



Looking Back to Better Understand Today's Education: A Review of *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* by William Heard Kilpatrick

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Article Type: Book review

To Cite This Article: Kozan, K. (2024). Looking back to better understand today's education: a review of *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* by William Heard Kilpatrick. *Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama*, 20(2), 119-123. <https://doi.org/10.17244/eku.1543099>

Ethical Note: In this research, Research and publication ethics were followed. Ethical approval is not needed for this book review.

Günümüzün Eğitimini Daha İyi Anlayabilmek için Geçmiş Bakmak: William Heard Kilpatrick'in *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* Adlı Kitabının İncelemesi

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Sorumlu Yazar: Kadir Kozan

Makale Türü: Kitap incelemesi

Kaynak Gösterimi: Kozan, K. (2024). Looking back to better understand today's education: a review of *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* by William Heard Kilpatrick. *Eğitimde Kuram ve Uygulama*, 20(2), 119-123. <https://doi.org/10.17244/eku.1543099>

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Abstract

The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process by William Heard Kilpatrick is a very informative book or article, in the author's words, providing some of the earliest insights into the concept of *project* and *project-based learning*. The author's purpose is to attempt to explain the latent concept that is fundamental to the term *project* and claim that the underlying concept should be a part of the way in which we think about education. The reading is eye-opening since what it means by a *project* has certain features some of which are shared with other instructional approaches, thus suggesting a certain level of intertwined relationships among them and having an eclectic approach to project-based learning. For instance, according to the author, a learner's making a dress or building a kite with a clear purpose and intention in a social context are *projects* that would remind the reader of constructionism or social constructionism. To this end, the reading gets the reader to question the origins of some instructional approaches and/or interconnections among them as well as their evolution over time. Finally, the reading also highlights the main features of a *project*: purposefulness, learners' willingness to do it, and happening in a social environment or context. In other words, the reading provides strong lenses to view project-based learning, other relevant instructional approaches, and the interrelationships among them thus making looking back at the past or origins of instructional approaches a precious tool to better understand today's educational context.

Article Info

Keywords: Intention, project, project-based learning, purposefulness, social context willingness

Article History:

Received: 3 September 2024
Revised: 24 December 2024
Accepted: 25 December 2024

Article Type: Book Review

Dijital Oyunların Yabancı Dil Sınıfına Entegrasyonu: İki İngilizce Öğretmeninin PCaRD Deneyimi

Öz

William Heard Kilpatrick'in *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* isimli kitabı, ya da yazarın ifadesiyle makalesi, eğitimde proje kavramına ve proje-tabanlı öğrenmeye yönelik bilgi sunan ilk kaynaklardan bir tanesidir. Yazarın amacı proje-tabanlı öğrenmenin temeli olan proje kelimesinin arkasındaki örtülü kavramı açıklamak ve bu kavramın eğitim ile ilgili düşünmemizin bir parçası olması gerektiğini öne sürmektir. Sunduğu proje kavramının diğer eğitimsel yaklaşımlarla olan benzerlikleri sayesinde bunlar arasında var olası karşılıklı ilişkilere işaret etmesi ve böylece proje-tabanlı öğrenmeye çok yönlü yaklaşması okuyucunun gözünü açmakta. Örneğin, proje olarak örnek verilen bir öğrencinin toplumsal bir bağlam içerisinde açık bir amaçla ve niyetle elbise dikmesi veya uçurtma yapması okuyucuya eğitimde oluşturmacılık ya da toplumsal oluşturmacılığı anımsatmakta. Bu açıdan, okuma okuyucunun eğitimsel yaklaşımların kökenlerini, birbirleriyle ilişkilerini ve tarihsel süreçte evrimlerini düşünmesini sağlamakta. Son olarak, okuma eğitimsel bir projenin temel özelliklerini şöyle sıralamakta: amaçlılık, öğrencilerin istekliliği ve toplumsal bağlam içerisinde olma. Başka bir deyişle, okuma hem proje-tabanlı öğrenmeyi hem de diğer ilgili eğitimsel yaklaşımları ve bunlar arasındaki ilişkileri görmek için bir merceğe görevi görmektedir. Bütün bunlar da bugünün eğitimini daha iyi anlayabilmek için geçmişe yani eğitimsel yaklaşımların kökenlerine bakmanın değerli bir araç olabileceğini düşündürmektedir.

