

Pragmatism in Education: Study Notes

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Meaning of Pragmatism:

The word Pragmatism is of Greek origin (pragma, matos = deed, from prassein = to do).

But it is a typical American school of philosophy. It is intimately related with the American life and mind. It is the product of practical experiences of life.

It arises out of actual living. It does not believe in fixed and eternal values. It is dynamic and ever-changing. It is a revolt against Absolutism. Reality is still in the making. It is never complete.

Our judgement happens to be true if it gives satisfactory results in experience, i.e., by the way it works out. A judgement in itself is neither true nor false. There are no established systems of ideas which will be true for all times. It is humanistic in as much as it is concerned more with human life and things of human interest than with any established tenets. Therefore, it is called humanism.

Pragmatism means action, from which the words practical and practice have come. The idealist constructs a transcendental ideal, which cannot be realised by man. The pragmatist lays down standards which are attainable. Pragmatists are practical people.

They face problems and try to solve them from practical point of view. Unlike idealists they live in the world of realities, not in the world of ideals. Pragmatists view life as it is, while idealists view life as it should be. The central theme of pragmatism is activity.

Educative experiences in life depend upon two things:

(a) Thought

(b) Action.

The emphasis of pragmatism is on action rather than on thought. Thought is subordinated to action. It is made an instrument to find suitable means for action. That is why pragmatism is also called Instrumentalism. Ideas are tools. Thought enlarges its scope and usefulness by testing itself on practical issues.

Since pragmatism advocates the experimental method of science, it is also called Experimentalism — thus stressing the practical significance of thought. Experimentalism involves the belief that thoughtful action is in its nature always a kind of testing of provisional conclusions and hypotheses.

Pragmatism has no obstructive dogmas. It accepts everything that has practical consequences. Even mystical experiences are accepted if they have practical results. Unlike idealists they believe that philosophy emerges out of educational practices while the idealists say that “education is the dynamic side of philosophy”. The chief exponents of Pragmatism are William James (1842-1910), Schiller, and John Dewey (1859-1952).

Pragmatism in Education:

In the present world pragmatism has influenced education tremendously. It is a practical and utilitarian philosophy. It makes activity the basis of all teaching and learning. It is activity around which an educational process revolves.

It makes learning purposeful and infuses a sense of reality in education. It makes schools into workshops and laboratories. It gives an experimental character to education. Pragmatism makes man optimistic, energetic and active. It gives him self-confidence. The child creates values through his own activities.

According to pragmatism, education is not the dynamic side of philosophy as advocated by the idealists. It is philosophy which emerges from educational practice. Education creates values and formulates ideas which constitute pragmatic philosophy.

Pragmatism is based on the psychology of individual differences. Pragmatists want education according to aptitudes and abilities of the individual. Individual must be respected and education planned to cater to his inclinations and capacities. But individual development must take place in social context. Every individual has a social self and an individuality can best be developed in and through society.

Thus pragmatism has brought democracy in education. That is why it has advocated self-government in school. The children must learn the technique of managing their own affairs in the school and that would be a good preparation for life.

Education is preparation for life. Pragmatism makes a man socially efficient. The pragmatists are of the opinion that the children should-not be asked to work according to predetermined goals. They should determine their goals according to their needs and interests.

Teaching-learning process is a social and bi-polar process. Learning takes place as an interaction between the teacher and the taught. While idealism gives first place to the teacher, pragmatism gives the first place to the taught. Similarly, between thought and action, they give first place to action. The pragmatists decry verbalism and encourage action. Today pragmatism occupies the most dominant place in the United States of America.

According to pragmatism the theory and practice of education is based on two main principles, viz:

- (i) Education should have a social function, and
- (ii) Education should provide real-life experience to the child.

Pragmatism and Aims of Education:

Pragmatism does not lay down any aims of education in advance. It believes that there can be no fixed aims of education. Life is dynamic and subject to constant change, and hence the aims of education are bound to be dynamic. Education deals with human life. It must help the children to fulfill their biological and social needs.

The only aim of education, according to pragmatism, is to enable the child to create values in his life. In the words of Ross, education must create new values: “the main task of educator is to put the educand into a position to develop values for himself”.

The pragmatist educator aims at the harmonious development of the educand — physical, intellectual, social and aesthetic. The aim of education, therefore, is to direct “the impulses, interests, desires and abilities towards ‘the satisfaction of the felt wants of the child in his environment.’”

Since the pragmatists believe that man is primarily a biological and social organism, education should aim at the development of social efficiency in man. Every child should be an effective member of the society. Education must fulfill his own needs as well as the needs of the society.

The children should be so trained that they may be able to solve their present-day problems efficiently and to adjust themselves to their social environment. They should be creative and effective members of the society. Their outlook should be so dynamic that they can change with the changing situations.

