

John Dewey and Museum Education



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ABSTRACT Although John Dewey's educational concepts have been discussed previously in relation to museums, his own writing about museums has received little attention. Dewey, who visited museums frequently throughout his life, recognized the powerful educational value of museums. He assigned a central role to museums as integrative components of raw experiences in his educational theory, and he made extensive use of student visits to museums at the Chicago Laboratory School. Early twentieth-century museum educators and directors applied Dewey's ideas, and advocated a museum education philosophy, based on the progressive education movement, that has significance for current exhibition and educational practice.

INTRODUCTION

An epitaph for John Dewey (1859–1952) calls him “America’s last public intellectual.”¹ The phrase is appropriate. In the half-century since his death, it has been difficult to find anyone with his stature in either academe or public life. Hawkins (1968) argued that no philosopher, including Plato, examined education “so long and so carefully” as did Dewey. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* on Nov. 17, 1997, on the subject of school reform, described the new emphasis on inquiry in state education standards, and proclaimed in its headline, “Dewey Wins!” Louis Menand’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) devotes a strong chapter to Dewey and his contemporaries’ progressive concepts. Dewey represents a major influence on modern thought and social action.

Dewey’s concepts, perhaps more than any other philosopher’s, are inexorably linked to his life activities. He preached that ideas are incomplete until they are applied and tested by being used in actual situations, and he made an effort to apply this practice to his own actions. He also wrote an enormous amount on an incredibly rich range of topics. His books and essays comprise 37 hefty volumes. These include major works on almost every aspect of philosophy—a breadth of interest and writing not matched by any

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other modern philosopher.² In addition, he created countless essays on philosophical topics and social and political issues. Dewey wrote and spoke out on every conceivable subject of public interest.

His works are components of a complex philosophical vision.³ One example is Dewey's broad definition and use of the term "experience." Not only does this word appear in the title of three major works, *Experience and Nature*, *Art as Experience*, and *Experience and Education*, but Dewey had such a complex meaning for "experience" that he considered replacing it with "culture" in a revision of *Experience and Nature* (see Westbrook 1991, 345–46.)

Dewey's philosophical positions were always intended to be consistent with his moral and social views—what he called democratic, progressive concepts. In his carefully structured philosophical work, he constantly attempted to achieve a balance of ideas to avoid the dualisms that have proven to be so problematic to philosophers: the Cartesian separation of mind and body, for example, or the distinction between fine and applied arts. He repeatedly demonstrated that these distinctions lead to hierarchies of value (in the case of Cartesian dualism, the valuing of thought over action.) At the same time, he consistently exerted himself to promote democratic progressive practices—tolerance, civil liberties, acceptance of immigrants, and economic reform (meaning decreasing disparity between the rich and the poor)—through political and social action.

A recent resurgence of interest in Dewey's life and work has had an effect on museum education literature. Cole points out that constructivism has its roots in Dewey's work because he recognized prior knowledge and experience as the basis for meaning-making (1985; 1995). Rochelle recognizes that Dewey's comprehensive definition of "experience" includes more than the empiricist notion of sensory input (1995). Ansbacher, focusing primarily on Dewey's *Experience and Education*, has stressed the need for exhibition developers to concentrate on the actual experience that visitors have with exhibitions, rather than looking only at the later outcome of "learning" (1998; 1999). Hennes has broadened the discussion to include Dewey's references to inquiry and his concept of the continuity of experience (2002).

But Dewey's own love of museums and his views of museums as educational entities have not received much attention. These topics are examined in this paper; they suggest the ongoing relevance of applying Dewey's educational philosophy to museums.

