

## RUSSELL VS. DEWEY ON EDUCATION

Michael J. Rockler  
*National-Louis University*

### Introduction

Bertrand Russell and John Dewey, major philosophers of the twentieth century, shared many important views on education. However, it is both interesting and instructive to note their differences about the nature of content, the role of democracy in education and the process of individual development. Both philosophers were progressive educators who wanted schools to be experiential and secular. While many aspects of Dewey's thinking about schooling remain a definitive part of modern pedagogy, Russell's perspectives add dimensions missing from Dewey which were derived from Russell's unique life experiences and intellect.

Bertrand Russell was interested in teaching and learning throughout most of his life. He wrote two major books on the subject - *Education and the Good Life* in 1926 and *Education and the Social Order* in 1932. Between the writing of these two volumes he and his second wife, Dora Black, founded Beacon Hill School in 1927. Russell continued to write about education throughout his career. Almost every book of social commentary he produced contains at least a chapter on the subject.

Russell published his first full book on education when he was past fifty years of age; he wrote it in celebration of having had two children with Dora. John, the first child, was born when Bertrand was forty-seven and at a point in his life when he had given up the idea that he would ever be a father. *Education and the Good Life*, like so much of Russell's writing, remains readable because it is clearly written. It contains reflections on how to create the best education for young children.

In between the writing of this volume and the completion of his second book - *Education and the Social Order* - Russell and Dora opened their school. This second book is superior to the first because Russell had achieved what persons at my university call "the

wisdom of practice." The Russell's had administered a school and Bertrand had actually taught young children. Russell demonstrates a better sense of education in this volume than he did in the first.

In *Education and the Social Order*, Russell abandoned the behaviorism he had embraced in *Education and the Good Life*. Russell had discovered John B. Watson, a leading proponent of behavioral psychology, shortly before he wrote his first book. In Katherine Russell Tait's memoir - *My Father Bertrand Russell* - his daughter scolds him for his behaviorist practices as a father. When he wrote *Education and the Social Order*, Russell had discovered Freud and given up his commitment to behavioral psychology. Over time, Russell continued to gain strength as an educational philosopher

### Russell's Education

By the time Bertrand Russell had reached the age of four, he had lost both of his parents. It was the intention of Lord Amberly, Russell's father, that his sons, Frank and Bertrand, be raised by Bertrand's godfather, T.J. Cobden-Sanderson, and by D.A. Spaulding, a young scientist who had once been employed as Frank Russell's tutor. Russell's grandparents thwarted this plan for their grandsons' upbringing and they chose instead to raise the boys in their home at Pembroke Lodge.

Russell's grandparents were interesting and important people. His grandfather was a prime minister of England and the atmosphere in Russell's boyhood home was a continually challenging one. His grandmother was a strong and liberated woman. She taught Bertrand that the most significant verse in the Bible read "Thou shall not follow a multitude to do evil." Russell accepted this saying and lived by it all throughout his life; he was sent to jail twice because he refused to follow the majority in England. Russell's experience with being jailed by democratic governments lead to one of his major differences with Dewey. Russell learned first-hand the limits of democratic government; he was less inclined than Dewey to support unqualified democracy in education.

Russell's older brother, Frank, was sent to Winchester - an English private school. Because Bertrand's grandmother was unhappy with Frank's educational experience, she decided that her younger grandson would be educated at home by tutors. As a result, young Russell was educated in isolation from other children. However, the home environment he found himself in was conducive to the polishing of his fine mind.

Russell spent much time by himself. He was often lonely and, as result, he opposed education by tutors when he became an adult. His educational experiences, however, did provide him opportunity to learn to concentrate on problems with single-minded efficiency. Furthermore, his intense personal and private education helped to develop the eloquent writing skills which were to serve him so well in later life.

Just before his sixteenth birthday, Russell was sent to an army crammer school to prepare for his examinations at Cambridge. Most of the boys at the school were preparing for entrance into the army; Russell was neither comfortable nor happy with his experience in this setting. Having spent his youth and early adolescence in the solitude of Pembroke Lodge, the crammer school represented his first excursion into the world as well as his first experience with education as it existed outside of his home. He found adjustment to the crammer school environment and its teaching methods difficult. Ultimately, however, he adapted to both and in December, 1890, Russell obtained a minor scholarship to Cambridge. He spent the next ten months at home where he was coached by a man who had been his teacher at the crammer school.

