

# JOHN DEWEY'S PREOCCUPATION WITH OCCUPATIONS: FROM SAVAGE MIND TO DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This article explores John Dewey's concept of occupations which remains a primary cornerstone of his philosophy of education. However, due to the fact that Dewey addressed occupations in both general education and vocational contexts, confusion reigns. Focusing on Dewey's use of occupations in articles and books ranging from "Savage Mind" to "Democracy and Education", this study articulates Dewey's expansive theoretical application of occupations in teaching and learning throughout education.

## Introduction

Over time, in fact most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many interpretations and ideas of John Dewey's concept of occupations have been developed. For instance, Westbrook (1993) observed that by focusing on his theory on occupations Dewey created the opportunity for both historical inquiry and basic skills training. Westbrook further noted that Dewey's presentation of occupations led to study in many disciplines such as art, music, mathematics, biology, physics, chemistry, reading, and languages. Dewey argued that gaining knowledge and understanding of occupations was central to understanding individuals and societal groups. By consistently revisiting and renewing his philosophy for education, John Dewey certainly provided scholars with more than ample opportunities to delve into his innovative views on occupations. My goal is to closely examine John Dewey's expansive theoretical application of occupations for teaching and learning in education. The central underlying question involved is: What's

in an occupation? Dewey's answer could be expressed as: More than meets the eye. A corollary objective is to examine that, contrary to the notions of some scholars, Dewey's focus on occupations did not develop merely as an educational methodology and was not solely a utilitarian pursuit. Dewey's theory that occupations were a direct reflection of mankind in general is often misinterpreted. In Dewey's view, occupations did not comprise vocational education nor were occupations only destined as a decision point for an individual's future. This close examination is important because various existing interpretations tend to skew and diffuse Dewey's intent for his creative use of the study of occupations in the curriculum.

Did Dewey's seemingly preoccupation with occupations constitute a unifying theme in his ideas and theories? My theory is that Dewey believed occupations were the glue that bound together the inherited gifts of all mankind. Why do some scholars believe his view of occupations amounts to little more than learning basic job skills? Or, did making effective use of occupations as a focus of study begin as, and remain, the cornerstone of Dewey's educational philosophy? I will examine Dewey's ideas on occupations as activities in his discussions of art, literature, geography, history, science and what he described as the savage mind. I believe that examining John Dewey's broad-based concept of occupations is vital in order to determine how and why his philosophical treatment of occupations can be used as an insightful educational tool to compel thinking and create interest in learning in virtually all disciplines. My purpose will be to make sense of the rationale behind Dewey's study

of occupations concept—that is, the importance that knowledge of occupations plays in our understanding of mankind and as a useful concept for curriculum building in schools.

### **Occupations as an Issues Based Concept**

Dewey returned time and again to occupations in writings such as *My Pedagogic Creed*, *The School and Society*, *Child and Curriculum*, *Interpretation of Savage Mind*, *How We Think*, and *Democracy in Education* to support his ideas for educating students in any community. However, Dewey launched his innovative views of occupations as early as 1894 with the start of his experimental laboratory school, prior to penning his own pedagogic creed in 1897. Dewey initiated his focus on occupations as a study in curriculum development. Records for the Dewey School at the University of Chicago indicate lessons in such endeavors as blacksmithing and gardening. However, it could be considered a folly for scholars to take only a cursory look at the Dewey School subjects and subject matter. Morgan and Shermis (1970) took the position that the ideas expounded in several Dewey books, such as *School and Society*, *How We Think*, and *Democracy and Education*, “were formulated as Dewey, his wife and a staff of creative teachers originated and tested ideas about curriculum, administration, method and learning theory” (p. 65).

Other scholars appear to easily draw a reference to the societal environment in the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this time, under pressure from rapidly growing industrialization, both the types of jobs and job skills requirements increasingly demanded specific vocational training. Some scholars, such as Jenness (1990) and Saxe (1991), have concluded that Dewey supported social efficiency views related to the

demand for vocational education during that era and have transitioned this into the suggestion that the use of occupations in the Dewey School was akin to vocational training. In his chapter on school reform, Martin (1991) succinctly noted that he believed Dewey’s opposition to a reform movement to separate curriculum and create vocational schools was based on his concern that such a change could result in reinforcing a class system. Morgan and Shermis (1970) point out that Dewey’s educational philosophy was honed during ten years of experimenting with curriculum at the University of Chicago laboratory school. These authors suggest that Dewey’s theory was to unite a liberal academic education with an injection of vocational curricula. Further, they indicated that Dewey did not regard vocational curriculum in the traditional narrow definition of technical training as preparation to work. Instead, they insightfully state:

