
Introduction

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES: SEIZING OPPORTUNITY IN CALAMITY

Tony DeCesare
DePaul University

There is always some danger in labeling a period of time as “unprecedented.” To do so often reflects ahistorical thinking or exaggerates the gravity of current circumstances. And yet we find ourselves in the midst of a now 18-month long pandemic that has, since early 2020, killed over 4.6 million people and infected over 223 million worldwide.¹ Despite some hope early in the summer of 2021 that the vaccines would help facilitate a global recovery (however unevenly), people in many parts of the world—including the U.S.—find themselves in the midst of a “fourth wave” thanks to the surging Delta variant and sagging vaccination rates. And this is, of course, in addition to many other crises that have intersected with the pandemic, most notably renewed calls for racial justice in the United States, the crises of democracy in many parts of the world (including the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021), environmental catastrophes, and the upheaval in Afghanistan. “Unprecedented” seems, in this context, entirely appropriate.

It is not surprising, then, to see the effects of the pandemic reflected in various ways in this issue of *Philosophical Studies in Education*, including its very structure. Indeed, readers will immediately notice that we have published less than half the number of essays that appear in a typical issue. This serves as a clear reminder of the early impact of the pandemic in spring 2020, including that it ultimately led to the cancellation of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society’s annual meeting that fall.² It also signals a broader and worrisome trend that has emerged and will likely continue into the foreseeable future, namely, that the pandemic and certain academic institutional responses to it have created a significant (and unequal) disruption to research productivity. Not only have many universities reduced research money and other supports in response to COVID-related budget shortfalls, but faculty are also spending more time preparing to teach in unfamiliar modalities, providing additional emotional and other support to students and colleagues, and managing new and increased domestic labor (including caring for and teaching their children with less than—or without—the usual support of other institutions). None of this is conducive to

¹ These numbers were retrieved from the *World Health Organization*, September 11, 2021, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

² See Aaron Schutz’s presidential address in this issue, “Brief Thoughts on Power Analysis in Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021).

meeting traditional measures of achievement in any aspect of faculty work, least of all research. One study estimates that the “lack of support from higher education and academic institutions” for non-COVID related research—in addition to other COVID-related barriers like travel restrictions—“will cause the research productivity of academics to decline by 50%–70%,” with this decline disproportionality affecting “female academics” and, especially, “academics who mother.”³

Related to and compounding these challenges is the fact that more faculty are now working under the threat of termination or non-renewal. The stop-gap strategies that many colleges and universities have adopted for dealing with pandemic-related (or -generated) budget crises—for instance, hiring and salary freezes and fringe benefit reductions—are giving way to more permanent measures, including faculty cuts. The AAUP—an organization, we should recall, that John Dewey helped to start and for which he served as the inaugural President in 1915—recently issued its Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession for 2020-21. The report indicates that amongst 650 institutions surveyed in March 2021, “almost 5 percent...terminated the appointments of at least some full-time tenure-line faculty members, and almost 20 percent terminated the appointments of or denied contract renewal to at least some full-time non-tenure-track faculty members.”⁴ In addition to the effects that actual and potential cuts have on individual faculty, these and other responses to the pandemic coupled with “years of unstable funding” have also exacerbated “an existential threat to shared governance and academic freedom in higher education.”⁵

These are some of the calamitous circumstances and challenges we face in academia as we continue to confront the pandemic and various other (and intersecting) crises. Given their unprecedented nature, it would be a bit Pollyannaish simply to say that we must remain hopeful and find the opportunities within these challenges. While this kind of optimism is necessary, it cannot ignore or attempt to gloss over the reality of the calamity, nor can it be divorced from bold and radical attempts to reconstruct certain aspects of our educational thought and practice. The important thing, then, is not just to point up the opportunities this moment presents, but also to meet the moment by actively seizing on these opportunities in ways that create real and sustainable change.

To do so, we must continue to criticize and to bring about alternatives to the neoliberal and economic logics prevalent in higher education and P-12 schooling. We must continue to challenge and replace the ideas, expectations,

³ Salima Kasymova, Jean Marie S. Place, Deborah L. Billings, and Jesus D. Aldape, “Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the productivity of academics who mother,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. 2 (2021): 421.

⁴ American Association of University Professors (AAUP) (July 2021), summary of “Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2020-21,” Retrieved from <https://www.aaup.org/report/annual-report-economic-status-profession-2020-21>.

