

John Dewey is often seen as the proponent of learning by doing – rather than learning by passively receiving. He believed that each child was active, inquisitive and wanted to explore. How to capitalise on these drives?

Dewey set up the Laboratory School that was allied to the University of Chicago. Children there were encouraged to learn through experience, clarify the key points and apply the lessons to get practical results.

Dewey referred to his philosophy as instrumentalism, rather than pragmatism, though the two are related. Instrumentalism sees the value of an idea or tool being its use as an instrument for getting results. Bearing this in mind, learning should be relevant and rewarding – rather than only theoretical.

Education should also equip students to take a full and active part in shaping their future society. Traditional education, he believed, saw children as empty, passive receptacles to be filled with ideas. This helped to support the existing order.

Progressive education, for which he – rightly or wrongly – became known, saw school as an opportunity for children to develop as individuals and citizens. They may even be able to find their real vocation. He wrote:

“To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.”

“John Dewey’s significance for informal educators lies in a number of areas.

“First, his belief that education must engage with and enlarge experience has continued to be a significant strand in informal education practice.

“Second, and linked to this, Dewey’s exploration of thinking and reflection – and the associated role of educators – has continued to be an inspiration. We can see it at work, for example, in the models developed by writers such as David Boud and Donald Schön.

“Third, his concern with interaction and environments for learning provide a continuing framework for practice.

“Last, his passion for democracy, for educating so that all may share in a common life, provides a strong rationale for practice in the associational settings in which informal educators work.”

lives: He believed education must be linked to the child's experience.

Students were much more likely to embrace mathematics, for example, if they could see how it applied to their daily lives. He wrote in *My Pedagogic Creed*.

"I believe that the school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground."

John was given the opportunity to test his ideas at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. Alice, his wife, was the Principal and the curriculum was based around real-life issues.

Dewey reiterated the link between real-life experience and education. He remained critical of traditional methods that saw children as passive beings, but also criticised some progressive educationalists.

“An educative experience, according to Dewey, is an experience in which we make a connection between what we do to things and what happens to them or us in consequence; the value of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities among events ...

“It is this natural form of learning from experience, by doing and then reflecting on what happened, which Dewey made central in his approach to schooling.”

*People can develop their problem-solving skills, clarify the learning and apply the lessons in their daily lives*

Dewey believed that learning by doing enabled students to develop their problem-solving skills. They could then clarify the learning and apply it in their future lives.

Dewey declared in *My Pedagogic Creed*: "I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."

Schools could achieve this in several ways.

*They could encourage students to take charge of their learning and make informed decisions.*

*They could enable students to practise some form of democracy within their own institutions.*

*They could play a more active part in the wider community.*

Dewey wanted students to develop critical thinking which, he believed, would provide a fail-safe against forces that might want to impose a dictatorship.

He also warned against the pressures stopping people pursuing their vocation. He wrote in *Democracy and Education*:

"In an autocratically managed society, it is often a conscious object to prevent the development of freedom and responsibility; a few do the planning and ordering, the others follow directions and are deliberately confined to narrow and prescribed channels of endeavor."