

Three Deweyan Ideas for Education
in the Age of Diasporas:
Social Center, Activity Curriculum,
and Teacher Education Laboratory

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Introduction

In this paper I present three of Dewey's concepts that work together to promote inclusive education for immigrants and refugees. Dewey developed these ideas during his decade in Chicago, while he was working closely with Jane Addams at Hull House in ameliorative efforts for immigrants and refugees.

Dewey spoke memorably in *The School and Society* about the social changes brought about by industrialization, through which political boundaries had been “wiped out and moved about,” and populations had been “hurriedly gathered into cities from the ends of the earth.” Habits of living had been altered with startling abruptness and thoroughness, while even “moral and religious ideas and interests (had been) profoundly affected.” It would be “inconceivable,” Dewey concluded, that such changes should not call forth a radical educational response.¹

In today's era of risk, the problems are, if anything, more profound than those facing Dewey and Addams in 1900. We face new risks of abject poverty, civil war, pandemic disease, and climate destruction that feed off of each other; “one risk meets and multiplies another risk – to produce an entirely new set of challenges, often unforeseen.”² Prominent among these are the waves of dispersed and homeless immigrants and refugees arriving in Europe - the new diasporas.³

The three ideas presented here are core elements of Dewey's response to the crises of 1900. They are at least as relevant today.

¹ John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 1: 6-7.

² Rob Fauber, “The Era of Risk” – Exponential Risk.”

<https://www.moodys.com/web/en/us/insights/exponential-risk.html>

³ I use the term “diaspora” in its contemporary sense - indicated by the Merriam- Webster dictionary - as referring to refugee or immigrant populations which are living “away from an indigenous or established homeland.” The number of forcibly displaced and stateless people in Europe rose to 21.8 million by the end of 2022, including almost 12.4 million refugees, 1.3 million asylum-seekers, 7.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and 474,000 who were stateless. UNHCR Global Focus, “UNHCR in 2022 - Meeting the challenges of record displacement,” <https://reporting.unhcr.org>, accessed on December 12, 2023.

1. The School as Social Center

Dewey developed the first idea in his 1902 essay, "The School as Social Center." He advances the idea that school can augment the efforts of municipal social settlement houses like Hull House with complementary efforts throughout the nation.

Dewey begins by noting that the political problems of his time involve "questions of the assimilation of diverse types of language and custom," and these cannot adequately be addressed through legislation but will require the "promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding."⁴

This leads him to the idea of expanding the school into a social center. While public schools assist in assimilating the younger generation to local institutions, the older generation remains untouched. Newcomers may experience culture shock and meet with intolerance. The power of older religious and social authorities weakens, especially among children. Parental authority has less influence – "obedient orderliness wanes."⁵ Meanwhile new scientific and technological developments continually transform all occupations, so newcomer adults require further technical and scientific education simply to adjust to their occupational situations in their new localities.

In developing the idea of the school as a social center, Dewey refers explicitly to Hull house as the "working model upon which I am pretty continuously drawing."⁶ Like settlement houses, the school as a social center can address the identified needs in several ways. First, it can "mix people up with each other ... under conditions which will promote their getting acquainted with the best side of each other." Classes for study are then regarded as "modes of bringing people together, of doing away with barriers of caste, or class, or race, or type of experience that keep people from real communion with each other."⁷

Second, the school can provide for social recreation, the "most overlooked and neglected of all ethical forces and one of the strongest and most fundamental things in human nature."⁸ The school is situated as a setting for social clubs, lectures, amateur

⁴ MW 2: 83.

⁵ Ibid., 87

⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ Ibid.

theater productions, social dances, and musical concerts.⁹

Third, the newcomers bring a surplus of unutilized talent, possessing capacities that remain untapped for lack of opportunity but when developed can contribute specialized labor for the workforce. The school can foster these with arts and crafts classes – music, drawing, clay-modeling – as well as scientific laboratories to attract those with particular talents. Without these newcomers are losing the satisfaction of skilled employment, while society suffers from wasted capital.¹⁰

Schools are typically under-utilized in the evenings. They have auditoriums and gyms for lectures, concerts, theater productions, and social gatherings as well as art studios, technical shops, and science laboratories. The school as a social center puts all of these at the disposal of immigrant and refugee families.

