

# SUSTAINABLE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF URIE BRONFENBRENNER AND JOHN DEWEY: A POSITION PAPER

**Jonas Christensen**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0428-2001>

**Joachim Thönnessen**

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9282-7627>

## Abstract

The concept of sustainable learning is playing an increasingly important role in today's educational landscape. In this article, we advocate an alternative approach to how higher education can contribute to this. Against the backdrop of global challenges such as climate change, social inequality and the need for sustainable development, educational institutions, particularly those in higher education, must reconsider their teaching and learning methods. In this context, the pedagogical work of John Dewey and Urie Bronfenbrenner provides valuable insights. Drawing on their experience of sustainable learning processes in numerous international social work programmes, we pose the question: 'How can the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner and Dewey improve our comprehension of learning processes within educational settings?' A leading thinker of the progressive education movement, Dewey argued that education should empower individuals to participate in democratic life and in continuous personal development, rather than merely transmitting knowledge. Furthermore, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic approach provides a profound perspective on learning, focusing on the complexity of human learning within its environment. The concept of a 'community of practice' (CoP) by Lave and Wenger, together with Mezirow's concept of 'learning as transformation', integrate the contextual framework for the theoretical discussions.

KEY WORDS: higher education, sustainable learning, Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Mezirow, community of practice, social work.

## Anotacija

Darnaus mokymosi koncepcija šiandienos švietimo aplinkoje vaidina svarbų vaidmenį. Šiame straipsnyje mes pasisakome už alternatyvų požiūrį, kaip aukštasis mokslas galėtų prie to prisidėti. Atsižvelgdamos į tokius pasaulinius iššūkius, kaip klimato kaita, socialinė nelygybė ir darnaus

Jonas Christensen – dr. habil., associate professor at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health and Society, Malmö University, SE-20506 Malmö, Sweden. E-mail: [jonas.christensen@mau.se](mailto:jonas.christensen@mau.se)

Joachim Thönnessen – professor emeritus at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Business Administration and Social Science, University of Applied Sciences, Osnabrück, DE-49076 Osnabrück, Germany. E-mail: [j.thoennessen@hs-osnabrueck.de](mailto:j.thoennessen@hs-osnabrueck.de)

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vystymosi poreikis, švietimo įstaigos, ypač aukštojo mokslo, turėtų persvarstyti savo mokymo ir mokymosi metodus. Šiame kontekste vertingų įžvalgų teikia John'o Dewey'aus ir Urie Bronfenbrenner'io pedagoginiai darbai. Remdamiesi jų tvaraus mokymosi procesų patirtimi, įgyta dalyvaujant tarptautinių socialinio darbo programų darbe, keliamo klausimą, kaip U. Bronfenbrenner'io ir J. Dewey'aus teoriniai pagrindai galėtų pagerinti mūsų mokymosi procesų supratimą švietimo aplinkoje? J. Dewey'us, vienas iš pažangaus švietimo judėjimo mąstytojų, teigė, kad švietimas turėtų suteikti asmenims galių dalyvauti demokratiame gyvenime ir nuolat asmeniškai tobulėti – ne tik perduoti žinias. Be to, U. Bronfenbrenner'io ekosisteminis požiūris suteikia gilų požiūrį į mokymąsi, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant žmogaus mokymosi sudėtingumui jo aplinkoje. Lave'o ir Wenge'rio „praktikos bendruomenės“ (PV) koncepcija kartu su J. Mezirow'o „mokymosi kaip transformacijos“ koncepcija įtraukia kontekstinių teorinių diskusijų pagrindą.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: aukštasis mokslas, tvarus mokymasis, Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Mezirow, praktikos bendruomenė, socialinis darbas.

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## Introduction

In this article, we advocate a comprehensive approach to how higher education can contribute to a global learning society, offering an alternative view. Despite coming from three different welfare traditions with their own specific understanding of social work and distinct approaches to social work education, in 2009 we embarked on a collaborative social work education project. Jonas Christensen (Malmö University), Joachim Thönnessen (University of Applied Sciences, Osnabrück) and Janet Walker (Lincoln University) initiated an annual joint study programme for social work students from Sweden, Germany and England. This programme was built upon two existing Erasmus-based collaborations: one between the University of Lincoln and the University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück, and another between Malmö University and the same institution. These existing partnerships highlighted the potential for a trilateral collaboration among our three institutions.

