
CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF INTEREST:
BUILDING BRIDGES, SHARING AIMS

Angela Hurley
Transylvania University

Occasionally, educational philosophers are accused of talking to one another almost exclusively. For their part, educational philosophers many times feel like Cassandra, the Greek prophetess who was forever warning and issuing prognostications but never being listened to. In fact, educational philosophers often wonder why their words either do not reach general populations or schooling policymakers or are simply not heard. Ideas certainly cannot be put into action if they have a limited audience or if philosophers do not listen to or are not conversant with other groups of theorists, practitioners, and policymakers. When groups exclusively use their own particular ways of seeing the world, important social and schooling problems continue to exist and gaps between groups widen. In addition, groupings engender hierarchies of power for some, while silencing others who find their humanity and agency diminished.

Therefore, the accusations of exclusionary practices were kept in mind when the 2006 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society conference and journal theme, “Cultivating a Community of Interest: Building Bridges, Sharing Aims,” was selected. A sustaining metaphor, that of building bridges, provided the conceptual hook for combining the notion of hearing and seeing beyond one’s own boundaries with the idea of working for the social good by forming communities for civic interests. Metaphors provide powerful instruments of thought by comparing nascent ideas to known entities in order to bring clarity and richness to the idea struggling for existence. Being able to make the unknown known is a particularly important task, and most often metaphors enable the connections to be made so that understanding can be achieved. The bridge serves as a most reliable metaphor because the conference and journal theme was a call “to hear” and “to see” those beyond immediate borders, to form relationships between groups and ideas not often connected, and to cross wide divides of dissent and disagreement. In this particular case, the device was made even more powerful by using an impossible-seeming construction, the Milau Viaduct, as the visual for sustaining the bridge-building metaphor. The effect of using an actual bridge, the Milau Viaduct, as an example of connecting the human imagination to seemingly impossible feats served as the generating spark for the essays contained in this volume of *Philosophical Studies in Education*. The conference and the journal both provided a space for the seemingly impossible to happen, for the bridging among disparate voices to occur. Perhaps Henry Giroux’s statement in “The Promise of Democracy and Edward Said’s Politics of Worldliness,” concerning the importance of the space between an idea and actual reality provides a

provocative description of what occurs when barriers are removed. Giroux states:

educators need to rethink the important presupposition that higher education cannot be separated from the imperatives of an inclusive democracy and that the crisis of higher education must be understood as part of the wider crises of politics, power, and culture. Jacques Derrida argued that democracy contains a promise of what is to come and that it is precisely *in the tension between the dream and the reality of democracy that a space of agency, critique, and education opens up* and signals both the normative and political character of democracy.¹

That space for allowing ideas and actions to come into being is the bridge; if you will, it is the intellectual Milau Viaduct.

In a culture and schooling system promoting facts, accountability, and exclusive groupings, there appears to be a hunger on the part of a growing number of individuals and groups to change the existing mindset and lived realities toward a more inclusive, equitable, and intelligent manner of thinking and living. In searching for a way to unite the voices, the bridge metaphor was deemed to be strong enough to open the space for conversation while at the same time offering a common theme around which to entertain big questions related to civic and schooling realities and dreams. Therefore, in this collection of essays, the metaphor of building bridges in order to form communities of interest weaves the various writers' thinking together. This journal's theme is an attempt toward "opening up boundaries" and participating in imaginative conversations for the flourishing of humanity. In addition, the role of postmodern thinking is taken into account as these possibilities are considered.

Setting the challenge in her presidential address, Rosalie Romano urges educators to work toward removing social inequalities through activism which requires the elimination of socially and educationally constructed boundaries. She challenges groups to complete impossible tasks so that bridges can be constructed between unlikely groups. In a word, Romano asks her colleagues to acquire an activist attitude in order to work toward finding solutions for social problems, such as poverty, inequalities in a variety of settings, and unfair accountability measures, which plague society and its schools. Romano calls for a civic culture whose members are able to converse about difficult issues rather than see the world through particular labels, lenses, and identifiers exclusively.

