Philosophical Analysis of the Implications of John Dewey’s Instrumentalism on Entrepreneurial Development

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This work sought to examine the philosophical arguments of John Dewey’s theory of knowledge for practical gains. Hence, it sought to address the problem on how the current rave of entrepreneurship can be given a new direction, especially from the perspective of ideas or theories matching with practice as inspired by Dewey’s instrumentalism. The method of conceptual and critical analysis, hermeneutics and inductive/deductive arguments are employed to achieve that aim. The major findings of the work are that entrepreneurial development must be engaged from an interdisciplinary matrix. Thus, this work is geared to translate John Dewey’s philosophy to business sustainability, management and gains.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, instrumentalism, hermeneutics, inductive, deductive and business

Introduction

John Dewey, an American pragmatic philosopher, propounded a theory of knowledge which he coined instrumentalism. He describes how instrumentalism as a theory of knowledge overcomes the pitfalls of competing theories within the philosophical tradition. This theory of instrumentalism does not assume that ideas are mental entities or that they are true if they somehow match or fit with the object in question. To this end, Dewey’s theory presents a different view opposed to what is usually called coherence or correspondence theory of truth.

It is interesting to note that John Dewey was a professed Hegelian. However, Hegel’s influence could still be seen in his works. Unlike many traditional idealists who see sense experience as unrelated to consciousness and thinking, sense experience for Hegel and Dewey must be viewed as the grounds by which consciousness first emerges and by which our thinking must be tested. For Dewey, then, the growth of consciousness entails a growth of sense experience.

In his work, Education and Knowledge, Dewey (1916a) had this thread of thought that cuts across all the works. It is that:

In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young. Since the young at a given time will at some later date compose the society of that period, the latter’s nature will largely turn upon the
direction children’s activities were given at an earlier period. The cumulative movement of action towards a later result is what is meant by growth. (p. 49)

Be that as it may, every society is concerned about the future of their children with respect to creating job opportunities for them. As a result of problem of unemployment ranging from varied factors, such as over population, unqualified man power/personnel, competition, limited space for white collar jobs, and so on, entrepreneurship seems to be the fastest route to individual financial freedom, poverty reduction/elimination and growth. In face of all these vicissitudes of life, the role of philosophy is called to question; in this regard what can philosophy do to get man out of the woods and help him live a better life? Without doubt, in the words of Ndubuisi (2015),

the relevance of philosophy is unquestionable in the face of multifarious problems. It enables man to solve his challenges. Even when it does not actually solve problem, it guides man on the best approach to adopt to avoid being weighed down when faced with such problems. (p. 40)

It is in the light of the above that one can argue that

the man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. (Russell, 2013)

**Conceptual Clarification of Key Terms**

The key terms in this work are: instrumentalism and entrepreneurship. These two concepts are linked together. The concept “entrepreneur” is a derivative from the French root word “entreprendre” which means to “undertake” (Van Sickle, 2010, p. 6). An entrepreneur will be one who organizes, manages and assumes the risks of business or enterprise. In the same line of thought, instrumentalism as a form of philosophical pragmatism holds that the value of any idea is determined by its usefulness in helping people to adapt to the world around them including the business world. Hence, entrepreneurship must draw on the principles of instrumentalism in order to maximize and manage any business or enterprise. This truth is premised on the argument that means-ends relations can be discovered by reasoning inductively and deductively about experience. Theories, therefore, are tools-of-the-trade of thinking, and there are no realities behind or beyond what can be known with regard to business and its sustainability, applicability and success other than what works.

But, the major problem bedeviling entrepreneurs is how to generate working ideas through thinking outside the box for their business on the one hand, how to get these ideas executed on the other hand. For this study, the problem that needs an attempted resolution is how Dewey’s instrumentalism can be translated into a veritable theory that will lead to a practical demonstration that will impact any business positively, being that theory must match practice. In other words, it addresses these questions thus: what constitutes the basic tenets as well as the substance of Dewey’s instrumentalism? What was the background that informed the postulation of Dewey’s instrumentalism? To what extent can Dewey’s instrumentalism lead to entrepreneurship development and societal progress? Thus, this work is geared to philosophically analyse John Dewey’s instrumentalism and bring to the fore its implications for entrepreneurial development.

