

Interest and Discipline

1. The Meaning of the Terms

We have already noticed the difference in the attitude of a spectator and of an agent or participant. The former is indifferent to what is going on; one result is just as good as another, since each is just something to look at. The latter is bound up with what is going on; its outcome makes a difference to him. His fortunes are more or less at stake in the issue of events. Consequently he does whatever he can to influence the direction present occurrences take. One is like a man in a prison cell watching the rain out of the window; it is all the same to him. The other is like a man who has planned an outing for the next day which continuing rain will frustrate. He cannot, to be sure, by his present reactions affect to-morrow's weather, but he may take some steps which will influence future happenings, if only to postpone the proposed picnic. If a man sees a carriage coming which may run over him, if he cannot stop its movement, he can at least get out of the way if he foresees the consequence in time. In many instances, he can intervene even more directly. The attitude of a participant in the course of affairs is thus a double one: there is solicitude, anxiety concerning future consequences, and a tendency to act to assure better, and avert worse, consequences. There are words which denote this attitude: concern, interest. These words suggest that a person is bound up with the possibilities inhering in objects; that he is accordingly on the lookout for what they are likely to do to him; and that, on the basis of his expectation or foresight, he is eager to act so as to give things one turn rather than another. Interest and aims,

concern and purpose, are necessarily connected. Such words as aim, intent, end, emphasize the results which are wanted and striven for; they take for granted the personal attitude of solicitude and attentive eagerness. Such words as interest, affection, concern, motivation, emphasize the bearing of what is foreseen upon the individual's fortunes, and his active desire to act to secure a possible result. They take for granted the objective changes. But the difference is but one of emphasis; the meaning that is shaded in one set of words is illuminated in the other. What is anticipated is objective and impersonal; to-morrow's rain; the possibility of being run over. But for an active being, a being who partakes of the consequences instead of standing aloof from them, there is at the same time a personal response. The difference imaginatively foreseen makes a present difference, which finds expression in solicitude and effort. While such words as affection, concern, and motive indicate an attitude of personal preference, they are always attitudes toward objects - toward what is foreseen. We may call the phase of objective foresight intellectual, and the phase of personal concern emotional and volitional, but there is no separation in the facts of the situation.

Such a separation could exist only if the personal attitudes ran their course in a world by themselves. But they are always responses to what is going on in the situation of which they are a part, and their successful or unsuccessful expression depends upon their interaction with other changes. Life activities flourish and fail only in connection with changes of the environment. They are literally bound up with these changes; our desires, emotions, and affections are but various ways in which our doings are tied up with the doings of things and persons about us. Instead of marking a purely personal or subjective realm, separated from the objective and impersonal, they indicate the non-existence of such a separate world. They afford convincing evidence that changes in things are not alien to the activities of a self, and that the career and welfare of the self are bound up with the movement of persons and things. Interest, concern, mean that self and world are engaged with each other in a developing situation.

The word interest, in its ordinary usage, expresses (i) the whole state of active development, (ii) the objective results that are foreseen and wanted, and (iii) the personal emotional inclination.

(I) An occupation, employment, pursuit, business is often referred to as an interest. Thus we say that a man's interest is politics, or journalism, or philanthropy, or archaeology, or collecting Japanese prints, or banking.

(ii) By an interest we also mean the point at which an object touches or engages a man; the point where it influences him. In some legal transactions a man has to prove "interest" in order to have a standing at court. He has to show that some proposed step concerns his affairs. A silent partner has an interest in a business, although he takes no active part in its conduct because its prosperity or decline affects his profits and liabilities.

(iii) When we speak of a man as interested in this or that the emphasis falls directly upon his personal attitude. To be interested is to be absorbed in, wrapped up in, carried away by, some object. To take an interest is to be on the alert, to care about, to be attentive. We say of an interested person both that he has lost himself in some affair and that he has found himself in it. Both terms express the engrossment of the self in an object.

