PHILOSOPHICAL "(RE)THINKING" DESCRIBED AND APPLIED

Eric C. Sheffield
Southwest Missouri State University

A Philosophical Itch

I am increasingly bothered of late by the way we professional philosophers of education go about our work as researchers—research that I believe should support and inform those who are in the "trenches" of elementary, middle, and secondary school classrooms. Our old friend Mr. Dewey called the type of "itch" that I am experiencing "a felt difficulty" and suggested that the way to regain comfort is to step away from the immediacy of the experience, ponder possible solutions, and apply the worthiest of them to the itch in question. John Dewey was wise enough to know that first scratches are usually not the last and, more often than not, lead to other related difficulties: that certainly is the case here.

I have, in fact, had various versions of this particular "itch" over the last several years and have stepped back to (re)build the case that, when done well, philosophy of education is a viable, relevant, and informative means of qualitative inquiry that is at least equal in practical impact to other forms of educational research. In (re)describing philosophical work in this way (for it has certainly been described as such before), I have in large part rid myself of that burdensome baggage that becomes particularly heavy when someone asks me what I "do." In (re)scratching this meta-philosophical itch, I hope, in addition to working through the problem personally, to remind the educational community that philosophy has an essential role to play in establishing policy, improving practice, and informing other research endeavors.

However, this one successful scratch has lead to a second, even more annoying, itch. Stepping back to revisit and redevelop my account of philosophical work in education has been crucially important, but my metaphorical return to the world of refereed journals, vita lines, and tenure procedures armed with my reinvigorated belief in and re-clarified understanding of philosophic method has landed me in a swamp I had not previously seen—a swamp composed of an itching, bothersome disconnect between what is valuable in educational philosophy and what is being encouraged in Educational Foundations departments. The stinging itch that I now feel is one that is not without a further bothersome and currently relevant implication: in times of economic duress, it is not uncommon for university administrators to (rightfully) question the value of theoretical work and those who do that work. This is particularly so in colleges of education where "production" can be maintained (hordes of properly licensed public school teachers) while simultaneously cutting the "waste" found in the theoretical "fringes" of foundational studies—in other

words, those departments that house philosophers as well as other educational theorists.

My newly felt discomfort is, I believe, directly related to the idea that philosophical discourse is a rethinking endeavor. I heartily believe that the philosophical work most of us do is, in fact, a matter of "rethinking" and not the purely creative endeavor for which many of us romantically yearn. It is rare that philosophers of education are truly creative in any paradigm-shifting way; let's face it, heroes such as Plato, Rousseau, and James don't come along very often. What we generally do as philosophers of education is "rethink" and then "reapply" ideas to new and changing educational/social contexts and in so doing, provide guidance to improve practice: it is vitally important work when done well.

What I will do with the remainder of this discussion, then, is to take the initial try at easing this new itch of mine by first, and very briefly, presenting an understanding of educational philosophy as a social practice that emphasizes its practical qualitative nature. Secondly, and drawing on that understanding of philosophy of education, I will argue that our work is at its heart a matter of "rethinking" and "reapplying" existing conceptual understandings within contemporary contexts and, therefore, that work should be judged for its relevance to contemporary educational contexts and less on the basis of its perceived "newness." Finally, in the spirit of philosophy as the rethinking endeavor I believe it is, and as a way to show the practical importance of training teachers to be both producers and consumers of philosophical work, I will briefly "rethink" two of the numerous troubling philosophical issues that exist in the "reform" pedagogy known as service-learning education and "reapply" them to see how its practice might genuinely be improved. In doing so, I hope to show that it is only with practically applicable philosophical work that we can defend ourselves against those charges of irrelevance that threaten our very existence in colleges of education.

Educational Philosophy as a Social Practice: a Working Definition

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that a social practice is any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[1] This understanding makes clear what does and what does not count as a social practice. As examples, plopping a tomato plant into the ground is not a social practice, but the larger work of farming certainly is; writing a school's mission statement is not a social practice, but the larger work of philosophizing about education is.

