

John Dewey's Notion of Thinking and Its Relevance to Learning

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the importance of Dewey's notion of thinking in improving learning skill among learners. The aim of learning is to 'lead out' of ignorance and equip the learners for quality living. Unfortunately, in most learning environment, educators seem not to have effectively and efficiently achieved this purpose. This is because the learning skill is devoid of 'thinking'. As a result of this, some learners cannot make the necessary connection between what they learn in school and real life situation. In other words, they cannot use what they have learnt to solve life problems. John Dewey however argues that thinking is that operation in which present facts suggest other facts in such a way as to induce belief in the latter upon the ground of the former

while learning on the other hand is a process of living. This means that thinking should be progressive and as such should be able to help one live a productive life. Therefore, this paper investigates this kind of thinking associated with learning as proposed by John Dewey and how it can be relevant to learners. The research methods will be descriptive, analytic and evaluative. This paper argues that John Dewey's notion of thinking when meticulously observed plays a formidable role in learning which in turn helps the learner to solve life problems.

Keywords: Thinking, Reflective Thinking, Learning, Experience

Introduction

From time immemorial, rationality and the ability to think are some of the things that distinguish humans from other animals. Facts have shown that it is this rationality that aids thought which proceeds to words and then actions. However, with the technological invention, all sorts of information have become readily available to all. This information is mostly through the Internet. This availability of information through the Internet is in contradistinction with what was obtainable prior to the dawn of modern technology. Then, people had to search for information manually and as such had more avenues and motivation for thinking and producing ideas. But now, with the advent of

technology especially Information and Communication Technology - with its attendant benefits - the media tends to do the greater part of the thinking than the rational part of man. Some learners, when faced with a task, always seek succour with the Internet. It is not a bad idea, yet some of the information from the Internet are either half-baked, unverified or entirely false. It is only the meticulously thinking mind that could be patient enough to weigh and connect issues in order to make a considerable impact in finding out the veracious status of these online ideas. This assertion does not in any way portray information technology as bad; it only emphasizes the fact that due to the uncensored and less scrutinized nature of most of them, it tends to impede knowledge for which it is set to achieve.

Thus, the following is interpreted as a challenge because individuals no longer think in a manner that we perceive as thinking. It is important to note here that the importance attached to thinking is not just for its own sake, but for the sake that it aids learning. As such, this paper sets out to investigate John Dewey's notion of thinking and how it can help in improving learning process. According to

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John Dewey, thinking is that operation in which present facts suggest other facts (truths) in such a way as to induce belief in the latter upon the ground or warrant of the former. This understanding raises the following questions: does it concur within the general notion of thinking? Is thinking limited to inducing belief or more? Does this understanding have a way of influencing learning? Therefore, this paper argues that John Dewey's notion of thinking when meticulously observed plays a formidable role in learning.

The research methods are analytic, descriptive and evaluative methods. The analytic method will be used to analyse thinking both from Dewey and others perspectives. Then, the descriptive method will be used to describe how thinking is relevant in learning while the evaluative method will be used to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of this approach (John Dewey's) and make few contributions.

In this paper, we shall explain thinking using few ideas from authors as well as dwell extensively on John Dewey's approach to thinking. Furthermore, we shall describe the place of thinking in learning theoretically. We shall also describe a pattern of developing thinking among learners. Finally, we shall present some few suggestions on how to improve thinking in the midst of available resources aided by information and communication technology.

Understanding the Concept of Thinking

One of the distinctive attributes of humans is thinking. However, some authors have given a conscious outlook and posited conscious opinions. Plato in his understanding of education placed it as path to justice; however, he promoted thinking as an aid to education which should precede every other form of education be it physical or otherwise. Progressively, in the words of Montaigne, thinking is necessary to be promoted by dialogue, debate and discussion. For him, issues need not be presented as absolute to allow this thinking ability in humans to be optimally used. In line with eliminating absolutism in the words of Montaigne, Kant reconciling the rationalists and the empiricist emphasizes that while animals behave out of instinct, humans behave with their mind. It is at this mind that discipline takes place to impede any

possibility of humanity degrading to animalism. In line with this, we see thinking as a platform for the mediator-discipline to chart its course. From the foregoing, thinking has no isolatory nature. By this, it means that thinking cannot be in isolation. It must be in relation to something as presented by Edmund Husserl's intentionality where to think is to think something. However, Dewey agrees that thinking must be in relation to something of which his is to learning and education. In this paper, we shall restrict our scope to John Dewey's notion of thinking and how it is made manifest in learning but from a theoretical point of view.

