

Hutchins and Dewey revisited : two views of democracy

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Hutchins and Dewey Revisited: Two Views of Democracy

(Red.) Die amerikanische Tradition der Pädagogik ist seit dem späten 19. Jahrhundert bis auf wenige Ausnahmen der Demokratie bzw. der *education of citizens* verpflichtet. Dadurch bezog sie eine Frontstellung gegenüber der europäischen, insbesondere der deutschen Bildungstradition. Innerhalb der amerikanischen Diskussion entfachte sich nach einem ersten Siegeszug des Pragmatismus eine heftige Debatte um die Art, wie demokratische Erziehung zu denken sei. Diese Debatte ist im kontinentaleuropäischen Raum wenig bekannt, obgleich sie vermutlich das Paradox der Erziehung, nämlich den kaum lösbaren Widerspruch zwischen der Priorität der Kindorientierung und jener eines Curriculums, thematisiert und obschon sie mit John Dewey (1859–1952) und Robert Maynard Hutchins (1899–1977) von zwei exzellenten Denker der Pädagogik bestritten wurde. Nel Noddings rekonstruiert diese Debatte in ihren Grundzügen und nimmt unmissverständlich Stellung für Dewey.

■ Nel Noddings

In the 1930s, two great American educators entered a debate that, in less sophisticated terms, is alive world-wide even today. Robert Maynard Hutchins, long-time president of the University of Chicago and advocate of the Great Books program, was challenged by John Dewey who suggested strongly that the Hutchins program was not one best suited for education in a democratic society.

Almost half a century later, Mortimer Adler (Hutchins's close associate and advisor on education) dedicated his *Paideia Proposal* (1982) to Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins. Ignoring the basic differences between Dewey and Hutchins (of which he was well aware), Adler praised the devotion of both men to democracy and proceeded to make recommendations for education that would have pleased Hutchins but dismayed Dewey. How is

it that two men, equally committed to democracy, could hold such widely different views on the sort of education required for democratic life?

The answer to this question is that Dewey and Hutchins had very different conceptions of democracy. To understand the difference, we need to consider their different views on several related concepts—those involving the intellect, communication, and philosophy itself. I'll start by examining their differences on the intellect and communication and then move to their views on democracy and education. Space will not permit discussion of their differences on philosophy. Suffice it to say that, although Hutchins recognized Dewey as America's foremost philosopher, he claimed that Dewey's pragmatism was not a philosophy at all because it lacked first principles (Hutchins 1953, p. 53).

The differences and debates discussed here are alive today, and I'll close by considering how those differences affect today's educational theory and practice.

Basic Differences

The terms *intellect*, *intellectual*, and *intellectualism* contain a variety of meanings and reveal important differences between Dewey and Hutchins. For Dewey, intellect is the human capacity to think, and its activity is triggered by the occurrence of a problematic situation (Dewey 1933). «Intellectualizing,» on this account, is a phase of thinking; it is working on a spontaneous idea or interest—deciding what to do with it. There is no sharp separation between thinking and doing, and development of the intellect is manifested in increasingly intelligent action. Dewey's unwillingness to recognize a real separation of thinking from action induced critics to accuse him and his educational recommendations of «anti-intellectualism.» This criticism is ironic because, in contrast to traditional views, Dewey's «intellectualizing» pervades all of conscious human activity. It is pro-intellectual in a most profound sense.

For Hutchins, the intellect refers to reason, and reason stands above experience and directs the activity of the senses. The rational and the empirical are separate, and the rational is superior. It, then, should be the special sphere of education: «Education deals with the development of the intellectual

powers of men. Their moral and spiritual powers are the sphere of the family and church» (Hutchins 1953, p. 70). Education, for Hutchins, has nothing to do with physical education, character building, preparation for an occupation or daily life.

This separation of human capacities and their relegation to different agencies is abhorrent to Dewey. He objects also to the artificial separation of the intellect from the emotions, and he blames the dichotomy for the schools' neglect of student interests. Lamenting this separation, Dewey, discussed a situation still familiar to us today: «Thus in education we have that systematic depreciation of interest which has been noted, plus the necessity in practice, with most pupils, of recourse to extraneous and irrelevant rewards and penalties in order to induce the person who has a mind (much as his clothes have a pocket) to apply that mind to the truths to be known. Thus we have the spectacle of professional educators decrying appeal to interest while they uphold with great dignity the need of reliance upon examinations, marks, promotions and emotions, prizes, and the time-honored paraphernalia of rewards and punishments. The effect of this situation in crippling the teacher's sense of humor has not received the attention which it deserves» (Dewey 1916, p. 336).