2. The Activity Curriculum

The second idea is the *activity curriculum* as presented in *School and Society* (1899) and more completely developed in *Democracy and Education* (1916). Typical school subject matters are quite divorced from the current experiences and needs of young people. The problem is exacerbated for migrant school children, as subject matters are presented in an alien language.

For Dewey, all school learning starts with *learning by doing*. “Every educative process should begin with *doing something*”¹¹ Teachers should start their instructional process by designing activities that children can engage with, and can project their own ends into, as when a primary school child can see a kitchen and mixing bowls and can already see the baking of cakes and cookies in the setting. The activities must be “inherently significant” so that “the pupil appreciates for himself its importance enough to take a vital interest in it.”¹²

In his idealized school, there are no classrooms – only activity areas: kitchens, dining rooms, textile and sewing rooms, and shops – plus art studios and science laboratories, a library, and a museum. The school is situated in a garden. Children are familiar with, and eager to participate in, the activities.

⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹¹ MW 4: 186, Dewey’s emphasis.

¹² Ibid.

In Dewey's drawings of his idealized school, practical activity areas are located on the first floor (see figure 1, chart III).

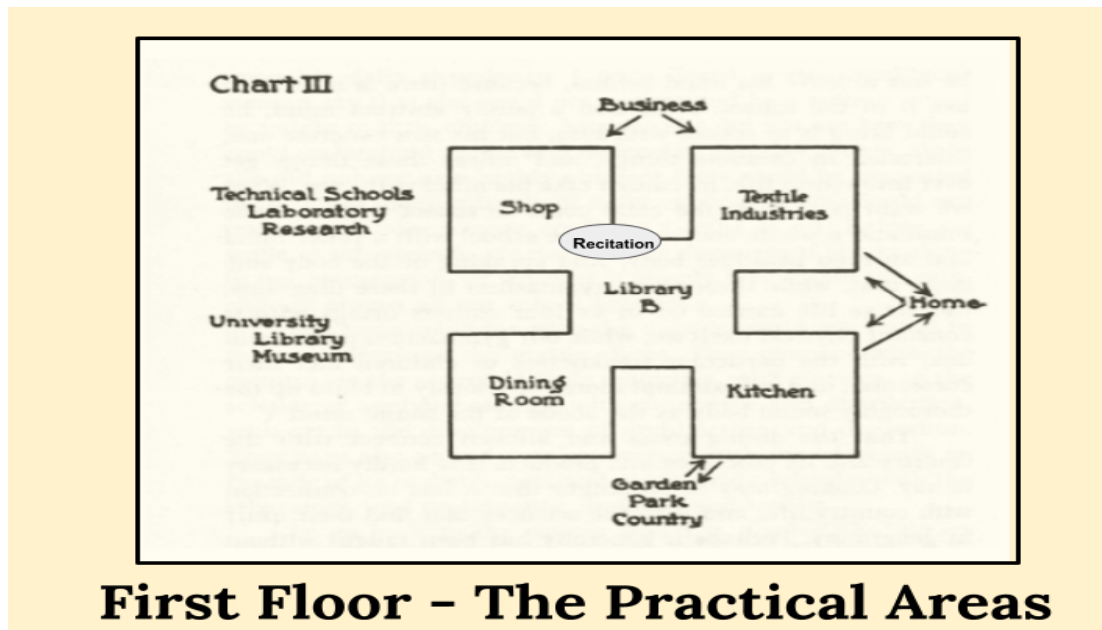


Figure 1. Practical Areas

When young people enter the school, they go to an assigned practical area. Dewey stresses the resulting continuity between home and school, as the practical activity areas of the school are modeled on a typical apartment: (see figure 2 below).