We identified commonalities in our approaches to social work education, such as our shared belief that cross-border cooperation could enhance students' understanding of international social work and be an essential component of our curricula. Our focus was particularly on comparative aspects from the British, German and Swedish contexts. Furthermore, we recognised that our diverse profiles and expertise as educators and researchers could significantly enrich our collaboration. The first part of the programme took place at the University of Lincoln, focusing on child care and making use of the faculty's specific qualifications. Students from Malmö, Lincoln and Osnabrück came together in Lincoln for this initial segment of the course. The programme then continued in Malmö in February with a focus

on social policies in Europe, a topic that remains central to the programme to this day. The final part of the programme takes place at the University of Applied Sciences in Osnabrück, focusing on diversity and inclusion.

Over time, our International Social Work module has gained recognition and become highly sought after by students. Around 800 students from Sweden, England, Germany and numerous other countries (primarily Switzerland, Finland and Austria) have participated in this module. This initiative has necessitated, and continues to necessitate, constant communication and numerous agreements among all parties involved. It also requires a high degree of flexibility from students and lecturers in various areas.

The module's pedagogical principles are rooted in the interactions themselves, integrating research and practice through a combination of lectures, seminars/workshops and field studies spanning nine days on campus. Instructors from each of the three universities actively engage as facilitators in every module. Beyond the structured programme content, there are opportunities for peer meetings and digital interactions. Each module culminates in a presentation in which students showcase their chosen topics.

## **1. The foundations of our work**

Throughout our theoretical exploration, we have engaged deeply with the works of Urie Bronfenbrenner and John Dewey. For the purposes of this article, we will also employ Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a 'community of practice' (CoP) and Jack Mezirow's concept of 'learning as transformation' (Mezirow et al., 2000; Mezirow/Taylor, 2009) as the contextual framework for our theoretical discussions. This leads us to our research question: How can the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner and Dewey enhance our understanding of learning processes in educational settings?

The authors of this article established the international module and remain actively involved in its continued development. We have illuminated the evolution, structure and importance of our International Social Work module across three significant publications, Christensen, Thönnessen and Walker (2017), Christensen, Thönnessen and Weber (2020), and Thönnessen and Christensen (2024). The aim of this article is to summarise the core aspects of these publications, and contextualise them within the sociological and pedagogical frameworks of John Dewey and Urie Bronfenbrenner.

## 2. Communities of practice (CoP)

In our initial article (Christensen, Thönnessen, Walker, 2017), we introduced the concept of communities of practice (CoPs). We adopted this concept from Lave and Wenger (1991) as our theoretical framework, expanding it to encompass interconnected circles involving students, educators and practitioners. Furthermore, we examined the organisation and facilitation of social work learning within an international context. Through participant feedback, we shed a light on the perspectives and experiences of students who participated in the programme. Our findings showed that ongoing cross-border collaboration in social work education, where educators consistently work together in regular meetings, creates a valuable social context for both students and teachers.

Within a CoP, members cultivate trusting relationships centred on their shared area of interest. They exchange unique knowledge and experiences, develop collaborative approaches to the issues they face, and build a collective knowledge base. This shared understanding strengthens their applied capacities in practices and guides their approach to their shared area of interest.

After completing the sixth iteration of the course, and prior to commencing the seventh, we undertook an intensive reflective exercise, documenting our insights in writing. The theory of communities of practice (CoP) was instrumental in framing our questions. However, we found it necessary to extend this theory to include interlocking circles of students, educators and practitioners, making the following assumptions: different circles overlap within the broader community that we had established. Each group, students, educators and practitioners, possesses distinct interests and goals.

