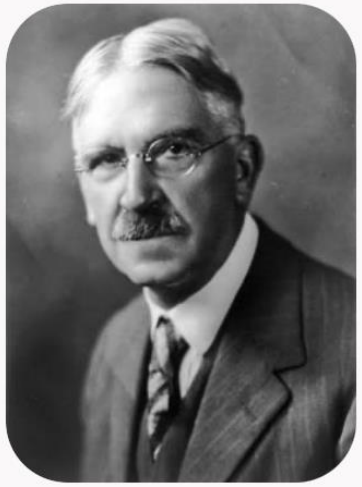






Dewey, Gramsci and Vygotsky - three perspectives on democracy and education

Prof. Ken Spours, College of Education, Capital Normal University
& UCL Institute of Education
Website - https://www.kenspours.com

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Section 1

Student presentations

Student presentations on their core understanding of Dewey's work applied to 21st century challenges

- *Amusing Ourselves to Death (Short Videos, Games, AI-created dramas, social media, etc.),*
- *AI Replacing Humans (as happened to software engineers)*
- *Shared Humanity and Interdependence (climate change, pandemic, etc.),*
- *Hypercompetitive Society (Involution and Anxiety)*
- *Factory Model of Schooling.*

Professor Spours will respond by delivering his understanding of the core of Dewey's work in Section 3, allied to these challenges.

Section 2

Aims and context

Dewey, Gramsci and Vygotsky

- Compare and contrast three leading 20th-century theorists on democracy and education from the perspectives of philosophy, political economy and social psychology.
- Situate their contributions within their respective historical/political contexts.
- Dewey as the foundation upon which to assess the contribution of Gramsci and Vygotsky.
- Relate the three contributions to the creation of a new unified model.
- Discuss the implications of this relational model for the Chinese 21st Century education agenda.

Historicism - Dewey, Gramsci and Vygotsky contextualised

John Dewey (1859–1952 | United States)

- **Socio-Political Context:** Rapid US industrialisation, urban expansion, and the rise of rigid, factory-model Taylorist schooling.
- **Core Contribution:** Philosophy - advocated active, cooperative experience to build adaptive citizens for a living democracy.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937 | Italy)

- **Socio-Political Context:** The rise of Italian fascism, intense class struggle, and imprisonment under Mussolini's regime.
- **Core Contribution:** Political economy - argued that working-class learners require mastery of integral knowledge to move beyond ‘common sense’ to achieve counter-hegemonic agency.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934 | Soviet Union)

- **Socio-Political Context:** Post-Bolshevik revolutionary state building, mass literacy drives, and cultural transformation.
- **Core Contribution:** Socio-cultural psychology - demonstrated how social tools, mediation, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) elevate everyday thought into scientific concepts.

Section 3
John Dewey - core thinking and the foundations of democratic education

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Dewey's education theory – the historical context

- **Context - socio-Economic shift (industrialization & urbanization)**
- **Context -** late 19th and early 20th-century industrialization severed traditional agrarian forms of community-based learning
- **Dewey's Reasoning:** Schooling needed to actively recreate cooperative, hands-on experience,

Critique - pedagogical orthodoxy (rigid Herbartianism)

Context: Established educational practice treated knowledge as static, pre-packaged subject matter to be systematically impressed upon passive student minds from the outside.

Dewey's Reasoning: Isolating academic content from action and initiative turns learning into artificial memorization.

Pillar 3: Political Imperative (Democratic Renewal)

Context: A rapidly expanding, diverse industrial democracy required adaptive citizens

Critique: Authoritarian, top-down classroom structures hostile to civic participation and open inquiry.

Dewey's Reasoning: Democracy is not merely a voting system, but a 'mode of associated living' that requires schools to function as mini-democracies.

