

## A Study of the Impact of Pragmatism on American Education

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**Abstract.** Pragmatism is a product of the economic and social development in the United States in the 1870s. It has permeated every aspect of social life in the United States. In order to make clear the relationship between Pragmatism and American education, large number of data have been gleaned and analyzed. The result shows that Pragmatism has, to some degree, shaped the present condition of American education, and we Chinese can draw upon it.

### Introduction

As a philosophical school, American Pragmatism came into existence in the 1870s in the United States [1], which was marked by the founding of “Metaphysical club” at Harvard University. That club, considered the first American Pragmatism organization, conducted many an activity during 1871-1874, of which the leader, Peirce, was later deemed as the founder of this school.

Unlike other schools of philosophy, Pragmatism lays more stress on the needs and actual benefits of the bourgeoisie and embodies their pursuit of actual efficacy. It not only influences the spirit and life-styles of Americans, but also has a universal impact on the whole world.

Education makes a nation. There is no denying that Education in America is applauded by the world in that Pragmatism is employed; but how much does Pragmatism affect American education? To some extent, Pragmatism has greatly shaped the present condition of American education. John Dewey (1859-1952), a representative of Pragmatism philosophy, was the first person to apply Pragmatism to education. From then on, the new pragmatic education system replaced the traditional one taken from the U.K. and has been dominating American education for more than a century and making great contributions to America’s prosperity [2].

### Generality of American Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophy movement started in the United States which was initiated by Charles Sanders Pierce’s publishing *How to make our ideas clear* in Jan. 1878. As mainstream values in the U.S., Pragmatism has profound and permanent influences on Americans because of its stress on freedom, equality and efficacy that Americans pursue. Later, due to Williams, John Dewey and others’ efforts, Pragmatism has partly determined the development of American education.

**Definition of Pragmatism.** Pragmatism, also known as instrumentalism, radical empiricism, conceptual relativity, is derived from the Greek word *Pragmatikos* [3]. It originally referred to the skills people applied in business or legal affairs. Based on it, the word picked up the meaning “practical” which refers to the thinking pattern of deciding everything according to specific circumstances. Generally speaking, Pragmatism emphasizes the creativity of people. It means people should deal with problems practically rather than theoretically and it views actual result as the sole criterion for testing theory.

There are two major schools of Pragmatism: the rational Pragmatism and the empirical Pragmatism[4]. The pragmatists in the former school pay attention to idealism, emotionalism, rationalism, and optimism, while the latter maintains materialism.

**Main Content of Pragmatism.** Pragmatism, as it indicates, implies experience, actions, initiatives, importance of knowledge, etc. which we should be aware of before we can use it.

Firstly, Pragmatism maintains that everything can be recognized and understood on the basis of experience, but the experience Pragmatism refers to is not the same as traditional experience. Pragmatism empiricism holds that thinking and reasoning are a kind of ability which is cultivated by human beings when they tend to adapt to environment. In this process, human beings gather experience which is the result of rational thinking, as opposed to traditional empiricism which argues that experience is just an activity under the action of simple feeling. Here we can draw a conclusion that Pragmatism is mostly featured by usefulness, just as James said “Usefulness Is Truth” [5]. That is to say, when we interact with the environment, we are supposed to employ our reasons to observe, understand, and communicate so as to construct our experiential world.

Secondly, Pragmatism emphasizes action and opposes mechanical determinism. Pragmatism believes that there is no external order and absolutely truth in the universe. If one person wants to survive in this world, he cannot pray his life for unreal god or rely on existing experience or theory. In the real life, everyone has its own opportunities to get better, and all their successes are mainly based on their own choices, explorations and development. Therefore, only by taking actions, one can grasp the opportunity and control his own destiny.

Thirdly, Pragmatism stresses the importance of knowledge. It believes that only knowledge can help humans control and change the reality. With the development of the society, people begin to realize that science and technology is the first productive force, without it we can not see through the world and thus utilize the laws of nature to develop our society and ourselves, so if a country wants to carve out a place in the international arena, it has to attach great importance to knowledge and exert no effort to develop it.

### **Impact of Pragmatism on American Educational System**

John Dewey was the first one to expound on the theory of pragmatic education in *Democracy and Education*. His empiricism education notion opposes the rigidities of dogmatism, and can thus avoid the shortcomings of forced indoctrination. It was the first time that Pragmatism and education authentically had incorporated. From then on, pragmatic education began to hold up the whole American education. In the following part we will research into the impact of Pragmatism on American infant education and American adult education.

**Traditional American Educational System.** In early America, educational system was borrowed from Britain which emphasized a good knowledge foundation obtained from some set courses. Students had longer school years but only humanity would be offered to them. Teaching methods are limited, teachers just instilled knowledge to students by lecturing, and students had to recite it by rote.

**Impact of Pragmatism on American Infant Education.** From the colonial period to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no infant education in America and not even any early childhood institution [6]. It was accepted that the family should be completely responsible for children before formal education. However, with the advent of Pragmatism in America, the society had a growing need for well-educated people, then education which should start from an early age gradually became a consensus, and ever since, infant education in the US has become public and institutionalized.

With the spread of Pragmatism, the principle of utility, the core of it, became the basic principle of American society and promoted the development of capitalistic economy in America, which in turn benefited the education. In order to provide well-educated and highly competent laborers for the economic construction, infant education was much accounted and became institutionalized. Since then, infant education has become one part of American elementary educational system and various states successively enacted laws to ensure school-age-children’s right of receiving education. To a large extent, institutionalization of infant education reflects pragmatic educational value.