⁵ AAUP, “Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession,” 4.

and measures of achievement that are currently operative in discourses around “research productivity,” “learning,” and “teaching.” We must determine and demand the kinds of institutional and other supports we need to conduct our work (and maintain our well-being) in light of the variously challenging conditions and fiscal realities under which we now labor. We must return to—or find in the first place—a healthier work-life balance. We must continue to question the pedagogical value of increasingly prevalent educational technologies and find ways to resist on principle and in practice certain uses of these technologies. We must address in creative and transformative and structural ways the inequities that have been laid bare (again) by the disparate effects of the pandemic not only on women in academia but also on other historically marginalized faculty members, teachers, students, and communities. And we must reclaim and reassert our role as faculty in the shared governance of our institutions and continue challenging the imposition of neoliberal systems and values in higher education, including by administrators who are intent not to “waste a good pandemic.”⁶

The task before us, then, is to capitalize on these and other moments of opportunity that are emerging from this set of unprecedented circumstances. And yet therein lies the rub: this task demands more of us as faculty—more time and energy, more vigilance, more engagement, more activism, more solidarity—at a time when we have less of these exact things to give. There is no easy way forward, and no single collection of essays can take us very far in navigating the still-evolving challenges we face, not just in higher education but also and uniquely in P-12 schools. But I would argue that the essays collected in this issue of *PSIE* engage us in helpful re-examinations of various education-related issues—contemporary and perennial—that are important in and of themselves but that also take on new urgency or new meaning in light of the pandemic. In doing so, each essay not only points up some opportunity to reimagine education amid calamity, but also helps us take constructive steps forward and, perhaps, suggests a way of doing philosophy of education in these unprecedented times.

The pandemic’s intersection with more *contemporary* issues in education is clear in the contributions from Morgan Anderson,⁷ Susan Haarman,⁸ and Paul Geis.⁹ Anderson calls our attention to some of the ways neoliberal logics tend to proliferate in education during times of crisis. Through an analysis

⁶ Colleen Flaherty, “Never Waste a Good Pandemic,” *Inside Higher Education*, December 4, 2020, Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/12/04/boulder-arts-and-sciences-dean-wants-build-back-faculty-post-pandemic-one-non-tenure>.

⁷ Morgan Anderson, “‘Quality Matters’ and Matters of Quality: Covid-19 and the Techno-Rationalization of Teaching,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021): 15-25.

⁸ Susan Haarman, “The Data Should Not Speak for Itself: Epistemic Injustice and Data as Rhetoric,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021): 26-36.

⁹ Paul Geis, (Re)turning to *Study* Abroad: Reimagining Global Education in the Aftermath of Pandemic,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021): 37-49.

of “Quality Matters”—“an educational ‘quality assurance organization’”—she demonstrates how the pandemic has further opened the door to various mechanisms of EdTech that advance “neoliberal conceptions of schooling by facilitating standardized forms of instruction that align university teaching more closely to market values of consumer satisfaction, predictability, and scalability.” Indeed, many of us are experiencing in practice how the massive shift to online teaching and learning that followed the pandemic has left certain aspects of our teaching “vulnerable to institutional mechanisms of standardization, control, capture, and commodification.”

One particularly worrisome consequence of the increasing imposition of neoliberal systems and values is that it also serves to undermine faculty autonomy and resistance. To make this important point, Anderson draws on Marcuse to return us to an earlier way of theorizing the relationship between the individual and neoliberalism, suggesting that the latter—especially its emphasis on technological efficiency in education—erodes individuality and thereby “undermines the critical rationality that is productive of dissent and autonomy.” Thus, faculty are groomed into “adopting standardized modes of instruction that adhere to market conceptions of education,” and thereby are stripped of their “intellectual and pedagogical autonomy” and their “ability to resist.”

One constructive response, Anderson suggests (and models in her essay), would be for philosophers of education to “engage in appropriately normative, philosophical discussions surrounding the role for technology in teaching and learning and the trajectory of standardization in higher education.” These discussions can help to disrupt the processes through which faculty are groomed and help to awaken us further to the possibilities for resistance. Such resistance can include, Anderson notes, faculty insisting that philosophical and pedagogical considerations “precede, not follow” the adoption of educational technologies. In this same spirit, I would argue that faculty need to insist that they “lead, not follow” their institutions’ adoptions of these technologies and find ways to refuse or undermine the implementation of any that are contrary to our pedagogical values. Recognizing and overcoming the erosion of our autonomy and our ability to resist is paramount to the work at hand, namely, shaping “what education will look like on the other side” of the pandemic.

