

Experience as Reconstruction— Actionable Insights into Pedagogy

Dr. Neelam Mehta Bali

Abstract

Human experience serves as a 'launching pad' which puts different thought constructs into orbit. Amidst the myriad forms, it is Dewey's 'Reconstructionism' which perhaps emerges as a strong exponent of experience. His thought process addresses some pertinent questions such as, "What is the scope of experience and what are its limitations? How far is it a sure ground of belief and safe guide of human conduct? "Is there anything inherent in experience which tends towards progressive organization of its contents?" "Can it organize itself into stable courses or must it be sustained from outside?", etc. In the present time the volatility and uncertainty of circumstances makes it necessary that pedagogy facilitates PAIRRs experience, wherein P represents perception of occurrence of experience, A stands for its analysis, I for interpretation and R for reflection on experience along with R, for owning up the responsibility of the experience. It goes without saying that the occurrence of experience is incumbent upon active engagement of the person in an organically connected dynamic world of his or her existence. Reconstruction represents conscious differentiation between the means and ends with reference to the ever evolving perception of the self and purpose of life in an ever changing environment within and outside the person. Dewey's analysis and interpretation is expected to provide the educators with actionable insights into pedagogy.

Keywords: Experience, Means, Ends, Reconstruction, Environment, Continuity, Consciousness, Interaction, Meaning.

The Perspective

Theodore Brameld, observes: WE are living in an age that is capable, on the one hand of destroying mankind overnight and on the other hand, of producing a higher level of civilization on a world scale". The former is the road to destruction and the latter, the path of Reconstruction. Reconstructionism is a philosophy of "search for value orientation" sought through the identification of "means" and "ends" in the "defining of purposes". The defining of purpose is suggestive of a desired change or flux in a "situation" obtained through reorganisation or realignment of its constitutive elements (a) per se and (b) their interpretation, understanding or "meaning" for "self" (by virtue of which the element once held as an 'end' acquires the significance of 'means' in a changed "situation"). Reconstructionists emphasize "that means are also shaped by the ends we decide upon and commit ourselves to."² In the wake of this 'commitment' Brameld takes notice of man's 'tremendously powerful irrational drives, both within himself and in his relations with other men.'³

These lush pastures of human conduct were of primary interest to Dewey. His endeavour was to 'read' experience in a manner as to ensure "a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number".⁴ Reviewing the characteristic feature of experience, as growth, he saw it (experience) as "development in a particular line."

Dr. Neelam Mehta Bali, Associate Professor, Maharishi Valmiki College of Education, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

According to Dewey, “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what at the time constitutes his environment.”⁴ The environmental conditions of the individual are defined by his personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities to create the experience which is had.” The individual who acts and undergoes, emerges as a modified being after every experience enacted or engaged in. The modification or transformation is affected because, in the course of the experience, the individual assimilates the ‘consequences undergone because of doing’ as the meaning of the subsequent doing and manifests it as a habit in his behaviour. It modifies the individual by preparing more and “changing the ground” for further experience. Thus “continuity and interaction in their active union” with each other provide an index of the value of an experience.

The Criteria of Experience- Dewey evolved the criteria of Experience in terms of two basic principles, the principles of Continuity and Interaction. The first of these, the Principle of Continuity of experience implies that “every experience takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those experiences which come after”.⁵ At the same time Dewey also observes that while the Principle of continuity applies in some way in every case, the quality of the present experience influences the way in which the Principle applies.⁶ In this context Dewey’s some other pertinent observations are:

“all human experience is ultimately social, that it involves contact and communication”⁷

Another of his contentions that “every experience enacted and undergone modifies, the one who acts and undergoes” is a “basic characteristic of habit”⁸ Habit as we shall see later has been identified by Dewey as an essential characteristic of human behaviour and therefore plays a significant role in his experiences.

