

## Dewey on Method/s

Barbara S. Stengel  
*Millersville University*

What does it mean to teach a “methods course” when student learning is a matter of personal and social construction of meaning? When “communities of learners” are the pedagogical vision? When the moral contours of teaching are garnering deserved attention? When schooling is being called to reflect the democratic ideal in form and substance? When the conduit metaphor for teaching is widely questioned? As teaching and teaching institutions are being reconceptualized, teacher education is irrevocably altered.

A cursory examination of most methods texts (both “general” and “special”) reveals a fairly common set of chapter headings and topical arrays: instructional planning, setting objectives, motivation for learning, classroom management, teacher-centered instruction, student-centered instruction, cooperative learning, inquiry approaches, literacy skills, individual differences, and assessment. As this list suggests, methods courses typically involve the study of planning for, delivery of, management of, special problems regarding, and professional concerns implicit in instruction. How is this taken-for-granted view changed as we take seriously what we know about the nature of human learning and the demand for teaching that is morally defensible, effective, and democratic? What is the meaning of method in teaching? As with so many educational issues, John Dewey provides timely assistance.

In short, Dewey teaches us that the determinative decision faced by teachers is not that of selecting the “best” methods from an available array, but that of choosing between method and the absence of method. Successful teachers unconsciously acquire and consciously opt for method, the method of Deweyan inquiry. Method requires an orientation to teaching that is intelligent, contextual, holistic, and responsive. Once the mantle of “method” is put on, the choice of “best practice” will follow relatively painlessly.

In this essay, I look closely at several well-known Deweyan texts to generate an understanding of method in teaching, and to tease out of that understanding some guidance regarding method for teaching method.<sup>1</sup>

### METHODS AND METHOD

The teacher who is an intelligent student both of individual mental operations and of the effects of school conditions upon those operations, can largely be trusted to develop for himself methods of instruction in their narrower and more technical sense (*HWT* 46).

There are, of course, “methods of instruction in their narrower and more technical sense,” suggests Dewey, but the far more interesting and important question is the issue of method (singular) in teaching. “*Method* is concerned with providing conditions so adapted to individual needs and powers” that growth is the inevitable result. *Methods* in the narrower sense will undoubtedly be part of the conversation that involves deconstruction and reconstruction of educational activity, but cannot

be the center of attention or the organizing principle of teacher preparation or the courses that comprise it.

In "My Pedagogic Creed," first published in *School Journal* in 1897, Dewey uses the language of schooling (school, subject matter, method) to frame his views. He describes education as "a process of living" and school as (ideally) an "embryonic social life" designed to "address the psychological necessity of each student" (PC, 84ff). He considers subject matter *before* method. Of method he says, "I believe that the question of method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of the child's powers and interests. The law for presenting and treating material is the law implicit within the child's own nature" (PC, 91). Dewey believes this view commits him to four guidelines for method in teaching: 1) situate instruction in action, avoiding student passivity; 2) focus on students' forming images, avoiding the presentation of lessons and ideas already fully formed; 3) attend to interests as signs of the power to learn; 4) acknowledge emotion as a corollary of action, accepting emotional response without focusing on it.

By the publication of *Democracy and Education* in 1916, Dewey's organic view of education has achieved full flower. Education is growth; growth does *not* have a fixed goal. Growth *is* the goal. "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" (DE, 50-51).

When we fix upon goals more narrow than growth, we open ourselves to a focus on methods as means to preset ends, to a purely technical, no longer fully human view of education. Says Dewey, "Whenever a method of education is stigmatized as mechanical, we may be sure that external pressure is brought to bear to reach an external end" (DE, 51).

Only after articulating a view of democratic society, the individual in the context of society, the nature of education as growth, and the quality and characteristics of human thinking, does Dewey address the topics we take for granted in our considerations of schooling. He notes that method is one of a trinity of school topics with subject matter and administration. Dewey acknowledges that he has already been talking about subject matter and method without referring to them as such, and goes on to disentangle them from the earlier context and discuss explicitly their nature. He begins with "The Nature of Method" (located *before* "The Nature of Subject Matter" and after "Aims," "Interest," and "Thinking").

