

WILLIAM JAMES'S PRAGMATISM IN EDUCATIONAL THEORY: A COMPREHENSIVE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ANALYSIS IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT: William James's pragmatic educational philosophy is discussed in relation to the principles of practicality, experiential learning, and personalization in teaching. James saw education as an important tool to help students face reality and thus emphasized the application of knowledge to problems rather than just theoretical instruction. The article delves into the origins of James's thought, rooted in his evolutionary and psychological background, and examines its key components, including goals, teaching methods, and student engagement. This article further explores historical, recent, and progressive issues of education that are put into practice, such as STEM and online education. Analysis of other philosophical ideas reveals something new in James's thinking. The article attempts to capture the significance of James's philosophy in the era of globalization and recommends its further application to Vietnam's changing educational policy from an over-focus on teaching theory to a more pragmatic approach.

Keywords: Pragmatic Epistemology, Constructivist Pedagogy, Individualized Instruction, William James, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Renowned as a founding figure in American philosophy and psychology, William James established himself as a leading proponent of pragmatism, a doctrine that emphasizes the practical effectiveness of knowledge in solving real-world challenges. William James came from

a distinguished intellectual lineage: He studied medicine at Harvard University. There he became a distinguished professor of psychology and philosophy. William James skillfully combined scientific rigor with human inquiry. In addition to his theoretical contributions, James excelled as a pragmatic educator. His most notable work was his influential *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, which reflected his deep dedication to understanding and meeting the psychological needs of students. He rejected abstract concepts, and his educational philosophy prioritized experiential learning and practical application. He also advocates an approach that equips learners to face the complexities of life with adaptive intelligence and insight.

His contribution to contemporary philosophy and education is unquestionable, primarily through his advocacy of a new conception of knowledge: knowledge is not an unalterable block of information but rather a pliable instrument that people use to adjust to their surroundings. In education, this means that the goal is not just to communicate information but to equip students with the necessary skills to face the realities of life, from solving personal problems to adapting to social changes. Studying James's pragmatic philosophy of education helps us better understand his thoughts and offers new perspectives on how education can be improved to suit the requirements of the times, such as flexibility and creativity.

As he explained, "pragmatic philosophy" is a way of thinking that evaluates an idea's value and truth regarding the results it accomplishes in real life¹. Instead of pursuing facts or eternal truths like most philosophies do, James' pragmatism cares about the usefulness and applicability of facts. He developed this idea from the early foundations of Charles Peirce, who initiated the concept of pragmatism. Still, James expanded it by emphasizing the role of personal experience, beliefs, and emotions in shaping knowledge. Compared to John Dewey, another

¹ Sharma, Sunita, Reeta Devi, and Jitendra Kumari. 2018. "Pragmatism in Education." *International Journal of Engineering Technology Science and Research* 5 (1): 1549–54

well-known pragmatic philosopher, James focused less on the social aspect of education and more on personal consciousness and how each person builds understanding through the learning process². James' philosophy of pragmatism allows for experiential learning by integrating real-world situations into the educational framework³. This methodology consists of two parts: discipline taught and discipline learned. Its impact rests on its flexible, practical philosophy that challenges conventional practices and equips students to thrive in a complex and ever-changing world. The paper's main argument is to examine William James' philosophy of education in terms of his ideas on practicality, experiential learning, and individualization in instruction⁴. Furthermore, this paper will relate these thoughts with contemporary practices such as STEM education and technology-enhanced personalized learning to demonstrate the relevance of James' principles in the current environment.

Finally, the paper will evaluate this philosophy's outstanding values and potential limitations, such as its high flexibility but lack of clear structure or the risk of underestimating theoretical foundations. The article wishes to provide a comprehensive view of James's legacy in the field of education and suggest new directions for applying his ideas in the future.

