

# Cultural Heritage and John Dewey's Philosophy of Education in a Democratic Community

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**Abstract.** John Dewey's philosophy of education has addressed a number of issues that present-day educational and cultural institutions continue to face in their quest for relevance. This paper focuses on some implications of Dewey's philosophy of experience which he considered foundational for any organized educational activity in a democratic community. The three major writings discussed in reverse chronological order are *Experience and Education*, *Art as Experience* and *Democracy and Education*. The paper concludes by suggesting that Dewey's philosophy of education provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation to contemporary studies and policies addressing the role of cultural heritage in a democratic society.

**Key words:** John Dewey, cultural heritage, experience, art, democracy.

Contemporary cultural studies emphasizing what Laurajane Smith referred to as “the discursive nature of heritage” (2006, 11) have revealed how the construction of values emerged historically through complex relations between knowledge and power. In this paradigm, the educational role of literature, artworks, cultural artifacts and institutions, notably museums, has for a long time reflected stable cultural identities, which had to be bequeathed to future generations. As various expressions of nationalism, patriotism, and civic allegiances developed against a backdrop of trust in the objectivity of history, major European museums were established following the model of the Louvre and became “symbols of, and containers for, national patrimonies” (Abt 2006, 129). Nowadays, the dominant approach has challenged the value distinctions between high and popular culture, considering the rather fluid nature of heritage as a diversity of modes of expression through which communities and individuals transmit what is meaningful to them. In particular, acknowledging Intangible Cultural Heritage as a resource for maintaining cultural diversity in a globalized world has drawn attention to the living nature of heritage and, as a consequence, to new modes of experiencing and transmitting it.

The influence of this paradigm shift on heritage education that takes place in schools and cultural institutions alike cannot be overlooked. How schools, universities, museums and cultural centers of non-formal learning are supposed to educate generations about heritage is far from obvious, once the authority of traditions and specialized expertise have been called into question. Turning to John Dewey for fresh guidelines may be helpful, not only because he was convinced that every philosopher should be deeply interested in education, but also because, as Alan Ryan notes in his biographical study, Dewey “exemplified the ‘philosopher as sage,’” according to whom “the division of labor had no place within philosophy itself,” (1995, 22). This drove him to always think of education in relation to science, religion, the arts, and especially to social progress and democracy. From the wide range of topics he investigated, which may provide important insights into how to

rethink the role of educational and cultural institutions, this paper focuses on the relation between experience, heritage and democracy in Dewey's philosophy of education. It brings to light a few ideas which may offer a theoretical foundation to contemporary studies and policies on cultural heritage, by drawing attention to the integrative mindset which was Dewey's hallmark.

### I. EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCES

An inquiry into the educational role of museums from the perspective of Dewey's philosophy of education, which he believed was "an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect of the difficulties of contemporary social life." (2004, 356) needs to adopt the postulate of "the organic connection of education with experience" (1997, 74). This was, in his view, not only a matter of calibrating content to engage the participation of those educated or, by analogy, museum visitors. In fact, as stressed in *Experience and Education* (1938), merely increasing interactivity ran the risk of producing improvised, though entertaining, learning and, unless integrated into a coherent philosophy of education, may defeat the purpose. Nowadays, many museums digitize entire collections, allowing for open source content, downloading and editing options for innumerable users. This may help stimulate interest in heritage, support lifelong learning, as well as remove financial barriers for the general public and specialized researchers. At the same time, it may foster attitudes of cultural consumerism and shallow understanding of heritage, despite all the information made available. In the long run, it may also encourage the public to expect "that their experiences will be customized to meet their own particular needs and interests," (Janes 2009, 83) an aspiration not only difficult to fulfill, due to some degree of institutional inertia, but also likely to affect the "museum as agora" (Janes 2009, 82) idealization, due to the tension between marketplace values and versions of the collective good, which museums could, in theory, address.

