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Editor's Introduction

FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT: FORGING AN AUTHENTIC PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Annie R. Schultz
Flagler College

In 1983, the Getty Museum in Los Angeles acquired what curators believed to be a sixth-century BCE kouros sculpture,¹ originating from the Greek island of Thasos. A heated public debate ensued about the authenticity of the Getty kouros. Art historians, including one of the Getty's own trustees, began to doubt the truthfulness of the purported origins of the sculpture, citing inconsistent and divergent stylistic links to other kouros from the same period.² However, scientific testing of the sculpture's surface found it to be consistent with the aging process of materials and techniques that might have been used at the time of the sculpture's purported creation. The Getty sided with the scientific evidence, bought the kouros for nine million dollars, and it went on view in 1986. The kouros was dubbed "one of the most important works of ancient art to enter the United States since World War II."³ Years later, in the early nineties, it came to light that the scientific evidence the museum relied upon to authenticate the kouros was not as solid as it had once seemed. The Getty's curator of antiquities at the time, fittingly named Marion True, who had up to that point believed in the sculpture's authenticity, changed her mind, admitting "I always considered scientific opinion more objective than [a]esthetic judgements."⁴ Art historians and anthropologists had questioned the authenticity of the kouros all along, but "hard" facts had seemed more reliable than connoisseurship.⁵

The concept of authenticity and the process of authentication are slippery in that it isn't clear on what grounds the foundation of each should be built. Ought we to look to objective facts to, for example, authenticate a work of art? Or should we look for recognizable patterns among other similar works? In the words of journalist Michael Kimmelman, who wrote about the Getty kouros case in the nineties, "objectivity is a chimera."⁶ Facts change as scientific analysis evolves and new information surfaces. Works of art do not always fit within

¹ Kouros sculptures depict young, anatomically idealized men in a front-facing rigid stance. They emerged during the so-called Archaic period: roughly 700-480 BCE.

² Michael Kimmelman, "Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?" *The New York Times*, August 4th, 1991, retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/art-absolutely-real-fake/docview/428176172/se-2>.

³ Kimmelman, "Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?", 1.

⁴ Kimmelman, quoting Marion True, in his article "Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?", 1.

⁵ Kimmelman, "Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?", 2.

⁶ Kimmelman, "Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?", 2.

patterns; there are one-off anomalies that defy the conventions of their era. Authenticating art is in some sense analogous to what Clarence Joldersma calls “authenticating truth” in this volume. Indeed, when we evaluate the perceived authenticity of a person or an idea, we rely on different means to do so: prior knowledge, empirical evidence, consistency with patterns, intuition, and emotional response. And, often, we’re deceived.

In addition to legitimate attribution and provenance in works of art, authenticity has taken on a variety of connotations in philosophy and society broadly: to be authentic can mean to be sincere or honest; it can also mean to be one’s true self or to represent oneself faithfully. In our current era of artificial intelligence and deep fakes, the very notion of authenticity is called into question as prior pillars of authentication processes such as authorship and provenance are no longer relevant in the post-truth digital world of disembodied non-consciousness.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin famously reckoned with the issue of authenticity in art amidst advancing reproduction technologies.⁷ What does the concept of *the original* matter when one can simply view a photographic reproduction of a work? Why would anyone travel to see the *real* Mona Lisa when a reproduced image is more available and accessible? Careful readers of Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” will note his ambivalence with regards to a notion of an “original” work of art. On one hand, Benjamin laments the loss of ritual associated with art in its more ancient, pre-great-hall-or-museum state. The cathedral, the castle, and, later, the gallery, removed the work of art from day-to-day life and experience (Dewey has a similar lament in his *Art as Experience*). On the other hand, though, Benjamin poses that the wide-spread availability of art that reproductive technology enabled democratized engagement with art. The work may not retain its aura in the case of the reproduction, but does this diminish its authenticity? The Getty kouros may have been a forgery, but “it was a captivating and immensely skilled example of ... the work of an artist of the first order.”⁸ What does its provenance matter if it exemplifies great skill nonetheless, even if it is not of the kind it claims?

To put the question in the context of philosophy of education, is an education that is not *true to life* or *of the real world* inauthentic? Is a paper written via AI *inauthentic*? If it is, what is the locus of the inauthenticity?

Philosophers of education have taken up authenticity and how it is related to, lauded in, and assumed by education. In a 2008 volume of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Laurance Splitter critiques the notion of “educational authenticity”: that is, that schoolwork can reasonably mimic “real work” done in

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zahn (1935; repr., Schocken Books, 1969).

⁸ Kimmelman, “Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?”, 2.

the “real world.”⁹ Merlin Thompson has discussed the relationship between authenticity and narcissism in the role of the teacher.¹⁰ Given the obvious implications for philosophy of education, the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society (OVPES) took up authenticity as the theme of its annual meeting in 2024. The articles in this volume of *Philosophical Studies in Education* offer glimpses into those and ongoing conversations on authenticity in philosophies of education. Lauren Bialystok, the 2023 Phil Smith Lecturer, longtime friend to OVPES, and something of a scholar of authenticity, defines the concept as the place where truth and representation collide.¹¹ When it comes to authenticity in teaching, ethical tensions emerge as there are authentic bad teachers and inauthentic good teachers.¹² More broadly, Bialystok writes “the pursuit of authenticity in education rests on various philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth, reality, ethics, and, ultimately, the aims of education.”¹³ Authenticity is not an a priori *good* when it comes to educating someone else. Bialystok’s contribution to this volume works as a kind of title track for this collection of articles. She rightly points out that since “the cultural fallout of the 1960s political movements” authenticity has come to “signal normative approval.”¹⁴

The articles in this volume of *Philosophical Studies in Education* carry the conversation on authenticity to many different places, yet commonalities surface amongst these contributions: these authors see a connection between authenticity, or authentication as a philosophical process, and truth; they also view truth as not a stasis to which one finally arrives individually, but a dialectic that we form together. Bruce Novak, for instance, sets out to resituate authenticity as “relational and transcendental, not in any way *simply* personal and existential.”¹⁵ Similarly, in their essay, Thomas M. Falk and Philip L. Smith offer a cultural and intellectual history of the search for authenticity. From Heidegger, to Nietzsche, to James, to the spectacle of the professional wrestling match, Falk and Smith crack something open about the interplay between intersubjectivity and individuality. Indeed, in the case of the Getty kouros, one

⁹ Laurance Splitter, “Authenticity and Constructivism in Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28 (2009): 135-151.

¹⁰ Merlin Thompson, “Authenticity in Education: From Narcissism and Freedom to the Messy Interplay of Self-Exploration and Acceptable Tension,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 6 (2015): 603-618.

¹¹ Lauren Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” *Canadian Philosophical Review* 53, no. 2 (2014): 271-298.

¹² Lauren Bialystok, “Should Teachers Be Authentic?” *Ethics and Education* 10, no. 3 (2016): 313-326.

¹³ Lauren Bialystok, “Authenticity in Education,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.168>.

¹⁴ Lauren Bialystok, “Against Authenticity as an Educational Aim,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 31, 30.

¹⁵ Bruce Novak, “Cultivating Relational Authenticity in Art, Philosophy, and Education to Reorient Democracy toward the Beautiful, the True, and the Good,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 40.

of the museum’s antiquities conservators remarked that scientists and humanistic scholars have a lot to learn from each other with regards to authentication.¹⁶ When objectivity is elusive and divergent perspectives arise from different frameworks, what does this mean for the possibility of a shared *truth*?

In her presidential address at the 2024 OVPEs conference, Sarah Stitzlein’s primary concern is the way *truth* is used in civic discourse. She takes up the erosion of civic reasoning amidst the rise in populism and polarization in the US. For Stitzlein, the simple question “what should we do?” is more difficult than ever to answer, given that the data we use to arrive at a plan of action are no longer seen as reliable. Although Stitzlein recognizes the value in both polarization and populism to move political discourse forward and help people develop convictions about what is important to them, she worries that polarization and populism can silo “citizens and their epistemic resources in ways that prevent them from making good decisions.”¹⁷ She troubles Bernard Williams’s truth-as-sincerity construction, pointing out that believing something sincerely is not the same as evidence-based truth. Epistemologies and affect work in tandem to separate citizens from the truth, and so our educational institutions ought to cultivate what Stitzlein calls democratic “epistemic communities.”¹⁸

In his response to Stitzlein’s address, Tony DeCesare takes up the diagnosis-prescription construction of political polarization and the epistemic communities potentially cultivated in schools to offer, as he puts it, a “less schoolish” approach to arriving at truth in our civil discourses.¹⁹ On the diagnostic side, DeCesare suggests that political polarization—a kind of authentication process gone awry—comes from three primary sources: political elites using deep divisions to galvanize their base, the increasing isolation of individuals from communities (referred to as an epidemic of loneliness), and, finally, the rigidity of thought that often follows aging. Therefore, DeCesare asserts, the prescription should better align with what he takes to be the causes of polarization, i.e., “our responses must address the problem at the level of the socio-political structure and not just the individual/personal level.”²⁰ In other words, he asks, what would it look like to scale Stitzlein’s idea “up and out” beyond schools?²¹ DeCesare conjures a vision of schools as community hubs that work to cultivate epistemic communities not only among children but adult citizens as well. In both Stitzlein’s and DeCesare’s views, schools ought to be sites where the truth is sought, not only by teachers and students, but by entire communities. In this way, the school takes the shape

¹⁶ Quoted in Kimmelman, “Absolutely Real? Absolutely Fake?”, 4.

¹⁷ Sarah Stitzlein, “Educational Responses to Polarization and Populism,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025).

