
INTERPRETING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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Judging from the number of anthologies with “rethinking” in the title, it seems that one intellectual preoccupation of past decade has been rethinking a number of important and often taken for granted philosophical concepts such as the subject, the public, the political, culture, social identity formation, autonomy, freedom, democracy, virtue, the ethic of justice, etc. Philosophers of education have contributed to this rethinking as well, at times bringing insights from cultural studies, feminist and queer theory as well as political and moral philosophy to bear on educational matters and at other times, bringing insights from the field of education to bear on the concept(s) in question.

The theme of the 2004 annual meetings of OVPES was “Re-thinking the relations between education, philosophy and the role of educational philosophy.” Natasha Levinson and I selected the theme through the course of many conversations about the role and effects of educational philosophy in contemporary schooling. We discussed our common concern regarding civic participation among American adults in everything political at both the micro and macro levels of organization. Not content to simply place blame elsewhere, we wondered how philosophy of education might contribute (both positively and negatively) toward understanding or misunderstanding of civic engagement. As philosophers of education, what is our contribution to understanding, explaining or even working against this problem?

One obvious contribution is the legacy of discourses of liberalism within political philosophy and educational theory. Indeed many of the papers in this volume take up discourses of liberalism by investigating foundational concepts like autonomy, equality, and justice. Moreover, Levinson’s presidential address and Li’s response provide a provocative treatment of the possibilities and limitations of various strands of liberalism within philosophy of education.

Let me first state that, like many other “post”-identified theorists, I have been resistant to concepts like “civic engagement,” “the public sphere,” and “liberalism” due to the theoretical baggage that accompanies them. For many, these terms—constituted by modernist assumptions of the subject and society—are vacuous in a post-modern, post-industrial era. As Li and McDonough (in an essay later in this volume) contend, feminists, queer and critical race theorists have argued for four decades that political philosophy has done little to address the conditions of the abject. Thus, some educational theorists have opted to focus their energy in the realm of cultural politics, leaving the notion of the civic and its democracy debates to self-identified “liberals,” “conservatives” or “progressives.”

While philosophers and philosophers of education debate on the viability of particular concepts, most agree on the focus of social justice and the role of education as a method to achieve it. (One exception is Sidorkin's lovely call to completely re-think education within that framework. For Sidorkin, both liberal and critical educational theorists attribute a false potential for schools to be sites of learning and/or social revolution. Rather, schools are sites of social solidarity whereby students and teachers conform to expectations of labor and its returns). Major philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Spivak have noted that it is modernist discourses (however problematic) that have provided the necessary foundation for recognizing the validity of claims regarding the invisibility and marginalization of particular groups. Thus, we are left with working in the ruins of liberalism and its discontents. How then, might we proceed with educational philosophizing that engages with the insights of multiple theoretical traditions, including the virtues of liberalism towards the goal(s) of social justice?

In her presidential address, "The Limits of Liberalism: A Positive Reappraisal," Natasha Levinson offers a primer on the distinctions between contemporary strands of liberalism within educational philosophy. She distinguishes between political liberalism and perfectionist liberalism, claiming that political liberalism has viability as a theory of restraint. Perfectionist liberalism, according to Levinson, centers individual autonomy as a public good. In contrast, political liberalism takes diversity as an outcome as well as a precondition of democratic societies. Arguing for a generous reading of Rawlsian theory, Levinson suggests that political liberalism may be an option for "ethical pluralism." In this way, Rawls's emphasis on a rational public describes those who are "willing to honor fair terms of cooperation" in civic society.

Huey-li Li's response to Levinson, in fact, does just that. Noting her own "skepticism," Li honors the attempt to provide a theory of political liberalism that takes into account the "contradictions of political reality and ethical ideal." Citing recent court cases that utilize the rhetoric of social justice to advance the rights of private interests, Li documents the challenges for public schools to provide "inclusive" multicultural curriculum. For Li, the rub lies between viewing cultural practices (including civic education) as a form of political idealism and hegemony.

Trevor Norris' paper, "Re-thinking and Re-producing Consumption," follows the neo-marxist position that schooling is a form of cultural hegemony. Working in the tradition of McClaren, Giroux and Deron Boyles, Norris investigates the current focus on "consumerism" in public schooling. Norris speaks to several key tensions in public education: public versus private interests; the rise of youth as a "market"; and the potential for schools to develop critical literacy. Norris' analysis shows how corporate interests compete with progressive education in making claims to defining "citizenship."