Dewey's Notion of Thinking

John Dewey, an American Philosopher, was born on 20th October, 1859 in Burlington, Vermont and died on 1st June, 1952 in New York City at the age of 93. His experience of the rapid change in his era also affected his ideas on thinking. The notion of thinking occupies an important place in Dewey's philosophy. This is because it is the intersection of his conception of experience, education and inquiry. Dewey's interest is to see that in the education of people, effort is made to see that they develop thinking skill. Therefore, for him: "Thinking is the method of intelligent learning, of learning that employs and rewards the mind". By this definition Dewey has in mind that thinking must involve the following characteristics; it must be active, persistent and be a careful consideration or examination of any belief or supposed form of knowledge based on the grounds that support it. This form of thinking takes nothing for granted, because it examines every assumption and explores its consequences. It connects every idea, tests them against what we already know with the aim of establishing a well-grounded idea. Hence "thinking is that operation in which present facts suggest other facts (or truth) in such a way as to induce belief in the latter upon the ground or warrant of the former". Thinking in itself does not imply certainty- even though it can lead to that- but it in itself presupposes some level of supposition. Following Dewey's understanding, we can say that thinking involves an attempt to find grounds to justify knowledge claim, investigating the action upon which it rests and exploring its possible consequences. One who is engaged in thinking tries

to find or make the appropriate connection between ideas that is, hypothesis and the intended well-grounded conclusion. Dewey calls this type of thinking "Inquiry". By this, Dewey equates thinking with the method of intelligent learning. It is on this ground that he argues that "all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned ... is to develop their ability to think". This according to him could be achieved if the school and the teachers will place emphasis on factual knowledge and intellectual skills. By focusing on these it will stimulate students' ability to think. Dewey observes that the traditional way of impacting information and teaching skills does not create room for the development of student's intelligence since the student is most often passive. For him, therefore, ability to think should be integrally connected with teaching skills since it helps to nurture the capacity for initiative and independent application.

Dewey goes a step further to show that thinking as an inquiry is purely reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is a part of the critical thinking process which has to do with the processes of analyzing and making judgments about a particular event or situation at hand. For Dewey, reflective thinking is that form of thinking that takes up the doubt and uncertainty arising from our experience of limitation. Reflective thinking has to do with our activities and the experiences we gain from them. Reflective thinking enables us to face the challenges of the moment and not ignore them. According to Dewey, "when our thinking process are so engaged as to try to understand the situation we are in such that we remain in 'suspense' and investigate our own blind spot, thinking becomes a reflective experience". This helps to illumine the relationship of the self to the world. In other words, it aims at demonstrating how the world reacts to our actions and how this reaction affects us. Through reflective thinking, we make a back and forward connection which gives birth to new meaning. The experience we get from this backward and forward connection is called reflective experience. According to Andrea English, a reflective experience is a term Dewey uses to describe genuine learning processes which entail the back and forth of doing, undergoing and making connections.

Following from this, we see that in any learning

environment, reflective thinking is highly recommended in that it aids the learners to assess what they know, what they need to know, and how to bridge that gap during learning situations. Reflective thinking, according to Dewey, assists individuals in solving complex problems, since it provides them with the opportunity to step back and think about how they can solve the problem at hand and how a particular set of problem-solving strategy(ies) can be applied to achieve the desired goal. From this, we can say that Dewey believes that problematic situations arouse reflective thinking. Hence, when we stay in a smooth and friendly environment, we rarely think of nothing or we merely daydream, but when a trouble or problem situation arises and interrupts the peace of the environment, then we begin to think and engage in problem-solving strategy so that the original peaceful atmosphere can be restored. What this means is that in every learning environment, the task of the teacher is to stimulate thinking by creating problem situation. The student(s) then solve(s) this problem by engaging in reflective thinking, that is by creating a point of contact between himself and the world. Being in touch with reality is the standpoint from which learning begins to take place. Therefore, what we can deduce from this is that for Dewey, knowledge or learning springs from action. This obviously is a pragmatic approach to learning. To illustrate what Dewey has in mind, let us carefully examine this situation. A driver is travelling by his car on a smooth road, at this point he thinks of nothing because there is no problem situation. Suddenly, he approaches a gully that interrupts his journey. At that moment he begins to think of possible solutions to his problems by producing sets of strategies to overcome his plight, like finding a narrow path, turning back and following another route, using planks and tree branches to construct a small bridge and so on. Then he finally finds an abundance of tree branches and planks and then he uses it to construct a bridge (here the self is creating contact with the world). He then goes back to the car, starts it, crosses the bridge and continues his journey. This example incorporates Dewey's theoretical description of reflective thinking: a real problem arises out of the present experience, suggestions for a solution come to mind, relevant data are observed and a

hypothesis is formed, acted upon and finally tested. Dewey believes that for thinking to be connected with learning, it has to involve all these. Therefore, any learning environment should be directed towards solving problems in order to help the students to think.