Makale Bilgisi

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amaçlılık, isteklilik, niyet, proje, proje tabanlı öğrenme, toplumsal bağlam

Makale Geçmişi:

Geliş: 3 Eylül 2024
Düzeltilme: 24 Aralık 2024
Kabul: 25 Aralık 2024

Makale Türü: Kitap İncelemesi

It was intriguing to read *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* by William Heard Kilpatrick (1918/1922) since it is one of the main and earliest sources of project-based learning that is a common practice in education today. The original intention behind doing this reading was to understand the very origins of project-based learning, and the reading turned out to be very useful in that sense as well as raising questions about the interrelationships between project-based learning and other instructional approaches. The version of the book or the article (henceforth: the reading) reviewed here is the 7th edition published in 1922. The version is a reprint from the University of Michigan Libraries collection. The reading does not have any chapters and consists of 18 pages devoted to main textual content. On page 5, Kilpatrick calls the book an article while providing it as an example of *project*: “my writing this article”. The reading is an interesting read *pro-jecting* Kilpatrick’s insights into the unifying and essential elements of education thereby shedding light on the origins or history of project-based learning. Accordingly, in what follows, the present paper analytically reviews the key aspects of project-based learning as covered in the reading, and lets the reader compare their understanding and/or practice of project-based learning with them. We highly suggest the readers compare what they know about and/or their use of project-based learning with the current analytical review.

To begin with, the author starts by highlighting that the concept of *project* is the most recent candidate term to be used in education and questions whether we should let it be a part of education. The author claimed that the value of a new term to be used in education should be based on: (a) whether there is a significant concept behind it; and (b) whether the term can properly represent such a concept. The author made it immediately clear that the reading handles the term, *project*, from the first perspective or based on whether there is a significant concept supporting it. Kilpatrick (1918/1922) also pointed out the need for a unifying term that covers the basic features of educational process (e.g., vibrant and owned action/activity, how learning works, ethical quality, and education is life). He further claimed that both educational theory and practice can be enhanced greatly to the extent to which combining all these aspects under one term can succeed. The author concluded that *purposeful act* would be the unifying element he had been looking for, and that the term *project* would relate to the word *purpose* in the *purposeful act*. Then, Kilpatrick explicitly admits that he did not coin the term *project* and he is not the first one using it in education: “Indeed, I do not know how long it had already been in use” (p. 4). According to Kilpatrick, other uses of the term is rather technical and limited or presents it in a general sense while he himself tried to define it more precisely. Most importantly, Kilpatrick highlights that his emphasis is not on the term itself, but the concept it would represent, and that, as long as *project* means “something projected” (p. 4), it represents the concept quite well.

The idea of a *project* above refers to some individual work; however, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) highlights that there are *group projects* as well. An example for a group project would be a class presenting a play or some students getting prepared to read a story to their friends. Combined with the ones above, all these examples show that projects may *project* all sorts of real-life purposes or purposes that would have a value in life. Still, Kilpatrick does not seem to prefer to be too strict and states that a sharp borderline between obligatory and wholehearted purposeful act is hard if not impossible to create, and that “psychological value” increases as a project nears “wholeheartedness” (p. 5). The author adds that some people may want to exclude social environment from the equation, and that he would be OK with it if those same people understand that, still, the concept behind a *project* requires some form of social context for it work successfully and to compare its value with other *projects*.

