

# The Significance of Geography and History

## 1. Extension of Meaning of Primary Activities

Nothing is more striking than the difference between an activity as merely physical and the wealth of meanings which the same activity may assume. From the outside, an astronomer gazing through a telescope is like a small boy looking through the same tube. In each case, there is an arrangement of glass and metal, an eye, and a little speck of light in the distance. Yet at a critical moment, the activity of an astronomer might be concerned with the birth of a world, and have whatever is known about the starry heavens as its significant content. Physically speaking, what man has effected on this globe in his progress from savagery is a mere scratch on its surface, not perceptible at a distance which is slight in comparison with the reaches even of the solar system. Yet in meaning what has been accomplished measures just the difference of civilization from savagery. Although the activities, physically viewed, have changed somewhat, this change is slight in comparison with the development of the meanings attaching to the activities. There is no limit to the meaning which an action may come to possess. It all depends upon the context of perceived connections in which it is placed; the reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible. The advantage which the activity of man has in appropriating and finding meanings makes his education something else than the manufacture of a tool or

the training of an animal. The latter increase efficiency; they do not develop significance. The final educational importance of such occupations in play and work as were considered in the last chapter is that they afford the most direct instrumentalities for such extension of meaning. Set going under adequate conditions they are magnets for gathering and retaining an indefinitely wide scope of intellectual considerations. They provide vital centers for the reception and assimilation of information. When information is purveyed in chunks simply as information to be retained for its own sake, it tends to stratify over vital experience. Entering as a factor into an activity pursued for its own sake - whether as a means or as a widening of the content of the aim - it is informing. The insight directly gained fuses with what is told. Individual experience is then capable of taking up and holding in solution the net results of the experience of the group to which he belongs - including the results of sufferings and trials over long stretches of time. And such media have no fixed saturation point where further absorption is impossible. The more that is taken in, the greater capacity there is for further assimilation. New receptiveness follows upon new curiosity, and new curiosity upon information gained.

The meanings with which activities become charged, concern nature and man. This is an obvious truism, which however gains meaning when translated into educational equivalents. So translated, it signifies that geography and history supply subject matter which gives background and outlook, intellectual perspective, to what might otherwise be narrow personal actions or mere forms of technical skill. With every increase of ability to place our own doings in their time and space connections, our doings gain in significant content. We realize that we are citizens of no mean city in discovering the scene in space of which we are denizens, and the continuous manifestation of endeavor in time of which we are heirs and continuers. Thus our ordinary daily experiences cease to be things of the moment and gain enduring substance. Of course if geography and history are taught as ready-made studies which a person studies simply because he is sent

to school, it easily happens that a large number of statements about things remote and alien to everyday experience are learned. Activity is divided, and two separate worlds are built up, occupying activity at divided periods. No transmutation takes place; ordinary experience is not enlarged in meaning by getting its connections; what is studied is not animated and made real by entering into immediate activity. Ordinary experience is not even left as it was, narrow but vital. Rather, it loses something of its mobility and sensitiveness to suggestions. It is weighed down and pushed into a corner by a load of unassimilated information. It parts with its flexible responsiveness and alert eagerness for additional meaning. Mere amassing of information apart from the direct interests of life makes mind wooden; elasticity disappears.

Normally every activity engaged in for its own sake reaches out beyond its immediate self. It does not passively wait for information to be bestowed which will increase its meaning; it seeks it out. Curiosity is not an accidental isolated possession; it is a necessary consequence of the fact that an experience is a moving, changing thing, involving all kinds of connections with other things. Curiosity is but the tendency to make these conditions perceptible. It is the business of educators to supply an environment so that this reaching out of an experience may be fruitfully rewarded and kept continuously active. Within a certain kind of environment, an activity may be checked so that the only meaning which accrues is of its direct and tangible isolated outcome. One may cook, or hammer, or walk, and the resulting consequences may not take the mind any farther than the consequences of cooking, hammering, and walking in the literal - or physical - sense. But nevertheless the consequences of the act remain far-reaching. To walk involves a displacement and reaction of the resisting earth, whose thrill is felt wherever there is matter. It involves the structure of the limbs and the nervous system; the principles of mechanics. To cook is to utilize heat and moisture to change the chemical relations of food materials; it has a bearing upon the assimilation of food and the growth of the body. The utmost that