DEWEY ON MUSEUMS

Museums were important to Dewey, and he enjoyed visiting them throughout his life. When the Dewey family moved from Ann Arbor to Chicago in 1894, he went ahead to find a house to live in and to prepare for a demanding position in this new university (the first classes had been held only two years previously) as the first chairman of a philosophy department that included psychology and pedagogy. His wife Alice and two older children were in Europe, while the youngest child remained behind with Alice's parents. The voluminous family correspondence during this separation includes details of his daily life

as well as notes to the children and concerns about other family matters. It also contains frequent mention of museums. Within the first month in Chicago, Dewey found time to visit both the Columbian Museum (now the Field Museum of Natural History) and the Art Institute. In early August, he wrote, "I haven't been invited out today and am going to see the Columbian Museum, as it's a 'free' day—alone and great will be the joy thereof" (Dewey 1894).

The theme of museum visitation continues as a constant thread throughout his correspondence. His many trips both within the U.S. and overseas usually included "a rigorous schedule of museum visits, occasionally interrupted by social occasions" (Martin 2002, 352). For example, on his way to the Soviet Union in 1928 with a group of educators to visit schools at the invitation of the Soviet Minister of Education, Dewey left early and went first to London and Paris, mainly to visit museums. (He was accompanied by his daughter-in-law Elizabeth; his wife had died the previous year.) About their time in London, he wrote, "We haven't done such a lot of sightseeing, but we have spent about two hours in the picture galleries every day continuing our art education—its [sic] astonishing how much there is to see each time that one never saw before" (Dewey 1928a). From Paris, he wrote to his close friend and colleague George Mead, "Our serious occupation is pictures, in which we are both interested. In fact I think I'm more interested in them than anything else outside of philosophy, and we have both been educated a la Barnes and our tastes agree" (Dewey 1928b).⁴

THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS

Dewey first elucidated the role of museums in his overall education scheme in *The School and Society*, a series of lectures delivered in 1899, shortly after he founded his Laboratory School (Dewey 1900). Dewey laid out a model plan for a school—describing it both in words and illustrations—and included charts that represented "not our architect's plan for the school building we hope to have; but . . . a diagrammatic representation of the idea which we want embodied in the school building" (1900, 79).

These charts are instructive of Dewey's pedagogic ideas and the connections he drew between school subjects and life activities. A first chart (not reproduced here) outlines the phases of education, from kindergarten through post-secondary opportunities. Chart II (figure 1) emphasizes that the school should be connected with life outside, not isolated from it—a theme that persists throughout Dewey's writing. He stated that he wished "to suggest that really the only way to unite the parts of the system is to unite each with life" (Dewey 1900, 72). Chart III (figure 2), symbolic of the lower level of the school, shows school activities (that are not traditional curriculum subjects) connected to life pursuits and all opening up to the library in the center. He described the relationship:

The center represents the manner in which all come together in the library; that is to say, in a collection of the intellectual resources of all kinds that throw light upon the practical work, that give it meaning and liberal value. If the four corners represent practice,