In October of 1890, Russell entered Cambridge for the final phase of his formal education. The intellectual challenge Russell received at Cambridge, under the tutelage of Alfred North Whitehead, helped to forge the genius that Russell soon demonstrated. At Cambridge his passion for mathematics became the center of his life and led to the publication of *Principia Mathematica*. This work established his reputation and paved the way for his future, first as a renown mathematician and then as a philosopher.

Russell's education was unique. He never experienced the interaction with others in elementary schooling that most persons do. He instead received superb schooling from his tutors and from the environment at Pembroke Lodge. Even Cambridge lacked the structure of traditional formal education. Russell's interest in education surfaced many

years later when he and Dora had children, causing him to think seriously about how youngsters might best be educated.

### Russell vs. Dewey

One fundamental difference between Russell and Dewey comes from Russell's aversion to pragmatism. Both Russell and Dewey sought to come to terms with David Hume's critique of induction which had threatened the foundations of scientific thought. Hume had demonstrated that induction - the belief that general principles could be obtained from specific instances - was not logically defensible. Hume's critique, which had been ignored, began to be taken more seriously when Einstein demonstrated that Newtonian physics was fallible. Russell, who produced many important writings from a skeptical perspective, came to the conclusion that induction could be accepted as an expedient in order to further the ends of scientific progress and knowledge. Dewey, in response to Hume, adopted the concept of "pragmatic truth." This point of view held that whatever worked was true as long as it functioned. When it no longer worked, it was replaced by a new truth. For Russell, this meant that truth was reduced to whatever the majority believed it to be. He concluded that pragmatism meant that knowledge was determined by power. For Russell this represented a misapplication of democracy. He opposed the notion that truth, in effect, be democratically determined. Russell believed that there must be some valid external criteria for understanding reality. Russell once wrote "William James preached the will to believe. I wish to preach the will to doubt."

Russell ultimately rejected pragmatism because of his distrust of what he called the "herd instinct" - the tendency of masses of persons to go unthinking in a single direction. Thus while Dewey pushed the concept of "democracy in education," Russell opposed pragmatism and was much more cautious about the extent to which education could be democratized.

While Russell saw the importance of democratic values in education, he also understood

the limits of the process. In *Education and the Good Life*, he suggests that the existence of democratic values in education could lead to "a dead level of uniformity." This Russell opposed because "some boys and girls are cleverer than others." While John Dewey might agree with this proposition, the notion of intellectual stratification is not one usually associated with Dewey's views. In *Education and the Social Order*, Russell continues to be critical of unchecked democracy in education. He argues that unadulterated democracy in education can be as evil as over reliance on aristocracy. He wrote:

The error of aristocracy lay, not in thinking that some men are superior to others, but in supposing superiority to be hereditary. The error of democracy lies in regarding all claims to superiority as just grounds for the resentment of the herd. In the modern world, much work which is necessary to the community requires more ability than most men possess and there must be ways of selecting exceptional men to do this work. In general, if they are to be as well qualified as possible, it is desirable to select them while they are still young - say twelve years old - and to allow them to make more rapid progress than is possible to a class of average boys or girls. The feeling that it is undemocratic to single out the best pupil is one which leads to a great waste of good material. (p.55)

Russell demonstrates his further concern with this issue by titling one of his chapters, "The Herd in Education." Partly from his aristocratic upbringing and partly from his experiences in England where he was jailed twice for holding unpopular views, Russell continues to have reservations about democracy in education. While endorsing the idea, he is cautious about its operation in practice. This is reinforced by his deep suspicion of and opposition to the political state.

The recent election in the United States lends support to Russell's views. Election campaigns have more and more become media events designed to manipulate the "herd" rather than to enlighten people. The success of Ross Perot in garnering nearly twenty percent of the popular vote with a slick media campaign that contained very little substance illustrates this as it highlights Russell's concern.

In some ways Dewey appears naive about these kinds of issues. Russell believed throughout his life that schools, even in democratic countries, participate in ideological

indoctrination.

Dewey's pragmatism and his unqualified belief in democracy in education probably result from his American upbringing. A belief in democracy was part of the uncritical socialization of the American school system in which Dewey received his education.