2. Theoretical basis of pragmatic philosophy in education

William James's pragmatic philosophy did not appear by chance but was formed from the profound inspiration of science and thought of the time in which he

lived⁵. One of the biggest influences on James' thinking was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which he approached during his medical studies at Harvard University⁶. The consideration of adaptation is well highlighted by Darwin, who states that life exists and evolves due to a species' ability to adapt to its environment. James applied this presumption to his epistemology by claiming that knowledge must adapt to be applicable in real-life situations. This perspective shows that knowledge is not permanent but a powerful instrument forged and refined through man-made actions and activities in the real world. Hence, within the context of education, James stresses that learning encompasses more than the rote reproduction of information. It is about assisting learners in acquiring the ability to apply knowledge to real-life situations. Besides Darwinian influences, James's psychological thinking also played a fundamental role in shaping pragmatic philosophy⁷. As the author of the classic *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), he explored how human consciousness operates as a tool for understanding and navigating the world around him. The proposal made by James on the "stream of consciousness" states that awareness is not broken down into separate events⁸; rather, it is an ongoing process in which individual experiences heavily shape knowledge and behavior. Regarding education, it means a student should not be expected to learn in a conventional passive way but rather let them experience the world uniquely and construct their understanding meaningfully. James argues that the sense

² Putnam, Hilary, and Ruth Anna Putnam. 2017. *Pragmatism as a Way of Life: The Lasting Legacy of William James and John Dewey*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

³ Oyewole, S. O., P. A. Oluwafemi, and S. Adeagbo. 2024. "Philosophical School of Thought (Pragmatism) and Its Role in Fostering Sustainability of Business Education in Nigeria." *AAU Journal of Business Educators* 4 (2): 89–95

⁴ James, M., Jeremy Carrette, William James, and Eugene Taylor. 2003. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398470>.

⁵ Ormerod, Richard. 2006. "The History and Ideas of Pragmatism." *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 57 (8): 892–909. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jors.2602065>

⁶ Taylor, Eugene. 1990. "William James on Darwin: An Evolutionary Theory of Consciousness." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 602 (1): 7–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1990.tb22726.x>.

⁷ McGranahan, Lucas R. 2017. *Darwinism and Pragmatism: William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315273891>.

⁸ Pollio, Howard R. 2013. "The Stream of Consciousness Since James." In *Reflections on the Principles of Psychology*, edited by Michael G. Johnson and Tracy B. Henley, 271–94. New York: Psychology Press. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203761656-13/stream-consciousness-since-james-howard-pollio>.

of the individual is central to the learning process, and education must take advantage of this to help students develop their full potential⁹.

In addition, James was influenced by the diversity of contemporary philosophies, especially John Stuart Mill's empiricism and Charles Peirce's empiricism¹⁰. From Mill, he learned the importance of experience in testing knowledge. At the same time, Peirce, the originator of the pragmatic concept, provided James with a theoretical foundation for evaluating ideas based on practical results¹¹. However, James has personalized these influences by emphasizing the role of beliefs, emotions, and personal choice in building knowledge, which Peirce paid less attention to. Education, to James, goes beyond the dissemination of information; instead, it focuses on building skills that facilitate making decisions based on actual experiences, which form valuable thinking and action patterns in a person's life¹².

James's approach to education comes from a practical philosophy of life with three central tenets. The first principle is critical for teaching and emphasizes that an idea is valid only if it brings about beneficial or practical change¹³. For instance, a scientific proposition can only be termed "true" after it has worked in practical situations like Newton's laws and the movements of objects. Understanding should be helpful in education so students can see its practical significance, like applying mathematics in real-life situations beyond mechanical

memorization of formulas. In this regard, James's goal is to ensure that students will be more adaptable in real-world work, especially when dealing with realworld problems, emphasizing the need for information-based education¹⁴.

The second principle deals with the importance of action and experimentation in constructing knowledge. James writes, "A pragmatic philosophy is an attitude of seeking, a method of solving problems."¹⁵ He suggests that people and scientists learn through doing and adjusting according to the results obtained. In education, this encourages hands-on learning methods, where students engage in activities such as doing experiments, undertaking projects, or solving practical math problems to draw knowledge for themselves rather than relying solely on theoretical lectures from teachers. The "trial and error" process that James emphasizes helps students understand more profoundly and trains patience and creative thinking in the face of failure, thereby preparing them with the skills they need to adapt to complex situations in life.

