

# What Are We For?

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I want to pose a few questions about how we go about our fundamental function as learning technologists. The question of what it is that we actually do, what it is that we are for, has gained particular pertinence in the light of the recent ALT Learning Technologist Accreditation Scheme Consultation Paper.

I will touch on familiar concepts and ideas. I have decided however to approach them on a different path.

Where I ask the questions “what are we for”, “what ought we to do” and “how ought we to do it”, I will not present a summary result of recorded and evaluated opinions and attitudes. Rather, I will see if there can be a “philosophical” grounding to our methods. Instead of inquiring empirically, I shall explore theoretically.

I will investigate whether pragmatism, in particular the instrumentalism (as he himself termed it) of John Dewey, can usefully inform our thinking about *what we are doing*, *why we are doing it* and *whether we ought to be doing it like that*.

As learning technologists, what is it that we are? We are a new layer of bureaucracy. We are a new strand of administrative, academic-related support. We are mediators. We mediate between academics and institutional strategy; we act as agents of change. We mediate between government legislation and academic practice. We weave it into our training, circumnavigate the ‘must’, smuggle in accessibility, copyright, IPR, best practice, etc. into sessions about creating learning objects with technology; we hope they won’t notice, because any ‘must’ conveys a threat, which may trigger resistance and resistance is what we are there to assuage.

Importantly, we mediate between staff and technology, we reconcile possible phobias, negotiate probable anxieties which occasionally arise from that threat of a word, *technology*. We encourage their courage to engage with the new.

And we do this by gentle coaxing, by persuasion, never through coercion, always by appeal to their ‘better sense’.

This (admittedly idealised, sanitised) description of our job is already very much in the spirit of Dewey’s political and philosophical programme: we help to *bring about* knowledge and actions and their ability to “improve” their teaching styles – we act, in the very small context that is learning technology, almost as *Socratic midwives*.

But why are we doing it like this, and is it ... “right”?

Can pragmatism provide a justification for this kind of approach? Are there any problems with pragmatism, and, therefore, if we are already acting 'pragmatically', are there objections we ought to remain aware of when we think about what it is that we are doing?

I will describe a little what pragmatism is, what Dewey says about education, and how it relates to our field. I will then mention some possible objections and consider how this may change our attitudes towards our 'purpose'.

Dewey is justifiably recognised for his socially orientated philosophy. He radically places both practical science and theory into the service of a democratic and educational programme of social improvement. The role of philosophy is to provide the theoretical foundations for his educational theory. Education in turn is fundamental to the life of any society, indeed necessary for sustaining life: both individual life and the life of a social group.

There is much that is noble in his writing. He offers an ideal vision of the democratic society, in which every member can and must take part and contribute to its growth and health and continuous improvement. He recognises that both science and philosophical theory are political, that they are not 'pure', that they do not exist independently from the social environment in which they are developed. They are not to be regarded, or used, as diversions for the amusement of the select intellectual few with occasional outcomes bearing on the rest of society. Where philosophy provides the theoretical validation for his ideas, science provides the method. Theoretically, Dewey's pragmatism asserts that an activity becomes meaningful when its consequences bring us closer to our predefined goal – an improved democratic society which continues to grow intellectually, progressively; then, empirical inquiry allows us to put this into practice, through observation and evaluation.

The purpose of Education, based on these idea(l)s, it emerges, is therefore to instil in students the ability to reason and to judge. Education ought not to be about imparting established knowledge, not about instilling facts that don't bear on the learner's practical experiences, but about learning to apply reason to situations and to increase practical knowledge. "Education is [...] a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process. All of these words mean that it implies attention to the conditions of growth" he writes in *Democracy and Education*. And this is best achieved through persuasion, through communication and through practice. Such skills are best taught communally and best learnt through doing. Activity, practice and collaboration are key words. We are accustomed to these words; these are established and familiar ideas.

If we translate this into our current context, we see how much we are already practically engaging in this kind of thinking.

We too have an attainable ideal towards which we are working, informed by the twin towers of current educational parlance, "widening participation" and "institutional competitiveness". Where we meet resistance, we employ persuasion and appeal to academics' rational faculties. We do engage in empirical validation: we compile tables and use interviews for feedback; we set up standards against

which we measure our successes. Thus we give meaning to our activities, by assessing their outcomes by their approximation to our final goal.

No doubt, pragmatism is a considered theory. It appeals to common sense and it banishes metaphysical speculation to the Realm of Useless. In demanding scientific verification, it demands of itself vigilance: no axioms allowed unless they pass appropriate tests! And with Dewey, pragmatism possesses an admirable aspect in its desire to conjoin theory and practice. His system marches towards an attainable ideal, it professes an attractive, forward-looking attitude.

It sounds *just so*, but it isn't *all that*.

For there are objections to be made.

I object firstly, to its inherent instrumentalism.

Education is an instrument to further democracy.

Learning Technologies are instruments for making current educational practices more democratic: creating accessible learning resources, widen participation, making learning more flexible.

Learning Technologists are instrumental in persuading academic staff to buy into the e-learning strategy.

Academic staff are instrumental for bringing about the strategic and institutional changes the institution requires.

The point at which we talk about individuals as instruments, as ends to further institutional strategies, may indicate a danger that we have stopped affording them the respect they deserve...

But, they argue, this need not concern us. As we judge our actions moral only on the basis of their consequences, the problem of treating people as 'means' or 'ends' is a meaningless and metaphysical consideration. Morality is meaningful only in particular instances, not in abstract conceptualisation.