**John Dewey’s Philosophy of Instrumentalism**

John Dewey’s theory of instrumentalism was informed by Charles Darwin theory of evolution by natural selection. His appeal to evolution as a basis for developing a naturalized theory of meaning was an appeal to the
most comprehensive of scientific theory, one supported by evidence from numerous and divergent scientific fields. Boydston (1990) said that John Dewey’s writing on instrumentalism avers thus:

... an attempt to establish a precise logical theory of concepts of judgments and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thought functions in the experimental determinations of future consequences. The verification of a theory ... is carried on by the observation of particular facts. An empirical philosopher must ... first find particular cases from which he then generalizes. It is therefore, in submitting conceptions to the control of experiences that one finds examples of what is called truth. (pp. 11-14)

Dewey popularized the concept of instrumentalism which he used to distinguish his peculiar thoughts from that of other pragmatists like William James and Charles Peirce. Instrumentalism from the above quotation can be reduced to the fact that the value of any idea is determined by its usefulness in helping people to adapt to the world around them. Learning then should be relevant, practicable and rewarding rather than being only theoretical.

Dewey’s instrumentalism is a kind of theory of knowledge that is essentially in terms of the biological and physiological role that the knowing process plays in human affairs, he then tried to employ this conception as a guide in directing the application of human intellectual activities to solving contemporary social problems. Thus, experience is not an object known, but rather an action performed (Hopkin & Avrum, 1993).

In the course of an organism’s activity in its environment, it encounters situations in which it can no longer act. Thinking arises as a means of dealing with these disturbing situations, by working out hypotheses, or guides to future actions. The merits of these intellectual act is determined by a practical criterion, by whether the organism can now function satisfactorily again. Thought, therefore, especially scientific thought, is instrumental in problem solving. The occurrence of problems set off a chain reaction of mental activity directed towards discovering. Brooke and Bruder (1999) affirmed thus:

John Dewey’s brand of pragmatism is known as instrumentalism, according to which, roughly, the forms of human activity, including thought, are instruments used by people to solve practical problems. In Dewey’s view, thinking is not a search for “truth” but an activity aimed at solving individual and social problems, a means by which humans strive to achieve a satisfactory relationship with their environment. (p. 188)

One can infer from Dewey’s perspective that metaphysics and religion only provide a false escape from the vicissitude of life. The world is evolving or changing and there is no use looking for a fixed universal and immutable truth. Nature, therefore, becomes experience; objects are not fixed substances but individual things such as “existences” or “events” and these are imbued with meanings. First like a piece of paper can mean different things to different handlers, it is an instrumental for solving a problem within a given context.

Dewey’s method of inquiry or instrumentalism was intended as a means by which societally relevant problems could be solved. For example, Dewey viewed technology as application of science which itself tended to be more theoretical in scope; hence, Mayhew and Edward (1936) stated that “another aspect of the science studied, is the application of natural forces to the service of man through machine” (p. 329). On this basis, science and technology are seen as connected, one representing theoretical knowledge and the other representing application of this knowledge. Today, the tendency to make education “technological” is apparent in goals that emphasize that skills developed in science must mirror the skills of problem solving and decision making essential to cope in an increasing technological world.

Hence, Dewey often represented his theory of education as one founded on science. By science, here, he meant people drawing on their own prior experience in order to make sense of a new situation. An everyday
inquirer, in this sense, draws on past experience and knowledge in order to make sense of a problematic situation. The first thing such a one will do is to first deliberate about the possible actions to take, imaging the consequences that could arise from each possible action before arriving at hypothesis. This position is akin to Ian Crofton’s (2000) thoughts about instrumentalism. He writes that:

… ideas such as scientific theories are not necessarily true accounts of reality, but rather instruments or tools for dealing with problems in the real world. The value of any theory thus lies not in its truth but in its success, for example in enabling us to order and predict for practical ends. (p. 102)

Dewey (1916) argued that the specialized knowledge of practicing scientists is different from every day “practical” modes of knowledge because it operates in an essentially imaginary world of systematic abstraction. Scientific knowledge is, thus, not a better knowledge than that organized in a practical manner. It is only better given the particular purposes to which scientists intend to put it. And the danger inherent in the scientific representation of knowledge is that the very thing that makes it so useful for science “renders its results, taken by themselves, remote from ordinary experience”. Dewey (1916) argued further that:

Science aims to free an experience from all which is purely personal and strictly immediate … whatever is unique in the situation, since dependent upon the peculiarities of the individual and the coincidence of circumstance, is not available for others. (p. 226)

Ideas, therefore, are instruments of action and their usefulness determines their truth. Dewey assuming that humans live in and adjust to social and physical environment experientially felt that metaphysical questions could be answered by distinguishing between events and objects. So these two terms, according to Castle (1977) in Dewey’s view “are the key to his characteristics experimentalist approach to pseudo-problems long agonized over by first philosophy”.

