

REVISITING JOHN DEWEY'S MESSAGE ABOUT COMMUNITY

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

More than a hundred years ago, the progressive American educator John Dewey stood in a furniture warehouse searching for desks and chairs to outfit his laboratory school at the University of Chicago. He wanted students to be active learners, and he wanted classrooms to reflect and enable the work they would do, asking questions and using their teachers' guidance to research and develop the answers. But the furniture dealer, like those in other warehouses Dewey had visited, could be of no help. "I am afraid we have not what you want," he told Dewey. "You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening."

In the midst of the COVID-19 era, Dewey's *School and Society* is an inspiring reminder of the importance of student-centered education at this critical moment in human history.

On the threshold of the twentieth century, Dewey published a "pedagogic creed" that called education "the fundamental method of social progress and reform." He believed that "the community's duty to education is, therefore, its paramount moral duty." Not only should society recognize "the necessity of endowing the educator

with sufficient equipment properly to perform his task," but he also hoped "that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling."

Schools, Dewey asserted, were meant to be "a form of community life," and he urged teachers to remember that the "child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education."

Students learn best, he said, when their natural curiosity guides their explorations, and when their teachers create opportunities for learning that is relevant to social contexts. As he memorably wrote: "I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living."

If, as Dewey believed, "the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing," then all the work that teachers have done this year to build community in their classes, whether remote or in person, will contribute to a stronger society when we eventually emerge into new routines.

As a veteran teacher, I can attest that the COVID-19 crisis has compelled me to revisit my course curricula and distill the most important elements of my goals and objectives for student learning, while the shift to online instruction has introduced new methods that no doubt bring a welcome update to my work with my "digital native" students.

Teaching has always been an exercise in hope. We can never be entirely sure which skills and knowledge our students will need for an unknown future, and today's uncertainty serves to highlight that reality.

As Dewey wrote in 1897, "it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions." An enduring lesson of this pandemic is that we do not know the future world for which we are preparing our students. The best we can do, in Dewey's view, is to give students command of their own powers, to help them develop "full and ready use of all [their] capacities," including perception, judgment, and effective action.



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