Dewey further draws the connection between thinking and communication. He argues that 'thought' itself comes to fruition only through communication. This is realizable when we are in "face-to-face relationship by means of direct give and take" within the communal encounter of dialogue. According to Dewey, a thought is by its very nature communal and dialogical. However, it is only when sought for personal gain rather than for public good that it is converted into the private capital of the individual. The fact that thought finds its basis in dialogue is expressed by the day-to-day encounter we have in our families, amongst our friends and colleagues at the workplace and so on. This is because thinking does not take place in isolation rather as part of a conjoint activity. Dialogue, therefore, can be regarded as the appropriate vehicle for thought. It is only through dialogue that we come to know what the other person thinks about a particular viewpoint and how he/she came about that viewpoint. This accounts for the reason Dewey observes that thinking does not just happen from nowhere, it is something that involves a certain process, and this must come to be through some situations or circumstances that evoke it. Thinking happens as a result of an attempt to respond to uncertainty, hesitation or doubt. We begin to think when we have something troubling us or a certain hurdle to overcome or a problem to solve. Dialogue makes it easier for us to think. Learning, therefore, should be dialogical, since it will aid the learner to begin to think in order to find solutions to some pertinent problems.

The Place of Dewey's Notion of Thinking in Learning Process

Thinking is very essential in learning. Suffice it to say that without thinking, it is impossible for proper learning to take place. For Dewey, thinking must be connected to learning so that it can increase efficiency in action and make the acquisition of new knowledge possible. Waters (2006) argues that learning can only occur if the mind of the learner

can connect the current level of knowledge with the prior knowledge during learning. This connection can be made possible through reflective/critical thinking. Waters' observation points to the fact that thinking does not occur in isolation, rather it leans on prior experience to make contact with the present. This makes learning possible. When we talk about the place of Dewey's notion of thinking, we refer to the purpose which thinking serves in one's life and that of society. Thinking is very important in life and as such there is a need for us to develop it at its best and avoid its worst possibilities. For Dewey, thinking does the following;

a). It Makes Possible for Action with a Conscious Aim

According to Dewey, thinking emancipates one from merely impulsive and merely routine activity. It enables one to direct one's activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view. Thinking makes it possible for one to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion in order to bring about what is lacking. By presenting the consequences of an action before us, it enables us to know what we are about to do when we act. It turns actions that are just appetitive, blind and impulsive into intelligent actions. In a learning environment, reflective thinking enables the learner to direct his/her actions towards problem solving. This he/she does by evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting the situation at hand to enable him to achieve success. When learners develop thinking skill they are able to harmonize relation among belief, attitude and responsibility. This enables one to solve critical problems and achieve future plans.

b). It Promotes Systematic Preparations and Invention

If teachers are able to stimulate thinking in students through their classroom encounter, it will bring about significant inventions. Through thinking, man also develops and arranges artificial signs to enable advanced knowledge of the consequences and of ways of securing and avoiding them. This is what brings out the difference between a learned person and an unlearned person. This difference, according to Dewey, is because the learned person has acquired experience as a result of his interaction with the world. He understands that there are alternatives to solving problems and as such it widens his scope. This indicates that when reflective

thinking is developed through learning, there is a significant level of transformation that it brings in the way a person does things. He/she foresees or anticipates future occurrences and then develops measures to forestall any negative thing happening. The ability to make this adequate preparation and come up with an innovative way to deal with any happenings is what reflective thinking does. Educators should therefore expose learners to the world of experience; this will help them to be innovative. Thinking dispels the possibility of what Dewey calls mis-educative experience that is leading someone to 'routine action' or limiting the 'meaning horizon'. Routine habits according to Dewey possess us; it indicates lack of awareness, while reflective thinking indicates awareness and the desire to contribute to the common good. Learning should be able to achieve the later.

c). It Spurs Creativity

Thinking or reflective thinking as Dewey will sometimes refer to it, is a building block to developing the cognition of a child. This is because it aids the child to solve problems intuitively and analytically. A child of three years who discovers what can be done with blocks, or of six who finds out what he can make by putting five naira and five naira together, is really a discoverer, even though everybody else in the world knows it. There is a genuine increment of experience; not another item mechanically added on, but enrichment by a new quality. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding one's own way out, does one think.