¹⁸ Stitzlein, “Educational Responses to Polarization and Populism,” 10.

¹⁹ Tony DeCesare, “Let’s Be Less Schoolish: Toward A More Holistic Educational Approach to Reviving Democracy,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 22.

²⁰ DeCesare, “Let’s Be Less Schoolish,” 26.

²¹ DeCesare, “Let’s Be Less Schoolish,” 26.

of the art museum: stakeholders work tirelessly at authentication, collaboratively and dialectically.

Like Stitzlein, Clarence Joldersma takes up the status of truth in our so-called “post-truth” climate. He explores the ways in which authentication as a philosophical process and truth are inextricably linked. Joldersma calls for “a more comprehensive notion of truth, one that goes beyond” epistemologies.²² And, when it comes to education, as Joldersma states succinctly, “truth in classrooms is now harder than it used to be.”²³ For Joldersma, truth ought to be conceived as a dialectic between person and world. Moreover, this dialectic must be an ethical one; the dialectical relationship between person and world must be fair. Joldersma cites a number of pledges made by K-12 teachers as part of the Zinn Education Project to teach the truth to their students. Joldersma rightfully quotes these at length; they are stirring in their convictions. As Joldersma points out, these teachers argue in their pledges that “it isn’t merely a choice, but a duty for the schools to tell the truth. These statements show a fascinating mix of epistemological and ethical commitments.”²⁴ Most importantly, the kind of truth these pledges tell—not irreducible to what Joldersma calls mere *propositional* truths, but *comprehensive* truths—are lifegiving in the sense of their fidelity to a *normative* social practice that bends toward human flourishing.

Others in this volume investigate the authenticity of particular experiences, such as travel, community organizing, and senses of place. Aziz Alfaiakawi troubles the *inauthenticity* of tourism as travel and the educational potential therein. According to Alfaiakawi, tourism, of the sort encouraged by study abroad programs in higher education, in having a specific end in mind, diminishes the actual experience of travel. For Alfaiakawi, an authentic travel experience would necessarily entail “an encounter in which one surrenders part of their control and finds themselves both contributing to and being changed by one’s environment.”²⁵ In other words, authentic travel would have a “self-effacing end” rather than an intended outcome.²⁶ Alfaiakawi compares the tourist to the voyeur, in that both want to exist in two places at once: in the midst of their object of desire but also at enough of a distance as to not be discovered as an outsider. In search of an authentic experience, the tourist, like the voyeur, paradoxically places himself “at a distance from what they seek to experience.”²⁷

Aaron Schutz likewise takes up experience as a site of potential inauthenticity, though in a different register than Alfaiakawi. Schutz is interested in so-called “transformative experiences” which complicate “the

²² Clarence Joldersma, “Authenticating Truth in a Post-Truth Climate,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 63.

²³ Joldersma, “Authenticating Truth in a Post-Truth Climate,” 64.

²⁴ Joldersma, “Authenticating Truth in a Post-Truth Climate,” 66.

²⁵ Aziz Alfaiakawi, “Tourism, Education, and the Paradox of Authenticity,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 79.

²⁶ Alfaiakawi, “Tourism, Education, and the Paradox of Authenticity,” 79.

²⁷ Alfaiakawi, “Tourism, Education, and the Paradox of Authenticity,” 82.

relationship between motivation and experience.”²⁸ For Schutz, it is the very inauthenticity in motivation that might enable transformative outcomes in education. Complicating the idea that students ought to understand the reasons behind any given educational activity, Schutz rather argues that what students understand to be taking place may in fact be irrelevant to the educational process. Like Alfailakawi’s self-effacing surrender to unforeseen outcomes, Schutz argues for unknown reasons toward a desired outcome. He points to Dewey’s lab school, in which students understood their teachers to be mere playmates in ongoing games, yet they learned all the while. Schutz maps this educational theory onto issues of motivation in community organizing efforts. Indeed, to do the right thing, we might need to be somewhat alienated from ourselves.

David Adams employs Bialystok’s conception of authenticity to place-based education in order to theorize an authentic sense of place in terms of our schools and communities. How might students “engage *authentically* with the real, local contexts of their lives,” asks Adams.²⁹ As Adams notes, “place as a concept is deeply intertwined with identity.”³⁰ Therefore, an authentic sense of place will necessarily inform an authentic sense of self. Adams offers a nuanced claim about the relationship between not only schools and the concept of place, but about what our perceptions of authenticity or inauthenticity to a particular place reveals to us about our values.

In his contribution to this volume, Spencer Smith examines the potential for inauthenticity in the student-teacher relationship when not only student work but the work of teaching itself is offloaded to AI. Smith makes the astute point that teaching is not the mere transfer of new information but rather the relational aspect of nurturing a student through a struggle to understand. ChatGPT cannot relate to someone who doesn’t understand a math problem; a human teacher knows that feeling acutely because she lived it herself. In this way, authenticity in teaching and learning becomes human in its lived-in-ness and its embodied-ness.

In the following group of articles, though the authors do not take up the theme of authenticity explicitly, each in their own way aims to access the essence of some concept important either to the field of philosophy of education, education as a broader human project, or both. In other words, each of these authors engages in a kind of authenticating process of their respective topics: rights, hope, equity, the past, and the concept of a student. Gabe Keehn takes up parental rights, namely, their tenability in educational policy, exploring what parental rights have in common with the age-old philosophical concept of rights generally, if anything. Through a deductive process, Keehn establishes that all

²⁸ Aaron Schutz, “Get Them to Do Right Thing for the Wrong Reasons: Exploring the Paradox of Transformative Learning and Choice in Community Organizing and Schooling,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 85.

²⁹ David Adams, “Whose Place? Using Bialystok’s Authenticity to Complicate ‘Place’ in Place-Based Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 92.

³⁰ Adams, “Whose Place?”, 101.

of the usual attempts at philosophically grounding a notion of parental rights fail in the face of a true understanding of what distinguishes a right from other related but different concepts, such as privileges, deserts, and the like.

Kyle Harris, in his paper “Forging a Pedagogy of Hope,” takes on fatalism in academia from a variety of angles: injustices related to our K-12 education systems, the precarity of academic work, and the growing climate of anti-intellectualism in the US. Harris roots his notion of academic fatalism in “a logical determinist mindset that assumes that the future is a settled outcome, one in which current decisions hold no sway.”³¹ Situating his theory of hope in the robust body of philosophy of education literature on the topic, Harris offers a hope that centralizes community, resources, exemplars, and context. Turning to the act of *forging* as a metaphor, Harris sees hope as a collective effort in which some do the work of gathering the materials, others work the forge itself, still others bring the finished product to the public. Hope, in other words, is a product of collaboration, cooperation, and community, not an individualized fight against nihilism. Similarly, Eunice Laryea insists that a basic educational aim such as equity is not the unattainable ideal that it may seem to be. Like Harris in the case of hope, Laryea contends that perceived scarcity and neoliberal market ideologies only work to obscure redistributive solutions.

Abbey Hortenstine offers cultural history as a philosophical framework to create a “usable past” of our society, the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society. Similar to Harris’s notion of hope, Hortenstine sees the construction of a shared past as dialectic; the past is not only *known* but “becomes a more active process ... of knowing.”³²

Jamie Herman’s essay in this volume explores conceptualizations of the student in the particular space of higher education. As Herman points out, a gap exists “between a conceptualization of a thing and the normative valence it holds. A concept can refer both to the thing as it is and the thing as it ought to be.”³³ For Herman, a normative conceptualization of what a student essentially is as s/he relates to educational institutions falls short. Instead, she proposes a conceptualization of the student as the *functional unit* of the institution.

Each of the articles in this volume, whether or not they situate their claims in terms of authenticity, are seeking out an essence or a truth in some aspect of education. To return to Bialystok’s contribution, the question remains, is authenticity a value for which educators or education as a broader project should strive? Bialystok rightly worries that claims to authenticity run the risk of resulting in the codification of bigoted or problematic views, on the grounds that these are true to the identity of the student: “An individual’s views on politics or

³¹ Kyle Harris, “Forging a Pedagogy of Hope in the Face of Academic Fatalism,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 124.

³² Abbey Hortenstine, “Cultural History and OVPES: Memory and the Creation of a Usable Past,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 137.

³³ Jamie Herman, “The Student Functional Unit: Revisiting How We Conceptualize Students in Higher Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 56 (2025): 146.

ethics may demand respect on account of their authenticity while also deserving reproach on account of their content.”³⁴ For this reason, thinks Bialystok, we ought not to rely on authenticity for normative guidance in education.³⁵ She writes, “encouraging a student’s authenticity may often be tantamount to encouraging their intolerance, their confusion, or their entitlement simply because it is *theirs*.”³⁶ We see this problematic normativity in the populous movement that led to the election of Donald Trump, who is lauded by his base for being authentic. However, as of this writing, Trump has failed to deliver on many of his campaign promises and in some cases done a complete about-face.³⁷ Authenticating Trump’s aims is a near impossibility, and, as in Bialystok’s worry, even if he could still make claims to authenticity, his actions remain abhorrent even if carried out *authentically*.

The question becomes, is authenticity a laudable value in general? The case of the Getty kouros remains unsolved to this day. Curators, art historians, archeologists, geologists, and others have never come to a definitive consensus on the authenticity of the kouros. For years, the kouros stood in the Getty collections with a sign that read “Greek, about 530 B.C. or modern forgery.” In 2018, the sculpture was removed from the permanent collection, placed into storage, and is now only viewable by appointment. However, for years, curators still thought the kouros was worth displaying even if it was a forgery. The case of the Getty kouros begs the question, what are we looking for when we look for authenticity? Especially when we’re looking not to a buff (maybe) Greek statue, but to each other?

