John Dewey’s Vision(s) for Interdisciplinary Social Studies

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For over a century, social studies educators have drawn upon the works of philosopher John Dewey to justify an interdisciplinary vision for the field. This manuscript explores the intellectual context that engendered Dewey’s pedagogical vision, outlines how and why Dewey organized his interdisciplinary curriculum at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, and traces how Dewey expanded his pedagogy in the 1920s and 1930s to include the interdisciplinary study of social and political issues in the classroom. The author argues that Dewey’s interdisciplinary pedagogy is best appreciated through a developmental and contingent framework.

Key words: curriculum, democratic, John Dewey, child-centered, interdisciplinary, Lab School, social issues

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, leading social studies educators such as Harold Rugg (1947), Maurice Hunt and Lawrence Metcalf (1955), Donald Oliver and James Shaver (1966), William Wraga (1993), Walter Parker (1996), and Steven Thornton (2005) have drawn upon the work of John Dewey to justify an interdisciplinary approach to the social studies. Prior to the work of these scholars, the 1916 Committee on Social Studies cited Dewey in support of its suggested interdisciplinary courses, Community Civics and the Problems of Democracy (Fallace 2009; Jorgensen, 2012). Dewey’s work, thus, has been instrumental in the interdisciplinary approach to the social studies since the founding of the field. Interdisciplinary study was important to Dewey throughout his long career but, there was a developmental aspect to his thinking on the topic that has been overlooked by many scholars who cite him (Fallace, 2012). To understand Dewey’s approach to disciplines and interdisciplinary study fully, we must reconcile Dewey’s earlier views on how the disciplines of history and geography were used at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (1896-1904) with his later writings on the importance of addressing social issues in the classroom through interdisciplinary study (1923-1938). I am constructing a consistency of views that Dewey never fully outlined. Dewey viewed his own thought in contingent terms; his ideas were never intended to be internally consistent, rather each idea was introduced in the context of a particular issue and period. As Dewey admitted to a colleague in 1931, “I’ve worked out my views rather piecemeal and not always with consistency in detail” (Hickman, 1931/2005, rec 08009). The consistency of Dewey’s thoughts on the disciplines can be found in the piecemeal nature of his career, development, and philosophy. Dewey was consistent in that he consistently approached knowledge and problems in a contingent and developmental manner. A historical and contingent approach to Dewey’s work not only provides a more accurate depiction of changes in Dewey’s thinking over time, but it may accurately reflect his views on the disciplines themselves.

Dewey considered disciplines as representing a specific form of thinking that emerged at a particular point in the history of the human race. Disciplines emerged during the latest,
modern, scientific stage of human development (Fallace, 2011b). He believed, therefore, that disciplinary study ought to be introduced to students only after they had mastered pre-disciplinary forms of thinking. In Some Stages of Logical Thought, Dewey (1900) outlined the universal stages of psychological and sociological growth that reflected the history of the human race, as well as the development of the individual. First, Dewey (1900/1976a) argued communities and individuals established fixed beliefs, customs and laws (stage one). They then incorporated these beliefs through discussions, dialogues and judgments (stage two). They next incorporated these discussions into a positivistic science of induction and deduction (stage three). They finally incorporated positivistic science into differentiated sciences based on contingency and inference (stage four). The last contingency stage produced the modern disciplines and the sub-disciplines within them, and each discipline had its own socially-constructed symbolic forms of knowledge and communication. The modernist period was not only the stage of the emergence of democracy, but also the stage of the modern, disciplinary specialist. So, Dewey identified specific stages of growth for both the child and society and sought to align these developmental schemes with one another. For Dewey, disciplinary thinking represented the highest psychological and sociological stage, not because disciplinary thinking was inherently superior to earlier forms of thinking, but because disciplinary thinking necessarily built upon pre-disciplinary kinds of thinking in the history of the human race and development of the history of the individual. Disciplines, Dewey (1901/1976b) wrote, “did not grow out of professional, but of human, needs” (p. 303). Disciplines were more complex forms of the same kind of inquiry and thinking in which children naturally engaged and that which our cultural ancestors had already undertaken. As a result, disciplines were simply outgrowths of previous, natural modes of human inquiry. He argued, therefore, that students should not be introduced to disciplined inquiry until the previous stages of inquiry had been mastered. Because both pre-disciplinary and disciplinary inquiry emerged out of attempts to solve real world problems, Dewey’s consistently criticized disciplinary experts for not using their knowledge to inform present issues and problems.