Herbartianism & Industrial Taylorism: The Factory Model of Schooling

- **Herbartianism** (Johann Friedrich Herbart, 1776–1841) **– Systematisation of Pedagogy**
  - 5-Step structured lesson delivery (Preparation, Presentation, Association, Generalization, Application)..
  - Separates theoretical reflection from physical action.
  - Degenerates into pre-packaged presentation (blackboard and the book) due to poorly trained teachers
- **Industrial Taylorism** (Frederick Winslow Taylor, 1856-1915) **- Systematisation of the Workplace**
  - ‘Scientific Management’: breaks work into standardized micro-tasks ("One Best Way").
  - Reduces workers to routine, obedient operators on assembly lines.
- **The Structural Connection - Factory-Model Schooling**
  - Early 20th-century schools fused Herbartian unit steps with Taylorist administrative efficiency.
  - Both share the core mechanism - **Separation of Planning/Thinking from Execution/Action.**
  - Dewey rejected both models for deskilling human beings and undermining democratic agency.

Deconstructing Dewey's Three Positions (Chapter 6)

Position 1: External Presentations (Systematic Transmission)

- **Concept:** Knowledge is external material systematically stamped onto the learner (Herbartian tradition in degenerated form).
- **Critique:** Treats the mind as a passive vessel; underplays native capacity and inquiry.

Position 2: Retrospection & Recapitulation (Historical Unfolding)

- **Concept:** Education unfolds latent powers by having children repeat past historical cultural stages.
- **Critique:** Backward-looking and anti-developmental; ignores novel problems of the present.

Position 3: Education as Reconstruction (Pragmatic Synthesis)

- **Concept:** Continuous reorganization of experience via active organism–environment interaction.
- **Mechanisms:** Accumulation of meaning, reflection on routine habits, and prospective growth.

Dewey's learning through experience process

1. **Organism–environment dialectic -** direct action and adaptation within local environments. *(Example: School gardening projects testing soil biology).*

2. **Reflection on routine activity -** interrupting automatic habits to build higher habits of mind. *(Example: Investigating crop failure causes over following pre-set recipes).*

3. **Prospective reconstruction -** continuous reorganization of living experience for community action.

Herbartian Pedagogy vs. Deweyan Experiential Inquiry

Feature	Herbartian Five-Step Model	Dewey's Five Stages of Hypothesis/Inquiry (Pragmatic Synthesis)
1. Initiation	Preparation: The teacher prepares the student's mind to receive new material by linking it to previous knowledge.	Definition of the Problem: The learner encounters a genuine difficulty or problem within their experience that requires resolution.
2. Introduction	Presentation: New material is presented systematically by the teacher (often via "blackboard and book").	Using a Universal (Theory): The learner uses existing theoretical criteria to determine what is relevant or irrelevant to the problem.
3. Connection	Association: The new material is compared and contrasted with old ideas to form connections.	Formulation of Hypothesis: The learner proposes a potential solution or explanation based on their reflection and theoretical criteria.
4. Systematization	Generalization: The teacher helps students derive general principles or rules from the specific examples presented.	Testing the Hypothesis: The learner actively tests their proposed solution through action and interaction with the environment.
5. Application	Application: Students apply the newly learned rule or principle to new exercises or problems.	Establishing the Link: The learner establishes a link between the emerging data and the universal theory, reconstructing their understanding immanently.

John Dewey — humanistic experiential foundation

Strengths

- Builds from everyday experience.
- Development through social interaction.
- Inquiry-driven pedagogy to cultivate the cooperative, inquiry-based habits of mind.
- Democratic strength.

Limitation

- Common sense limitation due the experiential nature of the ‘universal’

Session break

Section 4

John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci and Lev Vygotsky
Towards a new unified model of learning

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Antonio Gramsci — political economy and the role of organic intellectuals

Limits of experientialism - experientialism alone risks remaining parochial - working-class learners require the 'general intellect' + 'progressive specialist knowledge' (**integral universal knowledge)** to about societal transformation .

'Common Sense' to 'Good Sense' - transforming fragmented, spontaneous everyday thinking into systematic, coherent scientific understanding through structured theory and practice and criticality (good sense).

Role of 'organic intellectuals' – public educators/intellectuals act as 'bridge' to relate 'common sense' (everyday knowledge and experience) to structured knowledge (general and specialist) towards 'good sense', linked to continuing struggles to create socialism.

Lev Vygotsky — socio-cultural mediation & scaffolding

Socio-cultural context of learning (i.e. language, culture, society, and tool-use) and thus importance of **experience.**

Distinction between **spontaneous and non-spontaneous thinking** – everyday thinking and higher mental functions - where horizontal lived experience meets vertical conceptual structure.