This clearly shows that to get thinking to have value that is creative, one has to a very large extent be very thorough, and has to go beyond the normal experience, to be able to create something very different from the usual. When the parent or teacher has provided the conditions which stimulate thinking and has taken a sympathetic attitude towards the activities of the learner by entering into a common or conjoint experience, all has been done which a second party can do to instigate learning. The rest lies with the one directly concerned. If he cannot devise his own solution (not of course in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and other learners) and find his own way out, he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct

answers with one hundred per cent accuracy. This is seemingly trying to tell us that the parent or teacher could serve as a means through which the learner can provoke the thought process, in the sense that they serve as a guide to helping the learner gain access to some sort of experience which would eventually lead to education of oneself. For instance, a teacher who introduces a new topic to the student or a parent who brings to the knowledge of a child a concept which he or she was not formerly aware of, that parent or teacher has taken that individual a step further to gaining new experience of which they would be part of as well for education to be complete. After this concept has been introduced, it is now left for the student or child to make the effort towards thinking these things through. If he or she is able to succeed at gaining the knowledge intended, then learning has taken place; otherwise, that individual has merely come in contact with new information that might not be relevant to him or her. After proper analysis must have been done by both parties, the process would then eventually lead the student or child to ask questions to gain clarifications or possibly make contributions thereby exposing aspects the teacher maybe oblivious of. This, therefore, led Dewey to state that, in such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better.

d). It leads to sound Judgement

Making judgments is another role that thinking plays. This is because the purpose of reflective thinking is to make some sort of judgment aside from understanding a particular concept, whether directly or indirectly because what does one gain from engaging in the reflective process if it is not to achieve an aim which is highly synonymous with making a judgment. Kant clearly stated that judgment is a special faculty or power of the mind, a faculty not governed by (logical) rules; instead, it is a (personal) power to determine which concepts and theories are and are not appropriate for "concrete" situations. According to Kant, it is the mental capacity to formulate and to grasp logical relationships, concepts, theories, and laws (in Kant's terminology, rules). Judgment is of a

completely different order. It is the power to determine which rules (concepts, theories, and so on) are best aligned with concrete situations and problems. Kant would then say that the distinction between understanding and judgment also gives a clue about how best to make use of reflection in education since reflection is connected with the domain of judgment. In that domain, a student has to make discoveries according to his or her personal style. This is because judgment is situated between experiences and understanding (concepts), while reflective activities depend on the breadth of the experiences.

It is in the light of this that Dewey pointed out clearly that the whole process of thinking consists of making a series of judgments that are so related as to support one another in leading to a final judgment i.e. the conclusion. The purpose of solving a problem determines what kind of judgments should be made. Judgments need to be *relevant* to an issue as well as correct. Judging is the act of selecting and weighing the bearing of facts and suggestions as they present themselves, as well as of deciding whether the alleged facts are really facts and whether the idea used is a sound idea or merely a fancy. We may say, for short, that a person of sound judgment is one who, in the idiomatic phrase, has 'horse sense'; a good judge of *relative values*; he can estimate, appraise, evaluate, with tact and discernment. It follows that the heart of a good habit of thought lies in the power to pass judgments *pertinently* and *discriminatingly*. Dewey would say, that a man who is able to make sound judgment in any set of affairs is an *educated* man as respects those affairs, irrespective of his schooling or academic standing. And if our schools turn out their pupils in that attitude of mind which is conducive to good judgment in any department of affairs in which the learners are placed, they have indeed educated that child. Thus thinking should guide one to make good and sound judgment that will enable him/her overcome problem situations.

It is therefore, noteworthy to say that thinking for Dewey enjoys a pride of place in learning. This relevance which has been short-listed from Dewey's point of view shows that thinking should ultimately aim at providing the right kind of education which is necessary for living. This view of Dewey that education is life itself geared off from Rousseau's

notion that the aim of education is to learn how to live, not just to live but to live righteously which is accomplished by following a guardian who can point the way to good living.