### 2017 conclusions

We uncovered empirical evidence showing that students develop enhanced analytical skills, become more critical, and learn to reflect on their professional perspectives when they engage with an international cohort. Our research also showed that the scope of social work extends far beyond the curricula of their home institutions. Continuous cross-border collaboration in social work education, in which educators engage in sustained collaborative meetings, creates a valuable social context for students and teachers alike. In conclusion, we found that fostering a community of practice is crucial for facilitating open dialogue that incorporates both internal and external perspectives.

Our 2017 study concluded primarily that an immersive environment uniquely contributes to knowledge acquisition by enhancing students' capacities for professional social construction. Specifically, our findings emphasised that prolonged,

interactive and direct engagement is fundamental to the social construction processes that underpin adult learning.

This study yielded key insights into the success factors involved in developing an understanding of international social work through cross-border cooperation. Members of a CoP establish trusting relationships with each other in areas of common interest. They share their unique knowledge and experience of the issue in question, develop a shared approach to it, and establish a collective knowledge base that informs their practice and informs how they approach the shared area of interest (Christensen, Thönnessen, Walker, 2017). Building on the 2017 results, we refined our approach. We transitioned from emphasising communities of practice, which highlight togetherness and inclusion, to concentrating on individual tasks.

### **3. Reflectivity and reflexivity**

In our 2020 study, we used a theoretical interpretative framework emphasising reflexivity and reflectivity in teaching and learning contexts (Christensen, Thönnessen, Weber, 2020). John Dewey's contributions as a notable 20th-century educational theorist were particularly influential in this respect. Dewey's critique of teaching methods that lack experiential learning underpinned our approach. He contended that the primary challenge in experience-based learning is to create meaningful experiences for students. According to Dewey, it is the educator's task to organise these experiences sequentially to facilitate student learning (Dewey, 1938).

As we defined it, reflective learning involves processes in which students engage with each other to collaborate and learn. In contrast, reflexivity refers to the process by which students begin to apply their emerging knowledge in a more spontaneous and intuitive way. Thus, reflexivity is different from reflectivity: while reflection tends to reinforce existing beliefs, reflexivity involves an evolving understanding, which may lead to the development of a new professional identity. We argued that acquiring knowledge through cross-cultural interactions and forming a professional identity, supported by reflection, adds both global and local value to social work education. The dynamic environment of a new meeting space provides a unique framework for learning within the social work discipline.

As soon as one engages in an experience and upon its conclusion, the spontaneous interpretation of unfolding events naturally occurs. In the initial stages of reflective thought, these interpretations tend to be involuntary, with insights suddenly coming to mind (Rodgers, 2002, 851). Reflection therefore involves revisiting and consciously analysing an experience. It encompasses the conscious recall

and examination of experiences on which to base evaluation, planning and action (Schön, 1983; 1987).

We highlighted the viewpoints and experiences of our international students who attended the 2018/19 module through participant feedback. Our approach to defining glocal knowledge encompassed theoretical, practical and process-oriented dimensions. We demonstrated that grasping the concepts of reflexivity and reflectivity can significantly aid the understanding of students' knowledge construction processes. Our work encouraged students to develop their capacity for self-reflection and reflexivity, which provide a vital part of their professional development.

Learning experiences in different countries encourage students to reflect on different perspectives and the importance of context. This is facilitated by exposure to different educators and distinct systems and cultural norms. Examples include events with practitioners and study visits to practice settings, which provide opportunities for direct exchange and hands-on experience. The international aspect of our social work module therefore emerges not merely from theoretical analysis, but from interaction and mobility. It stems from collaborating with new peers, studying at different universities, travelling to various countries, and experiencing a new learning environment together with a range of teaching methods.

In teaching contexts, it is important to set aside time to discuss students' views on the nature of social work and the impact of 'international' influences from their perspective. Flexibility in curricula and assessments also allows students to focus on social work practices relevant to their home countries or other regions of interest, rather than exclusively considering the country in which they are currently studying (Rasell et al., 2019).