I wish Dewey had said more about the crippling of teachers' sense of humor, because we see again today the effects of a deadly seriousness in schooling—a seriousness out of all proportion to the triviality of subject matter on which students are tested.

So far, we have seen that intellectual development, from Dewey's perspective, can proceed through intelligent grappling with any subject of substantial interest. In contrast, Hutchins identifies intellectual development with a thorough knowledge of the Western tradition. Education, he says, «is the single-minded pursuit of the intellectual virtues» (Hutchins 1936, p. 32), and these are developed through the study of what he calls «the permanent studies» (ibid., p. 77). First among these permanent studies are the great books of the Western tradition—many of which fall «in the ancient and medieval period» (ibid., p. 78). To the great books (in order to read them), Hutchins adds «grammar, rhetoric, and logic» (ibid., p. 83). He then adds mathematics «which exemplifies reasoning in its clearest and most precise form» (ibid., p. 83). All other subjects, and particularly those addressed to the practical or vocational, are to be eliminated or postponed until students have the basic intellectual development acquired through mastering the «permanent studies.»

Hutchins's view is reflected today in the comments of those educational critics who insist that Deweyan practices diminish or even negate the intellectual mission of schools (see Ravitch 2000). Current critics, without describing the intellectual as carefully and narrowly as Hutchins did, speak in his

spirit. The «intellectual» or «academic» inheres in certain subjects, not in ways of inquiry. It would seem that the harder the subject—judged by how many students hate, fear, and fail it—the more «intellectual» it is.

Conceptual differences appear also in discussion of what it means to be «an intellectual.» On one view, an intellectual is one who loves ideas and engages in abstract thought for its own sake. Dewey could accept such a definition with slight modification. He would raise a question about the phrase «for its own sake» and insist that the activity of intellectuals, admittedly mainly mental, is still directed at matters of practical significance. On this, he writes: «The outcome, the *abstract* to which education is to proceed, is an interest in intellectual matters for their own sake, a delight in thinking for the sake of thinking» (Dewey 1933, p. 226). But he carefully recommends a balance in abstract and practical thinking: «Abstract thinking ... represents an end, not *the* end. The power of sustained thinking on matters remote from direct use is an outgrowth of thinking on practical and immediate matters, but not a substitute for it ... Nor is theoretical thinking a higher type of thinking than practical. A person who has at command both types of thinking is of a higher order than he who possesses only one» (ibid., p. 228).

Dewey goes on to discuss individual differences and to warn educators that abstract or theoretical thinking is not congenial to everyone and that, although this type of thinking is properly an aim of education, educators should not «esteem the one mental habit inherently superior to the other and deliberately try to transform the type from concrete to abstract» (ibid., p. 229). Insisting on such transformation, he warns, makes the abstract «identical with the academic and pedantic» (ibid., p. 229).

He also rejects a second view that identifies an intellectual with a particular study or set of studies. For Dewey, there are no «permanent studies» and one can study both mathematics and cooking intelligently or stupidly. Dewey insists that an intellectual is defined by his or her interest in abstract thought in any field or endeavor. This difference between Dewey and Hutchins is of fundamental importance in understanding their debate on education and the current insistence on the superiority of certain subjects in the school curriculum.

Dewey and Hutchins differ also on their interpretation of «communication.» On the surface, the difference seems subtle, but at a deeper level, it reflects a well-known conflict in views of democracy. In the second section of chapter one in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey concentrates on communication. He does not deny the power and necessity of transmission, nor does he deny the connection between community and having things in common: «Men live in community in virtue of things which they have in common, and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common» (Dewey

1916, p. 4).

Dewey puts the desire to communicate first in social life. The commitment to communicate, however difficult such attempts may be, leads to real communication and communication, in turn, produces common «aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge» (ibid.). This view is at the very heart of Dewey's conception of democracy: «A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience» (ibid., p. 87). It can be inferred from what Dewey writes that even an initial lack of common language should not be an insuperable block to communication, although it makes communication more difficult. Shared experience should aid in the development of shared language.