Through the serious study of vocations, one might undergo considerable intellectual growth. What is needed to understand a vocation is, in fact, an infinitely expandable series of principles and generalizations. For instance, the sewing of a button is not simply a self-terminating activity: it suggests a study of cotton and woolen fibers, and this in turn suggests a variety of studies, such as physics, geography and history” (p. 72).

Reflecting on their judicious use of the phrasing “serious study of vocations,” leads to delving deeper into Dewey’s ideas and thinking and opens the door to investigating and discovering Dewey’s path and purpose in developing his philosophy on occupations.

## Occupations and Dewey's Creed

*My Pedagogic Creed* (1897) represents Dewey's eloquent expression of his own pedagogy refined and distilled into a reflective writing. Dewey's creed consists of five articles of belief. The articles identify (a) what he believed education is and what education represents, (b) what schools are or should be, (c) what subjects to teach and what activities to teach, (d) methodology for education is described in four detailed belief statements, and, (e) in the final and fifth article Dewey outlined his belief and rationale that education is the foundation that provides for the continuation of social progress and the initiation of societal reforms. Dewey's creed was thoughtfully developed over years of gathering philosophical insights and gaining understanding of social and psychological needs of society and individuals. Throughout the subsequent years, he remained steadfast to the tenets of his own pedagogic creed.

The tone and tenor of Dewey's creed that was written entirely as "I believe" statements evidences his commitment to these beliefs. Among many aspects of his educational philosophy, Dewey's creed contains the basis for his belief in the value and importance of the study of occupations. In Article 2, Dewey stated: "I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (p. 78). Immediately following this belief, Dewey expressed: "I believe that the school must represent present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the play-ground" (p. 78).

Then, in Article 3, Dewey focused on the type and nature of subject matter for education as a key to training or growth. His beliefs are specifically unified in this singular statement: "I believe, therefore, that the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science,

nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities" (p. 79). This particular belief introduced Dewey's concepts on "social activities" which in Deweyan terms became synonymous in many ways with "occupations" in subsequent writings. It is important to note Dewey's emphasis on the aspect of "true center" for what are considered traditional school subjects. This idea is further developed in a subsequent Article 3 belief statement that expressed there is one method, and only one, to raise or increase a student's knowledge of how his own society progressed which "is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activity which makes civilization what it is" (p. 79).

Dewey (1897) reiterated in Article 3 that the basis of correlation or knowledge is "expressive or constructive activities" (p. 79). Further, he stated his belief that this idea established a standard that activities such as sewing, cooking, and gardening should be part of the curriculum. However, this author cautions readers to not stop here and leap to the traditional vocational training conclusion of some scholars. The very next belief statement solidified Dewey's theory that the study of occupations is groundwork for the study of academic subjects. Dewey affirmed:

I believe that they are not special studies which are to be introduced over and above a lot of others in the way of relaxation or relief, or as additional accomplishments. I believe rather that they represent, as types, fundamental forms of social activity; and that it is possible and desirable that the child's introduction into the more formal subjects of the curriculum be through the medium of these activities (p. 79).

Dewey's creed provided the foundation for his ideas of "activities" or "social activities" as "occupations." In several places in Article 3, his creed also expressed his concepts about "experience," "experiences," "previous experiences," or "developing a new interest in experience" (pp. 78-79) and his rationale for how this played into the nature of education and his ideas on studying occupations.

### **Window into the Laboratory School**

By the time *The School and Society* was published in 1899, Dewey's laboratory school had been operating for several years. In *School and Society* (1899) Dewey equated common needs and aims with common and productive activity. This led Dewey into a comparison of social organization on the playground with the classroom community. He noted: "There is something to do, some activity to be carried on, requiring natural divisions of labor, selection of leaders and followers, mutual co-operation and emulation" (p. 12). As a result, Dewey believed that occupations or activities should be made the "articulating centers of school life" (p. 12). In his view the type of motive, spirit, and atmosphere that existed in "a busy kitchen in which a group of children are actively engaged in the preparation of food" exhibiting "buoyant outgoing energy" and psychological "change in social attitude" (p. 12) was a contrast to the schools of Dewey's present day. Specifically, Dewey believed that the "weakness of the present school" (p. 12) was the lack of his definition of activity or activities and his concept of using activities to teach students.

