

## The Role of Thinking In Education

"What are we supposed to learn," Harry asks in *Harry 5*. A moment later he answers his own question; "We should be learning how to think."

"We do learn how to think," was Mark's response, "but we never learn to think for ourselves . . . They're always trying to fill my mind full of all sorts of junk."

This exchange comes as part of a discussion between Harry, Mark, and Maria concerning the purposes of education. Some of the other suggestions made are learning how to solve problems and learning how to ask questions.

John Dewey states the problem in similar terms. "To fill our heads, like a scrapbook, with this and that item as a finished and done-for thing, is not to think,"<sup>2</sup> and "Frequently [knowledge] is treated as an end in itself, and then the goal becomes to heap it up and display it when called for . . . No one could construct a house on ground cluttered with miscellaneous junk. Pupils who have stored their 'minds' with all kinds of material which they have never put to intellectual uses are sure to be hampered when they try to think."<sup>3</sup>

It is doubtful whether many people would disagree with the contention that children are in school to learn to think. While they might be surprised when it was further contended that children should also learn to think for themselves, it is also doubtful whether many would disagree with this contention *in theory*. In practice, of course, many adults have a great deal of trouble dealing with children who have learned to think for themselves; they are, after all, less prone to being led blindly. But while few educators would disagree with Harry and Mark, few do anything to further the goal.

Dewey believes that "thinking . . . is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous."<sup>4</sup> Schools fail to teach children to think well or for themselves because they divorce 'intellectual' activity from everything else, and because they teach in isolation, never helping the children to make connection between what they are learning, and the real world, their own thoughts, their previously learned knowledge, etc. "The separation of 'mind' from direct occupation with things throws emphasis on *things* at the expense of *relations* or connections."<sup>5</sup> It is the concern of schools, Dewey says, to provide children with materials and opportunities to explore, to make discoveries, so that they will begin to build up the experiences which they can use as the building blocks of thought.

Mark envisions a school where learning would be interesting. Dewey would say that learning *is* interesting because it involves the whole person, body and mind, senses and intellect, in an experience which is inherently pleasurable to the human animal. What is going on in so many of the classrooms, including Mark's, is not learning at all, but rote memorization and recitation of facts. But he indicts this kind of schooling as being worse than dull and useless, because children are always learning, but in this case they are learning something quite different from what we think they are learning. At best, rather than learning the subject matter,

the student is learning how to please the teacher, give him what he wants, and meet the requirements. At worst, he is learning "how to *seem to meet them* - or, how to come near enough to meeting them to slide along without undue friction."<sup>6</sup>

The upshot of all this is that, according to Dewey, Harry and the others are perfectly right in their objections to the kind of schooling they describe. In school, children *should* be learning to think, and to think for themselves. They should be given opportunities for activities which are interesting, and which lead to genuine problems which stimulate thought, they should possess the information needed to deal with these problems, they should be expected to deal with the problems in a rational way, and they should be given the chance to test and refine their solutions. In this way education produces children who can think, make connections with the real world, and use their intellect in combination with their powers of observation and experimentation to acquire knowledge which they will retain and to solve problems.

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### Footnotes

1. Matthew Lipman, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, p. 24.
2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 147.
3. *Ibid*, p. 158.
4. *Ibid*, p. 145.
5. *Ibid*, p. 142.
6. *Ibid*, p. 156.

### Bibliography

- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. 1  
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- Lipman, Matthew. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*.  
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