Why purposeful act? Because it “is the typical unit of the worthy life” (p. 6). Then, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) immediately points out that people should be the active subject of their lives with deliberate intentions not the object of fate or chance in a passive way. Such people, he further claims, focus on “worthy social aims” thus achieving “practical efficiency” and “moral responsibility” (p. 6). Right at this point, the tone becomes ideological: these people are “the ideal of democratic citizenship” (p. 6). Ironically enough, the reading also states that purposeful act is not suitable for “the serf or the slave” and “these poor unfortunates” should be “habituated to act” based on “a maximum of servile acceptance of others’ purposes” and “a minimum of their own purposing” (p. 6). Still, Kilpatrick continues to argue that since purposeful act is at the heart of worthy life in a democracy, it should be a part of educational system as well, which would make education life itself not a preparation for it. *Project* conception, he thinks, can achieve this thus making education and worthy life the same. Specifically, according to Kilpatrick, the conception of *project* also relates to learning by doing since it lets people practice purposeful acts of worthy life “under discriminating guidance” (p. 7). In this sense, learners should be given large limits to purposefully act and should be held responsible again in large limits. Moreover, all stakeholders including peers should have a say in the evaluation of learners’ progress if needed as determined by the teacher.

Kilpatrick (1918/1922), next, switches to discussing the link between purposeful act and how learning works. Interestingly, the author starts by stating that there is no need to explain how learning works in detail and his discussion is adapted from Thorndike. Accordingly, Kilpatrick delves into a behaviorist approach to learning by explaining that every act is a response to an existing situation due to an existing bond in human nervous system. Kilpatrick calls acquiring such bonds or changing them *learning*. As such, descriptions of the conditions under which such bonds happen correspond to how learning works or its laws. For instance, the law of readiness assumes that bonds need to be ready to act since acting becomes satisfying when they are ready and not acting would be annoying in such situations. In contrast, when there is no ready bond, acting would be annoying while not acting would give satisfaction.

The second law, the law of effect, is the one that is crucial to the discussion in the reading according to Kilpatrick (1918/1922). The law of effect is about strengthening or weakening existing bonds based on satisfactory or annoying outcomes. The third one, the law of exercise, is interpreted as “the continued application of “ the second law in the reading thereby covering practice of what is being learned. Kilpatrick highlights that even though there are more laws, there is enough room for a fourth one in the reading only, and it is the law of attitude that is directly related to people’s “capacity for persistent and directed action” (p. 8). According to Kilpatrick, such persistent and directed actions suggest that learning is a natural part of the process, and “(objective) success” (p. 8) is highly likely to happen since actions that bring success strengthen existing bonds due to satisfaction at the level of individual bonds and as a group of bonds “working together” (p. 8). After all, “Set, readiness, persistent action, success, satisfaction, and learning are inherently connected” (p. 8).

As an example of purposeful act using all these laws, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) presents a learner who wants to create a kite that will fly: The learner’s purpose is (a) the source of his motivation or attitude; (b) gets what the learner already knows or can do ready; and (c) lets the learner exercise each step or phase of building the kite. What comes next is intriguing since Kilpatrick claims that aligning with the laws of learning is not the whole story by comparing the processes in which two learners build the same kite one with a wholehearted willingness and the other one due to obligatory directions. The author further asserts that there are similarities and differences in the ways in which the two learners build the same kite, and those similarities should be our minimal priorities or learning tasks to ask for: “Upon such we can feasibly insist, even to the point of punishment if we do so decide” (p. 9). In other words, interestingly, the author leaves the door open to even employing punishment to get learners to do what he thinks is primary to achieve a purpose. Of course, Kilpatrick also thinks that the kite building also involves other features of learners that are matters of “inward thought and feeling” that can be either associate (closely connected) or concomitant (not closely connected) while the author accepts that distinctions among primary, associate and concomitant aspects are not clear (p. 9).

According to Kilpatrick (1918/1922), the set or existing attitude of a learner “conditions the learning process” (p. 10) and there are two types of sets: one that emanates from compulsion and aims at making something to pass, and the second one that does not work through compulsion but through satisfaction originating from success. Both would provide some satisfaction and lead to learning but since they are opposites, they damage part of each other’s satisfaction and resulting learning. The latter set seems to align with the wholehearted purpose Kilpatrick identified before, and the author claims that such a purpose is the one that leads to “a higher degree of skill and knowledge” and more long-term knowledge (p. 10). The reason is that, in the case of such a wholehearted attitude, learners will be able to employ a wider array of their inner resources including readiness, associate responses, thoughts, experiences, satisfaction and interconnections among them, which will not be the case for a learner whose attitude is driven by external forces or the wish to earn enough grade points. Kilpatrick further claims that the concomitant responses between the two differ as well: seeing school as a source of joy vs. not, taking teachers as friends vs. sages, for instance. According to Kilpatrick, “Desirable concomitants are more likely with the hearty purposeful act”, and the two endpoints above are “extremes”, and most learners are in between (p. 11). He further points out that the main question is whether we will try to achieve the first one or not by critiquing that, mostly, American educational system with its main components ranging from instruction to exams work through compulsion thus making learners do things without wholehearted purposeful act: “How many people ‘get an education’ and yet hate books and hate to think?” (p. 11).