Related to this idea, Dewey also discussed the importance of understanding that in the society prior to industrialization, children learned skills at home which were not necessarily just farm or ranch home skills, but also such skills as

weaving, spinning wool, candle making, etc. Every family member participated in these types of activities. Children learned that the entire process for goods and services took place in their town, their community. As children grew and gained more knowledge, their participation in processes increased. In the background, according to Dewey, there was "continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities" (p. 8).

Dewey reinforced his belief in this concept after cautioning that undirected activity or activities to keep busy or to occupy time inherently had a bustle or hurriedness atmosphere, which in his mind was not an effective teaching aspect. Therefore, Dewey in a direct manner stated:

But out of the occupation, out of doing things that are to produce results, and out of doing these in a social and co-operative way, there is born a discipline of its own and type....In critical moments we all realize that the only discipline that stands by us, the only training that becomes intuition, is that got through life itself (p. 14).

Expanding this view, Dewey returned to his theme that individuals learn from the writings and books of others more comprehensively if they were related to experience. Thus, Dewey believed that one "learns through directed living" not through "abstract and remote reference of some possible living to be done in the future" (p. 15). Later on in 1910, Dewey entered into a protracted, in-depth discussion of abstract thinking and its positive functionality for individuals in education. This was an integral part of his ideas about *How We Think* (1910).

To implement his concept of occupations, a key question for Dewey was “how shall we...introduce into the school...occupations which exact personal responsibilities and which train the child in relation to the physical realities of life?” (p. 9). Subsequently, Dewey provided a rationale and an answer by stating his belief that occupations such as metal work and woodworking, as well as cooking, weaving, and sewing should not be viewed as distinct studies. Instead these occupations represented methods of living and learning. He expanded his discussion by adding “We must conceive of them in their social significance, as types of the processes by which society keeps itself going, as agencies for bringing home to the child some of the primal necessities of community life, and as ways in which these needs have been met by the growing insight and ingenuity of man” (p. 11).

In many of his writings, Dewey incorporated geography into the discussion. In *School and Society* (1899) he expressed that “The unity of all sciences is found in geography” (p. 16). For Dewey, geography was significant in that it presented the earth to students as the “enduring home of the occupations of man” (p. 16). He related the world directly to human activity. The earth was the raw material for all activity, which Dewey identified as “the great field...great mine...great source of the energies of heat, light...great scene of ocean, stream, mountain” (p. 16). Within these elements of earth, Dewey placed “all our agriculture and mining and lumbering, all our manufacturing and distributing agencies” (p. 16). Thus, for Dewey geography was not places on the globe. Instead the environments of the geographical world determined the occupations by which humanity progressed historically both socially and politically. These occupations, according to Dewey, also developed the “intellectual and

emotional interpretation of nature” (p. 17). Dewey concluded that these various occupations as presented in the school would not have a practical orientation, nor represent ordinary employment. Instead, by using geography and its related occupations as a basis, schools became “active centers of scientific insight into natural materials and processes, points of departure whence children shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man” (p. 17).

Dewey maintained that “The child has not much instinct for abstract inquiry” (p. 43). He believed that the child’s natural impulse to be active led to investigating instinctively. He pointed out “There is no distinction between experimental science for little children and the work done in the carpenter shop. Such work as they can do in physics or chemistry is not for the purpose of making technical generalizations or even arriving at abstract truths” (p. 43). At the same time, Dewey clearly believed that children could acquire a certain amount of reasoning power through learning mathematics and science, but this could be considered more remote learning compared with the concentration of attention and judgment growth stemming from doing actual things that involved real motives and real outcomes.

Dewey pointed out that occupations as applied in a school enjoy a freedom from, in the alternative, of simply being viewed as a way to earn a living. That is, even the creation of a work product in the classroom through various work functions can allow students to valuably focus on a number of ways to understand society and its social processes—rather than simply viewing work as the creation of a product that has value in the marketplace. In writing about the value of understanding the way occupations work in society, he explained that “The aim is not the economic value of the products, but the

development of social power and insight” (p. 16). This freedom or openness created the avenue for the practical activities to become allies to the school subjects of art and geography and to act as “centers of science and history” (p. 16).

