

Two Solitudes

Progressive teaching methods are fatally flawed and should be abandoned.
By Hector Hammerly

In 1938, John Dewey said, “Ideas or hypotheses are tested by the consequences which they produce when they are acted upon.” Through most of the 20th and now into the 21st century, our education system has seen a tug of war between two opposite philosophies — traditional (T) and progressive (P). The two have different goals, procedures, and outcomes.

	Characteristic	Comment
1	T Relies on direct, teacher-led instruction, with any discovery being carefully guided.	<i>Only the ablest students learn things well without explicit help. They can succeed regardless of method of instruction or even in spite of it. What about the rest of the students?</i>
	P Relies on natural acquisition, whereby teachers are facilitators and learning is expected to result from unguided discovery (guessing).	
2	T Students are held to high standards of accuracy by being taught how to do things <i>before</i> or <i>as</i> they learn to do them.	<i>When something is mislearned, as often happens with progressive methods, it takes four times as long to correct as it would have taken to learn it right at the start.</i>
	P Students are encouraged to just jump in and do it.	
3	T The creative application of skills and knowledge is encouraged only <i>after</i> there is basic control of form/structure.	<i>Creativity without basic knowledge is rather chaotic, and when form/structure is neglected, it is never fully mastered. This applies particularly to subjects that involve complex skills, such as literacy and math.</i>
	P Freewheeling creativity is considered more important than form/structure.	
4	T Aims at making learning pleasurable whenever possible — making learning interesting is not the main goal however.	<i>Much learning cannot occur without deliberate, self-disciplined effort, and this isn't necessarily entertaining.</i>
	P Focuses on learning through fun, making the enjoyment of classroom activities central.	
5	T Practices step-by-step sequential instruction.	<i>In all subjects, there is a logical sequence of learning whereby A should come before B, B before C, etc.</i>
	P Rejects the need for step-by-step instruction.	
6	T Considers some memorization essential.	<i>The basics of all subjects require ready recall of certain facts, symbols, rules, tables, formulas, etc. Failing to demand this crucial memorization virtually guarantees serious difficulties later.</i>
	P Considers memorization neither necessary nor desirable.	
7	T Rules are to be explained with examples, followed by practice.	<i>Students learn faster and better when they are explicitly taught patterns and rules.</i>
	P Rules are to be learned unconsciously, without explanation.	
8	T Systematic practice (drill) considered essential in skill-based school subjects.	<i>To the extent that something facilitates learning, it should be used, whether or not it is enjoyable. And systematic practice does facilitate learning.</i>
	P Practice rejected as mechanical, dull and demotivating.	
9	T Calls for the prompt and effective correction of errors.	<i>Correction is indispensable feedback that makes learning success much more likely.</i>
	P Few errors are corrected.	
10	T After each major instructional step, integration and recycling of skills and knowledge are provided.	<i>If integration is a hit or miss, unconscious process, the result is often vague, incoherent knowledge and the inability to apply it.</i>
	P Integration is left up to the student.	
11	T Has as its goals academic achievement and the development of sound character.	<i>True self-worth is a byproduct of accomplishment. Self-esteem devoid of content or virtue is deceptive and even dangerous. When high school graduates' competence is tested by the real world, those with unfounded self-esteem are sometimes angry and discouraged at having been tricked by their teachers.</i>
	P Has as its goal self-esteem, without direct reference to accomplishments or behaviour.	
12	T Produces on the whole well-educated citizens of good character.	<i>No comment necessary.</i>
	P Produces on the whole glib high school graduates who have opinions but don't like to read; can't write a grammatical, coherent essay; can't do basic arithmetic without a calculator; speak error-plagued 'Frenghish;' have scant knowledge of history & geography; and so on.	

(Dr. Hammerly retired in 1997 from Simon Fraser University, BC, where he was professor of applied linguistics.)