Understanding Experience: Dewey’s philosophy

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Abstract
John Dewey is one of the most important philosopher of education. His philosophy has become the basis of modern educational theories which are being implemented all over the world. The researcher saw the need however to present his idea of Experience to further understand his philosophy. This research focuses on the exposition of Dewey’s understanding of Experience. His philosophy of experience is the central theme of his philosophy which needs a deep analysis and understanding. He basically defined experience as the interaction of organism and environment. He describe it to be dynamic, unified, communicative, historic and socially oriented. Experience always changes because there will always be a new and fresh interaction between organism and environment.

Keywords: John Dewey, Philosophy of Education, Experience

1. Introduction
John Dewey is one of the most famous philosopher of education. His contribution has largely influenced our present understanding of ideal education. Tubleo (2012) has put it “Dewey’s philosophy is a radical break with traditional aims and methods of education. Education for him must not just aim for individual development but for the society as a whole.” His ideas pertaining to education are so vital it remain undying until today. He is discussed in variety of ways by different scholars. It goes to say that his philosophy is discussed in different manner. If one will try to read materials or introductory books in philosophy of education the word experience is equally present in every discussion of Dewey’s philosophy. This does show that the concept of experience is so essential in his philosophy that one cannot afford to use it out of context or simply misuse it. Anyone who understands the concept of experience in the philosophy of Dewey would surely agree that a misuse of it will be a misinterpretation of the whole philosophical work of Dewey.

Smuts (2005) [31] noticed the neglect of Dewey’s experiential philosophy which is the reason why there is also a lesser consideration of Dewey as a social philosopher. This comment of Smuts is making sense not just for Dewey to be considered as a social philosopher but more importantly because Dewey’s experiential philosophy is the core of his philosophy. Ord & Leather (2011) [25] recommends a reconceptualization of “experience learning.” They suggested of the necessity to go back to the conceptualization of Dewey to reconceptualize “experience learning.” It was Dewey who first conceive of an experience learning that sprouts into various interpretations. However there are important things that are being missed by the recent model of “experience learning” such as the importance of meaning. For Dewey to say now that the proper role of thinking is to solve problems rather than to plum the depths of reality naturally seems to his critics to demean intelligence, to be therefore, anti-intellectual. It demotes from exalted role of an educational end to the menial role of a reason to a mode of natural adaptation just as little above the brute (Brubacher, 1969) [9]. In the book of Barrow & Woods (2006) [6], they claim Dewey is often mistaken by even those of his followers. According to them, it is not enough to place them in an environment that may cater his or her development and change from a child to an adult. Child development must rather be based from experiences that is mirrored with social context that is democratic world. In the school setting, the teacher has to see to it that the experiences of the students will lead to further experiences and interaction. Furthermore, they must not let the students just be too focus on their own interest to the point that there is no room for openness to other things that is not of their interest. Mark Faust (2000) [14], discussed Dewey’s concept of experience in not so different ways when he used it to explain literary experience that is a prevailing concept in literature. It must also be noted that since it was Dewey who made a thorough discussion on experience in his philosophy, literary experience must also be an inspired concept from Dewey. It is then very understandable that he used Dewey’s aesthetic theory which points out to those experiences that if we recall we would say “that was an experience”, to understand similar expressions when making literary pieces or even reading. Mc Ardle, J. (2011) [23] used the philosophy of Dewey in the teaching of online courses. There she mentioned that Dewey noted that mere linking experience for educational purpose is lacking because not all experiences are having positive outcome. Just like in making online courses, posting online activities is not enough. The teacher must see to it that the online venue is engaging and motivational. The students might be doing something about the online activities but if it will not lead to succeeding activities and fall of in as soon as he/she is done, then there was no good experience. People learn best by doing, hands-on instructional tasks encourage students to become actively, involved in learning. Active learning is a pedagogically sound teaching for any subject. Progressives like John Dewey, saw objectives as arising out of activity, giving that activity a richer, deeper meaning. Objectives, according to this criticism, do and should not always precede activity (Glanz, 2009) [15]. There is an ongoing
debate between the classical pragmatist and the neopragmatist. The debate is centered upon the classic epistemological question regarding the relation of knowledge and external reality. The proponents of neo pragmatism would suggest of abandoning the centrality of experience because of its foundationalist connotation, such as inclining towards realism. They want it to be replaced with the language, which is arm with the contemporary analytic and hermeneutic development made by language philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Gadamer. (Koopman, 2007) [22]. Regarding the Bartholomae/Elbow debate of constructivism and expressivism, Dewey has a significant stand that rejects both stand because of its lacking consideration on experience and time. For Dewey God created the world with a “raw material of chaos.” God created the world beginning from an emotional impulse. It was not immediate that God already had a blue print in his mind nor has he been provided with a blueprint from outside himself. The creation of the world is a product of God’s interaction with the “raw material of chaos”. The work has been formed and reformed until the lord has judged them good. (Crick, 2003) [11]