What pragmatism wants to achieve through education is the cultivation of a dynamic, adaptable mind which will be resourceful and enterprising in all situations, the mind which will have powers to create values in an unknown future. Education must foster competence in the children that they may be able to tackle the problems of future life.

Pragmatism and Curriculum:

The aims of education are reflected in the curriculum. The pragmatic aims can only be reflected in a pragmatic curriculum. The curriculum should be framed on the basis of

certain basic principles. These are utility, interest, experience and integration. Practical utility is the watchword of pragmatism.

Hence those subjects, which have utility to the students should be included in the curriculum. The subjects which carry occupational or vocational utility should find a place in the curriculum. Language, hygiene, history, geography, physics, mathematics, sciences, domestic science for girls, agriculture for boys should be incorporated in the curriculum.

While deciding the subjects of curriculum the nature of the child, his tendencies, interests, impulses at the various stages of his growth and multiple activities of daily life should be taken into consideration. The subjects like psychology and sociology — which deal with human behaviour — should be included in the curriculum.

The pragmatists advocate that the pupils should not be taught dead facts and theories because these may not help them to solve the problems of life. The subjects which help to solve the practical problems of life should be included in the school curriculum, particularly at the elementary stage.

The pragmatic aim of education is to prepare the child for a successful and well-adjusted life. He must be fully adjusted to his environment.

The pragmatists hold the view that the students should acquire that knowledge which is helpful to them in solving the present-day problems. They should learn only those skills which are useful to them in practical life. With this end in view the elementary school curriculum should include subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, nature study, hand-work and drawing.

According to pragmatism, all education is “learning by doing”. So it must be based on the child’s experiences as well as occupations and activities. Besides the school subjects, free, purposive and socialised activities should be in the curriculum. The pragmatists do not allow the inclusion of cultural activities in the curriculum, because they think these activities have no practical value. But this view is somewhat narrow and biased.

The pragmatists believe in the unity of all knowledge and skill. They prefer to give integrated knowledge round a particular problem of life. They do not like to divide subjects of instructions into water-tight compartments. Life is the subject matter of instruction. Its various problems studied in complete perspective are fit subjects of instruction.

Pragmatism and Methods of Teaching:

The principle of philosophy of pragmatic method of teaching is practical utility. The child is the central figure in this method. Pragmatic method is an activity-based method. The essence of pragmatic method is learning through personal experience of the child. To a pragmatist education means preparation for practical life.

The child should know the art of successful tackling of practical problems and real situations of life. Pragmatic method is thus a problem-solving method. The child has to be placed in real situations which he has to tackle.

The pragmatists are not interested in lectures or theoretical exposition. They want the children to do something. Action rather than contemplation figures prominently in pragmatic education. The child should learn by doing. “Learning by doing” is the great maxim of pragmatic education.

To the pragmatist — “education is not so much teaching the child things he ought to know, as encouraging him to learn for himself through experimental and creative activity”. Learning by doing makes a person creative, confident and cooperative. The pragmatic method is socialistic in nature. His learning should be thoroughly purposive. He should learn to fulfill the purpose of his life.

The method employed by the pragmatist teacher is experimental. The pupil is required to discover the truth for himself. To facilitate this discovery the application of the inductive and heuristic methods of teaching is necessary. Experiences should, therefore, be planned to arouse the curiosity of children to acquire knowledge.

The business of the teacher, therefore, is to teach his pupils to do rather than to know, to discover for themselves rather than to collect dry information. It is the business of the teacher to arouse “interest” in children. Interest is a watchword in pragmatic education.

Textbooks and teachers are not so much important in pragmatic education. Their position is secondary in the teaching- learning process. They are required to suggest and prompt only. The teacher suggests problems, indicates the lines of active solution and then leaves the students to experiment for themselves. The child learns for himself. Pragmatic education is thus auto-education or self-education.

Pragmatic method is a Project Method which is of American origin. “A project is a whole-hearted purposeful activity, proceeding in a social environment.” This definition is given by Kilpatrick, a follower of Dewey. A project has also been defined in other ways.

According to Dr. Stevenson a project is “a problematic act carried to completion in its natural setting.” Thorndike defines a project as “The planning and carrying out of some practical accomplishment.” A “project is a voluntary undertaking which involves constructive effort or thought and eventuates into objective results.”

The school tasks, therefore, should be such that arouse the eagerness of the children to do them. Such tasks are real, purposeful and related with life. The projects involve participation in social relationships, division of labor, willing acceptance of responsibility to the community “and they afford valuable preparation for playing a worthy part in a complex society.”

A pragmatist teacher requires only the child and his “physical and social environment”. Rest will follow. The child will react to environment, will interact on and thus gain experiences. The pragmatist does not, however, fix up his methods once and for all. His methods are dynamic, varying from time to time and class to class. If the essentials of teaching-learning situation are present the method will automatically follow.