In contrast, Hutchins insists on common knowledge as the basis for communication. For him, communication seems to be a one-way process of transmission until students are «educated»—that is, until they have firm knowledge of the permanent studies: «Graduation from an American university is no guarantee of literacy. It is no guarantee that the American has any knowledge of the tradition in which, whether he knows it or not, he lives. This tradition is the Graeco-Hebraic tradition. I had a senior of the University of Chicago in one of my seminars who had never heard of Joshua, and not long ago I was interviewed in Paris by a prominent American journalist, a graduate of a great American university who had never heard of Thucydides or the Peloponnesian War. Hence the failure in communication and community. When I was a student at Yale I could communicate only with those students who had happened, by accident, to elect the same courses that I had elected and whom I happened to know because I sat next to them in the lecture room» (Hutchins 1953, p. 61).

This is an astonishing statement. Could Hutchins find nothing to discuss outside the «permanent studies,» or was it simply that when he found someone lacking in such knowledge he would not deign to speak to him or her?

Beyond the apparent arrogance and elitism in the above statement, however, Hutchins makes an important point about communication. He points out that the specialization characteristic of universities makes it difficult, sometimes impossible, for professors to communicate across fields of study. But he fails to see that the attitude he embraces contributes to the difficulty. A common knowledge of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War is unlikely to help much. Specialists must *want* to communicate and work toward doing so. Instead, too often they scorn other professors as Hutchins did the journalist. If one can't speak my language, they imply, there is a failure of communication.

Another University of Chicago professor, Wayne Booth, examines the problem with a very different attitude. He describes the problem noted by Hutchins. «How is it,» he asks, «that we can gather hope-

fully here, year after year, to listen to one another tell about our special work, when we know in advance that most of us, most of the time, have no real hope of understanding the special work of most of the rest of us?» (Booth 1988, p. 310). To encourage communication, the university sponsored the Ryerson Lectures at which professors lectured to general audiences of professors on their work. One Ryerson lecturer confessed: «I grasped almost nothing in a couple of the lectures, about a third in half of them, two-thirds in a few of them and all in only one—my own» (ibid., p. 311).

Without the necessary background in each field—and that is clearly impossible to acquire—this result may be inevitable. But it gets worse. Even within fields such as mathematics and anthropology, experts cannot readily understand the work of other experts in different sub-fields, and often this lack of easy understanding is used to denigrate the work of new or different branches of a study. If I can't understand it, experts say, it can't be any good! Like Booth, I have observed this attitude many times at major research universities. I even caught myself at it once.

Unlike Hutchins, however, (and more like Dewey) Booth is willing to explore broad possibilities. He describes three «rhetorics»—or, many of us would say, «discourses.» The first is specialist rhetoric, available only to experts in a given field; the second is general rhetoric—the sort we use to communicate in any public situation; and the third is academic rhetoric—talk and understanding that are accessible to all those who live and work in the academy (ibid., pp. 318-322). It would take us too far afield to examine these rhetorics in detail, but several of Booth's points are important for the present discussion. First, if we have the will to do so, we can find ways to communicate with another. Second, the efficacy of our attempts at communication depends heavily on trust. In the academy, we engage in a certain mode of associated living and, by sharing our general experiences, we come to trust many of our colleagues, and this trust (or lack of it) influences our judgments. (This is why the famous Sokal hoax was more deplored by many academics than the lapse of judgment in publishing it.) Third, all three rhetorics are fallible. Specialist language changes over time, sometimes rapidly and dramatically. General rhetoric is subject to all sorts of errors in observation, repetition, and prejudices of association. Academic rhetoric is riddled with posturing and attempts to seize or exercise power. Nevertheless, with trust and commitment, communication takes place in the academy. If it can take place there, it can take place between university presidents and common people.

Dewey, in agreement with Booth and in contrast to Hutchins, insists on the primacy of communication. We do not first acquire a body of common knowledge and then engage in communication. Our efforts at communication, at sharing experien-

ce, produce both knowledge and greater competence in communicating. Dewey emphasizes the need to disseminate the results of social research and, although he recognizes that these results often «remain in secluded library alcoves» (Dewey 1927, p. 183), he believes that both writer and potential reader bear responsibility for this gap in communication. He comments: «A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow ... Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art» (ibid., p. 183).