The third principle is individuality, in which James asserts that each person has their approach to knowledge, depending on their experiences, beliefs, and life circumstances¹⁶. This starkly contrasts the traditional view of education, which often imposes a uniform curriculum on all students without regard to the differences between them. James believes that a student's steering toward what resonates with them must be done to preserve cultural diversity. Anything else will be counterproductive¹⁷. A good example would be a classroom where one

⁹ James, C. R., G. Dunning, and M. Connolly. 2006. *How Very Effective Primary Schools Work*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing. <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/4912686>.

¹⁰ Cobb, David. 2022. *Empiricism in the Philosophy of Science*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh. <https://philsci-archiv.pitt.edu/21458/>.

¹¹ Leary, David E. 2009. "Between Peirce (1878) and James (1898): G. Stanley Hall, the Origins of Pragmatism, and the History of Psychology." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45 (1): 5–20.

¹² Leary, David E. 2009. "Between Peirce (1878) and James (1898): G. Stanley Hall, the Origins of Pragmatism, and the History of Psychology." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45 (1): 5–20.

¹³ Barrow, Robin, and Ronald Woods. 2006. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. 4th ed. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203969953>

¹⁴ Barrow, Robin, and Ronald Woods. 2006. *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. 4th ed. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203969953>

¹⁵ Thomas, Gary, and David James. 2006. "Reinventing Grounded Theory: Some Questions about Theory, Ground, and Discovery." *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (6): 767–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600989412>.

¹⁶ Thomas, Gary, and David James. 2006. "Reinventing Grounded Theory: Some Questions about Theory, Ground, and Discovery." *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (6): 767–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600989412>.

¹⁷ James, M., Jeremy Carrette, William James, and Eugene Taylor. 2003. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203398470>.

student may learn best by actively participating in projects such as charting. In contrast, another student may learn best by reading or participating in discussions. This approach ensures maximum efficacy in education as the driving factors in motivating learning are heightened.

The link between practical philosophies and education is quite vividly brought out by James in the notions of education not just being the transfer of knowledge but rather a way where students are equipped to function in real-life situations. In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, he emphasizes that education aims to help students develop thinking habits and acting in the face of unpredictable situations, such as the ability to solve problems or make decisions in uncertain circumstances¹⁸. While this coincides with the idea of "learning through experience," as proposed by John Dewey, James's distinction lies in the fact that he considers personal self and experience more important than social factors or collective activities. James believed education should be centered around critical thinking, where students can validate or challenge information rather than passively accept it.

James' idea was that the teacher was not the only one, nor were other factors. He theorized that knowledge had to be discovered by the student himself. Thus, the teacher should facilitate their investigation and experimentation rather than fill the students' heads with information. James wrote: "A good teacher is the one who arouses curiosity and helps students find their answers". This requires a major shift in the approach to teaching, from passive communication to facilitating students' active participation in the learning process. Teachers must understand the psychology of the students; they should understand every single child's specific needs and interests and then approach them in a way that would make learning effective¹⁹.

¹⁸ Sternberg, Robert J. 2001. "Why Schools Should Teach for Wisdom: The Balance Theory of Wisdom in Educational Settings." *Educational Psychologist* 36 (4): 227–45. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3604_2.

¹⁹ Lindsay, Geoff. 2007. "Educational Psychology and the Effectiveness of Inclusive Education/Mainstreaming." *British*

Lastly, it is James' practical philosophy that education presupposes a solution to the unknown. He thinks students should have creative and flexible thinking capacity in the face of perpetual change instead of relying on set guidelines or borrowed knowledge. This, he considers, to be very pertinent in modern times. Shifters such as technological innovations and globalization will make it far too necessary to possess skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, which are practically crucial in today's world. Applying James's idea's premise is a challenge for educators, but not a theoretical one. It helps them move away from understanding education only through rigid systems and embrace its temporality.

3. The Central Components of James' Philosophy of Education

A core aspect of William James' views on education, in particular, learning, education should not only involve the transfer of theoretical concepts but also stage students into real-life challenges through developing effective problem-solving abilities²⁰. Rather, information has some tangible usefulness only when it enables people to act competently within given particulars and not merely as abstract phenomena. For instance, rather than only learning the laws of physics through reading textbooks, students should be taught how to use these laws practically: figuring out how much force is needed to lift something heavy or make a basic model representing a sphere. This point of view emphasizes that education must be highly applicable, helping students see the direct connection between what they learn and their daily life problems. James does not want education to stop at providing knowledge but to turn that knowledge into a helpful tool, thereby improving students' ability to act and think practically in all circumstances.

