

INTRODUCTION

DEFENCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION:

A QUEST FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSE

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I confess. My formal education in philosophy is abysmal. What's more, I've never thought deeply about what the construct of philosophy entails, despite self-proclaimed expertise in the armchair variety. In education circles, I've heard the term often, mostly tossed about in the context of a 'personal philosophy of education,' generally represented in a one page statement written by a teacher candidate in order to regurgitate the theoretical buzz words required to get a job.

There are other connotations in the general public's psyche, including mine, about what "philosophy in education" means. Modern academic philosophers can seem to be interpreters of past great thinkers, like English professors interpret the words of Shakespeare or Margaret Atwood, mining them for new understandings. As interpreters of other people's songs, this stereotype sees philosophers more akin to American Idol contestants than Beethoven. If pressed to consider what philosophy in education must be, I would have conjured specific images of interpretations of the kaleidoscope of education theory: fine comb analysis of what it means to learn, or to school or be schooled.

Reading the 24 submissions for this issue of *Antistasis* opened my mind up to the brave new world of a discipline that is both broad in its scope and relevant, but also acutely aware of the general misunderstanding of its nature and the gross underestimation of its power and importance. A significant number, nearly half of the submissions for this issue, in some way or other focus on the importance of philosophy in education contexts.

Two of the essays consider the role of philosophy in education systems. Trent Davis posits in his essay, *The aims of education in an information age*, that philosophy "can help us clarify the ultimate aims or purposes of education, and, further, that in our rapidly shifting information age this is necessary and even vital." The theme of purpose of education as the realm of philosophy is also addressed in Pinto and Portelli's *Philosophy as policy, policy as philosophy: Reviving a radical relationship*. They argue that "education policy **is** philosophy in that it defines educational purpose." They go on to present "a reconstitution of these terms" to "revive their relationship."

The backdrop to the examination of the importance of philosophy in education is remarkably similar in the bulk of the essays; clearly, the development of the "practical," "vocational," or "skills" in students *versus* individual, moral, intellectual development is a topic weighing heavy on the minds of Canadian philosophers and

in education. Gustafson's *Vocation and virtue: A modern educational path* suggests there is a middle-ground, which can resolve the dichotomy. In the process, she showed me how the history of philosophy can be brought to bear to support the work of current philosophers and provide insight into a current issue.

Maubant's approach to essentially the same question looks at historically-situated embodiments of educational philosophy for inspiration. In *Bridging the gap between the school and social life: A recurrent quest in pedagogy* he describes the nature of mediaeval education, and the development of new policy in 16th century France. "The New Education.. [was] not a school to learn "how to do", but a school to understand why it is important to do. As educators, we have to remember this necessary link between thought and action to promote the emancipatory value of education."

Roger introduces us to *The pedagogical philosophy of Bachelard*, a 19th century French teacher and explains his ideas on the contribution of the very act of the "construction of knowledge" to the development of the mind. With the claim that "the construction of knowledge supersedes the identification of skills in terms of educational priority," Roger, too, provides us with a way out, or through, the debate of knowledge vs. skills.

VanWynsberghe in *Toward a pragmatist-inspired redesign of education* addresses the same issue with an extension of modern philosophy of education. His "pragmatism asserts that knowledge is an experimental outcome" and "learning ... a change in knowledge that creates the capacity for action."

Carreiro is *Just asking: How do philosophers of education proceed when schools and students want more practice and less theory?* He suggests "theory can be experienced through activity..[as a]..feasible solution to the issue of separating theory and practice." His actions prove his point: he's living this philosophy, grounded in the work of others, in his teacher candidate classes "in an attempt to harmonize philosophical/theoretical thinking with a more pragmatic approach in which my students and I will try to practice, solve, and do." Ryan, too, in *Changing the philosophy of education with an education in philosophy*, provides an example of how philosophy enacted can transform teaching practice, in his case in a secondary classroom. These two essays in particular evoked, for me, a sense of the potential for that B.Ed. personal philosophy statement as a teaching and learning tool.

With *The uselessness of philosophy*, Di Paolantonio offers a provocative perspective on the question of the importance of philosophy in education and turns the issue on its head to ask "what would it mean to think about the relationship between philosophy and education by considering the significance of the impracticality of philosophy?" To embrace philosophy as useless, suggests Di Paolantonio, is to "unleash the wondering function."

Above and beyond preoccupations with the relevance of philosophy to education, other essays in this issue provide an inkling of the span of contributions modern philosophy can, and does, make to education. Ribeiro's *Teacher technology adoption*

and the philosophy of fear examines the current status of technology in the classroom in relation to historic information revolutions through a philosophical lens. Philosophy also provides grease to sooth the concerns.

The work of Burns, Leung, and Yeung – *Do as we say, not as we do: The nature of environmental education* – is a stand out in its direct philosophical approach to turn a moral spotlight on a current issue with little historic equivalent: the “intergenerationally unjust” nature of the formal teaching of environmentalism.

I found it a little sad to glean an inside perspective of a discipline preoccupied with defending its relevance, despite its articulate and varied arguments outlining how better understanding and training in philosophy could improve education, the lives of individuals, and society in general. Reading these essays convinced me that philosophy is crucial to education, as well as an integral part of the fabric of the field. I believe this transformation in my viewpoint from exposure to a single journal issue highlights two needs for the philosophy of education community:

1. Outlets like *Antistasis* to communicate scholarship to the general education public; and,
2. Dedication among philosophy of education scholars to develop the capacity to communicate their ideas and positions in a truly accessible way.

I’m also left pondering how it is that defense of philosophy in education is necessary in the first place. Are universities really so driven by the market needs of their consumers, the students, who want to be fed what they need to get a job, directly, now, on a platter if possible? (And if so, is this situation of our universities’ own making?) Perhaps a certain proportion of the general public must be exposed to philosophy in a formal sense in order to appreciate its importance? Is there a critical mass? I’m also left wondering what we’re missing out on, with all these active, knowledgeable minds engaged in justifying their discipline. What other guidance on critical issues, creative solutions, ruminations, and enrichment of intellectual life might ensue without this pressure to defend itself? And, finally, it has also crossed my mind that navel-gazing about the nature and relevance of the discipline of philosophy goes with the territory. After all, is not one of the big questions of philosophy our *raison d’être*?