



MODULE CODE: **ECES7004**

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT: **1 - Portfolio**

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AI Acknowledgement

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

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I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) on 01/12/2025 – 12/01/2026 to research and proofreading. I used the prompt(s):

1. What is the Context History of both John Amos Comenius and John Dewey?
2. What modern Theorists have links to both Dewey and Comenius?
3. How do I correctly format an academic portfolio?
4. Proofread this for clarity and grammatical errors
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Comenius and Dewey: Educational Evolution

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Introduction

Educational debates often focus on how structured learning should be, how much choice learners should have, and what schools are meant to achieve. These questions can be traced to influential thinkers such as John Amos Comenius and John Dewey, whose ideas continue to shape education today. Although they lived in different periods, both were concerned with how people learn, fairness in education and its wider social purpose.

Despite being separated by nearly three centuries, Comenius and Dewey both rejected education as simple instruction. Comenius supported structured, universal education to promote moral development and social harmony, while Dewey argued that education should prepare people for democratic life through experience and problem-solving.

This paper explores how their ideas relate to modern education, showing how their combined perspectives help explain ongoing debates about fairness, participation and meaningful learning.

Historical Review

The history of educational thought has been profoundly shaped by John Amos Comenius and John Dewey, whose ideas continue to influence debates about teaching, learning and the purposes of schooling. Although separated by nearly three centuries, both shared a central conviction: education should nurture human potential and contribute to moral, social and civic flourishing rather than function as technical instruction alone (Biesta, 2013; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). In this view, education is a social endeavour that shapes not only individual learners but also the character of societies.

Comenius and Dewey represent two foundational trajectories in educational theory. Comenius is widely regarded as an early architect of structured, developmental pedagogy, organising learning in carefully sequenced stages aligned with children's development (Illmer, 2021; Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky, 2019). Dewey, by contrast, is a central figure in constructivist and socially oriented learning, which views knowledge as something learners actively construct through experience and interaction rather than passively receive (Dewey, 1916; Glassman, 2001). Examining them together highlights enduring tensions in education, including structure versus inquiry, curriculum sequencing versus experiential learning, and individual development versus collective responsibility tensions that remain visible in contemporary debates about curriculum design, student voice and the democratic role of schools (Biesta and Säfström, 2023).

Comenius wrote in seventeenth-century Europe during a period of war, religious conflict and political instability. These conditions shaped his belief that education could promote peace, moral harmony and social cohesion (Murphy, 2020). Often described as the “father of modern education,” he advocated universal and systematic schooling organised around developmental readiness, challenging elitist assumptions and positioning education as a right and shared social responsibility (Illmer, 2021; Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky, 2019). Central to his philosophy was the belief that learning should begin with sensory experience and gradually move toward abstraction (Floss, 2014). This emphasis on clarity and sequencing influenced early

curriculum design and age-graded schooling and anticipated later psychological theories of development (Piaget, 1952).

Dewey wrote in the context of rapid industrialisation and social change in the United States. He criticised traditional, authoritarian schooling for producing passive compliance rather than reflective judgment. Dewey framed education as participation in democratic life, arguing that schools should function as communities in which learners practise shared inquiry and dialogue (Dewey, 1916, pp. 99–102; Glassman, 2001). Inquiry, understood as learning through questioning, problem-solving and reflection, positioned learning as an active, experience-based process that develops habits of cooperation and reasoned discussion (Garrison *et al.*, 2016).

Dewey rejected rote memorisation because learning detached from meaning does not support flexible application in real-world contexts (Dewey, 1916). His work laid foundations for later constructivist and socio-cultural theories emphasising the social nature of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1960). Despite different foundations, Comenius grounded in moral order, Dewey in democratic experience, both advocated learner-centred education and active participation. Their ideas remain influential because modern education systems combine elements of both traditions, requiring ongoing negotiation between coherence and participation, sequencing and inquiry, and standardisation and meaningful engagement (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Biesta and Säfström, 2023).

Exploration of Theories

Comenius and Dewey represent two major trajectories in educational theory: early modern humanistic pedagogy and modern progressive democratic education. Together, they helped shift education away from transmission-based teaching, where knowledge is delivered from teacher to student, toward approaches that recognise learners as active participants in learning (Biesta, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This shift is not simply from “teacher-led” to “child-led” education. Rather, their dialogue reframes deeper questions about what counts as understanding, the responsibilities of teachers, how knowledge connects to lived experience, and how schooling serves wider human and social purposes.