Journal of Educational Psychology 77 (1): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709906X156881>.

²⁰ Yilmaz, Kaya. 2008. "Constructivism: Its Theoretical Underpinnings, Variations, and Implications for Classroom Instruction." *Educational Horizons* 86 (3): 161–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42923724>.

James's second goal for education is to cultivate creativity and flexible thinking, qualities that he considers indispensable in an ever-changing world. In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, he encouraged teachers to create a learning environment where students could ask questions, experiment with new ideas, and explore different approaches instead of just following rigid rules. In a science class, instead of just providing a formula and asking students to memorize it, teachers can organize an open-ended experiment where students design their way of testing their hypothesis, such as measuring the rate of fall of different objects. James believes that creativity is not only a skill but also a habit of thinking, which helps students develop the ability to adapt to new and complex situations. This was especially important in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the development of industrialization and science and technology required people to innovate to meet the new requirements of society constantly. This idea is still valid today when creativity is seen as one of the key factors to success in fields such as technology, business, and the arts.

The last point is that James regards schooling as an essential element that prepares the learner to grapple with the uncertainties of existence that is life, which is a reality of the world. He states, "Life is a set of problems to be solved, and education must teach us the effective way of dealing with such problems". Contrarians to common educational ideologies, which rest on the provision and exposition of static, permanent, and unchangeable knowledge, James argues that students should be able to reason, value, make decisions, and cope with the randomness of life. For instance, in a history lesson, instead of rote learning of a sequence of events and dates, students can be tasked with interpreting the implications of the Industrial Revolution and devising how those lessons could be useful in today's issues: climate change. This view consolidates and effectively justifies the reasoning behind James's educational philosophy, which arguably is innovative, particularly nowadays because of the pleth-

ora of global challenges, whether pandemics, economic meltdowns, or unprecedented technological sprints.

James believed students learn better when they engage in project-based learning, which stems from his practical teaching philosophy²¹. Students should participate in tasks and activities over and above, listening to lectures or reading books. In a biology class, children do not only need to learn the theoretical part of the life cycle of plants. Instead, they can be allowed to grow a plant from seeds, and let them track its growth and make observations to come up with their deductions. This method helps students retain knowledge for longer and helps them understand the connection between theory and practice, thereby developing the ability to apply knowledge to real-life situations. Although James shares this idea with John Dewey, he differs in that he focuses more on the student's individual experience rather than on group activities or the social aspect of learning²². For James, each student needs space to explore independently and build an understanding based on what they have directly experienced.

Another essential feature of James's teaching method is that it encourages doubt and questioning rather than passively accepting knowledge²³. James argued that he did not deem learning to be just a droning reproduction of instruction given to students by their educators. Rather, it was an independent process, and learners were encouraged to ask questions and challenge the status quo. Take math, for example: instead of completing worked problems as the instructions suggest, students could be required to 'prove' the Pythagorean theorem by manipulating actual drawings or models. Not only

²¹ Capraro, Robert, and Scott W. Slough. 2009. *Project-Based Learning: An Integrated Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Approach*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. <https://byvn.net/EFth>.

²² Dewey, John. 2024. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/dewe21010-003>.

²³ Fenstermacher, Gary D., Jonas F. Soltis, and Matthew N. Sanger. 2015. *Approaches to Teaching*. 5th ed. New York: Teachers College Press. <https://byvn.net/3Tlr>.

does this technique foster the development of critical analysis, but it also enables students to appreciate the true essence of knowledge, that it is not stationary and absolute but sustained through constant probing and revision. James argues that teachers need to promote doubt in their learners, so he perceives doubt as the root of knowledge and learning.

