

# “The [Other] Half of Knowledge”: John Dewey, Michael Oakeshott, and Parallel Critiques of Rationalism in Education

*“La [otra] mitad del conocimiento”: John Dewey,  
Michael Oakeshott y críticas paralelas del  
racionalismo en educación*

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## **Resumen:**

En este ensayo, mantengo que a pesar de las muchas diferencias que existen entre Michael Oakeshott y John Dewey, los dos pensadores ofrecen visiones muy similares de cómo debería funcionar la educación. Por medio de sus críticas paralelas al racionalismo, ambos pensadores defendieron métodos similares de educación activa. Las similares visiones que Dewey y Oakeshott tenían sobre la educación, complejiza dos asociaciones que se escuchan a menudo: que los métodos de la pedagogía activa se relacionan exclusivamente con las políticas de la izquierda, y que la educación liberal tiene relación con el apoyo a una pedagogía pasiva y centrada en el libro.

*Palabras clave:* Racionalismo, pedagógica activa, juicio, educación liberal.

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## Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that despite the many differences between Michael Oakeshott and John Dewey, these two thinkers offer very similar visions of how education should operate. By way of their parallel critiques of Rationalism, both thinkers advocated similar methods of active education. Dewey and Oakeshott’s similar educational views complexify two often-heard associations: that active pedagogical methods are exclusive with leftward political advocacy, and that liberal education correlates with advocacy of passive, book-centered pedagogy.

*Keywords:* Rationalism, active pedagogy, judgment, liberal education.

## 1. Introduction

Seldom are the philosophers John Dewey (1859–1952) and Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) mentioned together or compared to one another. Where Dewey was a democratic socialist, Oakeshott was, depending on the interpreter, either a classical liberal<sup>2</sup> or a conservative.<sup>3</sup> When talking about their philosophies of education, a comparison is equally unlikely. John Dewey is much talked about as an important progenitor of progressive and child-centered education. Michael Oakeshott, on the other hand, is discussed, when at all, as an expositor of a more traditional, subject-centered, liberal education.

For all of their differences, however, Dewey and Oakeshott shared a very similar view of what was wrong with the then-dominant passive models of education, what made these models wrong, and the active model they should be replaced with. First, Dewey and Oakeshott similarly critique what I will call “Rationalism”—the notion that action requires only a rote, or near-rote, application of solid rules, derived by reason, to like situations. Both thinkers, in describing what it is to act, lay much emphasis on the role of judgment (which they both write cannot be broken down into rules).

From here, both Dewey and Oakeshott write, in different ways and using different vocabulary, in support of a constructivist approach to education. Both thinkers stress the importance of not only factual knowledge but also knowledge of how to act intelligently (requiring judgment) Both philosophers see education as something best done via guided practice, for in order for the student to know how to act, she must (if the awkward phrase will be excused) practice acting.

While these two thinkers are rightly seen as opposites in political philosophy, their similar advocacies of an active pedagogy is unique because it is sometimes thought that such a position tends to be exclusive to a leftward persuasion.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, some associate the advocacy of a more conservative liberal arts curriculum (which Oakeshott advocated) with the advocacy of a passive, book-centered, pedagogy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gray, J., *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 40–47.

<sup>3</sup> Rayner, J., The Legend of Oakeshott’s Conservatism: Sceptical Philosophy and Limited Politics, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18(2), 1985, pp. 313–338.

<sup>4</sup> Because many advocates of progressive educational methods have been of a politically leftward persuasion, the pedagogy of active learning has often come to be associated with leftward politics. See, for instance: Ravitch, D., *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reform*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000, pp. 208–238.

<sup>5</sup> Ravitch, *Left Back*, op. cit., pp. 284–322.

It should be noted that the goal of this paper is to compare (and to some degree, explain) elements of Dewey's and Oakeshott's philosophies, rather than defend them. In this paper, I approach the philosophies sympathetically, rather than critically, in order to understand them and their relation to each other.

## 2. Key Differences Between Dewey and Oakeshott

As mentioned, what makes some of the parallels between Dewey and Oakeshott surprising is the fact that their philosophies – particularly social and political – are so different. Before entering into analysis of the pedagogical similarities between Dewey and Oakeshott, it may be instructive to briefly review several of the important differences between them.