After taking in the insightful essays included in this volume of *PSIE* and reflecting on this topic, I’ve come to view authenticity as not in fact having anything to do with truthfulness or accuracy as those concern how one is viewed by other people. Rather, I’ve come to view authenticity as truthfulness to oneself. Bialystok quotes Simon Feldman’s adage that telling someone to be authentic is bad advice;³⁸ Falk reflects on his adolescence in the grunge rock era of the 1990s in which there was a slippage between being authentic and being a poser. In *trying too hard* to be authentic, one risks being called a pretender. On the other hand, one may be authentic in their earnest attempt to imitate someone else. Who’s to say that someone isn’t being their authentic selves in the process of imitation? When authenticity is reckoned with internally—am I being truthful to *myself*?—better outcomes seem more plausible. Another word for this synergy between core beliefs about who one takes themselves to be and the actions they perform in the world is *integrity*.

³⁴ Bialystok, “Against Authenticity as an Educational Value,” 38.

³⁵ Bialystok, “Against Authenticity as an Educational Value,” 38.

³⁶ Bialystok, “Against Authenticity as an Educational Value,” 39.

³⁷ “Promises kept, broken and TBD: Defining Trump’s first 100 days,” *Politico*, 4, 29, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/29/trump-100-days-promises-list-00309434>.

³⁸ Bialystok, “Against Authenticity as an Educational Value,” 31.

To close my introduction to this volume, I borrow Kyle Harris’s metaphor of the forge used in his contribution. Given the related etymology of *a* forge, *to* forge, and forgery, I offer a forged notion of authenticity, a forgery, if you like, which is neither a science nor an artform. This forged authenticity is, to borrow the words of last year’s *PSIE* contributing editor, Tom Falk, an “inspired mode of attending to ourselves.”³⁹ The theme of last year’s conference was attention; perhaps, in looking for authenticity in education, we misdirect our attention to a nebulous notion of truth, when we ought to be attending to ourselves all along. In keeping with ongoing inquiries in OVPES, the 2025 conference theme is aptly *inheritance and originality*.

³⁹ Thomas Falk, “Attending to Human Subjectivity in the Digital Age,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024): 7.

Presidential Address

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES TO POLARIZATION AND POPULISM

Sarah M. Stitzlein
University of Cincinnati

In recent years, I've become increasingly concerned with how we take up what I see as the fundamental civic question: What should we do? This is the question that we consider whenever we have to figure out how to live together in a democracy and especially when we face shared problems. We engage in civic reasoning together as we seek to understand and address the situation. That reasoning often requires us to use empirical information, facts, personal stories, and truth claims in order to arrive at informed, accurate, or wise decisions. Increasingly, civic reasoning is struggling, often because citizens cannot agree upon those elements or because they are wielded in problematic ways, including with dishonesty or malintent.

Two growing phenomena, polarization and populism, are significantly shaping how we determine and use truth, sometimes in ways that jeopardize our ability to reason together well. Today, I take up both, explaining how they not only reinforce each other, but put civic reasoning at risk. To be clear, I am not trying to defeat either phenomenon. In fact, I recognize that polarization can positively lead to stronger political identities that encourage people to participate in democratic life and can make them more resolute in their stances against unjust views or bad parties (for example, racist hate groups). I also value populism as an inspiring spirit of the people and as a force for democratization.¹ That said, I do seek to prevent polarization and populism from siloing citizens and their epistemic resources in ways that prevent them from making good decisions.

In this address, I will shed light on how polarization and populism pose threats to civic reasoning by problematically shaping how citizens employ truth and the evidence it relies upon. While I am primarily concerned with how we solve shared civic and social problems, those problems are often inherently political because they take up battles over power. I contribute, then, to the burgeoning field of political epistemology that goes beyond social epistemology to consider the uniquely political aspects of how knowledge and truth are used.² And I engage the pragmatist tradition, especially Deweyan approaches to

¹ I describe some of the promises and pitfalls of populism in my most recent book *Teaching Honesty in a Populist Era: Emphasizing Truth in the Education of Citizens* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

² Liza Herzog describes the new field of political epistemology in her book *Citizen Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

classroom inquiry, to ultimately offer educational guidance on how schools might address polarization and populism in ways that preserve or improve how we use truth in civic reasoning.

Polarization

There are different forms of polarization. Today I am going to primarily focus on affective political polarization because it has distinct impacts on civic reasoning. Affective political polarization entails holding strong attitudes or feelings toward other groups.³ Most often, those feelings are negative, including distrust and antipathy, and they are directed at the group, and may or may not be directed at the beliefs or policy preferences expressed by that group.⁴ Affective polarization plays out in terms of cognitive and practical polarization, causing one group to see another as dumb or irrational and to treat them poorly. Affective political polarization leads to an inability to communicate or compromise across groups; in fact, such communication or compromise may not even be seen as desirable.⁵ In this regard, it cuts citizens off from potential resources for better understanding the world and solving problems within it.

Affective political polarization is intricately bound up with cognitive and psychological practices and tendencies that drive citizens into likeminded echo chambers and produce confirmation bias, influencing how they interpret information. “Factual belief polarization occurs when an objective fact is known according to evidence and expert opinion, but citizens’ factual perceptions are nonetheless correlated with their party preference or issue attitudes.”⁶ Citizens side with those who share their views when deciding what is factual. Affective political polarization goes hand-in-hand with belief polarization, where citizens are driven toward more extreme views that may not be sufficiently supported by evidence. Belief polarization can urge citizens to adopt a belief that has little or no evidence to support it based on group membership and what citizens think others in their group believe. Citizens seek corroboration from their group rather than confirmation from evidence.⁷ If it seems to be a popular view amongst one’s group, a citizen is affirmed in taking up that belief. That corroboration can make citizens feel good about the belief, see it aligned with their identity as a member of the group, and lead them to become more committed to it, which in turn, may

³ John T. Jost, Delia S. Baldassari, and James N. Druckman, “Cognitive–Motivational Mechanisms of Political Polarization in Social-Communicative Contexts,” *Nature Reviews Psychology* 1, no. 10 (2022): 561, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00093-5>.

⁴ Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 98.

⁵ Robert Talisse, “Problems of Polarization,” in *Political Epistemology*, eds. Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (Oxford University Press, 2021), 209-210.

⁶ Roderik Rekker and Eelco Harteveld, “Understanding Factual Belief Polarization: The Role of Trust, Political Sophistication, and Affective Polarization,” *Acta Politica* (2022): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-022-00265-4>.

⁷ Talisse, “Problems of Polarization,” 218-219.

lead them to intensify their attitudes and shift toward more extreme beliefs.⁸ “From the standpoint of that intensified outlook, opposing views and countervailing considerations are bound to appear distorted, feeble, ill-founded, and extraneous.”⁹ Sometimes they are not even able to fathom the world as their opposing group sees it.

Affective political polarization and belief polarization don’t just make us dislike and drive us away from opposing groups, they also lead us to push out outliers in our own group. We become suspicious of naysayers, skeptics, and dissenters who may hold differing views.¹⁰ This further restricts our pool of epistemic resources and our ability to make decisions, especially those that rely on alternative views.

The beliefs resulting from polarization are not necessarily inaccurate or false. The problem, though, is that polarization shifts citizens away from the importance of verifying truth, leading us to too quickly take up beliefs asserted by one’s tribe, rather than more carefully considering not only sources of information, but also the ways in which we live our lives as partisan citizens, where truth claims matter as we vie for power. When our beliefs become so deeply wrapped up with our political identity, we turn off our willingness and ability to listen to and learn from those who have a different political affiliation or even those who have dissenting views within our own group. Additionally, we not only don’t pay attention to the evidence, but we may actually degrade others who present such evidence, foreclosing our ability to learn from the evidence and from the person presenting it.

Populism

The problematic outcomes of polarization are further exacerbated by aspects of populism.¹¹ Defined rather simply for my purposes here, populism sees society as divided into two homogeneous and competing groups, the people and the elite. Pitting “us versus them,” populists proclaim that the people are good, hard working, and pure, while the elite are corrupt and power hungry. They believe that the common sense and will of the people should win out over the expertise and control of the elite. Polarization and populism affirm this “us versus them” outlook in mutually reinforcing ways. Compiling the epistemic threats of polarization, populism promulgates epistemic bubbles and further shifts the determination of truth away from verification processes and toward embodied experiences of feeling a belief as sincere.

⁸ Talisse, “Problems of Polarization,” 219.

⁹ Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 118.

¹⁰ Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 99.

¹¹ While this address is new and original, aspects of this address have been borrowed or adapted from my book *Teaching Honesty in a Populist Era: Emphasizing Truth in the Education of Citizens* (Oxford University Press, 2024). In this section, I draw heavily on the account of populist truth provided there.

First, from the perspective of collective cognition models, populism shapes group norms for how evidence is treated and, from the perspective of discursive models, populists use rhetorical devices that symbolically express identity belonging. These limit who and what is heard, including through public discourse practices such as trolling and forwarding conspiracy theories.¹² This “creates the functional equivalent of a bubble, by blocking the group’s engagement with evidence in an accuracy-guided way, along with engagement in cooperative empirical inquiry with outsiders.”¹³

Second, populism presents an affective version of truth. In a post-truth setting, “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹⁴ Opinions, then, are sometimes touted as “facts,” as a way to claim authority for those views. Those opinions can spread easily through social media, where they amass affective emoji responses as they persuade others to adopt them. Or, as in the case of populist leader President Trump’s alternative social media platform intriguingly called “Truth Social,” opinions are “ReTruthed” as they are affirmed and shared with others. Their legitimacy as truth or fact comes from being affirmed repeatedly, especially amongst those who one trusts and from within one’s tribe. This practice is aligned with belief polarization.