Their influence extends across multiple educational traditions. Comenius’s emphasis on sensory experience, developmental sequencing and universal education influenced later approaches such as Froebel’s play-based pedagogy and Montessori’s prepared learning environments. These traditions share the assumption that learning should align with developmental readiness and be carefully structured to support understanding. Dewey’s emphasis on inquiry learning through questioning, problem-solving and reflection, informed constructivist and socio-cultural theories developed by Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, which view knowledge as actively constructed through social interaction and cultural tools. Dewey’s ideas also influenced Freire’s emancipatory pedagogy, foregrounding power, voice and social justice in education (Freire, 1970). Together, these lines of influence show that Comenius and Dewey function not as isolated “founders” but as enduring reference points within evolving educational traditions.

Reading Comenius and Dewey together highlights tensions that remain central to contemporary pedagogy. One concerns structure, understood as organisation, sequencing and guidance, and how much of it learners require to succeed. Another concerns agency, meaning learners’ capacity to influence their learning and participate meaningfully in educational processes (Garrison *et al.*, 2016; Glassman, 2001). Curriculum debates often hinge on whether explicit teaching and carefully sequenced content are necessary to ensure equity, particularly for learners who rely on school for access to academic knowledge, or whether such approaches constrain

curiosity and reinforce compliance. Similarly, student voice initiatives may reflect Deweyan ideals of participation while operating within Comenian structures, such as fixed curricula and assessment systems that limit genuine influence. Tracing these debates to their theoretical roots helps explain both their persistence and their practical difficulty.

The Comenius–Dewey dialogue also shows that educational theory is a debate about ends as well as means. Comenius framed education as a route to moral improvement and social harmony, grounded in an ordered view of human development. Dewey framed education as preparation for democratic participation, where learners develop habits of inquiry, cooperation and judgment (Biesta, 2013). This distinction continues to shape disputes about whether education should prioritise measurable outcomes, civic character, wellbeing or social transformation.

Taken together, their legacy is best understood as complementary rather than oppositional. Comenius foregrounds coherence, intentional design and equitable access to knowledge, while Dewey foregrounds meaning, agency and democratic participation. Their dialogue reframes enduring educational tensions as questions of balance, sequencing and equity, offering a framework for navigating contemporary debates about structure, inquiry and educational purpose.

Theoretical Foundations and the Social Purpose of Learning

The theoretical foundations of Comenius and Dewey are best understood relationally, as an ongoing dialogue about learning, development and social purpose. Both address how learning unfolds; how educational experience should be structured and how education relates to moral and social life. Comenius grounded education in an orderly developmental progression from the simple to the complex and from sensory experience toward abstraction (Illmer, 2021; Floss, 2014). Dewey rejected fixed developmental sequencing but shared Comenius's rejection of passive learning, framing growth as continuous and shaped by experience and social interaction (Dewey, 1916; Glassman, 2001). In both cases, knowledge emerges through carefully designed engagement with the world rather than passive transmission.

A key convergence is their emphasis on experience. Comenius argued that understanding begins in the senses, and his illustrated texts sought to make learning concrete and accessible by linking language closely to perception (Floss, 2014). Dewey extended this into a broader account of educative experience, where inquiry and reflection within meaningful contexts generate learning over time (Dewey, 1938). He also stressed that experience must be organised to be educative, anticipating contemporary theories of multimodal and experiential learning that emphasise embodied cognition and active engagement (Bronkhorst *et al.*, 2023).

Their clearest divergence concerns how structure is justified and organised. Comenius viewed structured sequencing as essential, aligning with later cognitivist models emphasising guided progression and scaffolding (Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky, 2019). For Comenius, structure functions as care, protecting learners from confusion and enabling progression. Dewey also valued structure but resisted rigid sequencing imposed externally, arguing that it should emerge from meaningful problems and remain flexible within social contexts (Garrison *et al.*, 2016).

Read together, their work clarifies that structure and inquiry are interdependent rather than oppositional. Comenius helps explain why novices often require clarity, modelling and carefully sequenced concepts, while Dewey explains why learning becomes inert when knowledge is disconnected from purpose and lived experience

(Glassman, 2001). Research supports this balance, particularly for diverse learners, as the absence of structure can disadvantage those who rely on school for access to academic knowledge, while the absence of inquiry can undermine engagement (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Haßler *et al.*, 2020).

Their foundations also differ in purpose. Comenius grounded education in moral and spiritual flourishing, aiming at wisdom and social harmony (Murphy, 2020). Dewey reframed educational purpose in democratic terms, emphasising participation in shared civic life (Biesta, 2013). Despite these differences, both resist narrow instrumentalism that reduces education to economic utility.