MacIntyre explains further that any social practice "involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods."[2] That is, social practices take their cues from established traditions to create various visions of our future and, importantly, suggest various practical means for reaching them. As such, MacIntyre's framework directs us to understand educational philosophy as a social practice that suggests reasonable means to reach reasonable goals in and through the educational process. To "get at" this underlying practical structure of educational philosophy, I return to a working definition that I believe succinctly and simply sums-up the matter: philosophy of education is "the analysis, clarification, and criticism of the language, concepts, and logic of the ends and means of education."[3]

Philosophy of Education (re)Explained

The first three terms of this working definition indicate the tools or instruments or the doings of educational philosophy. That is, educational philosophers "analyze," "clarify," and "criticize" educational practice. In analysis, one reduces complex ideas and situations into understandable, relational parts. Through analysis, essential concepts that drive educational practice are extracted from the "boom and buzz" of experience so that they may be more easily understood and debated. Closely related to and often following analysis is clarification. Once complex conceptual issues are broken down into understandable terms, they then must be examined for clarity: one traditional responsibility educational philosophers have is to understand, challenge and, ultimately, (re)clarify those constructs we use to make sensible educational decisions—constructs often taken for granted rather than truly understood. Finally, philosophic work traditionally entails criticism. Criticism simply means making judgments as to value. Educational philosophers judge the instrumental/practical value of concepts operating in educational contexts.

Just as any type of inquiry implies a particular type of problem, the educational philosopher has her own set of objects to which the above tools are applied. The second part of our working definition clearly indicates that the philosopher's traditional objects of inquiry are the "language," the "concepts," and the "logic" of educational practice. In applying the traditional philosophical tools to educational experience, philosophers provide insights into what, why, and how ideology impacts educational decisions and resulting practices. An educational philosopher, when doing good work, provides a reasonable understanding of how language, logic and concepts are used and how they might be restructured to be more useful within educational contexts.

Finally, our working definition concludes with the phrase "means and ends of education." That is, educational philosophers attempt to make clear the way we think about educational practice so that reasonable means might evolve which can lead us to equally reasonable goals. We do, after all, hope to make

educational decisions based on sound conceptual understanding. Educational philosophers investigate problems that might be alleviated through reworking and then reapplying concepts that have become inadequate for informing current practice. Philosophy of education is a traditional social practice that is qualitative in nature and one that should play a direct role in establishing formal policy, making sound decisions based on those policies, and informing daily classroom decisions through rebuilding existing ideas into better, more workable ones.

Philosophy as a Relevant (Re)thinking Endeavor

It all sounds quite simple, and yet my itch remains and in fact grows with the understanding that the battle over relevance and newness has been revisited numerous times by philosophers much more experienced and qualified than myself. In his introduction to Experience and Nature, Dewey reminded us that philosophy is a research method that is grounded in human experience: "The charge that is brought against non-empirical methods of philosophizing is not that it depends upon theorizing, but that it fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience."[4] That is, we philosophers of education do well to remember that the source of our work is living, ongoing educational contexts and educational philosophy's value as a social practice is found in its impact on moving educational practice in a better.

In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey made the point even more powerfully:

> In the classic philosophy, the ideal world is essentially a haven in which man finds rest from the storms of life; it is an asylum in which he takes refuge from the troubles of existence with the calm assurance that it alone is supremely real. When the belief that knowledge is active and operative takes hold of men, the ideal realm is no longer something aloof and separate; it is rather that collection of imagined possibilities that stimulates men to new efforts and realizations. It still remains true that the troubles which men undergo are the forces that lead them to project pictures of a better state of things. But the picture of the better is shaped so that it may become an instrumentality of action, while in the classic view the Idea belongs ready-made in a noumenal world. Hence, it is only an object of personal aspiration or consolation, while to the modern, an idea is a suggestion of something to be done or of a way of doing.[5]

In a more recent and well-known exchange on this issue, Jonas Soltis explained his view that

> We need substantive contact with educational researchers, professional educators of educators and practitioners to keep our minds open to potentially relevant philosophical problems, issues, or ideas. In fact, relevance of what we do to education must be the sine qua non [essence] of our professional commitment. It cannot be otherwise if we are honestly to call ourselves philosophers of education.[6]

I would only add an additional reminder: our audience is the educational community generally not exclusively other philosophers and as members of that broader educational community we simply must incorporate discussions of practical implications into our philosophical musings if they are to be relevant to the broader social practice of teaching and learning. To remain relevant to those in the trenches of elementary, middle, and secondary schools is to remember that what we really do when we philosophize about education is revisit and then refine those "big ideas" (as I call them in my foundations courses) that are operating in educational contexts to make them better directors of practice within our contemporary context(s). In these ways, we can reconnect with educators and participate in improving teaching and learning in all contexts for all students: the goal of any and every true educator.