My account of Dewey’s approach to disciplines and interdisciplinary study includes three sections. The first section provides some historical context for the formative years of Dewey’s philosophy of education to demonstrate that interdisciplinary study was already common in the social sciences and among reform-minded educators in the early 20th century. Second, I demonstrate how the social occupations and cultural and industrial history of the human race provided the underlying conceptual framework for the curriculum at the University of Chicago Laboratory (Lab) School, where Dewey first implemented his pedagogical vision. Dewey’s curriculum at the Lab School was best characterized as pre-disciplinary study, because Dewey sought to introduce children to early versions of the concrete problems with which pre-modern man struggled in order to demonstrate how disciplinary knowledge emerged organically out of these initial struggles and concerns. Third, I outline how Dewey’s expanded his approach to pedagogy in the 1920s and 1930s to argue on behalf of addressing social issues in the classroom. Dewey’s post-1923 work was explicitly interdisciplinary and included proposals to extend the social studies beyond even history and the social sciences. Divorced from the concrete prescriptions he had worked out empirically in Chicago, Dewey’s post-1923 interdisciplinary vision was overly ambitious and vague.

Throughout his career, nevertheless, Dewey was consistent in his assertion that Kindergarten-12 instruction ought to draw upon, but not necessarily work through, the individual
disciplines because expert specialization was best addressed in college after previous pre-disciplinary forms of thinking had been mastered. Even at the post-secondary level, Dewey consistently expressed contempt for the disciplinary expert who could not employ his or his knowledge towards the solving of present day issues and problems.

Dewey in Context

Dewey’s vision for interdisciplinary social studies did not emerge in a vacuum. His focus on applying multiple disciplines to a specific area of inquiry was aligned with the leading scholars of the period. Intellectual historian Morton White famously characterized the work of leading progressive era scholars such as Dewey, James Harvey Robinson, Charles Beard, and Thorstein Veblen as a revolt against formalism. White (1947) argued this ideological shift was characterized by two elements: historicism and cultural organicism. White defined historicism as “the attempt to explain facts by reference to earlier facts,” and he defined organicism as “an attempt to find explanations and relevant material in social sciences other than the one which is primarily under investigation” (p. 12). Drawing on the work of Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution emphasized contingency, adjustment and change, leading scholars of the period argued that the nation’s character and social structure had shifted as a result of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. Some of the most influential and exciting interpretations of the early 20th century drew upon historicism and multiple disciplines to support their theses in support of social reform. In the Theory of the Leisure Class economist Thorstein Veblen (1899) drew upon history and anthropology to argue the socioeconomic inequalities in the present were historical and cultural outcomes of events occurring centuries earlier. In The Frontier in American History, historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1921) drew upon sociology, psychology, and geography to support his theory that the development of the western frontier had profoundly shaped American ideals and character. In An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States, historian Charles Beard (1913) drew upon sociology and economic analysis to depict the founding fathers as politically and socially conservative. During Dewey’s formative years, William James authored major works in psychology (Principles of Psychology, 1890), education (Talks to Teachers on Psychology, 1907a), philosophy (Pragmatism, 1907b) and religion (Will to Believe, 1897; The Varieties of Religious Experiences, 1902). Dewey was not unique in his generation when he also authored major works in psychology (How We Think, 1910/1997a), education (School and Society, 1899/1956), ethics (Ethics, Dewey & Tufts, 1908/1978), politics (The Public and Its Problems, 1927/1954), religion (The Quest for Certainty, 1929/2008a), and philosophy (Logic: A Theory of Inquiry, 1938/1986). These interdisciplinary scholars agreed that the philosophical and social assumptions of the nineteenth century, which focused on individualism and competition, were no longer adequate for the new century, which demanded cooperation, professional expertise, and reform. The solving of emerging social problems involved the reconciliation of theory and practice through interdisciplinary study and the application of ideas to the real world (Kloppenberg, 1986; White, 1946).

