Just Asking: how do philosophers of education proceed when schools and students want more practice and less theory?

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Schools favour learning outcomes, assessment, competitiveness and technological expertise.[1] Social critics and educational theorists frequently decry the lack of funding and the decrease of interest in the social sciences and humanities.[2] Educators in theoretically inclined disciplines often complain that their students are less interested in theory and more interested in finding solutions to problems and applying knowledge to the real world.[3] Our cultural landscape suggests that earning a degree in the social sciences and humanities is a waste of time, because historians, philosophers, sociologists, and artists, for example, cannot apply their knowledge and expertise to specific issues in the real world, providing solutions. On the other hand, studying Business, Economics, Science or Engineering, for example, is considered a good investment, because a degree in these areas often results in employment, and business managers, economists, scientists and engineers effectively transform and manipulate the real world, providing solutions to human problems and fully engaging in the work force.

Amid this scene, reside philosophers of education, a group of scholars deemed so unimportant in recent times that in 28 years the field of philosophy of education in

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[1] The term *school* is used in a broad sense, meaning any educational institution, public or private, elementary, secondary or for higher education.

[2] A few of these books became popular in academia, such as Frank Donoghue's *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) and Martha Nussbaum's *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. More recent examples of books with both a scholarly and popular appeal that discuss this matter are Michael Roth's *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) and Sean Steel's *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education: Historical Sources and Contemplative Practices* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014).

[3] For evidence that students are less interested in theoretical speculation and more interested in pragmatic solutions, please *cf.* sources listed in note 2, above.

Canada went from "alive and well" to cries of "save the humanities at OISE".[4] One reason for this development may be that historically, philosophical contemplation has been the opposite of training for work. Dealing with topics that are not necessarily specific and applicable, such as ethics and morality, the meaning of existence or the nature of knowledge, for example, philosophy has always required a leisurely attitude that counters the paradigm of being productive in the work environment.

There are many features working to the detriment of the field of philosophy of education. Perhaps the most important one is difficulty in establishing the meaning of philosophy of education. One common conception is that philosophy of education is the set of cultural and personal beliefs a teacher uses in her/his teaching, *i.e.*, it is the teacher's personal philosophy. Another common concept is that philosophy of education is a method of inquiry, a way of thinking about the theoretical foundations that inform educational practice. In the *Phil Smith Symposium* at the *2013 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting* René Arcilla surprisingly argued that education and philosophy do not go together, entangling an already complex concept.[5] According to Arcilla, education is the art of training, disciplining and controlling, whereas philosophy is radical, divergent and emancipatory.

Having taught introductory philosophy, comparative literature and educational theory courses for about fifteen years, I have come to agree with Arcilla's assessment. In my experience, studies in education currently privilege professional development, classroom management, online presence and efficiency. Teaching is not generally considered a moral endeavour, permeated with complexity, doubt, and time to leisurely think about potential solutions to the questions raised in class.[6]

I am aware that I have just described a grim scenario for philosophers of education, however, I would like to invite any person interested in educational

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[4]   In 1981, Philosophy of Education in Canada was deemed "alive and well" by Sister Mary Olga McKenna, in the article "The Status of Philosophy of Education in the Curricula of Preservice *(sic)* Teacher Education Programs in Canada", *Canadian Journal of Education*, 6, vol.1 (1981): 42-54. The quote "Save the Humanities at OISE" refers to the great commotion caused by the end of the History and Philosophy of Education program at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto) in 2009. Letters of protest from students and scholars in the field against the closure of the program are currently archived at http://savethehumanitiesoise.wordpress.com

[5]   This special address is yet to be published in OVPES's journal, *Philosophical Studies in Education*, in the fall of 2014.

[6]   Although a constant in my academic career, one of the most remarkable examples of this mindset occurred when I taught a teacher candidate seminar titled Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice. Quite often, the bibliography I chose for the theoretical aspect of the course were dismissed by my student teachers as too academic, too philosophical, too theoretical or academic jargon with no real-life solutions.

philosophy to take heart. Not everything is lost, and there are alternative ideas in the works. Here are a few examples.

Paul Theobald, a professor of rural education, has been studying the need to reclaim the commons.[7] The commons are the resources that belong to a community, such as water, air, parks or knowledge. If knowledge were to be seen as integrated to the commons (therefore, belonging to everyone) instead of being private property, argues Theobald, we would foster a stronger sense of interconnectedness with each other and, consequently, with the environment that surrounds us. The entire idea of schools being connected to and serving the community of which it is part, counters the current environment of competitiveness and practical results that most seek in schools.

Beeman and Blenkinsop also offer an elegant solution to the conundrum of theory *versus* practice, or contemplation *versus* pragmatic results.[8] The authors make the case that advanced theoretical ideas were initially, experienced by philosophers in their lives and only afterwards codified into words, and transmitted to print. As an example, the authors state that when Plato described the dazzled visual disorientation that occurs upon exiting the cave, he could have been speaking from his own experience. The idea that theory can be experienced through activity might be a feasible solution to the issue of separating theory and practice. Theoretical ways of knowing and pragmatic ways of knowing can be reconciled and furthermore co-dependent.

I have incorporated in my own teaching a few elements in attempt to harmonize philosophical/theoretical thinking with a more pragmatic approach in which my students and I will try to practice, solve, and do. My pedagogical practice is to assign challenging readings in philosophical and educational theory.[9] In an environment in which we are constantly distracted by electronic communication, I work with my students in order to find focus, attention and empathy, asking them to disconnect for at least an hour every day, and concentrate on the message of the authors I assign. I also create outdoors activities and attempt to foster community by inviting students to discuss the texts in small groups, and later share ideas reunited as a whole class. I invite students to bring food to share, and attempt to make each class an event of its own. Another common practice is the collective drawing of mind maps on the board. By writing and drawing their thoughts and impressions on the board, each student has the opportunity to connect ideas to each other and learn from convergent and divergent ideas that emerge.

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[7]   *Cf.:* Paul Theobald. *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

[8]   Chris Beeman and Sean Blenkinsop. "Experiencing Philosophy: Engaging Students in Advanced Theory". *Journal of Experiential Education*, n.35, vol.1 (2012): 207-221.

[9]   Books or short essays by authors Maxine Greene, Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière are recent examples of theoretical, advanced readings I use in my classes.

In general, my attempts to unite advanced theory and classroom practice have been met with sympathy by students; there are, however, many students who prefer bullet-point presentations, note taking, and memorization of concepts. Often I am disheartened when I receive negative comments in teaching evaluations that I receive at the end of the term. Trying to conciliate practice and theory is still a new tendency, and not how educational theory has been traditionally taught. Based on the increasing number of scholars devoting their careers to change traditional pedagogies and based on my own experience, I believe it is an elegant solution, despite the resistance of some scholars and students.

Biography

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