There are several materials that discuss the Dewey’s concept of experience. Dewey himself has a very elaborate discussion of experience in his writings. However the researcher has find it very necessary to revisit those available materials so as to gain clarity of the concept. This will be an attempt to make a simple and understandable work on Dewey’s understanding of experience with the hope that this will be useful to those who will try to understand the philosophy of Dewey, those will make further research on his work, and those who will be teaching his philosophy. The researcher has found out upon reviewing the available literature gathered that in every mention of Dewey’s philosophy the word experience is always present. However, the researcher has recognized that there is differences among the presentation and most of these materials would speak little to explain Dewey’s concept of experience. With this in mind, this research will try to answer the question: what is John Dewey’s concept of experience? In this research the writer gather available materials such as journals and books. The researcher evaluates if there are clear presentation of Dewey’s idea of experience and or how the Dewey’s idea of experience is presented. Then the researcher makes a detailed presentation of Dewey’s experience from the literatures and from the writing of the author himself. In this way the researcher hopes to make a significant presentation of Dewey’s philosophy of experience and eventually help those who want to understand Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy and philosophy of education.

2. Materials and methods
This research will make use of qualitative research method. The researcher gathered materials from various research papers, journals and books that expound Dewey’s philosophy of experience. The materials that was gathered waspresented in the paper to expose Dewey’s philosophy of experience. In this manner, the researcher hopes make a systematic presentation of Dewey’s experience that is understandable to the readers, especially to those who are beginning to understand on of the greatest American thinker.

3. Results and Discussion
In his 1899 lectures, the concept of experience evolved. It was on this year when the concept of experience became the master term of his philosophy. And on his twelfth lecture, he used experience and incorporate it in his definition of education which is “the process of remaking, or reconstituting, experience, so as to give more socialized content.” Before this year the concept of experience there was not yet a wide discussion of experience in his writings (Crick, 2004).Frank Ryan (1994), in his discussions about Dewey’s primary experience. He started with the background as others would do, that Dewey’s philosophy is a reaction to the classical notion that experience is a matter of cognition. In this reaction Dewey has attempted to make idealism and empiricism reconcile in the continuous play of having and knowing. Dewey, as mention in the book of Stur (2000) [31], criticized the philosophical development of his time. He remarked that philosophy is like everything that the human person do like sports, experimentation, business, and sex. It must be a human activity. It must be something which directly involves the human condition. With this in mind, he would say, philosophy must be situated in experience.

Dewey characterized five different states of the reasoning process: first, when the organism’s habitual patterns of action are disturbed, it will nevertheless continue to act in order to resolve the situation. Second, to extract significant elements of situation in order to formulate it as problem-solving exercise. Third, there is a hypothesis construction or the creative use of imagination to provide possible answers. Fourth, the use of reason to weigh up and order the alternative hypothesis. Lastly, testing or experiment in which the hypothesis is eliminated as they are tried out in the court of experience. The end result is the resolution of problem with adoption of the new hypothesis that works. This led Dewey’s famous remark that “the true is that which works” (Stokes, 2007). Dewey’s cycle of problem solving through reflective thought begins with a disjunction between what is expected and what occurs, which can lead to re-thinking the nature of the problem and the directions in which one might work for solutions. Solving a problem involves one or more cycles of trial and error in which learning takes place as one seeks to achieve a desired outcome. (Wise, Bradshaw, and Cartwright, 2013). These idea of different stages of the reasoning process paved the way to his discussions on experience as its necessary condition.