Critical engagement reveals limits on both sides. Universal developmental assumptions risk marginalising diverse trajectories (Kim, 2019; Suggate, 2022), while inquiry-based ideals can presume conditions and resources that are unevenly available (Nolan and Rouse, 2017; Lynch, 2020). Without scaffolding, inquiry may reproduce inequality (Cook and Brown, 2022; Ryu and Sandoval, 2019). Their combined legacy is therefore best understood as complementary insight: Comenius foregrounds coherence and access, Dewey foregrounds meaning and participation. Later socio-cultural theories build bridges between them, reframing their tension as a pedagogical problem of balance, sequencing and equity rather than a choice between competing philosophies (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1960; Rogoff, 2020).

Learners and Educational Purpose

Considered together, Comenius and Dewey provide a layered and complementary account of learners and educational aims. Both reject authoritarian schooling and treat learners as active participants in learning, yet they differ in how development, readiness and agency are conceptualised. Comenius viewed learners as naturally curious and developing through broadly identifiable stages, requiring instruction aligned with readiness and age-appropriateness (Illmer, 2021). In his account, learning progresses from sensory engagement toward abstraction, with teachers carefully organising experiences to build systematically on prior understanding and prevent confusion (Floss, 2014). Dewey rejected fixed developmental stages, framing learning instead as continuous growth shaped by experience, inquiry and social interaction. Understanding develops as learners engage with meaningful problems, reflect on consequences and construct meaning through dialogue within social contexts (Dewey, 1916).

Taken together, their perspectives highlight a productive and enduring tension between developmental guidance and learner agency. Comenius emphasised structure, clarity and progression to ensure coherence and to prevent cognitive overload, particularly for novice learners encountering unfamiliar concepts. Dewey emphasised participation and inquiry to ensure relevance and to cultivate habits of reflection, judgment and responsibility rather than compliance. Contemporary theory increasingly supports the integration of these approaches, recognising that learners benefit from explicit guidance to establish shared conceptual foundations alongside opportunities for exploration, application and meaning-making (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). In practice, this balance often appears as cycles of instruction and inquiry, where teachers introduce key ideas explicitly and then design collaborative tasks that allow learners to discuss, test and apply those ideas in meaningful contexts.

Their educational purposes similarly diverge while remaining complementary. Comenius framed education as moral and spiritual formation, aiming to cultivate wisdom, virtue and social harmony within an ordered vision of human development (Murphy, 2020). Even where theological language is no longer adopted, this holistic impulse remains influential, reinforcing the idea that education is a formative process

rather than mere training. Dewey reframed educational purpose in secular-democratic terms, arguing that schools should prepare learners for participation in shared civic life by developing capacities for cooperation, inquiry and shared responsibility (Garrison *et al.*, 2016). Both perspectives resist narrow outcome-driven approaches that prioritise measurable performance over ethical judgment, civic capability and social responsibility (Biesta and Säfström, 2023).

This combined perspective also sharpens attention to inclusion and equity. Comenius's universalism risks marginalising learners whose developmental trajectories do not align with normative expectations when progression is interpreted rigidly (Kim, 2019; Suggate, 2022). Dewey's emphasis on dialogue and participation can likewise exclude quieter learners or those lacking linguistic or cultural capital unless teachers deliberately attend to power relations and participation structures (Lynch, 2020). Without intentional scaffolding, practices such as student voice may become symbolic or performative rather than genuinely inclusive (Cook and Brown, 2022; Ryu and Sandoval, 2019).

Crucially, the entwined perspective clarifies that learner agency is not a starting point but an educational outcome. Deweyan democratic participation presupposes capacities—disciplinary language, background knowledge, collaborative norms and reflective habits—that schooling must deliberately cultivate (Dewey, 1916; Garrison *et al.*, 2016). From this perspective, Comenius's emphasis on clarity, sequencing and explicit teaching can be understood as enabling Deweyan aims by providing shared intellectual tools that widen access to participation (Floss, 2014; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, Dewey's democratic purpose offers an ethical test for Comenian structure: sequence and order are educationally defensible only when they serve understanding, inclusion and meaningful participation rather than compliance.

