Classics and Beyond

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This paper is one of three in a General Session devoted to "What Our Experience Has Shown Us: Teaching Philosophy of Education in the '90s."[1] The purpose of the session is to raise questions that are all too rarely discussed at professional meetings like this, namely, questions pertaining to the practice of teaching theoretic courses in education, especially philosophy of education. The lack of discussion of these matters is, I believe, quite serious; in fact, I am coming to believe that it has been a factor, and possibly a major one, contributing to the decline in the importance of "foundations" courses in professional preparation in education at all levels. I want to suggest something of why I have reluctantly begun to think in this fashion.

Let me begin by backing up a step or two and presenting you with a concrete example of educational policy in the making. In my state, a recent report by the Iowa Business-Education Roundtable Task Force, led by David W. Hornbeck, has received much coverage in the press and is apparently a major source of ideas for the state's Governor and Department of Education as they plan major state-wide reforms. This report reflects what became the "conventional wisdom" in the 1980s, wrapped in the standard specious appeals to "excellence," "competitiveness," and "efficiency." What's especially interesting to me is that the set of *philosophic* assumptions underlying the recommendations are unusually clear in the report's sections on its "3 Assumptions" and "8 Guiding Principles," though I don't find either truly to be assumptions or principles. Going beneath the stated basis of the ideas, one sees that the report's view of humans is a mechanistic one. In reworking competency based instruction and Benjamin Bloom's Mastery Learning, the authors hold that all children are as like as trains running down the same tracks; the only difference is in how fast they move between stations. No question exists about qualitative differences among them, just as no question exists about the goal of the journey or about the means of getting there. The public is told something I think you will be surprised to learn, namely, that everything of importance in educational practice is already known: "What works is a matter of knowledge, not opinion." Thus, in good technicist fashion, the only issue for debate is the most efficient way to achieve our educational purpose, which is characterized by mastery of "a clearly defined, measurable core of learning.

In such a mechanical universe, issues of means and ends are not subject to debate; the only issue to be discussed--and this is a technical discussion, notice, not a public, political debate--is efficiency. It is from this perspective that the report makes its analysis. It argues that the failure of Iowa's school system currently is that it "emphasizes process, not results"; consequently, the system needs to be reconstructed solely on the basis of the latter. Laying aside Dewey's cogent attack on the process-product dichotomy so obviously present here, what is frightening is the Task Force's consequent recommendation that Iowa employ a state-wide "test" for all students which will not only define every few years or so who advances to the next level but also identify schools which are "unsuccessful" and, therefore, after being given a period in which "to improve," "*should* be penalized" [italics added] by a reduction of state funds. In short, the report encourages reducing an educational system—and here I am thinking of Iowa as it

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was originally delivered at the Midwest Philosophy of Education Society Annual Conference, Chicago, Illinois, Nov. 10, 1990.

reflects the whole U.S. approach—that, however deeply troubled currently, has produced arguably the richest diversity of innovative and democratic schools in history to what is basically a mass-produced ideal: "one size fits all." And with a Calvinist twist, too: be chosen or be punished. We're back to the elect and the damned, and in a pluralistic democracy, too![2]

There are, of course, almost limitless practical reasons for attacking such a report, including issues of the socio-economic character of a school's community, per-pupil financing levels, "measurement" of knowledge, and so on. I have brought it up, however, to call attention to its theoretic underpinnings, namely, its materialist reductionism, an educational philosophy which it proposes to impose *by legislation* on the entire state. In the presentation of this set of ideas to the people of Iowa, what is most striking to me is three things. First, there is a near total absence of educators, especially those with some theoretic sophistication, from the panel making these educational recommendations. Second, educators in the state seem not really to grasp the seriousness of the *ideas* represented in the report and have mustered little response to it despite the obvious interest of the state’s Department of Education and its Governor. Third, I find it uniquely ironic that during a period when the historically centralized governmental agencies of the U.S.S.R. and its client states are moving dramatically toward more democratic solutions to social problems, Iowa, a farming state with an long record of individualism, should want to centralize and standardize its entire educational system, thereby limiting, maybe even eventually eliminating, its pluralistic, democratic character.

Now, where does philosophy of education fit into all this? Well, in the direct sense, today it doesn't. What we may have forgotten, however, is that this was not always the case. From the Civil War of the 1860s up through at least World War II and 1945, national commissions on education, whether set up by the President, by other governmental agencies or by private foundations, frequently had major "foundations" types, including philosophers of education, on them, providing advice and criticism. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, participation in national investigations of education by educational philosophers and historians has almost totally disappeared. One need think only of the *Nation at Risk*, the Holmes Group and the Carnegie reports of the 1980s. That is at the national level.