3.1 What is experience?
In essays in experimental logic, Dewey defined experience as “the manifestation of interactions of organism and environment.” Dewey used the term “dynamic” to describe experience. He meant it in two senses. One indicates the pervasive quality that binds the elements of experience into continuous whole. Another, he also means that the elements that are in tension and conflict are also called dynamic that is, they are striving to formation of the whole and restatement of the parts. They continually moving to recover the equilibrium that was lost. Experience is not solely derived from introspection but rather from a transaction with nature. It is clear here that Dewey rejects any dualistic view between individual and the world. He has even remarked “an organism does not live in an environment but it lives by means of an environment.” In other words, experience is an interaction of
transformation between organism and environment such that a state of satisfaction or equilibrium is achieved. In this sense, it is not purely formal, that is it does not deal with things that go on exclusively in the mind, and it arises out of concrete situations. A positive quality runs through all elements of experience giving it unity and settlement. (Roth, 1998 and Armitage, 2003) Experience significantly connotes space and time which are necessary preconditions of human activity. As he wanted to recover the true spirit of philosophizing he saw experience as the point of departure. Empiricism has already put experience into the center of attention. However, the criticism of Dewey is that experience was just made as the basis of knowledge and experience became compilations of thought. Relevant points were highlighted by him to be evaluated. First, experience, as he observed it is regarded first as a knowledge affair. This he could not accept because if one looks into the depth of it, surely it will be that it is an intercourse of a living being with its physical object. The use of intercourse here by Dewey would imply that there is an active unity within the person and the object. Second, experience is understood in the confines of subjectivity and physicality. He then, countered for its objectivity which is true to every human endeavors. Third, experience is essentially tied up with the antecedent event. In this kind of understanding he sees nothing or little openness of experience towards the future. Experience must then be understood with being essentially experimental. In this way experience will lead us to look ahead and change what is given. In this way, he understood experience as not something passive but active. Fourth, experience is usually seen in terms of particular events. The way Dewey understood experience is in terms of connexions. As the subjects engages in the environment there could never be one but a continuous engagement. The environment continually offers new settings where the subject strives to take control. Lastly, experience and thought were understood to be always in contradiction. It was overshadowed by the idealism and empiricism. However, experience also needs inference. It is, in fact, full of inference. (Stur, 2000) [31] Dewey repudiated the traditional idea of experience found in modern empiricism precisely because he was loath to believe that intelligence could be driven for long by bad or silly intentions. Instead of defining experience as being composed of our private sensations, he defined it as a psycho-physical process of doing and undergoing. We do something, then we undergo and reflect on the consequences, and this process is the internal dynamic of learning that, in Dewey’s view, works to undermine unsavory and stupid motives as much as to help us decide what we should do next. We use our intentions to interpret our experience and guide our actions. But our intentions will usually be assessed and transformed in the light of their results. At least for Dewey, this is what happens when we trust and use intelligence. (Smith, 1994) [12]. In the words of Hohr (2013) [18], “Dewey’s concept of experience allows a holistic approach to education, in the sense that it is based on the interaction between the human being and the world. It takes all sides of human existence, its being in the world, as the methodological point of departure. Experience is a central aspect of this interaction and thus a communicative, historic and cultural phenomenon rather than an individual or mental one. It was not in the mind of Dewey to just let the children experience for the sake of experiencing. They are not left alone to do things on their own and experience things that they want to experience. Glassman (2002) [15], one primary function that education has is “to make experience more disciplined.” Teacher plays an important role in Dewey’s educational theory. Teacher’s is considered as the “map makers” in Dewey’s terminology. It must be clear on their part as to where they are leading the students but not to the point of giving them all the answers. In other words, the teachers must possess the end in view.

3.2 Primary and Secondary Experience

Dewey distinguishes two kinds of experience, the primary and the secondary. He said that all experience starts with a primary experience or “mediate immediacy.” Here the whole immediate experience mediate because of its relatedness, or connectedness. This goes to say that primary experience is transitory and full of alterations. This is contrasted to reflective experience or the secondary experience which strives for order and homogeneity (Ryan, 1994). Dewey’s theory of experience takes root in the “world of perception, action and reflection.” Whereas, “primary experience is the ordinary, direct interaction with things; secondary experience is a reflection on the primary experience and it is dominated by intellectual activity.” Experience, then, is encompassing. This is also his way of reconciling the long years of debate between idealism and empiricism (Armitage, 2003). Empiricism is the notion that concepts are products of experience. It is necessary that concepts be validated and justifiable in experience (Encyclopedia Britannica) while Idealism is a belief that something mental is the foundation reality (Guyer and Horstmann, 2018) [17]. In Dewey’s separate concept of primary and secondary experience, he recognizes truthful claims from both schools. Primary experience acknowledge the truth in empiricism which can be found from direct interaction of things while the secondary experience comes after direct interactions which is related to idealism.