And, so, what is it exactly that I mean when I suggest that our endeavors are generally a matter of revisiting, rethinking, and reapplying old ideas in new ways to new and emerging contexts? I would first argue that one important meaning of the term research is to examine again or to look at anew or, quite simply, to re-search. However, this position might smack some, and rightly so, as so much semantic gamesmanship. I think, instead, that a couple of examples might be the best way to further ease this itch of mine and further clarify my position.

Philosophical Research and the Service-Learning Reform

There is still afoot a reform movement in teaching and learning known as service-learning—I say "still" because it is enjoying a rather lengthy stay on the educational top ten reform list relative to most others. However, it is my contention that service-learning will soon be tossed onto the ever-growing educational reform garbage heap if it is not reeled-in philosophically. The problem with service-learning is that it is neither generally nor specifically well-defined and is certainly not well understood by those folks toiling in the trenches who might find it an appealing pedagogy. This, I think, is unfortunate because when scrutinized closely, service-learning holds genuine hope for revitalizing schools that have been beat down by such practices as high stakes testing, corporate/foundational involvement, and federal intervention. I believe that part of the garbage heap prevention program needed for service-learning is

philosophical in nature. There are several components of service-learning practice that must be clarified if its practice is to be successful and its status as a viable reform maintained. I will take up two of those components in the present discussion.

The first concept that must be clarified is the idea of service as it works in the context of service-learning. Of course, what is generally meant by service is doing something for someone who is in need. This general understanding of service has a history as long as humanity itself—when has there ever been a time when no one was in need and no one offering the proverbial helping hand? However, left un(re)examined, service might mean just about anything and, unfortunately, service does seem to mean just about anything when it comes to the current practice of service-learning education. For example, at my university service in service-learning education means everything from serving food to the homeless as part of a course on religion and society to helping a local library produce flyers and brochures as part of a computer/business class! This certainly is an example of how philosophical confusion can negatively impact educational practice. It is also a case where philosophical rethinking and reapplication would quite clearly and positively impact practice.

When it comes to service in the service-learning context, most discussions begin and end with the idea of mutuality. Mutuality is the understanding that in a service-learning project, it is important to encourage a two-way service ethic. That is, those being served benefit at least as much, if not more, than those receiving the actual "service." This is particularly the case in terms of human understanding and empathy. When, for example, a student attempts to alleviate problems associated with homelessness in a service-learning project, she can develop a sense of empathy and caring that goes well beyond what any book can tell her and beyond the benefits the homeless might receive from her "service" to them. However, on the mutuality account alone work done at, say, a thriving business where students learn by producing advertising documents is a completely acceptable service-learning activity. There *is* a sense of mutuality in this example and though it has little to do with empathy for those in need, it certainly is a two-way service street because both parties benefit: the students get "real-world" experience and the business gets free (some would say "slave") labor.

However, to get at the nature of service in service-learning that sets it apart from other internship-like partnerships, more philosophical work must be done. For one thing, conceiving community service as simply a matter of mutuality ignores the important educational aim of good habit formation or the development of dispositions toward more service work: mutuality alone provides no basis for service activity to accomplish anything educational beyond simply advancing subject area knowledge. In the language of Dewey, mutuality alone cannot be educative because it does not develop habits that will lead to future,

richer service experiences.[7] Additionally, mutuality alone does not take into account the particular context of education in and for democracy. There are justifiable and compelling reasons for conceptualizing service in a democracy as an essential element for advancing democracy.

