
DEWEY, JOHN (1859–1952)

John Dewey, among the 20th century's most famous and influential philosophers, was born in Burlington, Vermont, on October 20, 1859. He studied at the University of Vermont, graduating in 1879, and then after teaching high school in Pennsylvania until 1881 and in Vermont until 1882, he attended Johns Hopkins University, where he earned his PhD in 1884. In 1886, he married Alice Chipman, who died in 1927. In 1946, he married Roberta Lowitz Grant, who survived him when he died on June 1, 1952. Dewey's long life spanned the U.S. Civil War and both World Wars, not to mention countless other conflicts, industrial developments, and societal changes. His influence as a scholar has been substantial in a number of fields, including philosophy, psychology, the social sciences, and education. His work has helped focus attention on the crucial role of the dissemination of knowledge in democratic societies.

Few philosophers have had as great an impact on their societies as John Dewey. Dewey is most famous for his work in the area of education. Prior to his famous work, *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, education in the United States followed the European system that was founded on what some scholars have dubbed the "banking theory" of knowledge—that is, in the old way of doing things, as an authority the teacher would deposit his or her wisdom in the empty minds of students. Creative thinking was discouraged, and challenges to authority were treated as heretical. Dewey, however, saw that people were not prepared and empowered for addressing the problems of their own environments, a problem which meant that education was generally abstract, disconnected from students' interests, and often appeared pointless. Dewey understood that in a democratic society, students needed to be guided through a process of learning to address public problems around them. Sometimes history will help us to solve problems, sometimes to create art, but the overall point of studying subject matter was to become reoriented, according to Dewey. Education should address the overall project of developing more intelligent citizens, he thought, who are more able to

pursue their own goals as well as to live together harmoniously.

The great influence that Dewey's practical and democratic philosophy has had on disciplines such as education, sociology, psychology, and philosophy is rarely seen in the context of his whole body of work. Dewey came to hold the views he did about education because of how he thought about knowledge and inquiry in the first place. In the traditional approach to the subject of knowledge, an idea was understood as a picture or a mirror of the thing in the world that it represents. With that metaphor supporting all the human sciences, people sought to make more and more accurate pictures. They aimed to achieve certainty about the world using an approach to the sciences that ignored the scientists' purposes and desires. While Dewey understood and valued the avoidance of unjust or misleading bias and lack of objectivity, he recognized the unavoidable nature of inquiry as always undertaken from a given perspective—that is, following the modern insights of philosopher Immanuel Kant, Dewey noted that what we perceive in the world must be conditioned by the kind of observer who perceives it.

In response to these developments, Dewey preferred thinking of knowledge and ideas as a map, metaphorically speaking. A map is drawn for a purpose, though that does not by itself mean that the map lacks objectivity or is biased. Nevertheless, a map must leave out some things while focusing on others. In addition, a map is a kind of tool that in some ways represents things in the world, but a map can never be mistaken for a possibly perfect picture of all there is to the reality of what one is mapping. Also, a map should be judged on whether it is useful and good. It is a true map if it in fact can help one get from point A to point B or if it can help one achieve some other objective for which it is drawn.

With the map metaphor in place, Dewey conceived of inquiry and therefore science as a process of making clear what our objectives are, since some objectives are not properly formed and need to be rethought. Then observations, experiments, and hypotheses can be developed for learning more about the problems we hope to address. Sometimes we find out that our idea of the problem we wanted to study was unclear, inaccurate, not really a problem, or in some other way in need of revision. That is normal, thought Dewey, and is a crucial part of the process of inquiry. In his

influential book, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey presented his outlook on how to rethink the process of inquiry in a way that revised the traditional picture of the theory of knowledge and science. If we do not recognize the purposes we have in inquiry, we can so easily be misled or work on problems that are not worth our efforts. Dewey's theory of inquiry and science, therefore, saw human purposes as matters to be developed, refined, and discussed publicly. Public feedback and debate, he argued, are some of the most powerful forces for refining human intelligence.

With his sense of the power of criticism and public scrutiny, Dewey developed a robust democratic theory. He argued that the demands of public responsibility require educated inquirers and open channels for debate. He saw a need for schools to be available to all citizens, when they had been previously available only to the wealthy. As such, Dewey was an active advocate for public education. Some have called Dewey the patron saint of education.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, philosophy of technology has emerged as a substantial field of study. Industrialization and mechanization have had powerful consequences for enabling human beings to be more comfortable and to live longer. They have also brought with them some devastating costs and possibilities for humankind, however. Given that Dewey was a great advocate for the advancement of human intelligence through education and the sciences, critics of technological progress believe that Dewey was a part of the problem. Followers of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of technology, for instance, thought that people like Dewey did not recognize the worries that arise due to technology. In fact, Dewey has been shown to have been profoundly aware of the costs of technological development and to have had the seeds of a philosophy of technology of his own.