3.3 Aesthetic and Anesthetic Experience

Dewey in his work, Art as experience, understood experience as a dynamic interaction. The artist and the environment is in tension trying to find its center to make a wonderful art work. “It is a coherent, organic, and unified whole, a developmental process.” That happens when an artist is lost into the world and give all his attentions to the art. Dewey would call this as “an experience.” This perspective of art as experience has always been helpful to this day especially by the abstract expressionist (Berube, 1998) [6]. “When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience.” An experience of thinking possesses its own aesthetic quality. It has a quality that satisfy emotionally because of the organization and order of its movement. However, there is nothing of “an experience” that could happen if the qualities were not met. (Stur, 2000) [31] In this connection, Dewey has talked about a “rarely recognized experiential ailment” that Smuts calls as anesthetic malady. Anesthetic experience happens when the experiences of the human person has become mechanical mode of action. Dewey argued that there are two ways or worlds that in which aesthetic experience cannot happen. First is the world of perpetual flux and the other is the finished world of Nirvana. Therefore, experiences must have culminations or ends. Aesthetic experience cannot
happen in one single perpetual experience. There is no continuity if there is only one experience. And also experience must be a concrete experience. Aesthetic experience cannot happen in the mind that we thought of as experiences. (Smuts, 2005) [30]

1.4 Experience and Nature

“Experience occurs continuously, because of the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living. Under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges. Oftentimes, the experience has is inchoate. We put our hands to plow and turn back, we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end but because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy.” In contrast to that is a kind of experience that which run the course of fulfillment. It is an experience that carries individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. This is an experience. Experience is defined by those situations and events that we termed as “real experiences”; those are the times also when someone says, “that was an experience.” It is one of a kind experience. The experience that is unique and are always remembered. In such experiences, there is an uninterrupted flow where the enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that emphases of its varied colors. (Shur, 2000) [31]

From Dewey’s point of view, nature is experience. Objects are not fixed substances but individual things that are imbued with meanings. Object is what it means within an activity. Dewey did not mean to equate the object with the thought about it. Objects are not reducible to thought about objects. Things have an aspects particularity that idealism entirely neglects. (Moore and Buder, 2005) [23]

Dewey explored further the concept of experience by elaborating it in his work experience and nature written in 1925. Here he argued about the continuity between nature and experience. This is something different from the old notion that nature is something apart from experience which is something “causal and sporadic.” In the midst of this traditional belief, Dewey claims that “experience is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature and it is a growing progressive self-disclosure of nature itself.” Experience, then for Dewey, has a deep connection with nature. (Crick, 2004) [10]

Uffelman (2011) [33] talks of integration when he speaks of successive experiences. There has to be new experiences, diverse experiences, that must be made because new experiences can widen one’s horizon, make grater meaning, deeper realizations and reflections. Experience is the medium that connects the self and the world. It is in experience that we can understand the world and to live better in the world. We must experience various things in various ways and it must be integrated. It must be integrated.

3.5 Democracy and Experience

Democracy and education have the same goal. Each individual has something to contribute to the construction of social institutions, and the test value of all institutions will be the contributions they make back to the individual in terms of creating the conditions for all-around growth of every member society. Such growth involves achieving certain kinds of experiences that are final, in that they provoke the search for some other experience. Each individual must seek for experience that would contribute for the growth of the society. (Palmer, 2006) [25]

Experience is something of a whole. It is a kind of democratic and free. Experience cannot be restricted or even predisposed. An individual who experiences must be conscious of the event and not on the determined outcome. It must be separated from nature but one with it. We must not conceive that experience is a thing in the mind. There has been a dualism that was conceived of experience. However nature is a precondition to culture together with experience. (Greiger, 1958)

He thought of scientific method, not so much as a subject bus as a manifestation of certain general attitudes and virtues in all forms of inquiry. These included curiosity, objectivity, honesty, open-mindedness and a commitment to freedom of thought and discussion. For Dewey such attitudes and virtues constituted a democratic way of life. What is to count as warranted or justified belief in contrast to mere opinion and dogma is solely determined by a democratic discussion aimed at achieving an unforced consensus. (Bridge & Smith, 2007) [7]