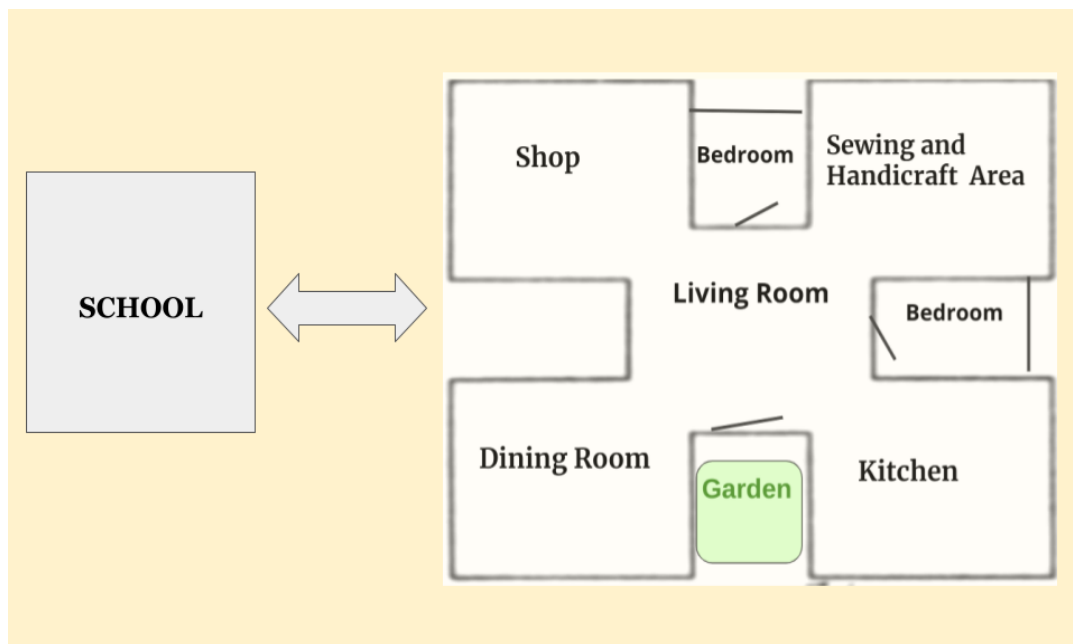


Figure 2. School Home Relationship

Students engage in practical activities like those in familiar homes: preparing meals, sewing, cleaning and mending clothes, growing vegetables and flowers. They can join in wholeheartedly because the activities are already familiar; the young people have been observing and maybe even participating in these activities outside of school. In the practical areas they will have many experiences to share with their local peers.

As the children learn by doing, questions and problems arise that require discussion and information. Teachers send the children to the library (today, they will send them to the Internet) and lead discussions in the recitation areas - now conceived as "social clearing centers" (see figure 3 below).

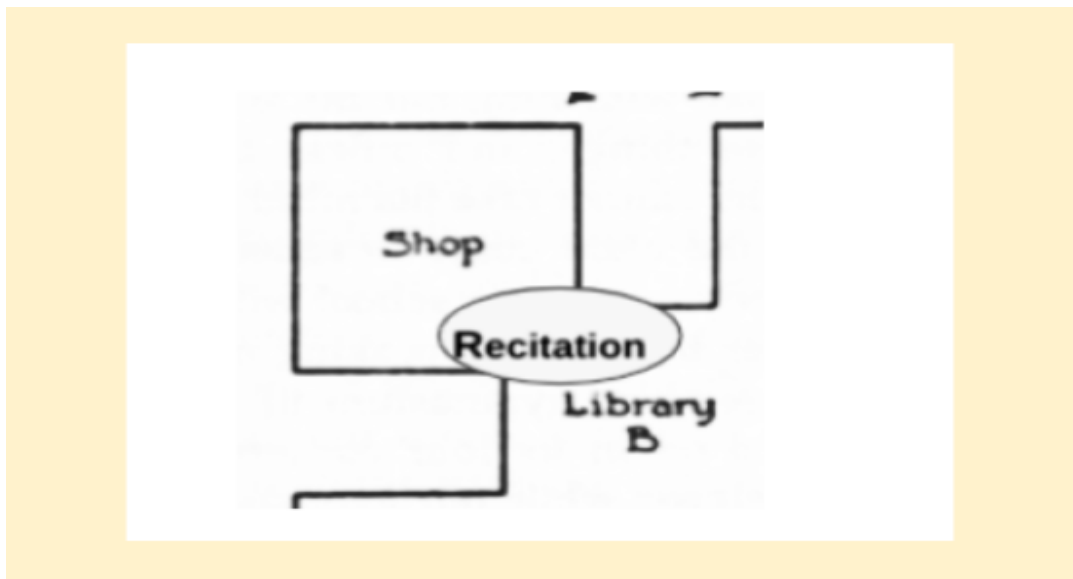


Figure 3.