When the place of interest in education is spoken of in a depreciatory way, it will be found that the second of the meanings mentioned is first exaggerated and then isolated. Interest is taken to mean merely the effect of an object upon personal advantage or disadvantage, success or failure. Separated from any objective development of affairs, these are reduced to mere personal states of pleasure or pain. Educationally, it then follows that to attach importance to interest means to attach some feature of seductiveness to material otherwise indifferent; to secure attention and effort by offering a bribe of pleasure. This procedure is properly stigmatized as "soft" pedagogy;

as a "soup-kitchen" theory of education.

But the objection is based upon the fact - or assumption - that the forms of skill to be acquired and the subject matter to be appropriated have no interest on their own account: in other words, they are supposed to be irrelevant to the normal activities of the pupils. The remedy is not in finding fault with the doctrine of interest, any more than it is to search for some pleasant bait that may be hitched to the alien material. It is to discover objects and modes of action, which are connected with present powers. The function of this material in engaging activity and carrying it on consistently and continuously is its interest. If the material operates in this way, there is no call either to hunt for devices which will make it interesting or to appeal to arbitrary, semi-coerced effort.

The word interest suggests, etymologically, what is between, - that which connects two things otherwise distant. In education, the distance covered may be looked at as temporal. The fact that a process takes time to mature is so obvious a fact that we rarely make it explicit. We overlook the fact that in growth there is ground to be covered between an initial stage of process and the completing period; that there is something intervening. In learning, the present powers of the pupil are the initial stage; the aim of the teacher represents the remote limit. Between the two lie means - that is middle conditions: - acts to be performed; difficulties to be overcome; appliances to be used. Only through them, in the literal time sense, will the initial activities reach a satisfactory consummation.

These intermediate conditions are of interest precisely because the development of existing activities into the foreseen and desired end depends upon them. To be means for the achieving of present tendencies, to be "between" the agent and his end, to be of interest, are different names for the same thing. When material has to be made interesting, it signifies that as presented, it lacks connection with purposes and present power: or that if the connection be there, it is

not perceived. To make it interesting by leading one to realize the connection that exists is simply good sense; to make it interesting by extraneous and artificial inducements deserves all the bad names which have been applied to the doctrine of interest in education.

So much for the meaning of the term interest. Now for that of discipline. Where an activity takes time, where many means and obstacles lie between its initiation and completion, deliberation and persistence are required. It is obvious that a very large part of the everyday meaning of will is precisely the deliberate or conscious disposition to persist and endure in a planned course of action in spite of difficulties and contrary solicitations. A man of strong will, in the popular usage of the words, is a man who is neither fickle nor half-hearted in achieving chosen ends. His ability is executive; that is, he persistently and energetically strives to execute or carry out his aims. A weak will is unstable as water.

Clearly there are two factors in will. One has to do with the foresight of results, the other with the depth of hold the foreseen outcome has upon the person.

(I) Obstinacy is persistence but it is not strength of volition. Obstinacy may be mere animal inertia and insensitiveness. A man keeps on doing a thing just because he has got started, not because of any clearly thought-out purpose. In fact, the obstinate man generally declines (although he may not be quite aware of his refusal) to make clear to himself what his proposed end is; he has a feeling that if he allowed himself to get a clear and full idea of it, it might not be worth while. Stubbornness shows itself even more in reluctance to criticize ends which present themselves than it does in persistence and energy in use of means to achieve the end. The really executive man is a man who ponders his ends, who makes his ideas of the results of his actions as clear and full as possible. The people we called weak-willed or self-indulgent always deceive themselves as to the consequences of their acts. They pick out some feature which is agreeable and neglect

all attendant circumstances. When they begin to act, the disagreeable results they ignored begin to show themselves. They are discouraged, or complain of being thwarted in their good purpose by a hard fate, and shift to some other line of action. That the primary difference between strong and feeble volition is intellectual, consisting in the degree of persistent firmness and fullness with which consequences are thought out, cannot be over-emphasized.

(ii) There is, of course, such a thing as a speculative tracing out of results. Ends are then foreseen, but they do not lay deep hold of a person. They are something to look at and for curiosity to play with rather than something to achieve. There is no such thing as over-intellectuality, but there is such a thing as a one-sided intellectuality. A person "takes it out" as we say in considering the consequences of proposed lines of action. A certain flabbiness of fiber prevents the contemplated object from gripping him and engaging him in action. And most persons are naturally diverted from a proposed course of action by unusual, unforeseen obstacles, or by presentation of inducements to an action that is directly more agreeable.

