

The strengths and weaknesses of John Dewey's and Paulo Freire's views on the nature of education. A critical comparison of their respective positions on the notion that education is about problem solving.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was born in Vermont. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was born in Brazil. Both men received a full education including studying at university level. Their main views on the nature of education include similar concepts, the most prominent being the use of a 'problem solving' form of learning rather than a rote learning or 'banking' system. In Dewey's case he wanted to use these concepts to create a democratic society. In comparison, Freire was concerned with helping the oppressed to overcome oppression. These aims are not contrasting or contradictory, yet they are different. This essay will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their respective views on education, in particular under the following themes; democracy and oppression, and learning process together with dialogue and praxis. The main focus however, will be their respective ideas about the link between education and problem solving.

As previously mentioned, Dewey's primary reason for the education of all was so that a dynamic and collaborative society that did not rely on aristocracy, or dictatorial power could be created. In order to build this democratic ideal, people of different interests and skills would have to work together to achieve their common goals. Dewey (1916, p.72) argued that 'a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience', and that this advanced level of thinking could only be created by education. The only weakness in this plan was the threat that people who believed in the division of social classes posed to democracy. In order to have a successful democracy, Dewey would have to rely upon everybody to forgo the notion of social stratification. This would not be impossible, however it would certainly prove very difficult for those on the higher end of society. Being a pragmatist, Dewey would stop at

nothing to achieve his cause. If successful, a huge benefit of this vision was that these newly educated people would become problem solvers. Everybody would contribute their own individual skills to solve problems which would create a more interesting and well-rounded society.

Freire, on the other hand believed that education was about helping the oppressed to overcome their oppression. The banking model serves the oppressors as it means that they impart their own ideas and beliefs on the oppressed with no fear of them being changed by the oppressed. In some cases, the oppressed do not even realise there are being maltreated. They were not taught to make decisions. This was degrading as ‘to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.’ (Freire, 1993, p.53). Freire believed the right kind of education would help the oppressed to overcome their own oppression. This education would have a focus on problem solving, praxis, literacy and dialogue. Similar to Dewey’s plan, Freire knew that this form of education would result in a flourishing of individuality. Unfortunately, for this theory to be successful, the oppressed would have to have access to education which is not the case in many countries. Also, it could be difficult to convince people who have been oppressed for so long that they should participate in formal education, especially if their survival is dependent upon working for their oppressors. On more positive note, in the places where Freire’s ideas worked, the results would be hugely beneficial. Henry Giroux, American and Canadian scholar and cultural critic, saw the strength in this idea saying that it would ‘make hope realizable and despair unconvincing’ (Giroux, 1985, p.xiii). As well as this, society would benefit as it would have more people contributing their own knowledge, skills and opinions to problems and obstacles.

For Dewey, the learning process was primarily based on experience and practise rather than theory. His famous quote, ‘education is not preparation for life, education is life

itself', describes perfectly his vision that education and experience were cut from the same cloth. He argued that it was the teachers role to guide the students through experiences but not to control the choices the students make. This way, intelligent inquiry (Dewey's term for human inquiry) would be made by the student which would then result in reflection and decision making. This process showed a huge strength in Dewey's educational views as it showed students how to think and make decisions for themselves. As well as this, it means that humans are continuing the learning process throughout their lives, education does not stop once a person finishes the traditional schooling system.

Freire also thought education should be conducted along these lines that focused on engaging with process . His primary concern was that literacy, dialogue and praxis should be at the heart of teaching. Literacy is not just the process of reading and writing, it is the means of interpreting a subject and forming an opinion on it. This shows a strength in Freire's views as this type of literacy means that the students have the power to make change in the world, not just obtain knowledge about it. Freire believed dialogue to be one of the most important parts of education. He points out in 'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed' that both the student and the teacher should be engaged in a flowing conversation in order to optimise the level of learning for both. 'The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.' (Freire, 1993, p.61). Both Freire and Dewey felt that all humans are unfinished beings and that praxis helps each person to become fully human. On one hand, there is weakness in this view on education as it assumes an idealistic and equal student-teacher relationship with no power conflicts. In many educational settings, the teacher is in a position of power so we can't assume that every student will be motivated to engage in full dialogue with their teacher. Also, whereas these plans would certainly be beneficial in developing the student into a critically thinking human, it could be argued that every person must engage in a certain

amount of rote learning in order to create a basic knowledge base to support the praxis. However for the most part, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses of their policies. If a student does engage in dialogue and praxis, double the amount and continual learning is achieved as knowledge passes from the students to the teacher and vice versa. This is a practice will benefit both teacher and student long after the formal education process is completed.

While the previous views have been important in both Dewey's and Freire's overall visions of education, their most prominent concept was that education is primarily about problem solving. They heavily rejected the banking system of learning. Dewey believed that instead of algorithms and specific principles, a method for approaching conundrums would serve as a better tool for people contributing to society's obstacles. He considered that 'to possess all the world of knowledge and lose one's own self' is an 'awful fate' in education. (Dewey, 1902, p.9) Freire on the other hand, felt that the banking model served the interests of the oppressors. 'The scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits' of the teacher's own knowledge, opinions and outlook. (Freire, 1993, p.53). Contrastingly, education that is based on problem solving creates students that are capable of critical thinking, a valuable level of intelligence that will be constructive in all aspects of life.

Education is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a body of knowledge acquired while being educated'. There is weakness in the views of Dewey and Freire in that they are so intent on achieving their individual aims of creating a democracy and helping the oppressed that the primary function of education, the acquiring of knowledge, may be overlooked. However, if we put their aspirations aside, many strengths can be seen in the problem solving system of education. Freire describes how problem solving based lessons can encourage students to become more engaged and interested in learning; 'Their response

to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed' (Freire, 1993, p.62). Also, in order to create new knowledge and fluid thinking for the future, experimentation must take place. This can only be achieved by examining problems and obstacles.

In conclusion, it is clear that the strengths of both John Dewey's and Paulo Freire's views on the nature of education outweigh the weaknesses. Their respective views on the importance of problem solving, experience and dialogue have been particularly formative in changing many people's perception of the role of education. The University of Chicago, where Dewey helped to develop twenty three of the most comprehensive and innovative education courses, describes his views as representing 'a turning point, not only for formal education but also for larger views of childhood learning'. In turn, Freire is described as 'truly revolutionary', by Croatian-Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich. To this day, education all over the world continues to be shaped and stimulated by his ideas and visions. In particular, their insistence that education is primarily about problem solving has been of huge benefit to humanity. Problems that may have been insurmountable before, are now opportunities to create new solutions.

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