Dewey was the not the first or only educator to suggest the interdisciplinary arrangement of content in the curriculum, especially for younger students. The U.S. followers of German pedagogue, Johann Herbart also employed what was called correlated courses of study, in which the disciplines were aligned with one another in an interdisciplinary and student-centered way (McMurray, 1946). Although Dewey (1895/1972) disagreed with the Herbartians on many issues, he praised the Herbartians for aiming their theory “at unification (organization) both in
method and in curriculum” (p. 297). Additional interdisciplinary prescriptions between 1900 and 1958 included core curriculum, curricular integration, and curriculum fusion. Fusion referred to the integration of several related disciplines into one course, such as the Community Civics and Problems of Democracy courses recommended by the 1916 Committee on Social Studies. Correlation, on the other hand, respected disciplinary boundaries but related bodies of knowledge to one another, especially the contents of English and social studies courses. The core curriculum integrated all the subjects of the school and focused upon a real world issue or problem (Mofatt, 1950).

The subject of social studies was most affected by the core movement between 1900 and 1958 because, as educational researcher Edwin Carr (1956) explained, “the goals of the core curriculum demand a social studies framework or at least the teaching of a large number of social studies concepts” (p. 426). A survey of schools that had adopted core programs confirmed that 72% of courses established through a core framework included social studies content (Wright, 1949). The impact of interdisciplinary study on social studies classrooms was only modest. A 1959 bibliographical review of research on social studies curriculum and methodology for the previous decade demonstrated a continued concern and focus on single discipline-centered instruction. The review listed only 19 articles on Fusion and Correlation compared with more traditional material such as 28 articles on World History, 83 articles on International Understanding and 151 articles on Geography and the Social Studies (Samford, 1959). Between 1900 and 1958 Dewey was often cited as a reference for arranging content in an interdisciplinary manner, but he did not invent the idea, nor was he the only educator supporting it (Fallace, 2009; 2011a).

Although correlated, core, and fusion classes made a minimum impact on the classroom, the interdisciplinary arrangement of content remains a major component of the progressive approach to education to this day. Scholars often cite Dewey as the major theorist behind the idea (see Kilpatrick, 1939; Rugg, 1947; Tanner, 1997) because interdisciplinary study was a consistent theme in his writings on education, and he was himself the consummative interdisciplinary writer. Viewing Dewey’s work holistically instead of historically and contingently obscures how Dewey’s views on interdisciplinary study evolved and expanded over the course of his career.

Social Occupations

Dewey’s first thoughts on an interdisciplinary curriculum were worked out at his experimental Lab School at the University of Chicago. In accordance with Dewey’s four-stage developmental theory, the Lab School curriculum was organized around social occupations arranged as a carefully selected reenacted history of the human race (Fallace 2011b). Regarding the selection of content, Dewey (1897) explained the “type phases of historical development may be selected which will exhibit as through a telescope, the essential constituents of the existing order” (p. 21). Regarding the organization of this content, Dewey insisted:

- a study of still simpler forms of hunting, nomadic and agricultural life in the beginnings of civilization; a study of the effects of the introduction of iron, iron tools, and so forth, serves to reduce the existing complexity to its simple forms (p. 21).