Responding to Romano's call, the authors of the disparate essays in this volume locate perceived divides in a variety of conceptual, social, and pedagogical locations. They either offer possible ways to eliminate boundaries or ways to view divisions in a different light, in order to build the bridges. Several of the authors situate their responses in ideas about ethics and agency

(Michael Gunzenhauser), relationality and power (Lisa Weems, Liz Jackson, and Linda O'Neill), pedagogical strategies (Julie Brooks, Frank Fitch and Greg Loving, Bryan Warnick, Eric Sheffield, and Robert Klein), and parenting practices (Carolyn Buttner and William Fridley), while other writers suggest that ideas presented by theorists in the past provide bridges to solving current separations, particularly those related to pedagogy (David Diener, Joseph Watras, Jane Anna Gordon, and Lemah Bonnick).²

Alluding to both professional ethics and agency, Gunzenhauser, in the first essay, develops an argument related to his concern that educators in public schools have been discouraged and disabled from developing professional judgment, both individually and collectively. His essay, "Resistance as a Component of Educator Professionalism," highlights the role resistance to normalization might play in a notion of professional ethics. The power relations of public school educators are rather complex in the current context—they are both normalizing and normalizers—and Gunzenhauser believes that to be a very difficult place from which to act. By focusing light on relation, he attempts to confront the issue head on and work toward frames for acting and reflecting on what it means to be with others. Focusing on models of relation is essential to building communities of interest, because it has direct implications for the construction of self and other.

Weems also explores the notion of otherness. In her essay "To Be Mindful of Otherness: Toward a Post-Psychoanalytic Problematic of Ethics and Education," Weems claims that poststructural, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic discourses provide multiple ways to achieve insights regarding an ethical problematic which foregrounds issues of otherness, desire, and relationality within pedagogical encounters. Weems highlights the work of Sharon Todd, Deborah Britzman, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek in her argument. Drawing heavily from psychoanalytic discourses, Weems features learning but assumes that both teachers and students are learners who struggle with affective as well as cognitive demands from the self and others.

Working somewhat in the same vein, Jackson moves the conversation to postmodern theory. Within that theory, a particular perspective on the practices of building bridges exists, that of making connections between different individuals and groups that bears in mind particularly the importance of difference and realizing what difference difference makes. Viewing Friedrich Nietzsche as the father of postmodernism, Jackson identifies within Nietzschean thought a special concern for social and intellectual situations. In her essay, "Nietzsche and the Paradox of Postmodern Education," Jackson shows how helpful Nietzsche's ideas can be in helping educators who are interested in building bridges and connecting people despite the possibility of irreconcilable differences stemming from power relations.

Also considering differences and power relations, O'Neill in "Gadamer and the Game of Truth: Frames and Fusions," offers yet another way to close

gaps among groups. Because the concept of *fusion of horizons* has been applied successfully to investigations of constructed identities, it seems to be an ideal philosophical grounding for exploring value alternatives in the development of “multicultural” understanding. O’Neill’s analysis suggests that explicit references to metaphorical frames such as those developed by George Lakoff and James Ault might be useful in facilitating discussions that lead, not simply to dueling frames, but to fusions of horizons that keep conversations about differences “in play.”

In “‘Celebrating the Other’: Power and Resistance as Prelude to Benhabib’s Deliberative Democracy,” Brooks also examines notions related to classroom power. Brooks seeks to illuminate the ways through which educators might reconsider the hierarchical nature of classroom conversation. She further explores resistance to and the reconstitution of traditional relationships so that interaction between students and teachers is predicated on building and maintaining bridges between theory and practice, content and process, emotion and cognition, and reflection and action. Against the backdrop of Seyla Benhabib’s rationale for a deliberative democracy, Brooks argues that it is through a reconciliation of power dynamics in the classroom and a fostering of dialogue that celebrates both storytelling and active listening that a more equitable system of education and thus participation in a democracy are truly possible.