Method is a statement of the way the subject matter of an experience develops most effectively and fruitfully. It is derived, accordingly, from observation of the courses of experiences where there is no conscious distinction of personal attitude and manner from material dealt with. The assumption that method is something separate is connected with the notion of the isolation of mind and self from the world of things (DE, 179).

This excerpt from the summary paragraph in the chapter on method only makes sense in light of Dewey's earlier discussion in the chapter on "Thinking in Education" entitled "The Essentials of Method."

Thinking *is* the method of intelligent learning, of learning that employs and rewards mind. We speak, legitimately enough, about the method of thinking, but the important thing to bear in mind about method is that thinking is method, the method of intelligent experience in the course which it takes (DE, 153).

It should become clearer here that “method” provides a lens for examining the experience of both teacher and pupil. Mind is the purposive and directive factor in the development of experience. Both teacher and pupil will be successful to the extent to which their experience is marked by the presence of mind and the essentials of method:

Processes of instruction are unified in the degree in which they center in the production of good habits of thinking. While we may speak, without error, of the method of thought, the important thing is that thinking is the method of an educative experience. The essentials of method are therefore identical with the essentials of reflection. They are first that the pupil have a genuine situation of experience — that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake; secondly, that a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought; third, that he possess the information and make the observations needed to deal with it; fourth, that suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; fifth, that he have opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover for himself their validity (DE, 163).

His most thorough and effective presentation of the method of intelligence is available in *How We Think*, a work which takes up both philosophical and pedagogical questions in dialectical turn. Dewey begins by giving substance to the “problem of training thought,” gives way to more properly philosophical issues (which he refers to as “logical considerations”), and returns in part 3 to instantiate these considerations in “the training of thought.”

Dewey contrasts an older, faculty psychology view “that method consists of a set of operations by which the machinery of thought is set going and kept at work upon any subject-matter,” with a newer, preferred view that “method is concerned with providing conditions so adapted to individual needs and powers as to make for the permanent improvement of observation, suggestion, and investigation” (HWT, 45). The teacher’s problem is two-fold: “he needs...to be a student of individual traits and habits; on the other side, he needs to be a student of the conditions that modify for better or worse the directions in which individual powers habitually express themselves” (HWT, 46). Further, “he needs to recognize that method covers not only what he intentionally devises and employs for the purpose of mental training, but also what he does without any conscious reference to it” (HWT, 46).

The pre-eminence of method over methods finds clear expression: “(M)ethods of instruction and discipline that are technically faulty may be rendered practically innocuous by the inspiration of the personal method that lies back of them” (HWT, 47). Dewey suggests that without the method of intelligence, effective teaching is impossible; with it, even apparently inappropriate action is transformed by it. The simple reality is that everything the teacher does elicits a response in the child. Attention to the totality of method determines more than the utility of methods.

Throughout his writings, Dewey uses “methods” to refer to instructional strategies in a common sense way. Still, methods is not a central category, evidenced by the fact that Dewey does not use “methods” as the title of a chapter, or even a section. Interestingly, by the time Dewey wrote *Experience and Education*, he even omitted a chapter for method!<sup>2</sup> There are chapters contrasting traditional and progressive education, laying out a theory of experience, articulating the criteria of

educative experience or growth, arguing the importance of purpose, and considering the role of subject-matters. However, concern with method *per se* gives way to a chapter entitled, "Social Control and Individual Freedom." The method that was, even in 1898-99, the "form of school life" is now so woven into the fabric of that social experience that its presence is both explicit and implicit in every chapter of the book.<sup>3</sup> The teacher who is intelligent — that is, who pursues the method of intelligence, of inquiry — can be trusted to develop appropriate teaching methods. The teacher who is not cannot make up for it by appropriating the methods of others.

#### CONTENT AND METHOD

Method means that arrangement of subject matter which makes it most effective in use. Never is method something outside of material (*DE*, 165).