If museums are to provide educative experiences which are "conducive to growth" (Dewey 1997, 46), the content of the collections, the way exhibits are arranged, presented and promoted to the public, the philosophy and functioning of the institution, its complementarity with formal education and integration into a particular social landscape must be harmonized. Reflecting on the mission of progressive schools, Dewey warned of the danger of a curriculum that marginalizes the past, in radical opposition to traditional education, and strongly defended the idea that "the achievements of the past provide the only means at command for understanding the present." (1997, 77) His was a worldview perfectly compatible with an anti-elitist stance, yet insistent on claiming that contemporary problems cannot be properly solved unless individuals understood how they came about. As a first and famous example, the experimental school he initiated in 1896 at the University of Chicago for children and teachers, also known as the Lab School, was meant to explore how the conjunction between theory and practice can be made fruitful in a pragmatist framework, where obtaining knowledge was considered a

continuous process of collaborative discovery. The Lab School had a holistic approach: cooking was also a means to initiate pupils into basic notions of chemistry, as well as into the history of culinary heritage and various social customs; science was important, but so was learning about weaving; visits to museums and study of artworks were not only about getting across notions of aesthetics, but also about raising awareness of the reality of social class and expressions of class differences (Durst 2010). As a second example, later in his career Dewey disagreed with Robert Maynard Hutchins, educational philosopher and president of the University of Chicago about the fact that the classics should form the basis of university education, which the latter saw mostly as a matter of cultivating the intellect. As Alan Ryan notes with regard to this episode, Dewey's main concern was with "Social engagement and social commitment," and this is what led him to strongly oppose the idea "that higher intellectual life must be protected from the contamination of practical life." (1995, 280)

Dewey's general framework was both experiential and socially-oriented; interest in the practical side of things was a consequence, not a principle. It understood education as interplay of social organization (and, to some extent, social control) and free individual expression. If successful, education could be an instrument for democratic socialization of individuals with different backgrounds, needs and capacities, helping them better know themselves and one another, and a process of intellectual, moral and emotional growth that comes about through experience. *Experience and Education* refers to two complementary criteria, continuity and interaction or "the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience." (1997, 44) Together, they may suggest the image of an ever-broader streambed for inner growth, and also that of the indispensable context to be considered:

The principle of continuity in its educational application means, nevertheless, that the future has to be taken into account at every stage of the educational process. This idea is easily misunderstood and is badly distorted in traditional education. Its assumption is, that by acquiring certain skills and by learning certain subjects which would be needed later (perhaps in college or perhaps in adult life) pupils are as a matter of course made ready for the needs and circumstances of the future. Now "preparation" is a treacherous idea. In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience. (Dewey 1997, 47)

This is a recurrent theme in the book, leading Dewey to the conclusion that the main mission of education is to instill the "desire to go on learning." (1997, 48) and refrain from stifling interest in life, curiosity for solving problems and framing new ones. Rote learning was not the only characteristic of traditional education to blame in this regard. In fact, the entire educational environment, the choice of standards assessing performance and good conduct, the degree of the educator's familiarity with the interests and backgrounds of those educated were as relevant then as they are now. Although in the case of museums, the lack of the educator as a central figure in Dewey's argument limits the analogy, it is not difficult to imagine or recall the passivity and boredom of visitors overwhelmed by

the information they had to absorb navigating their way through some museums. Indeed, Dewey's worries about the reductionism and dogmatism that characterized the debate between proponents of progressive and traditional education may apply to the museum setting as well. The predicament of many modern-day museums can be summarized as a quest for relevance, complicated by "the inertia of past practices" and "the uncritical adoption of methods, models and practices from the world of commerce." (Janes 2009, 14) For Dewey, the relevance of schools and, by extension, of heritage and museums, was indisputable in a conceptual framework linking education with democracy and social progress. The second criterion of experience, interaction, drives this point home by defining education as "essentially a social process." (Dewey 1997, 58) and a "transaction" (1997, 43) between an individual and the environment in which he forms a community with others.

