

# Making the Classroom Democratic in Higher Education: Dewey's Prospects of Education

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**ABSTRACT :** *Colleges and universities have sought to promote democratic engagement. In the current era, many felt that this public purpose of higher education has been diluted due to various issues, such as changing conception of democracy, global economic crisis, and brain drain. This essay pursues highlighting Dewey's prospects of education in order to make the classroom democratic and help students more engaging in higher education. Four elements, i.e., social action, comprehensiveness, consistency, and practicality are exhibited for a success of democratic engagement. Higher education should be transformed and aligned with the pressing needs of democratic engagement.*

**KEYWORDS** -*democratic engagement, Dewey on education, higher education, philosophy of education, societal needs*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"...whether this educative process is carried on in a predominantly democratic or non-democratic way becomes therefore a question of transcendent importance not only for education itself but for its final effect upon all the interests and activities of a society that is committed to the democratic way of life" John Dewey, 1937 [1].

Higher education is central to societies in developing a culture of democratic engagement [2]. *Engagement*, which is scholarly and mutually beneficial, involves the processes and values of democracy embedded within the core of teaching, research, and service in higher education [3]. Higher education should function as serving societal needs: preparing students for professional careers and supporting them to become successful members of society [4]. Higher education should be democratic, rational, and applicable to communities and society. It should also be practical to those who receive education and to society as a whole. In the current era, however, it seems that democratic engagement has been weakened in higher education [5, 6]. Furthermore, there has been a misconception of what democratic education might look like via imprecise and vague language when discussing the public purpose of higher education [5]. Purposes of democracy in higher education are to develop the culture of democracy and mitigate problems through democratic means. Therefore, higher education necessitates an inclusive and continual effort to ensure democratic engagement [5, 7]. It should take a responsibility of broadening the students' outlooks, engaging them in democracy in academia, which leads to prepare them to become democratic citizens. To do this, university education should manifest rudimentary principles of democratic engagement.

Dewey indicates the conception of democracy as "freeing intelligence for independent effectiveness" [8, p. 193]. Dewey considers that schools have fallen behind the general contemporary social movement; that is, democracy, leading to a discrepancy between the relatively undemocratic organization of the school and the

growth and extension of the democratic principle in society; that is, the inconsistency of democracy in society versus democracy in education [8]. He criticizes that since schools do not embrace democracy, teachers may not have the power of instruction or constructive effort of the function of teaching [8]. Students may lack the development of individual mental power and a sufficient responsibility for its use. In order to make education work, Dewey stipulates the perspectives of how teachers and students should be treated [8]. Teachers must make a judgement on matters of educational importance in a democratic way and have some share in the exercise of educational power, considering that teachers' competency and liberation would enable them to flourish originality, invention, and the continuous expression of individuality. Students' interest should be respected by letting them have firsthand experience and make their own decisions with freedom to be active learners. Students should find the problem in higher education that they care about in democracy. Hence, higher education should reflect democratic engagement by empowering teachers and providing students with first-hand experience dealing with the problem that they care about in the society. This short essay displays Dewey's prospects of democratic engagement connected to education and calls for it in higher education.

## **II. MAKING THE CLASSROOM DEMOCRATIC ALIGNED WITH DEWEY'S VIEWS**

Dewey posits education as growth [8]. In other words, a life runs with a constant process of growth, and education plays a role to facilitate this growth. Dewey's view with the emphasis on the need to learn by doing has led to the development of progressive education aligned with democracy [8]. Dewey believes that students learn through a "hands-on" approach by interacting with their environment in order to adapt and learn since reality must be experienced [8]. Dewey's approach to education emphasizes the needs and interests of the individuals. In this view, students should freely construct their own paths for acquiring and applying knowledge. The Dewey's view of education is advanced and favorable, which should be promoted in higher education for democratic engagement, due to four elements: social action, comprehensiveness, consistency, and practicality.

