
Response to Presidential Address

WHOSE PHILOSOPHIES? WHICH PRACTICE?

Cris Mayo
West Virginia University

I thank Jess for her thoughtful paper that puts the work that we do in relationship to the different kinds of work that other people do and reminds us that these divisions mean that we all look at the theory/practice split quite differently. Jess reminds us, too, that we can all learn from another's different balances of theory and practice to rethink what we do, how we are understood, and how we might connect our various needs with one another's capacities and talents. Now, just as much as ever, our ability to break down the division between school and society is necessary, to help us see how education already happens in communities—and to help us see how practice already happens in universities. But as we think about these different approaches to our work, let's also keep the differences in philosophy of education, too, and push back against the idea that our interdiscipline is not worth advocating for. We are not teaching foolosophy, nor are most of those who do action in the street only reacting. Educational philosophy as philosophy, as Harvey Siegel points out, is a disciplinary practice and educational philosophy as Jess points out can stress the border crossing required.¹ We have limited room but we have room for these differences and more, the kind of nepantlism that Gloria Anzaldúa argues for, drawing on traditional forms of knowledge and also moving into newer theories/practices.²

I'm not a pragmatist but *Experience and Education* is something I taught quite a lot before this latest career change.³ The either/or is once again quite popular as a key way to organize complaints and we as philosophers of education are well positioned to counter the either/or tendency. The people who are not showing up at rallies and protests are not just the thinkers, the people who are dismissing thought are not just those on the right. We who might possibly have leisure time ought not to be castigated for the reading we try to squeeze in between everything else we do (and no one knows what we do so we ought not to take their commentary on our lives as accurate, we do need to keep trying to explain to everyone what our work looks like). We also ought not to be castigated for hoping that more homes in the US had books (any

¹ Harvey Siegel, "Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 273–280.

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Seattle: Aunt Lute, 1987).

³ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, [1938] 1997).

educational media will do)—yes, we would like them to have reasonable living accommodations too. We fight for bread but we fight for roses too.

The either/or, as Dewey was so wont to point out, is itself a key problem.⁴ Just as I was writing this, friends on the left were chiding the University of Maryland for establishing a small group in their counseling center to help white people talk about race. People on the right were also chiding the University of Maryland for the same thing. In both cases, whatever white students might want to learn more about how to be allies of people of color (without taking up people of color’s time and energy), was deemed as either ludicrously searching for a space to have that conversation when white people have the world, or ridiculously snowflaky for thinking they needed to have a conversation to help them address white racism.

The either/or, in other words, can quickly become the double bind. In so many situations, some of us want people to show up but some of us don’t invite them. Or they don’t trust invitations when they come—“you really wanted us at Trans Day of Remembrance? We thought we wouldn’t be welcome.” Some of us want them to learn but some of us also stop their questions, possibly because the questions they ask are all too often alibis and deflections at least apparently masquerading as earnest questions. We think we’ve heard these questions before and we just aren’t up for one more round of “what do you mean the working class is oppressed? I know a plumber who makes \$70K.”

It is possible that interactions or missed connections are framed by this sort of double bind because practitioners and theorists and theorist/practitioners are all angry. As Seneca observed, anger is revenge.⁵ It seeks to stop conversation; anger lashes out at pain with no intention to repair or improve. “Anger’s in a hurry,” he says (18:1). I started reading about anger because I’m fairly convinced anger is the engine of my personality. Students I work with are motivated by anger sometimes, too. When hate-speakers comes to campus, by definition motivated by their anger, some of the students (not mine so far) respond with their own anger, derision, and threats of vengeance. Confronting a hate-preacher, one fraternity member, perhaps seeking to be an ally to those who were threatened by the preacher, in turn threatened to rape the preacher’s daughter. I’d say at that point, the young man had no theory. Or maybe he was drawing on mainstream practice; of course, the rate of sexual assault on our campus is fairly high. I don’t want to imply I’m a fan of Seneca—he’s fine with genocide as long as it’s dispassionate—but I at least take his point that anger can be “too hasty and witless” (12:5). But apathy is no answer either so to return to the problem of the either/or, we may be pushed to act urgently, but it is likely we have theories, thoughts, and ethics on which to draw as we do so.

⁴ Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

⁵ Seneca, *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, trans. Robert A. Kaster and Martha C. Nussbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

As Jessica notes, activists who respond quickly and angrily to events have thought for a good long time about the events to which they respond. Newton and Davis hold PhDs, Bobby Seale learned about Black history in college and continued to teach in Black Studies with the Black Panthers and beyond. Mike Brown was pushed out of a public school that lost accreditation but obviously knew both when enough was enough and did not have options for practice that kept him alive because the police around him were more heavily armed for their practices.

If practitioners think that philosophers of education have our heads impossibly in the clouds, given that our focus is on educational aims and practices, I do worry that so many people couch their critiques in anti-intellectual language—I've even been to two different professors' talks lately and both of them disparaged their own work as too jargon-laden (and they led us through definitions of words we all know because they were apparently so used to having to defend themselves). I think there's a kneejerk disavowal of our work now precisely because it is under attack from all sides. State universities continue to be defunded, student debt continues to make educational aspirations into long-term sacrifices, and public schools continue to be challenged by the constellation of market-driven replacements and disparagement. We've seen university-based activists of color reinvigorated to demand better and we've seen, too, student precarity and the precarity of non-tenure track faculty become the focus of protest.

Philosophies and practices together can help us think through how to critique ideas, whether in philosophy, in activism, or in any combination. If they are derisive of philosophies, we need to inquire, as I have no doubt Jess does, which philosophies and why? While some of the critique of some philosophies may be based in the urgency of anger, some may be quite focused on particular frustrations. Some may anger at the need for anger. Anger, in other words, at lacking the necessary time of response and to have to respond with an anger that one knows is insufficient to sustaining critique and rebuilding. Activists may need to be immediately responsive to events but if Ferguson is any indication, such responsiveness becomes organized, multivocal, and studious, building on the talents of response and moving into periods of consideration aimed at sustaining community in the midst of attack and beyond. Philosophy may not always live in the flash of immediate response, but, as Jess points out, it comes back in fairly quickly. We can all wonder whose interest is served by making thoughtful action appear to be either a non-organic practice or an unnecessary luxury.