the most learned men of science know in physics, chemistry, physiology is not enough to make all these consequences and connections perceptible. The task of education, once more, is to see to it that such activities are performed in such ways and under such conditions as render these conditions as perceptible as possible. To "learn geography" is to gain in power to perceive the spatial, the natural, connections of an ordinary act; to "learn history" is essentially to gain in power to recognize its human connections. For what is called geography as a formulated study is simply the body of facts and principles which have been discovered in other men's experience about the natural medium in which we live, and in connection with which the particular acts of our life have an explanation. So history as a formulated study is but the body of known facts about the activities and sufferings of the social groups with which our own lives are continuous, and through reference to which our own customs and institutions are illuminated.

## **2. The Complementary Nature of History and Geography**

History and geography - including in the latter, for reasons about to be mentioned, nature study - are the information studies par excellence of the schools. Examination of the materials and the method of their use will make clear that the difference between penetration of this information into living experience and its mere piling up in isolated heaps depends upon whether these studies are faithful to the interdependence of man and nature which affords these studies their justification. Nowhere, however, is there greater danger that subject matter will be accepted as appropriate educational material simply because it has become customary to teach and learn it. The idea of a philosophic reason for it, because of the function of the material in a worthy transformation of experience, is looked upon as a vain fancy, or as supplying a high-sounding phraseology in support of what is already done. The words "history" and "geography"

suggest simply the matter which has been traditionally sanctioned in the schools. The mass and variety of this matter discourage an attempt to see what it really stands for, and how it can be so taught as to fulfill its mission in the experience of pupils. But unless the idea that there is a unifying and social direction in education is a farcical pretense, subjects that bulk as large in the curriculum as history and geography, must represent a general function in the development of a truly socialized and intellectualized experience. The discovery of this function must be employed as a criterion for trying and sifting the facts taught and the methods used.

The function of historical and geographical subject matter has been stated; it is to enrich and liberate the more direct and personal contacts of life by furnishing their context, their background and outlook. While geography emphasizes the physical side and history the social, these are only emphases in a common topic, namely, the associated life of men. For this associated life, with its experiments, its ways and means, its achievements and failures, does not go on in the sky nor yet in a vacuum. It takes place on the earth. This setting of nature does not bear to social activities the relation that the scenery of a theatrical performance bears to a dramatic representation; it enters into the very make-up of the social happenings that form history. Nature is the medium of social occurrences. It furnishes original stimuli; it supplies obstacles and resources. Civilization is the progressive mastery of its varied energies. When this interdependence of the study of history, representing the human emphasis, with the study of geography, representing the natural, is ignored, history sinks to a listing of dates with an appended inventory of events, labeled "important"; or else it becomes a literary phantasy - for in purely literary history the natural environment is but stage scenery.

Geography, of course, has its educative influence in a counterpart connection of natural facts with social events and their consequences. The classic definition of geography as an account of the earth as the home of man expresses the educational reality. But it is easier to give