Developing the Culture of Thinking among Learners

First of all, in this paper, we remark and remind the reader that culture is a way of life. So, when we present the idea of developing the culture of thinking, we simply want to present the picture of how learners can make thinking a way of life. Invariably, it implies starting early if not from the scratch. Then, how can this be achieved? When we talk about learners, we are not restricting it to the secondary and tertiary college students. We understand learners as people who study and as such even the primary school pupils are categorized in this kind of studentship that we refer in this section. Dating back to primary school days, we were usually given a take home assignment not just in a manner of paper work but also handiwork whereby the pupil is expected to either make any product from the palm tree like the broom, basket and so many others. It is a pretty well-established pedagogical technique. Then, you will see all forms of creativity and flaws too because it was usually done by the pupils. But now, it has been replaced with toiletries and money. One finds out that at the previous level, virtually every part of us is involved and research has shown that learning is better done when a balance of multisensory approach is used (.

It should be noted that when we present thinking among learners, we restrict to thinking to learn. On entrance to secondary school, these elementary methods are relegated to the backdoor and theories hold sway thereby replacing the memories that spurcreativity to a linear approach. In most secondary schools, the style of teaching promoted the auditory and visual style of learning with less of kinaesthetic style which contributes more to learning because research has shown that 37% of people are kinaesthetic while 29% and 34% are for the two others respectively. Research shows that though people favour each of these learning styles, combining these styles will make an improvement in learning. The emphasis in this paragraph is that there should be a retrieval and strict adherence to practical right from the

elementary and never to be discontinued as studies progress. When this style is continuous, it will consciously or unconsciously become a habit and then a character.

In line with Dewey's emphasis on experience, thinking here is a higher order of thinking and as such need not be much for children due to their age range but as secondary and higher institutions students, research has shown that the brain needs to be fed with novel experiences. Research has also shown that the greater the experiences, the more ability to learn and more inclination to thinking because the brain has enough data to process. In line with this, the idea of excursions should be retrieved in schools no matter how simple it is. It must not be travelling overseas; it could just be a visit to a museum or an event centre around just to acquire extrasensory and multisensory information. Our life events have a way they affect our thinking as well as learning styles deliberately or unconsciously. The focus of this paragraph is that the brain needs to be developed both by nutrition and life experiences (made possible by problem-situations). Students should be taught that experiences should not be in vain. We may not experience all by ourselves but even that of our neighbour should concern us not in line of poke nosing but with reference to learning from it. When the brain is well developed, thinking is enhanced and learning possible and faster.

Furthermore, tutors of different categories whether of formal kind of learning or informal should always try to make learning reciprocal. By this, it means that the tutor should expect some contributions from what they teach in such a way that the learner will be spurred into thinking and relative independency. It is expected that when this kind of learning is used at both formal and informal levels, it will go a long way to initiate the individual into a class with thinking culture.

The role of the family in developing the culture of thinking cannot be underestimated. As the atomic unit of the society, it plays a vital role in the speed with which a society grows. Parents or guardians should be able to sustain the tempos the tutors have started. This is by allowing the children of different stages and class to try to do the assignment given them especially on handiwork. In doing this, they will encounter some problems and then find a way of resolving it. Once they are able to

solve the problem, they have engaged their minds. Thinking has been explained from the viewpoint of creative utilization. Thinking is a cognitive activity; learning is also a cognitive activity which buttresses the nexus between the two. The intent is to have a deeper understanding of things and as such go beyond adding new concepts to connecting these concepts to bring about creativity. Creativity does not emanate from theory. It does from practice. It does not deny the relevance of theory but the idea is that in practice, there is theory implicitly and as such, theoretical contribution at different levels of learning should be given a practical touch no matter how little. A deeper look of the aforementioned strategies will see their developmental nature from which the culture we intend to propagate can be achieved.

Conclusion

Education is the life of the society. Without it, the survival of the society stands on the edge. Developing the ability to think is one of the many things that the learning environment inculcates to the students so that they can make the connection between real-life experience and what they learnt in school. If this is done, it will become easy for the student to make a positive contribution to society. Learning in some societies still has a long way to go in terms of fulfilling the task of making learners to think and critically. In Nigeria, for example, the curriculum is not so much the problem as it is with the method of teaching. Most often, the students do not receive adequate knowledge and skill that will help them have a good life, because the method with which the teacher teaches does not provoke the students to engage in reflective thinking. The traditional method of teaching whereby the students are passive or a situation whereby the teacher banks the information on the brain of the student and expects to receive it exactly the same way during the exam should be jettisoned. Learning should be such that the student should be able to reflect on the information provided by the teacher, process it and see how it reflects in the world of everyday life.

The beauty of Dewey's notion of thinking lies in the fact that it sees our everyday life experience as a product of critical or reflective thinking. With the amount of information available on the Internet,

students should be taught to think critically before assimilating the information. This will aid in receiving a sound education (quality learning).

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