And when scientific or aesthetic issues arise, the students visit the science labs and art studios on the second floor (Figure 4); here Dewey is using the “second floor” as a metaphor to mark a distinction between primary and secondary, higher-order thinking.

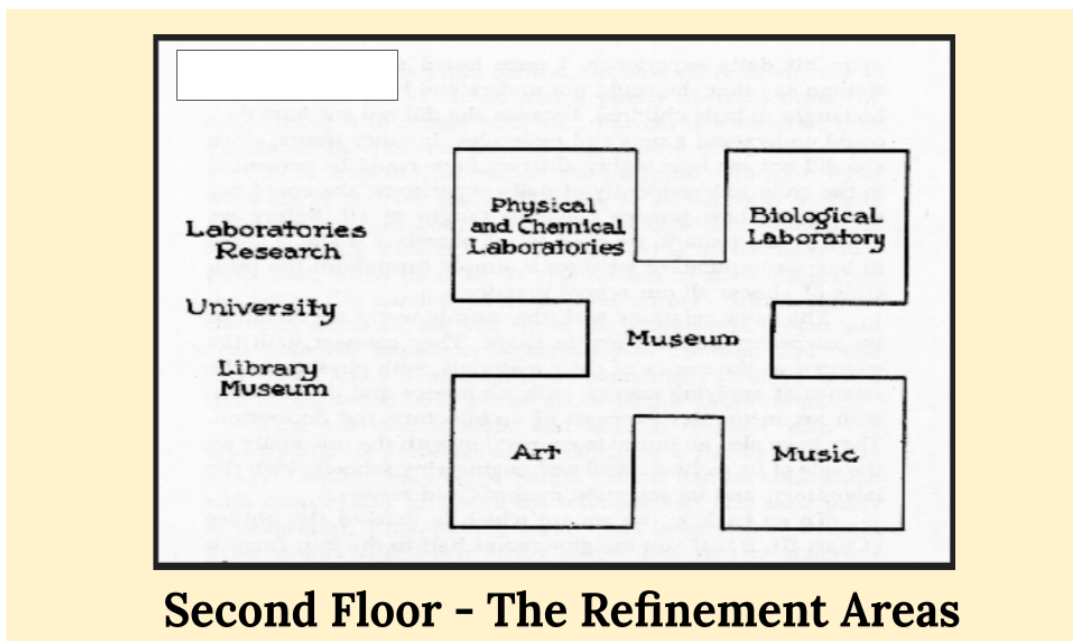


Figure 4. Studios and Laboratories

When immigrant and refugee young people enter ordinary schools, they confront unfamiliar subject matters presented in an unfamiliar language. But all people are familiar with food, clothing, and shelter. The newcomers are already familiar with kitchens, eating areas, spaces for making and mending clothing, and gardens. So the activity school and its practical areas are much less alien; kids can carry ideas and practices from home directly to school and bring ideas from school back to their homes.

The immigrant children can even suggest meals to prepare, and can display clothing from their native lands. Non-locals, everywhere, add valuable new experiences embraced by locals: think about pizza, eggrolls, bagels etc. Non-local children always have some impact – generally positive and enriching – on local style preferences. Furthermore, their parents can be recruited to assist in the kitchen, textile areas, and gardens – providing an opportunity to serve their new communities. By age 10, some youngsters will also be able to prepare these meals and make these clothes themselves. Activity learning is situated in communities of practice: younger children can engage in “legitimate peripheral participation” in school activities and grow in knowledge and skills plus loyalty and responsibility to the school and the community.¹³

The activity curriculum also helps the newcomers in learning the local language, as they will be picking up the living language of their peers through informal contacts. The activity areas are also excellent settings for teachers and teacher-education candidates to observe, record, document, and research the behaviors of the immigrant and refugee learners. The practical settings invite informal exchanges that permit the teachers and teacher education students to come to know the youngsters on an individual level, and hence detect special talents and needs. This brings us to the next idea, the school as a teacher education laboratory.