At the other extreme, the local level, I suspect that my experience at Iowa State may not be wholly different than that at many contemporary institutions. Philosophy of education (history of education, too, for that matter) is *required* in no graduate program in education and hasn't been for decades. (Though an undergraduate requirement of a "Social Foundations" course still does exist in the teacher-preparation program, neither the text used nor the way the course is taught presents any serious consideration of philosophic or historical issues—but that's a topic for another time.) I know that this is not a peculiarity of Iowa State because when I talk to students who have attended graduate programs at other public and private universities in Iowa and other states, a number—I would guess a majority—cannot remember *ever* having had a course in philosophy of education, graduate or undergraduate. Most disturbing, possibly, is that colleagues in other areas of education respond, when philosophic issues are brought up, that this is not their area of expertise, that they don't really know anything about it, and that anyway, it's

[2] As I reread this essay in 2015, 25 years after it was written, I am struck by how similar the ideas are to the philosophy and legislation of “Race to the Top,” the U.S. Department of Education’s attempt to shape all of American public education through the use of competitive grants to the states and local school districts. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

more important to be about our business and not get caught up in all that abstract debate. Again, as the previous paragraph suggested, this has not always been the case.

So philosophy of education is virtually invisible at the level of national policy debate and close to invisible in the experience of many professors of education and their students. Why? Well, a number of reasons external to the field exist, of course, ones having to do with such things as socioeconomic forces, the American streak of anti-intellectualism, political struggles, professional turf protection in public schools, in colleges, and in universities, plus a host of others. However, I think some reasons are internal to our field itself. Two causes of the decline of philosophy of education, ones I will not deal with here, have to do both with the type of philosophy that has dominated since the Second World War—positivist and analytic—and with the increasing "professionalization" of the field. A third cause, however, I do want to discuss here, namely, the teaching of philosophy of education.

It is striking to me that at meetings such as this one, professional philosophers of education rarely discuss teaching their discipline. Going back through the *Proceedings* of the annual meetings of the Philosophy of Education Society, I find only a handful of papers in the last decade directly devoted to teaching philosophy of education. In the Midwest PES, I'm told it was last discussed in a panel in 1986, but prior to that Milwaukee meeting it is unclear to me when it was last brought up. I think it is critically important to think about and discuss with one another not only what philosophy of education is but also how one presents the discipline to others, especially "outsiders," those who do not plan on becoming philosophers of education. Many of the students who have passed through our classes have gone on to be leaders at some level in educational circles, and others have gone on to become professors of education and even our present colleagues. Judging by frequently expressed attitudes of colleagues in other education fields, we have not in the past been able to help them see the central importance of what we do for *all* educational endeavors. Philosophy of education, at least potentially, is not just one more technical specialty jockeying for academic power in a Hobbesian war of all against all.

This panel has been put together, therefore, as an attempt to begin to suggest something of the wide diversity of approaches to teaching philosophy of education that exists today and to stimulate reflective discussion of the issues involved in how we present our discipline to others. In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to propose to the Society that we establish some kind of forum at *each* of our annual meetings where the issues of teaching philosophy of education can be discussed and some of the different approaches even demonstrated in an abbreviated form. Hopefully we will have time later during the discussion of this panel's presentations to debate this proposal.

Such, then, was the impetus behind putting this panel together. Since my two colleagues are going to focus their remarks directly on aspects of how they teach philosophy of education, I will just sketch quickly some of the approaches I have made to this problem, each of which leaves me more or less dissatisfied with its effectiveness.

Let me describe the typical graduate class I work with. It is a 3-credit-hour, semester-long course entitled "Philosophy of Education." None of the students is a major in philosophy of education, so this is entirely a "service" course. Students take it usually because either philosophy, a "social foundations," or a psychology course is required in their masters or doctoral program. They are all experienced teachers, ranging from preschool/ kindergarten through junior college level. They tend to be either upgrading their certificates through a masters program or working on a doctorate in Educational Administration, Research and Evaluation, or

Curriculum and Instructional Technology. Sometimes they can remember taking a "foundations"-type course in their undergraduate teacher-preparation program. Only infrequently do they remember *ever* having had a philosophy or a philosophy of education course.

One approach I have made was suggested to me by the first paragraph of Dewey's *Experience and Education*.

> Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. . . . The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure.