This synthesis strengthens the link between education and equity. When learners arrive with unequal access to academic language and cultural capital, the absence of structured support can magnify gaps (Haßler *et al.*, 2020). Yet when schooling is experienced as irrelevant or silencing, structure alone can produce superficial performance rather than genuine understanding (Glassman, 2001). Seen through both theorists, inclusive education requires pedagogical designs that combine

coherence with participation, enabling learners to grasp core ideas and use them in dialogue, problem-solving and civic reasoning (Cook and Brown, 2022; Ryu and Sandoval, 2019).

A further implication is that agency must be cultivated intentionally. Deweyan participation depends on routines for dialogue, norms of collaboration and shared tools for inquiry capacities that schooling must explicitly teach and practice (Dewey, 1916; Garrison *et al.*, 2016). Comenian clarity can therefore be interpreted as a condition of possibility for democratic participation, because visible expectations and shared conceptual resources widen who can take part (Floss, 2014; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, Dewey's democratic purpose tests the legitimacy of structure: order and sequencing are educationally defensible when they expand understanding and participation rather than enforce compliance.

Educational Methods and Contemporary Relevance

The methods advocated by Comenius and Dewey reflect their commitments and demonstrate convergence in practice. Comenius championed structured learning environments with clear sequencing, explicit guidance and sensory engagement, beginning with concrete experience and moving toward abstraction (Comenius, 1658/1967; Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky, 2019). Such approaches align with scaffolding and explicit teaching and are supported by research showing the importance of guidance for novice learners (Haßler *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly relevant in equity-focused contexts: clear explanations and carefully sequenced tasks can make expectations visible to all learners rather than relying on implicit cultural knowledge.

Dewey argued that structure should arise from meaningful activity rather than predetermined sequences, beginning with problems and experiences drawn from learners' lives and organised through inquiry (Dewey, 1916). This orientation is evident in project-based and experiential education, where learners investigate complex questions, collaborate to produce outputs and reflect on processes and outcomes (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 2020; Larmer and Boss, 2018). Dewey's emphasis on inquiry also positions assessment as more than testing recall; it becomes evaluation of understanding-in-action, including reasoning, communication and collaboration.

Although often treated as oppositional, contemporary evidence and practice increasingly support integrated approaches that combine explicit teaching of core concepts with guided inquiry and collaborative application (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). Within such approaches, Comenian sequencing can support the acquisition of foundational knowledge, while Deweyan inquiry can support transfer, engagement and the development of civic and social capabilities. Both theorists opposed rote memorisation: Comenius sought understanding grounded in experience, while Dewey criticised memorisation detached from meaning and adaptability (Glassman, 2001). Their shared commitment to active learning is visible in multimodal and dialogic approaches that emphasise interaction and meaning making (Bronkhorst *et al.*, 2023; Mercer, 2021).

A practical implication of this integrated approach is the need to differentiate between unguided inquiry and guided inquiry. Dewey's account of inquiry was never a call for minimal teaching; rather, it positioned teachers as designers of environments, questions and supports that make reflective learning possible (Dewey, 1938). This aligns with contemporary evidence that novices require explicit instruction and structured modelling to participate successfully in complex tasks (Haßler *et al.*, 2020). Comenian sequencing can therefore be used to build the conceptual "materials" learners later mobilise in Deweyan projects: vocabulary, key concepts and disciplinary procedures. Once these foundations are established, inquiry becomes more equitable because participation depends less on outside knowledge and more on shared classroom resources (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020).

This also reframes assessment. Comenius supports the value of clarity about what is to be learned, while Dewey supports evaluation of understanding as use and judgment rather than recall. Balanced practice often involves assessing both conceptual mastery and the capacity to apply ideas in discussion, collaboration and problem-solving (Garrison *et al.*, 2016; Mercer, 2021).

Their relevance is particularly clear in inclusive and whole-child frameworks. Comenius's universal educability aligns with inclusive practice and universal design for learning, adapting environments to learners (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). Dewey's emphasis on agency supports student voice, collaboration and democratic engagement (Cook-Sather, 2019; Anderson and Stillman, 2020). However, both face constraints: structured approaches can become inflexible when imposed without responsiveness to diversity, while inquiry requires expertise, time and institutional support often limited by accountability pressures and standardised assessment regimes (Nolan and Rouse, 2017; Thomas and Warren, 2019). The entwined approach therefore requires not only classroom-level decisions but also attention to system conditions that enable teachers to balance structure and inquiry effectively.