this definition than it is to present specific geographical subject matter in its vital human bearings. The residence, pursuits, successes, and failures of men are the things that give the geographic data their reason for inclusion in the material of instruction. But to hold the two together requires an informed and cultivated imagination. When the ties are broken, geography presents itself as that hodge-podge of unrelated fragments too often found. It appears as a veritable rag-bag of intellectual odds and ends: the height of a mountain here, the course of a river there, the quantity of shingles produced in this town, the tonnage of the shipping in that, the boundary of a county, the capital of a state. The earth as the home of man is humanizing and unified; the earth viewed as a miscellany of facts is scattering and imaginatively inert. Geography is a topic that originally appeals to imagination - even to the romantic imagination. It shares in the wonder and glory that attach to adventure, travel, and exploration. The variety of peoples and environments, their contrast with familiar scenes, furnishes infinite stimulation. The mind is moved from the monotony of the customary. And while local or home geography is the natural starting point in the reconstructive development of the natural environment, it is an intellectual starting point for moving out into the unknown, not an end in itself. When not treated as a basis for getting at the large world beyond, the study of the home geography becomes as deadly as do object lessons which simply summarize the properties of familiar objects. The reason is the same. The imagination is not fed, but is held down to recapitulating, cataloguing, and refining what is already known. But when the familiar fences that mark the limits of the village proprietors are signs that introduce an understanding of the boundaries of great nations, even fences are lighted with meaning. Sunlight, air, running water, inequality of earth's surface, varied industries, civil officers and their duties - all these things are found in the local environment. Treated as if their meaning began and ended in those confines, they are curious facts to be laboriously learned. As instruments for extending the limits of experience, bringing within its scope peoples and things otherwise strange and unknown, they are transfigured by the use to which they are put.

Sunlight, wind, stream, commerce, political relations come from afar and lead the thoughts afar. To follow their course is to enlarge the mind not by stuffing it with additional information, but by remaking the meaning of what was previously a matter of course.

The same principle coordinates branches, or phases, of geographical study which tend to become specialized and separate. Mathematical or astronomical, physiographic, topographic, political, commercial, geography, all make their claims. How are they to be adjusted? By an external compromise that crowds in so much of each? No other method is to be found unless it be constantly borne in mind that the educational center of gravity is in the cultural or humane aspects of the subject. From this center, any material becomes relevant in so far as it is needed to help appreciate the significance of human activities and relations. The differences of civilization in cold and tropical regions, the special inventions, industrial and political, of peoples in the temperate regions, cannot be understood without appeal to the earth as a member of the solar system. Economic activities deeply influence social intercourse and political organization on one side, and reflect physical conditions on the other. The specializations of these topics are for the specialists; their interaction concerns man as a being whose experience is social.

To include nature study within geography doubtless seems forced; verbally, it is. But in educational idea there is but one reality, and it is pity that in practice we have two names: for the diversity of names tends to conceal the identity of meaning. Nature and the earth should be equivalent terms, and so should earth study and nature study. Everybody knows that nature study has suffered in schools from scrappiness of subject matter, due to dealing with a large number of isolated points. The parts of a flower have been studied, for example, apart from the flower as an organ; the flower apart from the plant; the plant apart from the soil, air, and light in which and through which it lives. The result is an inevitable deadness of topics to which attention is invited, but which are so isolated that they do not feed imagination.

The lack of interest is so great that it was seriously proposed to revive animism, to clothe natural facts and events with myths in order that they might attract and hold the mind. In numberless cases, more or less silly personifications were resorted to. The method was silly, but it expressed a real need for a human atmosphere. The facts had been torn to pieces by being taken out of their context. They no longer belonged to the earth; they had no abiding place anywhere. To compensate, recourse was had to artificial and sentimental associations. The real remedy is to make nature study a study of nature, not of fragments made meaningless through complete removal from the situations in which they are produced and in which they operate. When nature is treated as a whole, like the earth in its relations, its phenomena fall into their natural relations of sympathy and association with human life, and artificial substitutes are not needed.