Cultural and historical processes and individual mental processes dialectically related through **social practices** - movement to higher mental functions originate in collective social life.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - the difference **between** what a learner can't do without teacher's assistance and what they can do without help.

Scaffolding – learning exercises that help a learner move through their ZPD from periphery to centre.

Role of the MKO (More Knowledgeable Other) - Educators and peers act as scaffolding agents - saturated with language, artifacts and historical tools - to elevate horizontal experience into more vertical intellectual agency.

Bringing Dewey, Gramsci and Vygotsky together

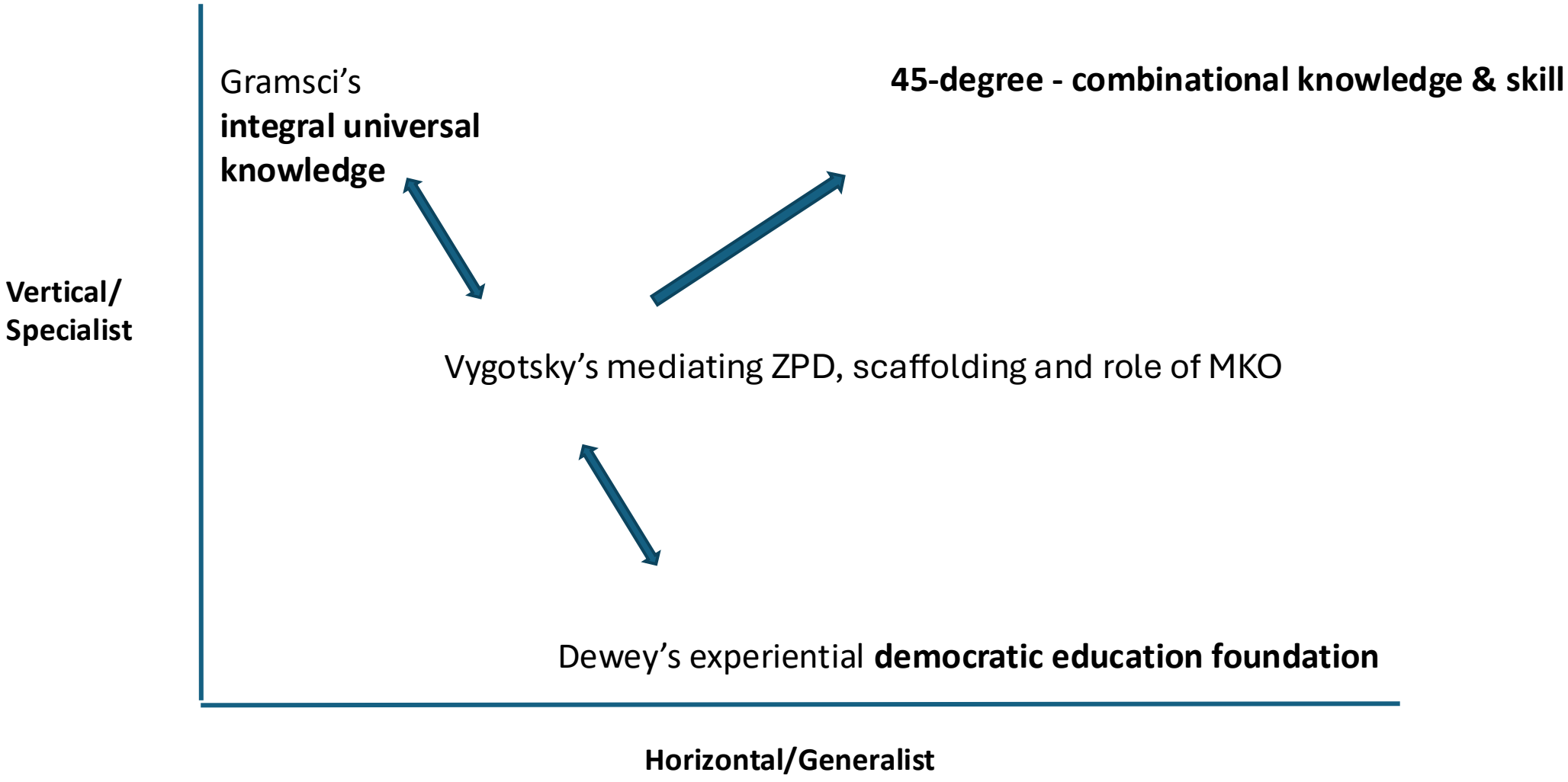
- **Dewey** - building education systematically from the ground upwards to provide a foundation for the **General Intellect** (shared societal knowledge for transformation).

