

# John Dewey: Philosopher of Community

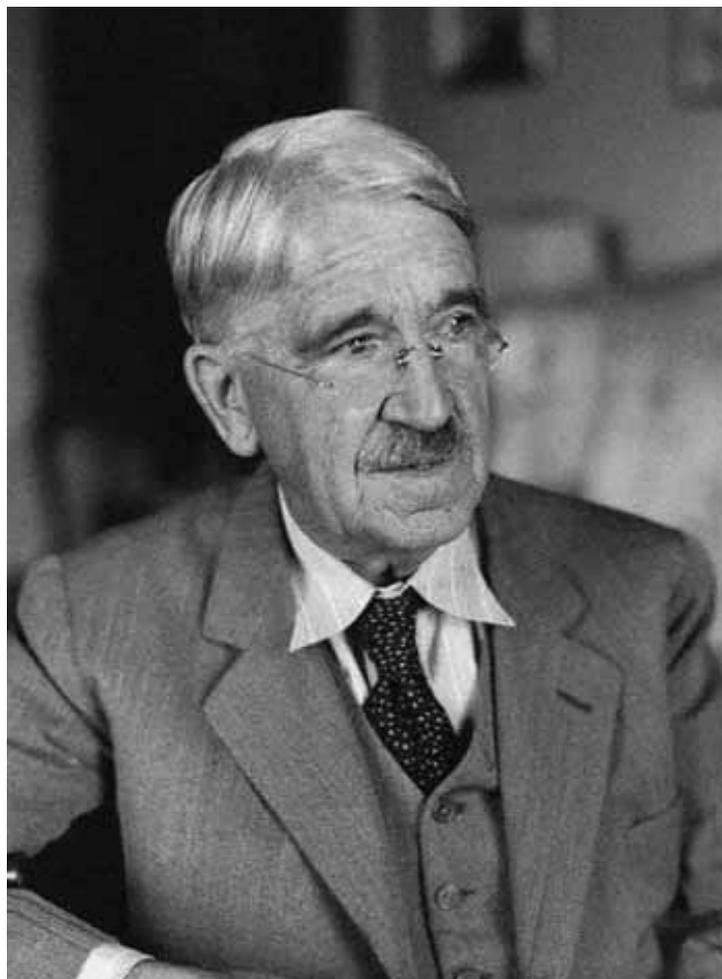
In American history, no public intellectual represented the close connection of education to our most passionate debates—those about the kind of communities we want and how to shape and govern them—as forcefully or as credibly as John Dewey.

IN 1834, THE PENNSYLVANIA legislature received more than 30,000 protests from irate taxpayers who objected to a budget allocation that they regarded as unconstitutional. The same battle was fought in state after state. The controversy made its way through the courts for four decades until the U. S. Supreme Court finally settled it. At last, it became legitimate to use public funds for a furiously debated, vigorously opposed purpose that today we take for granted: high schools.

A century later, in the 1970s, controversy raged around court decisions ordering the racial integration of city school districts on civil rights grounds, requiring some children to be bused to schools outside their neighborhoods.

These incidents illustrate a fact of great importance today: the close connection of education to our most passionate debates about the kind of communities we want, and how to shape and govern these communities. In American history, no public intellectual represented this connection as forcefully or as credibly as John Dewey.

Dewey died in 1952, but his work continues to frame all discussions about the role of schools in community building. No one has demonstrated his talent for convincingly linking educational policy to the pursuit of healthy communities, nor has any American scholar concerned with the philosophical basis of community exerted anything like the stature and public respect that Dewey commanded as a commentator on broad questions of national life and policy. “It is scarcely an exaggeration,” said historian Henry Steele Commager, “to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.” Dewey not only changed American education, but also, of great impor-



tance, he based his investigations of social issues on a concept of community life that revolved around education—especially education built on science, technology, and scientific method.

Large philosophical ideas take time to filter through cultural institutions and they retain relevance over generations even when they recede from public view. Although Dewey’s ideas were formulated a lifetime ago, they currently are of renewed relevance for all urban professionals, public policy makers, companies, government agencies, and citizens concerned with the promotion of healthy communities. Today, new

technologies, and the erosion of old barriers between schools and their communities, are linking schools increasingly with the world outside the classroom on several fronts. For example:

▷ In June, the state of Maine announced it had signed a \$41 million contract with Apple Computers to provide eBooks to 36,000 seventh- and eighth-grade students and their teachers, extending for another four years a program initiated in 2002 to make laptops part of everyday teaching at all of Maine’s 241 public middle schools—the first such statewide initiative in the United States. Maine reports that its pro-

gram, aimed at making technological literacy available to all students regardless of economic background, is still the biggest of its kind in the country.