As any reader of Dewey knows, method and subject matter form a unity, distinguishable for purposes of analysis, but inseparable through the entire process of teaching, from aim setting through planning through instruction to assessment. This point is implicit rather than explicit in "My Pedagogic Creed." In that brief statement, Dewey offers separate articles to deal with subject-matter and method, giving rise perhaps to the view that they are distinct phenomena. However, the way in which Dewey discusses each apparently separate item belies that possibility.

With reference to subject-matter, he says that all studies must be "controlled by reference to social life" (*PC*, 89). Since "the primary basis of education is in the child's powers at work along the same general constructive lines as those which have brought civilization into being" (*PC*, 90), there is "no succession of studies in the ideal school curriculum." There is only life in its scientific, cultural and communicative aspects. In life there is both subject-matter and method, in that "education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience" (*PC*, 91).

In describing method, Dewey argues for the importance of acknowledging ideas in action, of shaping the child's powers of imagery, of observing the child's growing interests, and of allowing emotions to follow intelligent action (*PC*, 92-93). Each of these efforts implies substance as well as form, subject-matter as well as presentation and treatment of that subject-matter.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey is challenging dualisms head-on, beginning with the supposed split between "mind and the world of things and persons," and extending that to the content-method distinction. He begins the chapter on "The Nature of Method" with a section entitled, "The Unity of Subject Matter and Method." When separated, subject matter appears to be ready made and antecedent to any educative experience. Method

then has for its province a consideration of the ways in which this antecedent subject matter may be best presented to and impressed upon the mind; or a consideration of the ways in which the mind may be externally brought to bear upon the matter so as to facilitate its acquisition and possession (*DE*, 164).

This view gives rise to the possibility of a "complete theory of the methods of learning, with no knowledge of the subjects to which the methods are to be applied" (*DE*, 164). Dewey is quite critical of this view, suggesting that it opens educators up to the charge that "pedagogy is futile," since it is undeniable that a "profound and accurate acquaintance with the subject in hand" is a *sine qua non* of teaching. Dewey goes on:

(S)ince thinking is a directed movement of subject matter to a completing issue, and since mind is the deliberate and intentional phase of the process, the notion of any such split is radically false. The fact that the material of a science is organized is evidence that it has already been subjected to intelligence; it has been methodized, so to say (*DE*, 165).

Method and subject matter mirror each other. Not only is method *of* subject matter; it is *toward* desired results or ends. Dewey illustrates his point that method means “directed movement of subject matter towards ends” (*DE*, 165) by using the example of the pianist:

Piano playing is not hitting the keys at random. It is an orderly way of using them, and the order is not something which exists ready-made in the musician’s hands or brain prior to an activity dealing with the piano. Order is found in the disposition of acts which use the piano and the hands and brain so as to achieve the result intended....It is the same with “pedagogical” method. The only difference is that the piano is a mechanism constructed in advance for a single end; while the material of study is capable of indefinite uses (*DE*, 166).

Not surprisingly, considerations of method are linked to Dewey’s conception of experience. “Experience as the perception of the connection between something tried and something undergone in consequence is a process.” In experience, there are no seams between content and method. There is no consciousness of separation. Only second order reflection (reflection *upon* experience) enables us to distinguish content and method. And such reflection arises only in our effort to control the course of the experience/process. Says Dewey, “For the purpose of *controlling* the course or direction which the moving unity of experience takes we draw a mental distinction between the how and the what” (*DE*, 167).

Nonetheless, Dewey admits that “this distinction is so natural and so important for certain purposes, that we are only too apt to regard it as a separation in existence and not as a distinction in thought” (*DE*, 167). That mistake pulls us into another — that the self and the environment are also distinguishable. In turn we arrive at the notion that knowing is done by the self and that subject matter belongs to the environment. That move sends us looking for laws of operation — what we commonly refer to as methods — and the more accurate, ultimately more useful meaning of method is lost.

#### METHOD AND CONTROL

Method is concerned with providing conditions so adapted to individual needs and powers as to make for the permanent improvement of observation, suggestion, and investigation (*HWT*, 46).

If, as suggested above, method is a way of gaining control over the educational process, then the nature of this control is a proper object of inquiry. This entails not only *awareness* of educational aims and ideals, but a thorough analysis and *interrogation* of these ideals in light of democratic social needs. It entails as well the careful examination of teacher-student interaction to reveal the nature of the control exercised as well as the nature of the (self-)control developed by the student. This — aims and ideals, democratic social needs, teacher-student control and student self-control — becomes the “subject matter” of a method course.

This is a far cry from the standard methods course content noted in the introduction to this essay. What we now refer to as planning, objectives, motivation, classroom management, modes of instruction, literacy skills, individual differences,

and assessment would all no doubt figure in the conversation, but would arise as moments in an educative process subject to our (admittedly limited) control, rather than as topics for discrete consideration.

As teacher educators, we seek to enhance our students' prospective *control* as teachers over the educational process — a process that goes on with or without fully conscious participation. Control is a by-product of the development of thought since "(T)hought affords escape from routine and impulse" (*HWT*, 14). We are then involved with our students in a kind of "consciousness raising" with respect to a) themselves and their own mental attitudes and habits, b) the demands of the subjects studied, and c) current educational aims and ideals. How is this to be done? How is conscious control to be acquired?

First and foremost, it can only be acquired through experience (in Dewey's parlance). It cannot be acquired simply by harvesting the fruits of the experience of others: "Nothing has brought pedagogical theory into greater disrepute than the belief that it is identified with handing out to teachers recipes and models to be followed in teaching" (*DE*, 170). Those who seek teacher-proof methods are misguided, whether those methods are the much-maligned "drill and practice" or the more acceptable "whole language instruction." If a particular strategy or approach is "teacher proof" in the sense that it removes the teacher's judgment from the process, then there is *no* method in Deweyan terms. "Flexibility and initiative in dealing with problems are characteristic of any conception to which method is a way of managing material to develop a conclusion" (*DE*, 170).

The emphasis on one's own experience does not devalue the study of other's past practice, both in the form of case studies and the principles that are the result of formal research. Dewey says: "There can be no discovery of method without cases to be studied. The method is derived from observation of what actually happens, with a view to seeing that it happen better next time" (*DE*, 168). The "cases" of one's own activities are a vital, but not exclusive source of material for observation and discovery. "Cases" carefully described in casebooks, systematically observed in field experience, and/or reflectively encountered in early (and controlled) teaching efforts can enable the development of method.

Again, the key is experience as Dewey conceives it. There must be a trying, an undergoing, and consequent reflection on the connection between the two. Reflection is greatly assisted by the availability of research findings (practice titrated to its "logical" formulation, that is "the logic of the trained adult mind" [*HWT*, 60]), but such findings cannot substitute either for cases that call for action-response or for the "other" (instructor, peer, student) who reacts and, in so doing, provides the consequence. Experience demands cases, others, and reflective ideas.

In *How We Think*, Dewey describes reason in ways that mirror the dialectic of experience. Systematic inference involves the double movement of both induction and deduction. "The inductive movement is toward *discovery* of a binding principle; the deductive toward its *testing*.... So far as we conduct each of these processes in the light of the other, we get valid discovery or verified critical thinking" (*HWT*, 82). We move in inductive mode, motivated by perceived, particular facts, toward

tentative hypotheses; we shift to deductive mode to test — with reference to general, though conditional, principles — our hypotheses. We continue this back and forth movement until “a coherent experience of an object is substituted for the experience of conflicting details” (*HWT*, 83). In other words, we reason until a situation makes sense and a fitting course of action presents itself.

Teacher educators who would guide future teachers’ inductive movement must both 1) enlarge the scope of data, and 2) render the data more minute, more amenable to scrutiny. To guide deductive movement requires “a system of allied ideas” (*HWT*, 95), of systematized knowledge, of definition and classification.

Dewey’s structure of reasoning helps us to understand the role that research findings have to play in method instruction. While the presentation of others’ findings, of others’ experience, cannot constitute teachers’ method or teachers’ knowledge, such findings can and should provide the conditional ideas to be employed in the deductive phase of reasoning about a particular teaching experience.