Secondly, Pragmatism emphasizes practical ability of a person. In other words, it refers to one’s ability to integrate into society and one’s level of socialization. In America, people began to realize that simple family education can only teach children living skills and private morality, but formal infant education is a better way of learning social skills and public morality. In 1896, Dewey set up an experimental school where he enrolled students aged between 4 and 14 to conduct an experiment

of infant education in University of Chicago. There he employed “learning by doing” by providing students with many activities [7]. This interactive learning style aimed at learning from participating, communicating cooperating, etc.. And he regarded the school as a micro society where students could be trained to be good citizens. The result showed that infant education in school could greatly promote students’ public awareness while eliminate the adverse effects of family education. Due to the great significance of infant education, more and more public kindergartens mushroomed.

**Impact of Pragmatism on American Adult Education.** There are three kinds of higher education institutions in America: university, vocational college and community college. In a general sense, people regard adult education institution as a place which enrolls students who have graduated from high schools or people who have worked formally.

Pragmatism argues that the reason why people need to learn is to meet practical needs. If a person wants to live in a society, he must have the marketable skills in order to earn a living. The question arises: Where do people get marketable skills? Definitely schools. Therefore, adult education in America pays close attention to the employment rate. Nevertheless, this employment rate is distinct from that in China; it stresses the comprehensive employability of the students, that is to say, students are shaped not only with skills, but also with professionally systematic knowledge which can ensure them a smooth and sustainable development.

To achieve the foregoing purpose, the adult education institutes offer a variety of courses. And in American college, there is a special class form which is called “seminar”. Students in seminar can be divided into several groups and communicate with each other on a specific theme. Prior to it, students have to gather relevant information and built up their own perspectives so that they can present themselves clearly. This class form can improve students’ expressing ability and build up their confidence. What’s more, American adult education courses are keeping pace with the changing society, so students can always fit in the society upon graduation

### **Impact of Pragmatism on American Education Concept**

Pragmatism philosophy has a macroscopic influence on American education. It not only influences the American educational concept, but also school system, education quality and many other aspects.

**Student-centered Education.** Based on Pragmatism, American schools have been hammering away at establishing a new harmonious teacher-student relationship. Students themselves and their activities should be the center of education. They can study the courses at their own pace and choose to self-evaluate their knowledge. Teachers prefer to instruct students how to advance themselves in extracurricular time. These instructions include: the establishment of the objectives of self-advancement, selection of subjects autonomous activities and so on.

**Experience Accumulation and Ability Training.** Pragmatic education believes that the real education should be a process of experience accumulation and reorganization, but not a simple system of book studying. Knowledge is infinite, but the methods of intellectual enquiry are limited. Students should try their best to establish unique problem-solving patterns exclusive to themselves by teachers’ guidance and motivation. And then, they constantly build their own studying framework, enrich their experiences, form their habits, arouse emotions and increase their knowledge [8].

**Committed to Providing Highly Competent People to the Society.** Pragmatism emphasizes efficacy, so the ultimate objective of pragmatic education is to transport “useful” people to the society. In America primary and secondary schools teach students with personalized touch by considering their real conditions; and almost every American university pays close heed to students’ practical ability when giving them a comprehensive assessment. This quality-oriented education can train and develop students’ thinking, creativity and manipulative ability.

**Impact on American Students and Society.** Undoubtedly pragmatic education improves students’ independence, creativity, imagination, and manipulative ability; however, it also has brought many problems to the students and society. First, pragmatic education’s overstress of the dominant role of student in study leads to the fact that students are not as assiduous as before. Second, it is inevitable that theoretical knowledge be ignored when class activities take the place of books. This type of educational system may promote the economic development in the primary

phase of industrialization, but it would be powerless in today's high-tech society which is propelled greatly by theoretical knowledge. In this sense, US crisis has been aggravating. Third, American traditional education emphasizes moral molding, but Pragmatism believes that moral judgment is based on the validity and practicality. So many students have more reasons to refuse to be constrained by morality and become self-abandoned or act willfully in the family or society.

### **Inspiration for Chinese Education**

China, the biggest developing country in the world, is in the period of comprehensive social transformation. Rapid economic growth and comprehensive technological innovation set high requirements of personnel training. Although Dewey's pragmatic education had a huge influence on our country in 1920s, China's education still has many deficiencies, and it is wise for us to utilize the essence of American education.

**Transforming Exam-oriented Education to Quality-oriented Education.** American fundamental education seems inferior to that of China, for example, but as a matter of fact, American students have wider interests, broader knowledge, and higher practical abilities which are desired by the society. Urgently we Chinese are supposed to take over those strong points of American education to change our exam-oriented education into quality education. It is not only a way of teaching, but also a way of thinking which will finally benefit our nation.

**Reform on College Entrance Examination System.** In today's China, college entrance examination can determine a person's future and thus has been the ultimate goal of education. As a consequence, students just focus on knowledge that will be tested. To change it, we should support vocational education with policy and finance. Second, excellent graduates from adult college should be offered the opportunity to enter regular full-time colleges and universities, and when they graduate, they should not be discriminated by the employees. In a word, education system should be flexible so as to make talents easily stand out.

### **Summary**

Pragmatism is a kind of philosophy which emphasizes experience, usefulness, action and knowledge. It has greatly shaped American education and thus American society. American education is so successful that we can draw upon it and better our own. What's more, through mutual communication, Sino-American relationship can be enhanced, too.

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