The Big Three Educational Theorists: Dewey, Tyler, and Montessori

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August 3, 2008
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Learning is a complex process that involves many factors like the age, maturity, intelligence, cognitive processing, and psychological development of the child. Educators face the challenge of how to stimulate a child’s learning process and develop the student’s skills and abilities to meet the demands of society. There is a continuous debate among academia, educators, administrators, and society as to the best ways to develop student's learning skills. Educators set curriculum standards base upon the political, social, and economic trends that society is facing. Throughout the history of education in America there have been many individuals whose philosophy of education has impacted the curriculum standards. Three key figures that have influenced the American curriculum are John Dewey, Ralph W. Tyler, and Maria Montessori. Each of these individuals has their own philosophy of education and how their approach will stimulate a child learning process.

John Dewey

Philosophy

John Dewey was American philosopher, psychologist, and educator. He was born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859 and taught at a number of universities. He also studied many educational systems worldwide. His work was largely responsible for the change in teaching that began in the United States early in the 20th century, as emphasis shifted from the institution to the student. According to Dewey, a curriculum should deal with a group of themes for which a student may choose based on his/hers interests. By working through the experiences provided, the student will gain a variety of skills. For example, in his growing of the corn theme students will learn science skills such as plants need water and sunlight to grow. They will learn math and economic skills by planting, harvesting and selling the corn. He felt that through one theme
a vast amount of knowledge can be gained through this holistic, relevant, and hands-on approach. “Moreover, subject matter never can be got into a child from without. Learning is active.” (Dewey, 1899, p. 187) In his lab school the students are essentially a modified community and there is no specific grade level.

Dewey believes that in school a child needs no specific prior knowledge at any given time. He bases this criterion on moving forward simply on the interests of each child. He takes the student's interests and provides various opportunities for that child to grow from there. "The child is the starting point, the center and the end. His development, his growth is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard." (Dewey, 1899, p. 187) According to Dewey, the interests and the needs of the child alone determine the subject matter to be taught.

“To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of the growth. Personality, character, is more than subject matter. Not knowledge or information, but self-realization is the goal. To possess all the world of knowledge and lose one’s own self is as awful as a fate in education as it is in religion.” (Dewey, 1899, p. 187) In addition, Dewey was strongly opposed to assessment and accountability for information learned by a child. He believed that one is comparing each child to a standard that you have put on the whole group. There is total discard for the needs and interests of each individual. Instead Dewey believed that “the growth of the child in the direction of social capacity and service, his larger and more vital union with life, is the unifying aim, and discipline, culture, and information fall into place as phases of this growth.” (1902, p. 91) When looking at education through Dewey's theory, there is no need for assessing and reassessing to determine mastery before moving on to the next subject.

Criticism
Critics of Dewey’s Progressive Education system believe that his educational philosophy is too complex and open to interruption. His ideas have been attacked as anti-intellectual, catering too much to the whims of children, politically radical, and promoting group conformity. Controversy surrounds Dewey’s philosophy because the curriculum is based on the beliefs that all knowledge has a social origin and that the interests of the child are the primary sources of learning. Dewey’s actual impact on the American educational system is difficult to measure. Certainly his ideas on learning and curriculum have been widely discussed since the beginning of the century, but there is little evidence that his ideas have caused significant changes in the public schools. (Spring, 2002, p. 241) Other's believe that Dewey’s influence is in the psychological development of children rather than in the classroom. Despite his efforts, his work at the University of Chicago Lab School remains more the exception than the rule in American classrooms.” (Smith, 2002, p. 586)

Ralph Tyler

Theory

Born in Chicago in 1902, reared and schooled in Nebraska, the 19-year-old college graduate Ralph Tyler became "hooked on teaching" while filling in as a science teacher in South Dakota and switched his career plans from medicine to education. Many years later, he became a “guru”, traveling around the country advising teachers and administrators on how to set objectives that foster the best teaching and learning within their schools. According to Tyler, learning is best accomplished through hands-on experience, but a curriculum is best organized by dividing the objectives into various subject matters. There are three major criteria in building an effectively organized group of learning experiences. These are continuity, sequence, and integration. The former two criteria are quite different from Dewey’s way of thinking. Not only
does Tyler consider that subject matter should be introduced in a specific order, but he also believes that in order to move on to the next level, the previous level needs to be mastered. There are important factors of sequence involved in educating a child. To Tyler, concepts should be introduced in a series of steps where every child needs each successive experience to build upon the preceding one. (1969, p. 85) In other words, without mastering the previous skills it is impossible for a student to progress.

Determining what and how the subject matter should be taught Tyler devised four curriculum questions that should be used for determining the curriculum. (1989, p.5)

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. How can learning experiences be selected which are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives?
3. How can learning experiences be organized for effective instruction?
4. How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated?

In addition, he believes that “…no single source of information is adequate to provide a basis for wise and comprehensive decisions about the objectives of the school.” (Tyler, 1969, p. 5) There are a variety of sources which should be used to determine the curriculum including: studies of the learners themselves, studies of contemporary life outside the school, suggestions from subject specialists, the use of philosophy, and the use of the psychology of learning. Tyler views needs assessment as a way of determining what should be taught. He thinks schools should look at the student population as a whole and determine a starting point from there. Next, educators should determine the objectives and how these objectives should be taught. Once the material is taught to the students, then educators reassess to see if any learning has occurred.