Throughout his discussion of the connecting relationships of “school and society,” Dewey encouraged society to break out of its current, narrow, practical focus. Education should be viewed and developed as an “end and aim in a less exclusive way” (p. 26). Dewey advocated that schools introduce “active occupations, of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history” (p. 27) while also relegating what he considered symbolic and formal teaching to a “secondary position” and changing the school atmosphere. That is, Dewey promoted bringing into the classroom “activities which appeal to those whose dominant interest is to do and to make” (p. 26) and the result should find students regarding school as “more vital, more prolonged, containing more of culture” (p. 26). If this modification—broadening the focus of education to reflect the significance of occupations—were adopted, then to do so “means to make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science” (p. 27).

### **Another Window into the Laboratory School**

It is likely that Dewey’s laboratory school experiences and experimental practical application of educational theory were actively reflected in *The Child and Curriculum*, which was first published as a pamphlet and copyrighted in 1902. Here, Dewey’s philosophical discussion involved the debate between advocates of teaching the child versus teaching the subject. He intensely detailed both sides concluding that the

debate should cease and desist. Instead he reformatted the opposing sides into his definition and idea of teaching through experience. His views on the curriculum in place at that time concluded that “the subject-matter does not appeal; it cannot appeal; it lacks origin and bearing in a growing experience” (p. 37).

Dewey believed the child needed to be connected to reality symbols, not formally developed symbols. He explained that teaching should provide genuine forms or symbols to “serve as methods in the holding and discovery of truth” (p. 31). Thus, actual experiences which the child had previously gone through provided the path to learning. Dewey stated that “A symbol which is induced from without, which has not been led up to in preliminary activities, is, as we say, a *bare* or *mere* symbol; it is dead and barren” (p. 32). He proceeded to connect activity or activities with his idea of teaching through experience. In *Child and Curriculum* Dewey also issued his caution regarding what he considered the teaching fallacy of “the recourse to adventitious leverage to push it in, to factitious drill to drive it in, to artificial bribe to lure it in” (p. 35). In Dewey’s view, this methodology was

Unpleasant, because meaningless, activities may get agreeable if long enough persisted in. *It is possible for the mind to develop interest in a routine or mechanical procedure, if conditions are continually supplied which demand that mode of operation and preclude any other sort* (pp. 35-36).

Suffice to say that Dewey strongly advocated that curriculum should emulate real life experiences and activities, what he more frequently described as occupations, of everyday life. According to Dewey, learning occurred in doing, not in repeating facts and figures.

Kliebard (2004) observed that Dewey first detailed his central principle that “disciplines of knowledge, whatever their lofty status, had their origins in basic human activity” (p. 198) in *Child and Curriculum*.

### A View of “Savage Mind”

What can be gleaned out of Dewey’s perhaps most uniquely titled writing, “Interpretation of Savage Mind” that can shed light on his concept of occupations? I suggest that the focus of this article is principally about humankind, understanding mankind, and is linked directly to occupations of man theoretically in any society. “Interpretation of Savage Mind” was published in 1902 when Dewey’s involvement in the laboratory school was still in play. Various interpretations of Dewey’s “interpretation” surfaced—even as soon as that early 20<sup>th</sup> century year. M.S. MacDonald wrote a critique of Dewey’s “Interpretation of Savage Mind” in the September 5, 1902, issue of *The Philosophical Review* in which MacDonald presented an analysis that was consistent with Kliebard’s (2004) conclusion almost 100 years later. MacDonald (1902) wrote:

The abuse of the comparative method, which has resulted in the neglect of the mental structure of the savage by genetic psychology, is due to the lack of a proper method of interpretation....We must recognize that mind has a pattern, or schema of arrangement in its constituent parts....The group of occupational activities affords the schema or pattern of the structural organization of mental traits (pp. 529-530).

I suggest that Dewey’s (1902) extended savage mind discussion represented his philosophical view of mankind relative to the education of

mankind and the individuals that comprise any society. That is, Dewey’s view was that his concept of occupations supported a way of organizing mental traits and related activities that provided a broad scoped understanding of the social nature of humankind.