For many populists, truth is viewed in terms of conflicting and constructed, yet indisputable, narratives to which members of competing political tribes loyally adhere.¹⁵ Populists invoke post-truth in how they see each group, the people and the elites, as having a separate version of truth that arises from their differing experiences, emotions, and opinions. Truth cannot be divorced from politics; it is steeped in power. In this regard, populists demonstrate that truth, in some objective sense where truth reflects a reality that exists apart from politics, doesn’t exist.

Populism uses shared narratives amongst the people to unite them, especially against the elite. The “facts” that compose those narratives “are subsidiary to narratives – to pre-determined visions of politics, the clash between popular and elite interests, and ideological visions of the world. As kernels of knowledge, facts are inseparable from power for they are produced according to

¹² Elizabeth Anderson, “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics,” in *Political Epistemology*, eds. Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (Oxford University Press, 2021), 20.

¹³ Anderson, “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics,” 25.

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “post-truth, adj.”

¹⁵ I am aware that “tribalism” invokes images of indigenous people and Native Americans and can do so in ways that may be perceived as offensive or derogatory. I do not mean to invoke such understandings here. Instead, I am using “tribalism” in a sense common in literature in political science and social psychology to identify tendencies to privilege and protect those most like oneself, especially members of one’s social or political group.

epistemic premises grounded in relations of domination.”¹⁶ Populist facts are not necessarily accurate reflections of the world, but rather are endorsed because they are aligned with the overall political narrative and its goals. Proclaiming them to be true lends epistemic and moral heft to those seeming facts and narratives, driving up affective and loyal responses to them.

For populists, truth-telling emphasizes the sincere way in which one expresses or enhances the narrative of the people, regardless of the accuracy of the claims asserted or the deception they may cause. Being sincere demonstrates that one is aligned with the people. Philosopher Bernard Williams, who put forward one of the most significant modern accounts of truth, also emphasized the component of sincerity, which he saw as being open and straightforward in telling what one believes to be the truth, without deceiving oneself or others.¹⁷ This notion of sincerity is aligned with the populists to the extent that it is a way of sharing what one believes to be the case, but the populist notion of sincerity is far less concerned with trying to prevent inaccuracy or deceptiveness. For populists, sincerity does not rely upon sophisticated reason or empirical data. Instead, sincerity grows out of one’s personal experiences and sharing them in a way that produces an affective response in others, typically one that strengthens the divide between the people and the elite and nurtures one’s identity within a particular tribe. It is our affective response that makes things *feel* true. Edda Sant notes, “accuracy does not have primacy, sincerity does. Knowledge is a matter of trust.”¹⁸ When compelled to differentiate ourselves from our competing political tribes and assert our loyalty, we may breed distrust of the dueling group (affective polarization) and tend toward adopting more and more distinctly opposed, and thereby often more extreme beliefs (belief polarization). Polarization, then, is spurred by how truth is employed by populists, affective dimensions of tribal loyalty, and dishonesty in how we share information to serve group interests.

Populists emphasize personal experience as reliable knowledge, where the individual is the arbiter of truth. Liesbet van Zoonen aptly calls this an “I-pistemology.”¹⁹ Notably, populists don’t emphasize taking in information from others to build knowledge or verify truth. Instead, their focus is on personal expression and assertion—pushing one’s view outward. These assertions often disregard how one is connected to or interdependent on others for understanding and transacting with the world. This form of I-pistemology, then, stifles other key aspects of democracy, such as relationships of trust and exchange. What we

¹⁶ Silvio Waisbord, “The Elective Affinity between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics,” *Communication Research and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2018): 25-26.

¹⁷ Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Edda Sant, *Political Education in Times of Populism: Towards a Radical Democratic Education* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 107.

¹⁹ Liesbet van Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture,” *European Journal of Communication* 27, no. 1 (2012): 56-67.

need instead is to emphasize the social connectivity of knowledge building and truth validation in order to tie epistemology with democratization. Just Serrano-Zamora further adds, “More generally, if citizens’ practices are oriented by an epistemology that puts special emphasis on epistemic interdependence and cooperation, we can expect that the interpretation of political norms and values will be more engaging and inclusive, since epistemic cooperation tends to disclose practice possibilities that deepen the values and reinforce the conditions that are necessary for the democratic project.”²⁰ To revive democracy, we need to build epistemic communities. And that is where schools come in.

Educational Responses

To respond to these significant struggles in democracy that put civic reasoning (and more) at risk, schools can take an array of approaches. I work here largely with high schools in mind because they provide a space where students have developed greater agency and democratic skills than in elementary schools, while also being in a community setting that brings attributes missing from many universities. Some approaches could be integrated across levels, however. I also am assuming that these high schools have some degree of social and political diversity within them, an assumption that is increasingly less safe as schools further homogenize along multiple lines of identity.

Detecting the Influence of Polarization and Populism

To begin, teachers should help students recognize that they are vulnerable to affective and belief polarization and related psychological phenomena that impact how they receive and interpret information. This may come as a surprise to many students, especially those who do not see themselves as particularly politically inclined. Students need to understand how these phenomena work and why they are a problem. This includes seeing how they risk the quality of beliefs, in part because citizens are increasingly not disposed to seek evidentiary confirmation and because they foreclose criticisms from within and from without. Teachers can showcase instances where polarization has led to unwise or uninformed decisions or actions by students in their class, or other citizens. Some of those examples may also demonstrate a tendency toward easy solutions that are more common amongst populists who champion “common sense,” but fail to take up the complexity of situations and of the people that compose them. These sorts of examples can draw attention to the need for more careful, inclusive, and slow investigation of phenomena and decision-making.

Classroom Inquiry

²⁰ Just Serrano-Zamora, “What Kind of Epistemology is Required for Democratic Renewal?” Open Conference on the Future of Deliberation: Exploring Political, Social, and Epistemic Control, University of Iceland EDDA Research Center, June 3, 2023.

Classrooms should engage in inquiry, itself a way of *doing* democracy. Students should not just learn about how the inquiry process ideally works, but actually engage in real and meaningful inquiries together. A class might take up some pressing social or political problem, one with competing views on how it should best be addressed. Students should learn how to gather related evidence, seek out relevant experiences from stakeholders, and share their own associated personal stories. Students should learn how to identify differences and similarities across the perspectives and experiences they gather. Teachers should encourage students to be open-minded and to listen to each other well. Being a good citizen entails learning not just to speak out when one disagrees with others, but how to listen to and respond to the disagreeing views of others. Good inquiry intentionally opens spaces for minority views because they offer insight into problems and possible solutions; they help others to see the issue in different ways. This sort of inquiry foregrounds the democratic commitment to pluralism that is increasingly jeopardized in populist and polarized settings, where different ways of living and believing are not just tolerated, but celebrated for their contributions to a richer understanding of the world. Facilitated inquiry can also help students learn how to be responsive to and be moved by others, which changes the student in terms of their identity, the reasons they give regarding the problem, their position on the problem, or how they view other people impacted by the problem.²¹ Inquiry can even lead to “civic epiphanies,” where students can be surprised by each other and come to see the world and competing groups within it in new ways, possibly breaking down tendencies to cast off opposing tribes as idiots or crooks.²²

Whereas some commentators have advocated giving students more facts and arming them with media literacy to sort out disinformation online, an inquiry approach engages students in practices of truth determination, a sustainable skillset that can be transferred to an array of settings, even as facts and media change. Students should learn how to seek scientific, historical, and other forms of evidence from multiple sources. Along the way, they must learn how to identify legitimate sources, contextualize information historically, and substantiate sources to assess their reliability.²³ Students should work together to interpret and question the evidence, beliefs, and accounts they gather, with overt concern devoted to the influence of echo chambers, tribal pressures, and similar epistemic threats and limitations. They should work to detect which seem to be “common sense,” and intentionally then seek out expertise in those areas, using

²¹ Bryan Warnick, Douglas Yacek, and Shannon Robinson, “Learning to Be Moved: The Modes of Democratic Responsiveness,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 25, no. 1 (2018): 31-46.

²² Douglas Yacek, “Should Anger Be Encouraged in the Classroom? Political Education, Closed-Mindedness, and Civic Epiphany,” *Educational Theory* 69, no. 4 (2019): 421-37, <https://doi-org.uc.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/edth.12378>.

²³ Bruce VanSledright, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically...and How do you Teach it?”, *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (2004): 230-233.

each as a check on the other. This outward-oriented process aims to arrive at a thorough understanding of the problem or situation and slows the i-pistemology rush to assert beliefs about it from the students themselves.

At the same time, teachers should guide students through self-reflections, pushing them to consider how their political and identity positions may distort or bias their beliefs. They should work to identify which claims or narratives are persuasive because they feel sincere and align with the views of one's group, which would include careful reflection on how they affectively experience the claims or narratives. This educational approach is not merely aimed at showing *that* emotions matter, but learning to question *how* emotions matter in the construction and determination of truth.²⁴ Inquiry, with its underpinning of fallibilism, assumes (and sometimes even reveals) that any of us can be wrong about our opening stance on an issue. It urges us to remain open to competing views and to the evidence gathered before reaching a conclusion about it. In this way, inquiry encourages intellectual humility and works against further entrenching polarized positions, as some classroom debate techniques tend to do.²⁵ Rather than debating opponents, teachers can encourage students to carefully examine the criticisms raised by opponents to help students see how their views can be improved. When facilitated well, teachers can help students identify that it's okay to change one's mind, especially when the evidence indicates shortcomings in our views. Teachers can use questions such as "How might I be wrong?" or "What makes you say that?" or prompts such as "I used to think...but now I think" to foster awareness of affect and cultivate intellectual humility.²⁶ Reflecting on practical examples and the outcomes of previous inquiries can affirm for students the value of challenging their own beliefs and expanding what they understand to be reasonable or viable beliefs among those who differ from them politically. This approach is not well-supported through classroom debate with those who disagree on two sides of an issue. Instead of jumping to bridge divides with dialogue, a better starting point may be working internal to one's self and one's group so that we come to see ourselves and our beliefs differently. This approach entails learning to be open to criticisms of one's own view. This can help to manage belief polarization while also sharpening and strengthening one's views.²⁷

²⁴ Michalinos Zembylas, "The Affective Grounding of Post-Truth: Pedagogical Risks and Transformative Possibilities in Countering Post-Truth Claims," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2020): 81.