Larry Hickman, director of the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University, has written extensively on the subject of a Deweyan philosophy of technology. He explains that to address problems of technology and science, science and technology must be used even more. The solution to environmental degradation has been scientifically driven. Recycling and fuel-efficient light bulbs and automobiles are developed with the help of technological sciences. In sum, Dewey's

philosophy of technology, as Hickman has expressed it, holds technological development to be the application of intelligence to address problems. So we must not turn our backs on science and technology when our technological developments come at a cost. Our science and technology need to be enhanced, in fact, such that costs can be balanced or minimized. In this sense, Dewey was a defender of science and likely would be today.

Students of journalism and communication will find a guiding theorist in Dewey. In the fifth chapter of his famous book, *Experience and Nature*, Dewey explained why communication is the greatest of all tools that humanity possesses. Just as ideas are maps and therefore tools for developing, refining, and achieving goals, so too is communication a tool. Dewey describes communication as "wonderful," the building block upon which all public inquiry is founded. Teams of scientists, politicians, educators, and journalists would all be impossible without the ability to make one's own ideas, amazingly, travel from one person's private realm of thoughts to another's. In this way, we see how Dewey's views about knowledge and inquiry led him to see great potential in tools such as language. Language, science, and technology are tools human beings can use collectively to maximize their happiness and future prospects and to address new problems as they arise. With language, education, science, and technology, people can and do pursue greater and greater human ends.

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See also Deliberative Democracy; Scientific Method

Further Readings

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DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

Diffusion is a multifaceted perspective about social change in which innovations are communicated over time among the members of a social system. Key to understanding this research and practice paradigm is acknowledgment of its emphasis on diffusion as (a) an inherently processual activity that occurs over time (see Figure 1), (b) the relations among people and their organizations as channels through which influence is exchanged in a network of social relations as individuals decide how to respond to an innovation they have previously learned about (see Figure 2), (c) perceptions by potential adopters of innovation characteristics that partly determine whether they will adopt the innovation or not, and (d) the enabling and constraining force of the sociomedia-environmental context in accounting for diffusion.

Scholars dating at least to the German social philosopher Georg Simmel and the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde theorized about imitative behavior at the level of small groups and within communities and the relation between these microlevel processes to macrolevel social change. In the 100 years since, researchers have tended to conceptualize diffusion either at the macrosociological level of sector, system, national, or state change; the social psychological or communicative level of local relationships and how those linkages affect adoption patterns as in a classic study by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld; or the psychological level

of how individuals perceive innovations in the form of a codified set of pros and cons. Beginning in the 1960s, diffusion concepts have been operationalized and used to purposively spread prosocial innovations through development communication in Colombia, Pakistan, Brazil, Nigeria, India, Finland, Korea, Tanzania, Bolivia, and Vietnam.

Since 2000, diffusion studies have traced and explained the spread of kindergartens across cultures throughout the world, the spread of schools-of-choice policies among the 50 states in the United States, the diffusion of tobacco control policies back and forth between Canadian and U.S. political jurisdictions, the adoption of participatory approaches in community health system planning, the spread of e-commerce, and the online spread of social norms among adolescents. Studies such as these form the basis of the generalized codification of key concepts and the general pattern of diffusion over time from a literature of more than 5,500 publications as best synthesized by the communication scholar Everett M. Rogers in his successive editions of *Diffusion of Innovations*. Diffusion concepts have also contributed importantly to theoretical and conceptual development of social learning theory, technology transfer, dissemination strategy, social network theory, entertainment education, and now the science and practice of translational studies.

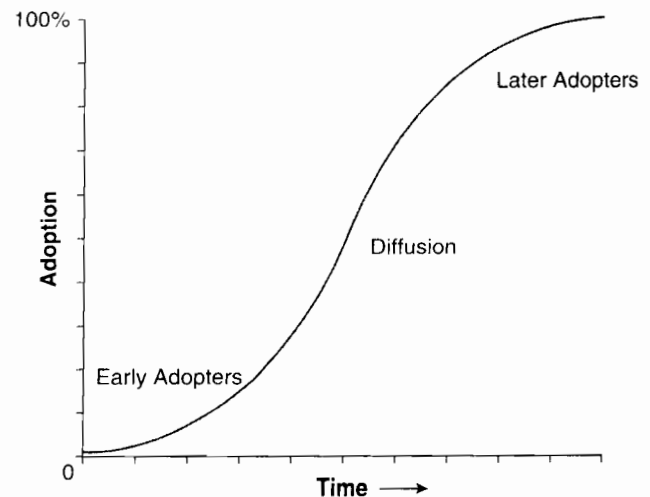


Figure 1 Diffusion is a nonlinear process of social influence over time.