With respect to the status of truth, Dewey states that truth or falsity is a property of ideas. This property is chiefly one of predictions of what consequence will follow if given plan of action, communicated by an idea, is carried out. Hence, good consequences are relevant to truth only if they serve to verify an idea or hypothesis. A truth of hypothesis, therefore, is its successful working. Success here does not mean an incidental ethical satisfaction but one in resolving the specific problem that has evolved the inquiry. Accordingly, a hypothesis is true if it works to transform a perplexed, confused and discordant situation, which has insisted the inquiry, into a clear, orderly and satisfactory situation, which brings the inquiry into a close. Castle (1977), according to Dewey, asserted that: “all ideas are hypotheses continually being verified or diversified in the light of predictable results. The particular consequences or results are those in terms of which a problem has arisen” (p. 73).

Thus, truth belongs to humans actively engaged in a changing world. Verity, as Dewey sees it, is a satisfactory response to a problem originating in the world. It is so because we are not monolithic or fixed in a rigid matrix forever, humans can be transformed by the subjective, interested thinker who must consciously and continuously, strive to cope with his environment. Since there is no final and absolute truth, there can be no further test of veracity other than its ability to work and to organize facts.

**Theories as Tools-of-the Trade of Thinking**

John Dewey’s instrumentalism emphasizes that theories are tools-of-the trade of thinking, seeking to map means-ends relationships found in experience. Hence, Popper (1962) affirmed that instrumentalism endorses
“the interpretation of scientific theories as practical instruments or tools for such purposes as the prediction of impending events” (pp. 62-63). The fundamental problem of this modern era according to John Dewey is the mismatch between the development of science and the fixing of philosophy in belief that do not follow the scientific and technological advancement or move in a world apart from it.

Hence, Larry A. Hickman identifies the problem of science and technology as central to Dewey’s philosophy. John Dewey’s contribution to the critique of the technological culture appears in all aspects of his theory of logic, education, aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, etc. Hickman (2001) referred to John Dewey as “the philosopher of technology”. Interpreting his theory of inquiry as technology, featuring the principle of the instrumentalism of the author as thus:

The key to understand Dewey’s work as a contribution to the philosophy of technology is, I suggest, an appreciation of his contention that all inquiry or deliberation that involves tools and artifacts, whether the tools or artifacts abstract or concrete, tangible or intangible, should be viewed as instrumental: in other words, as form of technology. (p. 26)

In this case, technology is identified with all the intelligent techniques that are developed for satisfaction of the human needs and not only mechanical forms. Thus, technology is found in both primary experience and the reflective experience. According to this interpretation, Dewey analyses the development of this intelligence along the history in order to extract his understanding of the philosophy or of the technology of the philosophy.

John Dewey’s instrumentalism conceives that scientific theories should be thought primarily as tools for solving practical problems rather than as meaningful descriptions of the natural world. Indeed, instrumentalists typically call into question whether it even makes sense to think of theoretical terms as corresponding to external reality. In that sense, instrumentalism is directly opposed to scientific realism, which is the view that the point of scientific theories is not to generate reliable predictions but to describe the world accurately.

**Relating on Entrepreneurship**

Exploring economic opportunities entails a lot of factors which require intelligence, ideas, wisdom, capital, knowledge amongst others. A part from launching out or venturing into a business, one must be able to understand the nitty gritty of such a venture, the terrain and climate. This is why Hisrich, Peters, and Shepherd (2009) opined thus:

In almost all the definitions of entrepreneurship, there is agreement that we are talking about a kind of behavior that includes: (1) initiative taking (2) the organizing and reorganizing of social and economic mechanisms to turn resources and situations to practical account, (3) the acceptance of risk or failure. (p. 12)

To an economist, an entrepreneur is one who brings resources, labour, materials and other assets into combinations that make their value greater than before, and also, one who introduces, changes, innovations and a new order. To a psychologist such a person is typically driven by certain forces such as the need to obtain or attain something, to experiment, accomplish, or perhaps to escape the authority of others.