A person who is trained to consider his actions, to undertake them deliberately, is in so far forth disciplined. Add to this ability a power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline. Discipline means power at command; mastery of the resources available for carrying through the action undertaken. To know what one is to do and to move to do it promptly and by use of the requisite means is to be disciplined, whether we are thinking of an army or a mind. Discipline is positive. To cow the spirit, to subdue inclination, to compel obedience, to mortify the flesh, to make a subordinate perform an uncongenial task - these things are or are not disciplinary according as they do or do not tend to the development of power to recognize what one is about and to persistence in accomplishment.

It is hardly necessary to press the point that interest and discipline

are connected, not opposed.

(i) Even the more purely intellectual phase of trained power - apprehension of what one is doing as exhibited in consequences - is not possible without interest. Deliberation will be perfunctory and superficial where there is no interest. Parents and teachers often complain - and correctly - that children "do not want to hear, or want to understand." Their minds are not upon the subject precisely because it does not touch them; it does not enter into their concerns. This is a state of things that needs to be remedied, but the remedy is not in the use of methods which increase indifference and aversion. Even punishing a child for inattention is one way of trying to make him realize that the matter is not a thing of complete unconcern; it is one way of arousing "interest," or bringing about a sense of connection. In the long run, its value is measured by whether it supplies a mere physical excitation to act in the way desired by the adult or whether it leads the child "to think" - that is, to reflect upon his acts and impregnate them with aims.

(ii) That interest is requisite for executive persistence is even more obvious. Employers do not advertise for workmen who are not interested in what they are doing. If one were engaging a lawyer or a doctor, it would never occur to one to reason that the person engaged would stick to his work more conscientiously if it was so uncongenial to him that he did it merely from a sense of obligation. Interest measures - or rather is - the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one, moving one to act for its realization.

2. The Importance of the Idea of Interest in Education

Interest represents the moving force of objects - whether perceived or presented in imagination - in any experience having a purpose. In the concrete, the value of recognizing the dynamic place of interest in an

educative development is that it leads to considering individual children in their specific capabilities, needs, and preferences. One who recognizes the importance of interest will not assume that all minds work in the same way because they happen to have the same teacher and textbook. Attitudes and methods of approach and response vary with the specific appeal the same material makes, this appeal itself varying with difference of natural aptitude, of past experience, of plan of life, and so on. But the facts of interest also supply considerations of general value to the philosophy of education. Rightly understood, they put us on our guard against certain conceptions of mind and of subject matter which have had great vogue in philosophic thought in the past, and which exercise a serious hampering influence upon the conduct of instruction and discipline. Too frequently mind is set over the world of things and facts to be known; it is regarded as something existing in isolation, with mental states and operations that exist independently. Knowledge is then regarded as an external application of purely mental existences to the things to be known, or else as a result of the impressions which this outside subject matter makes on mind, or as a combination of the two. Subject matter is then regarded as something complete in itself; it is just something to be learned or known, either by the voluntary application of mind to it or through the impressions it makes on mind.

The facts of interest show that these conceptions are mythical. Mind appears in experience as ability to respond to present stimuli on the basis of anticipation of future possible consequences, and with a view to controlling the kind of consequences that are to take place. The things, the subject matter known, consist of whatever is recognized as having a bearing upon the anticipated course of events, whether assisting or retarding it. These statements are too formal to be very intelligible. An illustration may clear up their significance. You are engaged in a certain occupation, say writing with a typewriter. If you are an expert, your formed habits take care of the physical movements and leave your thoughts free to consider your topic. Suppose, however, you are not skilled, or that, even if you are, the machine

does not work well. You then have to use intelligence. You do not wish to strike the keys at random and let the consequences be what they may; you wish to record certain words in a given order so as to make sense. You attend to the keys, to what you have written, to your movements, to the ribbon or the mechanism of the machine. Your attention is not distributed indifferently and miscellaneously to any and every detail. It is centered upon whatever has a bearing upon the effective pursuit of your occupation. Your look is ahead, and you are concerned to note the existing facts because and in so far as they are factors in the achievement of the result intended. You have to find out what your resources are, what conditions are at command, and what the difficulties and obstacles are. This foresight and this survey with reference to what is foreseen constitute mind. Action that does not involve such a forecast of results and such an examination of means and hindrances is either a matter of habit or else it is blind. In neither case is it intelligent. To be vague and uncertain as to what is intended and careless in observation of conditions of its realization is to be, in that degree, stupid or partially intelligent.

