

The Philosophical Underpinnings of the Teaching and Learning Process: A Deweyan and Freirean Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This article addresses the often-overlooked philosophical foundations of the teaching and learning process by offering a comparative analysis of two influential pedagogical philosophies: John Dewey's pragmatism and Paulo Freire's critical theory. While much of the contemporary discourse on education focuses on practical methodologies and measurable outcomes, this paper argues that deliberate philosophical understanding is essential for effective and ethical pedagogy. The central thesis is that although both Dewey and Freire champion a student-centered approach, their differing philosophical underpinnings - one rooted in democratic experience and the other in the deconstruction of power - lead to distinct conceptions of the teacher's role, the nature of knowledge, and the ultimate purpose of schooling.

The analysis first examines Dewey's pragmatist vision, where learning is framed as the continuous reconstruction of experience, and the teacher acts as a guide facilitating problem-solving for the development of democratic citizens. It then analyzes Freire's critical theory, which treats education as a political act and a tool for liberation. In this framework, the teacher serves as a co-investigator, and knowledge is co-created through dialogue and conscientization to challenge oppressive structures. The paper then compares these perspectives across three domains: the role of the teacher, the nature of knowledge, and the goals of education. Findings show that while Dewey seeks to improve democratic practice from within, Freire aims to transform and liberate society from oppressive conditions. The paper concludes that philosophical self-awareness is a practical necessity for educators, enabling deliberate, informed, and ethically grounded choices in the classroom.

Keywords: Philosophy of education; Pragmatism; Critical pedagogy; Student-centered learning; Philosophical self-awareness

INTRODUCTION

In modern educational discourse, debate often gravitates toward measurable outcomes and practical methodologies. Policymakers and educators deliberate on the effectiveness of specific teaching techniques, curriculum implementation, and technology integration, with a primary focus on improving student performance and developing tangible skills. While such practical concerns are important, they have often eclipsed a more fundamental question: the philosophical 'why' that undergirds the 'how' of teaching and learning. Without a robust philosophical lens, pedagogical practices can remain unexamined, leaving educators to operate on inherited assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the purpose of schooling, and their own roles within the educational process.

This article addresses that gap by arguing that deliberate and critical philosophical understanding is essential for effective and ethically grounded pedagogy. It undertakes a comparative analysis of two influential, yet philosophically distinct, traditions in educational thought: John Dewey's pragmatism and Paulo Freire's critical theory. While both philosophies reject rote-based, teacher-centric instruction and are often described as student-centered, their foundational tenets diverge in important ways (Nweke & Owoh, 2020).

This paper's central thesis is that although Dewey and Freire both advocate learner-focused education, their divergent philosophical underpinnings - one oriented toward improving democratic experience, the other toward deconstructing social power - produce different conceptions of the teacher's role, the nature of

knowledge, and the purpose of schooling. To explore this thesis, Section 2 examines Dewey's pragmatism; Section 3 examines Freire's critical theory; Section 4 compares the two thinkers across three domains (nature of knowledge; role of the teacher; purpose of education); the conclusion synthesizes findings and offers practical implications for educators.

2. The Pragmatist Perspective: The Education of Experience

John Dewey, a foundational figure in American pragmatism and progressive education, proposed a philosophy that integrates schooling with community life. Writing at the turn of the 20th century as a corrective to rigid, traditional models, Dewey argued that the purpose of education is not the mere transmission of inherited knowledge but the fostering of continuous growth and the development of intelligent, democratic citizens (Nevin, 2021).

Central to Dewey's educational philosophy is the concept of experience. Dewey defines learning as a "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey, 1916:89). This claim reorients education from teacher-centered content delivery to student-centered engagement with the world. For Dewey, students' prior experiences are the foundation upon which new knowledge is built. The curriculum should therefore be dynamic and integrated, serving as a tool for students to solve real-world problems. Knowledge is not a fixed entity to be deposited into students' minds but an instrument for inquiry and for navigating complex environments.

