John Dewey—the precursor of pedagogy of creativity

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Abstract

The paper focuses on J. Dewey's contribution to the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy of creativity. J. Dewey is considered a precursor of this field. He introduced new concepts, including the concept of "creativity" and highlighted the traits of creativity in children's activities in school. He made important suggestions with respect to the desired content and characteristics of desired creativity training in schools. The paper reviews and discusses all these contributions.

Keywords: pedagogy of creativity; John Dewey; potential of children; originality

1. Introduction

The pedagogy of creativity is a domain of pedagogy concerned with stimulating the potential of each pupil to conduct creative activities. These activities are unlike other human activities types because of their results, which can be characterized by attributes such as novelty, originality, ingenuity, utility.

The first research papers and pedagogical theories concerning the stimulation of creativity in pupils appeared in the second half of the XXth century. The term itself of creativity was not present in the major specialty dictionaries before the 1950 (Roco, M., 2004). After that year, once systematic investigations on creativity started to be published (J.P. Guilford, 1950, 1967, Rogers C., 1967, Osborn Al., 1971, Wallach, N.A, Kogan, N,1965, Torrance, E.P., 1971 and others) there were other papers which tried to find practical application for the psychological theories on creativity (Davies, G., Scott, J. (ed), 1971, Fustier M., Fustier B. 1998, Jaoui, A. 1990 and others). Few authors used though the pedagogical ideas of J. Dewey in regards to the stimulation of pupils' creativity, which were formalized long before the psychological research papers.

2. Methodology

Our paper intends to bring to attention these pedagogic ideas of J.Dewey which can be considered as the theoretical basic for the pedagogy of creativity. We will identify the paper in which J.Dewey introduced the concept of 'creativity', we will examine the meanings he gave for this concept and investigate his approach towards the peculiarities of creative activities undertaken by pupils in schools. Finally, we will summarize the suggestions he made in his research regarding the content and the desirable characteristics of the creative instructions which takes place in schools.

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3. Results

3.1. J. Dewey - the creator of the concept of creativity

"Creativity” as a term has emerged in the first decades of last century being introduced in pedagogy by J. Dewey (1921) and in psychology by G. Allport (1938). “The joy experienced by children is the joy of an activity which is intellectually constructive, of creativity (...) if we can use this word (...).” (Dewey, J. 1972, pp. 139)

Dewey introduced the term with certain precaution to indicate the qualitative aspect of the mind rather than an exceptional personal trait, referring more precisely to the constructive aspect of intellectual activity Any thought – said Dewey – has something creative in it, as it implies the discovery of something new and inventive. Few years later, Allport, deepening the study of the psychology of creativity highlighted the participation of the entire personality, as creativity requires a specific structuring of all mental processes. The term creativity does not occurs though in the European pedagogical thinking of the time, terms like „creative potential,” „creative capacity” and „spontaneous creation” being used instead.

By the middle of this century (1950) researches in the psychology of thinking (I.P. Guilford etc.) led to a new use of the term which had since experienced increasing use in pedagogy, sociology and philosophy. Its meaning is related to the broader problem of human creative power and its nature. The idea that through systematic education we can make quantitative and qualitative changes to the human creative potential revealed a great dependence of the creative potential on the learning activity. Man's creative power was always interpreted as his ability to produce "the new". The disagreement in the field arose mainly with respect to the nature of this ability, its scope as well as the levels on which it manifests itself.

Different possibilities to influence creativity through education are created depending on how the creative potential of human nature and its relationship with learning is understood.

3.2. J. Dewey's ideas on the nature of children's creative potential

The term “potential” is used by J. Dewey to mean "a force positively present." More specifically, the creative potential of child refers to the internal forces at his disposal to carry out a creative activity.

Dewey critiques the traditional school because "it mostly addresses the intellectual aspect of our nature, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, to understand symbols rather than our impulses and tendencies to make, to create, to produce in the shape of something useful or art" (author's highlights). (Dewey, J., 1977, pp. 99)

The starting point in education should be given by these primary impulses and tendencies. "The problem of the relationship between school and child’s life – says Dewey- is essentially this: either to ignore a child natural endowment and tendencies - dealing not with the living child but with an inert image we have formed about him - or to give liberty and satisfaction to his nature” (Dewey, 1977, pp.109). Dewey supports the second alternative.