Individualization in teaching is another fundamental concept in James's philosophy. As he points out, every student possesses unique requirements, interests, and backgrounds, so teachers must modify their teaching approaches to suit the prevailing diversity instead of adopting a uniform system. For instance, in a literature class, one student interested in writing may be required to express his feelings toward a specific work through a personal essay. In contrast, another student may be able to learn through active participation in group discussions or text analysis. James goes on to state that effective education has to take into account individual differences, which will help students have the liberty to find out what best suits them instead of being bound by a set curriculum. In any case, teachers would need to be more adaptable, know their students' needs very well, and change their methods to help each student work their best to achieve optimum learning results for each individual.

In James' pragmatic philosophy of education, students have a key role in learning. James contended that students are not merely passive recipients of the learning process but are active participants in constructing their knowledge based on individual experiences²⁴. As an illustration, while learning geography, a student living next to the ocean will understand the concept of tides differently than a student living in the mountains. This self-efficacy creates meaningful experiences and relates to students' lives, encouraging them to learn. James explains that when students take an active part in the lesson, they

acquire knowledge and learn how to think critically and solve problems independently. James also emphasizes students' freedom of choice and responsibility during the learning process. He argued that students should be allowed to decide how they learn and take responsibility for those decisions rather than just following the teacher's instructions. It alludes to engaging students enough so they can select their individual research questions for a science project, for instance, how solar energy can be applied in practical situations or plant growth, which will foster a sense of responsibility towards one's education. It serves the dual purpose of increasing personal motivation and developing self-regulatory skills, which are crucial for success later in life. James offhandedly comments that responsible actions and their particular consequences can only be dealt with through taking personal ownership of decision-making²⁵.

In addition, for James, knowing involves an endless cycle of hypotheses and corrections, analogous to research. He wrote, "We learn by acting, making mistakes, and correcting them". According to this view, students should be encouraged to develop hypotheses, test them, and learn from failures to perfect their knowledge. In a physics exercise, students can try various ways to balance a lever, from changing the position of a heavy object to adjusting the length of the swing and exploring the basic mechanics independently. This process helps students build in-depth knowledge and trains patience, resilience, and creative thinking in the face of difficulties. James believes that learning is not a straight path but a challenging journey in which failure is just as critical as success.

Regarding the evaluation, James criticizes using standardized exams or cut-off scores as the only criterion in evaluating a student's performance. He has argued that such methods typically measure an individual's ability to recall information in the short term, which suffers from

²⁴ Danforth, Scot, and Terry Jo Smith. 2004. *Engaging Troubling Students: A Constructivist Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. <https://byvn.net/YHx6>.

²⁵ Weick, Carl W. 2008. "Issues of Consequence: Lessons for Educating Tomorrow's Business Leaders from Philosopher William James." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 7 (1): 88–98. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2008.31413866>.

an understanding or practical skill level. In his view, nevertheless, pragmatic education should concentrate on evaluating knowledge about real-life situations. For instance, instead of a written chemistry test comprising predominantly theoretical questions, learners could be required to conduct a simple experiment illustrating a basic chemical reaction and explain the results in light of the theory. Such techniques serve the purpose of gauging the level of understanding and the ability to apply the knowledge that embodies the essence of practical education.

How James evaluates a learner is equally broad and pan-cultural, as he employs different assessment forms rather than sticking to one set method only. He supports through assessments done in practice, such as field trips, class debates, or even practical sessions, as long as they relate to the subject and interest of the students. For instance, in a literature class, students may be required to write a personal essay about their feelings about a work, or instead of just answering multiple-choice questions, participate in a debate to try to explain the meaning of the work. This strategy gives teachers the power to evaluate the student's knowledge, creativity, critical thinking, and eloquence. James emphasized that diversity in assessments helps to reflect students' true abilities more fully, rather than relying solely on a rigid criterion such as grades.

Finally, James asserts that the goal of the assessment process is not to classify or punish students but to support them in their learning²⁶. He wrote, "Good evaluation is an evaluation that helps students to recognize their strengths and improve their weaknesses". In this view, the assessment results should be used as a tool to guide students, help them better understand themselves, and adjust their learning styles for greater effectiveness. Here, as in the rest of the world, modern education grapples with the popularity of the formative assessment method, which focuses on supporting the learning pro-

cess rather than just on the result achieved. James's evaluation philosophy reveals not only the humanity of his thoughts but also the prescience of his construction of a student-centric education system.