²⁵ Paula McAvoy and Gregory E. McAvoy, "Can Debate and Deliberation Reduce Partisan Divisions? Evidence from a Study of High School Students," *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (2021): 275-84.

²⁶ I borrow some of these examples from Harvard's Project Zero and Rob Ritchart, Mark Church, et. al. *The Power of Making Thinking Visible* (Jossey-Bass, 2020).

²⁷ Robert Talisse, *Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 16.

Individual and Collective Work in Classrooms

While teachers may help students identify how cognitive biases happen at the individual level, working in a community of inquiry can provide the resources that demonstrate that those biases are better revealed and addressed collectively. Teachers should engage students together in reflecting on how they develop beliefs collectively and how their identity shapes what they affirm and reject as they do so, again exposing aspects of polarization and populism that may be limiting. This is done through meta-reflections on the process of reasoning and decision-making, including guiding students through analyzing how a discussion occurred, whether alternative perspectives were considered, if dominant group beliefs were corroborated, the extent of affective reactions to other participants, and how criticisms were handled. Teachers can help students pay attention to the political groups that shape their views and the norms that operate within them. Finally, participating in inquiry can help students see how knowledge is arrived at. This metacognitive aspect of inquiry is valuable because it helps students understand *how* they think and believe with others, not just *what* they think and believe. Notably, this includes how they think with and through the pressures and limitations of polarization and populism.

Individual and collective work can also help one to see that there can be good-faith disagreements within one's own group. Being more open to recognizing weaknesses in one's own beliefs or rationale, and discovering interdependencies on others for our understanding within webs of social epistemology, can both help alert us to the value of differing views, including among our allies. "We become able to disagree with our allies without calling their authenticity into question. This recognition of reasonable dissensus among allies can prevent the in-group dynamics of belief polarization that normally lead to fracture."²⁸ It may also help members detect when more extreme partisans are acting in ways that affirm epistemic bubbles and have the courage to push back, perhaps even changing the norms of the group.²⁹ This sort of work may be further supported by teaching about the value of dissent, a cause I have long championed in schools.³⁰ Students need to understand how dissenting views work against groupthink, bring forward new ideas to be tested, and keep democracy vibrant. Students should learn to celebrate dissent, to seek it in their epistemic and civic undertakings, and learn how to engage in it themselves. This sort of education can head off the in-group demands of populism and foster the sorts of intellectual humility that are jeopardized by partisan arrogance and populist bravado.

Coming to identify and value differences within one's own group may help to pave the way for managing polarization between groups. While there can be instances where facilitation across groups works to tear down walls between

²⁸ Talisse, *Sustaining Democracy*, 126.

²⁹ Anderson, "Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics," 27.

³⁰ Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Teaching for Dissent: Political Activism in Schools* (Routledge, 2015).

groups, acknowledging the depth and impact of political identity suggests that a better starting point entails exposing likeminded allies only to the beliefs and rationales of their competitors, rather than the people themselves. Engaging initially with the ideas, rather than the people that one detests or mistrusts, and doing so in a spirit of openness to trying to understand and to seek accurate and useful information may be a good first step.³¹ This may encourage participants to reduce the sorts of attacking and trolling behaviors common in partisan outlets because there is no recipient present, denying the gratification that comes from watching a zinger land and no opportunity to provoke a response.

When groups are intermixed or simultaneously present, teachers may be most productive when focusing their work on particular, real local problems that impact all involved and must be solved.³² Shared fate in an issue, even if burdens are disproportional, can help to curtail animus between groups, especially in a classroom setting where shared norms for respectful discourse have been nurtured. Teachers who seek intergroup exchange when teaching in relatively homogenous classrooms might engage in service-learning projects in communities that differ from the makeup of their classroom. These should be aimed at common purposes or problems, which may provide conditions of equal status, common goals, and collaborative work on a particular issue necessary for the contact hypothesis to be invoked and thereby generate forms of empathy and respect across groups.³³

Apart from community service-learning, there is some evidence that well-facilitated deliberations and discussions across groups can decrease affective polarization and develop more positive views of individuals in competing groups.³⁴ For example, the cross-group dialogues studied by Rachel Wahl reveal that, though students are unlikely to change their own political views from the conversations, they are able to change their views of the people on the other side of the issue. In part, this is because they come to see the worldview of those other people and their underlying values as reflecting a legitimate conception of the good life. Her studies show that “Students who begin to question their own assumptions are especially able to entertain the possibility that politically opposed peers draw on a moral source that is valid.”³⁵

During the next stage of inquiry, students move toward answering, “What should we do?” They should form their beliefs about the issue and propose potential solutions or actions to address it. Those ideas should then be tested and assessed to see if they bring about better ways of living together. This evaluation

³¹ Talisse, *Sustaining Democracy*, 121.

³² Anderson, “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics,” 27.

³³ Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Addison-Wesley, 1954).

³⁴ Christopher Clark, “Civic Education’s Relationship to Affective Partisan Divides Later in Life,” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 18, no. 1 (2023): 50.; Rachel Wahl, “‘If you say you believe this, then why did you vote like that?’: Reasoning as Questioning in Dialogue,” *Educational Theory* 74, no. 1 (2024): 5-21.

³⁵ Wahl, “If you say you believe this.”

phase foregrounds the shared fate of participants as they face together the benefits and risks of their hypotheses and beliefs. Students thus arrive at truths that should be held tentatively, remaining open to falsifiability or new evidence. Establishing classroom communities of inquiry also provides a way to demonstrate to students how to seek and tell the truth together. Having to sort out empirical evidence underlying their political beliefs and civic proposals can affirm for students that evidentiary processes matter—that we have to intake information and process it together, rather than just asserting it individually, often as an echoing affirmation of what our group has already proclaimed. Notably, this does not mean always teaching “both sides” of an issue. Such an approach may reify competing views that “can actually be resolved by empirical evidence.”³⁶ Instead, the focus should be on figuring out the problem and the solution together with a focus on evidence.

Ethical Interactions and Political Friendships

Limitations on civic reasoning posed by polarization and populism must be addressed both in terms of political epistemology and morality, where we foreground a sense of political community and a spirit of working together civically. This is because, in part, it matters how we form our beliefs with others, but also that, instead of trying to win, curtail, or end disagreements with others, we have to figure out how to manage them ethically, ideally around shared democratic values, but at minimum in ways that enable us to live together satisfactorily.³⁷ It is not enough just to urge epistemic solutions (epistemic responsibility, media literacy, etc.) when the problem is not only one of how we think, but how we feel about each other and the claims we make.

Classroom communities of inquiry may provide a more caring and connected space for such engagement, arising from the fact that students have often known each other for many years, come from the same area or neighborhood, and have some shared interest in the well-being of that local region. Classroom communities can help us see what unites citizens, even as polarization and populism emphasize what divides them. To foster high-quality inquiry, teachers must first work to establish a sense of community connectedness and personal relationships between students in the class. This sort of environment can help sustain conversation when it faces moments of tension or conflict. And, it can help humanize political divides by enabling students to see that their classmates may be on “the other side” and yet still be kind, smart, and funny people.

One way to foreground ethical engagement alongside settling epistemological disputes is to encourage political friendships in the classroom.

³⁶ Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess. “Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 53, no. 1 (2013): 14-47, 39.

³⁷ Elizabeth Edenberg, “The Problem with Disagreement on Social Media: Moral Not Epistemic,” in *Political Epistemology*, eds. Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon (Oxford University Press, 2021), 259-279.

Such friendships foreground the shared fate of citizens and respect for the democratic value of political equality across all community members. Embracing the value of pluralism, it invites us to see our fellow citizens as capable of holding reasonable, but differing, views from our own. The aim, as articulated by Danielle Allen, is not achieving one harmonious America without disagreement; rather achieving a whole, where we respectfully live together in a union, even as we disagree about significant matters. It is to figure out how to handle disagreements well, as a persistent and important part of pluralist democracy.

As political friends, citizens recognize that sometimes they will lose out in political battles and others will win, but the sacrifices should be fairly shouldered and reciprocated.³⁸ Populism has been spurred, in part, by anger and resentment of “the people” feeling that the “elite” have unfairly reaped rewards at their expense. We have to learn how to distinguish reasonable from unreasonable feelings of loss, and then how to handle loss in ways that don’t foster distrust toward others. For a political friendship “to flourish, friends must feel that their relationship rests on equality: each must believe that the relationship’s benefits and burdens are shared more or less equally; each friend needs equal recognition from the other; and each needs an equal agency within the relationship.”³⁹

Classrooms, then, might become spaces where students learn how to share power, benefits, and burdens. When trust has been broken, a widespread result of polarization and populism, political friendship brings citizens back together.⁴⁰ When nurtured by classroom ethical norms aligned with civility as a commitment to ongoing communication, and when students learn to moderate their interests in light of the well-being of the community or compromise to reduce unjust burdens, trust can be rebuilt.⁴¹ When nasty and divisive aspects of polarization and populism arise in the classroom, a teacher might follow suit with Allen, encouraging students to ask, “Would I treat a friend this way?”⁴²

Conclusion

Taken together, this approach of identifying the influences of polarization and populism on how we think and live politically, drawing attention to the affective aspects of truth, engaging in communities of inquiry, and nurturing political friendships may help us head off some of the problematic epistemological and civic implications of polarization and populism.