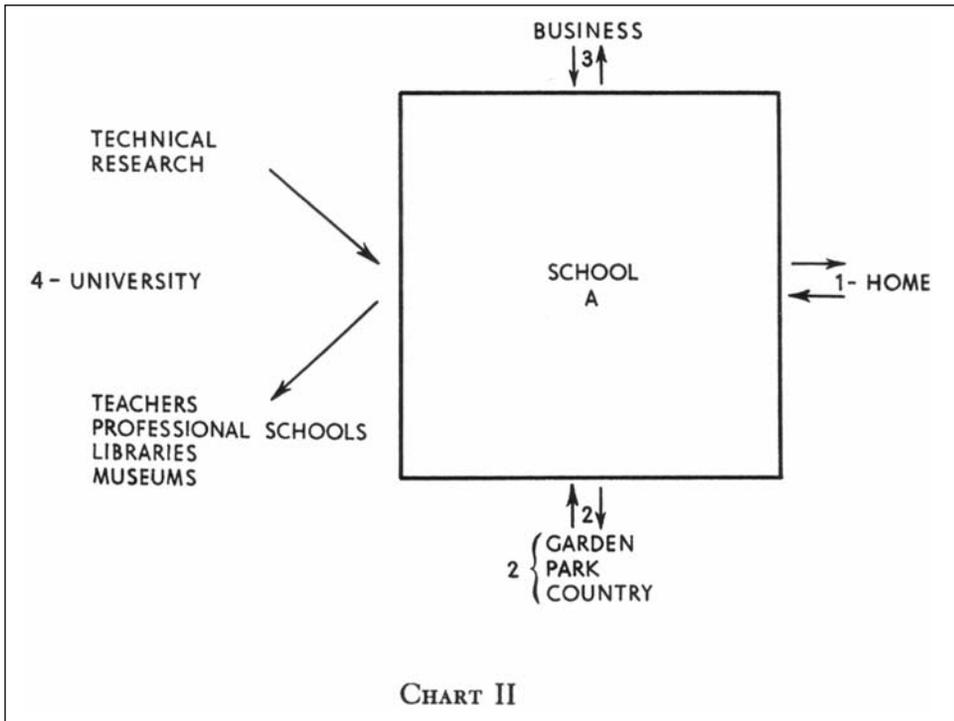


Figure 1. Dewey's conception of the unity of school and life. From Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900, p. 73). *Reproduced by permission, University of Chicago Press.*

the interior represents the theory of the practical activities. In other words, the object of these forms of practice in the school is not found chiefly in themselves, or in the technical skills of cooks, seamstresses, carpenters, and masons, but in their connection, on the social side, with the life without; while on the individual side they respond to the child's need of action, of expression, of desire to do something, to be constructive and creative, instead of simply passive and conforming. Their great significance is that they keep the balance between the social and individual sides—the chart symbolizing particularly the connection with the social (Dewey 1900, 79–80).

Dewey continued to elaborate the relationship between the activities and the library:

If you imagine rooms half in the four corners and half in the library, you will get the idea of the recitation room. That is the place where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found, and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others, the accumulated wisdom of the world—symbolized in the library. Here is the organic relation of theory and practice; the child not simply doing things, but getting also the idea of what he does; getting from the start some intellectual conception that enters into his practice and enriches it; while every idea finds, directly or indirectly, some

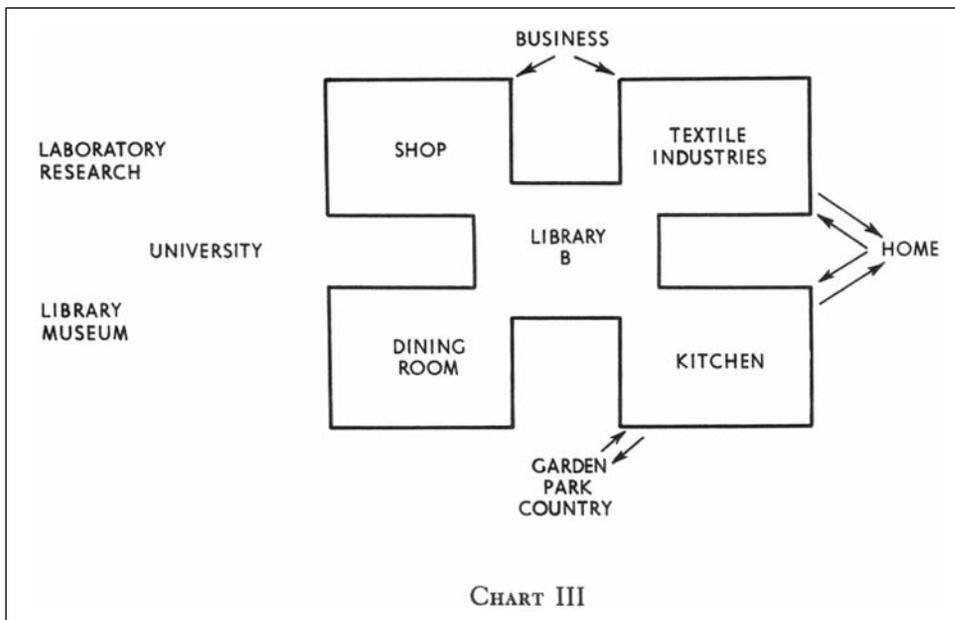


Figure 2. Dewey's representation of the ground floor of his ideal school. From Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900, p. 81). *Reproduced by permission, University of Chicago Press.*

application in experience, and has some effect upon life. This, I need hardly say, fixes the position of the “book” or reading in education. Harmful as a substitute for experience, it is all-important in interpreting and expanding experience (Dewey 1900, 85).

