from yet another philanthropist—Anita McCormick Blaine—further complicated the merger of the Dewey School and Parker School. Dewey, intending to smooth over tensions of rival schools at the same University suggested the combination of his and Parker’s schools. The teachers of Parker’s schools objected to Chipman Dewey’s headship—she had, before the two schools merging, been quite critical of the Parker school. Harper, intending to resolve these issues made a deal with the school’s patron, Blaine, and the school’s teachers by assuring them that Chipman Dewey would step down at the year’s end. When this was communicated to Chipman at that year’s end without forewarning, both she and Dewey resigned from the school and the University of Chicago.

⁷³ John T. McManis, *Ella Flagg Young and a Half-Century of the Chicago Public Schools*, (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1916), 102-103 as cited in Lagemann, “Experimenting with Education,” 174.

⁷⁴ Lagemann, “Experimenting with Education,” 176.

⁷⁵ Dewey in McManis, *Ella Flagg Young*, 120; as cited in Lagemann, “Experimenting with Education,” 177

Dewey quickly received an offer from Columbia, and accepted, despite the attempts by Harper to retain his star philosopher and internationally renowned educator.⁷⁶

Dewey's time at Chicago primarily represents the culmination of his contribution to educational philosophy. In fact, Dewey wrote *Democracy and Education* based on his time at the University of Chicago.⁷⁷ While he would go on to write *Experience and Education* twenty-two years later after *Democracy and Education*, it mostly represented a rebuke to both traditional and progressive education—the latter of which incorrectly claimed to follow Dewey's educational philosophy.⁷⁸ The situated context in terms of time, politics, and economics provides an excellent lens in which to view the Dewey School. The Pullman Strike, a clash between capital and labor in the same city that housed the University of Chicago; a center of post-laissez-faire thought, and yet still one in which an inevitable pressure existed to not entirely push against their massive source of funding in Rockefeller. Dewey, for one, did not continue publicly speaking and teaching in the same manner in which he did at the University of Michigan—he “vented his radical spleen only in his private correspondence.”⁷⁹ The only evidence of Dewey's views that ran contrary to those espoused by capitalists would be a thorough examination of the industrial democracy promoted by the curriculum at the Dewey School.⁸⁰ The Hull House and its founder provided inspiration for Dewey. In seeing the sociological laboratory, Dewey had proof of concept for his eventual philosophical laboratory. Jane Addams and Dewey's collegial and intellectual friendship paid dividends in Dewey's view of the reconciliation of those with oppositional value systems. Opposites that grow closer by way of mutual arbitration and communication—sentiments one can derive from reading Dewey's writings on morals.⁸¹ From the Dewey School came the bulk of Dewey's philosophy of education and philosophy.⁸² The collaborative development of the curricula demonstrate the pragmatism central to his thought—the idea of inquiry, of using the scientific method providing the guiding theory, and the collaborative work between the teachers, University experts, Alice Chipman Dewey, and Ella Flagg Young influencing ongoing improvements to methods of inquiry and teaching. The theory influencing teaching practices which further informed the theory is an ongoing cycle of negotiation and improvement. This praxis (informed action) represents a perfect example of the pragmatic ideal of theory influencing action, the practice, what happens in the real world. One cannot overstate the importance of Chipman and Young to the success of the Dewey School and Dewey's eventual philosophy, but especially that of Young. While Chipman was critical to the realization of his ideas coming into practice as a school, Young's experience and skill as an education, in addition to her intellectual prowess helped to shape Dewey's educational philosophy.

⁷⁶ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 322; 331-333. Dewey made it known that his departure was a result of multiple conflicts between he and Harper, not just due to his wife's dismissal. It seems that her dismissal was just the final cause which made previous issues finally untenable.

⁷⁷ Lagemann, "Experimenting with Education," 180-181

⁷⁸ John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (Indianapolis, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938).

⁷⁹ Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats," 411. Recall, that at the University of Michigan he spoke much more plainly about laborers finding self-realization in their work—closer to a socialistic form of thinking than the prevailing spirit of the times: siding with capital over labor. This can be found in *Democracy and Education* in Dewey's discussion of "Vocational Education," 370-374.

⁸⁰ See Westbrook, "Schools for Industrial Democrats," for a more nuanced analysis of this particular interpretation.

⁸¹ See Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 414-417, for example—a section entitled "The Social and the Moral."

⁸² Some of Dewey's thoughts central to the connection between philosophy and education can be found here: *Democracy and Education*, 382-384. These pages are found within the chapter entitled "Philosophy of Education."

Conclusion

Dewey's growth as a philosopher, and subsequently as an educational philosopher, cannot be tied to any one period of his life. Burlington provided the early idealism and interest in philosophy—the idea of the connectivity of knowledge, much like the ideas the biology textbook and the way knowledge was conceived of at the University of Vermont by the Vermont Transcendentalists. The early disinterest in school, contrasting with life outside of school, provided an example of what education could be for children. While at Johns Hopkins and Michigan, one can see the change from Transcendentalism to Hegelianism and then to an early form of Pragmatism. During that time, one can see the growing social engagement and need for social activism in meeting with other social activists and reformers. Dewey's marriage to Alice Chipman, as well as his childhood with two parents who believed in being socially involved, undoubtedly influenced his growing engagement with social reform. Finally, the transformative time at Chicago: the initial experience with the Pullman Strike and Jane Addams' remarkable reaction to that conflict, helping to shape the future ideals of democracy which Dewey espoused; the famous Hull House, a proof of concept for the Dewey School; the collaboration among teachers to develop a remarkable model for what education could be. In sum, or perhaps Dewey would say 'in reflection,' these experiences inform the birth of an educational philosophy as "philosophy is the theory of education as a deliberately conducted practice."⁸³

Tegan W. Nusser (tnusser@ksu.edu) is a graduate research assistant in the College of Education at Kansas State University and a mathematics teacher at Wamego High School in Wamego, KS. Follow him on Twitter @TeganNusser

⁸³ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 387.