First, in reading the works of Dewey and Oakeshott, one notices an overall difference in temperament. Dewey's work often exhibits great enthusiasm for the scientific method and an optimism toward change and flux.<sup>6</sup> In line with much political progressivism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey sought to apply the scientific method to pressing social problems of the day in order that society could be improved via intelligent piecemeal reform.<sup>7</sup>

Oakeshott, on the other hand, illustrates a conservative temperament that “delight[s] in what is present rather than what was or what may be.”<sup>8</sup> While Oakeshott recognizes the need for change and flux, his work is generally more pessimistic than Dewey's with regard to the potential for reform efforts to lead to social improvement.

This difference in temperament manifests itself in very different political visions. In books like *Individualism Old and New*,<sup>9</sup> Dewey argued for a social order containing elements of democratic socialism. Dewey argued that the “old,” laissez-faire form of individualism was too atomistic and needed to be supplemented by a recognition of social interconnectedness. Dewey's political order sought to foster a democratic interconnectedness amongst the polity.

The “old” individualism that Dewey objected to is, to some degree, found in Oakeshott. Essays like “The Masses in Representative Democracy” and “The Political Economy of Freedom”<sup>10</sup> make clear not only Oakeshott's methodological individualism, but his overall antipathy to political collectivism of the kind Dewey endorsed.

Lastly, Dewey and Oakeshott's divergent political temperaments led to very different views toward the school's proper relation to society. Dewey's writings advocate that schools be used democratically as institutions that prepare students to help solve pressing social problems.<sup>11</sup> Oakeshott advocated that schools *not* concern themselves with current social problems, but to teach students to “becom[e] aware of a so-called cultural inheritance” in order to “understand some of its specific invitations.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, where Dewey wanted schools to be an engine of social cohesion by fostering students who could think about current social problems, Oakeshott saw schools as engines of individuals whose individuality was based on a solid understanding of the past.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: Dewey, J., *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy, and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*, New York, Henry Holt, 1910.

<sup>7</sup> Ryan, A., *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1997

<sup>8</sup> Oakeshott, M., *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, J., *Individualism Old and New*, Amherst, Prometheus Books, 1999

<sup>10</sup> Oakeshott, M., *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., pp. 363-407

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education [EPUB edition]*, Salt Lake City, Gutenberg Project E-books, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Oakeshott, M., *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2001, p. 17.

### 3. Dewey and Oakeshott as Critics of Rationalism

While Dewey and Oakeshott exhibited marked differences in social and political temperament, their divergent philosophies are undergirded by very similar critiques of Rationalism. Dewey devoted two books—*Reconstruction in Philosophy*<sup>13</sup> and *The Quest for Certainty*<sup>14</sup>—to critiquing the rationalistic tendencies of his predecessors. Oakeshott's most popular essay—"Rationalism in Politics"<sup>15</sup>—is devoted to critiquing Rationalism, which he devoted several other essays to as well. This common critique of Rationalism is important for understanding both thinkers' views on why education must be an active process of student participation rather than a passive process of facts and rules conveyed from active teacher to passive student.

By Rationalism, both thinkers meant very similar things: the tendency to view Reason as a fixed and exalted thing that, when applied to concrete affairs, obviates the need for improvisational or in-the-act judgment or discretion. For Dewey, the rationalistic tendency of the philosopher leads her to "produce an overdeveloped attachment to system for its own sake, and an over-pretentious claim to certainty."<sup>16</sup> Dewey lamented that so much philosophy had "arrogated to itself the office of demonstrating the existence of a transcendent, absolute or inner reality and of revealing to man the nature and feature of this ultimate and higher reality."<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, Oakeshott describes the Rationalist thus: "At bottom, he stands (he always stands) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason.' . . . Moreover, he is fortified by a belief in a 'reason' common to all mankind, a common power of rational consideration, which is the ground and inspiration of argument."<sup>18</sup>

For both authors, then, Rationalism is the quest for a philosophical system of Reason that stands above (or can be formulated without appeal to) context.<sup>19</sup> For Dewey, Rationalism could best be seen in Platonistic philosophers like Spinoza (and to some degree Kant), in their arguments that "that ultimate reality [decipherable by reason] is the measure of perfection and the norm for human activity."<sup>20</sup> For Oakeshott, the Rationalist is best seen in the philosopher of the enlightenment, who holds things like natural rights, supposed "laws" of human progress, and other *a priori* abstract principles to somehow "exist" (rather than being historically contingent ideas emerging as a product of human interactions).<sup>21</sup> For both Dewey and Oakeshott, then, Rationalism was an adherence to the belief that there is a rational order that transcends contingency and context, and that this is discoverable by *a priori* reason.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Dewey, J., *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, New York, Henry Holt, 1920.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, J., *The Quest for Certainty*, New York: Minton, Balch, 1929.