Moreover, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) thinks that the richness of one’s life can be measured through “the tendency of what one does to suggest and prepare for succeeding activities”, and that an activity transforming people in such a way that they can now see what they could not see or do what they could not do before does not become dry (p. 12). This is to say that the activity in question has an educational effect. As such, the value of an activity whether it is deliberately educational or not is determined to the extent it directs individuals and those around them toward other similar activities. Kilpatrick argues that American schools lack such activities, which is the result of basing American

educational system on activities that lack real purpose. Still, all these points do not mean that (a) every purpose works; (b) a learner is always a good judge among purposes; and (c) learners should never be pushed against their purposes. In other words, the author warns that his main point is not to mean that we should always accept learners' wishes but we should strive to create and use learners' wholehearted purposes. Still, he adds that there are not necessarily contradictions between the society's expectations and learners' interests, and learners can have "socially desirable interests" (p. 12). Therefore, the unique chance and responsibility of teachers is to guide their learners based on their current interests and achievements towards larger interests and achievements asked for by the society.

From a morality perspective, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) claims that wholehearted purposeful activity can strongly help to develop a moral character while "a selfish individualism" would be the result of the usual "set-task sit-alone-at-your-own-desk" educational process (p. 13). Kilpatrick adds that morality is closely linked to social interactions since it determines a person's actions and attitudes in relation to the well-being of the society, which works through stimulus-response interactions. Then, education should lead to the necessary ideas or stimuli, and the skills to evaluate morality and suitable response bonds all which can be best provided in a social context "under competent supervision" (p. 13). It seems that the supervision task belongs to teachers since "Under the eye of the skillful teacher" learners as a social group will learn what is right or wrong; but, over time, teachers' role should disappear "if we believe in democracy" (13). Further, in such a context, peer approval or disapproval is quite impactful on learning: Such a disapproval can get people to act based on their own decisions more. Kilpatrick highlights the importance of a teacher's guidance here again since learners may tend to procrastinate: "the teacher is responsible for the results" that refer to learners' gaining "ideals necessary for approved social life" (p. 14). All these gains can be achieved more permanently through purposeful activity that mirrors life better and such activities can make the evaluation of these gains better.

According to Kilpatrick (1918/1922), nurturing interest is important at this point, and "maturing" is crucial since infants react to their environments automatically and it take many experiences for them to employ purposes with different levels of accomplishment (p. 14). Likewise, later in the process, learners can have "the conscious choice of steps to the attainment of deliberately formed purposes" (p. 15). This way, what is learned as an end would be a means to achieve another end, and some means can be turned into ends through "special consideration" the latter of which is the most beneficial resource of new intellectual interests (p. 15). Maturing goes hand in hand with increasing "interest span" that refer to the amount of time in which learners' attitude or set is active and learners are engaged in a project (p. 15). Kilpatrick further states that interests can be created, and interest spans can be expanded through "stimulus-response bonds" and in line with "the laws of learning" (p. 15). After all, an external set can create interest, which can be blocked by an internal opposite set thus leading to decreased learning. However, the decreased learning itself can activate some other existing interest, and the blocking of the internal set can be remedied, which is regarded as a beneficial effect of compulsion "as a useful temporary device" that is, otherwise, "a choice of evils with the general probabilities opposing" (p. 16).