## 2020 conclusions

The universal challenges faced by social workers necessitate a focus on knowledge that is shared internationally. Developing reflective learning processes and activities to support an understanding of these challenges is therefore becoming increasingly important. Interactions between individuals from diverse backgrounds, cultures and perspectives challenge their assumptions, particularly within learning environments and educational settings. In theory, teaching is a process through which knowledge is integrated with the surrounding environment, and the acquisition of specific knowledge or methods occurs alongside the development of a student's professional identity and actions. Interacting with diverse service users and collaborating with students and colleagues greatly contributes to the perceived professional 'meaningfulness'.

In conclusion, reflective and reflexive learning processes in social work education enable participants to gain a broader self-perception and understanding, thereby strengthening their professional identities (Christensen, Thönnessen, Weber, 2020).

Having explored the meso-level in our 2017 article and analysed the micro-level in our 2020 article, we examined the significance of our international module on a meta-level.

#### **4. Sustainability**

In our 2024 article, ‘The Importance of Sustainability in International Social Education’ (Thönnessen, Christensen, 2024), we explored the significance of sustainability in ISE (International Social Education). We examined the historical origins of learning within an international context, emphasising the vital role of knowledge discovery and acquisition through empirical investigation. We took a twofold approach: first, we identified key competencies based on the work of the American pragmatist John Dewey and his transactional approach; second, we conducted empirical research to shed light on our students’ experiences of learning processes in an international setting.

In an international context, learning is ‘24/7’. This means that learning processes extend beyond the specific times and spaces set aside for education, and occur naturally outside these structured environments. Learning is not confined to the classroom; it happens in group settings where topics are discussed during breaks and after lessons. This continuous learning process also encompasses activities during free time. For example, when members of the international group prepare meals together at the youth hostel, they collaborate to decide what to eat, who will shop for ingredients, who will cook and who will clean up afterwards. While language acquisition is not the primary focus, it occurs ‘incidentally’, without being explicitly intended. The same applies to professional knowledge. During shared leisure activities, students can openly discuss classroom topics, express their views and ask follow-up questions more easily, as they feel less inhibited in smaller, informal groups.

In terms of personal development, sustainability is not confined to traditional educational settings, but is influenced by a multitude of everyday experiences and reflections, both directly and indirectly. This process involves diverse learning experiences within a single community, while also enabling students to identify with multiple communities simultaneously.

This approach ensures students gain a holistic perspective, enhancing their ability to understand and address complex local and global challenges. Integrating

these insights into higher education curricula promotes a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to learning, equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge for professional and personal growth in an interconnected world.

## 2024 conclusions

Our findings revealed that learning in an international context fosters a transnational, multiprofessional understanding of social work as a profession and its context. We propose that these insights should be applied at a broader educational level, particularly in higher education, to benefit all practitioners. Personal development sustainability is not confined to the traditional educational context; instead, it is driven by a variety of everyday experiences and reflections. This involves engaging in a variety of learning experiences within a single community while also identifying with multiple communities.

Based on these observations, we can define what professional identity means for young international students. They describe it as a process of broadening one's horizons and understanding that there is no single ideal solution, but rather multiple approaches, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. They frequently emphasise the importance of reflexivity, whereby individuals reconsider their perceptions of the world and themselves. Learning experiences within groups, which we describe as 'communities of practice' (CoPs) in our theoretical framework, significantly contributes to this process. Furthermore, young people gain self-confidence through experiences in a foreign country and by interacting with peers in a foreign language. These experiences are directly linked to their personal and professional growth.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (Tilbury, 2009; Unesco, 2018) is an important framework for sustainability education, but it is incomplete. Skills such as critical and systems thinking are vital for acquiring knowledge and awareness. The concept of sustainability is based on three pillars: social, economic and environmental. A holistic understanding of sustainable practices is crucial, and mindfulness can be particularly beneficial in this respect. Universal challenges in social work and its contextual environment (e.g. artificial intelligence) necessitate a focus on internationally shared knowledge. Therefore, it is imperative to develop conditions and structures, such as curriculum development and in-service training, that promote reflective and reflexive learning processes and activities to grasp this global dimension. This understanding must integrate the intersection of global and local dimensions in learning processes, particularly in the context of places where borders are crossed and practitioners are involved. It is important to recognise that enhancing students' self-confidence is a crucial factor in their learning journey.