³⁸ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 111.

³⁹ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 129.

⁴⁰ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 136.

⁴¹ Anthony Simon Laden, “Two Concepts of Civility,” in *A Crisis of Civility?*, eds. Robert G. Boatright, Timothy J. Shaffer, Sarah Sobieraj, and Dannagal Goldthwaite Young (Routledge, 2019).

⁴² Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 140.

Response to Presidential Address

LET'S BE LESS SCHOOLISH: TOWARD A MORE HOLISTIC EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO REVIVING DEMOCRACY

Tony DeCesare
Saint Xavier University

Introduction

This OVPES Presidential Address is vintage Sarah Stitzlein. It offers characteristically clear and focused philosophical analysis; it takes up pressing matters related to civic and democratic education; it opens important interdisciplinary conversations between the pragmatist tradition in philosophy of education and emerging scholarship in other fields, including civic studies and political epistemology; and it offers an insightful approach to how we might change our school practices in order to improve the quality of our shared civic and democratic life. These are some of the many qualities in Sarah's research that have cemented her place as one of the most prolific voices in political philosophy of education over the last decade. My own thinking has been significantly influenced by Sarah's work, and I am both honored to deliver this response and grateful to have this chance to continue dialoging with her.

Sarah's primary concern in her address is about the epistemic and civic consequences of polarization (especially affective political polarization) and populism—how they shape the ways we think about and employ truth and evidence, how they silo us from the range of epistemic resources our fellow citizens possess, and, thus, how they have doomed us to epistemically impoverished deliberative and decision-making processes. If we wish to “revive democracy,” then, we must rebuild the kinds of “epistemic communities” that are essential to democracy. And this, Sarah argues, “is where schools come in.” Focusing on high schools in particular, she outlines an educational response that aims to 1) help students detect and analyze the influence of polarization and populism; 2) create inquiry-based classrooms where students can grapple with pressing social and political issues and pursue truth with intellectual humility; 3) engage in individual and collective reflection on the formation of their beliefs and identities and on their reasoning and decision-making processes; and 4) encourage students' ethical interactions and the cultivation of political friendships in the classroom.

I find myself in agreement with the broad contours of Sarah's thinking and recommendations. We are right to worry about the effects of affective political polarization and populism on our ability and willingness to engage in civic reasoning and solve shared problems. And we are right to think about how schools can help to remediate these effects and promote the general revival of

civic and democratic life. Where I want to join Sarah in this work and perhaps contribute to it is by thinking more about the relationship between the diagnosis and the prescriptions—that is, between affective political polarization as a disruptive force in our civic life and the educational response that Sarah recommends. On the diagnostic side, I want to foreground a more historical and contextualized view of polarization, with particular attention to some of the factors contributing to its current high levels. On the practical side, and in light of this broadened view, I want to reexamine some of the educational responses Sarah outlines and explore the need for additional responses to polarization that are, as I will put it, less “schoolish.”¹

Contextualizing Polarization—Three Key Factors

To understand the current state of polarization in the United States, it is useful to start with what the historical record reveals about the waxing and waning of polarization levels over time. As Putnam has argued, the 120-year view of polarization reveals an inverted U-curve. US society was deeply polarized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by a period of significant depolarization in the middle decades of the 20th century, before a return to hyper-polarization since the 1970s.² Clearly, there has never been a time of perfect political comity in the United States. But there is good evidence that at midcentury, at both the “elite” level (i.e., among our political leaders and within our political parties and institutions) and the “mass” level (i.e., among the general citizenry), polarization was quite low and “political values included collegiality, compromise, and bipartisanship.”³ This U-curve points to an obvious question: what factors drive or sustain (or, at least have accompanied) levels of polarization and depolarization and, more to the point, what is driving our current and historically high levels of affective political polarization? When we drill down, there is some emerging scholarly agreement around at least three enabling factors related to this kind of polarization that might inform how we understand and diagnose it and, therefore, how we can best mitigate its damaging effects, including on our civic reasoning.

One such factor is our political structure, including political parties and institutions and their leaders—what Putnam calls the “elite.” There is growing consensus that strategically generated ideological polarization among this elite is driving affective political polarization among the masses more so than the reverse. Putnam, for instance, draws this conclusion based on evidence that mass polarization has lagged behind elite polarization by about ten years. Our most

¹ See Susan D. Blum, *Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning* (Cornell University Press, 2024). I have borrowed this term from Bloom but given it a simpler meaning here, as indicated below.

² Robert D. Putnam, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster, 2020).

³ Putnam, *The Upswing*, 81.

recent surge of polarization, he notes, “appears to have begun at the elite level in the 1970s, but spread to the electorate as a whole in the 1980s, as voters, responding to the increasingly disparate options offered by leaders and encouraged by activists, sorted themselves into opposing camps.”⁴ This followed a period of time in the 1960s when conflicts over racial justice (and later other issues) revealed clearer ideological differences between the parties, and when leaders from within each party—as well as some within the American Political Science Association—were urging the pursuit of more distinct party positions and identities that could present voters with real choices (not mere echoes) and secure more stable blocs of voters.⁵

From this, Putnam draws a conclusion that is consistent with “the balance of opinion among experts currently”: a major factor in polarization is a party structure—indeed, a broader political structure—that encourages party and political leaders to “send polarizing messages to the electorate in an effort to win support with partisan appeals.”⁶ This messaging, often helped along by the media, not only causes voters to alter their views on issues, but also further solidifies partisan identities and loyalties as the main determinants of one’s views.⁷ It also has the effect of convincing the citizenry that their ideological differences with members of the other party are far greater than they actually are. This emerging recognition of political parties’ and leaders’ strategic fueling of affective political polarization among the masses has led to a more structural way of addressing polarization. The idea is that “programming that focuses on change at the Individual/Personal level” must also translate into “action at the Socio-Political level,” including, in this case, action that challenges a political structure that is incentivized to instrumentalize polarization.⁸

A second enabling factor related to polarization concerns our levels of connection and engagement in social and civic life, which, as Cox and Pressler note, have “declined by every conceivable measure since the mid-twentieth century.”⁹ The related increases in loneliness and social disconnection have led the US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, to declare an epidemic of loneliness and isolation.¹⁰ He has done so not just in response to the serious health

⁴ Putnam, *The Upswing*, 99.

⁵ Putnam, *The Upswing*; Rachel Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023.

⁶ Putnam, *The Upswing*, 99.

⁷ Putnam, *The Upswing*, 99.

⁸ Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence,” 7-8.

⁹ Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler, “Disconnected: The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life: Findings from 2024 American Social Capital Survey,” *Survey Center on American Life* (August 22, 2024).

<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/disconnected-places-and-spaces/>.

¹⁰ Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services (2023).

implications but also on account of the effects that loneliness and isolation have on our social fabric, including how they increase levels of polarization. Indeed, Putnam shows that our levels of social isolation have essentially followed the same inverted U-curve that maps changes in our levels of polarization: periods of greater social isolation and individualism correspond to greater polarization, while greater social cohesion and communitarianism correspond to lower levels of polarization. Thus, Putnam comes to call this U-curve the “I-we-I curve.”¹¹ Klinenberg, who has also studied the myriad dangers of social disconnection and isolation, has reached a similar conclusion: “social distance and segregation” (along with other forms of social and cultural sorting) “breed polarization.”¹² As we will see, Klinenberg’s primary solution—reflected in Murthy’s report and consistent with Putnam’s long-standing research—is a broad commitment to building up our social infrastructure.

A third and final enabling factor gaining increased recognition in relation to affective political polarization is age and aging. Data have consistently shown that polarization is rising far more and more rapidly among the population of citizens who are sixty-five years of age and older.¹³ Furthermore, Phillips has found that aging in general matters to levels of affective polarization, particularly insofar as our “in-party warmth” increases as we age.¹⁴ Amidst unprecedented growth in the population of citizens in the sixty-five and older age range and the general aging of the US citizenry (and its political leaders), sharp increases in levels of polarization thus seem inevitable.¹⁵ Interestingly, though, these age- and aging-related dimensions of affective political polarization intersect with another possibly emerging trend, namely, that young people—particularly Millennials and Gen Z—are, by some accounts, demonstrating less intense party identification and greater consensus on key issues. This intersection of age-related factors have led some researchers to conclude that as these younger generations come (further) into political power we may see a sort of natural phasing out of polarization.¹⁶ Even if this proves correct, of course, we are still

¹¹ Putnam, *The Upswing*, 200.

¹² Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (Broadway Books, 2018): 176.

¹³ Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 40 (2017): 10612-10617.

¹⁴ Joseph Phillips, “Affective Polarization: Over Time, Through the Generations, and During the Lifespan,” *Political Behavior* 44 (2022): 1483-1508.

¹⁵ Mark Mather and Paolo Scommegna, “Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States,” Population Reference Bureau: <https://www.prb.org/resources/fact-sheet-aging-in-the-united-states/>.