Then, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) identifies three types of projects. The first type puts "some idea or plan" into an "external form": "building a boat, writing a letter, presenting a play" (p. 16). The first type consists of "purposing, planning, executing, and judging" phases, and learners themselves should be responsible for each step as much as possible (p. 17). Still, guidance would be provided since "total failure" would be more harmful than "assistance" that should be provided by teachers (p. 17). Kilpatrick takes special attention to the fourth phase, judging, and states that as learners grow older, they "may increasingly judge the result in terms of the aim", and "with increasing care and success", they can take future lessons from the process. The second type involves "some (esthetic) experience, as listening to a story, hearing a symphony, appreciating a picture", and Kilpatrick accepts that some may have difficulty understanding why they would be projects (p. 16). The author claims that *purpose* informs the process of the second type of projects, and "influences the growth of appreciation" (p. 17). However, Kilpatrick does not have any steps or phases of the second type of projects.

The third type of projects refers to explaining some difficulties and problem solving (p. 16). Lastly, the fourth type includes earning "some item or degree of skill or knowledge" such as "learning the irregular verbs" in a foreign language (p. 16). Kilpatrick (1918/1922) claims that there is not black and white boundaries among these project types, and they can even functions as means for each other. The author adds that "the project method logically includes the problem method as a special case" and it is "the best known" thanks to Dewey and McMurry, and the phases of it emanates from Dewey's analysis of thought (p. 16). The author further claims that together with the fourth type, the problem-based type of projects are the "best of all to our ordinary schoolroom work"; however, education needs more of the social aspect of the first type (p. 17). Finally, according to Kilpatrick, the fourth type focusing on specific

knowledge or skills has the same steps as the first type (i.e., purposing, planning, executing, and judging). In relation to the fourth type, the author warns that there can be too much focus on drill as a *task* not as a *project* even though the two would lead to very different outcomes.

Towards the end, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) states that there are some other important points that go beyond the reading, ranging from school structure and supplies to a fresh curriculum and program to, most importantly, “a changed attitude as to what to wish for in the way of achievement” (p. 18). He further states that the limits of the content makes it impossible to dive into what all these would mean for democracy thus making “us better citizens”, capable of thinking, acting and adapting to “new social conditions”, being critical enough not to be fooled, and independent. Likewise, the challenges lying ahead also needs a separate article including but not limited to “opposition of tradition” and “unprepared and incompetent teachers” and they can demolish the ideas stated here if it is not intensely “grounded” (p. 18).

Finally, Kilpatrick (1918/1922) argues that children are naturally and socially active, and compulsion in the education system had frequently made American schools places of blind procrastination and our students “selfish individualists” (p. 18). Thus, the main claim of the reading is that “wholehearted purposeful activity in a social situation” is the best way of making the most of learners’ natural capacities that are wasted significantly in general (p. 18). After all, “under proper guidance purpose means efficiency” as it relates to achieving both the targeted results of an activity and learning outcomes (p. 18). Learning and its results advance ideally commensurable to a purpose, and “character building” can emerge in line with the learners’ social nature and good teachers’ guidance (p. 18). Kilpatrick concludes that all these insights depend on a rebuilding *project* on the part of teachers who have the courage to aspire to do so.

All in all, *The Project Method – The Use of the Purposeful Act in the Educative Process* focuses on the concept of *project* thereby providing initial insights into *project-based learning* in an eclectic way that helps the reader see the interconnections between project-based learning and other instructional approaches including behaviorism, constructionism, constructivism, problem-based learning, and guided instruction. The reading’s touch on democracy and socially meaningful projects implies that the author sees education as a way of achieving a better society or social life and sounds ideological from time to time. All these critical takeaways should be approached with caution by the readers of the present review as well since: (a) the reading itself is structured more like a book thus presenting the author’s subjective opinions and insights rather than research; and (b) this critical review also depends on its author’s individual understanding of the reading and subjective ideas. This fact should also provide the readers of the current review with an opportunity to approach project-based learning based on what they know, and their educational ideas and practice thus enriching our understanding of the evolution of instructional approaches. Accordingly, *remembering the past* from time to time and connecting it to the present appears to be a great strategy to reconsider and better understand the present educational context.

Ethical Note: In this research, Research and publication ethics were followed. Ethical approval is not needed for this book review.

Contributions of the Researchers

One author contributed to the manuscript.

Financial Support and Acknowledgment

The author declared that this work received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The author has disclosed no conflict of interest.

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