Reflective and reflexive learning processes in social work education encourage participants to gain a broader self-perception, thereby strengthening their professional identity. Fostering reflective knowledge requires an environment that is community-based. Creating such an environment requires an understanding of the contextual factors that influence personal and professional development.

In summary, addressing universal challenges in higher education requires an emphasis on internationally shared knowledge, as well as the development of reflective learning processes and activities. This focus is critical for implementing sustainable higher education practices. Before examining how the theories of Urie Bronfenbrenner and John Dewey can enhance our understanding of, and justification for, educational practices, we would like to emphasise the concept of 'learning as transformation'. This concept is central to the work of the educational theorist Jack Mezirow, providing us with a better understanding of topics crucial to the work of Dewey and Bronfenbrenner.

Mezirow (1978) studied the experiences of women returning to higher education via community colleges. This led to the development of TLT (transformative learning theory). According to Taylor (2009, 3; in Mezirow, Taylor, 2009), transformative learning is a form of education that challenges students to critically reflect on their values and world-view, resulting in personal growth. It involves the most significant form of learning in adulthood: communicative learning. This entails identifying problematic ideas, beliefs, values and feelings, critically assessing their underlying assumptions, testing their justification through rational discourse, and reaching decisions through consensus building (Mezirow, 1995; Mezirow and Associates, 2000). The core elements of TLT are: individual experience, promoting critical reflection, dialogue, awareness of context, authentic relationships, and holistic orientations.

These categories bear a striking resemblance to those developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner and John Dewey. We can now address our original research question, which is: in what ways can the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner and Dewey contribute to a deeper understanding of learning processes in education? By exploring this question, we aim to integrate their insights into developing more effective and reflective pedagogical strategies.

## **5. Theories referenced: Urie Bronfenbrenner and John Dewey**

Why Urie Bronfenbrenner? He was a psychologist who was renowned for using a contextual framework to improve our understanding of human development. His ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; 1979; 2004) posits that child development is a complex interplay of interactions influenced by va-

rious facets of the local environment, including the family, school, and broader cultural values, laws, and practices. An individual's development is profoundly affected by their surroundings, including societal frameworks (local, national and international) and organisational contexts (such as personal networks and student environments), particularly in relation to their capacity (Christensen, Thönnessen, Weber, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's developmental theory is, as we see it, very useful as a theoretical framework for understanding and supporting learning processes. The theory emphasises that individual development and learning take place in a complex interaction between different systems in the environment, which provides important perspectives on how learning is shaped and can be promoted.

When examining societal and educational transformations, Bronfenbrenner's development ecology model is invaluable, offering a specific theory on how humans acquire knowledge from everyday actions (Thelen, Smith, 1994). This reflective approach nurtures the ability to creatively rebuild and re-elaborate pathways to new understanding. This involves scrutinising routine practices, which can be perceived differently or understood in a new light through reflective analysis (Martins et al., 2015). According to Bronfenbrenner's model, all elements in an individual's environment are interconnected and interact, albeit to varying degrees and at different times. Both individuals and their environments change over time, and Bronfenbrenner asserts that these temporal changes are essential for understanding how different systems influence development. His theory extends beyond interpersonal relationships to encompass the various systems that constitute our lives and worlds. This holistic perspective is particularly valuable for understanding the complex and dynamic interactions that shape human development. This makes Bronfenbrenner's framework instrumental in educational settings that focus on sustainability and reflective learning.