This view also suggests that attending to the double movement of reason is a key concern in teaching method. Specifically, university method instructors should 1) avoid the isolation of facts, always incorporating facts in meaningful contexts or cases, 2) insist on both movements in reasoning, 3) avoid beginning with general rules, principles and classifications such that they be removed from their legitimate place in the double movement of reason, 4) insist that deduction must proceed into new observation and/or action, and 5) provide for experimentation (*HWT*, 96-99). Put simply, method teachers must provide for students’ experience. When teacher preparation does not focus on the construction of experience, “(M)ethods have then to be authoritatively recommended to teachers, instead of being an expression of their own intelligent observations. Under such circumstances, they have a mechanical uniformity, assumed to be alive for all minds (*DE*, 168).”

The goal, of course, is to avoid such mechanical uniformity by enabling each teacher to develop method as a conscious tool. Only in this way is control maximized. Nonetheless, there can be method that is unconscious, just as there is habit that is unconscious. In fact, the unconscious development of method must precede the conscious. “Method is gradually built up,” says Dewey, through search, exploration, trying, undergoing, and reflection (*HWT*, 113). Dewey decries the assumption that the conscious precedes the unconscious in development:

A conscious setting forth of the method logically adapted for reaching an end is possible only after the result has first been reached by more unconscious and tentative methods, while it is valuable only when a review of the method that achieves success in a given case will throw light upon a new, similar case. The ability to fasten upon and single out (abstract, analyze) those features of one experience which are logically best is hindered by premature insistence upon their explicit formulation. It is repeated use that gives a *method* definiteness; and given this definiteness, precipitation into formulated statement should follow naturally (*HWT*, 113).

The method instructor cannot then assist students in achieving methodological control by the conscious imposition of principles and frameworks. Method must be “gradually built up.”

## CONCLUSION

The central transformation required of the present-day methods instructor is the shift from methods to method. This does not sacrifice what has counted as methods study. Quite the contrary — and perhaps ironically — it is the only way to achieve competence in the selection of methods best adapted to achieve specific educational results. Nonetheless, to take Dewey's prescription seriously is to open up the possibility of radical change in the way teachers are prepared. If aspiring teachers are to acquire method through experience, method instructors and their students must move beyond the walls of the university classroom and the covers of the methods text. This is a move well worth the effort. Only then will teachers choose method over no method.

In *The Water is Wide*, Pat Conroy's description of his own teaching experience among island children in South Carolina, the author/teacher writes:

I have read a number of books by teachers who had brilliant success by using certain methods. I would stumble upon an idea in the morning that seemed surpassingly clever and relevant, then find it foolish and absurd by afternoon. Or what appeared ordained by the gods in the autumn seemed commonplace and senseless by spring. What fired the imagination of my students one week bored and stultified them the next. So there was constant shifting in emphasis, approach, and material.<sup>4</sup>

Conroy was clear about what he hoped to accomplish: "The one goal I developed the first week that never changed was to prepare the kids for the day when they would leave the island for the other side." But he fretted about his own method or lack thereof: "Yet I worried that I did things more by instinct than by logic and would be hard-pressed to explain why I let the twins mold clay when their literacy was questionable, except that they seemed to enjoy it."<sup>5</sup>

By his own account, at least, Conroy seems an effective teacher, one with a clear goal and an obvious knack for understanding what the situation required. Above all, he was an astute observer of his students and their context. Under his tutelage, these young folks *grew*. But he is right to worry about the lack of logic in his approach. It is just this lack of logic that method study — as suggested by John Dewey — can address.

---

1. Texts include John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *The Early Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1972; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1897), 84-95, esp. chap. 13. This work will be cited as *PC* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1966). This work will be cited as *DE* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references. John Dewey, "The Nature of Method," in Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 164-79. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910; reprint, Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1991) esp. chap. 4. This work will be cited as *HWT* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

3. John Dewey, "Pedagogy I B 19. Philosophy of Education. 1898-1899 — Winter Quarter" (Syllabus *The Early Works*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 330.

4. Pat Conroy, *The Water is Wide* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 247-48.

5. *Ibid.*, 248.