The idea was that the content presented to students would not be the products of disciplinary experts (i.e. disconnected and predetermined facts), but rather content would be presented as immediate problems, which also happened to have disciplinary significance in the future. After
students had mastered the thinking and appropriate content for each stage, they would eventually arrive at the modern stage, which included the introduction of the techniques of the disciplinary expert in high school or college. Dewey believed, contrarily, that students would only appreciate the techniques of the disciplinary expert if these methods were viewed as a natural progression from prior social inquiries. “With increasing mental maturity, and corresponding specialization which naturally accompanies it,” Dewey explained, “these various instrumentalities may become ends in themselves” (p. 25). The study of the disciplines of history, geography, economics, and political science as their own ends—as an abstract means of understanding and appreciating the value of the past and present—was a product of the final stage of development. Dewey argued living through (or experiencing) the social occupations of the human race represented the key to appreciating the inherent value in the final, modernist, scientific stage. Dewey (1897) insisted that the content of mature disciplinary thought should not be taught directly during prior stages. Students would only appreciate the present fully after previous stages had been “adequately lived through” (p. 25).

Dewey’s lab school teachers translated these ideas into practice. For example, two teachers writing about the school’s industrial curriculum, reported how they approached a social occupation as simultaneously historical, pre-disciplinary, and problem-based:

The study of the hammer is a good example of what may be done in this line. It can be traced back from the tool in the boy’s hand through various stages to the rock in the hand of the savage. Through such study the child unconsciously learns much of the history of the race (Langley and Butler, 1900, p. 377).

Students at the Lab School relived the human race’s experience through social occupations such as cooking, gardening, and construction that reenacted the pre-disciplinary stages of mankind. Lab School teacher, Laura Runyon, confirmed how Dewey’s approach was employed in the curriculum at the famous school. As Runyon (1906) explained, rather than basing the elementary curriculum upon the biographies of famous people, as many schools were doing at the time, the subject matter of the Lab School curriculum was based upon “new problems… through whom [the student] is living out, in the sense of through race development. Progress, a new discovery, a new invention, something which helps on, is the constant revelation” (p. 16). The early years at the Lab School, Runyon continued, were devoted to “the discovery of one thing after another which makes life comfortable and which the child dimly realizes he is the inheritor of” (p. 16). In this manner, students did not take the intellectual and physical inventions of the present for granted. Learning took place, Runyon insisted, when students repeated the race experience, “for [the student] is primitive man, striving to find out by tracing how he may control nature, and in this experimentation discover nature’s laws” (p. 27). The students were discovering first-hand the issues, problems, and activities that eventually gave rise to the disciplines themselves.

In The Child and Curriculum, Dewey (1902/1956) clearly explained his skepticism of introducing young children to the disciplines. The child comes to the classroom, Dewey asserted, with “an integral”, “total” worldview, “held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along” (p. 5). Disciplinary subject matter presented information “torn away from their original place in experience and rearranged with reference to some general principle” (p. 6). When subject-matter was “arranged in most logical,…external ready-made fashion,” Dewey continued, it failed to connect with young children (p. 26). The job of the teacher was to present the products of the disciplines precisely at the point in which the
subject matter, in its embryonic form, aligned with the students’ interests, not as predetermined answers, but as questions linked to particular problems in the history of the human race and development of the individual.

Dewey’s early curricular vision did not suggest the discussion of public issues and current problems. He espoused the application of cooperative learning and problem-solving to historic and geographic content, but, present day issues were not addressed. Dewey designed his curriculum to prepare students to think critically about and to transform their evolving democratic society, but the students at the Lab School never engaged in open-ended, interdisciplinary discussions about public life. A reader of Runyon’s (1906) account of the Lab School’s history curriculum for the intermediate years (as well as Mayhew and Edward’s 1936/2007 account of the school) would likely be struck by how much specific content was transmitted to students yet, none of it was related to discussion of public issues or problems. Runyon (1906) admitted that beyond the third grade, “topics studied do not differ greatly from the usual selection of topics in United States History” (p. 19). The terms social issue, controversial issue, and or social problem do not appear anywhere in School and Society (1899/1956), The Child and the Curriculum (1902/1956), How We Think (1910/1997a), and Democracy and Education (1916/1997b), works based on Dewey’s work at the Lab School. Although Dewey (1916/1997b) made passing references to students being “in touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement,” he did not clearly state that this content should be addressed through student-centered discussion or deliberation (p. 318). After 1923, he began to consider the importance of discussing social issues in the classroom through an interdisciplinary framework.