### **3. History and Present Social Life**

The segregation which kills the vitality of history is divorce from present modes and concerns of social life. The past just as past is no longer our affair. If it were wholly gone and done with, there would be only one reasonable attitude toward it. Let the dead bury their dead. But knowledge of the past is the key to understanding the present. History deals with the past, but this past is the history of the present. An intelligent study of the discovery, explorations, colonization of America, of the pioneer movement westward, of immigration, etc., should be a study of the United States as it is to-day: of the country we now live in. Studying it in process of formation makes much that is too complex to be directly grasped open to comprehension. Genetic method was perhaps the chief scientific achievement of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Its principle is that the way to get insight into any complex product is to trace the process of its making, - to follow it through the successive stages of its growth. To apply this method to history as if it meant only the truism that the present social

state cannot be separated from its past, is one-sided. It means equally that past events cannot be separated from the living present and retain meaning. The true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems.

This general principle may be briefly applied to a consideration of its bearing upon a number of points. The biographical method is generally recommended as the natural mode of approach to historical study. The lives of great men, of heroes and leaders, make concrete and vital historic episodes otherwise abstract and incomprehensible. They condense into vivid pictures complicated and tangled series of events spread over so much space and time that only a highly trained mind can follow and unravel them. There can be no doubt of the psychological soundness of this principle. But it is misused when employed to throw into exaggerated relief the doings of a few individuals without reference to the social situations which they represent. When a biography is related just as an account of the doings of a man isolated from the conditions that aroused him and to which his activities were a response, we do not have a study of history, for we have no study of social life, which is an affair of individuals in association. We get only a sugar coating which makes it easier to swallow certain fragments of information. Much attention has been given of late to primitive life as an introduction to learning history. Here also there is a right and a wrong way of conceiving its value. The seemingly ready-made character and the complexity of present conditions, their apparently hard and fast character, is an almost insuperable obstacle to gaining insight into their nature. Recourse to the primitive may furnish the fundamental elements of the present situation in immensely simplified form. It is like unraveling a cloth so complex and so close to the eyes that its scheme cannot be seen, until the larger coarser features of the pattern appear. We cannot simplify the present situations by deliberate experiment, but resort to primitive life presents us with the sort of results we should desire from an experiment. Social relationships and modes of organized action are reduced to their lowest terms. When

this social aim is overlooked, however, the study of primitive life becomes simply a rehearsing of sensational and exciting features of savagery. Primitive history suggests industrial history. For one of the chief reasons for going to more primitive conditions to resolve the present into more easily perceived factors is that we may realize how the fundamental problems of procuring subsistence, shelter, and protection have been met; and by seeing how these were solved in the earlier days of the human race, form some conception of the long road which has had to be traveled, and of the successive inventions by which the race has been brought forward in culture. We do not need to go into disputes regarding the economic interpretation of history to realize that the industrial history of mankind gives insight into two important phases of social life in a way which no other phase of history can possibly do. It presents us with knowledge of the successive inventions by which theoretical science has been applied to the control of nature in the interests of security and prosperity of social life. It thus reveals the successive causes of social progress. Its other service is to put before us the things that fundamentally concern all men in common - the occupations and values connected with getting a living. Economic history deals with the activities, the career, and fortunes of the common man as does no other branch of history. The one thing every individual must do is to live; the one thing that society must do is to secure from each individual his fair contribution to the general well being and see to it that a just return is made to him.

Economic history is more human, more democratic, and hence more liberalizing than political history. It deals not with the rise and fall of principalities and powers, but with the growth of the effective liberties, through command of nature, of the common man for whom powers and principalities exist.

Industrial history also offers a more direct avenue of approach to the realization of the intimate connection of man's struggles, successes, and failures with nature than does political history - to say nothing of

the military history into which political history so easily runs when reduced to the level of youthful comprehension. For industrial history is essentially an account of the way in which man has learned to utilize natural energy from the time when men mostly exploited the muscular energies of other men to the time when, in promise if not in actuality, the resources of nature are so under command as to enable men to extend a common dominion over her. When the history of work, when the conditions of using the soil, forest, mine, of domesticating and cultivating grains and animals, of manufacture and distribution, are left out of account, history tends to become merely literary - a systematized romance of a mythical humanity living upon itself instead of upon the earth.