Museums as well as libraries function as intellectual centers for developing the work that occurs in the “corners,” as seen in Chart IV (figure 3). The upper floor of the school grows out of the lower one; the topical areas are now translated into school subjects; the shop gives rise to natural sciences; the kitchen to biological sciences; and art and music develop from their artisan roots. Dewey explains this:

The other chart [Chart IV] illustrates precisely the same idea. It gives the symbolic upper story of this ideal school. In the upper corners are the laboratories; in the lower corners are the studios for art work, both the graphic and auditory arts. The questions, the chemical and physical problems, arising in the kitchen and shop, are taken to the laboratories to be worked out. . . .

The drawing and music, or the graphic and auditory arts, represent the culmination, the idealization, the highest point of refinement of all the work carried on. I think everybody who has not a purely literary view of the subject recognizes that genuine art grows out of the work of the artisan (Dewey 1900, 85–86).

Using the example of art as a model for describing the organization of the school, Dewey says in a grand summary statement:

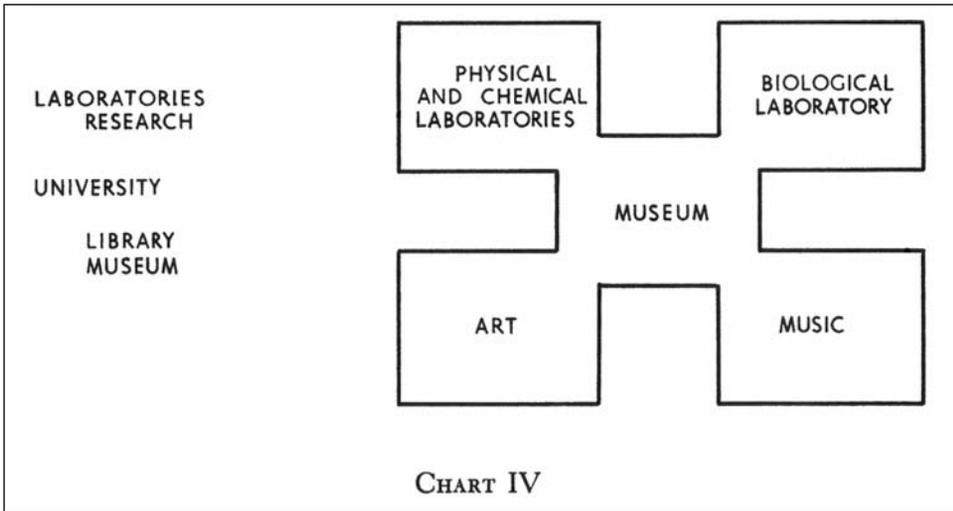


Figure 3. The symbolic upper story of Dewey's ideal school. From Dewey, *The School and Society* (1900, p. 87). *Reproduced by permission, University of Chicago Press.*

[The school] is a living union of thought and the instrument of expression. This union is symbolized by saying that in the ideal school the art work might be considered to be that of the shops, passed through the alembic of library and museum into action again (Dewey 1900, 89).⁵

The same conception would apply to science and history. As he says further on:

Thus I have attempted to indicate how the school may be connected with life so that the experience gained by the child in a familiar, commonplace way is carried over and made use of there, and what the child learns in the school is carried back and applied in everyday life, making the school an organic whole, instead of a composite of isolated parts. The isolation of studies as well as of parts of the school system disappears. Experience has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it (Dewey 1900, 91).