Within the parameter of his work, Experience and Education, Dewey has observed that “Experience does not go simply inside a person. It does go on there, for it influences the formation of attitudes, of desire and purpose. (However) every genuine experience has an active side which changes to some degree, the objective conditions, sources outside an individual which give rise to experience. It is constantly fed from these springs.”⁹

While the quality of experience is the ticket to the continuity of experience viz-a-viz the person, the content of the experience is the venue of continuity between the person and the objective conditions. ‘Principle of Interaction’, the second principle provides the vista of this continuity. It is this second principle, that together with the first, forms the criteria of experience. Interaction “assigns equal rights to both factors in experience- objective and internal conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation.”¹⁰

The expression ‘objective condition’ needs some elaboration here. Identifying their nature Dewey say’s, “The environment is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes and capacities to create the experience which is had.”¹¹ The objective conditions include (a) the social responses, the action and the manner (b) The physical world and (c) The total social set up. In other words, these conditions “include what is done (by educator) and the way in which it is done...the material with which the individual interacts, and most important of all, the total social set up of the situation in which a person is engaged.”¹²

The importance of these (objective) conditions can never be overestimated. Dewey says, “Conditions..... give each present experience a worthwhile meaning..”¹³ Meaning of an experience, is the crux of Dewey’s experience. It gives experience the quality of agreeableness or disagreeableness. It is the vehicle of continuity

of experience, of the person, within and with the situation. Thus Dewey observes, “every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity and reconstruction of experience.”¹⁴

Besides these two principles or the Criteria as given in his work, ‘Experience and Education’, more insight about the nature of experience are found in Dewey’s other works namely, ‘Art as Experience’ and ‘Experience and Nature’. The elements/criteria of experience construed from these consists of : (a) Principle of Continuity (b) Principle of Interaction-Situation (c) Reconstruction -bridging the gulf. and (d) Transformation –the change effected.

Principle of Continuity –Elaborated. The significance of the Principle of Continuity as perceived by Dewey stands self explained in what he describes as ‘form of an integral experience. In his words:

“In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organisation. I call the organisation dynamic because it takes time to complete it, because it is growing. There is inception, development and fulfilment. Material is ingested and digested through interaction with that vital organisation of the results of prior experience that constitutes the mind of the worker. Incubation goes on until what is conceived is brought forth and is rendered perceptible as part of the common world.”¹⁵

Dewey observes: “Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers in unison with it either through effect or by some happy chance.”¹⁶

However, if this, conscious intent is reduced to labelling situations, events and objects as so-and- so in mere succession, then it marks the cessation of a life that is a conscious experience. this act of labelling represents ‘distraction and dispersion’ in contrast with an experience when continuities are realised in an individual, though discrete forms,’¹⁷ when “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment...its close is a consummation and not a cessation, (it) is a whole and carries with it, its own individualising quality and self sufficiency”.¹⁸ then and then only is it “integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences.”¹⁹

Realisation of continuities, in ordinary conditions or in conditions of resistance and conflict, is the foundation stone on which the building of experience is constructed. Thus “experience is necessarily cumulative and its subject matter gains expressiveness because of cumulative continuity. The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience”²⁰

The laying of the foundation stone in the words of Rodman Webb is the “presence of the past.” It is attended by consciousness which marks the place where the formed disposition and the immediate situation happen to interact. It is the “continuous readjustment of the self and the world in experience.”²¹ It is relevant here to ask what disposition stands for. Are these ‘formed dispositions’- the living fossils of the past ? Perhaps yes, for Dewey observes:

“In their physical occurrence, things and events that are experienced- pass and are gone. But something of their meaning and value is retained as an integral part of the self. Through habits formed in the interaction with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience.”²²

In his work, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey qualifies how through habits...we in-habit the world. Dewey says, “all habits are demands for certain kinds of activity, and they constitute the Self. In any intelligible sense of the Will, they are the Will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities.”²³ Investing habits with an expanded functionality he adds, “concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done.”²⁴

Here one feels tempted to wonder whether habits would lead to a highly fixed, structured and rigid conduct. Foreseeing this dilemma of rigidity as an offshoot of permanency of habits, Dewey states:

“By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness. Thus even if we think of habits as so many grooves, the power to acquire many and varied grooves denotes high sensitivity, explosiveness. Thereby an old habit, a fixed groove if one wishes to exaggerate, gets in the way of the process of forming a new habit while the tendency to form a new one cuts across the same old habits.”²⁵

The role of consciousness acquires a unique position in the gamut of experience. Dewey tries to associate habits and consciousness. He says that the function of habits, phenomena of their formation, operation, their interruption and re-organisation are expressed by consciousness, “whether as a stream or as special sensations and images”.²⁶

Here the term consciousness is not to be taken in the sense the idealist or the subjectivist would have it. His definition of consciousness as sensation shows his biological orientation as also another of his statements, “by some physiological process, not exactly understood at present but to which the name habit is given, the net outcome of prior experiences gives a dominant quality, designated ‘promontory’ to a perceived existence.”²⁷

Taken in the biological sense or otherwise, consciousness is “more acute and intense in the degree of the readjustments that are demanded, approaching the nil as the contact is frictionless and interaction fluid, it is turbid when meanings are undergoing reconstruction in an undetermined direction and become clear as a decisive meaning emerges.”²⁸

Thus, establishing continuity in and among experiences is essentially a process of establishing meaning.