Perhaps the most neglected branch of history in general education is intellectual history. We are only just beginning to realize that the great heroes who have advanced human destiny are not its politicians, generals, and diplomatists, but the scientific discoverers and inventors who have put into man's hands the instrumentalities of an expanding and controlled experience, and the artists and poets who have celebrated his struggles, triumphs, and defeats in such language, pictorial, plastic, or written, that their meaning is rendered universally accessible to others. One of the advantages of industrial history as a history of man's progressive adaptation of natural forces to social uses is the opportunity which it affords for consideration of advance in the methods and results of knowledge. At present men are accustomed to eulogize intelligence and reason in general terms; their fundamental importance is urged. But pupils often come away from the conventional study of history, and think either that the human intellect is a static quantity which has not progressed by the invention of better methods, or else that intelligence, save as a display of personal shrewdness, is a negligible historic factor. Surely no better way could be devised of instilling a genuine sense of the part which mind has to play in life than a study of history which makes plain how the entire advance of humanity from savagery to civilization has been dependent upon intellectual discoveries and inventions, and the

extent to which the things which ordinarily figure most largely in historical writings have been side issues, or even obstructions for intelligence to overcome.

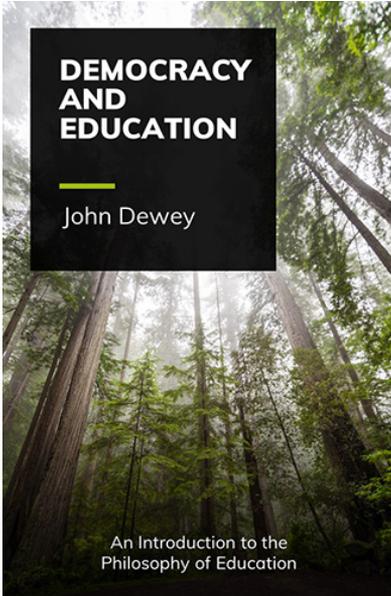
Pursued in this fashion, history would most naturally become of ethical value in teaching. Intelligent insight into present forms of associated life is necessary for a character whose morality is more than colorless innocence. Historical knowledge helps provide such insight. It is an organ for analysis of the warp and woof of the present social fabric, of making known the forces which have woven the pattern. The use of history for cultivating a socialized intelligence constitutes its moral significance. It is possible to employ it as a kind of reservoir of anecdotes to be drawn on to inculcate special moral lessons on this virtue or that vice. But such teaching is not so much an ethical use of history as it is an effort to create moral impressions by means of more or less authentic material. At best, it produces a temporary emotional glow; at worst, callous indifference to moralizing. The assistance which may be given by history to a more intelligent sympathetic understanding of the social situations of the present in which individuals share is a permanent and constructive moral asset.

## **Summary**

It is the nature of an experience to have implications which go far beyond what is at first consciously noted in it. Bringing these connections or implications to consciousness enhances the meaning of the experience. Any experience, however trivial in its first appearance, is capable of assuming an indefinite richness of significance by extending its range of perceived connections. Normal communication with others is the readiest way of effecting this development, for it links up the net results of the experience of the group and even the race with the immediate experience of an individual. By normal communication is meant that in which there is a

joint interest, a common interest, so that one is eager to give and the other to take. It contrasts with telling or stating things simply for the sake of impressing them upon another, merely in order to test him to see how much he has retained and can literally reproduce.

Geography and history are the two great school resources for bringing about the enlargement of the significance of a direct personal experience. The active occupations described in the previous chapter reach out in space and time with respect to both nature and man. Unless they are taught for external reasons or as mere modes of skill their chief educational value is that they provide the most direct and interesting roads out into the larger world of meanings stated in history and geography. While history makes human implications explicit and geography natural connections, these subjects are two phases of the same living whole, since the life of men in association goes on in nature, not as an accidental setting, but as the material and medium of development.



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.