As Kliebard (2004) pointed out the “savage mind” article addressed complex ideas in a classic Dewey innovative manner. What seems to be lost in some accounts of “Savage Mind” is Dewey’s overarching focus on occupations of mankind as a whole, not as historical epics or cultural stages of “primitive” or “savage” people. For instance, in a discussion on the Dewey School, Fallace (2011) adopted the position that “Instead of viewing children and savages as inchoate and lacking, they should be approached on their own terms, as prior, necessary steps toward the civilized mind” (p. 56). However, according to Kliebard (2006), Dewey ultimately rejected historical epochs as a curriculum tool to connect the experiences of the human race and the involved knowledge disciplines to students’ learning experiences. Thus, Dewey’s “savage mind” discussion was not about a cultural stage. Kliebard (2006) believes “*Dewey substituted a reconstruction of the evolution of organized knowledge for the recapitulation of human history...*” (p. 124), and, that Dewey interjected his particular concept of occupations into the curriculum. Kliebard (2004) in his analysis of this article concluded that “Perhaps the fullest explanation of the importance that he [Dewey] attached to the notion of occupations is found in one of his brilliant essays, ‘Interpretation of the Savage Mind,’ a work written during the period of the Dewey School, but not on any pedagogical topic” (p. 60).

Why does Dewey’s “Savage Mind” involve occupations? I argue that occupations or activities are a core concept for Dewey. I believe

that this Dewey article did not support ideas of man evolving throughout hierarchical levels. Instead, Dewey essentially designed an educational format in order to meet the present needs and interests of students as well as to enhance their readiness to deal with real life problems through the inherited cultural capital of all mankind. Dewey presented an approach that drew upon the experiences or occupations of all people, including what he called primitive and savage people, as teaching and learning tools to live more enriched lives. According to Kliebard (2004), the reason was that Dewey believed the central problem for educational theory would be resolved by providing occupations as “the bridge that would harmonize individual social ends” (p. 61). This explains Dewey’s overriding interest in using occupations as a platform from which to gain an understanding of all mankind.

Studying occupations, or the methods of activities, of individuals as a societal group, represents Dewey’s foundational cornerstone for education. In “Savage Mind” Dewey (1902) stated: “So fundamental and pervasive is the group of occupational activities that it affords the scheme or pattern of structural organization of mental traits. Occupations integrate special elements into a functioning whole” (p. 220). Dewey was occupied with “occupations” during the tenure of his laboratory school and throughout his writings. Kliebard (2006) cautions scholars that Dewey’s concept of occupations “is a deceptively complex idea and, from Dewey’s treatment of it in *Democracy and Education* alone, it may be difficult to apprehend just how it is supposed to function in his theory of curriculum” (p. 114).

### **Dewey’s View of How People Think**

Many, if not all, of Dewey’s philosophical educational writings up until 1916 resulted in the

educational concepts extensively defined in his acclaimed *Democracy and Education* (1916). His eloquently thoughtful publication *How We Think* was one of several important building blocks or precursors to the all encompassing *Democracy and Education* book. In his discussion of *How We Think*, Dewey entered into his view of abstract versus concrete thinking. The former, abstract thinking fell into the theoretical arena. In turning to the latter, concrete thinking, Dewey noted that concrete thinking applied to activities that needed to handle situations or problems in a practical method. For Dewey, concrete thinking required “doing.” In particular, Dewey encouraged teachers to “make much in occupations that are not of a routine and mechanical kind and hence require intelligent selection and adaptation of means and materials” (p. 139). So after several reflective chapters on how mankind thinks, Dewey reached again for his study of occupations concept. More specifically, Dewey’s view of concrete thinking wrapped in his occupations and activities theory because it involved “the use of natural materials, tools, modes of energy” and he directed that teachers “do it in a way that compels thinking as to what they mean, how they are related to one another and to the realization of ends; while the mere isolated presentation of things remains barren and dead” (p. 140).

### **Occupations in *Democracy and Education***

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey purposefully stepped back into his “savage mind” discussion of occupations. He defined life under a broad scoped description of life experiences, meaning both individual and societal. He explained that examining life entailed looking at society historically, early and in its current surroundings, as well as “the conditions and occupations of the family” (p. 2).

Dewey then stated that similarly “we speak of the life of a savage tribe, of the Athenian people, of the American nation. ‘Life’ covers customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations” (p. 2).