If we recur to the case where mind is not concerned with the physical manipulation of the instruments but with what one intends to write, the case is the same. There is an activity in process; one is taken up with the development of a theme. Unless one writes as a phonograph talks, this means intelligence; namely, alertness in foreseeing the various conclusions to which present data and considerations are tending, together with continually renewed observation and recollection to get hold of the subject matter which bears upon the conclusions to be reached. The whole attitude is one of concern with what is to be, and with what is so far as the latter enters into the movement toward the end. Leave out the direction which depends upon foresight of possible future results, and there is no intelligence in present behavior. Let there be imaginative forecast but no attention to the conditions upon which its attainment depends, and there is self-deception or idle dreaming - abortive intelligence.

If this illustration is typical, mind is not a name for something complete by itself; it is a name for a course of action in so far as that is intelligently directed; in so far, that is to say, as aims, ends, enter into it, with selection of means to further the attainment of aims. Intelligence is not a peculiar possession which a person owns; but a person is intelligent in so far as the activities in which he plays a part have the qualities mentioned. Nor are the activities in which a person engages, whether intelligently or not, exclusive properties of himself; they are something in which he engages and partakes. Other things, the independent changes of other things and persons, cooperate and hinder. The individual's act may be initial in a course of events, but the outcome depends upon the interaction of his response with energies supplied by other agencies. Conceive mind as anything but one factor partaking along with others in the production of consequences, and it becomes meaningless.

The problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends. The remedy for the evils attending the doctrine of formal discipline previously spoken of, is not to be found by substituting a doctrine of specialized disciplines, but by reforming the notion of mind and its training. Discovery of typical modes of activity, whether play or useful occupations, in which individuals are concerned, in whose outcome they recognize they have something at stake, and which cannot be carried through without reflection and use of judgment to select material of observation and recollection, is the remedy. In short, the root of the error long prevalent in the conception of training of mind consists in leaving out of account movements of things to future results in which an individual shares, and in the direction of which observation, imagination, and memory are enlisted. It consists in regarding mind as complete in itself, ready to be directly applied to a present material.

In historic practice the error has cut two ways. On one hand, it has screened and protected traditional studies and methods of teaching from intelligent criticism and needed revisions. To say that they are "disciplinary" has safeguarded them from all inquiry. It has not been enough to show that they were of no use in life or that they did not really contribute to the cultivation of the self. That they were "disciplinary" stifled every question, subdued every doubt, and removed the subject from the realm of rational discussion. By its nature, the allegation could not be checked up. Even when discipline did not accrue as matter of fact, when the pupil even grew in laxity of application and lost power of intelligent self-direction, the fault lay with him, not with the study or the methods of teaching. His failure was but proof that he needed more discipline, and thus afforded a reason for retaining the old methods. The responsibility was transferred from the educator to the pupil because the material did not have to meet specific tests; it did not have to be shown that it fulfilled any particular need or served any specific end. It was designed to discipline in general, and if it failed, it was because the individual was unwilling to be disciplined. In the other direction, the tendency was towards a negative conception of discipline, instead of an identification of it with growth in constructive power of achievement. As we have already seen, will means an attitude toward the future, toward the production of possible consequences, an attitude involving effort to foresee clearly and comprehensively the probable results of ways of acting, and an active identification with some anticipated consequences. Identification of will, or effort, with mere strain, results when a mind is set up, endowed with powers that are only to be applied to existing material. A person just either will or will not apply himself to the matter in hand. The more indifferent the subject matter, the less concern it has for the habits and preferences of the individual, the more demand there is for an effort to bring the mind to bear upon it - and hence the more discipline of will. To attend to material because there is something to be done in which the person is concerned is not disciplinary in this view; not even if it results in a desirable increase of constructive power. Application just for the sake

of application, for the sake of training, is alone disciplinary. This is more likely to occur if the subject matter presented is uncongenial, for then there is no motive (so it is supposed) except the acknowledgment of duty or the value of discipline. The logical result is expressed with literal truth in the words of an American humorist: "It makes no difference what you teach a boy so long as he doesn't like it."