Entrepreneurship is the dynamic process of creating incremental wealth by individual who assume the major risks in terms of equity, time and/or career commitment or provide value for some product or services. Contained in risk-taking is enormous investment of time, effort, resources and mental ideas or thought. So, entrepreneurship will involve the creation process, i.e., creating something new of value. This value must be a mix involving the creator and audience, for which it was developed. Thus, the entrepreneurial process will
involve four distinct phases: identification and evaluation of the opportunity, development of the business plan, and determination of the required resources and management of the resulting enterprise.

However, entrepreneurship is more than an economic function. The essence is the application of innovatory management processes, directed at bringing about changes of both a social and economic nature. The key to unlocking the potential of entrepreneurship lies within the individual members of society and the degree to which the spirit of enterprise exists or can be stimulated. Furthermore, without this personal initiative, the process of entrepreneurship is a non starter. The most important of the rewards of an entrepreneur is independence, followed by personal satisfaction.

Entrepreneurship plays important roles in the economic system of a nation. Government establishments cannot provide jobs for all the graduating scholars from tertiary institutions. The small business enterprises usually come to rescue providing employment for at least some commensurable percentage. According to Anukam (2009), entrepreneurship “provides employment for the unemployed and ensue the dispersion of industries to the hinterlands, the people’s lives are improved” (p. 77). An entrepreneur is the one who add value to the economic well being of himself and others.

**Implications of John Dewey’s Instrumentalism on Entrepreneurial Development**

John Dewey’s instrumentalism is pertinent to the contemporary Nigerian business environment. The demand for skilled workers and qualified technicians is already cute and will become ever more intense as the industrial sector becomes the dominant provider of employment. Unfortunately, there is a mismatch between educational training and the requirement of labour market in Nigeria. The present technological inventions require formal education to produce a knowledge-based workforce for national development.

From a philosophical perspective, entrepreneurship education falls within the philosophy of education for self-reliance. It is the cardinal point of the pragmatist educational ideas, which emphasizes learning by doing. John Dewey and his followers in the school of pragmatism condemn an educational system which only dwell on accumulation of what they called “dead facts and knowledge” without its application in solving human problems.

Hence, entrepreneurship or business education ought to be inculcated in schools to provide students with an understanding of business—its purposes, its structure, and its interrelationship with other segments of the economy and society. It equips students in many aspects such as self-empowerment, values clarification, role modeling and system thinking. Entrepreneur education plays an essential role in shaping attitudes, skills and culture—from the primary level up. Entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and behavior can be learnt. The exposure to entrepreneurship education throughout an individual’s lifelong learning paths, starting from youth and continuing through adulthood into higher education—as well as reaching out to those economically or socially excluded—is imperative.

Dewey’s instrumentalism believes that humans use intelligence to cope with a conflict or challenge and that experimentation is vital to life. The implications Dewey’s instrumentalism has on business strategic management approach are that the entrepreneur takes decision on conditions of uncertainty, balancing potential success against potential loss whether or not he chooses a “risky” alternative or a conservative alternative which depends on the attractiveness of the alternative; the extent to which he is prepared to accept the potential loss; the relative probabilities of success and failure and the degree of which one’s effort increase the likelihood of success and decrease the likelihood of failure (Osemeke, 2012).
JOHN DEWEY’S INSTRUMENTALISM ON ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

The prospect of instrumentalism in the establishment of business development strategy is imperative. There are some important business strategies that enhance entrepreneurial skills. The first one is identification of business opportunities. The primary function of the entrepreneur is to identify business/investment opportunities that constitute potential demand and this takes training and experience to learn coupled with information gathering from such organizations and centres vested with the responsibility of collecting and publishing data on economic and industrial trend.

Another important strategy is the allocation of resources. The effective allocation of the limited resources available to the entrepreneur is a crucial factor in entrepreneurial function. The resources can be man, money, material and machine (4 Ms) should be greatly mobilized and allocated for maximum benefit (Nzegbullem & Odionye, 2016). Moreover, business environment is dynamic; the entrepreneur must be a good planner to enable him foresees the future. This is so because effective planning and controlling are the basic ingredients for the survival and growth of the enterprise. On the other hand, Akanwa and Agu (2012) admonished that the entrepreneur should not only concern himself with starting a business, he should also be preoccupied with maintaining and sustaining the business. To this, he must understand the management principles and theories like motivating personnel, provision of effective leadership, delegation, etc.