In a related essay, Loving and Fitch offer a new perspective on a perceived pedagogical dichotomy. Their essay, “Competition and Cooperation: Evil Twins or Fated Lovers,” centers on Richard Bernstein’s notion of engaged fallibilistic pluralism as a concept bridging the falsely dichotomized notions of competition and cooperation. In the classroom, the educator fosters the shared aim of mutual critique within an atmosphere of dialogic questioning. When competition and cooperation are seen as mutually supportive, the classroom forges a common community of interest dedicated to building bridges across chasms of difference in the common quest for knowledgeable understanding.

Warnick’s essay, “Emerson and the Education of Nature,” approaches the bridging theme from yet a different angle, closing the gap between school and society and the past and the present. Warnick thinks that too often when individuals work to better the world, they break the world into separate domains. Hence, there are the domains of “educational improvement,” “environmental protection,” and “personal morality.” Within his essay, Warnick attempts to build bridges among these separate areas, revealing the connections between improving education, protecting the environment, and moral development. Thus, with the help of the thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Warnick provides a way to view disparate problems more holistically instead of as isolated issues, including taking into account lived experience.

In discussing the importance of root metaphors for directing the understanding of lived experience, in his essay, “Root Metaphors, Paradigm

Shifts, and Democratically Shared Values: Community Service-Learning as a Bridge-Building Endeavor,” Sheffield provides a discussion of how contemporary metaphorical understanding of multicultural democracy no longer serves society’s needs. A metaphorical shift is needed for democracy to remain viable. Community service-learning as a democratic pedagogy provides an educational opportunity to shift the understanding of democracy in ways that can change perspectives and educational practice. Community service-learning, the author argues, can be both the means and ends to building new bridges while at the same time leading to new and deeper understandings of democracy and multiculturalism.

Also working with the notion of the importance of place, Klein combines his knowledge of mathematics to the classroom experiences of learners in “Educating in Place: Mathematics and Technology.” Klein’s essay focuses on the tension between the idea that “mathematics is everywhere” and the idea that educators find it is difficult to craft meaningful, place-based mathematics lessons. The approach attempts to bridge the currently disconnected ideas of place and mathematics and to demonstrate the possibilities resulting from engaging the two (place and mathematics) through a pedagogical turn guided by ethics of eco-justice and critical approaches to decolonialization and reinhabitation. This approach, known as “critical place-based pedagogy,” is articulated primarily through examples although some effort is made to offer more general strategies for practice. Two ideas motivate Klein’s argument: first, mathematics and the technology used in mathematics classrooms seem stuck in mathematics classes but oddly divorced from the place wherein the mathematics classrooms lie; second, that there is value in “opening the ears” of teachers and students so that they can listen to the mathematics of place.

Also thinking about pedagogy, but from a different angle, Buttner and Fridley view parenting as a major form of bridge building; parents build bridges to their children and by doing so, they model and teach their children how to build bridges within themselves (connection with self) and to their world (connection with others). Using the work of two contemporary parenting “experts,” Buttner and Fridley analyze the differences in the advice from the two in their essay, “WWJD: What Would Jim Do? A Comparison of James Dobson’s and Jim Fay’s Philosophies of Parenting.” Their analysis shows that these “experts” provide two views of how parents should relate to children. Additionally, Buttner and Fridley’s essay relates to building bridges to teachers via professional development programs in which ideas that might transcend the teachers’ dominant and traditional cultural/political milieus can be presented in reference to these two parenting theories.

One of several authors in this volume who reach to the past for ideas, in “An Inquiry into Teaching in the *Meno*,” Diener looks to Plato. Diener asserts that great thinkers of the past have wrestled with many of the same educational questions that face us today. In order to learn how current conceptions of

education compare with and have been influenced by these thinkers, however, we must first possess an accurate understanding of their thought. In his essay, Deiner attempts to lay a foundation for a bridge to history by examining a seminal work in the philosophy of education, Plato's *Meno*, as he analyzes what constitutes teaching.