4. Application of James's pragmatic educational philosophy in practice

William James's pragmatic philosophy left a deep mark on the history of education, especially in the United States in the 20th century, through his lectures and works such as *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899). Although James did not directly build a complete education system, his ideas inspired educational reformers greatly, especially in the Progressive Education movement led by John Dewey. In experimental schools in the U.S. in the early 20th century, such as the Dewey Experimental School in Chicago, students were allowed to participate in practical activities such as farming, building models, or participating in community projects to learn from experience rather than just learning theory from books. These activities clearly reflect James's idea of connecting knowledge with practice, helping students understand the lesson and see its practical value in daily life. Nonetheless, while Dewey emphasized the role of community and social cooperation in education, James focused more on each student's individual experience. This was shown in small American classrooms of the time, where teachers encouraged students to explore their unique interests through activities such as choosing books to read on a whim, writing a personal journal, or taking on small projects based on their interests, such as animal studies or astronomy. James's influence was particularly pronounced in teacher training, as pedagogical schools focused more on educational psychology, a field in which James pioneered *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). The courses based on this work have helped teachers understand how psychology can be applied to tailor teaching methods to each student's unique needs and abilities, thereby improving teaching effectiveness in the classroom.

²⁶ William, Dylan. 2011. "What Is Assessment for Learning?" *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 37 (1): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2011.03.001>.

Compared to Dewey's progressive education movement, James's philosophy is less systemic but stands out for its flexibility and ability to accommodate the diversity of students. While Dewey focuses on building an integrated curriculum that combines theory and practice in an organized framework, James advocates giving students the freedom to experiment and adapt their learning styles based on their individual experiences. While Dewey's class may require students to work in groups to build a housing model, a James-style classroom may allow each student to choose a unique project on their own, like drawing a map or making a simple object, according to their preferences. This flexibility makes James's thought valuable inspiration for educators who want to balance individual freedom with the overall goal of education, especially in heterogeneous learning environments.

In modern education, James's pragmatic philosophy continues to maintain its value. It is widely applied in many fields, especially STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education and personalized learning methods through technology. STEM education, focusing on hands-on projects, clearly demonstrates the spirit of experiential learning that James values. In a STEM classroom, students may be asked to design a simple robotic arm using basic components, thereby not only learning about mechanics and programming but also understanding how to apply that knowledge in practice, like assisting people with disabilities. Similarly, experiments on renewable energy, such as building a wind turbine model, help students see the connection between physical theory and modern environmental problems. These activities reinforce knowledge and reflect James' call that education must prepare students to solve practical problems in life.

Personalized learning through technology is another area where James' ideas are applied effectively. With the development of online learning platforms such as Khan Academy, Coursera, or AI-based learning applications, today's students are free to choose the learning con-

tent and learning pace that suits their unique needs and preferences, a core principle of James's pragmatic philosophy. A student who is passionate about technology may focus on lectures on computer programming, while another student who loves history may choose courses on ancient civilizations or interactive stories about world wars. AI technology also enhances personalization by analyzing each student's learning data to make appropriate suggestions, such as suggesting advanced assignments for students who are good at math or supplementary reading for students with weak writing. This approach reflects James's view that education should respect individual differences and provide a meaningful learning experience for each student.

In the context of globalization, James's thoughts also play an essential role in preparing students to face the world's constant changes. He emphasized that education must equip students to adapt and think flexibly - skills indispensable in a society affected by the rapid development of technology, economics, and culture. International educational programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) encourage students to participate in practical projects, such as research on climate change or sustainable development, and require them to reflect on their own learning. These activities not only help students apply knowledge to practice but also practice independent and creative thinking, just like the pragmatic spirit that James proposed. In a world where new professions are constantly appearing and old ones are disappearing, James's thought provides a guideline for education to teach knowledge and how to learn and adapt to the unknown.