¹⁶ Sally Friedman and David Schultz, “Polarization May Phase Out of American Politics as Younger Generations Shift to Power,” *The Conversation* (May 9, 2024), <https://theconversation.com/polarization-may-phase-out-of-american-politics-as-younger-generations-shift-into-power-227506>. These authors consider Millennials as those born between 1982-1995 and Gen Z as those born between 1996 and 2013.

in need of more immediate remedies, especially for those in the most affected age groups.

Our Educational Response

So, what do these enabling factors related to polarization suggest about potential prescriptions and, especially, a potential “educational response”? I think it suggests, first, that our responses must address the problem at the level of the socio-political structure and not just the individual/personal level. This has to include opportunities for collaborative work by citizens that aim to alter the ways our political structure incentivizes political parties’ and leaders’ fueling of affective polarization. Further, it suggests that our responses need to focus on creating and sustaining opportunities for social connection and belonging and the cultivation of a shared fate and shared identities. Finally, it suggests that we need responses that can also educate—in the broad sense—citizens who are no longer of school age.

To zoom out, what this ultimately means, in other words, is that, while we can be optimistic about what schools can do to combat affective political polarization, we also (and perhaps primarily) need a less “schoolish” response. What I mean is that we need a response that is less focused on schools—and, even more narrowly, on the pedagogy and curriculum of schools—as the primary if not only remedy. More positively, I mean that we also have to reconsider how schools are *structured* and how they *function in society*, and we have to think *beyond schools* altogether and look to other potentially educative institutions and opportunities. And I think we can make a good start toward this broader “educational” response by asking what it might mean or look like to scale Sarah’s response up and out—to a broader population of citizens and beyond the traditional structure and functioning of schools. So, I want to offer three examples of what this might look like—one that emphasizes the structure of schools, one that suggests how schools might function more comprehensively within society, and one that takes us beyond schools entirely.

Klinenberg’s work on social infrastructure as a key weapon in the fight against polarization (among other things) is a strong structure-oriented example. Parts of his analysis and recommendations focus on schools, but he does not write about different pedagogies or curriculum or classroom activities or even school-age citizens. Instead, he argues that we need to design schools in ways that enable their full contribution to the buildup of our social infrastructure, by which he means “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” and that help “people forge bonds” and “engage in sustained, recurrent interaction.”¹⁷ For Klinenberg, this means inviting parents to join their children in their classrooms not just on “special occasions,” but for a substantial period of time at the start of every school day in order to give parents—adult citizens—

¹⁷ Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 5.

“time and space to get to know one another” and “build relationships.”¹⁸ It means intentionally designing the physical space around schools for socializing among parents and other community members. It means, on the whole, acting on the understanding that when educational institutions are structured “to promote social connection, they can strengthen networks and dramatically improve the lives of parents and children.”¹⁹

We can move further in the direction of a less schoolish response to polarization by thinking also about the *function of schools* in society. In the early 1900s, another period of intense polarization in the United States, Edward Ward took up John Dewey’s call for schools to realize their “full function” in society by operating as “social centers”—central hubs for community gathering, engagement, and education that would be open to all (young and old) on nights and weekends.²⁰ Ward implemented an explicitly political version of the idea in schools across Rochester, New York from 1907-1911, converting seventeen schools into social centers where citizens gathered for “organized deliberation,” for “getting at the facts,” and “all-sided hearing and discussion.”²¹ Importantly, Ward felt strongly that the schools were the best place for these centers, in part, because the school was public and a symbol of the future of the community. It was here—in the schools serving as social centers and as embodiments of meeting-place democracy—that Ward hoped that individual citizens would not only learn “crucial lessons about democracy,” but also come to form “collective public judgment.”²² On any given day one could find discussions around key issues of relevance to the community, like local housing conditions, the development of public buildings, education, immigration and national citizenship, race relations, women’s suffrage, labor union politics, foreign affairs, and more. And Ward recognized that in order for public opinion on these and other issues to be meaningful, information—from politicians, the press, and other citizens—had to be interpreted and vetted before it was put to use in political action.²³

Finally, a less schoolish response to polarization also encourages us to look *beyond schools* altogether. To draw again on a historical example: In the 1930s, a major experiment in civic education—“educational forums”—swept the

¹⁸ Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 84.

¹⁹ Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*, 86.

²⁰ John Dewey, “The School as Social Center,” *The Elementary School Teacher* III, no. 2 (1902): 73-86.

²¹ Edward J. Ward, “The Rochester Civic and Social Centers,” in *National Society for the Study of Education: 1907–1911*, ed. S. Chester Parker (University of Chicago Press, 1911), 20.

²² Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 56, 71.

²³ For more on the schools as social centers movement, see Tony DeCesare, “Centered Democratic Education: Public Schools as Civic Centers,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 51 (2020): 33-43.

nation, engaging over 2.5 million adults in experiences that advocates hoped would do what schools had not (and perhaps could not), namely, provide “a civic education adequate to the new demands of citizenship in a society wracked by crisis.”²⁴

John Studebaker, the driving force behind the forums, recognized the need to increase citizens’ opportunities both to participate in the work of democracy—especially public discussion over the central issues of the day—and to further their education as participatory citizens. Education forums were, for Studebaker, the best means to these most fundamental democratic ends, and could provide citizens with opportunities to learn about and analyze complex problems, recognize and learn to tolerate diverse viewpoints, deliberate over pressing issues, and agitate for social and political reform. Over time, the education forums became, by most accounts, “the first federally coordinated, nationwide mass program in adult civic education.”²⁵ At its height the program helped establish close to 500 regular forum sites across 43 states, including many in public school buildings as well as other public or communal spaces. Like the social centers, the content of the education forums varied by location, but the overarching purpose, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt put it, was “to engage as many citizens as possible ‘in a continuous, fearless, and free discussion and study of public affairs. This should be the natural postgraduate program of all citizens.’”²⁶

Conclusion

These kinds of broadly “educational” responses to polarization can go a long way to helping restore the strength of our civic reasoning and our shared civic and democratic life. Klinenberg’s work suggests how we might move beyond traditional ideas about how to enlist schools in the fight against polarization, namely, by conceiving and redesigning them as part of our social infrastructure—as spaces that offer opportunities for social connection, community building, and the cultivation of a “we.” Such spaces are sorely lacking in our society at precisely the time we need them the most. The social centers and educational forums helped to generate, albeit briefly, the kinds of democratic and epistemic communities that seem poised to help us—all of us, across the age range—address the factors that fuel or sustain affective political polarization. They demonstrated the potential to be mixed-age spaces of belonging and connection; to create the conditions within which political

²⁴ Robert Kunzman and David Tyack, “Educational Forums of the 1930s: An Experiment in Adult Civic Education,” *American Journal of Education* 111 (May 2005): 320. Also see Tony DeCesare, “The Adults are Not Alright: Theorizing Adult Democratic Education from the Capabilities Approach,” *Educational Theory* 74, no. 5 (2024): 735-758.

²⁵ Kunzman and Tyack, “Educational Forums,” 324.

²⁶ Cited in Kunzman and Tyack, “Educational Forums,” 320.

friendships can develop and be sustained; and to offer opportunities for citizens to engage in the work of democracy—including sharing their epistemic resources, vetting information and political rhetoric, and developing an accurate sense of where other members of their communities actually stand on issues. They also helped lay the groundwork not just for talking but for democratic action and social reform, including that which could be aimed at social and political structures themselves. None of this, of course, is to say that school-focused (or schoolish) responses to polarization and other civic and democratic ills are not or cannot be effective. It is to say that we need more, and that these broader “educational” responses deserve further attention in our efforts to combat polarization and revive democracy.

AGAINST AUTHENTICITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL VALUE

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Notwithstanding the extensive critiques of moral and character education, there's little disagreement that educators are in the business of teaching values. In this paper I consider authenticity as one of these values. Sometimes education names a virtue, such as honesty, as a specific value and expectation of students, and there is even curriculum designed to support it. But there is also indirect character education that promotes values through cultural messaging. Authenticity is more of the second type. Students find slogans like "Be Yourself!" emblazoned on colourful posters in the hallways of their schools around North America. Among progressive educators, the notion that students should be encouraged (empowered?) to "be themselves" is about as contentious as the principle that Christmas is not the only winter holiday. Whether they are using the word or not, a large proportion of teachers and educational experts uphold authenticity as a value.

"Authenticity" became a buzzword in the student movements of mid-Century America, most notably through Students for a Democratic Society, and migrated from college campuses to high schools and youth groups.¹ Since the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis has intensified, with many applications of the vernacular of authenticity—from authentic pedagogy to authentic assessment to authentic classrooms—popping up in educational scholarship, curriculum policy, and teacher education.² The term 'authenticity' is used in a variety of ways, some of them incompatible.³ But in all applications, to call something or someone 'authentic' is to signal normative approval.

The tacit emphasis on identity and personal authenticity in education is no accident; it has deep roots in Western culture. The legacies of Romanticism and liberalism, while often distorted, are used to support an ideal of perfecting an interior life and responsibly maximizing individual freedom.⁴ In contrast to more collectivist philosophies, for example, Westerners have long viewed education as a journey toward something like personal actualization. These values are also related to seemingly progressive educational goals and political commitments

¹ Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (Atheneum, 1970).

² Lauren Bialystok, "Authenticity in Education," *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, ed. George Noblit (Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ I lack the space here to address the different conceptions of selfhood behind uses of authenticity language, but see Lauren Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 53, no. 2 (2014): 271-298.

⁴ Indeed, the ideal has persisted despite the intractable metaphysical problem of finding the true self (Bialystok, "Limits").

that have historically sought to emancipate students from hierarchical and harsh educational structures. The notion that we ought to affirm and prop up student identity is a precept of progressive education that can be traced back to the earliest child-centred philosophies of education.