This may be so, but it doesn't give the pragmatists any leeway in dealing with conflicting outcomes.

To continue on our path towards implementing e-learning strategies may be judged morally right *if* it can be measured that as a consequence students experience a more flexible, accessible and democratic approach to learning. By way of empirical inquiry this can be measured.

But only if we agree on the particular parameters within which we measure. Only if we agree that "better learning" is a measurable quality. And only if we don't worry about the problem of conflicting consequences. What if a renewed learning vigour on part of the students comes at the cost of a renewed teaching apathy? May this not be brought about by teacher's perception that they are no longer valued for themselves, but merely as instruments to further another group's progress?

Pragmatists may counter that teachers ought not see themselves as distinct from students, that there is only one group, that of each member of the institution. But this is to profess to a naïve conception on how staff and students actually view themselves, and each other.

But is pragmatism even so coherent as a theory, is there not in fact a disparity about pragmatism's claim to eschew any universal value, by making truth relative (meaningful only in relation to the consequences of an action) and the fact that in proclaiming a democratic social ideal and a universalisable, universally applicable *formula*, it smuggles 'grand theory' in through the backdoor! For our purposes this may be a small point, but it shows up an internal contradiction.

But let us allow that pragmatists successfully avoid mention of a universal truth. This reinforces the idea that change will come about through persuasion, instead of appeal to an immutable truth that exists independently of us. This 'persuasion', it is suggested, is our instrument to counter resistance and bring about change. Are things that easy? What is this great concept 'persuasion', that it can magically deal with all possible reasons for why academics do not wish to jump on the e-learning train? That myriad of reasons, ranging from deliberate resistance, to lack of time, to fear and ignorance, to reasoned skepticism towards technology. Again, I would suggest that pragmatism perforce delivers a naïve and simplistic conception of human nature as malleable and reasonable; it needs us to be entirely open to rational argument, but we know from experience that we simply are not like that. I would suggest that societies and/or institutions operate on a somewhat more complex level.

Third, far from being broadly democratic and inclusive, there is an underlying paternalistic "logic" at work in this idea that change may be brought about by persuasion. Dewey is adamant that all individuals in a society, if properly schooled, will make the same judgements, will come to the same conclusions. But is this not presumptuous? Let us consider an example: we will, by gentle guidance, make a particular academic see for *herself* that, really, increasing the use of learning technology is the only way for her institution to progress forward. But, she insists, I do not see it, I do not agree. Will we then counter that she has not used her reason in the correct way?

*If you read this book often enough, you will understand it. But I have read it twenty times and I still don't understand it! Ah, I did not say twenty times, I said often enough...*

The 'if...then' statement employed here works no different from the assertion that "if individuals use their practical reason properly, then they will come to agree that only a democratic society is an ideal society." Neither statement is *verifiable* or *falsifiable*, because assertions such as "often enough" and "use properly" are not *quantifiable*.

More importantly, as I have mentioned before, the pragmatists' reasoning underestimates the variety of underlying grounds for individual's resistance. We may *suspect* that it stems from unreasonable – and unshakeable – mistrust of the new, we may be right, but short of coercion, there's not much we can do: and coercion plays no part in pragmatism.

What I am trying to say is that perhaps we ought to realise that there isn't just one universal ideal – that we must allow for the possibility that this gentle, democratic approach isn't always preferable (can democracy work in HEIs? Is that what we want?). So in a sense, this type of theorising is too

formulaic, and consequently too narrow. Pragmatism, although on the one hand it eschews universalisability, on the other it continually seeks to formulate a universal rule, in as far as it asserts an almost monistic ideal (one goal). But haven't we already found, even in the short period that "learning technology" has existed as a subject, that such universalising cannot apply? That the very diverse natures of our educational institutions prescribe us to work in a localised, contextualised, and personalised manner?

I began by asserting that in many senses we are already engaging with our academics 'pragmatically'. But what are the consequences of our thinking, and acting accordingly, along the lines of pragmatism?

I would suggest that it lulls us into a false sense of security. There is something soothing, and indeed on a day to day basis, quite possibly NECESSARY about feeling that we are doing something right. But on a larger scale, we ought to realise that pragmatism, with its insistence on 'what matters is that it WORKS', is *an excellent antidote to thinking radically*. If we analyse our profession as following pragmatic principles, we do not allow ourselves to have any greater input than our remit, as it was written yesterday, prescribes for us today. It precludes us from bringing about change in a more forceful, explosive way, because pragmatism is also about conserving the status quo. Pragmatism is essentially cautious.

It is essentially dull.

I don't suggest that I have a thought out alternative, I merely would like to put it to you, that our jobs should be about more than merely being given a brief and following it to the letter. Can we imagine ourselves being less soothing and more uncomfortable? What would it mean for us to take learning technology into more exciting directions – could we make education more exciting? Instead of treading the cautious line of accepting how things are, supporting them with cautious, carefully applied, tested twenty times, perfectly accessible and non-threatening educational technology, why not let ourselves be challenged and guided by technology into different ways of thinking about teaching and learning? Instead of current HE principles guiding our use of technologies, how about letting technology dictate our practices in HE?

Instead of toeing the line, we could stamp on some toes. Instead of holding our academics' hands, we could push them around a bit – and, since we ought to remember that these are intelligent writers and thinkers themselves, we may find ourselves being pushed towards our own limits in turn.