The above are just a few reasons why service-learning practitioners need a clearer and much more sophisticated understanding of service if the service-learning pedagogy is to meet its hopeful potential. To address this particular problem is to reformulate what service means within the specific context of service-learning projects. This is a practical problem that can be solved philosophically, but only when philosophy is understood as a rethinking endeavor derived from relevant and real problems rather than as a purely abstract, creative endeavor that may not lead one back to solving problems in the experienced educational context.

To extend further the rethinking character of educational philosophy, I suggest that this problem can be successfully addressed by calling upon work done by past philosophers of education. By combining, reworking, and "tweaking" the thoughts of Howard Radest, Richard Rorty, Nel Noddings, and Dewey, I have elsewhere, developed and presented a more sophisticated and useful understanding of service that can be incorporated into service-learning projects—an understanding that will make such projects much more educationally valuable and more easily understood by classroom teachers. Certainly in advocating such a view of service, I am combining old ideas in new ways; it is, however, hardly an artistic endeavor and I would never describe it as something I have wholly "created." Most importantly, when applied to service-learning projects, this reformulated vision of service makes a service-learning project more educationally sound and more practically successful than before the reformulation. This is, I believe, how educational philosophers should proceed in their work.

A second component of service-learning that calls for similar philosophical clarification is in the idea of reflection. Reflection is essential to success with the service-learning pedagogy and not understanding its complicated conceptual structure can lead to poorly run service-learning projects and can result in poorly run service-learning research. Again, reflection is not a new player who has suddenly burst onto the educational scene as part of the service-learning pedagogy. Philosophers from the time of Socrates, himself, have attempted to clarify how it is we think and act in the world; that is, what is the process and value of reflective thought and how can it be encouraged and taught? The research to be done here is to (re)clarify reflection and its relationship to other components of service-learning; that is, the concept of reflection must be "rethought" via the contextual lens of service-learning.

In doing some philosophical "rethinking" of reflection in service-learning, I have again taken on a problem that is grounded in teacher/student experience. It, quite simply, calls for a rethinking and then reapplication of reflection to the particular contemporary context of the service-learning pedagogy. To reformulate a useful conception of reflective thought means reworking the ideas of such folks as William James, John Dewey, Janet Eyler, David Kolb and others so that reflective practice can be understood and then incorporated into service-learning projects. In revisiting the notion of service from a philosophical perspective, I do not hope to radically shift paradigms; I only hope to solve problems of practice by making the concept of service more practically directive.

One particular aspect of reflective thought that goes without needed attention in service-learning is in understanding the initiating source of reflective thought. That is, if you want students to truly reflect on service-learning projects, they must "own" the project problem. If the student(s) don't feel the problem, they have no reason to reflect. In my own experiences working with the service-learning pedagogy it was this seemingly small aspect of reflection that caused our projects to flounder. The fact was that I presented the project problem to the students and in appropriating the problem for myself rather than having the students take the problem over as their own, little, if any, meaningful reflection occurred. No meaningful reflection quickly equates to no meaningful learning. At the risk of being overly repetitive, clarifying reflection in the context of service-learning projects is not a system building endeavor. This particular work is, as most philosophical work should be, a matter of focusing on re-fermenting the old wine to improve the new bottle and is vitally useful to the entire educational community.

Has the Salve Worked?

And so, where do I, and we, now stand relative to this swamp of vita lines, tenure, administrative program reviews, and publications. Well, I certainly can't admit to having my equilibrium back. On the other hand, there is some relief in getting this all off my chest, so to speak. I also hope that this discussion will bring us to revisit, rethink, and revise our own perceptions and conceptions of what we should be doing as philosophers of education; and, I think that in this professional reflection we will find our work meaningless if not practically applicable to all of those responsible for the health of the educational community. In fact, I believe that this rethinking process has relevance to our work as professionals and to our very survival in colleges of education.

Notes

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981), 187.

2. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 190.

3. Robert R. Sherman, Lecture Hand-Out for "Philosophy of Education" course. U of Florida, 1995. Photocopy.

4. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, [1938] 1958), 6.

5. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, Volume 12. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, [1920] 1988), 118.

6. Jonas Soltis, "Perspectives on Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings*, ed. William Hare and John P. Portelli (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1988), 11-12.

7. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1938), 13-14.