The creative potential of children originates therefore in a bundle of instinctual forces which are manifested by a need to create, by a natural impulse to produce. This innate trait itself contains also a "growth potential". Not in the sense that it would develop by itself (as it requires favorable environment to transform it into action), but in the sense it has plasticity and it depends in its development on the social interactions of the individual. (Dewey,J.,1972, pp.38)

From these ideas, in regard to the nature of internal forces (vectors) which orient the child toward creative activities, we can draw three conclusions for pedagogy:

a. Firstly, they imply that an education which aims to cultivate the creative activity of the child corresponds with its natural tendencies. Therefore it aligns with the principle that education needs to be in conformity with the nature of the child.

b. Secondly, such an education cannot neglect the natural endowment of the children, which needs to be its starting point. The existence of natural traits does not
render education useless, on the contrary, requires it to make possible their development. This development is possible as a result of the plasticity of these tendencies, which depend in their development on the social interaction and the social experience of the individual.

c. The main impulses that underlie the creative activity of the child are specific to the childhood, which means that all children have a common starting energetic vector to carry a creative activity. Up to a certain point all children are able to carry out a certain creative activity. Up to what point? We find J. Dewey’s answer to this question when we analyze the nature of children’s creative activity and the results of this activity.

3.3. The particularities of creative activity of children and the desirable features of the creative training

J. Dewey believes that creative activity is mainly an intellectual activity. Any human being who really thinks is involved in a creative mental activity. "A thought – says Dewey – is creative, is a journey to something new. It involves a certain inventiveness (...) as the novelty, the ingenious inventiveness are related to the way in which the object is viewed and the different uses it receives" (Dewey J., 1972, pp.139). In order to think, a man needs to encounter a difficulty. "A difficulty – shows Dewey – represents an essential prerequisite for thinking" (Dewey J., 1972, pp.137). The difficulty which generates thinking is felt by the individual as a problematic situation. "Much of the art of training is to proceed in such a way that a new problem is difficult enough to cause the act of thinking but low enough in uncertainty, which naturally accompanies innovation, in order to uncover bright known spots which could lead to useful suggestions” (Dewey J., 1972, pp. 137) In a problematic situation the individual thus finds familiar elements but also unfamiliar elements. The familiar elements cannot supply what is missing. "They define, clarify and localize the problem: they cannot generate the answer." (Dewey J., 1972, pp. 137) The creative act of child’s thinking lies in imagining these missing elements in order to solve the problem. It follows that in Dewey’s view the creative activity of the child is essentially a problem solving activity. What is the importance of such creative activities for the child’s development? "If he (the child) – says Dewey – cannot find his own solution (...) and his own way, he will not learn, even if he can reproduce a correct answer with 100% accuracy” (Dewey J.,1972,pp. 138). Therefore the creative activity is involved as an essential element in a superior way of learning. For Dewey, the best type of teaching leads the student to discover commonalities and reciprocal relationships. As a result, in his view, the concept of creative activity for children in schools takes mainly the form of learning by discovery.

The discoveries made by a child in his learning do not have the same significance as, for example, the discoveries in science. Nobody imagines that students will discover laws and scientific principles with novelty value for science.

The main aspect of learning by discovery is related to a certain attitude that the child has when facing a problem. It pertains to the courage of trying to solve it by himself and to try to look for different answers than those widely known and accepted. "We care about – says Dewey – the originality in attitude, resonating with the natural answer of each individual’s own personality, not about the originality measured in results” (Dewey J.,1972, pp. 259) Firstly, the attitude is to have the children tackle problems with the confidence that they can be solved, with the trust that „it is possible”. Secondly, it requires approaching the problem with receptivity that is the existence of a tendency to accept different points of view. Lastly, it involves responsibility toward the consequences of his own activity.

The confidence in the ability to solve the problem, the receptivity toward other points of view and self-exigence are important components of an experimental attitude.

The attitude component mentioned earlier is a condition for solving problems in an original fashion – for the actual creative activity. For Dewey, the attitude components
mean finding a natural way of relating a child to an issue, with the condition that it is really his issue, not a foreign one imposed on him by the teacher.

To resume how J. Dewey understands the creative activity of the child, we can draw four conclusions:

a. the creative activity is, at the essence, an activity intellectual in nature;

b. the creative activity of the child in the school is about solving issues;

c. the learning activity which requires creative activity the most is learning by discovery;

d. the main challenge when learning by discovery is to establish an experimental attitude in the mind of the child towards the object of his knowledge, which can be understood as the voluntary engagement of the child to solve his knowledge problems, by his own means.

3.4. The pedagogical significance of the child creation results, according to J. Dewey

Dewey was considering that once a pupil realizes his lack of means to solve a problem or to express a feeling, he will consciously seek to find those means, and, if nobody is ready to provide them as such, he will create them. This creative drive was not imposed on him by someone, instead he arrives by himself independently at the conclusion that he needs more experience, new means. In the latter case, his means of action are not taken over from others (imitation) but are discovered on his own. It is possible that these means of actions or expression that he creates are identical to other people’s means. However, this is a different problem, to establish the value of creation for others. What is important from an educational point of view is that the pupil arrived to possess those means through a creative process. Why is that important? Because in life, there will be seldom be someone from outside to offer ready-made solutions to his problems. Most often, he will have to find those solution by himself. And the school should be life itself.