<sup>15</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 21. Oakeshott also suggests that Rationalism's appeal is "its appearance of both beginning and ending with certainty." Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Dewey's Rationalist is committed to demonstrating a "transcendent" reality; Oakeshott's Rationalist "always stands" for reason free from context. Both of these imply that the Rationalist quests for something *above* human context.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., p. 54

<sup>21</sup> Tseng, R., *The Sceptical Idealist: Michael Oakeshott as a Critic of the Enlightenment*, Thorverton, Imprint Academic, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> There are, to be sure, differences between Dewey's and Oakeshott's portrait of Rationalism, such as Dewey's suggestion that the Rationalist is unjustly bound to tradition where Oakeshott suggests that the

Dewey's above-cited books both aim to convince readers that reason *is* fully human; neither certainty nor fixity can arise from the use of reason because humans are neither omniscient nor static. Since this is so, viewing reason as a faculty somehow immune from or above context (which imperfect humans can channel but is not itself imperfect) is a fallacy. Instead, seeing reason as a human tool that provides "[c]oncrete suggestions arising from past experience, developed and matured in the light of needs and deficiencies of the present, employed as aims and methods of specific reconstruction, and tested by success or failure in accomplishing this task of readjustment, [must] suffice."<sup>23</sup> In other words, reason may give us suggestions on how to act based on past experience, but it does not obviate the need for intelligence in employment or judgment and modification in light of consequences.

Already, we can see that Dewey is very cognizant of the large role of human judgment in human conduct and that this account is wholly missing from the Rationalist conception of how reason operates. Oakeshott is even more explicit in this recognition. He suggests that there are two kinds of knowledge involved in human action:

"The first sort of knowledge I will call technical knowledge or knowledge of technique. In every art and science, and in every practical activity, a technique is involved. In many activities this technical knowledge is formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and as we say, put into practice; but whether or not it is, or has been, precisely formulated, its chief characteristic is that it is susceptible of precise formulation. . . . The second sort of knowledge I will call practical, because it exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules. This does not mean, however, that it is an esoteric sort of knowledge. It only means that the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine"<sup>24</sup>.

For Oakeshott, all activity involves both technical and practical knowledge. When driving a car, we utilize the technical knowledge of how (mechanically) to handle the car and abide by the rules of the road, and the practical knowledge of judging when to merge into the next lane, predict the actions of other drivers, and use observation and remembrance of past experience to keep alert for dangers. The former can be taught (by reading a driver's manual or learning how to handle the vehicle). The latter, however, is a matter of practical knowledge—knowledge gained by acquiring judgment that cannot be reduced to a set of fixed rules, but must be, to at least some degree, improvised.

Oakeshott writes of practical knowledge as distinct from technical knowledge in the fact that "the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine."<sup>25</sup> How is it shared? Practical knowledge can only be shared by observation and experience. In order to acquire and hone the kind of knowledge that allows judgment in action, one must observe others acting and practice acting oneself.<sup>26</sup> Practical knowledge is the kind of "tacit" knowledge acquired from human experience that has not been reduced to a formula. One should, of course, study examples of judgments that have been made in the past (this is where the study of history, philosophy, science, and the like comes in), but, in the end, one must also see concrete examples of judgment being applied to real situations and practice judging in real situations.

Rationalist is not attuned enough to tradition. These differences, while certainly interesting, are beyond the scope of the present article. Here, we will focus only on the similarities in the two thinkers' conception of Rationalism.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Oakeshott is not suggesting that one cannot act until one observes others acting (for to observe is itself an act). Rather, acting gets better through observation of experienced actors and subsequent guided practice.