3.6 Educative and Miseducative

Everyone is educable though not of the same level. Everyone can develop their capacities which is the task of education. Education would lead to enrichment of experience. This is the meaning of Dewey when he said, “Education is growth”. (Greiger, 1958) [16]

Experience could be educative or mis-educative. For an experience to be educative it must meet this two criteria: first, it must be engaging or immediate. The other is it must lead to other experiences. This is for the continuity of experiences. Dewey implies here that both the person and the environment are always changing and with the process of experiencing both are modified. Failing to meet these criteria a miseducative kind of experience can lead to insensitivity to materials of following experience, inflexibility, carelessness, and fragmentary thinking. (Waks, 2001) [34].

The best single measure of an institution’s fitness to serve and to survive-whether the institution be a government, a railroad, the cinema, an art museum, a law, a newspaper, the right to own property, etc., is the total educative effect of that institution on the living of human beings. Education is the cumulative effect of all the successive learning experiences one undergoes. Hegel said that “progress is growth in freedom.” Dewey define progress as an increase of present meaning. He formulated his categorical imperative “so act as to increase the meaning of present experiences”. He is saying that everything absolute, is sterile.” (Kilpatrick, 1951) [20]

Dewey recognized that experiences are built on previous experiences, and he insisted it as the teachers’ responsibility to determine the direction in which experience is heading. He believed that experiences can be both educative experience and knowledge as that which leads to constructive direction toward intelligent action. Intelligent action leads to another action rather than static. It deliberates rather than impulsive. Above all it is reflective. In contrast, a miseducative experience is one that “arrests and distorts” development. It cultivates a callous, unreflective, self-absorbed disposition. (Dimitriadis, 2006) [11]

3.7 Experience and Communication

Dewey’s expression who said that learning is an active process rather than a passive acceptance of facts. He emphasized that
promotion of child’s natural interests in conversation or communication, in inquiry or finding out things, in making things or construction, and in artistic expression is important in view of child’s active growth. Child’s skill in reading writing, and counting must follow out these natural interests and must be mastered by the child not as an end in themselves. But as tools, thus for Dewey, the curriculum was concerned with realities of child’s nature and life. Activities should be selected for inclusion in the curriculum keeping the child in mind. (Johri, 2005)

Dewey looked at experience as never private but partly a result of a social interaction and condition. To say “my experience” is even problematic for the reason that there is a necessary communal nature of experience which is manifested in communication. It is even impossible for Dewey to draw a clear distinction between “my experience and your experience.” Experiences always extend to other persons in the society due to communication, “in which one assimilate, imaginatively, something of another’s experience in order to tell him intelligently of one’s own experience.” From the experiences that we have we learn to formulate words that would be understandable to the other. In order for us to communicate our experience we also have to have a “large fund of social knowledge” so that we will be able to formulate the best possible words to communicate. Therefore, it is through shared experiences that we were able to understand each other and learn the meaning of words. (Crick, 2004)

4. Conclusion

The concept of experience is the core of Dewey’s philosophy. His philosophy is first a philosophy of experience which sprouted from the idea of a need of a more socially oriented philosophy. He worked to make philosophy useful in his time and our time today. His contribution was not so much about the criticism of the philosophical development of his time and the call for its reconstruction but the reevaluation of experience and placing it in the core of philosophizing. His criticism was shared by a good number of philosophers. However, his uniqueness as a philosopher lies in his reassessment of experience. His philosophy of experience is a reassessment of experience because experience was also not a new word in the field of philosophy. The empiricist, the naturalist, romanticist, and perhaps the idealist has made mention of experience. But instead of adding an exclusive perspective of experience, he tried to reconcile the past understanding of it.

He basically defined experience as the interaction of organism and environment. He describe it to be dynamic, unified, communicative, historic and socially oriented. Experience always changes because there will always be a new and fresh interaction between organism and environment. There are a lot of experiences that can happen but no experience is fragmented so as it is totally different and disconnected to other experiences. They are always liked in the idea of unity. This is what makes experience difficult to find a clear divide between one to another experience and also because of its social and cultural dimension. The social and cultural dimension of experience set as the context of every experience. It is the ground where the organism and the environment manifest its interaction. And in the process of interaction there is an inevitable result of communication.

5. References