As Ted Ansbacher argued, applying *Experience and Education* to the museum setting may raise awareness of the interaction between visitors and exhibits, which needs to generate an experience, and to the ways in which this experience can be assimilated. Consequently, a Deweyan postulate for enriching the educative experiences of museum visitors would read "What people *do* (or see, touch, hear, taste or smell) in an exhibition is a necessary precursor to whatever they feel and learn." (Ansbacher 1998, 39; emphasis in original)

Innovative display strategies and guided tours are ingredients, but not guarantees of genuine educative experiences. Another conclusion of the study is that careful planning of exhibitions along Dewey's recommendations would aim at anticipating a diverse set of learning outcomes considering at the same time that visitors enter the museum with different backgrounds and expectations. In the case of school groups, both the teacher and students need to prepare for the visit, and students need to be encouraged in formulating their own questions beforehand. If this habit is complemented by interactive activities made possible by the museum, it can provide "more sense of ownership" and "can help move social control to the students themselves." (Ansbacher 1998, 46) Two more questions raised by the study are: (i) how to make sense of this diversity and improve the quality of visitor experience, considering that this is a difficulty distinct from that of the educator dealing with more age-homogeneous, less multicultural groups; (ii) how to extend learning-by-doing, easier to apply in science museums, to other kind of museums. Not least, the balance between the educative and enjoyable aspects of visitor experiences needs to be carefully examined:

In attempting to make learning fun, for example, some exhibits have used pinball machines to present concepts of genetic inheritance or have rewarded visitors for correct answers by making funny noises. These types of exhibits may achieve the goal of relatively painless information transfer – a seemingly positive educational effect – but they introduce serious negative effects as well. Since the information has been *delivered* rather than *acquired* through inquiry, it has not engaged the visitor's own thinking. The result (which is also commonplace in schools) is that words may be learned, giving the appearance of knowledge, but understanding is not achieved. Visitors are denied that deeper satisfaction and instead receive the message that the material is inaccessible to them unless "sugar-coated." (Ansbacher 1998, 43; emphasis in original)

## II. AESTHETIC PERCEPTION AND THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE ARTS

Dewey's thoughts on artworks and aesthetic perception deserve special attention. This is not because they form the object of theoretical investigations strictly separate from his other writings but because they were articulated through the interaction of aesthetic theories, mainstream views on the arts in the American society of the thirties, and his critical analysis of capitalism. According to Alan Ryan, *Art as Experience* (1934), his major work in this field, is so deeply engaged with "the social role of the art", that Dewey could have safely chosen to name it "Art and Society" (1995, 249).

The opening chapter prepares the ground for a criticism of contemporary society by drawing attention to the negative effects of (i) identifying art with its material dimension, (ii) isolating artistic objects from their context of origin and how they impact experience, and (iii) giving credit to the distinction between art of high and low value, such as fine vs. applied arts, a fallacy of "the museum conception of art" (Dewey 1980, 6). We find these ideas as central themes of current contributions on heritage studies, along with criticism of hegemonic or authorized discourses of heritage, and the affirmation of heritage not as an object of conservation, but as a cultural practice, discourse or performance (Smith 2006). Similarly, Dewey's critique and explanation of the causes of the "compartmental conception of fine art" (1980, 8), the main one being that most European museums emerged at a time of nationalism and imperialism, is in accord with the critical assessment of museums as "repositories and manifestations of national identity and cultural achievement" (Smith 2006, 18). Dewey also remarked that, as an institution, they tended to conserve the past in an unfruitful way, a mindset he referred to also in *Experience and Education*, where he dismissed the duty of schools to ensure the transmission of the grand heritage from a generation to another as a proof of comfortable inertia.

The metamorphoses of museums in the context of capitalism when many *nouveaux riches* established themselves as patrons of the arts, and when due to the mechanization of industry artists were "less integrated than formerly in the normal flow of social services" (Dewey 1980, 9), provided him with interesting material for reflection. His "ambivalent attitude toward art museums" (Constantino 2004, 400) was a combination of criticism of the use of art as a status symbol by capitalist collectors, and of acknowledging the positive side, namely facilitating interaction with art for the working classes. His friendship and collaboration with Albert C. Barnes bears witness to his capacity for lifelong learning, as well as for gratitude. It was to him that Dewey dedicated *Art as Experience*, acknowledging "the great educational work carried on in the Barnes Foundation" (1980, viii) which he praised for its quality and innovative nature.