The counterpart of the isolation of mind from activities dealing with objects to accomplish ends is isolation of the subject matter to be learned. In the traditional schemes of education, subject matter means so much material to be studied. Various branches of study represent so many independent branches, each having its principles of arrangement complete within itself. History is one such group of facts; algebra another; geography another, and so on till we have run through the entire curriculum. Having a ready-made existence on their own account, their relation to mind is exhausted in what they furnish it to acquire. This idea corresponds to the conventional practice in which the program of school work, for the day, month, and successive years, consists of "studies" all marked off from one another, and each supposed to be complete by itself - for educational purposes at least.

Later on a chapter is devoted to the special consideration of the meaning of the subject matter of instruction. At this point, we need only to say that, in contrast with the traditional theory, anything which intelligence studies represents things in the part which they play in the carrying forward of active lines of interest. Just as one "studies" his typewriter as part of the operation of putting it to use to effect results, so with any fact or truth. It becomes an object of study - that is, of inquiry and reflection - when it figures as a factor to be reckoned with in the completion of a course of events in which one is engaged and by whose outcome one is affected. Numbers are not objects of study just because they are numbers already constituting a branch of learning called mathematics, but because they represent qualities and relations of the world in which our action goes on,

because they are factors upon which the accomplishment of our purposes depends. Stated thus broadly, the formula may appear abstract. Translated into details, it means that the act of learning or studying is artificial and ineffective in the degree in which pupils are merely presented with a lesson to be learned. Study is effectual in the degree in which the pupil realizes the place of the numerical truth he is dealing with in carrying to fruition activities in which he is concerned. This connection of an object and a topic with the promotion of an activity having a purpose is the first and the last word of a genuine theory of interest in education.

3. Some Social Aspects of the Question

While the theoretical errors of which we have been speaking have their expressions in the conduct of schools, they are themselves the outcome of conditions of social life. A change confined to the theoretical conviction of educators will not remove the difficulties, though it should render more effective efforts to modify social conditions. Men's fundamental attitudes toward the world are fixed by the scope and qualities of the activities in which they partake. The ideal of interest is exemplified in the artistic attitude. Art is neither merely internal nor merely external; merely mental nor merely physical. Like every mode of action, it brings about changes in the world. The changes made by some actions (those which by contrast may be called mechanical) are external; they are shifting things about. No ideal reward, no enrichment of emotion and intellect, accompanies them. Others contribute to the maintenance of life, and to its external adornment and display. Many of our existing social activities, industrial and political, fall in these two classes. Neither the people who engage in them, nor those who are directly affected by them, are capable of full and free interest in their work. Because of the lack of any purpose in the work for the one doing it, or because of the restricted character of its aim, intelligence is not adequately engaged. The same conditions force many people back upon themselves. They

take refuge in an inner play of sentiment and fancies. They are aesthetic but not artistic, since their feelings and ideas are turned upon themselves, instead of being methods in acts which modify conditions. Their mental life is sentimental; an enjoyment of an inner landscape. Even the pursuit of science may become an asylum of refuge from the hard conditions of life - not a temporary retreat for the sake of recuperation and clarification in future dealings with the world. The very word art may become associated not with specific transformation of things, making them more significant for mind, but with stimulations of eccentric fancy and with emotional indulgences. The separation and mutual contempt of the "practical" man and the man of theory or culture, the divorce of fine and industrial arts, are indications of this situation. Thus interest and mind are either narrowed, or else made perverse. Compare what was said in an earlier chapter about the one-sided meanings which have come to attach to the ideas of efficiency and of culture.