Oakeshott goes on to write, "Rationalism is the assertion that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all, the assertion that, properly speaking, there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge."<sup>27</sup> Why would the rationalist miss the existence and necessity of practical knowledge? Because she seeks guidance in Reason of a kind thought to be unfettered by contextualized, prejudiced, mundane, and difficult to unqualifiedly generalize as human experience. "The heart of the matter," wrote Oakeshott, "is the pre-occupation of the Rationalist with certainty."<sup>28</sup>

Here, the parallel with Dewey becomes very clear. Dewey also explains the Rationalist's motive as a quest for certainty and explainable thus: "Man's distrust of himself has caused him to desire to get beyond and above himself; in pure knowledge he has thought he could attain this self-transcendence."<sup>29</sup> For both thinkers, Rationalists were Rationalists because they saw reason as something that could be free from human imperfection and fallibility.

It should be stressed that neither Dewey nor Oakeshott are skeptical of reason itself. Dewey, the pragmatist, sees reason as a human-made tool that, however fallible and contextual, helps humans act in ways that help them attain their ends. Oakeshott, as we have seen, does not deny that technical knowledge is a kind of knowledge or that it is necessary for action. Rather, both Dewey and Oakeshott argue against a misconstrual of what reasoning and acting entail: they entail practical judgment every bit as much as abstract rules.

Dewey and Oakeshott do disagree when speculating as to what motivates the Rationalist. Dewey argues that Rationalism stems from attempts of classical conservative philosophers to exposit a "rational justification of things that had been previously accepted because of their emotional congeniality and social prestige."<sup>30</sup> Oakeshott argues quite the opposite: that the Rationalist looks to reason in order to liberate humans from tradition: "Much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal, and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect: and the rest is rational administration."<sup>31</sup>

Likely, this has to do with the difference in Dewey's and Oakeshott's political temperaments. Dewey's philosophy is shot through with the idea of change and flux, and he viewed Rationalism as the obstacle to it. Oakeshott, on the other hand, expressed (in his essay "On Being Conservative") a "prefer[ence for] the familiar to the unfamiliar . . . the tried to the untried."<sup>32</sup>

Whatever their disagreements, Dewey and Oakeshott agreed that Rationalism is an obstacle to action because it discounts the necessity of human judgment in the equation. Human judgment, being an example of practical knowledge, is not the kind of knowledge that can be taught by learning or divining rules, but must be learned through observation and practice. This greatly influences their views on education, and particularly their equal distaste for passive, rather than active, learning.

<sup>27</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408.

#### 4. Critique of Rationalism as Critique of Educational Trends

For both Dewey and Oakeshott, the proper aim of education is to produce the ability to act intelligently, which requires guided practice. For both thinkers, this involves the integration of both information (Oakeshott's *technical knowledge*) and judgment (Oakeshott's *practical knowledge*). Both thinkers were highly critical of education that failed to cultivate both of these types of knowledge, and both reserved their strongest criticism for systems of education of a Rationalist sort—those that confused “education” with “the imparting of technical knowledge.”

It is precisely this confusion that leads Dewey to reject traditional methods of education. For him, education is about producing experiences in the child that induce growth and hopefully lead to future growth-inducing experiences. Consequently, “[a]ny experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.” Growth, for Dewey, is much more than the knowing of a new fact or thing that one did not know before. “An experience may increase a person’s automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut.”<sup>33</sup>

An important part of what Dewey recognizes as “educative experience” was that it cultivates a habit of reflective judgment. For Dewey, the problem with “traditional” methods of education was not that they didn’t provide experience for students, but that “the experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind.”<sup>34</sup> “How many [students] acquired special skills,” Dewey asks rhetorically, “by means of automatic drill so that their powers of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?”<sup>35</sup> Thus, “traditional” education is capable of producing experience that could nurture students’ technical knowledge, but often neglected creating experience that nurtured practical knowledge.