Bronfenbrenner posits that the individual always develops within a context (Christensen, 2016). According to his theory, human development can only be comprehended by examining individuals' relationships with others within their socio-cultural contexts, considering their given psychological and biological conditions. Bronfenbrenner developed his ecological model to facilitate the understanding of the intricate interactions between the individual and society, which likely serves as a critical bridge to education where awareness of the role of the environment plays a key role. This is an important bridge to John Dewey: as an advocate of progressive education, Dewey significantly adapted concepts from Rousseau to a more contemporary understanding of nature and education, emphasising the importance of ecological thinking in education (Jorgensen, 2014). Further, the model focuses on the individual's drive and ability to influence relative to their specific environment and not so strongly on the individual's sphere of influence. It gives

an understanding of the complex inter-relationship between the individual and society where the ecological model consists of four systems: the micro, meso, exo and macro. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model should be seen as a general system theory and that in itself makes it possible to understand a general context and complexity from a holistic approach which can be applied to different species ages, domains and grains of analysis. But it is also a specific theory of how humans gain knowledge from their everyday actions (Thelen, Smith, 1994). The model makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the individual's role and behaviour in relation to the context surrounding them on different levels for knowledge formation. When discussing professional development and/ or the constitution of subjects the model is a significant tool for analysing and explaining the forces underlying those developments. This model likely serves as a critical bridge to education, where awareness of the role of the environment plays a key role. This is also relevant to the work of John Dewey, who, as an advocate of progressive education, adapted Rousseau's ideas to create a more contemporary understanding of nature and education, emphasising the importance of ecological thinking in education (Jorgensen, 2014).

Why John Dewey? His ideas on problem-based, experience-based and experiential learning, as well as adaptive intelligence, have had a significant impact. Some argue that experience and subsequent reflection can improve managers' capacity to manage sustainability transitions (Thomassen, Jorgensen, 2021). Furthermore, other scholars have demonstrated that contemporary sustainability education can be based on Dewey's democratic pedagogy (Tarrant, Thiele, 2016; Williams, 2017). Dewey's work has also been identified as forming the basis of contemporary early childhood education for sustainability (Luff, 2018). For our 2024 article, we selected original text passages that demonstrate the alignment of Dewey's theory with our topic (Thönnessen, Christensen, 2024). Dewey's insights into the relevance of learning processes support our understanding of sustainability within educational processes in an international context (Engel, 2007; Westbrook, 1993).

Dewey developed his experimentalist model of education as an alternative to the conventional education system of the early 20th century, which, unfortunately, still persists to some extent today. In his seminal work *The School and Society* (1899), Dewey expressed his complete rejection of this 'old education', an educational system that continues to prevail 120 years after its publication. By embracing Dewey's progressive educational theories, we aim to promote experiential learning as a means of fostering sustainability in social work education. Furthermore, Dewey's emphasis on reflective practice and democratic engagement offers a robust framework for tackling the challenges of contemporary education for sustainability. His theories advocate an educational model that values experien-

tial learning and reflective practice, emphasising the importance of adapting to and learning from real-world experiences in order to develop a deeper understanding of, and the ability to enact, sustainable practices.

Dewey argues that traditional education methods often prioritise the transmission of factual information over the development of critical thinking and reflective engagement. Consequently, students may find the content overwhelming and disengaging, which can suppress their innate curiosity and active participation in their own learning processes. This critique highlights Dewey's belief in an educational approach that fosters active learning and critical engagement. He argued that education should be about more than just absorbing information; it should nurture students' inherent interests and intellectual activities. He believed that learning is most effective when connected to learners' experiences and interests, promoting a more dynamic, participatory approach.

Integrating Dewey's principles into contemporary educational practices enables us to create learning environments that encourage active thinking and participation. This approach is consistent with our exploration of sustainability in education, as it emphasises the importance of engaging students in meaningful, reflective learning experiences. Such an environment enhances knowledge acquisition and supports the development of the competencies needed to address complex, real-world challenges. In Dewey's alternative, experimental approach to education, students are encouraged to think for themselves rather than simply memorise information or gain a superficial understanding of a subject. From the outset, students are engaged in activities that require them to experiment with ideas in pursuit of meaningful goals. In *The School and Society*, Dewey drew inspiration from late 19th-century advances in primary education, such as art lessons, nature studies, workshops and gardens, situations in which students engage actively in complex and uncertain scenarios that require judgement.