Like Anderson, Haarman grapples with a contemporary and technology-related issue in education that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In this case, the driving concern is with the potential for “datafication technologies” like “Big Data” and algorithms to disrupt or reinforce epistemic injustice. This is an especially urgent problem in light of the massive amounts of data being generated “as education becomes more digital in delivery in the wake of COVID 19.” And Haarman makes clear how the implications stretch beyond education, *per se*, to questions related to knowledge creation and the construction of our shared world and, hence, to issues of epistemic injustice. She is concerned with a particular kind of epistemic injustice—one that Bondy calls “argumentative injustice,” which concerns specifically those instances when “an

arguer” is given too much or too little credibility. When we take datafication as a form of rhetoric, Haarman argues, it is easy to see how it benefits from inflated credibility, wrapped, as it tends to be, “in the false objectivity granted by scientism.”

Haarman frames the problem that motivates her essay (i.e., datafication technologies) as both a “threat and [an] opportunity.” Capitalizing on the opportunity means making datafication technologies work more consistently and effectively in the service of epistemic justice. Toward this end, Haarman takes up the literature around “data activism” and seeks to reframe datafication as just “one form of rhetoric amongst many ways to claim truth and to learn.” In doing so, she defends two claims. First, we need to take a more “critically participatory stance” toward data, which demands the inclusion of more qualitative inputs (especially from those affected by the data). Second, we need to practice “epistemic responsibility,” which includes a healthy dose of “metadistrust” that would disrupt our tendency to assume the credibility of data and, instead, would have us ask “the ‘listener’ of a datafied argument to examine whether or not the data (despite its bulk) is actually salient.” Thus, what matters, for the sake of our pursuit of epistemic justice, is how we *interact with* and *make sense of* datafication technologies—including how much credibility we give the data and whose narratives and what alternative forms of rhetoric we allow to speak (back) to the data.

The contemporary issue motivating Geis’s essay is the need to reexamine college study abroad programs. Although these programs have come to a “virtual stop” during the pandemic, Geis takes this pause and the circumstance around it as a “unique opportunity for leaders in the field—and for philosophers and theorists of education—to rediscover and renew study abroad.” In his own contribution to this effort, Geis grapples with the problematic discourses of learning that have come to define study abroad (and, indeed, higher education and P-12 schooling in general). He takes up Biesta’s ideas about “learnification” and Lewis’s claims about learning being transformed into an economic logic and uses them to argue that study abroad has generally come to be framed as “individualized” (i.e., individual learner-centered), “operative” (oriented toward actionable and measurable learning outcomes), and “career-oriented” (i.e., focused on the acquisition of professional and marketable skills).

To escape from a discourse so dominated by *learning*, Geis concludes, those working in the field of study abroad must be equipped “with an alternative framing from philosophy of education—*study*.” Indeed, one strength of Geis’s paper is that he opens a new educational space—study abroad programs—into which philosophers of education can helpfully wade and urges us to do so at this precise moment of opportunity. He posits the Benjaminian ideas of “wandering” and “collecting” as two potentially useful ways that study abroad programs can center *study* and bring it into a better balance with *learning*. As such, these two ideas have tremendous potential not just for reframing study abroad programs, but for helping us to rethink higher education and P-12 schooling more broadly, especially as they evolve through and beyond the pandemic.

Though less directly related to COVID-19, the final two essays suggest (or so I would argue) how the pandemic and its effects have also revealed new aspects of *perennial* problems or questions in education. Meghan Brindley’s essay takes up discourses surrounding the public-private distinction in schools.¹⁰ She argues that we do not actually know the difference between public and private, especially as these concepts are presented and operationalized in our classrooms. The difficulty stems, in part, from the “assumption that we can effectively label components of our identity as being private or public” when, in fact, our identities as individuals and as public citizens defy such easy classification. Thus, Brindley argues, public schools are places where students must be given opportunities to learn how to “navigate the fuzziness between private and public,” and this means, in part, that teachers must both construct an environment in which the “clash” of the private and public aspects of students’ lives can be confronted and help students to learn from these confrontations.

Thus, Brindley’s essay makes an important contribution to various political arguments and educational policies concerned with perennial questions about how we navigate the relationship between the public and the private in the context of education. And her particular point of entry into this discourse takes on added significance as we continue to grapple with the challenges of widespread online learning, especially in P-12 schools. The literal lines between the public space of schools and the private space of students’ homes has been blurred, and schools, teachers, and students have struggled to determine both where the line between public and private exists in remote learning and how (and by whom) this should be determined. To Brindley’s concern, we need to ask how teachers facilitate the inevitable “clashes” between public and private that occur during remote learning and how they can do so in ways that help students—and teachers themselves—learn what public and private mean in and for this changed context. Take just one of Brindley’s three “exemplars”—one student’s expression of “Ewww! Gross!” upon seeing a classmate’s “homemade ethnic lunch.” Now imagine how many (and how many kinds of) “ewww” moments like this are likely to occur—indeed, have occurred—when students can literally see into each other’s homes, that is, when all of a student’s classmates have a window into various aspects of their private life. The unprecedented scale on which—and the speed with which—we moved to remote learning during the pandemic adds to the urgency of taking up the language and tools Brindley provides and adapting them to the reality of remote teaching and learning in P-12 schools.