I have quoted this section at length because it illustrates Dewey’s ideas as they relate libraries and museums to life experiences in education. In all these passages, Dewey consistently described the ideal school as an institution that includes libraries and museums in an organic whole in which life-experiences and specialized experiences such as reading and museum visits are unified. The “experience” in museums is valuable, but, by itself, it isn’t a complete life-experience. Like knowledge in books, it may be “harmful as a substitute for experience,” but “all-important in interpreting and expanding experience.”

His view that museums should be part of the active learning network of any school is reinforced by other references to museums in his writings. For example, in an earlier mes-

sage to parents about the status of the emerging school, Dewey referred to his efforts to avoid certain dualisms and emphasized using museums among other educational resources:

Already we have much help from the university in scientific work planned, sometimes even in detail, by heads of departments. The graduate student comes to us with his researches and methods, suggesting ideas and problems. The library and museum are at hand. We want to bring all things educational together; to break down the barriers that divide the education of the little child from the instruction of the maturing youth; to identify the lower and the higher education, so that it will be demonstrated to the eye that there is no lower and higher, but simply education (Dewey 1897).

The theme of the library and museum as central both conceptually and practically comes up again in the actual plan for a School of Education building, completed after Dewey left Chicago for New York. The building floor plans are based on his previous theoretical model.

The space on the third floor immediately over the library has been assigned to the museum. The museum shall be used largely for practical work in connection with all the departments of the school. Adjoining the museum on the west are two rooms for biology, one for elementary, the other for advanced pupils (Dewey 1904, 343).

These same themes continue in Dewey's writing over many years: museums should be an integral part of any educational setting, and the most desirable museums are those that are used for educational purposes and are associated with life activities outside of the museum. After visiting Turkey as a guest of the new republican government, he was much impressed with the archeological work there and urged that a department of archeology be established at the University of Constantinople with close connections to a museum both for display and education (Dewey 1924a). His recommendations to the Turkish government include advice familiar to any reader of *The School and Society*: that a school building needs to reflect the educational program and, thus, needs to include a museum.

The construction of the school building bears closer relation to the kind of instruction given, and the methods of school discipline and instruction, than is usually believed. . . .⁶ No steady development of progressive education is possible without buildings which have proper sanitary and toilet facilities, places for manual training, domestic science, drawing and art, library, museum etc. (Dewey 1924b).

In his lengthy report on his visit to the Soviet Union he mentions that:

The best museum of natural history and social materials for pedagogical purposes I have ever seen is in a country district outside of Leningrad, constructed on the basis of a complete exhibit of local fauna, flora, mineralogy, etc., and local antiquities and history, made by pupils' excursions under the direction of their teachers (Dewey 1928c).

This story neatly illustrates Dewey's conception of museum use. This museum is exemplary not because of the strength of the collection, but because it comes from the local life outside the school and has been used to organize and analyze the results of experience. Museums should grow out of life experiences and be used to reflect back on life.

For Dewey, regular museum visits, along with other kinds of field trips, were a component of the educational program, not a special once-a-year activity. In writing to a prospective teacher he hoped to hire at the laboratory school, he described her duties as follows:

Begin work after New Years on the basis of about 25 children between the ages of 6 & 9, . . . I don't know just what to say about hours, from 9–12 in the morning, but some afternoons a week to be given to going to see the country about, visit the museums &c (Dewey 1895).

The Laboratory School did indeed include extensive use of museums. Besides visits to the university museum, mentioned previously, children from the school went to the Field Columbian Museum (at that time close to the school at the site of the present Chicago Museum of Science and Industry) for an hour and a half every week. This was part of an extensive program of excursions to connect school life with the world outside.

During 1896–97, an hour and a half was set aside on Monday mornings for trips to the Field Columbian Museum. . . . The younger children had a plot of ground. . . where they often went to observe seasonal changes in nature. Older children went to the university laboratories to see such instruments as the interferometer and spectroscope. There were also longer trips—to the quarry on Stoney Island where glacial markings were observed, to the cotton mills in Aurora to see the spinning of cotton, and others to Ravinia to see the clay bluffs, to Miller Station to see the sand dunes and desert and to Sixty-third street and the city limits to see a typical prairie area (DePencier 1967, 33).