Again, one of the strategies of business is creation of employment opportunities. The managers of big business organization employ people with requisite skills in order to achieve the enterprise objectives. However, successful entrepreneurial development appears to rest on three basic skills namely: conceptual, technical and human skills. These skills are interrelated. Conceptual skill involves the ability to see the enterprise as whole which includes recognizing how the various functions of the organization in Nigeria depends on one another. It also extends to visualizing the relationship of the individual business to industry, the community as well as the political, social and economic forces of the nation as a whole. It advances the over-all welfare of the total organization. Thus, the success of the strategic decision-making depends on the conceptual skill of the entrepreneur who makes decision and those who put it to action.

Human skill, on the other hand, is the ability to work effectively as a group member and to develop cooperative effort within the term he leads. On the other words, it is the ability to work with others. But, technical skill is quite different from human and conceptual skills in the sense that it has to do with working with things (processes or physical objects). It involves specialized knowledge, and the technical ability with one’s area of specialization. This is the skill required of the greatest number of entrepreneurs. The Federal Government has established many agencies to improve the vocational skill of the Nigeria youths towards solving the growing unemployment problem of the economy, like Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), NDE, Small and Medium Industries Equity Investment Scheme (SMIEIS), Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), and others. These agencies help to remove constraints on entrepreneurs and expound the opportunities available to them by providing information and needed training, financial assistance, which are considered germane to entrepreneurial development.

Critical Evaluation of John Dewey Instrumentalism and Entrepreneurship

John Dewey’s instrumentalism has contributed so much in the scientific and technological innovations in the modern period. But, there are some objections in this theory. Popper (1935) criticized Dewey’s instrumentalism as being too mechanical and focused on mere computation. Although science might apply empirical or instrumental theories, the epistemological or reality-based theory, revealing truths independently
of experience which John Dewey denied are equally valid. For example, he postulates that pure science such as mathematics and logic can make true statement without observing facts-of-the case.

His instrumentalism asserts that all values are tentative. In other words, it does not admit of any static or objective value system. This cannot be true in the Nigerian case, where there is stable value system. This is why national policy on education repeatedly emphasized that the quality of instruction at all levels of education has to be oriented towards inculcating, among other things, moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations. Admittedly, some school administrators still make full use of this opportunity for religious instruction and value orientation. But sadly too, others perhaps, taking refuge in the valueless mantra of Dewey, have turned our institutions of learning into a nursery for future atheists and secular humanists.

Dewey’s projection of scientific method as the only genuine technique for problem-solving tends to be a new type of authoritarianism which he spent a great deal of his time and energy condemning in traditional education. His avowal that education must be exclusively earthbound, limited to the experiential world needs to be revisited, because it is in itself an extreme position, an inflexible claim which puts a stain on the consistency of his system.

Dewey’s instrumentalism is quite relevant to entrepreneurial education. Entrepreneurial education in Nigeria is a wishful thinking as a result of inadequate funding. Basic equipments and facilities are lacking in vocational institutions and workshops. In addition, part of the major challenges facing entrepreneurship development in vocational and training is lack of skilled man power. The goals of entrepreneurial education in Nigeria cannot be actualized unless teachers are trained and empowered. Also, there can be no development in society that is lacking entrepreneurs or innovators who are prepared to risk their capital in business enterprise.

Again, there is absence of linkages between training agencies and tertiary institutions. Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria have Department of Business Administration and Entrepreneurship studies which offer courses in Entrepreneurial study management, etc. There is little or no evidence of collaborative arrangements and enterprise development agencies in the country. It is important to introduce a mentorship programme in the training activities, so that young entrepreneurs can learn from successful businessmen. Successful businessmen should also be invited to give at least one lecture during each training programme so that beneficiaries learn from actual experiences of others.

**Conclusion**

This work has examined John Dewey’s thought on instrumentalism and how it influences or impacts on the business enterprise of the contemporary Nigerian society. It has established that entrepreneurial education which is the engine fuelling innovation, employment generation and economic growth can positively impact a learner at all levels in a wide range of context. This may explain why there are such a wide variety of entrepreneurship education programmes, all of which can provide important outcomes at various stages of learner’s life. Business education contributes to a state’s economic advancement in the form of job creation, income growth and poverty reduction. Helping young people unlock their entrepreneurial potentials is not only good for each individual; it is also a sound national fiscal and educational policy. This is because successful businesses tomorrow will come from the entrepreneurship of today’s youth. Entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and behaviours can be learned, and that exposure to entrepreneurship education through an individual’s lifelong learning path, starting from youth and continuing through adulthood into higher education, is imperative.
References


