
Introduction

ON EDUCATING WELL

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In the call for papers for the OVPES 2017 annual conference, there is a line that, on the face of it, seems as obvious as it is platitudinous: “Educational theorists and researchers are always on the search for fresh perspectives on the task of *educating well*” (our emphasis). Of course we are trying to contribute in some way to the improvement of the educational encounter—why even mention it in the confined space provided by a call for papers? In writing up the call, our idea was that teachers and educational theorists can at least agree on one thing, which is that we want to educate well, and we want students to be educated well. At this most general level of speaking, there is agreement. And the call for papers aimed to invite theorists and practitioners to have a vibrant conversation on the task of educating well, by drawing on ideas old and new. From our perspective, this vibrant conversation took place in the diverse sessions, breaks, meals, and meetings of OVPES 2017.

While starting a conversation about educating well may be a worthy enough aim for a conference, and participating in such a conversation a nice way to spend a weekend, there is admittedly one important problem with these endeavors. While we might agree about wanting to educate well, we disagree, sometimes vehemently, about what it means to educate well. Now of course it is no surprise that there is very little agreement about what it is to educate well, nor what a well-educated student looks like. Zygmunt Bauman has famously characterized our era “as a time of ‘liquid modernity,’” which is to say that even our most fundamental ideas and meanings are in flux. There is a bit of a paradox here. One might despair at the thought that there is no way to determine whether we philosophers and practitioners of education are making progress on our understanding of “educating well” if the very idea is still so much in flux. On the other hand, it is difficult not to have the intuition or even conviction that the very possibility of educating well turns our continued search for this understanding—even if one cannot pin the idea down once and for all. To tackle this modern educational paradox, perhaps—in the spirit of the call for papers—we can look to some old ideas for insight. There is an important parallel here with Socrates’ insight into how to dissolve the philosophical problem of understanding what the good life is. Even if one cannot determine what the good life is in an absolute sense, one can at least come to see that asking “What is the good life?” over and over is itself partly constitutive of living the good life.

The articles in this issue of PSIE 2017 each engage with the idea of educating well from various perspectives. The intriguing ground they cover is evidence, we think, that the question of educating well remains a philosophically profound question.

The paradox of educating well is something Kevin Gary discusses head on in his presidential address, asking whether, in spite of our uncertainty regarding any final definition of good education, there are still qualities we see in others that we know are the mark of education. Gary sides with David Foster Wallace in thinking that there are. Being educated is being “able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.”

Dini Metro-Roland, in his response to Gary, questions whether we can teach students to educate well (or, relatedly, live well) without being overly moralizing, self-deluding, or pessimistic about the prospects of the student’s ability to find her own understanding of educating (or living) well.

The issue of educating well is further complicated and—here’s the paradox again—at the same time illuminated in Karl Joyner’s “Rethinking Code-Switching.” Joyner argues that (so-called) code-switching rests on an unproductive assumption that language is a skill. Students are more likely to flourish in school if they can see language as a genre of communication, as a kind of relation, which can be changed, rather than rules simply to be learned and executed properly.

Alexandros Nikolaidis engages with the philosophical problem of student agency in education: do students have agency or is their agency given to them? Nikolaidis agrees with John Dewey in thinking that there is a false dichotomy here, one that rests on a dualistic conception of human agency: that agency is something that must either already be present in human beings or it is something received from without. Nikolaidis proposes a different conception of human agency. Human beings are self-interpreting beings and educators would do well to think about how they might assist students in their self-interpretations.

Julia Novakowski provides a conceptual contrast of pluralism and multiculturalism, by drawing on William James and W. E. B. Du Bois. She finds that teacher education can be improved by a study of Du Bois’ notion of multiculturalism, which is an active, inclusive, and disruptive pedagogy. She argues that pluralism, by her lights, does not go far enough in making society more equitable, since teachers are not encouraged to disrupt “systems of oppression.” Novakowski’s analysis challenges and enriches the notion of teaching well.

Deron Boyles and Kip Kline question the role of technology and, more importantly, the *desires* of educators and administrators to use technology, and whether technology is truly an educational benefactor. Drawing on Jacques Ellul (who is not discussed enough amongst philosophers of education), they argue that the ubiquitous use of technology splits the person, into real and simulated,

eventually leading to the blurring of boundaries, something that is educationally and philosophically troubling.

These articles represent the quality and diversity of discussions that flourished at OVPES 2017, and we hope that they will motivate and inspire the reader to continue to engage with questions of what it means to educate well.