Dewey's clear sense of the educational potential of museums can also be seen from his critical remarks about some museums. Dewey criticized traditional museums much as he criticized traditional schools. He recognized that in the public mind, museums, like schools, are seen as dusty places filled with rows of objects, neatly catalogued but devoid of the interactions that animate knowledge. *Art as Experience* contains some of his better known passages in reference to many art museums:

The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits. For, when what he knows as art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse towards experiences enjoyable in themselves finds such outlet as the daily environment provides. Many a person who protests against the museum conception of art, still shares

the fallacy from which that conception springs. For the popular notion comes from a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience that many theorists and critics pride themselves upon holding and even elaborating (Dewey 1934, 6).

He goes on to comment that art museums are primarily the product of the capitalist urge to show off wealth, with the result that the fine arts have been separated from the rest of life and cloistered in selected, inaccessible places. The problem is once again a destructive dualism: the separation of fine arts from practical arts, of art and its appreciation from other life activities, and the gap between museum exhibitions and popular education.⁷

It is worth pointing out that at the time Dewey was taking the children to the Field Columbian Museum on a regular basis, some museum administrators did not see much use for such visits. George Brown Goode, often regarded as the advocate for the educational role of museums (Zeller 1989a), proclaimed:

I should not organize museums primarily for the use of people in their larval or school-going stage of existence . . . before their minds have reached the stage of growth favorable for the reception and assimilation of the best and most useful thought (Goode 1887/1991).

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND MUSEUM EDUCATION

At the same time that Dewey was working to integrate life experiences and educational activities in schools, museum education was developing as an active component of American museums. The Brooklyn Children's Museum was founded in 1899 as the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. John Cotton Dana began his work in Newark in 1902; after the Newark Museum was founded in 1909, he served as director until 1929. Others were developing the educational and social role of the museum early in the twentieth century. These "Innovators and Pioneers" (Alexander 1997) recognized the progressive education agenda as the appropriate model for their efforts and referred to it frequently.

Dana's writings, long inaccessible, have recently been republished (Peniston 1999). They include a startling similarity to Dewey's own words. Dana also decried the elitist nature of current museums. He had little appreciation for "temples" devoted to the visual arts and proposed branch museums for every school, as well as in churches and factories. Dana expressed his views forcefully:

Our own modest experience in this type of school museum in Newark has led us to the conclusion that a collection of objects costing, say, \$1,000, plus the activities of a group of museum workers costing \$10,000 per year, would be of far more value to a community, chiefly through its use by schools, than would a collection which cost \$100,000 and is merely presided over in the ancient manner by a few curators (Peniston 1999, 193).

Dana constantly stressed the need for the museum to serve the community—to connect what occurred in the museum with the life of the society—and he emphasized learning from the ordinary objects created by workers of his predominantly immigrant city. Photographs of the museum’s outdoor activities for children or the demonstration of weaving sponsored by the Newark Museum look very much like the pictures of children planting their garden or working in the textile shop at the Laboratory School in Chicago.⁸

In 1913, Dana sent Louise Connolly, a former teacher and superintendent in New Jersey and then “educational expert” at the Newark Free Public Library, on two trips to museums across the United States to see what they were doing in education. Her first journey was up and down the East Coast; the second took her as far west as Detroit. Her report provides a ringing endorsement of progressive education and the role that museums could play in this experience-based educational movement (Connolly 1914). She also echoes Dewey’s concept that museums need to be associated with life experiences. In a section entitled “Good Museums Waited on Good Teaching,” she describes the impact of progressive education ideas on pedagogy and their application to museums:

Then came the modern movement in pedagogy. It took off the shackles of dead forms that had trammled the feet of teachers, and bade them walk. Some do not know to this day that their feet are free; but many are treading with firm step the uphill path that leads to high achievement just because they know enough to study the child as well as the subject

So we take out children to see the real thing, whatever that may be, and then to the museum where hand specimens of it may be found to remind us of it, and then we reduce our knowledge of it to language, and, finally, we look into books to be reminded by language of our experience-gained knowledge.