Once again, Dewey emphasizes process and interaction. One can learn to inquire by diligently studying any significant subject matter and mastering the demands it makes on thinking. Similarly, if people want to communicate and have something of general import to say, they will struggle to find a suitable mode of communication. This does not mean that Dewey rejects all efforts to transmit cultural knowledge, standards of language, and accepted social customs. He values these quite as much as Hutchins does. He and Hutchins differ on method and order. Hutchins makes common knowledge a pre-condition for communication; Dewey makes communication antecedent to common knowledge. Hutchins describes the intellect as the application of reason to his «permanent studies»; Dewey describes it as a growing capacity to act intelligently on any human problem. These differences are reflected in broader differences in their views on democracy and education.

Before turning to those views, I'd like to say something about the communicative styles of Hutchins and Dewey. Hutchins could not accuse Dewey of lacking the necessary background knowledge for communication (Dewey was familiar with Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War!), but he said that Dewey was «not a clear writer» (Hutchins 1953, p. 15). In his response to Dewey's review of *The Higher Learning*, Hutchins complained that he couldn't really reply because «Mr. Dewey has stated my position in such a way as to lead me to think that I cannot write, and has stated his own in such a way as to make me suspect that I cannot read» (Hutchins 1991, p. 592).

Having carefully read both *The Higher Learning* and Dewey's review of it, my sense is that Dewey—who was often unclear—was this time clear and fair. Why did Hutchins take exception to Dewey's observation that «Mr. Hutchins looks to Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas»? Mr. Hutchins clearly did so, and he does so again in later works. Moreover, he advises all of us to do so if we wish to be «educated.»

It is hard to determine when Hutchins is speaking seriously and when (perhaps) he is having a little fun. For example, in an interview in 1942, he was asked, «Are we to assume that all the real thinking is only being done in the universities of this country?» He responded, «Yes» (Hutchins 1942, p. 10). Surely he could not have believed this. It is probably an ex-

ample of the sort of exchange about which we say, «I guess you had to have been there.» However, his evasive and amusingly simplistic answers ruffled Dewey's feathers. Responding to Hutchins's «reply» to his review, Dewey was obviously annoyed: «The tone and substance of President Hutchins' reply would lead one to suppose that after all he was not raising or meaning to raise any fundamental issue. I must ask his forgiveness if I took his book too seriously» (Dewey 1991, p. 407).

So much for communication between two men who wrote eloquently on the topic! Let's turn now to their views on democracy and education.

Democracy and Education

There is no reason to doubt Adler's claim that both Hutchins and Dewey were devoted to democracy, but they held vastly different views of democracy. For Hutchins, democracy is a form of government patterned on Athenian democracy. For Dewey, democracy is a mode of associated living characterized by many widely shared values and open communication across groups (Dewey 1916, p. 87); a democratic form of government must reflect, must build upon, that mode of living.

Hutchins declares that, in a democracy, every man (we would say now «person») is a ruler: «Democracy makes every man a ruler, for the heart of democracy is universal suffrage. If liberal education is the education that rulers ought to have, and this I say has never been denied, then every ruler, that is every citizen, should have a liberal education» (Hutchins 1953, p. 84).

If by «liberal education» we simply mean an education that contributes to human freedom, no one would argue. But Hutchins is wrong to say that no one has ever denied that liberal education, narrowly and traditionally defined, is the education rulers should have. Biographies are replete with criticism of liberal education as Hutchins describes it, and the Western world has experienced two centuries of war and economic violence ruled by people who were so liberally educated.

The claim that democracy «makes every man a ruler» is also false, but it facilitates Hutchins's argument. Having made every citizen a ruler, Hutchins can consistently look at the special forms of education provided by Plato for his philosopher-kings and by the powerful nations of Europe for their political and military leaders. Two comments are appropriate here. First, citizens in today's democracies are not rulers; they elect representatives to make their laws and enforce them. Second, the apparent equality advocated by Hutchins is questionable. What sort of equality is achieved by insisting that people with demonstrably different talents should be coerced into exactly the same curriculum? Hutchins is surely right to say that education should develop the intellectual capacities of all students, but we must figure out how to do this, and the same content for

all seems unlikely to accomplish our goal. Moreover, it seems highly undemocratic.

Hutchins praises the German Gymnasium, the French lycee, and the Italian liceo. It is odd that he continues to do so even after World War II (*ibid.*, p. 36, p. 38). In contrast, Dewey raises questions about this form of education even before World War II. He comments: «The 'state' was substituted for humanity; cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism. To form the citizen, not the «man» became the aim of education» (Dewey 1916, p. 93).