Principle of Interaction -Situation: The statement that individuals live in a world means.....that they live in a series of situations. And when it is said that ‘men live in these situations’, the meaning of the word “in” is different from its meaning when it is said that pennies are ‘in a pocket’ or ‘paint is in a can’. The point of difference between the two situations is the presence of interaction in the former. “It means ...that interaction is an ongoing process...The conception of situation and interaction are inseparable from each other.”²⁹

Placing the ‘individual’ in a situation Dewey recognizes that the “individual is an organism who acts with reference to a time spread, a serial order of events, as a unit, just as it does in reference to a unified spatial variety. An environment, both extensive and enduring, is immediately implicated in present behaviour.” Thus, “the action called ‘organic’ is not just that of internal structures, it is an integration of organic-environmental connections.”³⁰

The concept of interaction finds more elaboration in the observation that, “Experience in the degree to which it is experienced is heightened vitality it signifies active and alert commerce with the world, at its height it signifies complete inter-penetration of self and the world of objects and events.”³¹ For Dewey, it is the

fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things. Herein, the use of adjectives like “heightened vitality”, “active and alert commerce”, “struggles and achievements” are all suggestive of active relations subsisting between a human being and his natural and social surroundings.

As regards the initiation of these relations, Dewey states that in some cases it is “on the side of the environment, the human being undergoes or suffers certain checking and deflections of endeavours,” while in other cases, “the behaviour of surrounding things and persons carries to a successful issue the active tendencies of the individual, so that in the end what the individual undergoes are consequences which he has himself tried to produce.”³²

Wherein lies the significance of these relations? Dewey replies, “In just the degree in which the connections are established between what happens to a person and what he does in response, that is undergoing and doing and between what he does to his environment and what it does in response to him, that is doing and undergoing, his acts and things about him acquire meaning.”³³ According to Dewey, in the total event “reason ceases to be a remote and ideal faculty, rather, it signifies all the resources by which activity is made fruitful in meaning and experience” ceases to be “empirical and becomes experimental.”³⁴

Experience as the perception of the connection between something tried and something undergone in consequence qualifies as a process. The perception of these relations is dependent upon man’s consciousness of the relations found in nature, the distinguishing contribution of man. Dewey recognizes that, “Through consciousness, he (man) converts the relation of cause and effect that one observed in nature into relations of means and consequences.”³⁵ He identifies consciousness with the ‘inception of such transformation’ where resistance becomes something to be used in changing existing arrangements of matter.”³⁶

Describing other characteristics associated with this transformation Dewey states that in it, “human energy gathers, is released, dammed up, frustrated and victorious. There are rhythmic beats of wants and fulfillment, pulses of doing and being withheld from doing.”³⁷

Highlighting the contribution of moments of contrast, (as in a drama) Dewey points out that drama is responsible for giving experience a design and pattern, because “drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness.”³⁸ One aspect of the drama is, the need of supplementation. It is indicative of an actual or impending break or discontinuity. It gives the total event a unifying quality to which Dewey gives the term ‘emotion’. Underlining its significance, he observes, “The discord is the occasion that induces reflection. Desire for the restoration of the union converts mere emotion into interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony.”³⁹

Thus the whole process so far has been one of transformation of:

- a. Wants into fulfillment,
- b. Relation of cause and effect into relation of “means and ends.”⁴⁰ and
- c. Emotion into interest. The common demand of these transformations is “focalization of meanings.”