The whole city administration in any progressive city is a museum. A class reciting upon the function of courts has seen a court in session. The city itself is a still larger and fuller museum. A class desiring to sketch trees sits in the park or on its school-house doorstep for the lesson. A class in United States history gathers about the statue of Washington. Rivers are studied on a river’s brink.

So through their own observation of the response given to their efforts and through the diffusion of ideas as to how the people should be taught, museums have been slowly led to the revolution which is now going on in their conduct (Connolly 1914, 6–8).

At about the same time, a number of school districts experimented with school museums, and other museums accepted the social role championed by Dana and Dewey’s experiential learning model. For example, the St. Louis public schools, under the direction of C. G. Rathmann (1915), developed a particularly extensive collection of museum objects to lend to schools, a practice that became a model for other efforts (Zucker 1989). In Rochester, Arthur C. Parker “saw museums as places of discovery . . . where John Dewey’s philosophy of learning by doing received direct application” (Zeller

1989). The Brooklyn Children's Museum's progressive education efforts influenced many other museum education departments (Alexander 1997). Progressive educators, in turn, copied the work of museums. Their students built things, learned from objects, went on field trips, and even developed exhibitions.⁹

That Dewey and Dana expressed such similar views can be explained at least in part by their common allegiance to progressive principles. The progressive movement, at its height in the early twentieth century, was of course much broader and more complex than its manifestation in the educational domain. Progressives urged wide-ranging reforms to address social problems associated with urbanization, immigration, and industrialization. Public institutions, including schools and libraries, grew rapidly as reformers succeeded in forcing local and state governments to assume greater responsibility for and oversight of education, health and other social service functions.¹⁰

The notion that museums could play a role in the emerging and rapidly expanding public education system was also not unique to Dewey and Dana, but a common early-twentieth-century concept. The idea that museums were inherently educational goes back to the birth of the modern museum during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and was constantly stressed throughout the nineteenth century (Hein, in press).

But Dewey's contribution is still impressive. Just as his Laboratory School became the model and symbol for the progressive schools that followed, so his championing of the particular educational role of museums—and the application of that view to his own practice—can serve as a model for museum education.

CONCLUSION

Dewey considered museums to be institutions that he personally enjoyed and visited often, as an integral part of the rich life experiences that contribute to education. But museum experiences, even active ones, still need to be associated with richer, authentic life experiences. Dewey believed that people learned in museums, just as they can learn in schools and from books. But all structured, specialized learning environments, whether formal (schools) or informal (museums), need to test their activities constantly against a criterion of their relation to the world outside the specialized setting.

Dana's solution to this challenge of uniting museum experiences with life experiences involved taking the museum to the community and bringing the community into the museum, by exhibiting products of local manufacture, making the museum a center for community groups, and developing exhibitions of the traditional crafts of community groups. For example, he wanted visitors to appreciate the latest practical and accessible products of our culture. As a champion of modern, inexpensive factory design, he developed exhibits of inexpensive store-bought items.

Dana, always the educator, thought up an ingenious way of showing visitors to his museum that they could enjoy aesthetically pleasing objects in their homes at very little cost. In 1928, he sent members of his staff into nearby stores with instructions to purchase