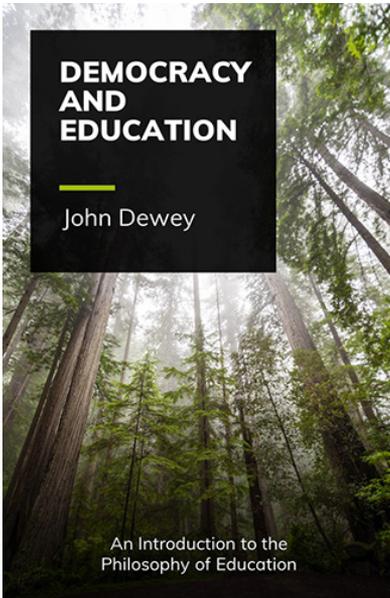
This state of affairs must exist so far as society is organized on a basis of division between laboring classes and leisure classes. The intelligence of those who do things becomes hard in the unremitting struggle with things; that of those freed from the discipline of occupation becomes luxurious and effeminate. Moreover, the majority of human beings still lack economic freedom. Their pursuits are fixed by accident and necessity of circumstance; they are not the normal expression of their own powers interacting with the needs and resources of the environment. Our economic conditions still relegate many men to a servile status. As a consequence, the intelligence of those in control of the practical situation is not liberal. Instead of playing freely upon the subjugation of the world for human ends, it is devoted to the manipulation of other men for ends that are non-human in so far as they are exclusive.

This state of affairs explains many things in our historic educational traditions. It throws light upon the clash of aims manifested in different portions of the school system; the narrowly utilitarian

character of most elementary education, and the narrowly disciplinary or cultural character of most higher education. It accounts for the tendency to isolate intellectual matters till knowledge is scholastic, academic, and professionally technical, and for the widespread conviction that liberal education is opposed to the requirements of an education which shall count in the vocations of life. But it also helps define the peculiar problem of present education. The school cannot immediately escape from the ideals set by prior social conditions. But it should contribute through the type of intellectual and emotional disposition which it forms to the improvement of those conditions. And just here the true conceptions of interest and discipline are full of significance. Persons whose interests have been enlarged and intelligence trained by dealing with things and facts in active occupations having a purpose (whether in play or work) will be those most likely to escape the alternatives of an academic and aloof knowledge and a hard, narrow, and merely "practical" practice. To organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of a constructive imagination, is what most needs to be done to improve social conditions. To oscillate between drill exercises that strive to attain efficiency in outward doing without the use of intelligence, and an accumulation of knowledge that is supposed to be an ultimate end in itself, means that education accepts the present social conditions as final, and thereby takes upon itself the responsibility for perpetuating them. A reorganization of education so that learning takes place in connection with the intelligent carrying forward of purposeful activities is a slow work. It can only be accomplished piecemeal, a step at a time. But this is not a reason for nominally accepting one educational philosophy and accommodating ourselves in practice to another. It is a challenge to undertake the task of reorganization courageously and to keep at it persistently.

Summary

Interest and discipline are correlative aspects of activity having an aim. Interest means that one is identified with the objects which define the activity and which furnish the means and obstacles to its realization. Any activity with an aim implies a distinction between an earlier incomplete phase and later completing phase; it implies also intermediate steps. To have an interest is to take things as entering into such a continuously developing situation, instead of taking them in isolation. The time difference between the given incomplete state of affairs and the desired fulfillment exacts effort in transformation, it demands continuity of attention and endurance. This attitude is what is practically meant by will. Discipline or development of power of continuous attention is its fruit. The significance of this doctrine for the theory of education is twofold. On the one hand it protects us from the notion that mind and mental states are something complete in themselves, which then happen to be applied to some ready-made objects and topics so that knowledge results. It shows that mind and intelligent or purposeful engagement in a course of action into which things enter are identical. Hence to develop and train mind is to provide an environment which induces such activity. On the other side, it protects us from the notion that subject matter on its side is something isolated and independent. It shows that subject matter of learning is identical with all the objects, ideas, and principles which enter as resources or obstacles into the continuous intentional pursuit of a course of action. The developing course of action, whose end and conditions are perceived, is the unity which holds together what are often divided into an independent mind on one side and an independent world of objects and facts on the other.



Dewey, J. (2018). *Democracy and Education (1st ed.)*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracyandeducation>



CC0: This work is in the public domain, which means that you may print, share, or remix its contents as you please without concern for copyright and without seeking permission.