

John Dewey's Democracy and Education

Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is the touchstone for a great deal of modern educational theory. It covers a wide range of themes and issues relating to education, including teaching, learning, educational environments, subject matter, values, and the nature of work and play. This handbook is designed to help experts and non-experts navigate Dewey's text. The authors in our handbook are specialists in the fields of philosophy and education; their chapters offer readers expert insight into areas of Dewey's work that they know well and have returned to time and time again throughout their careers.

The handbook is divided into two parts. Part I features short companion chapters corresponding to each of Dewey's chapters in *Democracy and Education*. These serve to guide readers through the complex arguments developed in the book. Part II features general articles placing the book into historical, philosophical, and practical contexts, highlighting its relevance today.

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Edited by Leonard J. Waks , Andrea R. English

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John Dewey's Democracy and Education

A Centennial Handbook

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Foreword

David T. Hansen

John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* has been studied and quoted the world over ever since its appearance in 1916. Countless educators have engaged with the book and responded to its powerful vision of the relation between education, society, and the individual. The book has been translated into many languages. There have been innumerable local as well as international conferences that have incorporated it as part of their purview. This current year – the centenary of the book's publication – there are many conferences, special issues of journals, and book-length sets of essays on Dewey's oeuvre. What accounts for this remarkable scale of attention?

The handbook edited by Leonard J. Waks and Andrea R. English that you, reader, are looking at right now offers a wide-ranging response to the question. Having recently turned the last page of the very last entry, I would say that the handbook generates the following impressions of *Democracy and Education*:

Dewey's book is a strikingly original and intellectually expansive inquiry into education and its significance for society and the individual. Dewey began writing it in 1911, when he was 52 years old, and the book seems an outgrowth of his entire life's scholarly and practical work on education.

The book is astounding with respect to the educational and philosophical topics it addresses. The reader of the present handbook can hardly help but ask: Is there a single important educational theme that Dewey does *not* address, either directly or indirectly?

Dewey sometimes presents these topics in a highly compressed and not easily accessible form. It appears that he is thinking *on the page itself* rather than providing a report on thinking that has been completed. Some readers find this effect exciting and appealing. Other readers wish he had thought a bit more first.

What Dewey has to say about education, schools, teaching, curriculum, knowledge, learning, society, democracy, justice, and more, remains profoundly pertinent today. I will return to this impression of the book below.

Democracy and Education constitutes what Dewey himself once said of it: that the book is his most complete statement about education and, for many years, was his best statement of his overall philosophical view of life. The book echoes Dewey's previous writing on education, in works such as

The School and Society (1899) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), and it anticipates later works such as *Experience and Education* (1938). It also addresses in a substantive – if introductory – way questions of politics, aesthetics, ethics, inquiry, and more that Dewey would later devote entire works to elucidating (e.g., *Experience and Nature* (1925), *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), *Ethics* (1932), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938)).

Democracy and Education embodies Dewey's responses as a scholar, educator, and concerned human being to what he took to be the most provocative theories of education in the history of the written word, including those of Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and J. F. Herbart.

Dewey appears to write as a child of his times, with regards to what some today would dub cultural biases or blind-spots, while also writing as a child of a time that has yet to come: namely, a truly democratic time, which Dewey himself imaginatively “rehearses” across the pages of his book.

Democracy and Education presents a consistent argument regarding the nature of education and its relation with society and the individual. This argument pivots around the idea of education as growth, or what Dewey also calls the continuous reconstruction of experience on the part of the child or adult. It is a conception that gives rise in turn, to the idea that democracy constitutes the best political mode of life for supporting such an education for all persons. Education and democracy become symbiotic: to become educated, for Dewey, just is to become more open and engaged with the world, which is precisely his notion of what it is to become a democratic citizen.

I hope these impressions convey why this handbook will be a useful compendium to people making their way through Dewey's challenging but infinitely rewarding book. The two-part handbook opens with twenty-six commentaries, each of which examines one of the twenty-six chapters in Dewey's text. The commentaries illuminate the purposes Dewey had in mind in composing the chapters as well as their actual substance. The second part features nine longer essays that range widely into current issues of education and society while incorporating reflection on many of Dewey's writings from before and after the appearance of *Democracy and Education*. These contributions shed light on historical and contemporary treatments of Dewey's ideas, and they offer insight into ideas that strongly influenced him. The editors provide helpful introductions to each of the two parts. The inclusion of so many commentators in the handbook mirrors the value in reading Dewey's work in the company of fellow students, teachers, scholars, or others engaged in the same undertaking.

The handbook entries are diverse in form and substance. Some of the commentaries provide a blow-by-blow, interpretive summary of a given chapter. Others fuse such a summary with questions both for Dewey and for our present age. In my experience, readers of *Democracy and Education* tend to have favorite chapters, and in turning to this handbook they will likely gravitate

first to the commentaries on them. This experience will be enjoyable. It always feels interesting – even gripping – to see how someone else interprets a favorite writing. I think Dewey would have found it delightful that almost every commentator in the handbook writes that the chapter he or she is addressing constitutes “the key” to the whole book, or is “at the heart” of it, or is “pivotal” for an understanding of it. Twenty-six “all-important” chapters in a twenty-six chapter text: not a bad accomplishment for any writer!