Rounding out this issue is Bryan Warnick’s thought-provoking essay on the relationship between being happy and being right (that is, holding a strong belief).¹¹ Warnick works from the assumption that one major purpose of

¹⁰ Meghan Brindley, “The Publicly Private: Schools as Sites of Confronting the Clash Between Public and Private,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021): 50-60.

¹¹ Bryan Warnick, “Interrogating the Opinionated Life: An Educational Engagement with Pyrrhonian Skepticism,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52 (2021): 61-73.

education is to promote happiness—or, as he prefers, “subjective wellbeing,” a term that combines “overall life satisfaction and a regular experience of positive emotions.” From this assumption, he launches an inquiry into whether we are more likely to attain subjective well-being by holding opinions and beliefs or by adopting Pyrrhonian skepticism. Importantly, Warnick is concerned here with the ethical side of the debates around skepticism (i.e., whether it has something to contribute to one’s subjective wellbeing) and not with the epistemological side (i.e., whether we truly lack standards for knowledge).

Warnick rehearses various arguments in both directions—namely, for how having beliefs promotes happiness and for how adopting skepticism promotes happiness. Interestingly, one claim related to the former is that “beliefs and opinions...play a role in happiness through their *construction of communities*. Coming together with others around beliefs and opinions can create a sense of connection and shared purpose. This allows for relationships of intimacy and mutual concern, which are pillars of human happiness.” Contrast this with one claim related to the case for skepticism in promoting happiness: the “quest to prove oneself ‘right’ in one’s opinions can *devastate human relationship and communities*. Think of the friendships, neighborhoods, and marriages that have disintegrated because individuals were focused on ‘being right’ in their opinions.” Ironically, Warnick describes this need to be right as an “insidious virus” that can destroy one important aspect of happiness, namely, “meaningful human connection.”

The relevance of these claims to the recent politics around the pandemic, especially mask and vaccine mandates, is striking. How do we maintain the community-constructing potential of holding beliefs without this devolving into the kind of devastation that occurs when we hold too strongly to these beliefs? We have witnessed the development of communities—in physical or virtual space—around the beliefs *both* that mask and vaccine mandates (and other safety measures related to COVID-19) are morally wrong *and* that they are moral imperatives. The coexistence of communities that coalesce around these or other opposing beliefs seems, on Warnick’s analysis, to require our adherence to at least two aspects of Pyrrhonian skepticism. First is the ability to “step back from identifying so strongly with our knowledge claims” and, more broadly, to dissociate beliefs from identities. Second, and related, is the ability to check our impulses to be right at any cost. Warnick offers a rather startling (but relatable) admission that helps make the latter point, in particular: having grown increasingly annoyed with those who mocked and disregarded COVID-19 safety measures, Warnick recalls at one point “cheering increased infection in red states” because he “wanted to be right” in his opinion of these safety measures.

Warnick also draws out the education-related implications of these aspects of skepticism. Among other things, education can help us to learn “the dangers of placing our epistemic identities above our relationships with others” and, closely related, it can help to “promote a certain sort of fallibilism”—one “that does not mourn uncertainty, but celebrates it.” How, then, might we introduce these positive elements of skepticism into our lessons? Warnick

recommends having students write *anti*-resumes, complete *anti*-bibliographies, compose papers about why they are *un*qualified to hold an opinion, and celebrate in various other ways what they do *not* know. We would all do well to embrace at least these characteristics of skepticism and to explore further how we can develop them in our students. Our ability to co-exist in and through these unprecedented times may well depend on it.

When I first started to conceive of this introduction to *PSIE* 2021, I thought the pandemic—if not its effects—would be largely behind us. I thought I would be able to write with the perspective of hindsight and with a clearer picture of how education—and life itself—was taking shape *post*-pandemic. Instead, I am struck—as this essay likely makes clear—by the continuing uncertainty we face and the evolving challenges that still lie before us. But I am grateful to the authors of these essays for helping me—and, I hope, the general readership—continue making sense of this calamity and finding and seizing opportunities within it to rethink and reimagine higher education and P-12 schooling in the (eventual) aftermath of the pandemic.