The situation in which we seek the “focalization of meaning” is not an insulated and isolated system of objects, events and persons. “Any experience” says Dewey, “has an indefinite total setting” He observes that the “things, objects are only focal points of a here and now, in a whole that stretches out indefinitely.”⁴¹

Describing the relationship of these ‘focal points’ to the total settings, he states that the latter is “the qualitative background, which is defined and made definitely conscious in particular objects and specified properties and qualities.”⁴² As regards the quality of their relationship Dewey observes that, “there is something mystical associated with the word intuition, and any experience becomes mystical in the degree in which the sense, the feeling of the unlimited envelope becomes intense.” However, there is always a “bounding horizon which moves as we move and consequently we are never wholly free from the sense of something that lies beyond.”⁴³

Regarding the selection of the focal points Dewey states that, “if we observe the entire field, from bright focus through the fire-conscious, the fringe to what is dim, sub-conscious, feeling the focus corresponds to the point of immediate need of urgency, the “fringe” corresponds to things that just have been reacted to or that will soon require to be looked after, while the remote outlying field corresponds to what does not have to be modified and which may be dependently counted upon in dealing with immediate need.”⁴⁴

Another important thing with regard to ‘focal points’ is their temperarity in a world of flux. Highlighting this aspect Dewey says that, “the scope and content of the focussed apperency have immediate dynamic connections with portions of experience not at (the) time obvious.”⁴⁵ (sic) In his work ‘Art as experience’ Dewey observes that these things which form the horizon are, the capital with which the “self notes, cares for, attends and purposes”. * It is in this substantial sense, that mind forms that active background upon which very new contact with surroundings is projected. In the projection of the new upon it, “there is assimilation and reconstruction of both background and what is taken in and digested.”⁴⁶ It may seem here that Dewey has made a leap from the talk of horizon to that of the mind, but this leap appears to be so only if we overlook the mention of the self which Dewey has earlier identified in terms of habits, dispositions, attitudes, desires and will.

In the present situation we are faced with the demand of reconstruction of the context of habitual meanings (mind) which is organically related to consciousness, (which is) “that phase of a system of meanings which at a given point of time is undergoing re-direction, or transitive transformation.”⁴⁷ This brings us to the conclusive part of this exposition of the principle of Interaction-Situation which aphoristically has been put as –

“It would be much more direct to say that a self is contained in a perception than that a perception is presented to a self.”⁴⁸

Reconstruction– Bridging the Gulf: Dewey holds that it is possible to be efficient in action and yet not have a conscious experience. “The activity is too automatic to permit of a sense of what it is about and where it is going.”⁴⁹ And “between the poles of aimlessness and mechanical efficiency, there lie those courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating towards an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process.”⁵⁰

In the process of every experience Dewey identifies an element of undergoing, and ‘of suffering’ in its large sense. He explains “otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded, for “taking in” in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known.”⁵¹

In order to understand the nature of reconstruction, let us take account of this statement, “An experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alteration but consists of them in relationship. The scope and content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience.”⁵²

Perception, according to Dewey, is an act of going out of energy in order to receive, but if it is withheld from receiving before it gets a chance to develop freely, then it is arrested at the stage of recognition. And it is

this which is the pace-maker in the life of experience. This imputation of meaning of reconstruction, stands supported by Dewey's observation that:

"The consequences undergone because of doing are incorporated as the meaning of subsequent doings because the relation between doing and undergoing is perceived."⁵³

Thus the activity is transformed in its significance, an 'end' becomes a 'mean'. The relationship or transformation can be further understood with a personal experience. The action of hitting the fist on the wall registers pain as a consequence, in subsequent experiences, pain becomes so much an integral part of the action that it becomes the bearer of the meaning of the action.

Dewey holds that "perception of relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence."⁵⁴ At the same time he also mentions that in a vital experience it is not possible to divide from one another, the practical, emotional and intellectual, and to set the properties of one against the characteristics of the others. "The emotional phase binds parts together into a single whole, "intellectual" simply names the fact that the experience has meaning, "practical indicates that the organism is interacting with events and objects which surround it."⁵⁵

Qualifying the above statement, he says that the practical, emotional and intellectual are the terms we coin when we reflect or think about our experience and not when we have it. The reason being that in total normal experience—

"Both inner and outer factors are so incorporated that each has lost its special character....things and events belonging to the world, physical and social are transformed through its inter-course with things previously external to it."⁵⁶

These are the echoes of the twin principles of continuity and 'situation-interaction,' and remind that reconstruction is not separated from them in time, it is a simultaneous process and therefore the consummation of the integral experience 'does not wait in the consciousness,' for the whole undertaking to be finished. "It is anticipated throughout and is recurrently savoured with special intensity."⁵⁷