In his discussions on Dewey (Waks, 2018), Leonard Waks often presents images of students engaged in active learning, such as growing gardens, building structures, experimenting with robotics, conducting environmental research by testing water from local streams and delivering presentations. This is in stark contrast to conventional classrooms (Waks, 2018). In summary, for Dewey, the most natural way to learn is through doing and communicating. Thinking involves applying intelligence in the context of action and communication. He argued that traditional teaching methods do not naturally facilitate learning, although formal lessons are necessary. By emphasising experiential learning, Dewey's approach aims to create educational environments in which students can develop their intelligence through meaningful activities and interactions. This method promotes deeper understanding and engagement, enabling students to apply their knowledge in real-world

contexts. Incorporating these principles into contemporary education can make learning more relevant and effective, fostering the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for addressing today's complex challenges.

Dewey notes that each individual is surrounded by numerous other people in their specific social sphere, each pursuing their own goals. Every action in every sphere occurs within, and is presupposed by, an interconnected, dynamic world of social actors and institutions. The behaviour of these actors is governed by social norms relating to customary ways of doing things. For example, 'setting the table' involves following rules about where to place dishes and tableware. If a child places them differently, a parent might correct them, saying, 'That's not setting the table, dear.' We develop habits by learning to act in accordance with these norms. Dewey refers to significant life activities governed by normative practices as 'occupations'. Occupations are not just jobs, but also characteristic ways of purposefully occupying ourselves. In *The School and Society*, Dewey (Dewey, 1899) defines occupation 'in its educational sense as any mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work carried on in social life' (Dewey, 1899, 93, cited after Waks, 2018). By engaging in occupations, children learn to think in terms of concrete goals, to think like adults, and thus mature. For Dewey, education in the broadest sense is the process of guiding young people towards full participation in the occupations of adult social life (Waks, 2018).

When Dewey speaks of education through occupations, he is not referring to education for occupations, i.e. preparing for specific jobs or careers. Rather, he rejects utilitarian goals, emphasising that learning through occupations cultivates educational values. This involves extracting the science and art inherent in occupations, developing habits of experimental thinking and persevering through obstacles to achieve goals. Through these experiences, students learn to navigate the ever-changing landscapes of adult life. They learn how to learn, continuously acquiring new knowledge for unforeseen future situations. In essence, they learn to grow (Waks, 2018). Dewey's approach highlights the importance of incorporating meaningful activities into the educational process, enabling students to actively engage with their learning environment. This method fosters critical thinking, problem-solving abilities and adaptability, preparing students to tackle future challenges and contribute positively to society.

## General conclusions

In summary, Dewey's advocacy of experimentalism ('the way to truth is through experimentalism and empiricism'), combined with his somatic philosophy ('mind emerges from the body's more basic physical and psychophysical functions'), and

his emphasis on social atmosphere, provides a robust historical and theoretical foundation for preserving ecological systems, developing sustainable communities (Shusterman, 2012), and promoting sustainable education. Dewey asserts the importance of understanding the learning process and the interplay of three components: the content learnt ('objects of knowledge'), practical understanding and engagement, and democratic values expressed through uncoercive interactions (see also Bowers, 2005).

Dewey is strongly associated with concepts such as practical engagement, experience, critical reflection and reflexivity, and learning democracy as a way of life. These concepts are being revisited in contemporary higher education, and have rightly earned the term 'sustainable learning'. Similarly, adopting a relational view of individual traits such as rationality or intelligence can shed a light on the various facets of reflective capacity. This includes examining how our perceptions of rationality and intelligence themselves can become subjects of reflection. Dewey's relational view of reflective learning emphasises that learning depends on practical engagement. We learn about new objects of knowledge that help us to navigate and act in the world by interpreting and integrating them into our experience. Objects of knowledge gain significance as they become meaningful and consequential for individuals. Dewey's theories advocate a dynamic, participatory approach to education that fosters critical thinking and reflective practices. In doing so, they provide a sustainable framework for educating individuals who can engage with the world thoughtfully and effectively, thereby fostering the development of adaptive and resilient communities.