Kliebard (2004) noted that *Democracy and Education* was published at the pinnacle of industrialized society’s emphasis on “direct trade training” (p. 125). Therefore, consistent with his previous writings, Dewey restated his own definitions for vocation and occupation in an effort to end confusion regarding vocational training as defined by society versus occupation as conceptualized in his view. Dewey’s goal was to clarify and crystallize his concept of the study of occupations versus the vocational training advocated by the social efficiency proponents of the 1916 era. He believed that until society and educators, or more specifically teachers, understood his theory of occupations, they would be unable to recognize the dichotomy of the two educational approaches and the vast difference in Dewey’s motivation and rationale for using occupations and activities in teaching. The chapter titled “Play and Work in the Curriculum” represents Dewey’s synthesis of previous writings on the study of occupations. However, Kliebard (2006) indicated that Dewey was not sufficiently clear and articulate in order to preclude and prevent misperceptions regarding his theory of occupations. Similarly, DeFalco (2010) noted “Much of what has been written about Dewey’s occupations and vocational education is confusing” (p. 83). This notion is in line with Kliebard’s (2006) observation that “Vocational education...appealed to the longstanding belief...that schooling exists primarily, almost exclusively, to get jobs” (p. 126). In Kliebard’s view Dewey devoted one entire chapter in *Democracy and Education* to a serious critique of that assumption. Therefore, Kliebard indicates

that Dewey “found himself swimming against the tide of prevailing American public opinion” (p. 126).

Dewey (1916) extensively addressed “the vocational aspects of education” in the chapter under this title. As in previous writings, Dewey considered “the varied and connected content of the vocation and the broad background upon which a particular calling is projected” (p. 360). However, he believed that “an occupation is the only thing which balances the distinctive capacity of an individual with his social service” (p. 360). Here lies Dewey’s line of demarcation from the vocational training advocates of the era. Dewey’s view was much like Krug’s (1964) suggestion that two recognized understandings of society’s social efficiency ideas were in place during this era—that is, education for social control and education for social service. Krug suggested that the social reforms of that day involved both. I believe this represents Dewey’s position on social efficiency in the 1916 era, and, therefore, leads to an understanding of Dewey’s study of occupations versus vocational training or education

Therefore in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argued that “an occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose” (p. 361). The value provided to education through the study of occupations is that “it combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method” (p. 361), such as calling habits and instinct into play and reaching an end or result. Therefore, Dewey concluded that the study of occupations “appeals to thought” and, even more important, that “it demands that an idea of an end be steadily maintained, so that activity cannot be either routine or capricious” (p. 361). Dewey believed that the study of occupations was the vehicle to meet students’ interests as well as present needs of growth only

if occupation study was “pursued under conditions where the realization of the activity rather than merely the external product is the aim” (p. 362). Thus, pursuant to Dewey’s philosophy of education, “the only adequate training for occupations is training *through* occupations” (p. 362). Dewey advised “that all the earlier preparation for vocations be indirect rather than direct; namely, through engaging in those active occupations which are indicated by the needs and interests of the pupil at the time” (p. 363). I believe this view of occupations represented the classic Deweyan principle of meeting pupils’ immediate interest and needs.

### Conclusion

John Dewey’s focus on the study of occupations has frequently been misinterpreted and sometimes maligned by scholars. Contrary to some views, Dewey’s laboratory school was not merely all play and did not teach routine work. Occupations, not jobs, and genuine activities such as art represent John Dewey’s cornerstone theory for educating all humankind, all individuals. Various scholarly interpreters apparently become entrapped in semantics and miss the intent and rationale behind Dewey’s thinking. It is important to sort through the plethora of scholarly views on Dewey. It is also important to recognize that Dewey’s elaborate writing technique is often not direct and straightforward. I believe that this close examination of his theory of occupations in Dewey’s *My Pedagogic Creed*, *The School and Society*, *Child and Curriculum*, *Interpretation of Savage Mind*, *How We Think*, and *Democracy and Education* illustrates that Dewey’s use of occupations reinforced a consistent educational philosophy. That is, the importance that knowledge of mankind as gained through his concept of occupations plays in our understanding of humanity and the social nature of all societies.

Using the study of occupations as a platform from which to consider the social nature of humankind has the potential to create an active, issues-centered approach for teaching and learning in education. Dewey’s uniquely stylized theory of occupations serves as a timeless foundation on which to build curriculum that still has significant relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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