Interestingly, Dewey also criticizes *progressive* education along similar lines. As the teacher’s job is to create experiences that would lead students to grow, Dewey warns progressive educators about the dangers of *unstructured* experience. Judgment, after all, is a skill that must be *cultivated*, and lack of structure leaves judgment equally undeveloped as a structure that emphasizes only technical knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

Oakeshott is equally hard on visions of education that put focus only, or mainly, on the acquisition of technical knowledge. Even though Oakeshott is often seen as a conservative, he is no friend to traditional “bookish” methods of education—education that focuses only or primarily on “the half of knowledge which can be learnt from books when they are used as cribs.”<sup>37</sup> As with Dewey, teaching fact and technique may be education of a certain limited kind but “[w]hat is required in addition to information is knowledge which enables us to interpret it, to decide upon its relevance, to recognize what rules to apply and to discover what action permitted by the rules should, in the circumstances, be performed.”<sup>38</sup>

#### 5. Critiquing Rationalism Leads to Advocacy of Active Pedagogical Methods

If judgment, or practical activity, is a necessary part of education, and if it is a part that can’t be reduced to articulable rules and formulae, how does it get taught? How does something that cannot be conveyed by symbolic representation get passed from teacher to

<sup>33</sup> Dewey, J., *Experience and Education [Sony EPUB Edition]*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1983, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, op. cit., p. 50.

student? As both Dewey and Oakeshott recognize that cultivating judgment is an essential component of a good education, they both see the need for education to be active – for it to afford students opportunities to practice acting. While one can learn facts in a passive fashion, this is not the case for judgment. Judgment must be learned, or refined, only by watching examples of others employing judgment and practicing one's own judgment. This, however, is an active process: it requires an active engagement because it requires reflection on what one has seen and immersion in similar activity.

Is it circular, though, to say that judgment can only be learned or refined by engaging in acts of judgment? Doesn't a thing have to be learned *before* it can be engaged in? This is not circular for Dewey, who sees the faculty of judgment as one of several "native capacities" that school cannot create, but can only nurture, in students.<sup>39</sup> To Dewey, it would have been erroneous to suggest that we can have *any* experience without exercising judgment. When we see a wagon, for instance, we do not simply see the raw sensation, but we use judgment to recognize it as a wagon, rather than as a mess of sense data. When we see an event, we do not just see the raw sense data, but we construct a story to explain what that data is. Judgment, in other words, is a native capacity that humans use automatically.<sup>40</sup>

Even though judgment is a native faculty, Dewey stresses that this faculty needs to be cultivated and can be cultivated through guided practice. The more it is worked on in school, the more refined the ability to employ judgment becomes. This is one reason Dewey stressed the use in school of real, or authentic, problems designed to get students actively thinking. This way, students acquire not only factual and technical knowledge but also a strong ability to employ judgment.

*"As a consequence of the absence of the materials and occupations which generate real problems, the pupil's problems are not his; or, rather, they are his only as a pupil, not as a human being. . . The type of judgment formed by these devices is not a desirable addition to character. If these statements give too highly colored a picture of usual school methods, the exaggeration may at least serve to illustrate the point: the need of active pursuits, involving the use of material to accomplish purposes, if there are to be situations which normally generate problems occasioning thoughtful inquiry"*<sup>41</sup>.

Simply put, an individual can learn to improve thinking only by thinking. One can only teach thinking by getting students to actively think. Learning is an active process, and activity is made all the more necessary because, as we've seen earlier, Dewey, like Oakeshott, believed that learning to think is not reducible to teaching a set of rules. It must be engaged in to be understood.

While Dewey's advocacy of active learning in order to sharpen judgment is well known, some may be surprised to hear Oakeshott put in this category. Oakeshott carries a reputation of a conservative, and it is often tempting to believe he is a defender of the "traditional" methods of education that Dewey rejected. A closer look, though, shows us that Oakeshott hinted strongly at a belief in active learning. Oakeshott very firmly believed that education should lead to not just the ability to know but also the ability to understand, think about, and do. All of these things require judgment and all of them, for Oakeshott, required active participation and activity.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, op. cit., pp. 115–116.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126, italics added.



The importance of engagement in activity for Oakeshott's theory of education stemmed from his recognition of the mind as inseparable from the knowledge that constitutes it.

"You do not first have a mind, which acquires a filling of ideas and then makes distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, reasonable and unreasonable, and then, as a third step, causes activity. Properly speaking the mind has no existence apart from or in advance of these and other acquisitions"<sup>42</sup>.

Like Dewey's view that all experience involves thinking and judgment, Oakeshott sees mental activity not as something apart from experience, but as something that is inseparable from experience. Thinking—the "mak[ing of] distinctions between true, and false," etc.—is a natural part of experience. As such, the learning of judgment, for Oakeshott, required active methods of instruction similar to those advocated by Dewey that demand activity on the part of the student.