Barnes was born in a working-class family from Philadelphia and after graduating from medical school, prospered in pharmaceutical research and business. He purchased an impressive collection of artworks, notably late impressionists, which he hosted in a gallery built for this purpose, and designed to function as an educational center. His scientific approach to public education by art, in many ways a result of Dewey's influence,

was reflected in an unconventional strategy of displaying artworks. They created “a whole wall of color and mood,” (Ryan 1995, 253) rather than being classified chronologically or by styles, with details about the work and the artist kept to a minimum. Barnes, who used to illustrate aesthetic theory for factory workers with paintings from his collection was, like Dewey, interested in activities that demonstrated how art, ethics, and politics could be brought together to improve quality of life for all people. As George E. Hein noted with regard to Dewey’s debt to Barnes, the success of this partnership was also due to the fact that Barnes himself shared “an unflinching faith that experiencing art was experiencing life and could be life transforming.” (2011, 131) He and Dewey had a long-lasting intellectual exchange, and Barnes participated in some of Dewey’s lectures. His interest in African art, well represented in his collection, matched Dewey’s own concerns that aesthetic perception may be distorted by the ideological context in which people learn about art. To correct this, one had to be willing to accept that not only the Parthenon, but also “The arts which today have most vitality for the average person” (Dewey 1980, 5) such as cinema and jazz have aesthetic value in view of the experiences they help generate. Indeed, these can be found “in the raw;” (Dewey 1980, 4) that is, in what manages to catch one’s attention, to engage people fully, including “the delight of the housewife in tending her plants” or “the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.” (Dewey 1980, 5) At the same time, cultivating the capacity for aesthetic appreciation and expression was meant to provide more than “immediate moral and aesthetic uplift in the viewer;” (Constantino 2004, 408) and rather to enrich everybody’s experiences; in particular, to enable workers, whose everyday life was deprived of aesthetic stimuli, to give new meaning to their labor.

### III. DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

*Art as Experience* ends with Dewey expressing trust in the idea that art is important because it brings people together as members of a community. In contemporary paradigms, this last chapter about art and civilization is a discourse aiming to join tangible and intangible heritage by showing that symbols, rites and magic “united the practical, the social and the educative in an integrated whole having esthetic form.” (Dewey 1980, 327) By today’s standards, his view would give a great theoretical foundation to international policies that justify the importance of heritage safeguarding in relation to values such as social equality and cooperation between communities. To unfold this view takes us to *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey’s best known book, which he considered a complete presentation of his philosophy.

Writing about why ancient Greek philosophers devalued experience and customs, turning to reason as the highest source of authority, Dewey noted that the domination of intellectualism in schooling was bound to come to an end. Experimental science, as well as new social conditions which could not disconnect “the occupations of the household, agriculture, and manufacturing” (2004, 296) from advances in the sciences, rendered

the rigid distinction between knowing and doing irrelevant. One implication Dewey focused on is that the distinction between cultural and vocational education was, too, a product of the same philosophical dualism that separated mind from body or labor from leisure (2004, 330). Just as our minds are to a greater extent social than individual, no human activity should be considered private or isolated from practical concerns. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey would reaffirm this view concluding that “As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure.” (1980, 344) True to his conviction that the tendency to think in extreme opposites makes one overlook the core of a problem, he wrote:

We must avoid not only limitation of conception of vocation to the occupations where immediately tangible commodities are produced, but also the notion that vocations are distributed in exclusive way, one and only one to each person. Such restricted specialism is impossible; nothing could be more absurd than to try to educate individuals with an eye to only one line of activity. In the first place, each individual has of necessity a variety of callings, in each of which he should be intelligently effective; and in the second place any one occupation loses its meaning and becomes a routine keeping busy at something in the degree in which it is isolated from other interests. (Dewey 2004, 331)