Watras, in "Can Science Provide Bridges Among Educators?" makes a similar connecting move between history and the present when he compares and contrasts the ways William Torrey Harris and John Dewey thought about the following issues: the ways that philosophy shaped instruction, the need to blend curriculum theory and social concerns, and the importance of appropriate teaching methods. In the hands of Harris and Dewey, Watras claims, philosophy of education directed teachers, administrators, and scholars to integrate ideas in ways that reinforced a democratic society. Watras then turns to a more recent report from the National Research Council (NRC) released in 2002, *Scientific Research in Education*, that called on the U.S. Congress to create the conditions that could bring practitioners, researchers, business people, and policymakers together into a community of scientific research. Watras notes that although the pleas of the NRC appear to build bridges among different groups, he thinks that the model of such a community may reinforce the status of the researchers more than it will make society more democratic.

Gordon also uses a historical figure in her essay which connects to the theme of building bridges in two primary ways. The first is temporal in that Gordon suggests that there are surprising affinities between the educational situations in which Anna Julia Cooper and Jonathan Kozol reflect and write at, respectively, the dawn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By considering both Cooper's and Kozol's diagnoses and prescriptions together, researchers may develop educational language capable of counteracting the narrow anti-teleological thinking that dominates contemporary public schooling. The second metaphorical bridge that Gordon's essay, "Failures of Language and Laughter: Anna Julia Cooper and Contemporary Problems of Humanistic Pedagogy," supplies relates to intersubjective relations, the conditions of which are those that make language and laughter possible and that humanistic pedagogical approaches insist are the core of what make actual learning possible. These must be the alternative to the kinds of standards in policies like No Child Left Behind that, although presented as the fruit of mature, sober, and responsible thinking, instead rely on cultivating a sociality and encouraging outright cheating.

Bonnick also studies Cooper's work, using Cooper's ideas as a foundation for an anti-racist pedagogy. In her essay, "In the Service of Neglected People: Anna Julia Cooper, Ontology, and Education," Bonnick asserts that Cooper's thinking provides a pedagogic space of rescue for neglected people, especially for insecure black children. Bonnick claims that Cooper's work accomplished this rescue by "bearing witness to the emotional

and social needs of children, the most voiceless of the neglected, by seeking to transform the lived conditions of racism.” Bonnick interprets Cooper’s work as forming bridges across the divisions of race, class, and gender, thus creating inclusion for individuals’ lived experiences. It seems appropriate to end this journal with an essay that focuses on lived experiences; it is the place from which the needs for and the impulses to construct bridges originate.

In summary, let us return to the notion of collapsing boundaries, engaging in conversation, and promoting the flourishing of humankind. The variety of ideas put forth in this collection of essays attests to the generative function of ideas. Ideas build bridges between the knower and the unknown, between every day life and the imaginative possibilities of life, and ideas provide the bridges through which purposive action can be released into the world. Taking the notion of building bridges to reduce the insularity and hierarchical groupings of diverse peoples so that work can proceed toward easing social problems, the various authors whose essays are contained in this journal each found a different way to conceive a response to the journal’s theme. The essays originated in differing perspectives and disciplines, and they emphasize differing temporal and place dimensions of bridge building. Within just this small volume of work, then, we can observe the expanding force of a simple idea (in this case, building bridges). Just imagine the force that we humans, individually and collectively, have when we choose to use our ideas to guide the work of wrangling with the difficult problems associated with human living and promoting human flourishing. Nel Noddings describes this work at its best when she challenges educators to “promote joy in genuine learning, guide moral and spiritual development (including *the development of an uneasy conscience*), contribute to the appreciation of the arts and other great cultural achievements, encourage love of place and protection of the natural world, and educate for both self-understanding and group understanding.”³ Perhaps it is the development of the “uneasy conscience” that is the important work on which the construction of bridges depends.

NOTES

1. Henry Giroux, *The Giroux Reader* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 299 (emphasis added).
 2. In an attempt to close a division between the person writing an introduction and the writers themselves, I asked the authors to compose a paragraph relating their essay to the topic of building bridges. The descriptions of the essays throughout this introduction are taken from those paragraphs or from the essays themselves. Sometimes the wording has been changed a bit, but sometimes not. In essence, then, the writers furnished their own introductory remarks. I merely changed a few words and tied their essays together. This experiment was an attempt to build a bridge.
-

3. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 260 (emphasis added)).