This instrumental view reshapes the teacher's role. Rather than a purveyor of facts, the teacher functions as a facilitator or "guide on the side." The teacher's responsibility is to design learning environments rich in opportunities for meaningful, hands-on experience - activities that connect academic content to students' interests and lived realities. In Dewey's classroom, students are active participants engaged in collaboration, critical inquiry, and problem-solving; the classroom operates as a miniature democratic society where students learn cooperation, communication, and shared decision-making.

For Dewey, the purpose of education is synonymous with growth. Education is a social process that cultivates habits of mind necessary for adapting to change and contributing to the welfare of a democratic community. The school is not merely preparation for life; it is part of life itself. Dewey's pragmatism thus underpins a pedagogy that values inquiry, experience, and the cultivation of engaged citizens.

3. The Critical Theory Perspective: The Pedagogy of Liberation

In contrast to the pragmatist vision of improving democratic society from within, Paulo Freire developed a critical theory of education aimed at liberating the oppressed from unjust social orders. Working amid widespread poverty and illiteracy in mid-20th-century Brazil, Freire treated education as an explicitly political act: a tool that can either maintain the status quo or challenge it.

A central tenet of Freire's philosophy is conscientization - the process by which learners become aware of the social, political, and economic contradictions that shape their reality. This awakening is a prerequisite for liberation. Freire insisted that consciousness cannot be bestowed by a teacher; it must be co-created through dialogue. He critiqued the "banking concept" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge and students act as passive receptacles; this one-way model, he argued, "anaesthetizes and inhibits creative power" and helps maintain systems of oppression (Freire, 1970:72).

Freire's alternative is problem-posing education, a dialogical method in which teachers and students jointly investigate their shared reality. Here the teacher is reconceptualized as a co-investigator or co-creator of knowledge. The teacher's expertise is valued but placed in dialogue with students' lived experiences, which become legitimate sources of knowledge. The curriculum emerges from problems and "generative themes" identified by students, ensuring that learning is connected to their lives and directed toward transformation. Henry Giroux's work situates Freire within a broader tradition of critical pedagogy that sees the ultimate purpose of education as humanization and social transformation (Giroux, 1988). For Freire, education aims to

empower the oppressed to become subjects of their own history, to challenge injustice, and to create a more equitable society. The philosophical foundations of critical theory thus chart a pedagogy that is dialogical, politically engaged, and oriented toward liberation.

3.1 Two Brief Classroom Vignettes Illustrating Practice

3.1 Vignette 1 (Deweyan Practice)

In a Deweyan classroom, a teacher notices students' curiosity about local river pollution. She frames a multiweek inquiry in which students investigate water quality, design simple tests, collect and analyze samples, and present potential community interventions. The teacher organizes the activities, models scientific inquiry, and scaffolds students' reflection on the consequences of different interventions. Assessment emphasizes problem-solving processes, collaboration, and the ability to apply knowledge in civic contexts. The project situates learning in community life, cultivating democratic habits through practical inquiry and shared responsibility.

3.2 Vignette 2 (Freirean Practice)

In a Freirean-styled unit, the teacher begins by asking students to identify pressing problems in their daily lives; students repeatedly name unfair water access and hazardous waste practices. The teacher facilitates a dialogical process where students and teacher map the social, economic, and political structures producing the problem. Students research local actors, histories, and policies, and they plan collective actions - such as a community forum or petition - as both learning and praxis. The teacher foregrounds critical reflection and conscientization, positioning students as protagonists who analyze and act upon oppressive conditions.

4. A Comparative Analysis: Contrasting Philosophies, Divergent Practices

To prepare for a focused comparison, I examine three domains where philosophical commitments most directly shape practice: the nature and function of knowledge, the role and authority of the teacher, and the overarching purpose of education. These domains reveal both epistemic commitments (what counts as legitimate knowledge and how it is justified) and practical consequences (how teachers act and what schooling aims to accomplish). The following comparative analysis uses these lenses to clarify where Deweyan and Freirean thought converge and where they diverge.