To me, the sense that every chapter in the book is “the decisive one” attests to how alive the book remains: how its sentences pulse with concerns and questions that remain very much on the table today. For example, the United States has been undergoing several decades of intensive efforts to privatize public education, through the creation of what are called charter schools, the use of vouchers (i.e., public funds) to pay for private schooling, and what has come to be called “personalized learning,” this last a pet idea of technology entrepreneurs who dream of dissolving schools as we know them in favor of highly individualistic, computer-based activities with teachers hanging around as facilitators in panopticon-like settings. At the same time, the nation has seen the steady intrusion into official educational policy of business mentalities and criteria with regards to assessment, not just of students but of teachers and of schools as a whole. The evidence thus far demonstrates how harmful it is, for individuals and for society alike, when the bottom-line, winner-and-loser mentalities of business crash their way into education. Business values may be great for business, but they are constitutionally unable to recognize or acknowledge what renders education a moral, intellectual, social, and civic undertaking – when, that is, it is allowed to be “education” rather than a mere means to externally determined economic ends.

Dewey’s book anticipates these developments, formidable versions of which were at work in his era. As in his time, so today there is heartening evidence that educators and people “on the ground” recognize the damage to society and its individual members when we lose sight of the public meaning of education in a democracy. Dewey himself constantly encourages his readers to confront thorny challenges, and to bring to bear on them their best selves: that is, their hope, their courage, their generosity, and their trust and faith in the fact that it is never a fact that the structure of education and society is a settled question.

Dewey acknowledges throughout *Democracy and Education* that he is pushing against a strong tide of contrary forces. He makes plain that the United States is not yet a democratic society, judging democracy as more than a set of institutions – and not as a mere license to pursue self-interest regardless of social cost – but as what Dewey calls an “associated form of living” characterized by open, fluid channels of genuine communication and collaboration among people who may differ from one another with respect to values, interests, and aspirations. He makes plain that the United States is not yet a civilized society, judging civilization by his criterion of whether it applies its technology, inventions, and other resources in an egalitarian and just manner. These are not “anti-American” attitudes. On the contrary, they represent a profound passion

for the nation to live up to its very real potential and promise, undergirded by the foundation of a dynamic constitution and set of laws.

Dewey also makes clear in the pages of his book how wooden educational policy in his day had become, with its emphasis on creating factory-like schools that, however inadvertently, threaten to turn out the same “product”: namely, persons unable and uninterested in participating in democratic life, that is to say a life in which they can have a real say, and want to have a real say, in the very constitution of the world in which they live, whether at a local or larger level. I suspect that these and other forces that Dewey identifies are on the mind of many readers of this handbook. They are certainly on the mind of its contributors. Educators are still, as it were, paddling up river.

To be sure, they always have, as any reader of the history of educational thought and practice will quickly discover. Confucius, Plato, the authors of the Upanishads, and other pioneering thinkers were in fundamental ways *atopos*, an ancient Greek term for “out of place,” “not fitting in,” “having a foothold outside culture.” As Dewey’s book illuminates, education is always in tension with both society and the individual. For Dewey, the reason for this state of affairs is that education accomplishes more than helping students *function* in society, important as that outcome is. Rather, education has to do with helping students become *purposive* beings, able to conceive ends and hopes not dictated to them by current structures and forces. Such aims need to be as aesthetically and morally rich as circumstance and imagination permit. They are a far cry from a desire for mere material wealth or for power over others. Put another way, education disconfirms ingrained expectations as often as it may affirm them, whether these emanate from society or the individual. Education implies growth, which for Dewey means not just “change” with respect to adding discrete skills or bits of information, but transformation in one’s very being, however microscopic these metamorphoses will be in most instances. Dewey emphasizes throughout his book that education at its finest generates not just skills and knowledge, but also agentive dispositions such as open-mindedness and a sense of social responsibility.

I believe Dewey hopes, more than anything else, that his book will provoke others to creative, humane thought and the action that can accompany it. Will his hope continue to live on? What will people say about *Democracy and Education* on its 200th anniversary, a century from now, presuming they are still reading it? The contributors to this handbook, ably edited by Leonard J. Waks and Andrea R. English, show that so long as humanity cares about education, and so long as it keeps alive the idea of democracy as a way of life, Dewey’s book will remain a great companion.

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Note on Abbreviations

For citations of Dewey, we use the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey: 1882–1953* with reference to the series abbreviation (below), volume number, and page number.

EW: Early Works
MW: Middle Works
LW: Later Works

We make an exception to this citation format for references to entire chapters of *Democracy and Education*, which are indicated by chapter number only. When additional clarity is required, we add the abbreviation “DE.”