Russell did not have this kind of experience - he was socialized by his grandparents and not by the kind of public school view that existed when Dewey was child. Furthermore, there was a deep rooted skepticism in Russell which seemed to be lacking in Dewey. This skepticism led him to become a critic of pragmatism, a critic of democracy in education, and generally a gadfly in western society. Another way in which Russell differed from Dewey is with regard to the limits of the application of science to all realms of knowledge. Dewey, for example, believed that the scientific method could be applied to an understanding of values. Russell remained a skeptic about this and was ahead of his time with these viewpoints.

Many contemporary educators believe that the scientific method has been over-applied to human activity. There is now within education as a discipline considerable movement to seek alternative means for knowing about human social life other than by the methods of science. One example is what Elliot Eisner describes as the "aesthetic perspective" - the use of artistic awareness for knowing. The application of ethnography to the study of teaching and learning is another. Dewey's pragmatism enabled him to retain induction as a means of knowing and thus to remain a staunch empiricist. Russell's skepticism opened the way for him to be comfortable with other ways of knowing.

Still another difference between Dewey and Russell was their differing perception of the way in which teachers could intervene in the development of human beings. In this regard, Dewey was a follower of Rousseau. He accepted the naturalistic, content neutral kind of education fostered by romanticism. Dewey believed that children learn best within a context of social and emotional development that did not focus heavily on the acquisition of knowledge but rather on the humanistic development of persons. While Russell accepted this to a certain extent, he was also a deeply committed rationalist who felt that schooling must intervene directly into the educational development of children.

Because of this perspective, the Russells created Beacon Hill School rather than sending their children to A.S. Neill's already existing Summerhill.

In *Education and the Social Order* Russell analyzed the notion of progressive educators that education is primarily the affording of opportunity for natural growth. This idea Russell calls the "negative theory of education." He rejects it because it fails to account for the educational needs of a complex society. He says:

The negative theory of education, therefore, while it has many important elements of truth, and is largely valid so far as the emotions are concerned, cannot be accepted in its entirety as regards intellectual and technical training. Where these are concerned something more positive is required. (p.29)

Still another difference between the two philosophers exists with regard to the possibility of individual development through education. Just as Dewey was more optimistic than Russell about the role of democracy in education, so he believed that schooling could result in the positive growth of individuals.

Russell's skepticism made him less sure of this possibility. Russell began *Education and the Social Order* by asking a fundamental question: Should schooling train good individuals or good citizens? In a perfect society, there would be no difference between the two but this is not an ideal world and therefore the question is legitimate. Russell makes the point that governments prefer citizens who support the status quo and who want to preserve it. He views education as a conservative and reactionary force.

At the end of this volume Russell restates his opening question: "Can the fullest individual development be combined with the necessary minimum of social coherence?" Russell feels that this can only occur when the state identifies its own interests with that of the school child. Russell is pessimistic about this possibility. For it to take place a number of things must happen. First, large scale wars must be eliminated. Second, superstition must not exist. Third, the love of uniformity must be abolished. Finally, schools must be administered by scholars rather than by bureaucrats.

Can these changes take place? Russell sounds a pessimistic note. He claims the world of 1932 is an insane one which lacks international cooperation and which is

divided into hostile camps. In order for improvement to occur human beings must become sane. Men and women have the power to overcome these obstacles; Russell suggests that they can do this with better education. Russell was considerably more pessimistic about the efficacy of education for individual development than was Dewey. Dewey's pragmatism and his stronger commitment to unbridled democracy lead him to this difference. Life in the world today lends support for Russell's views on this issue. These many issues differentiated Russell's educational thought from that of Dewey. Russell rejected pragmatism because he feared "truth" based on the power of the majority. He opposed naturalistic education, believing it to be a negative approach to teaching and learning. For Russell, educational practice needed to intervene in the lives of students. Dewey desired a minimum of intervention. Russell believed in greater balance between content and process while Dewey's views were more process oriented. Finally, Russell saw the role of democracy in education as more limited than did Dewey.

### Russell vs. Dewey on the Aims of Education

Dewey believed that process was the most important aspect of education while content was only minimally significant. Russell accepted the importance of process but he believed in the necessity of content. He also had other aims for education which were neither process nor content. These additional goals make a significant contribution to education which is missing in Dewey.

At the beginning of *Education and the Good Life* Russell makes a distinction between education for knowledge - which he labels instruction - and education of character. The latter is the most important aim of education.