This creative activity is not an exclusive trait of adults. “A 3-year old child – Dewey notes – which discovers what can be done with cubes, or a six-year-old that discovers what to do by putting together 5 cents with other 5 cents is a true discoverer, even if everybody else in the world already knows these things. It is an authentic experience augmenter, not an element added mechanically, but an enrichment by new means.” (Dewey J., 1972, pp. 139) The „authentic” increase of the experience requires from the child an effort to discover and this is a creative activity.

The resulting conclusions, the ones that are important to establish a pedagogy point of view of creativity are at least four. All children, at all ages, can achieve constructive activities, which are not directly imitated and which enlarge the field of personal experience for each; this is the point up to which we can say children are capable to sustain a creative activity.

The results of the creative activity undertaken by pupils have mainly educational value, because they involve acquiring new knowledge, abilities, experiences and personal means of action or expression – in short, an expansion of personal experience. These may materialize or not in actual products.

In school, the creative activity of children is actually a superior way to learn. The learning which requires the children to create their own experience and requires creative activity on their part is learning by discovery.

e. The content of creative learning, according to J. Dewey

Dewey is critical of Rousseau’s idea that the native abilities of the child can be self-built if they are left freedom of manifestation. The development of these traits depends on the way in which they are going to be used. They must be used and trained.

To that end, first of all, an educational environment must be set up to ensure development, „an environment in which innate abilities can be put to the best of uses”. This environment must allow „the positive use of innate individual abilities, towards socially meaningful pursuits”. It will provide an orientation for the child via: 1) the social interactions involved and 2) the experiences accumulated in this environment. The social interactions will direct him towards new types of
experiences, and these experiences, once occurred, will allow him to acquire other new experiences and thus development of the individual. According to Dewey this environment will have to include „the totality of conditions involved in the execution of the activity”.

For J. Dewey, the child must learn, first of all, a method to discover and react, and not ready-made knowledge. He will perfect that method by himself, by repeated, successive polishing enriched with his accumulated experience. He will learn how to obtain information and solve his problems. What is important here is not the knowledge but how to reach it, the method. In the end, he will master an „art” of solving his own problems, by his own means.

For this, the child must first acquire a „general method”. The „general” part denotes that it concerns the methods that the experience of others have shown to be the best. The child arrives to this general method by studying, for example, past experiences, current techniques, the ways in which supporting materials can be used. The general method is the starting point for developing personal methods. This is because these general method do not preclude in any way the existence of individual initiative and originality, the use of personal approaches to achieve things, and the personal, individual method is actually a new usage, in a new combination and situation of the general methods. The individual method and originality, for Dewey are convertible terms.

Thus, originality can become a topic of discussion for education as long as it helps the child to develop a personal method. To achieve a personal method, it is necessary to allow the child to „experiment”. Experimentation means facing some problematic situations. It is education’s task to offer to children the possibility to face such situations that will require the permanent and progressive improvement of their means of action. In short:

a. When the native conditions are met, the creative activity will become possible, to the extent to which means of actions with verified efficiency were assimilated. These means must be learned as such: as methods that must be mastered and applied.

b. In regard to the methods to be acquired by children – given his natural tendencies towards communication, building, expression and inquiry – they must be helped to perfect adequate methods with priority towards these actions (communication, expression, etc.)

c. it is important to prepare the children for self-expression (to manifest his own personality), for communication with others and optimum positioning in relation to the world. In a learning sense, this means to welcome attitudes (mentioned previously), to acquire the languages necessary for communication and some methods of research and investigation. Common knowledge, from a creativity point of view, means internalizing these vectors (attitudes) and mastering the typically human instruments of actions (communication languages and investigative methods). Learning for creativity will require simplifying the knowledge rich programs by dropping whatever is not absolutely necessary, allowing the children to master these great resources of creative activity: attitudes, reasons, languages, methods of independent investigation.

To conclude, the ideas of J. Dewey we mentioned can be summarized thus:

The creation potential of man is mix of innate characteristics, which, in order to flourish, needs systematic external pedagogic intervention and a favorable learning environment. The education cannot supplant nor compensate the lack of these innate characteristics; it can only at best create the conditions for them to surface and allow for their continuous development. Creative learning is not possible without these native impulses which must be set free, because it would lack the needed energy support they provide and would not meet the creative needs of the individual. Although creative impulses exist naturally in all children, education cannot set itself the goal to increase their intensity or scope of manifestation beyond their natural levels. The intensity and reach of the scope of manifestation have a natural basis which cannot be supplanted by education.
References: