

THE STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING MODEL IN JOHN DEWEY'S PROGRESSIVE CONCEPTION

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ABSTRACT. The educational model proposed by John Dewey brings the student in the center of the pedagogical act and promotes an approach that emphasizes on the motivational structure of the student's personality, on his/her interests and skills, those being considered as important variables in the educational process. In this respect, an educational approach able to harness and maximize the students' natural potential is claimed by the actual educational system, mostly when proposing to implement student-centered learning at all the levels, as its main objective. So, taking into account that the student-centered learning starting practically with a change in the teachers' current practice, it comes the question: under what conditions this model can be really applied in practice?

Keywords: student-centered learning, contemporary school, educational model, experience, John Dewey

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Das von John Dewey vorgeschlagene Bildungsmodell stellt den Schüler in den Mittelpunkt des pädagogischen Handelns und fördert einen Ansatz, der sich auf die motivationale Struktur der Persönlichkeit des Schülers, seiner Interessen und Fähigkeiten konzentriert, die als wichtige Variable im Bildungsprozess gelten. In diesem Zusammenhang ist ein Bildungsansatz erforderlich, der in der Lage ist, das natürliche Potenzial der Schüler zu nutzen und zu maximieren, vor allem, wenn wir studierendenzentrierten Lernstrategie auf allen Ebenen als Hauptziel implementieren mögen. Da es sich bei dem lernerzentrierten Lernen jedoch im Grunde um eine Veränderung der derzeitigen Lehrpraxis handelt, versucht dieser Artikel die folgende Frage zu beantworten: Unter welchen Bedingungen kann dieses Modell tatsächlich in der Praxis genutzt werden?

Schlüsselwörter: Schülerzentriertes Lernen, zeitgenössische Schule, pädagogisches Modell, Erfahrung, John Dewey

I. Introduction

Nowadays children - the generation developed under the influence of technological factors, with very early habits related to information literacy, who communicate and define on-line friendships more easily than in the past, having unlimited access to knowledge in any field -, represented another type of challenge for their parents and teachers who were trained with other values in a former environment influenced by other factors. The psychologists noticed that the nowadays children are evolving and developing in a faster pace, clearly determined by specific environments and situations, gathering easily their competences and skills in the field of technology, facing with problems needed to be

rapidly solved, mostly related to the control and management of emotions, relationship and socialization. In this respect, the big challenge is addressed to teachers, who need to identify and apply the best didactic methods suited to each student's personality, during the educational process.

Education represents a complex process that starts from the moment of birth, being linked to the whole existence of each individual. Throughout the life, a person learns and evolves, develops competences and skills in particular directions, in many cases in accordance to the demands addressed by the environment in which the person has to deal with. Under those circumstances, when very rapid societal mutations take place, education must form the future skills in order to help the individual to be adapted effectively, to be able to reorient towards another field or to change the basic activity if required, to find optimal motivation and self-control in certain difficult situations, to know very well how to make proper physical, mental or intellectual effort, fully exploited the own potential. Moreover, education is a dynamic process, it generates changes, progress, evolution and, in turn, it must be adapted to the exigencies and needs of the society. Education must release the creative force of individuals, so that they can contribute to the development of the society.

II. The centrality of the educational process

Over the time, there have been many pedagogical trends, influenced by political, economic and cultural conditions, but also by paradigms and educational policies active at specific moments, which placed the teacher or

the student in the heart of the educational act, referring differently to each individual educational actor.

The period of traditional didactics (from the 17th century to the 19th century) was dominated by the *magistro-centrism* vision (Cristea, 1998), where the teacher's importance was emphasized in the didactic approach, being effectively centered on teaching. The main source of knowledge was the perception and the educators were the ones who designed and carried out the formative activities, the trainees' tasks being to reproduce the received pedagogical message (Cristea, 2008).

The period of *modern* didactics (from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century) had specific *psycho-centrism* features, a pedagogical current that places the student in the center of the educational act, and its psychological potential, to which absolute freedom must be given. The psycho-centrism defines the education starting from the recognition of the importance of the trained student and individualizing the training in this respect (Cristea, 2008). The representatives of this period (as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Edouard Claparède, Ovide Decroly) promoted a new conception, opposite to the traditional school, where the education had the student in the heart of all actions and approaches, for the educator being given another role, as partner in the teaching demarche. The needs and the interests of the students became primordial, and not the imposed and rigid learning contents. This paradigm was followed by the *socio-centric* and *techno-centric* ones, which are specific to the period of *post-modern didactics* (starting with the second half of the 20th century). At present, student-centered teaching targets to raise the satisfaction of the student in relation to his/her learning experience, trying to make the student to deeply understand how the acquired knowledge can be valued in his/her own life (Nilson, 2016; Weimer, 2013).

III. Student-centered learning - a basic pedagogical principle in John Dewey's progressive conception

John Dewey's didactical conception derives from his philosophical vision - the *pragmatism* - and emphasizes on certain principles, innovative at those times, in the American pedagogy and beyond. Dewey's thinking represents a turning point in the history of pedagogy: on the epistemological level, it is detached from empiricism, and on the psychological level, it proposes an articulation of the naturalistic point of view with a sociological perspective (Crahay, 2009, p. 82). For Dewey, the human is in a relationship of continuity with the environment, and the act of acquiring the knowledge is essential in the process where the human being builds his own experience of the social and physical world (Crahay, 2009, p. 83). The knowledge is generated by action (*learning by doing*) and occurs after repeated attempts made by the individual, to solve problems - *learning is based on experience*. The student is the center of the teaching process, and education has to meet the student's natural needs. The role of the educator is to place the students in contexts that require the students to call their problem-solving skills. Such approaches have beneficial effects on students, developing thinking skills close to scientific research, and solve *ipso facto* the difficult problem related to students' interests (Crahay, 2009, p. 85). Dewey's formula ("*Learning by doing*") can define the advisable method at school age, with the condition to mention its sense and its range of action. A good school education is therefore what makes the student to participate in the process of acquiring knowledge through activities and personal studies that favor its initiatives and ways of expression, instead of imposing his or her immobile attitude, as a participant more or less passive (Debesse, 1981, p. 66).

Dewey considered that *“the only true education comes from stimulating the student’s capacities under the pressure of social situations in which he/she is set up. In this sense, he/she is determined to act as a member of a unit, to broaden its field, initially restricted to its actions and feelings, and to think on himself/herself from the point of view of the welfare of the group to which he/she belongs. Through the reactions that their own activities cause to others, he/she gets to understand what it means in social terms (...)”* (Dewey, 1897, apud Crahay, 2009, p. 92). For Dewey, the education has two sides: one *psychological* and one *social*, but the psychological dimension is more important due to the fact that the student’s instincts and abilities provide the material and the starting point in education. But the child (the future adult) is also a member of the society, so that the education must have a clear social valence.

In his work - *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902) - John Dewey develops the idea of *student-centered curriculum*, namely the organization of learning experiences and educational values, which are relevant to everyday activity as daily experiences. He proposes that, under the umbrella of the curriculum concept, not only the information should be found, but also the didactical approaches needed to its assimilation. This means that in the heart of all educational activities and actions, must stay the needs, interests and aspirations of the student, the learning of certain disciplines being supported only to the extent that their particular contents respect the condition of applicability, practical value and satisfaction strongly related to the intrinsic needs of the student. In this process, the educator has the task of organizing the learning opportunities.

Dewey argues that *“the interests are the signs and symptoms of developing of a capacity; they represent the capacities of becoming (...)”*

(Dewey, 1897, apud Crahay, 2009, p. 94), so the student must be given the opportunity to study elements of his or her sphere of interest that support his / her intrinsic motivation and contributing to the enrichment of its experience.

The student-centered learning requires effort from the teacher's part, but effectively exploits the student's individual potential, develops critical thinking, emphasizing on the understanding / applying the knowledge, enhancing an active and exploratory learning, inciting to research and leading to collaborative learning. The student becomes the subject of the educational process, which contributes to the responsible assumption of learning outcomes, to the development of independence in learning, to the formation of self-learning and lifelong learning skills, to the development of creativity and teamwork skills, motivation and intellectual curiosity.

In this context, the teacher performs a multitude of roles: guide, coach, coordinator, team-mate, consultant, instructor, trainer, collaborator, facilitator - he/she places himself/herself in relation to the student, as learning partner. He/she does not provide answers, but creates situations from which the students discover solutions to problems, do not criticize and discourage, but motivate, stimulate the curiosity, direct students on the way of getting the knowledge and give to students the freedom and satisfaction to discover themselves.

In a strong relation with Dewey's theory, it can be projected a learning frame, that situate both the teacher and student in a connection governed by the student-learning center process (figure 1).

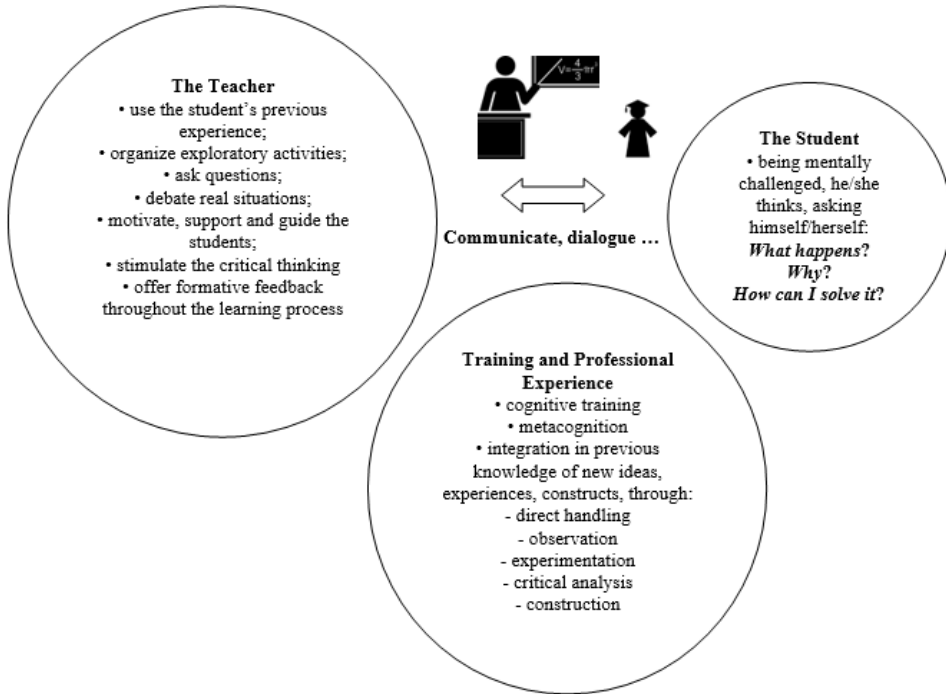


Fig. 1. The teacher and the student from the perspective of student-centered learning

IV. Conclusions

Student-centered learning represents a model that brings the student in the middle of the learning process - the teacher offers students a series of opportunities to learn independently and in collaboration, by mediating the process in the direction of acquiring the skills students need. The students thus have the possibility to influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. In addition, the priority of the experience over theory is powerfully represented, as underlined in John

Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, when learning is strongly influenced by thinking and reasoning, by tackling real problems which arise in real experiences: "... *progress (in education) is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience. (...) Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.*" (Flanagan, 1994).

As a direction affirmed by the *Psychology of Education*, the centering of the learning on student targets to: a) effective participation of students on building their own knowledge; b) objective self-evaluation of the learning results; c) learning by cooperation in groups; d) raising of intrinsic motivation for authentic learning; d) improving the teacher's activity by assuming of new roles (mentor, facilitator, mediator, counselor, manager etc.). However, the unconditional assumption of the student-centered learning paradigm, propagated from an exclusively psychological perspective, without any significant effort of pedagogical mediation, necessary for its transformation into a viable didactic model, achievable in a normative sense (teleological and valuable) and a prescriptive direction (methodological, docimological, managerial), may lead to a negative influence on the school life, on building the school programs, but also on the didactic and extra-didactic teachers' behavior (Cristea, 2015).

Dewey's theory and his didactic philosophy overlap largely over the defining elements of the nowadays society and actual education - its timeliness being very actual -, and his work seeming to describe the educational process with its realities and challenges, more than a century apart. Dewey believed, as we also conclude now, that education is the only one which can save a nation: "*I think education is the fundamental method of social progress and society reformation ...*" (Dewey, 1897, apud Crahay, 2009, p. 94).

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