Dewey's educational model has not been widely adopted, having faced opposition from economic and political elites, as well as from traditional educators. There are also inherent challenges with this approach (Waks, 2018). Firstly, it has proven difficult to replicate professional settings within schools. As Dewey himself observed, schools often lack spaces in which practical work can be carried out. Few schools have facilities such as fashion studios, dress shops, print shops, bookbinding workshops, construction sites or advertising agencies. The school garden has become the archetypal example of a Deweyan activity space, simply because it is relatively straightforward for most schools to designate a small outdoor area for gardening. Few other activities fit these conceptual constraints as seamlessly. Secondly, experimentalist teaching requires teachers to possess a combination of practical and theoretical knowledge which is uncommon. Teachers must be able to address unpredictable practical obstacles that arise during activities and approach these challenges with extensive systematic knowledge. This requires a high level of expertise, which not all educators possess.

Thirdly, experiential learning requires students to possess a sense of personal agency. Although teachers can facilitate engaging activities, if students do not feel capable or empowered, they will remain overly dependent on teachers for guidance and direction (Waks, 2018). These challenges highlight the complexities of implementing Dewey's educational model in practice. Despite its theoretical strengths and potential benefits, its widespread adoption has been hindered by practical barriers and a lack of necessary resources and support. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to provide schools with the appropriate facilities and teachers with the necessary training and resources, as well as fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among students. Only then can the full potential of Dewey's vision for education be realised.

Originally developed to understand contemporary early childhood development, Bronfenbrenner's theory also serves as a robust tool for examining the interactions between societal, organisational and individual dimensions. This is due to its emphasis on the interplay between individuals and their environments, and on the continuous interaction of phenomena and actors at various levels, including organisational and societal contexts. When analysing perspectives on professions, both individual and organisational factors must be considered. Similarly, reflecting on social systems requires a focus on the broader societal level. However, Bronfenbrenner's theory does not focus on individual motivations or abilities to influence relationships within a specific environment. Rather, it posits that human development can only be understood by examining individuals' relationships with others within their socio-cultural context alongside their psychological and biological conditions. This reflective approach fosters the ability to creatively rebuild and re-elaborate pathways to new understanding in education and learning, and it gives a broader understanding of what stimulates learning processes out of contextual knowledge formation on different levels; the micro (direct environments), meso (connections between different environments e.g. school and home), exo (indirect environments e.g. working life), and macro (cultural and social values). The chrono level above this relates to, for example, social changes.

It does so by encouraging a reflective approach to knowledge acquisition, which involves consciously recalling and examining experiences to inform evaluation, planning and action (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1995). Applying this reflective approach enables individuals to creatively reframe their understanding and adapt their learning processes to better navigate their social and educational environments. This perspective highlights the importance of considering the broader socio-cultural context in which learning and development occur, thereby facilitating a more holistic understanding of human growth and educational transformation. There is growing evidence that university education needs to shift away from traditional

lecturing and rigid curricula that track students into predefined paths. Hence, there is a need for further research focusing on strengthening learning capacity. Due to practical changes, such as opening universities to practical applications within a comprehensive socio-spatial framework, foundational principles like passion, personal responsibility, and a desire to collaboratively shape the world will be necessary to explore. This also involves promoting social integration through cooperative learning processes that respect and acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Through long-term, collegial and cross-border collaboration, where trust, openness and transparency are core values, we have succeeded in creating a dynamic sustainable learning environment that stimulates students' ability to develop new insights and perspectives in their profession and as human beings, equipped to face new challenges in a new world, despite (and perhaps because of) heterogeneous frames of reference based on different welfare logics and traditions. As teachers and researchers, we have been encouraged to work across subject boundaries, which has helped us to create and promote a learning environment that stimulates students' curiosity, and helps them discover new perspectives and insights as future social workers. We have shown that a theoretical 'triangulation' based on the dimensions of a) transformative learning, b) the role of levels in knowledge formation, and c) the democratic role of education based on Mezirow, Bronfenbrenner and Dewey, can clearly support sustainable development in knowledge acquisition based on these values.

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