Democratic engagement can emerge from social action and experiences. There is a link between the social macrocosm and the school microcosm [9]. Dewey performed as a reformer of education by developing the Dewey School and travelling to other countries (Japan, China, and Turkey) to promote his educational mottoes. The slogan of the Dewey School is that a school must function as a social center of students' participation in the daily life of the community [8]. Dewey maintains that the school should take "the child out of doors, widening and organizing his experience with reference to the world in which he lives" [8, p. 202]. Dewey's argument clearly shows a heavy emphasis on education students through experiences and social actions. Education must aim at the social significance of its matters through the interconnectivity of theory and practice [9]. Dewey applied the approach of learning by doing to the study of social structure. Such application signifies an innovation in democratic inquiry, investigating the individual's experiences and collective aspects of life goals and values. The issues of democratic participation should relate cultural development and human nature with particular insight of the individuals [10]. Experience involving reflective thinking is amplified by communication [11]. Hence, the idea of democratic engagement includes the salient attributes—experiences and communication. Dewey stresses the essence of making the school a form of community life [11]. Therefore, students should be trained to actively engage and act as a member of democratic society.

The second view of Dewey is the comprehensiveness of the outlook in education. Democratic engagement may occur on a balance between the demands of individuals and the demands of society. Dewey thinks that "every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance" [8, p. 195]. In other words, teachers should be able to make their own decision on education in order to make teaching rewarding. Schools should pursue nature as ideal by focusing on health, activity, and individual differences in order to develop students' natural talents, interests, and abilities as a whole. Dewey's idea is that professionals and educators should encourage "individuality and thoughtfulness in the adoption of methods of teaching" [8, p. 196] in a wide-ranging spectrum of education.

Consistency is another criterion of developing democratic classrooms. Dewey's claim is that democracy is education in that education is about expanding the shared meanings the same as democracy for social efficiency, helping students fit in the social world [8]. In order to fit in the society, students should be allowed to select a career for their future employment on the condition of change in the society. Interactively, society does good to the students when they can function and play a role in the society. In terms of consistency, as students learn useful and practical knowledge in a school, their acquisition of these skills is closely linked to the preparation of the future employment in a reliable and steady manner.

Last but not least, practicality matters in democratic classrooms. Democratic engagement in education should occur at the activities connected to the real-life. These activities relate solving real problems with students' lives. Students naturally participate in shared meanings without any enforcement of paying attention and learning. There is no need to intentionally motivate them to learn or acquire rules because motivation originates from the situation, in which the rules are embedded. In this sense, Dewey's progressive education seems feasible since all the activities the students have and do at home occur without heavy loads. Dewey's argument on the notion of democracy is to engage in a situation where we share a life and where there is no enforcement to do things [8]. Shared common interest between the teacher and students constitute democratic mutuality. The realization of socially situated learning in which the shared interest is advanced and readjusted can be an essential consideration, establishing a democratic community and systematic education [11]. Higher education should assist students in finding problems in the society that they care about in a democratic way. As the teachers are willing to begin with the students' genuine interest in learning, the students will perceive their learning as democratically engaging and practically useful.

Higher education should inspire students to move towards a better way of life. The essence of education is the reaction of a particular individual or group on experience and the expression of personality. I found several evidences that appeal to us in light of a personal flavor and the expression of personality. Dewey denotes that "education is the most personal, the most intimate, of all human affairs" with the implication of teachers' power in the training, character, and intelligence of the individual [8, p. 198]. The nature of the freedom should be maintained with regard to "intellectual freedom, free play of mental attitude, and operation which are sought" [8, p. 199]. After all, Dewey's educational direction of greater play for the individuality leads to a guide to democratic growth and engagement. Furthermore, Dewey's implication of the school system approximates the "appeal to a more thorough-going democracy" [8, p. 196]. Above all, flourishing social and institutional motive is the essence of democratic and progressive society. The intellectual and scientific motive encourages the interest in knowledge, in scholarship, and in truth [8, p. 203]. Dewey's remark about the recognition of the spiritual basis of democracy, the efficacy and responsibility of freed intelligence is appealing with a necessity for procuring social action, comprehensiveness, consistency, and practicality in higher education.

### III. CONCLUSION

All in all, this essay portrays Dewey's prospects of education—social action, comprehensiveness, consistency, and practicality—in order to fulfill democratic engagement in higher education. Learning and teaching should be social and interactive in an environment in which experiences and curriculum support students' learning. The liberation of diversity of individual capacities characterize democracy. Furthermore, the leading form of democratic engagement should reflect interactions among students, faculty, and staff in the academic community defined by partnerships and mutuality. The purpose of education should be the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use the skills for the greater good.

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