The total account has revealed itself as one of 'ordered and organized movement' culminating in 'internal integration,' and rounding up the entire activity with a satisfying emotional quality marking its fulfilment, as an experience, an integral experience. In their vital sense these real experiences are complete in themselves (itself), "standing out because marked out from what went before and what came after."⁵⁸ The manner however is not one of 'dissection' but one of 'succession.' At this juncture we can ill afford to omit this account which so succinctly records the process of experience as series of succession in which:

"Every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. In an experience,...as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself...because of continuous merging. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement."⁵⁹

Transformation effected: From the experiential 'interaction-situation' the individual emerges transformed. As a consequence of reconstruction, each experience makes its contribution to the quality of movement of Life, by way of providing it with ever new meanings and values. In this manner every individual assimilating the past experience has, in a special sense, a scale of funded meanings and values to measure the value of,

‘possible experiences’ and then decide to ‘have it.’ It is a different matter though, that, of these “some things (values) sink deep while others stay on the surface and are easily displaced.”⁶⁰

The “possible experiences” which are estimated to be of worth become manifest in an individual’s expression on the occasion when he chooses to have it (the experience) in a particular situation. It is “an objective result as well as a personal act.” This alone explains why the “lines and colour” in the work of an artist “arrange themselves in one pattern and rhythm rather than in another,”⁶¹ As a personal act the experience becomes unique in itself and to the experiencer. Dewey observes, “when an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us... the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something.”⁶²

A well pronounced contention of Dewey that merits mention is, “only by progressive organisation of inner and outer material in organic connection with each other, can anything be produced that is not a learned document or an illustration of something familiar.”⁶³

In a concluding statement, Dewey states:

“It is not true that we forget or drop into unconsciousness only alien and disagreeable things. It is even more true that the things which we have most completely made part of ourselves, that we have assimilated to compose our personality and not merely retained as incidents, cease to have a separate conscious existence.”⁶⁴

References

1. Theodore Brameld, Toward a Reconstruction in Philosophy of Education, in Joe Park, (Ed.) Selected Readings in the Philosophy of Education. 3rd Edition- The MacMillan Co. New York 1968. pg 125
2. Ibid. pg 130
3. Ibid
4. John Dewey, Experience and Education . MacMillan Co., New York. 1938 from S.M. Cahn(ed) The Philosophical Foundations of Education. Harper & Row Publishers Ltd. London. 1970. pg 230
5. Ibid
6. Ibid, pg 231
7. Ibid, pg 232
8. Ibid, abridged pg 232-33
9. Ibid, pg 231
10. Ibid, pg 233
11. Ibid, pg 235
12. Ibid, pg 236
13. Ibid, pg 237
14. Ibid, pg 239
15. John Dewey, Art as Experience, Minton Balch & Co., New York, 1934. pg 56
16. Ibid 14
17. Ibid, pg 24
18. Ibid, pg 35
19. Ibid
20. Ibid, pg 104
21. Ibid, pg 266
22. Ibid, pg 104

23. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct : An Introduction to Social Psychology*. The Modern Library, New York, 1957.pg25
24. Ibid, pg 177
25. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*. pg 281 from Rodman Webb, *The Presence of the Past*. John Dewey and Alfred Schutz on the Genesis and Organisation of Experience. A University of Florida Book,1976.pg 62.
26. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, pg 177
27. John Dewey, *Qualitative Thought* pg 197 from Victor Kestenbaum. *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning*. Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey.1977 pg 33
28. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pg 266
29. John Dewey, *Experience and Education*
30. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, pg 279
31. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pg 19
32. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, pg 276
33. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pg 162
34. Ibid, pg 276
35. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pg 25
36. Ibid
37. Ibid, p16
38. Ibid, pg 25
39. Ibid, pg 15
40. Ibid, pg 62
41. Ibid, pg 193
42. Ibid
43. Ibid
44. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*.pg 311
45. John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic: Epistemological Realism*.p-6 in Victor Kestenbaum. *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning*
46. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. p 264
47. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p 251
48. John Dewey, *Essay's in Experimental Logic*, pg 276
49. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p 38
50. Ibid, p39
51. Ibid, p41
52. Ibid, p44
53. Ibid, pg 62
54. Ibid, pg 45
55. Ibid, pg 55
56. Ibid, pg 246
57. Ibid, pg 55
58. Ibid, pg 36
59. Ibid
60. Ibid, pg 71
61. Ibid, pg 87
62. Ibid, pg 139
63. Ibid, pg 75
64. Ibid, pg 71