Tyler's most famous work was his “little” book Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction (1969). This book is well known because it captures and concisely describes his philosophy in simple logical terms. These four basic principles include: 1). Defining
appropriate learning objectives. 2). Establishing useful learning experiences. 3). Organizing learning experiences to have a maximum cumulative effect. 4). Evaluating the curriculum and revising those aspects that did not prove to be effective. The fifth and final section describes “How a school or College staff may work on curriculum building.” In this first section, Tyler mentions that one of the main problems with education is that educational programs “do not have clearly defined purposes.” These “purposes” as he describes them should be translated into educational objectives. This objective-based approach to evaluation is at the core of what Tyler proposes. His approach to evaluation followed these steps:

1. Establish broad goals or objectives.
2. Classify the goals or objectives.
3. Define objectives in behavior terms.
4. Find situations in which achievement if objectives can be shown.
5. Develop or select measurement techniques.
6. Collect performance data.
7. Compare performance data with behaviorally stated objectives.

In Tyler’s educational philosophy he pioneered the model for curriculum and utilized education learning objectives. His influence has led to an emphasis on stating learning objectives in behavioral terms that specify what students should master in each subject at each grade level. In today’s high stakes educational system which includes standardized testing, Tyler's ideas about planning result in a scope-and-sequence approach to curriculum and instruction. This, in turn, helps educators meet politician’s tough requirements. (Morrison, 2003, p. 427)

Criticism

Although Tyler’s educational philosophy is relatively sound and is in practice throughout much of the United States there are some critics that disagree with the concept of selecting behavioral objectives before developing the curriculum. Others claim that data collected from
the learners and their society is biased and that there is no scientific formula to separate the chaff from the wheat when using this data in combination with subject-area specialists’ suggestions. Some critics argue that Tyler’s proposal for filtering educational objectives through a philosophical screen is regarded as vacuous and trivial, with no scientific criterion to choose between objectives. Tyler’s view may leave curriculum-development in the hands of a less-qualified group at the local school, as opposed to being mandated by state experts and industrial interests. (Burks, 1998)

Maria Montessori

Theory

Maria Montessori was born in 1870, in Chiaravalle, Italy. She was an educator and physician who is best known for the Montessori Method of teaching young children. Her method was introduced in Rome in 1907 and stresses development of initiative and self-reliance by permitting children to do by themselves the things that interest them, but within strictly disciplined limits. The teacher guides the child's first endeavors to avoid wasted effort and the learning of wrong habits; otherwise the child learns alone. In fact, the principles that Maria Montessori emphasized at the turn of the century form the cornerstone for enlightened parenting in today’s world. These principles include: respect for the individual child, freedom in which to grow, and a stimulating learning environment that allows for the flourishing of children's interests. (Kallen, 1993, p. 96) These guiding notions, far more than any educational theorizing, have fueled Montessori's reforms of the spirit-inhibiting traditional classrooms in which many students fidgeted, waiting for the school day to end. In an “authentic” Montessori school, one will find multiage groupings, typically of a three-year span as well as, the “classic” Montessori manipulative materials including games, blocks, and various household utensils designed by
Maria Montessori herself. In addition there will be a lot of movement among children, with many things going on in a class at once; and teachers who act as guides rather than instructors. (Ruenzel, 1997, p. 30)

Maria Montessori studied children, while working at an asylum. She worked with children that were labeled “deficient and insane,” though most were more likely autistic or retarded. The children lived in a very poor learning environment, and she noticed that the children were starving for stimulation. Experimenting with various materials, she developed a sensory-rich environment, designing letters, beads and puzzles that children could manipulate, and simple tasks such as mat weaving that prepared them for more challenging tasks. After observing the children’s transformation in learning, Montessori set out to other schools to determine if normal student are able to learn by immersing them in a stimulating activity. She incorporated the philosophical ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to develop the theory that the child, through mastery of their immediate environment was the key to individual development. According to Montessori, in an attempt to foster better individual learning development each child must be free to pursue what interest him most at his pace but in a specially prepared environment. (Shute p.73) The role of the teacher in the Montessori Method is to make the children the center of learning, encourage them to learn through the freedom provided in a prepared environment, and be keen observers in order to plan appropriately for children’s learning. (Morrison, 2003, p.344)

Criticism

Some critics say it gives students too much freedom and others say it's too rigid. Critics of the Montessori Method for teaching site that this style of instruction forces children into the “correct” use of blocks and beads and causes child to abandon fantasy and creativity. Educators
like William Heard Kilpatrick, a disciple of John Dewey, dismiss Montessori’s method as too formal and restrictive, failing to spark children’s imaginations sufficiently. (Shute, 2002, p. 74) Chattin-McNichols, whose 1992 book, *The Montessori Controversy*, explores why the Montessori movement has been regarded with suspicion by the mainstream educational establishment, is skeptical about the future of “genuine” Montessori programs within the public schools. “Public school teachers don't want to be retrained in a very different philosophy,” he said. “And Montessori programs need support from the superintendent, which can be very tenuous.” (Ruenzel, 1997, p. 32)

**Conclusion**

These three key figures John Dewey, Ralph W. Tyler, and Maria Montessori have influenced the American curriculum. Each of these individuals has a made an impact on the educational system with their own philosophy of education, and each attempted to stimulate the child throughout the learning process. All have had created some form of criticism in the field of curriculum and instruction. Out of the three, Ralph W. Tyler, has been the most influential in regards to today's mainstreamed educational system. His four simple principles are found in most of most public school teacher’s lesson plans and his position on assessments and accountability has played an even bigger role in today’s high stakes education system with standardized testing. While Dewey and Montessori have not had as large of an impact on curriculum as Tyler, both of their influences on education can be seen in many classrooms today. For example, the use of learning centers, teaching in themes, using hand-son materials and manipulatives, and student exploration, are all examples of the influences that these educators have in today's classrooms.
References