Impact Review

The enduring influence of Comenius and Dewey is most clearly visible in the assumptions underpinning modern education systems. Comenius shaped the organisational architecture of schooling through age grading, sequential curricula and systematic progression (Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky, 2019; Illmer, 2021). These features provided stability, scalability and administrative coherence, particularly during periods of rapid educational expansion. Such structures made mass schooling possible and supported the idea that learning should follow an ordered progression accessible to all learners. Dewey did not reject these structures outright but questioned how they were used, insisting that systems must serve democratic and human purposes rather than becoming ends in themselves (Biesta, 2013). Their combined influence is therefore evident in the coexistence of structured curriculum frameworks with pedagogical movements that emphasise inquiry, learner voice and experiential learning.

Both theorists strongly supported universal education, though for different reasons. Comenius grounded this commitment in the principle of universal educability, asserting that all people are capable of learning and therefore entitled to education. Dewey framed universal education as a democratic necessity, arguing that democratic societies depend on educated citizens capable of judgment, cooperation and participation (Garrison *et al.*, 2016). In contemporary contexts, this shared legacy is reflected in policy discourses of inclusion, access and rights. However, it also underpins ongoing debates about whether education systems deliver genuine equity or merely equal attendance. Dewey's emphasis on democratic participation sharpens the meaning of equity by highlighting that access alone is insufficient if participation is restricted by structural inequality or classroom practices that privilege certain voices (Lynch, 2020; Biesta and Säfström, 2023).

In practice, the combined influence of Comenius and Dewey is visible in how structure and inquiry are negotiated within classrooms. Comenius's emphasis on sensory grounding, clarity and sequencing continues to inform early education, explicit instruction and curriculum coherence (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Bronkhorst *et al.*, 2023). Dewey's emphasis on inquiry, collaboration and experiential

learning shapes project-based and problem-centred pedagogies that aim to connect learning to real-world contexts (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 2020; Larmer and Boss, 2018). Contemporary classrooms often layer Deweyan inquiry onto Comenian structure, combining explicit teaching with discussion, application and investigation. This hybrid practice reflects evidence that learners require both guidance and agency, and that the absence of either can undermine learning quality and equity (Haßler *et al.*, 2020; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020).

Their impact also extends to inclusive and whole-child frameworks. Comenius supports the principle that learning environments should adapt to learners rather than expecting learners to conform to fixed norms, a foundation for inclusive practice and universal design for learning (Bourke and Loveridge, 2018). Dewey supports participation, social interaction and learner agency as central to meaningful learning and wellbeing (Cook-Sather, 2019; Anderson and Stillman, 2020). However, limitations emerge when these ideas encounter contemporary constraints. Rigid developmental interpretations risk marginalising learners whose trajectories differ from normative expectations (Kim, 2019; Suggate, 2022), while inquiry-based approaches are often constrained by curriculum pressure, limited time and unequal access to resources (Nolan and Rouse, 2017; Thomas and Warren, 2019). Dewey's vision of democratic classrooms may underestimate the effects of wider structural inequality (Lynch, 2020; Biesta and Säfström, 2023), while Comenius's emphasis on universal sequencing requires reinterpretation in light of cultural and neurodiverse variability (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020).

Their legacy therefore endures not as a fixed model but as an evolving dialogue about how education systems can balance coherence and agency. This dialogue is sustained and extended by later socio-cultural and scaffolded accounts of learning, which show how structured guidance and social interaction jointly support development and participation (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1960; Rogoff, 2020).

Reflection

Engagement with the ideas of Comenius and Dewey helps explain why debates about structure, agency and educational purpose persist. These tensions reflect enduring dilemmas in education rather than problems with simple solutions (Biesta, 2013; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). Read together, their work continues to inform contemporary educational practice.

Comenius's emphasis on clarity, sequencing and sensory grounding aligns with research supporting explicit guidance for novice learners (Haßler *et al.*, 2020). While this approach promotes coherence and access, rigid applications risk marginalising learners whose developmental pathways differ from normative expectations (Kim, 2019). Dewey's emphasis on inquiry and democratic participation broadens education beyond academic outcomes to include reflective judgment and civic engagement (Garrison *et al.*, 2016). However, inquiry-based approaches can reproduce inequality if conditions for participation and scaffolding are absent (Cook and Brown, 2022).

Together, Comenius and Dewey support an integrative view in which structure and agency are interdependent. Structure without agency risks compliance, while agency without guidance risks exclusion. Later theorists such as Vygotsky, Bruner and Freire extend this synthesis by demonstrating how structured support and social interaction jointly promote understanding, participation and equity. Overall, their combined legacy offers a valuable framework for evaluating educational practice and supporting inclusive, meaningful learning.

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