**Social Problems**

While at the University of Chicago, Dewey identified the significance of history and geography throughout his writings on education. The cultural history of the human race played a central role in organizing the interdisciplinary curriculum at his Lab School. In Democracy and Education (1916/1997b) Dewey identified history and geography as specific disciplines addressing them in separate chapters. Prior to 1923, Dewey never mentioned anything about addressing political issues or current events in the classroom. Dewey’s failure to endorse current events in the classroom prior to 1923 put him somewhat at odds with the proponents of the social studies.

The social studies as a coherent educational reform movement began with the publication of the report of the Committee on Social Studies in 1916. The report cited Dewey’s work repeatedly to justify the new scope and sequence of history and social sciences courses it recommended. While Dewey had no direct relationship to the Committee (or to the larger Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education of which it was part), his colleague and friend, historian James Harvey Robinson was an influential member of the social studies group (Fallace, 2009). One major suggestion from the Committee was the creation of an interdisciplinary senior capstone course called Problems of Democracy. As the course’s title suggested, the class was designed to center on enduring public issues and current events, topics Dewey had never explicitly endorsed. In a 1923 essay entitled, The School as a Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children, Dewey fundamentally expanded his views on how to teach history, geography, and social studies in relation to citizenship. He seemed to have finally endorsed the social studies movement by outlining the significance of addressing current events and politics in the classroom. Dewey suggested social
class divisions and conflicts should be discussed openly with students. This was Dewey’s first and most overt endorsement of the interdisciplinary discussion of social issues in the classroom. Dewey (1923/1983a) insisted, “our instruction in history and geography and our social studies should be intellectually more honest, they should bring students into gradual contact with the actual realities of contemporary life” (p. 156). This was the first time Dewey used the term social studies in his writing. The students at the Lab School had studied the social conditions of the present in a broad sense, but they had not studied current events or specific social conditions. Dewey was now stating students should indeed study the present.

To be “good citizens in the broadest sense,” Dewey (1923/1983b) explained in an essay published the same year, politics should be addressed directly in the classroom and teachers should have the courage to do so (p. 159). “The political aspect is an important one, and one that is increasingly important for the public schools of the country to emphasize” (p. 159). Dewey implored teachers to move beyond the mere mechanics of how government worked to address the specifics of the larger social problems facing the nation. Dewey recognized there would be resistance to evaluating American society critically with students but, he insisted, teachers were not taking on their full responsibility if they failed to do so. Teachers should not take sides on political and social issues, but provide a forum in which the facts could be explored and considered. Dewey suggested teachers would gain greater respect in their local communities if they became more engaged with the social realities surrounding them. “We need to develop in the coming generation a much more discriminating judgment about political problems and plans,” Dewey reasoned, “if our public schools are going to train our people so that they will really make our democratic experiment a complete and adequate success” (p. 163).

During the 1920s, many intellectuals, such as journalist Walter Lippman, expressed disillusionment with progressive reform (1922, 1927). Intellectuals were particularly dismayed that many leading progressive scholars and politicians were drawn into support for World War I. In the decade after the war, Dewey was virtually alone in his continued commitment to progressive reform and the expansion of democratic means (Kloppenberg, 1986; Lasch, 1965). For his educational vision to be realized, Dewey needed to have students engage more directly with contemporary public issues. Dewey’s expanded educational vision came to fruition in The Public and Its Problems, a book elaborating his critique of what he called Lippman’s oligarchical view of democracy. “The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses,” Dewey (1927/1954) insisted, “The essential need [of democracy], …is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion” (p. 208). Dewey argued that improving democracy primarily involved the “freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions” (p. 208). The burden of creating inquisitive citizens skilled in deliberation and debate fell on teachers and schools. Dewey again endorsed a curriculum directly addressing emerging social problems as they occurred, so students could be taught how to approach them with reflection and insight. As Dewey explained:

inquiry must be as nearly contemporaneous as possible; otherwise it is only of antiquarian interest. Knowledge of history is evidently necessary for connectedness of knowledge. But history which is not brought down close to the actual scene of events leaves a gap and exercises influence upon the formation of judgments about public interest only by guesswork about intervening events. Here, only too conspicuously, is a limitation of the existing social sciences. Their material comes too late, too far after the event, to enter effectively into the
formation of public opinion about the immediate public concern and what is to be done about it (Dewey, 1924/1956, p. 179).

Note Dewey’s insistence on the interdisciplinary connectedness of knowledge and the potential irrelevancy of history and the social sciences to emerging issues, if the disciplines were not approached in the correct manner. Throughout his career, Dewey had emphasized the need for history and geography to speak to present conditions. He was mostly referring to the general conditions of the development of modernity, science, and democracy. Not until the 1920s, did Dewey begin to speak specifically about the need for the social studies curriculum to address current political issues and conditions directly. Dewey’s new emphasis on current issues was necessarily tied to interdisciplinary study. As a result, Dewey asked teachers and students to do what most social scientists were reluctant to do: apply the knowledge of the past directly to current issues as they unraveled and to encourage open discussion about how to solve them. He chided the disciplinary specialists for failing to address social issues and making their work more relevant.

In later years, Dewey’s proposals for a curriculum grounded in the social and economic realities of the present became more forceful and direct. The events of the Great Depression pushed Dewey to place even greater focus on the issues of the present. In 1933 in the essay Education and Our Social Problems, Dewey (1933/2008b) endorsed the “newly aroused interest of teachers in basic social problems” (p. 128). The next year in his essay Education for a Changing Social Order, Dewey issued perhaps his most direct and specific appeal for curriculum reform of his entire career:

What is required is something fundamental by way of a pretty complete overhauling of the curriculum from the fifth grade onwards through high school. 

The whole course of study should be oriented toward the world of the present, not toward the past, and its great aim should be to make those who go out from the school conscious of the forces that are changing the condition of life for everybody (Dewey, 1934/2008c, p. 164).

Again, Dewey’s new vision based on the world of the present and basic social problems was quite different from how social studies was taught at the Lab School, although he specifically aimed his new vision at fifth grade and above.

Along with his proposals for greater engagement with social issues, Dewey began to emphasize interdisciplinary study more directly. In an essay on progressive schools Dewey (1933/2008d) explained, “Something more is needed than simply the addition of one subject after another. The new subjects should be introduced with some relation to each other and the ways in which they operate and integrate in the world outside of school” (p. 151). Dewey (1934/2008c) later complained that “At present the curricula of the schools are so centrifugal, so dispersed and overloaded, so lacking in intellectual organization and unity of purpose, that unification is needed on every ground” (p. 168). He suggested the unity be arranged around “whatever is relevant to present needs” (p. 168). The term present needs, which had been used by the 1916 Committee on Social Studies as a rationale for its suggested reforms, was likely not very helpful to teachers and administrator who were seeking specific guidance from the nation’s most respected educator (Fallace, 2009). What exactly did relevance to present needs mean? It implied a flexible and responsive curriculum, but it also left a lot of space in which teachers could introduce trivial and nonessential information.
In 1938 Dewey addressed the social studies directly for the first and only time. His message was brief but provocative. Dewey (1938/2008e) argued the idea of the social studies should be expanded beyond history and the social sciences to “literature, fine arts, and mathematics” because any “vital comprehension of existing economic and political issues demands insight into processes and operations that can be grasped only through understanding of fundamental physical and chemical operations and laws” (p. 339). Thus, the social studies needed to be expanded into any and all subjects, as long as they relate to the studies’ “social origin and function” (p. 340). Dewey again targeted the irrelevancy of the academic disciplines as they were currently conceived, complaining universities produced experts and specialists, but these experts failed to “view their special skills and knowledge in connection with social conditions, movements and problems” (p. 340). Democratic citizens, Dewey insisted, needed to be able to apply their social studies knowledge to present day social issues, even when scholars were reluctant to do so.

