The teacher is a learner: Dewey on aims in education

Dr Atli Hardarson

University of Iceland
atlivh@hi.is
Chapter VII of Dewey’s *Democracy and education* is entitled ‘Aims in education’. In that chapter, Dewey seems to deny all of the following three propositions and argue for notions that are diametrically opposed to currently prevalent views of education as outcomes-based:

1. Education should serve predefined aims.
2. Education should serve aims that are external to the process of education.
3. Education should serve aims that are imposed by authority.

These three propositions all seem plausible. There may be disagreement about who should have the authority to decide what aims to serve; whether they should be the same for all students; and to what extent they should be subservient to overarching aims such as economic prosperity, social justice or human flourishing. Such disagreement seems, however, to presuppose acceptance rather than denial of propositions 1, 2 and 3.

When a student has completed a course of education, he or she must have gained some improvement from it, some knowledge, skill, virtue or ability. Is the improvement not an outcome that is external to the process of education? If running schools is a rational enterprise, those responsible for organising what goes on must have some predefined purposes in mind and be able to say what the whole enterprise is for. Does it not follow from this that the aims are, at least to some extent, predefined and imposed by authorities?

Imagine we want to teach some subject, say a biology course in secondary school. How can we choose textbooks, prepare assignments and plan our classes without first deciding what we want our students to be able to do at the end of the course? If we have not made up our minds as to whether we want them to answer questions about the history of life on our planet, explain the function of ribosomes, or diagnose common diseases in potato plants, our course is probably not going to be very well organised. Successful teaching of biology seems to require predetermined aims and they must be chosen by someone who already knows the subject, that is, someone other than the students. This does not only apply to academic subjects. It seems to be true of organised teaching across-the-board. The aim of what goes on in a driving school is for instance a predefined ability to drive safely and follow traffic rules. This aim is imposed in the sense of being determined by external authorities and it is an outcome, something external to the learning process, a competence the students are supposed to have when the course has been completed.

In a book that presents an understanding of education that has much in common with Dewey’s, the Irish philosopher of education, Pádraig Hogan, depicts a view similar to propositions 1, 2 and 3 as dominant in educational discourse: ‘The idea that education must receive its aims and contents from a body deemed to be superior to its own practitioners and leaders is widely taken as part of the natural order of things’ (Hogan, 2010, p. 170). Since propositions 1, 2 and 3 seem to be plain common sense, how could Dewey deny them?

**Dewey’s objections**

In the summary at the end of Chapter VIII, Dewey states his main points in a concise form, saying:
An aim denotes the result of any natural process brought to consciousness and made a factor in determining present observation and choice of ways of acting. It signifies that an activity has become intelligent. Specifically it means foresight of the alternative consequences attendant upon acting in a given situation in different ways, and the use of what is anticipated to direct observation and experiment. A true aim is thus opposed at every point to an aim which is imposed upon a process of action from without. The latter is fixed and rigid; it is not a stimulus to intelligence in the given situation, but is an externally dictated order to do such and such things. Instead of connecting directly with present activities, it is remote, divorced from the means by which it is to be reached. Instead of suggesting a freer and better balanced activity, it is a limit set to activity. Instead of suggesting a freer and better balanced activity, it is a limit set to activity. In education, the currency of these externally imposed aims is responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish. (Dewey, 1980, p. 117)

From the quotation above it seems evident that Dewey objects to aims that are externally dictated, i.e. commanded by other people. The very last words, and the conclusion of the chapter, is that they render the ‘work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish’. From some of his remarks in Chapter VIII it seems also evident that he takes a dim view of aims that are external to the learning activities students engage in. Close to the middle of the chapter, he says, for instance:

In contrast with fulfilling some process in order that activity may go on, stands the static character of an end which is imposed from without the activity. It is always conceived of as fixed; it is something to be attained and possessed. When one has such a notion, activity is a mere unavoidable means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own account. As compared with the end it is but a necessary evil; something which must be gone through before one can reach the object which is alone worth while. In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience. Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. We call it end when it marks off the future direction of the activity in which we are engaged; means when it marks off the present direction. Every divorce of end from means diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could. (Dewey, 1980, p. 112–113)

From these two quotations (hereinafter referred to as Quotations 1 and 2) one gets the impression that Dewey denies propositions 2 and 3.

But what about proposition 1? From the first sentences in Quotation 1 it seems evident that Dewey thinks of intelligent action as guided by aims. Given that successful teaching and learning are species of intelligent action, we can conclude that what teachers and students do serves a purpose. Still Dewey denies that education has an end, aim or purpose in the ordinary sense of bringing about, or causing, a predetermined good we seek. In the very first paragraph of Chapter VIII, he says that ‘the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education [...] we are not concerned, therefore, with finding an end outside of the educative process to which education is subordinate. Our
whole conception forbids’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 107). There is also a similar remark in Chapter IV where he says that ‘there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 56).

Why is education not subordinate to predefined aims?

The quotations above from Chapters IV and VIII of Democracy and education indicate that Dewey did not think of education as subservient to ends ‘outside of the educative process.’ Nevertheless, in the last two paragraphs of Chapter VIII, he writes about what he calls the ‘larger ends’ of education, and says that ‘the more general ends we have, the better’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 117). He seems to mean that educators should be mindful of many values and avoid tunnel vision or focusing on some one type of goods. In other parts of the book, he also hints at a number of general aims or purposes that education serves. In Chapter II, he declares that through education ‘the older bring the young into likemindedness with themselves’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 14). In Chapter II, he also touches on the vital role schools play both in transmission of cultural heritage and in counteracting ‘centrifugal forces set up by juxtaposition of different groups within one and the same political unit’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 26). In Chapter IX, he seems to endorse aims that have to do with justice and equality where he asserts that it ‘is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 126). In the beginning of Chapter XII, he writes that ‘all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned (that is, leaving out certain specialized muscular abilities), is to develop their ability to think’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 159). This seems to be a statement about the main aim of education, although the aim is not very specific. Another such statement is at the end of Chapter XVII where Dewey says: ‘Knowledge is humanistic in quality [...] because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Any subject matter which accomplishes this result is humane, and any subject matter which does not accomplish it is not even educational’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 238). It seems to follow from this that for something to count as education at all it must serve the overarching aim of liberating human intelligence and human sympathy. Comparable remarks about the overarching aims of education can also be found in other works by Dewey. In his Experience and education, published in 1938, that is 22 years after Democracy and education, he says for instance that the ‘ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control’ (Dewey, 1988, p. 48).

How does this fit together? How can it simultaneously be true that ‘there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 56) and that we, the educators, should work towards aims having to do with the improvement of society and liberation of human intelligence? Although this may seem paradoxical, these two tenets are logically compatible. It is possible that everything we do within some context has a clearly defined aim even though the whole is without purpose. We can take a game of chess as an example. Every move within the game has an aim that is subservient to the end of mating the opponent’s king. From these purposes within the game, nothing follows about the purpose of the whole game. It may well be played without any aim. Likewise, from the mere fact that learning activities have ends that are subservient to more overarching aims within the context of education, nothing follows about the purpose of education as a whole. This shows that even if Dewey means, literally, that education has no aim, and that educators should, despite this, work towards worthy aims, he does not thereby contradict himself. Some of the general aims he mentions, such as correcting
unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, seem, however, to belong to a wider context than school education. It is therefore not plausible that Dewey wants to forgo all purposes beyond activities within school settings.

In the first paragraph of Chapter IX, Dewey sums up the conclusion of the chapter under discussion and says that we ‘have just pointed out the futility of trying to establish the aim of education—some one final aim which subordinates all others to itself’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 118). It seems implicit here that his target is not aims as such, but attempts to give pride of place to one aim that subordinates all others. If that is the case, why does he not simply say that education is subordinate to many aims? If he is only arguing for a plurality of aims then why does he insist that education is not subservient to anything save more education?

I think there are two different reasons. One of them is not stated, at least not clearly, in Chapter VIII. It is explained in a later chapter, number XVIII, where Dewey describes education as ‘identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 248). In what follows he points out that education is constitutive of the goods we seek through learning and says that ‘it is a great mistake to regard these values as ultimate ends to which the concrete satisfactions of experience are subordinate. They are nothing but generalizations, more or less adequate, of concrete goods’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 252). In other words, from a description of what is good about education, it does not follow that the goods are consequences subsequent to the process of education. Part of what Dewey means when he denies that education is subservient to any aims outside of the educative process, is that it is valuable in itself. It can nevertheless serve aims, although they cannot all belong outside the context of education. A teacher of biology can, for instance, set subject-specific aims, and make them serve some more general aims having to do with, say, critical thinking or awareness of environmental issues, realizing all the time that the whole value of what his students are up to is not found in ends outside the study of biology. Neither does this strand of Dewey’s argument exclude a definitive list of all the good aspects of education. Goods that are included or internal to the process can be valid aims. So, although we grant that education is constitutive of a good life, it does not follow that its aims cannot be specified in more detail than Dewey does when he says that it is not subordinate to anything save more education.

The argument above discusses one of the two reasons I have found in Dewey’s text for casting doubt on proposition 1. This reason only shows that it should not be accepted without some reservations, not that it should be rejected altogether. To explain and evaluate the other reason it may be helpful to review Dewey’s conception of how actions are related to aims. In his view aims that guide actions are always ends-in-view. An aim unknown to a student cannot guide her action. A teacher can have some aim that the student does not know of. That aim can, however, not directly guide learning activities, although it may determine what tasks the teacher assigns or suggests, and, hence, what aims come to guide the student’s learning activities.

Aims that guide actions are typically close. We can, however, work towards them in order to reach more distant aims. A student in a driving school who is trying to park in a tight space aims at fitting the car in between two posts. That is her end-in-view or what Dewey called the ‘mainspring of present effort’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 61). But that end-in-view may be sought in order to serve more distant aims such as passing a test and getting a driving licence. Possibly some of these more distant aims are ends-in-view of the teacher and unknown to the student. Such distant aims do not suffice to guide learning because without an aim that is, so to say, internal to the endeavour, the student will not do
An endeavour to pass a test cannot guide learning activities otherwise than through aims more close at hand.

Ends-in-view are, according to Dewey, hypothetical and tentative. We use them to organise our activities and as we proceed things may turn out otherwise than we expected and then our ends are revised and new ones emerge. As Israel Scheffler, the US philosopher of education, has pointed out in a chapter about the means-ends distinction in Dewey’s philosophy, an end-in-view ‘is itself a means of organizing present activity’ (Scheffler, 1974, p. 230).

If ends that guide our actions are also means that are revised when our situation changes as a result of what we do then a sharp means-end dichotomy is an illusion, ‘the distinction being only one of convenience’ as Dewey (1980, p. 113) says in Quotation 2. In Chapter XIII Dewey reflects on his argument in Chapter VIII and takes it to be primarily an argument against ends-means dualism. This reflection concludes with a remark to the effect that aims are means: ‘A target is not the future goal of shooting; it is the centering factor in a present shooting’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 182).

We are now ready to look at Dewey’s second reason for rejecting proposition 1. In Chapter VI of Democracy and education, he says that in static societies education is, in the main, ‘a sort of catching up of the child with the aptitudes and resources of the adult group’ and adds that this is not the case ‘in progressive communities’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 85). The reason seems to be that in a progressive community the adult group is also learning. In Chapter XXIV, which is the third last chapter of Democracy and education, Dewey sums up the philosophy behind the account of education in the first chapters of the book, which shows, says he, that education involves ‘growth of both the immature individual and the group in which he lives’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 331). It does not only change the children, but also the adult population. A subgroup of a static society (say schoolchildren) can be directed by fixed aims imposed by another subgroup (say teachers). But if the whole of society is seen as a community of learners then education is, from the broadest point of view, guided, not by the real outcomes that are always to some extent unknown, but by ends-in-view that are tentative and subject to revision. If we already knew all the goods of education there would be little left for us to learn.

In the light of Dewey’s view of culture as dynamic with an open and unknown future, his denial of proposition 1 can be seen as not only an affirmation that education is constitutive of a good life but also a reminder that while we are still learning we cannot make a definitive list of what education is good for. It does of course not follow from this that we should give up working towards aims we see as good and worthy, only that we should be ready to reconsider them and admit that other goods may be no less important.

What is wrong with aims that are external to the process of education?

Chapter VIII of Democracy and Education is divided into three parts. In the first one, entitled ‘The nature of an aim’ Dewey makes a distinction between aims which ‘belong within the process in which they operate’ and aims that ‘are set up from without’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 106). In the second part, entitled ‘The criteria of good aims’ he distinguishes between aims that are ‘imposed by some authority’ and those that are not. The imposed ones are, according to the text, typically fixed, static, rigid and ‘limit intelligence’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 111) whereas an aim that is not imposed is flexible, ‘experimental, and hence constantly growing as it is tested in action’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 112).
It is not clear from the text whether Dewey thinks of these two distinctions as independent. He sometimes lumps them together and seems to assume that external aims are typically also imposed. From Quotations 1 and 2 the reader gets the impression that good aims are neither external nor imposed and the bad ones are both external and imposed. Dewey does not say anything about aims that are either external or imposed but not both. Such aims do, however, exist.

For example, when asked what I am doing, while I am studying German, I may answer by saying: I’m translating a news article. I say what I am doing and thereby indicate my aim, typically an aim within the learning process. If I am asked why I am doing that I may state an aim not belonging within the process. I might for instance say that I want to be eligible for a job that requires knowledge of German, or that I want to be better able to communicate with some German friends. These aims would be external to the process. Nevertheless, they would be chosen by me, the learner, rather than imposed by some authority. This example shows that we are dealing with two different distinctions. Let’s begin with the one between aims that are external and aims that are not.

An aim that belongs within a process is, according to Dewey, an aim that ‘assists observation, choice, and planning in carrying on activity from moment to moment and hour to hour’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 114). Such aims are action-guiding ends-in-view. However, some actions do not seem to have any such internal aims. When, for instance, I pay my energy bill my aim is to avoid having the electricity cut off. Having electricity until the end of the month is, however, not internal to the process of paying a bill because that is only a single action, not an activity that I carry on. Dewey would, I think, accept this. In the beginning of Chapter VIII he makes clear that he focuses on what he calls ‘orderly and ordered activity’ and also describes as work that ‘possesses intrinsic continuity’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 108).

Most often when we learn, practice or study something we are engaged in orderly and ordered activities and they typically generate purposes that belong within the learning process. What the student aims at is to complete some task. If a student of biology is writing a report on a potato plant he has been investigating then his end-in-view is to complete the report, describing, for example, observed symptoms of potassium deficiency. If a student in a driving school is trying to back into a parking space, her end-in-view is having the car properly parked. In both cases, the students are engaged in work that possesses intrinsic continuity.

This, however, does not give us any reason to think there is anything wrong with external aims. Even though the aims learners seek to achieve are internal to or tightly coupled with their activities these aims may be mere means in the larger context that is understood by the teachers or the authorities who designed the curriculum. Dewey has given us good reasons to think of internal aims as vital for education. But why does he speak ill of the external ones?

A clue to one possible answer can be found in Dewey’s monograph from 1913, entitled *Interest and effort in education*. There he argues that learning activities are, like other actions, driven by ends the learner has in view. He criticises both those who try to use harsh discipline to force students to learn and those who attempt to make a school subject interesting by ‘clothing it with adventitious traits that are agreeable’ (Dewey, 1979, p. 168). In what follows, he says that these two methods ‘represent failure to ask the right question’ (Dewey, 1979, p. 168). What an educator should do, according to Dewey, is to find some task that will occupy the students and ‘can be carried forward to its appropriate termination better by noting and using the subject-matter [… ] so that when
carried to its completion it will naturally terminate in the things to be learned’ (Dewey, 1979, p. 169). The message to the educator is: Neither try to please nor force your pupils. Try rather to find something for them to do that makes them learn. Once they are busy with their tasks they are driven by ends-in-views that are internal to what they are working on.

Dewey’s objections to external aims are best seen as arguments against trying to use them directly to drive learning activities. Doing that leads to bad pedagogy where the educators either try to threaten or to please their students rather than make them busy. If this is the right interpretation then Dewey does not see external aims as entirely useless. They may be needed to guide teachers’ choice of tasks and assignments – what is external from the point of view of a student may be and end-in-view for a teacher. This understanding of Dewey’s opposition to external aims in Chapter VIII appears plausible in light of his discussion about education as preparation for the future in Chapter V. There he concludes that the ‘mistake is not in attaching importance to preparation for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 61).

What is wrong with aims that are imposed by authority?

If a teacher in a driving school commands his student to park a car in a tight space then the aim that guides the student, while she tries to do this, is probably imposed – a part of a syllabus written by some external authority. Nevertheless, it is hard to see the teacher’s command as oppressive: it is just a normal part of a program most people want to go through in order to be able to drive safely and legally. So, what is wrong with aims that are imposed by authority?

In Chapter II of Democracy and education, Dewey writes about social activities and says that a workhorse is not a co-partner in a shared activity. He ‘does not really share in the social use to which his action is put’ (Dewey, 1979, p. 17). The reason Dewey gives is that the horse does not have the same interests, ideas and emotions as the people he works for. One possible interpretation of the phrase ‘imposed aim’ in Chapter VIII is in that it refers to aims the student does not share, or are alien to the student. That would explain why Dewey says (in Quotation 1) that imposed aims make work slavish. Aims that are imposed in this sense make the student work like a horse rather than a man.

If a teacher asks her student to carry out a task such as writing a report, the student can ask: Why do you ask me to do that? If the teacher cannot give an honest answer that the student sees reason to accept, then the aim is imposed rather than shared. Aims that are suggested or commanded by educators are, however, not imposed in this sense if the learners share the interests of the teachers.

In Chapter III Dewey touches on ideas, then-recent, about the social construction of the self, i.e. the ‘predominating influence of association with fellow beings in the formation of mental and moral disposition’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 38). It seems that he believed, rather optimistically, that in a cooperative and friendly school environment students would readily share the purposes of the educators, who could therefore guide students without imposing aims on them in any pejorative sense. Dewey seems to have thought that when a student concurs with an aim that a teacher has suggested, it becomes flexible, something the student can adjust to circumstances. Without such flexibility the aim is not useful as a means of organising learning activities, because in complicated situations, acting upon an aim ‘brings to light conditions which had been overlooked. This calls for
revision of the original aim; it has to be added to and subtracted from’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 111).

From Chapter II it is clear that, in Dewey’s view, educators have aims, they set up school environments to transmit chosen parts of society’s cultural heritage. Dewey can though point out that setting up an environment to transmit culture can be done without exact, fixed, aims – in the hope that the students will advance in roughly the right direction. Dewey thought that such purposes have to fit into something the student is ready to work towards. He writes about the impossibility of purely external direction in Chapter III, saying: ‘Speaking accurately, all direction is but re-direction; it shifts the activities already going on into another channel. Unless one is cognizant of the energies which are already in operation, one’s attempts at direction will almost surely go amiss’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 30). Such re-direction is possible, according to Dewey, because normally students adjust to the culture they grow up in and are ready to partake ‘with others in a use of things which leads to consequences of common interest’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 39). Dewey reflects on this again in Chapter XIX where he says: ‘In the degree in which men have an active concern in the ends that control their activity, their activity becomes free or voluntary and loses its externally enforced and servile quality, even though the physical aspect of behavior remain the same’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 269). It seems to follow from this that successful education requires a cultural environment where learners and teachers share interests and values.

**Concluding remarks**

The dominant paradigm of curriculum design focuses on ends from the point of view of those who design a course of education for others. From the vantage point of policy makers and authors of curriculum guides, propositions 1, 2 and 3 seem plausible, even self-evident. Dewey’s sees the aims of education from another point of view, as a learner.

From a learner’s point of view propositions 2 and 3 are only half-true because external aims that are not shared by the student cannot successfully guide educative activities.

As regards proposition 1, Dewey’s philosophy does not accommodate the birds-eye view required to make it literally true. He does, of course, not deny that a teacher may sometimes be able to view his students’ journey through a course of study from above, know what it leads to, and fix the aims in advance. As learners, however, we cannot have an external view of our whole progress. We do not see what is ahead of us and therefore we cannot predefine the aims in detail, at least not with any certainty. What we say about them is hypothetical and subject to review. For a learner the aims-in-view are emerging and there is no sharp distinction between ends and means. If we are all learners proposition 1 cannot therefore be literally true of the whole of education. Some of our aims are not predefined but discovered on the way. If we are all half-educated we only half-know what education is good for.

Dewey sees the whole of society as advancing, through education, into unmapped territory. He also has a political ideal of a community of equals where all are learning. On his view ‘the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher’ (Dewey, 1980, p. 167). Although his denial of propositions 1, 2 and 3 may seem strange at first sight there is something to be said for this ideal and the view of educational aims that goes with it.
References