As Dewey makes clear in *Democracy and Education*, this opposition is fundamentally that between Rousseau and Plato. So my course structure was clear: begin with the *Republic*, then turn to *Emile*, and conclude with *Democracy and Education*. Classes read the whole of each book and discussed them each week, with little formal lecturing on my part. My main purpose was to get students to recognize the importance of thinking connectedly and comprehensively about the problems that education raises. I wanted them to begin to recognize that education is not just the technical skill they've been led to believe it is but also the most important perspective one can take on civilized life. The course's success in my eyes was Deweyan in character: *either* students "took to" this approach like the proverbial ducks to water—I have yet to find any student who remembers ever having read any of these works previously—*or* this was just a chore to get through. Dewey's observation on humankind's tendency prevailed.

What to do? Two ideas occurred to me. The first arose out of student complaints that these books were "too abstract" or "didn't reflect reality." Since "What do I do Monday morning?" seems to be the level at which most of their educational preparation has functioned, I decided to become "concrete." Having written a dissertation on Emile, I had great sympathy with such an approach to theoretic problems. Consequently, I decided to present individual schools that had been organized on philosophic principles. Maybe that would be "practical" enough. But which schools? Here my work on Richard McKeon came to mind. McKeon argues for four enduring approaches to intellectual issues: in rough terms, the atomist, formalist, skeptical, and problematic approaches. Moreover, he argues that "any question pushed far enough is philosophic in character." So I had four approaches to work with, a rationale for beginning with the concrete, and the structure for the course. I tried to choose a school to represent each of the four approaches. First came Skinner's *Walden Two* for the atomistic view of education. (I know, this is not a real school, but it *seems* as if it is to the students; furthermore, if pressed, I bring out Kathleen Kinkade's *A Walden Two Experiment* as a working example.) Next was Bruno Bettelheim's *Children of the Dream* about the Israeli Kibbutzim—often supplemented with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, a wonderful (and also seemingly concrete) feminist utopian novel—to present the formalist educational perspective. Then I've used either Carl Rogers' *Freedom To Learn in the '80s* or A. S. Neill's *Summerhill*, both taking a more skeptical, relativistic approach. Finally, the last reading was Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School*, the detailed recollections of two sisters who taught

with Dewey in Chicago. I have come always to present Dewey last in a course; I find his ideas the most difficult for students to grasp.

I've had some modest success with this approach, and less students complain about abstraction and irrelevance. I am, however, troubled by the marginality of several issues that I try to work into discussions but lack the time in the context of this course to deal with. First is the whole host of feminist issues. A substantial majority of my students are women and they tend to find little attention paid to gender issues in other courses. I'm troubled that I haven't provided more in this area. Second, I have a similar unease about racial issues. Third, the 1980s provided a most striking reorganization of public priorities, leading to unique and growing class divisions or socio-economic inequalities, all increasingly reflected in our educational system in America. Last, as I talk with practicing teachers, I'm becoming increasingly uneasy about the power of television. Television (and I recognize I've come late to this awareness) is arguably *the* most powerful educator in America today. It has apparently become the environment within which we all function, mediating both our direct "experience" of the world as well as, more obviously, the way we are presented with what's important in that world by other humans. I sense that as a philosopher of education I need to think about media much more carefully and stimulate the students in my classes to do so, too.

In short, I wish I could conclude by telling you that mine is a success story. I can't. I wish I could at least tell you what the "moral" is. But, again, I can't. My class gives me just one chance to talk with individuals who have virtually no philosophic background and little intention of formally pursuing further the intellectual issues raised in class. I find myself torn between two purposes. One is to indicate that there is something I would call an intellectual world, a world in which matters of knowledge, action, and emotion have a discernible, if debatable, relation to each other. I would like to encourage students to recognize that when they are told to think about learning, for instance, as being merely information-processing based on a metaphor of the mind as a computer, they are also being told to conceive of knowledge as having a certain character and of human relationships, social and political, as having a certain quality, that, in short, learning theory has consequences far beyond the field of cognitive psychology. Yet another purpose I find myself drawn to is to consider some of the critical "issues" currently so important in general discussions and practices of education today, for instance, the four I mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

So, as I think about the next time I will teach philosophy of education, which purpose will act as my guide as I prepare the course? I don't really know today. I find it important, however, to share my experience with those of you who teach even in situations only loosely related to mine because I believe your responses can help me see my way more clearly. Perhaps my experience will provide some stimulus for your reflections, too. And, most important, it opens the possibility of our both seeing more by conversing together than any one of us can see alone. As Socrates says in the *Protagoras* [348d], referring to Ulysses' night investigation of the Trojan camp in the *Illiad*, "When two go together, one sees before the other." And that is a central source of intellectual community.