For Russell, the primary purpose of schooling should be to produce certain necessary characteristics in men as well as in women (the inclusion of women is advanced for its time). It is the development of character that is the most important purpose of education. Russell identifies four qualities that must be included in character education. These are vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence.

Vitality, Russell argues is a physiological rather than a mental trait; it relates to the pleasure of feeling alive. Vitality heightens pleasure and diminishes pain. It promotes interest in the world and it also encourages hard work. Vitality is a quality that all men and women should possess; it is a legitimate outcome of schooling.

The second aim of education is the promotion of courage. This quality has two parts. The first Russell calls the absence of fear. The second aspect of courage is more difficult to state; it involves the ability to understand one's own limits. He summarizes this perspective in the following manner:

Thus the perfection of courage is found in the man of many interests, who feels his ego to be but a small part of the world, not through despising himself but through valuing much that is not himself. This can hardly happen except where instinct is free and intelligence is active. From the union of the two grows a comprehensiveness of outlook unknown both to the voluptuary and to the ascetic; and to such an outlook personal death remains a trivial matter. Such courage is positive and instinctive, not negative and repressive. It is courage in this positive sense that I regard as one of the major ingredients of character. (p.69)

The third quality needed for the development of character is sensitiveness. This Russell defines as an appropriate response to particular emotional events in life. Sensitiveness includes sympathy and the ability to respond to abstract injustice as well as to concrete examples of wrong doing. Truly sensitive people, Russell believed, could not tolerate the cruelties of industrialism even if they had only vicarious exposure to it.

Finally, Russell stresses that character includes intelligence. Russell's conception of intelligence offers a useful perspective for contemporary teachers. He makes an important distinction between acquired knowledge (with which intelligence is generally equated as in IQ tests or SAT scores) and what he calls the aptitude for acquiring knowledge. The truly intelligent person is the one who knows how to learn. Russell also states that curiosity about general propositions rather than interest in specific facts is a concomitant of intelligence. It includes the ability to think for oneself.

In a later section of the book Russell suggests an important way to foster intellect. He says that the teacher should "tell [the child] rather more than he can understand, not

rather less; the part he fails to understand will stimulate his curiosity and his intellectual ambition."

Russell concludes his analysis of the aims of education by reflecting on a world where people have achieved vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence. He argues that it would be a very different community from anything that has existed before. Like so much in Russell, this perspective seems accurate and valid for today.

### Summary and Conclusions

Both Bertrand Russell and John Dewey were twentieth century philosophers who had a deep and abiding interest in education. While Dewey was perhaps a more prolific writer about teaching and learning, Russell wrote about the subject for most of his long life. While Russell and Dewey shared many perspectives on schooling, they also differed in some interesting and significant ways.

The first major difference between the two of them was over the issue of pragmatism. Dewey believed that truth was what worked. This formulation disturbed Russell, who concluded that pragmatism made the search for truth into an issue of power in which the majority could tyrannize the minority. Having experienced imprisonment by democratic governments, Russell recognized the limits of majority rule; the application of power to knowledge made him uneasy.

Russell viewed the role of democracy in education as a more limited one than did Dewey. Russell feared what he called "the herd instinct." He also was afraid that too much democracy in education could result in a "dead level of uniformity."

Russell believed that "growth" was a far too limited goal for education. In addition to facilitating development, Russell wanted education to be interventionist and to be content-active rather than content-neutral. There was much for children to learn and thus the acquisition of knowledge should be an important goal of schooling. The most important aim of education for Russell was the development of character in men and women. For Russell character included vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence.

Russell wrote for a larger audience than did Dewey. Dewey addressed his work to teachers and college faculty (though occasionally he addressed parents). Russell called his books on education, as well as his other popular works, "potboilers." Because he wrote for popular consumption, his books remain readable today by a much wider group than do those of Dewey. This, too, is an interesting difference. The great philosopher of democracy, John Dewey, is no longer very accessible to the masses while the aristocrat turned democratic socialist, Russell, remains so.

### References

1. Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd. 1975).
2. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902).
3. John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1938).
4. John Dewey, *Now We Think*, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933).
5. John Dewey, *The School and Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915).
6. John and Evelyn John, (1915) *Schools for Tomorrow*, (New York: Dutton, 1915).
7. Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good Life*, (London: Boni and Liveright, 1926).
8. Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Social Order*, (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1977).
9. Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, (London: Unwin Books, 1928).