▷ In Waldorf, Maryland, the new \$64 million North Point High School for Science, Technology, and Industry, which commenced operations last year after seven years of preparation, sees itself as a “21st-century school,” offering students a mix of traditional high school subjects and exposure to leading-edge computer technology. Its goal is to equip its graduates for college or for immediate jobs in the workforce. The school combines a traditional educational role with that of a vocational and technology training facility for the community and regional businesses,

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including the use of the school’s sophisticated equipment for continuing adult education, videoconferencing tools, and digitized textbooks. ▷ The U.S. online education industry is expanding rapidly, using advances in telecommunications technology to enable adults to continue their education while holding down full-time jobs—even in remote locations. (The U.S. Armed Forces are actively cooperating with accredited online course providers so that military personnel can attend school by Internet even while on active service in locations like Iraq and Korea.) This phenomenon is linked to the trend toward commercializing education services. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported earlier this year that for-

profit colleges represent the fastest-growing sector in higher education, with the eight largest corporations showing a combined market value of around \$26 billion.

▷ Community colleges and other educational institutions increasingly are being recognized as economic empowerment resources that can be integrated usefully into community plans. Work is currently underway on a state-funded \$29 million education and community development center in downtown Binghamton, New York, which, in addition to its role as an educational facility, is expected to help advance community revitalization. According to New York Governor George E. Pataki, it will be “a major catalyst” in reenergizing Binghamton’s economy, attracting people and activity to the heart of the town, and establishing “a whole new market for business that will help retain and boost existing retailers, while also encouraging new private sector investment and job creation.”

While it is unlikely that Dewey would have unreservedly endorsed every form of contemporary school-community integration—one can speculate he would have wanted the intellectual independence of education protected from improper influence by any vested interest group, commercial, religious, or political—the overall trend toward increasing integration of schools into community life is in accord with his thinking. It is, therefore, useful to consider these events against the background of his ideas and influence.

The U.S. school system has many historic roots, but one of the most fruitful vantage points from which to view it is the work of the 17th-century Czech cleric and scholar Jan Amos Komenský, widely known by his Latin name Comenius. His educational philosophy won many adherents and played a major part in forming subsequent educational practices in many countries. But the tide eventually turned against his approach. Urban theorist Lewis

Mumford asserted: “Comenius invented modern pedagogy and helped ruin modern education.” Although Comenius astutely promoted the idea of an integrated education that developed the whole person, he was captivated by the notion of mechanization. This conflict in his theories helped bring about a regimented, military style of teaching, separating education from the contexts of living communities and concerning itself with facts and efficiency—assembly-line rote learning—rather than the nurturing of understanding and well-developed citizens. This kind of drill-sergeant education reached its acme in the Victorian age. One of the leaders of the revolt against it was Dewey.

It seems appropriate that Dewey was born (in Vermont) in 1859, the year that saw the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Both Darwin and Dewey were ahead of their times. Darwin placed human understanding of biological evolution on a new level, blurring the distinction between humanity and the animal kingdom, while Dewey devoted his career to an evolutionary interpretation of learning that rejected artificial dividing lines between education and everyday life. The mind, Dewey taught, is not an empty vessel into which facts and ideas are poured. It conditions what it learns and its explorations change the world around it. Gaining knowledge is an active process of environmental involvement, and educational institutions must reflect this. Just as the mind is never isolated from its surroundings, so too is the school a part of the community and must reflect the active patterns of social life.

Unlike many philosophers who confine their reflections to their libraries, Dewey developed his findings in practical ways. During his formative years in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the booming cities of Chicago and New York largely defined the urban milieu for Americans. After launching his aca-

dem career with teaching stints at Baltimore’s newly formed Johns Hopkins University and then the University of Michigan, Dewey transferred to the University of Chicago, where he developed an experimental school, the Dewey School, in which his activity-based teaching methods were put to the test with apparent success.

Dewey also participated in Chicago’s Hull-House, one of the most famous community projects of its time. Hull-House was tailor-made to support the thought of a young scholar interested in integrating educational infrastructure into community life. A glimpse at the history of Hull-House offers a valuable window on Dewey’s thought and the influence that he came to exert on America down to the present day.

The driving force behind Hull-House was Jane Addams, who at the age of 29, cofounded Hull-House with her friend Ellen Starr, in 1889, after the two had visited England, where the world’s first so-called settlement house, a support center for slum dwellers, had been established at London’s Toynbee Hall. Hull-House was not the first of its kind in the United States; others developed independently around the same time. But it became the most prominent, mainly due to the force of Addams’s personality.

Hull-House provided relief to the immigrant poor through an extraordinary range of services aimed at improving the wretched conditions in which many residents of Chicago’s 19th ward lived. It was no mere soup kitchen. Addams and her co-workers bathed babies, dispensed advice, arranged classes for the poor in subjects from philosophy and economics to artisan skills, campaigned for civil rights, promoted cooperation among people from diverse social classes, lobbied for legislative reform, lectured scholars on community affairs, and got embroiled in rowdy local politics in an age of male ward bosses unaccustomed to female challengers. Addams’s work earned her such

respect across the nation that when she stood up on the convention floor to second the nomination of Theodore Roosevelt for reelection as president of the United States on the Progressive Party ticket, she was thunderously applauded. She later became an activist for international peace and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.