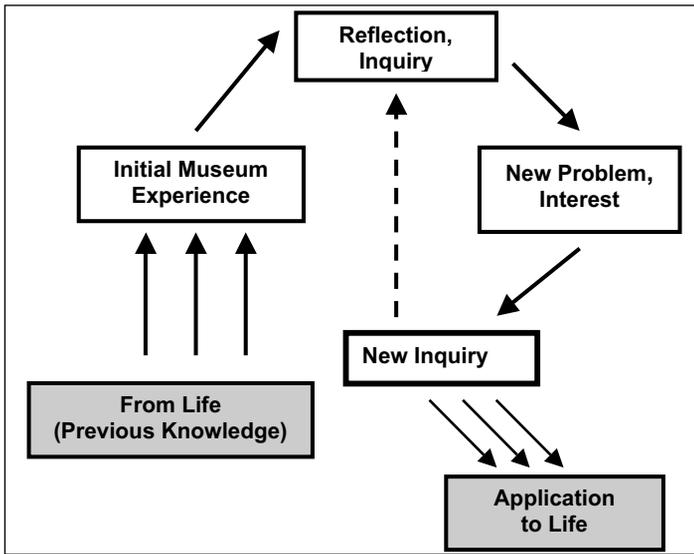


Figure 4. An educational cycle, based on Dewey.

well-designed objects for no more than 10 or 25 cents. The purchases were then installed in museum cases under a sign that proclaimed, “Beauty has no relation to price, rarity or age” (Duncan 2002, 144–145).

The challenge for museums is to find ways to formulate exhibitions that lead to inquiry and that guide visitors to apply the results of such inquiry to life situations. Museum experiences—just like weaving, building a play house, or cooking in progressive schools—need to lead to something more; they are not complete educational experiences simply in the doing. They require integrated settings that foster discussion, challenge the learner, make connections to issues of interest to the learner, and provide guidance for application in the world outside the museum. Hennes has noted this point in relation to museums by discussing Dewey’s emphasis on *continuity* of experience: that the educative value of experience should be judged by its capacity to enable the learner to have future (educative) experiences (2002).

Figure 4 illustrates a Dewey-inspired education model applied to museums. As depicted in the bottom left-hand side of figure 4, museums on the whole have accepted the challenge of mounting objects in context, so that visitors can appreciate how museum experiences are connected to life outside the museum and to visitors’ previous knowledge. Some museums have instituted ways to promote reflection and inquiry (ways that are not simply “hands-on” in the sense of pushing a button); a few have attempted to create exhibitions that allow visitors to engage in a full cycle of inquiry. But the last component of Dewey’s conception of experience, the ability to relate the immediate outcomes of museum experiences back to life (illustrated in the bottom right section of figure 4) remains a challenge for today’s museums.

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NOTES

1. The epitaph is usually attributed to his student, Sidney Hook.
2. These topics include aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, legal theory, logic, metaphysics, pedagogy, political theory, psychology, and social theory.
3. "Without the rest of his world view, Dewey would scarcely have held just the social and political views he did, and it is hard to imagine anyone holding just those social and political views who did not wish to embrace much of the rest of his philosophy" (Ryan 1995, 231).
4. The reference is to Albert C. Barnes, a controversial collector who created the Barnes Foundation. He and John Dewey were close friends and intellectual colleagues for over 30 years. Their rich, complex relationship was a significant part of Dewey's association with museums.
5. An alembic, an alchemical distillation apparatus still in use in the nineteenth century, might have been more familiar to Dewey's readers than it is to us.
6. There is a famous passage in *The School and Society* on this subject: "Some years ago I was looking about the school supply stores in the city, trying to find desks and chairs which seemed thoroughly suitable from all points of view—artistic, hygienic, and educational—to the needs of children. We had a great deal of difficulty in finding what we needed, and finally one dealer, more intelligent than the rest, made this remark, 'I'm afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening.' That tells the story of the traditional education" (Dewey 1900, 31).
7. These themes are elaborated in Dewey's speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration (Dewey 1937).
8. Although Dana had several of Dewey's books in his library (according to W. A. Peniston, of the Newark Museum, in correspondence with the author), there appears to be no record of any meeting or correspondence between Dewey and Dana despite their similar backgrounds and ages, common views, and close proximity in metropolitan New York City for 25 years.
9. An excellent example of this museum-like school work can be found in Lucy Sprague Mitchell's vivid illustrated description of how her students studied geography (1935).
10. See E. S. Morse (1893).

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