Although James's pragmatic educational philosophy brings many significant benefits, its practical application also faces many critical challenges. The first challenge is the difficulty of measuring practical results, a principle that James emphasizes in his philosophy. He argued that students' abilities should be assessed based on their ability to apply knowledge in practice rather than based on

grades alone. Be that as it may, this requires assessment tools that are much more complex and flexible than traditional standardized tests. How do you quantify how successful a student is when designing a product like a solar-powered car model? The lack of clear and uniform criteria can make it difficult for teachers and administrators to evaluate learning effectiveness, especially in large classrooms or large-scale education systems. This requires a significant shift in the approach to evaluation, from focusing on quantitative results to evaluating the process and quality of the actual product.

The second challenge is the conflict between James's ideas and the traditional education system, which often emphasizes imparting theory and using standardized curricula. In many countries, especially in Asia, such as Vietnam, education still prioritizes memorizing knowledge to pass national exams or simultaneous tests, which goes against James' view of experiential learning and personalization. In a traditional classroom, students may be asked to memorize the chemical periodic table without understanding how the elements interact in practice. In contrast, a James-style classroom will encourage students to conduct experiments to explore chemical reactions. This contradiction can lead to resistance from teachers, parents, and students alike, who are accustomed to the traditional approach and see it as the standard for measuring success. Changing from a rigid system to a flexible one requires time and broad consensus from all stakeholders.

Finally, applying James's pragmatic philosophy requires a major investment in training teachers to adapt to the new role he proposes. James emphasized that teachers should be imparters of knowledge and instructors, arouse curiosity, and support students in self-discovery. However, not all teachers are fully equipped with the skills to do this, especially those used to traditional teaching, where they play a central role in the classroom. A teacher who is used to reading lectures and asking students to take notes may have difficulty designing hands-on activities, such as organizing a group project

or instructing students to research independently. This requires teacher training programs to change, focusing on developing skills such as flexible classroom management, real-world activity design, and project-based assessment, a task that is not simple, especially in under-resourced or large-scale education systems. This change not only requires financial investment but also time to change the mindset and habits of teachers.

5. Evaluate and criticize

William James's pragmatic philosophy of education offers many outstanding advantages, making it a valuable thought in history and modern education. First, the high practicality of this philosophy makes education an effective tool to prepare students to face the practical challenges of life. By emphasizing experiential learning and encouraging the application of knowledge to specific situations, James ensures that education is not only the accumulation of theory but also the process of equipping practical skills. In today's STEM apprenticeships or classrooms, students learn how to repair machines, program software, or design technological models, reflecting James' view of the close connection between knowledge and action²⁷. This helps students gain a deeper understanding and prepares them with the skills they need to succeed in realworld fields.

Second, James's philosophy encourages independent thinking and creativity, qualities that are important in a constantly changing world that requires constant innovation. He argued that education should create conditions for students to freely ask questions, experiment with ideas, and explore new approaches instead of just following what is taught passively. This is evident in modern teaching methods such as project-based learning, where students can design a product, such as a mobile app or a

²⁷ Pham, Kien Thi. 2022. "Ho Chi Minh's Educational Philosophy and Its Meaning in Educational Innovation in Vietnam Today." *Aufklärung: Revista de Filosofia* 9 (1): 109–24. <https://doi.org/10.18012/arf.v9i1.62412>.

smart home model, thereby developing creative thinking and problem-solving skills. This emphasis on innovation not only helps students grow personally but also meets the needs of the global economy, where companies and organizations are always looking for individuals who can come up with new solutions to complex challenges.

The third advantage of the James philosophy is the ability to meet the diverse needs of students through individualization²⁸. He argued that each student has his or her approach to knowledge, which depends on his or her experiences, interests, and life circumstances, and that education should respect this difference. In practice, this aligns with the trend of using technology to personalize learning, such as online learning platforms such as Duolingo or EdX, where students can choose lessons that suit their level and interests, from language learning to data science. This flexibility enhances learning motivation and ensures that education truly serves the individual rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model. Thanks to these advantages, James's philosophy retains its appeal and value in shaping education today.

On the other hand, James's pragmatic philosophy of education also faces notable limitations and criticisms, highlighting the challenges of applying it to practice. One of the most significant limitations is the lack of clear structure in his proposed education system. James emphasizes flexibility, experiential learning, and personalization²⁹. Still, he does not offer a specific framework for implementing these ideas on a large scale, such as in public schools or national education systems. This makes it difficult to apply his philosophy in environments that require unity and tight organization. A classroom of 40 students, teachers may have trouble designing activities

individually for each child instead of teaching according to a standard curriculum, leading to inconsistencies in classroom management and evaluation of outcomes.