Similarly, Graham McDonough questions the educational aims and implications at work in the educational psychological deployment of the construct of autonomy in his paper, “Rethinking Autonomy as Resistance.” Using Althusser’s critique of liberal ideology, McDonough wrestles with educational heavyweight Kohlberg by suggesting that liberal definitions of autonomy may in fact be “illusory” given the role of schooling as an ideological state apparatus. Yet, McDonough argues that philosophers must continue to use the concept of autonomy, what he terms “autonomy-as-resistance” to allow students a means of “hope” for “struggling to cope with the effects of hegemonic practices.”

Jennifer Logue takes up the question of recognition in her article, “Recognition versus Re-evaluation of Privilege in Social Justice Education.” Using insights from post-colonial literary theory, Logue “deconstructs” the concept of privilege by examining two approaches: recognition and re-evaluation. She introduces Edward Said’s concept and method, “contrapuntal reading” to “re-examine problematic foundational assumptions that have been constituted by the exploitation and exclusion of difference.” Logue argues that critical theories of privilege tend to focus on the positive effects of privilege, and that reading privilege contrapuntally can lead to an interrogation of the negative effects (or what she terms “boomerang effects”) that are necessary for the advancement of a more sophisticated approach to social justice education.

The papers noted above focus on the possibilities and limitations of various theoretical constructs taken for granted in civic and/or social justice education. Other papers in this volume address the methodological approaches for investigating schools, education and what constitutes learning. In his paper, “Philosophical “(Re)thinking” Described and Applied,” Eric Sheffield reminds us that educational philosophy is a social practice. Sheffield notes: “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.” Drawing on the tradition of John Dewey, Sheffield advocates for a strong relationship between educational philosophers, researchers and policy-makers towards the goal of informing daily classroom decisions.

Like Sheffield, Joseph Watras looks to Dewey’s writing on the connection between philosophical thinking and scientific inquiry. In his paper “Does Education for Democracy Lead to Globalization?” Watras employs the writing of Dewey and Bateson on the role of democracy in developing countries. Responding to the charge that “rationality is an inherently oppressive construct, Watras’ analysis explores the distinction between instrumentalism and critical thinking for individuals and societies working towards ecologically friendly and egalitarian solutions. Watras’s analysis points to key differences in these two theorists writing on the subject: “While Bateson believed the only way to correct

the faults of science was to adopt another model of thinking, Dewey thought that people could turn scientific thinking in moral directions.”

Sarah McGough’s piece, “The National Council: Education as Intervention” enacts the sort of philosophical ‘re-thinking’ outlined in Sheffield’s argument. McGough uses Sheffield’s philosophical method of “analysis, clarification and criticism” to investigate the foundational assumptions at work in the National Research Council’s project to make education more “research” based. Through careful deconstruction, McGough shows how the NRC narrowly defined research as that which is empirical, statistical and designed for replication across divergent cases. McGough terms this approach as education as intervention versus a more interpretive approach “education as *bildung*.”

Another paper to address the methodological role of philosophy in education is Linda O’Neill’s piece, “The Juggernaut of Tradition: Gadamer, Feminism and Philosophy of Education.” O’Neill picks up almost where McGough’s analysis leaves us, which is, to question the role of interpretation in the educational enterprise. O’Neill’s paper shares characteristics of others in this collection. Like Logue, O’Neill deploys feminist critiques of liberal and critical perspectives in philosophy. A key strategy used by both is the practice of reflexivity in the classroom. They argue that classrooms ought to be a place where concepts are interrogated not just in terms of their theoretical history and logical viability, but also in relation to their ability to speak to various members’ experiences. Like Logue, O’Neill turns to the pedagogical practice of interpretation as a potential for developing critical awareness. O’Neill distinguishes two types of hermeneutics: hermeneutics of tradition and hermeneutics of suspicion. Her paper follows the later tradition, quite eloquently, by interrogating her own complicity in the tendency for theorists to conflate “commitments” with tradition.