3. The Laboratory Method in Teacher Education

The third idea is *the laboratory method for teacher education*, as developed by Dewey in “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education” (1904). Standard teacher training

¹³ For situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation, and communities of practice, see Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

provides teacher candidates with instruction in (1) foundation disciplines – psychology, sociology, and history of education; (2) professional courses in curriculum, instruction, and classroom management; and (3) a period of supervised practice teaching. Dewey calls this the “apprenticeship model” for teacher education because the supervision of candidates’ practice teaching is akin to an apprenticeship.

The main problem with the supervised practice, for Dewey, is that teacher education students, already conditioned in conventional schooling, will be further reinforced in their conventional thinking. They will look to their supervising teachers for tricks in managing classrooms and hammering in lessons. They will be sent in the wrong direction, observing their supervising teachers instead of their individual students. In this way they will learn to neglect their most important allies – their students.

This problem is greatly intensified in schools in regions with high immigrant and refugee populations. Teaching conventions have built up through experiences with local students, those possessing background understandings, habits, and attitudes typical of the region. Those familiar with the notion of *habitus* in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, however, will immediately grasp that immigrants and refugees from more vulnerable groups have a different *habitus* – different posture, gestures, modes of perception, classification, emotion, and action. These are shaped early in life, below the level of language and thought, and in vastly different social contexts. The different *habitus* may distort the newcomers’ adjustment to their new school setting, and it is very difficult to change.¹⁴ The mismatch between *habitus* and school learning gives rise to learning limitations perceived by conventional teachers as “pathologies” – the children are devalued as lazy, uncooperative, or dull-witted.

Dewey replaces the “apprenticeship method” of teacher education with the “laboratory method.” He replaces standard professional courses and supervised practice teaching with a structured sequence of observation, psychological study, tutoring, and curriculum design.

In the first stage of practical experience, teacher candidates make detailed observations of the interactions between teachers and individual students. This period of observation is followed by a sequence of increasingly more responsible activities. In the second phase candidates serve as teaching assistants – gathering resources for

¹⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

the teacher and tutoring individual students requiring special assistance: especially those who are slow learners or who have been out of school due to illness or life disruption. In the third phase candidates shift from their focus on the more theoretical and psychological to the more technical aspects of classroom teaching and management. They select subject matter materials and organize them for units and entire courses, emphasizing the continuous growth in understanding over periods of time. They also may build up a scheme of more advanced lessons and units for the faster learners. In these ways they are taking account of the actual, ready at hand psychological capabilities of the various individual learners in a group, over an extended period of time. Only in the fourth phase are candidates assigned to teach lessons on their own. They are directed, however, to take full responsibility, to act under their own intellectual initiative with little or no assistance or supervision.

Instead of supervised teaching, candidates get to know individual students. They work toward a “meeting of minds,” an understanding of their ways of thinking. They help them to learn. They work together as a cohort to create lessons and curriculum units suitable for these children, based on their understanding of the children’s” minds. The laboratory method thus promotes direct attention upon, and positive regard for, individual young people – especially those experiencing school difficulties. It does not pathologize these difficulties, but instead seeks to build a humane one-on-one relationship of mutual trust and understanding. The teachers-in-training, instead of learning how to deliver the standard curriculum and “manage” the “problem learners,” including the new immigrants and refugee children, are instead learning about the children as growing, culturally conditioned individuals. By doing so, they are learning how these students learn. On this basis they can design learning experiences that foster their growth in continuity with their prior learning histories.

Conclusion

These three Deweyan ideas work harmoniously together. The *school as social center* brings the newcomers into a hospitable, supportive, social space. The *activity curriculum* makes direct use of their cultural habits to ease their young people into school learning. The *laboratory method of teacher education* prepares teachers to communicate one-on-one with, and come to know and value, each school child – especially those – like the newcomers – who are making a difficult adjustment. This prepares the cohort of teacher candidates to work together to develop learning

activities in which the new school children can engage wholeheartedly and as rough equals with their native peers.