Continuing his criticism, Dewey notes that the effort to help people become «truly moral, rational, and free ... depends upon men consciously striving to educate their successors not for the existing state of affairs but so as to make possible a future better humanity. But there is the great difficulty. Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity» (Dewey 1916, p. 95).

On this goal, Hutchins and Dewey agree. Hutchins even recognizes that Dewey should not be accused of promoting education as «adjustment to the environment» (Hutchins 1953, p. 15). But whereas Dewey insists on the contextual nature of educational theorizing (Dewey 1916, p. 97), Hutchins believes that the intellectual virtues are the same for all times and places: «Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same ... I suggest that the heart of any course of study designed for the whole people will be, if education is rightly understood, the same at any time, in any place, under any political, social, or economic conditions» (Hutchins 1936/1995, p. 66).

Hutchins believes, further, that democratic government depends for its success on this common education. It is odd that he does not notice that the education he espouses did *not* develop in democratic societies.

Dewey rejects both a dual system of education—one «narrowly conceived for the masses» and a different one for a «specialized cultivated class»—and also a curriculum for all that is a poor copy of elite education. This, he says, is of little use to anyone. What is needed? In many places, Dewey makes clear that worthwhile content must spring from student interest (Dewey 1916, 1938/1963), induce the active engagement of intelligence, and lead to outcomes deemed educationally significant by well-informed adults. He rejects the Hutchins/Adler recipe for a fixed, universal curriculum for all but, it seems clear, he would also have rejected the recommendations—so popular in the 1960s and 1970s—for a concentration on intellectual processes. Intellectual processes cannot be taught directly and in isolation from content. Content—that with which students engage wholeheartedly—is crucial. It is the task of

teachers to help students master the intellectual and practical processes demanded by the subject matter they have chosen (Dewey 1938/1963).

Perhaps it is wise to use Dewey's own words in closing this section. Here is Dewey speaking explicitly on democracy and education: «Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a *particular* social ideal ... A society that makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder» (Dewey 1916, p. 99).

The Debate Today

In the U.S. today, the debate is alive only in potentiality; that is, although questions remain about what democratic equality requires of us in education, there is no real debate. Policy-makers almost universally advocate the same curriculum for all students in the name of equality. Many academics and educational critics, however, continue to raise strong objections to the standardization of curriculum (see, for example, Eisner 1995; Kohn 1999; Noddings 1992, 1997, 2003; Ohanian 1999), but no real communication takes place between the two sides.

Neither Hutchins nor Dewey has won the argument. Almost surely, both men would strongly criticize the current standards movement—Hutchins because the subject matter forced on all students is mostly trivial, Dewey because it *is forced* on students, and their interests are largely ignored. Hutchins would scorn much of the «academic» material today as a travesty on the intellectual; Dewey would object to it on the grounds that it is indeed academic in the pejorative sense. Hutchins would be distressed because the schools now address problems that he thought were outside the purview of education—character building, sex education, conflict resolution, drug resistance, and driver education. Dewey would applaud the inclusion of such topics, but he would be deeply disturbed by the dogmatic ways in which these topics are treated. All learning now seems encapsulated in the specification of performances that can be measured on standardized tests, and there is little discussion about what these performances mean for permanent or developmental learning. Everyone knows that students can «cram» for tests, pass them, and then forget the material on which they were tested. We need to know a lot more than we do about the lasting effects of the current emphasis on test performance. We also need to know what is happening to students whose talents and interest are entirely neglected in the pursuit of «equality.»

Figuring out what everyone needs to know in a democratic society is hard, fascinating work. Hutchins made it too simple, and the record shows dramatically that 1) there are well-educated people who have not heard of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War and 2) exposure to a Hutchins-type liberal education does not guarantee the production of reasonable and virtuous people. Dewey was perhaps too vague on the question. He seemed to suppose that students will gain the necessary skills and habits of mind by engaging fully with subject matter that interests them, and this may be true for many areas of knowledge. But can this approach be used in learning mathematics? How much mathematics do all students need? Questions about the knowledge needed by everyone and how best to teach and learn it are still open questions, and they are not being addressed seriously.

We are not communicating effectively. Dewey said, «Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought» (Dewey 1927, p. 218). Our challenge now is this: Can we open a genuine educational dialogue on democratic education?

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