The keynote address this year was given by Bonnie Honig professor of Law at the American Bar Association and Northwestern University. Honig’s paper is titled “Bound by Law? Alien Rights, Administrative Discretion and the Politics of Technicality: Lessons from Louis Post and the First Red Scare.” Honig uses the historical case of Louis Post to analyze the distinctions between administrative, juridical and technical power. As an appointed leader hired to implement the Sedition Act of 1913, Post used his position to “free” approximately 3,000 persons detained as “aliens” under the Act. Honig asks the question, “Was Post implementing the Sedition Act or using his discretionary power to undo it?” I will leave Honig’s position for you to read. My own reading points to the latter, given that Post was fired for his “tender solicitude for social revolution.” To me, this implies that Post’s interpretation (and consequent actions) did not meet the interpretation and expectations of the authors of the Act. I am not suggesting that his actions were wrong. In fact, I applaud his efforts given

the social and political context of the Act and its creation. This point is key; social and political contexts heavily frame whether one action (such as releasing detainees) can be read as either complicit or subversive to Power.

In her response to Honig, “Ambivalent Power in Public Contexts,” Cris Mayo notes “Schools are odd and instructive places for considering the promises and possibilities of kinds of administrative power, as well as negotiations over competing obligations of law and responsibility.” Mayo then outlines how teachers’ utilized their agency coupled with rhetoric of care and responsibility in their actions regarding Proposition 187 and the forming of a Gay Straight Alliance. As Mayo illustrates, teachers used discretion in defining their own positions (whether to support or oppose certain policies) as well as whether or not to use that discretionary power to advance their position. I agree with Mayo, that discretionary power is a doubled edged sword” “One must rely on the administrator’s good character and disposition to act in just ways.” This statement gets at the crux of the paradoxes and limitations of liberalism in specific and modernist conceptions of power in general.

As a Foucaultian philosopher, I am suspicious of claims to good character, positional power, and relying on commonsense notions of justice. For as history (as well as any classroom, newspaper, television, recent election and even religious setting) makes visible, injustices not only abound, but are part and parcel of taken-for-granted social norms. Just as the problem is not cultural diversity, the solution may not be political pluralism. As several of the papers in this volume have outlined, one of the limitations of liberalism is that it assumes rationality, fairness and justice as a shared commitment – yet whole classes of folks are time and time again excluded from the very constitutive definition of personhood. Liberalism may acknowledge these injustices, but ultimately relies on features like “hope” and “faith” (in liberal individuals, political leaders and institutions) to make a better society. Faith and hope are laudable values that make possible the daily celebration of life of persons and communities struggling with injustices. However, teaching/learning these values may be better suited within the realm of spiritual life rather than civic education. (Wait, I know I’ve just ruffled some feathers...)

Let me return to Honig and Mayo’s analysis of discretionary power and offer a potential application (or translation) for educational contexts. Honig argues that Post was able to do (or undo) the work of the Sedition Act by using a form of technicality to circumvent the original intent of the legislation. One way that teachers might use a similar form of discretionary power is to look for technical loopholes in educational policies (such as standardized testing) to allow for curriculum that is more locally-derived and/or culturally relevant. In the wake of the Gay Straight Alliance, Abstinence Only programs, corporate businesses determining what gets sold in the lunchroom and playground, why can’t schools

(and the teachers that comprise them) advance their own interests for the sake of the public good? Yes, some parents may be upset, resistant, and even willing to go to court, but if there are enough like-minded socially progressive teachers willing to act as Post did, it might make a change.

After reading the papers in this volume I realize another possible link between Honig's analysis of the Post case and educational contexts. In the past foundations of education scholars have held a privileged position within the educational community as informers (if not makers of) educational policy agendas. But in the last twenty years our position has been delimited to the role of "implementing" standards imposed from elsewhere. From *A Nation at Risk* to the current National Research Council, this work has been done under the rubric of requiring more "empirical-research" based scientific educational research. I argue that we can not only not afford to relinquish our power to set educational priorities, but that we must use our theoretical skills to help educators "implement" (or shall I say interpret?) what constitutes educational research.

A common thread (in my assessment) across the diverse papers in this collection is the role of interpretation in political action. Whether the object is "individual autonomy," "critical literacy," delineating the effects of policy or even describing philosophy, political action is interpretive and in turn, all interpretation is political. As philosophers of education we practice and teach our students about analysis, interpretation and criticism. Whether we utilize Dewey, Gadamer, Foucault or whomever, we can and should remind our audiences of the critical role of interpretation in educational inquiry.