The most general method of a pragmatist teacher, according to Ross, is “to put the child into situations with which he wants him to grapple and providing him, at the same time, with the means of dealing with them successfully.”

Pragmatism and the Teacher:

In Naturalism the teacher is merely an onlooker. Idealism regards him as an indispensable authority. In Pragmatism the teacher is not either of the two. He stands midway. According to Pragmatism a teacher is useful, even though not indispensable.

The position of the teacher is of a guide and adviser. He is the helper and prompter. He should teach “his pupils to think and act for themselves to do rather than to know, to originate rather than to repeat.”

His importance lies in the fact that he has to suggest suitable problems only to his students and to motivate them in such a way that they can solve the problems with tact, intelligence and cooperation. He is not required to provide raw information to the students from the textbooks. The pupils will gain knowledge and skill at their own initiative. Doing is more important than knowing.

Pragmatism and Discipline:

Pragmatism does not believe in external restraint and discipline enforced by the superior authority of the teacher and the award of punishments. It advocates discipline based on the principles of child’s activities and interests. It upholds discipline based on social and mutual understanding. It believes in engaging the children in free and purposeful real activities of human life.

This process gives him a discipline which is acquired in every kind of real and creative work, as a very natural consequence of the activity itself. Thus the discipline in pragmatic system of education is to be self-discipline, the discipline of the pupil’s own work and purposeful and creative activity. Imposed and rigid discipline can have no place in the pragmatic school.

“In pragmatic scheme of education the children are expected to work in cooperation with one another. They are to take up a project on real problem, and to work at it as a team. These cooperative activities impart to them very useful qualities of social life — sympathy, give and take, fellow-feeling, spirit of sacrifice and toleration — which constitute an invaluable moral training for them.”

The school is the representative of the greater community. It is a society in miniature. Therefore, the school has to provide for all those activities which constitute the normal life of the community. It has to provide for the socialised, free and purposive activities. These activities provide the pupils a very useful training in citizenship.

Criticism of Pragmatism:

The philosophy of pragmatism has been severely criticised on various grounds. Pragmatism does not advocate any absolute standards. Education is to help man to create his new standards of life. In the absence of eternal values, there is very likelihood of a vacuum being created in social organism.

It may lead to many vices in the society. Eternal values create social cohesion and harmony. Without values human conduct cannot be evaluated. Pragmatism neglects cherished values of humanity. It is, of course, true that human values change with the change of time and circumstances.

It is true that action is important and it may generate thinking. But it is equally true that all thinking does not proceed from action only. Truth is an end in itself. Rusk stresses that “if culture is to be saved, it must be by developing in pupils a love of knowledge for its own sake; the pragmatist is right in maintaining that practical activities must provide the incentive to learning, but the end must be the development of a disinterested activity.”

Pragmatism opposes the spiritual values. It advocates extreme type of utilitarianism. It develops a super-ego in man and leaves little scope for selfless humanitarianism. Too much experimentalism is as bad as too much of faith and traditionalism.

Pragmatism appears to be too radical and sceptical. It works towards denial of authority. Man has his limitations. To describe human purpose as the yardstick to perform actions cannot be accepted as the whole story of human existence.

The pragmatic aims of education are vague. Pragmatic methodology of teaching is also not free from criticism. Pragmatism tries to build knowledge through projects and experiments. Gaps are often left in such type of knowledge. The curriculum may be given a vocational and social efficiency bias, but wholesale condemnation of liberal studies and cultural subjects is not justified. Accomplishment of a task cannot be judged by results alone.

Pragmatism is considered by European philosophers as of little value — ‘an eccentricity peculiar to Americans’ (PEARS Cyclopedia). When William James asserted “If a hypothesis works satisfactorily it is true’ Russell refuted it by saying: “The hypothesis of Santa Claus works satisfactorily — it brings goodwill world over. So, to James, ‘Santa Claus exists’ is true. To me, it is false!” (Ibid)

Contribution of Pragmatism:

In spite of its drawbacks, pragmatism has immensely contributed to the theory and practice of education. It is not only a practical philosophy but also a progressive one. It conceives education as a dynamic and life-long process.

Man always creates new values and education should help him in doing so. Pragmatism is not based on fixed values. It is a dynamic and adaptable social philosophy. Learning is true and real only when it comes through doing. Project method is an activity method. It develops sociability in students. It also generates a sense of cooperation among them.

A project is to be completed not within the four walls of a school building but in constant contact with the community. Its opposition to formalism and artificiality, its emphasis on practical result, its bias towards social efficiency, its critical spirit — all have revolutionized education. It has accelerated the pace of democracy in educational institutions. Its humanistic and social approach in education ensures better citizens.