Table 1. Comparative summary of Dewey and Freire across three domains

Domain	John Dewey (Pragmatism)	Paulo Freire (Critical Theory)
Nature of knowledge	Instrumental; validated by practical consequences	Co-created; oriented toward critical consciousness
Role of teacher	Guide/facilitator; structures inquiry	Co-investigator; dialogical partner
Purpose of education	Growth and democratic participation	Liberation and humanization

Sources: primary texts and comparative scholarship.

First, the two philosophies hold distinct views on the nature of knowledge. For Dewey, knowledge is an instrumental tool for solving problems and fostering growth. It is acquired through a reflective and interactive process with one's environment and is validated by its practical consequences. Knowledge in a pragmatist framework is not a fixed external truth but a fluid, evolving instrument that helps individuals navigate and improve democratic life. For Freire, knowledge is a tool for understanding and transforming social reality; it is co-created through critical dialogue and action. Its value is measured by its capacity to produce

conscientization and to empower the oppressed to challenge systemic injustice. The central contrast lies in the primary function of knowledge: Dewey emphasizes improving democratic practice; Freire emphasizes uncovering and challenging the power structures that render democracies unjust.

Second, the role of the teacher differs markedly. Dewey's teacher is a "guide on the side" who structures environments to facilitate inquiry and problem-solving. The teacher designs experiences that connect to students' interests and helps them derive meaning from interactions with the world. While not an authoritarian figure, the Deweyan teacher remains a more experienced guide leading a journey of discovery. In Freire's framework, the teacher is a co-investigator or co-creator of knowledge. This relationship is more horizontal and dialogical: authority is based not on superior knowledge but on a shared commitment to critical inquiry and liberation. The teacher's role is to participate in a mutual process of decoding reality alongside students.

Finally, the ultimate purpose of education differs. For Dewey, the goal is growth and the cultivation of thoughtful, engaged citizens who can sustain and improve democratic society. His vision seeks to refine and perfect social life through education. Freire's vision is more radical: education's purpose is liberation. He conceives education as a means for oppressed people to gain critical awareness and to become agents of social transformation. This contrast - education for democratic improvement versus education for social liberation - highlights a philosophical chasm within progressive educational thought.

Although both thinkers champion learner-centered approaches, their philosophical differences yield divergent educational practices. These differences have practical implications for curriculum design, assessment, and teacher preparation.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that beneath the shared progressive spirit of John Dewey's pragmatism and Paulo Freire's critical theory lie different philosophical foundations that yield divergent educational practices. Dewey's philosophy, shaped by a desire to improve and refine democratic life, frames knowledge as a tool for practical problem-solving and the teacher as a guide for growth. Freire's philosophy, emerging from the struggle against systemic oppression, treats knowledge as a vehicle for liberation and the teacher as a dialogical co-investigator. The tension between educating for competent democratic participation and educating for critical transformation is a central analytic insight of this comparison.

Practically, philosophical self-awareness can be operationalized in teacher education and professional development through three modest strategies: (1) structured reflection prompts that ask educators to state their implicit aims (for example, whether they prioritize growth within existing democratic arrangements or liberation from oppressive structures); (2) small-scale curricular experiments that test whether a unit centers problem-solving for civic competence or problem-posing for critical inquiry; and (3) lesson debriefs that explicitly connect classroom choices to epistemic commitments. These measures help teachers translate abstract philosophical commitments into everyday pedagogical decisions.

Acknowledging that many contemporary educators enact hybrid practices, the comparison offered here should be read as analytic rather than classificatory: Deweyan and Freirean orientations can coexist or be blended in practice, and empirical work could fruitfully examine how teachers navigate these tensions in diverse contexts. Future research might explore how these philosophies inform digital pedagogy or interventions aimed at educational inequity.

Ultimately, a reflective and ethical pedagogy requires philosophical self-awareness. By understanding the foundational ideas that guide practice, educators can make more deliberate, informed, and courageous decisions in their classrooms. The teaching and learning process is not merely a set of techniques; it is a human endeavor imbued with philosophical meaning, and it is in this meaning that the power of education resides.

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