The second limitation is the risk of overemphasizing practical experience and ignoring the importance of theoretical background knowledge; a problem pointed out by critics from the school of essentialism. Essentialists, like William C. Bagley, argue that education should focus on imparting basic knowledge such as math, science, and literature to ensure students have a solid foundation before entering the real world. Conversely, if the focus is only on practical activities in James' style, students may lack the theoretical concepts necessary to develop more profound knowledge. A student may know how to use a machine through practice but does not understand its physical principles, resulting in limitations in solving more complex problems. This raises the question of whether James's philosophy is suitable for all stages of learning or is limited to certain aspects of education.

William James's pragmatic philosophy of education offers valuable suggestions for improving Vietnam's education system, which is transitioning from a traditional model that focuses on theory to a practice and application orientation. With the principle of experiential learning, James encourages students to participate in practical activities to build knowledge. In Vietnam, this can be applied by enhancing practical natural sciences or technology lessons. Instead of just learning the theory of chemical reactions, grade 10 students can perform simple experiments such as mixing solutions to observe color changes, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of knowledge. Vocational schools can also apply this idea by giving students internships in repairing machinery or assembling equipment, which aligns with the actual labor needs of the economy.

James's personalization is also very much in line with the trend of educational innovation in Vietnam, especially in the 2018 General Education Program emphasizing personal capacity development. Instead of adopting a uniform curriculum, teachers can design flexible assign-

²⁸ Dung, Bui Xuan, and Kien Thi Pham. 2022. "Education Philosophy of Pragmatism and Its Impact in the Global Context Present." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 19 (3): 310–329. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-bja10042>.

²⁹ Pham, Kien Thi, and Bui Dung Xuan. 2021. "Pragmatist Idea of Democracy in Education and Its Meaning for Educational Innovation in Vietnam Today." *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 94:975–95. <http://www.gilsonsociety.com/files/975-995-Pham-Bui.pdf>.

ments, such as giving students the option of a research project on local culture or planning a small business, depending on their interests and abilities. Technology also supports this, with learning applications such as the Viettel Study allowing students to self-adjust their learning paths, from mathematics to foreign languages, reflecting James' ideas on respecting individual differences.

However, the application of James Thought in Vietnam faces challenges from the tradition of theoretical education and exam pressure. The shift to experiential learning requires investment in facilities, such as laboratories, and teacher training to shift from traditional teaching to instructional roles. A teacher in a rural area may lack the tools to organize practice, or a parent may object because they are worried their child will not prepare well for the national exam. To overcome this, Vietnam needs to gradually integrate the James Thought through pilot projects, such as the New School Model (VNEN), combined with policies to encourage creativity and reduce the theoretical load, thereby improving students' adaptability in the context of international integration.

7. Conclusion

William James's pragmatic educational philosophy revolves around three core elements: practicality, experiential learning, and individualization in teaching. He sees education as a process of preparing students for reality by imparting knowledge and equipping them with practical skills and the ability to adapt to life. Experiential learning is the cornerstone of James' thought, which encourages students to engage in real-world activities to build their knowledge. At the same time, individualization ensures that education meets each student's unique needs and interests. These principles constitute a flexible approach that transforms education into a living process, far from rigid traditional methods and empty theories.

James's thought is important because it shapes education as a tool for developing creativity, flexible think-

ing, and the ability to deal with uncertainty. From his influences in the history of American education, such as the progressive education movement, to modern applications in STEM and personalized learning, James's philosophy has proven its timeless value. In the contemporary context, when technology and globalization are rapidly changing the way we live and work, his ideas provide a solution for education to teach knowledge and how to learn and adapt to new things. Educators and policymakers can learn from James to build flexible learning programs encouraging students to self-explore and apply knowledge to practice. Still, James's thoughts leave issues that need further study. In addition, combining his ideas with modern technologies, such as artificial intelligence and online learning, is also a potential research direction that can bring breakthrough innovations to education in the 21st century, making it closer and more effective for each student.

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