This claim resonates with the idea that, as social beings, we all play a variety of roles, and, consequently, it would be detrimental to exaggerate the development of one at the expense of the rest. It also implies that education needs to be, if not liberal in the historical understanding of the notion, broad enough to provide options and meaning because “The dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living – intellectual and moral growth.” (Dewey 2004, 334) As an example, the Hull House’s Labor Museum, established by Mary Hill, a teacher at the Laboratory School, the social reformer Jane Addams and Dewey himself, was meant to fulfill a variety of functions: educate adults about the traditions of immigrants, bring together tangible and intangible cultural expressions, preserve modes of spinning and weaving which were no longer used in modern factories, and create a bridge between different generations of immigrants (Durst 2010, 105). Presenting traditions as a form of safeguarding heritage went thus hand in hand with building social cohesion through understanding how life conditions in a particular historical and social setting come to shape worldviews. Similarly, geography and history should not be approached as “ready-made studies” (Dewey 2004, 225). This would only widen the gulf between knowledge and experience. Instead, they could be creatively used as means to improve perception of the physical and social aspects of life, of how our actions are related to nature and to other generations’. Translated into recommendations for heritage management, this could suggest that heritage which is remote from ordinary experience, and would require much effort to be appreciated, would be better understood by focusing on its place in an evolutionary process, rather than by biographies and anecdotes, for example:

An intelligent study of the discovery, explorations, colonization of America, of the pioneer movement westward, of immigration, etc., should be a study of the United

States as it is today: of the country we now live in. Studying it in process of formation makes much that is too complex to be directly grasped open to comprehension. (Dewey 2004, 231)

In the end, heritage policies inspired by Dewey's philosophy of education should reflect a democratic society, where individuals take pleasure in associative life (with festivals, cultural centers and museums as forms thereof), classes are not segregated, and education cultivates a diversity of human capacities, primarily "personal initiative and adaptability." (2004, 94) Even if one may agree that the educational role of cultural institutions is not as clear as it seems because learning comes in many ways and degrees, the influence of the progressive movement could not be overlooked. Learning with the help of objects, recording experiences of heritage in qualitative surveys, organizing debates and creating events meant to express the social responsibility of cultural institutions have become common practice. However, in order to be consistently Deweyan, such initiatives should be guided by his original principles, as summarized by George E. Hein in a study on museum education: "1. Constant questioning of all dualisms" that generate value judgments conducive to social inequalities; "2. Recognition that the goal of education is further education", which means providing constant conditions for inquiry; "3. Applying progressive education universally", which requires self-examination from the part of museum educators, and "4. Connect educational work back to life", that is, looking at how exhibitions originate in life experiences and relate to life situations (2006, 349-50).

Thinking about today's problems with the help of such a prolific philosopher and public intellectual like Dewey is in many ways inspirational. This may be also because changing demographics, political radicalism, social inequalities, the need for firm foundations of democracy, and the importance of science for social progress which he was writing about are part of our world too. How Dewey articulated his philosophical creed of the centrality of education allows us to see them in a different light.

Applying Dewey's philosophy of education to the question of cultural institutions and heritage takes us beyond rhetoric, and does more than confirm that education should not be confined to the classroom or that museums do have an educational role. First, it draws attention to the quality of educational experiences that can be created with the help of heritage, and to the need for a theory of experience that gives weight to both the individual and the social aspects. It looks at how the enjoyable and the transformational dimensions can be harmonized to produce educative experiences: how to teach history and geography, how to make the study of a painting relevant for one's life, how to understand that a spinning tool encapsulates intangible heritage, how to overcome artificial oppositions such as fine vs. applied arts or intellectual vs. vocational education. It emphasizes the need for consistency and planning from the part of individual or institutional educators, and raises doubts about the easy success of improvisations.

Essentially, it connects the educational mission of schools and cultural institutions to the aim of consolidating a democratic community in which each individual's quality of life would be better than in any alternative arrangement. The fact that contemporary studies on



cultural policies look at the instrumental roles of heritage (for example, creative industries and tourism that support communities' economic self-reliance, common governance of natural and cultural resources as a pathways to developing collaboration, tolerance and social equality) is in accord with Dewey's view that glorifying the grand achievements of the past does not contribute to our better understanding of the present. Contemporary representations of cultures as dynamic and multilayered or of heritage as a negotiation of meanings find theoretical support in Dewey's view of the transactional nature of our interactions with the environment, which led him to argue on numerous occasions that experience gained in ordinary situations should be carried into educational contexts and then back into life. The fact that today's educational and cultural institutions have yet to solve this problem takes us from Dewey's philosophical insights back to our value commitments.

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