"[W]e are apt to believe that in order to teach an activity it is necessary to have converted our knowledge of it into a set of propositions . . . and that in order to learn an activity we must begin with such propositions. It would be foolish, of course, to deny that this device has a pedagogical value. But it must be observed that, not only are these rules, etc., these propositions about the activity, an abridgment of the teacher's concrete knowledge of the activity . . . but learning them is never more than the meanest part of education in an activity. . . . To work alongside a practiced scientist or craftsman is an opportunity not only to learn the rules, but to acquire also a direct knowledge of how he sets about his business . . . and until this is acquired nothing of great value has been learned"<sup>43</sup>.

As Oakeshott very much believed that the proper end of education was "education in activities" (speaking, writing, thinking within various disciplines), the teacher, then, does not only impart information but also models conduct and assists the student in practicing conduct.<sup>44</sup>

We can see, then, that both Dewey and Oakeshott advocated for the kind of education that teaches judgment and practice as much as the learning of facts, rules, and technical knowledge. Both of them recognized that in order to teach such inarticulable things as judgment and practice, something more than Oakeshott's above-quoted "convert[ing] . . . knowledge into a set of propositions" is needed: the learner cannot learn judgment in the same way she learns fact x or rule y. Thus, both Dewey and Oakeshott advocate an active learning environment where the learner is immersed into the world of practice as opposed to being the passive recipient of knowledge.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite their differences in political philosophy, Dewey and Oakeshott maintained very similar positions with regards to pedagogy: both were critics of Rationalism; both advocated schools that taught students not only information and technical knowledge but also judgment and practical knowledge, which led both to critique certain educational trends of their day; and both thinkers advocated a type of active learning where the student participates in learning by being immersed in the world of practice.

<sup>42</sup> Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112, italics added).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

I have tried to show not only that these three beliefs were consistent between the two thinkers, but also that they are consistent among themselves. That is, a critique of Rationalism that sees error in stripping reason of contextual judgment as its aid is exactly the type of starting point that would lead one to criticize the educational institutions that one believes operate with, and perhaps perpetuate, this error. Likewise, if one believes that schools should teach judgment and practice as well as facts and rules, one may very well go on to advocate a type of active learning where students must learn these types of things (which are not as articulable as facts and rules, and often need to be learned by immersion in practice).

Despite these similarities, Dewey and Oakeshott still came to different conclusions about the most appropriate curriculum. Dewey championed progressive education, while Oakeshott advocated liberal education. If Dewey and Oakeshott agreed on the importance of moving beyond a Rationalistic approach in the schools and active pedagogical methods, then why do they wind up with divergent conceptions of what children should learn (academically speaking)?

Oakeshott was a self-proclaimed conservative in temperament who wrote that the primary business of schools is to educate students into their cultural inheritance—to equip them with the languages created by their forebears so that they can participate in life. Dewey, by contrast, was a democratic socialist who believed that the schools should equip students with the ability to deal with or solve the social problems that would confront them when they graduated.

Thus the differences between Dewey and Oakeshott were over curricular, rather than pedagogical, concerns. This is interesting because it is often thought that liberal and progressive education are pedagogically incompatible. By way of curriculum, this may be true *curricularly*, as progressive education stresses a curriculum determined by relevance to the individual and her environment. Liberal education, on the other hand, tends to stress a “cultural literacy” curriculum that, as Oakeshott writes, initiates the individual into her cultural inheritance. The former, concerned with the present and future, often stresses change, where the latter, concerned with learning from the past and present, tends to stress continuity. But as this paper hopefully shows, there need not be disagreement between progressive and liberal education over what *types* of knowledge schools teach (facts and technique or judgment and practice) or on the pedagogical model best suited to teach those types of knowledge (passive or active). In the age of standardization and increased reliance on standardized tests<sup>45</sup>, recognizing that two very distinct thinkers—“progressive” Dewey and “conservative” Oakeshott—stood together in advocating that schools teach students to think and act via active engagement, rather than passive conveyance of Rationalistic information, should not be overlooked.

<sup>45</sup> It has often been argued that increasing standardized testing increases reliance on (to use Oakeshott’s term) technical knowledge. This, in turn, leads teachers to use more teacher-centered methods of instruction. See, for instance: Jones, M. G., Jones, B. D., and Hargrove, T., *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.