Dewey became involved with Hull-House, lectured there, and drew from Addams's work an insight into the practical impact of ideas, the many-sidedness of community life, the hunger for knowledge and self-improvement in all sectors of society, and the fact that all social problems seemed to come down, eventually, to issues of education. These experiences, together with his vision of learning as a dynamic process in which the social environment plays a critical role, formed the mainspring of the philosophy that Dewey was to elaborate over a long and prolific career. From Chicago, he went to New York's Columbia University, which became the base from which, for the rest of his career, he poured out a lengthy series of books, papers, and articles that interpreted every major aspect of American life from the viewpoints of education—the extension of science, technology, and scientific methodology into all areas of life—and the sense of community. For Dewey, science, technology, and scientific methodology provided the glue that connected education to community development. It is this connection that makes Dewey's thought so relevant to contemporary urban issues, the role of schools in communities, and the use of technological infrastructures to improve urban environments.

Dewey differed from many, and perhaps most, other philosophical promoters of science in that he did not see scientific inquiry as fundamentally separate from the development of community values. The process of scientifically assembling, sharing, and collectively evaluating information and options, and the development of scientifically grounded methods and technologies to solve problems, was for him by its nature a value-clarifying process. This was, and today remains, a highly controversial view. In general, secular philo-

sophical interpreters of science and technology can be divided into two camps. On one side are those who see science and technology as ethically neutral and regard human evaluations of scientific and technological products as separate from scientific and technological enterprise. At the extreme on the other side are thinkers who see science and technology as containing elements that inherently constrain the best qualities of human experience, that place in human hands powers that human wisdom is unable to control, and that encourage behaviors dangerous to natural ecologies.

Dewey's vision of science and technology as positive moral forces in community life, extending even into society's celebration of the arts, runs counter to both these perspectives.

In this regard, Dewey most likely would have been excited about the application of computer technology in schools today. Furthermore, without a doubt, Dewey would have embraced the power of telecommunications technology to integrate schools and colleges into the community. This technology connects his thought in very practical ways to the political manner in which we now address urban development challenges.

For Dewey, science, technology, and education were all politically significant as cornerstones of the spirit of democracy. The contemporary urban development technique of vision planning, whereby private citizens join with officials and scientifically trained experts in efforts to evaluate development options and articulate a systematic development

path, is highly consistent with Dewey's philosophy of community. Politically inclusive community action of this kind has great potential to build bridges among various groups, Dewey believed.

A current example of the difficulties Dewey identified in building bridges among groups can be seen in the efforts to reconstruct Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Alan Feinberg, a professional planner based in Frederick, Maryland, who assisted earlier this year in relief meetings in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, found that almost more alarming than the physical devastation were the socioeconomic barriers dividing social groups that he encountered. "These are clearly communities for whom the natural disaster was only part of the problem," he says. "On a long-term

basis, their most serious problems have been social and economic divisions. It would make little sense to rebuild those areas along the lines of the same social divisions that existed before the hurricane struck. Yet, so far I have seen every sign that that is what is happening." Feinberg says he believes the reconstruction initiative in Louisiana presents an opportunity for a more inclusive urban policy to evolve, providing for housing, transportation, schools, and other amenities to reflect participative inputs from traditionally marginalized groups—the ethos of Hull-House projected into a large-scale urban vision planning exercise.

The tool to accomplish this, Feinberg suggests, is a faith-based collaboration in which leaders of recognized churches in poor neigh-

borhoods come together to pool their insights into community needs and work with local and federal authorities. The objective, he argues, should be to formulate a redevelopment plan that will enjoy wide support among a diversity of ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Interestingly, this proposal would emphasize a Deweyan goal of a widely inclusive urban reconstruction made possible by technology. Feinberg believes that distance-spanning telecommunications tools, including videoconferencing, could help such a process in New Orleans by enabling traditionally marginalized groups in remote areas to participate.

Dewey's concepts also are relevant to Feinberg's recommendation in that Dewey found the idea of reconstruction useful to productive community building. He maintained that the best progress can be achieved by recognizing that we possess no perfect solutions and that we must constantly reconstruct our assumptions in the light of new problems and situations. However, Dewey likely would have preferred a collaboration that included not only church leaders but also a broad range of secular community advocates and activists.

Remaining as relevant today as it was more than half a century ago is Dewey's early recognition that while developing successful communities must necessarily involve attention to schooling, sanitation systems, medical amenities, transportation, private and public architecture, and a host of physical infrastructures and organizational support resources, communities are, at bottom, much more than buildings, roads, and other material assets. Ultimately, they are reflections of human values that transcend political ideology, ethnicity, gender, and religion. **U**

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