Conclusion

Dewey consistently argued on behalf of an interdisciplinary approach to the social studies, but his rationale for interdisciplinary study changed over time. At the Lab School, when he was working with elementary age children, Dewey argued on behalf of organizing the curriculum around the historical reenactment of social occupations corresponding with his four-stage developmental theory. After 1923, he argued for the discussion of pressing social, political, and economic issues in the classroom. There are two ways to fit these two interdisciplinary visions together. First, we can assume Dewey’s social occupations approach was intended for elementary age students, while the social issues approach was intended for middle and high school students. That is, we can simply view the two visions in a sequential and developmental manner. Dewey stated his social issues vision was intended for fifth grade and above. This would accord with Dewey’s four stages of sociological and psychological development espoused earlier in his career (1895-1916). Dewey stopped referencing his stage-theory in the 1920s, precisely at the point at which he starting outlining his vision for the discussion of social issues in the classroom (see Fallace, 2012). A second way to reconcile the two visions, therefore, is to assume his later approach to social issues somehow negated or revised his earlier focus on social occupations. In accordance with his contingent approach to knowledge, Dewey updated his pedagogical approach to meet the needs of a new social and political context. Both the developmental interpretation and the revisionist interpretation to Dewey’s vision for interdisciplinary study would be consistent with his philosophy, so, it is difficult to determine which approach he intended. There seems to be more evidence pointing to the developmental approach of having students study social occupations up until fifth grade and then having students study social issues after that year.

Dewey only once explicitly approached the entire curriculum from early childhood to college, in a 1901 essay called The Educational Situation, which contained specific sections on elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schooling (Dewey, 1901/1976b, pp. 262, 283,301). In this essay, Dewey reiterated his commitment to interdisciplinary study in each section. In the elementary section, he argued: “The unity and wholeness of the child’s development can be realized only in a corresponding unity and continuity of school conditions” (p. 269). In the secondary section, he insisted that educators ought to devote themselves “to tracing threads of connection which unite the different specialized branches into a coherent and consecutive whole” (p. 286). In the college section, he asserted: “History, sociology, political science, and political
The economy may certainly claim to stand for the humanities...Yet they are offspring of the scientific method... The body of knowledge is indeed one” (p. 305). Considering that Dewey authored this essay in 1901 when he was still running his Lab School, it is not surprising that his prescriptions became more vague as he worked his way up the academic ladder to each stage of schooling. Dewey demonstrated a clear commitment to connecting the various subjects to each other and to the students’ developmental stage. He believed that the unity of experience artificially severed by the academic subjects needed to be restored at all levels of education.

Overall, two recurring themes emerge from Dewey’s interdisciplinary pedagogy that are still of use to social studies educators today. First, Dewey asked educators to reconnect every answer— that is, every piece of knowledge— to the original question engendering it. The academic subjects often sort, categorize, and present lists of facts and answers in textbooks, but this is not how these facts originally emerged. He reminded us, instead, facts emerged from real world people trying to solve real problems. The job of the social studies educator, according to Dewey, is to recreate these original discoveries for and with students; facts should be introduced and related to their questions, not simply presented as a list of answers in a textbook. Second, Dewey insisted the disciplines of history, economics, geography, political science, and sociology are just different ways to describe the same organic, holistic world. These disciplinary divisions are not necessarily inauthentic or false, but are relatively recent and contingent developments in the history of the human race. Dewey argued all disciplines more or less share the same form of scientific inquiry, and they all describe the same social world. Teachers, as a result, may make explicit connections among the disciplines in order to restore the organic wholeness often distorted by the separation of the world into different subjects.

References


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