- **Gramsci** - the progressive role of **integral universal knowledge** that integrates general and specialist thinking in the formation of **organic intellectuals**

- **Vygotsky** – the mediating role of the **social, the MKO educator and the scaffolding process.**

Three perspectives can be brought together into a **unified multi-dimensional model of learning and knowledge production**

Dewey, Gramsci, and Vygotsky - towards a unified model



Section 5

China's 21st century education agenda

The Dewey contribution



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Why John Dewey continues to be popular in China

- **Historical connection -** spent over two years lecturing across China (1919–1921), directly influencing May Fourth Movement intellectuals and modern school reforms.

- **Famous protégés -** mentored influential Chinese educators like Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi, who adapted his practical, child-centred philosophies to China.

- **Action-oriented philosophy -** resonated with traditional Chinese pragmatic thinking through his emphasis on *"Learning by Doing"* (知行合一 alignment).

- **Promotes active learning -** provides a framework to break away from rigid, examination-heavy and factory-model instruction.

- **Adapted and aligned with socialist modernisation** –

Relevance to Chinese educational modernisation

- **Shift to Quality Education** (*Suzhi Jiaoyu*): Supports the transition from exam-driven memorization (*Yingshi Jiaoyu*) toward holistic student development and critical inquiry.

- **Fostering 21st-Century Innovation:** Aligns with modern national goals to build student creativity, problem-solving, and practical technological competencies.

- **Combining Practice and Theory:** Complements modern vocational-academic integration by bridging horizontal lived experience with vertical academic knowledge.

- **Student-Centred Classrooms:** Encourages interactive, project-based learning while maintaining structured guidance from educators.

45-degree unified model and Chinese socialist construction

Synthesis of horizontal & vertical - combines Dewey's horizontal experiential foundation with Gramsci/Vygotsky's vertical and mediating conceptual structures.

Balanced trajectory (45° Line) - integrates practical 'learning by doing' with rigorous 'specialist knowledge' to avoid both purely academic rote learning and unstructured activity.

The combinatorial model and modernisation alignment - directly supports Chinese *Suzhi Jiaoyu* (Quality Education) goals by fostering collaborative, knowledgeable, expert, problem-solving and innovative citizens to support national rejuvenation and socialist construction.

Contemporary sources on John Dewey and China

Tan, C. (2021). Mindful Learning: A Neo-Confucian Interpretation of Dewey's Experiential Learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(12), 1251–1261.
Relevance: Explores the philosophical common ground between Dewey's "learning by doing" and traditional Chinese thought, ideal for students studying cross-cultural educational theory.

Zhang, H., & Garrison, J. (Eds). (2022). *John Dewey and Chinese Education: Comparative Perspectives and Contemporary Interpretations*. Leiden: Brill.
Relevance: Provides modern comparative frameworks connecting Deweyan pragmatism with Chinese philosophy, directly addressing contemporary educational modernisation and school reform.

Zhou, Y. (2024). A fragmentation of Dewey: Dewey in the political and educational reforms of China, 1910s–1920s. *Comparative Education*, 60(4), 609–625.
Relevance: An accessible historical analysis of how Chinese reformers initially translated and adapted Dewey's ideas to reshape modern school curricula.

Zhu, X., Peters, M. A., & Besley, T. (Eds). (2022). *Dewey and Chinese Education: A Centennial Reflection*. Singapore: Springer.
Relevance: Examines the lasting legacy of Dewey's lectures in China and evaluates how student-centred inquiry and progressive pedagogy align with modern educational goals.

Zhang, H. (2020). Dewey and Chinese Education: A Centennial Reflection. *Beijing International Review of Education*, 2(1), 1–6.
Relevance: A concise introduction to the contemporary resurgence of Deweyan studies in Chinese higher education and its dialogue with *Suzhi Jiaoyu* (Quality Education).