The ambient enthusiasm for authenticity, however, may mask serious problems. In this paper I draw attention to three risks associated with endorsing authenticity as an overall value in education. I refer to them as *essentialism*, *narcissism*, and *relativism*.⁵ These concerns mimic debates from the 1970s and 1980s, when both conservatives and progressives wrestled with the cultural fallout of the 1960s political movements.⁶ The cultural relevancy of authenticity has surged again recently with the intensification of identity politics, the spectre of deep fakes, the normalization of mendacity from people in power, and the desperate longing for something bedrock in a fractured and dangerous world. Arguably, authenticity matters more than ever, and it's something we should want for our children irrespective of our other commitments. By retrieving and updating some of the concerns of more conservative critics in a previous era, I hope to show why progressives today should be wary of leaning too readily on authenticity as an educational value.

I considered titling this paper, "Against Authenticity as an Educational Aim," in the tradition of analytic philosophy of education that declares itself for or against some particular aim.⁷ Sometimes the values that appear to be the most foundational or indisputable do not lend themselves to pedagogical promotion. Even if you believe in authenticity, you might think it's a strange aim to adopt as an educator. How, after all, could you help, much less compel, someone else to "be themselves"? As Simon Feldman painstakingly demonstrates, telling someone to "be authentic" is "bad advice": it backfires, or rings hollow, or pollutes the very outcome it is intended to usher in.⁸ This has not stopped some educators and educational scholars from trying, however.

Marcia Baxter Magolda's influential notion of "self-authorship"⁹ is a prime example of how the aim of authenticity is operationalized in educational practice. Parroting elements of the Romantic account of personal authenticity, self-authorship stresses originality and resistance to passive conformity. As Baxter

⁵ These risks have been variously voiced by many philosophers and cultural critics in different contexts. I synthesize them here under these headings for conciseness.

⁶ Berman, *Politics*; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard: 1991).

⁷ See, e.g., Michael Hand, "Against Autonomy as an Educational Aim," *Oxford Review of Education* 32, no.4 (2006): 535-550.

⁸ Simon Feldman, *Against Authenticity: Why You Shouldn't Be Yourself* (Lexington, 2015). In this respect, it mirrors some of the worries about teaching autonomy (Hand, "Against Autonomy"). For one account of the relationship between authenticity and autonomy, see Michael Bonnett and Stefan Cuypers, "Autonomy and Authenticity in Education," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*, eds. N. Blake, P. Smeyers, R. Smith, & P. Standish (Oxford, 2003): 326-340.

⁹ Marcia Baxter Magolda, *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges* (Stylus, 2009).

Magolda says, it “encourage[es] participants to develop their personal authority by listening to their own voices in determining how to live their lives.”¹⁰ Likewise, in his account of teaching for authenticity, Laurance Splitter advocates “developing, encouraging, and cultivating reflective dialogue” so that students can “construct a balanced and harmonious self-concept.”¹¹ Using somewhat more mystical language, Carolin Kreber argues that when teaching for authenticity, “the student’s being is engaged in the teaching–learning interaction.”¹² One needn’t spend too long looking through the literature to generate a whole list of loosely constructivist techniques, many of them related to literacy and dialogue, which promise to have salutary effects on students’ relationships to themselves and to the subject matter. I consider these to be endorsements of authenticity as an educational aim, even if the word is not used explicitly.

I want to pick on a slightly different target, however, since I think that the current modes of promoting authenticity are more politicized than the generic pedagogical trends that have gained favor in the last few decades. It is not so much an educational aim as a background value that is thought to prop up progressive goals. Authenticity immediately connotes questions of identity. The educational role of authenticity today is indexed to the inevitably political stakes of all identity questions and must be understood as part of our present moment of epistemic collapse and self-reinforcing polarization. In this context, authenticity has arguably become an even more central value in education, especially among progressives. It expresses the confidence that it is good for students who are at risk of discrimination, misrecognition, or erasure to in some sense *be themselves*—indeed, that political progress may depend on it. This well-intended approach to cultivating students’ identities can be traced to the successes of twentieth century civil rights movements, whose slogans like “Gay by nature, proud by choice” cemented the relationship between authenticity and political recognition.

Contemporary social justice movements have reinvigorated this dependence on authenticity by making it common knowledge that, for instance, a person can only speak about certain issues from lived experience, and challenging a person’s self-reported oppression is itself oppressive. Educators have been caught up in this discourse, especially in the face of crushing backlash in Republican-controlled districts, where students may be told that they are inferior, that they are being brainwashed, or that who they are is illegitimate.¹³ The rejection of

¹⁰ Baxter Magolda, *Authoring*, 251.

¹¹ Laurance Splitter, “Authenticity and Constructivism in Education,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 2 (2009): 135-151, 148, 150.

¹² Carolin Kreber, “Academics’ Teacher Identities, Authenticity and Pedagogy,” *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 2 (2010): 171–194, 191.

¹³ Since this paper was first written, Trump took office for the second time, and his first spate of executive orders has exacerbated the threats to certain identity groups and educators.

hate and erasure entails affirming the validity of who people are. Many progressive and justice-oriented trends in education, in other words, appear to depend on affirming students' authenticity. Although the word *authenticity* may not appear as an explicit end, the pervasive confidence in the importance of identity affirmation captures a sensibility that permeates schools and education departments. If anything, authenticity is tacitly accepted as the master-theory of identity, which sanctifies any particular account of what individual identity is.

As central as identity has been made in the social and political arenas, I want to argue that we should avoid a kind of uncritical celebration of whatever a person takes to be fundamental to their identity or the product of their unique vantage point on the world, especially when it comes to children and students in a formal education setting. An unexamined reliance on the value of authenticity in education triggers familiar problems. Although the context is different, some of the worries raised by critics in the last century remain salient. More importantly, liberals today should be especially concerned about progressive political aims being co-opted or undermined by authenticity talk, or leading to illiberal practices. I will articulate these worries by taking up each of the three risks mentioned above.

Essentialism

The first risk of using a generic authenticity frame to develop students' identities is that it may essentialize whatever aspect of identity comes into question. Essentialism has long been criticized for perpetrating a conservative politics of self, even as it can allow progressives to rally around recognizable causes.¹⁴ As soon as we attach political or psychological significance to being ourselves, there is a risk of calcifying an aspect of identity in the name of recognition. This is the double-edged sword well known within identity politics. Debates about the ethics of retreating to "strategic essentialism" attest to an aversion to thinking of identity this way.¹⁵ We don't actually believe in essentialism, but sometimes we have to act like we do. Proponents of radical social transformation are, indeed, more readily associated with the anti-essentialist impulses of post-structuralism than the Romantics' fascination with the 'true self'; in higher education in particular, advocates of social justice are more likely to name-drop Judith Butler or Gilles Deleuze than Rousseau or Descartes.¹⁶ Perhaps counterintuitively, there is substantial overlap between the

¹⁴ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (Routledge, 1989).

¹⁵ Kristina Wolff, "Strategic Essentialism," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, vol. 10 (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 4797-4799.

¹⁶ I am staying within the Western philosophical tradition to sharpen the contrast here, but of course these same scholars and activists are profoundly influenced by non-Western thinkers, who also eschew a kind of Enlightenment metaphysics of substance.

theoretical adherents of anti-essentialist social critique and the most committed identitarians, all of whom tend to cluster in leftist social movements.

However, it's hard to see how such leftists could consistently abdicate all essentialism and pursue social action via a kind of post-structuralist metaphysics. Social justice advocacy, bent on dismantling the oppression of identity groups, already alerts us to facets of identity that are supposedly worthy of our attention. It pre-determines the moral significance of some category, even if it simultaneously repudiates the metaphysics of such categories. To talk about the constructedness of race is still to talk about race; to talk about the fluidity of gender identity is still to talk about gender. Combatting the systems of oppression that are predicated on race and gender requires seeing ourselves as raced and gendered. Small wonder, then, that the most self-proclaimed radical spaces in education and political organizing expect participants to locate themselves within an array of social categories before anything further is said. Such practices cannot help but have the effect of artificially simplifying identities and encouraging everyone to sort each other into groupings that appear deterministic.¹⁷

Given that people need to be identifiable by race and gender in order to explain racism and sexism, authenticity emerges as preferable to alienation. Much as the phrase “gay by nature” suggests, authenticity is associated with or expressed through pride. Members of minority groups are encouraged to take pride in their race or gender, to “be true to them,” and their inauthenticity can be viewed as “selling out” or suffering from “internalized racism” or “internalized homophobia.” But who decides who has an authentic relationship to their identity? The precarity of such standards of authenticity becomes evident every time someone is outed as an impostor from a group where they seemed to be at home, as in the scandals of ethnic frauds, or “Pretendians.”¹⁸ There is no way to insist on a criterion of authenticity without eventually policing the boundaries of the identity category to which some people claim an authentic relationship.

In education, the promotion of authenticity means that some types of identity, such as race and gender, may be elevated and oversimplified, while others are demoted. This emphasis on the most politically loaded identities may serve to validate who a student is, or is thought to be, but these quickly become a proxy for what they are presumed to need educationally. Culturally Relevant Teaching, for example, was developed to help teachers “[use] the students’ culture to help them create meaning and understand the world” and reduce disparities in educational outcomes, with the implicit understanding that Black

¹⁷ It could be objected that these are arguments against essentialism, but not necessarily authenticity as such. For an argument that the structure of authenticity is ultimately essentialist, see Bialystok, “Limits.” I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

¹⁸ Haley Lewis, “What Are ‘Pretendians’ and How Are They Causing ‘Severe Harm’ to Indigenous Communities?” *Global News*, March 9, 2023, <https://globalnews.ca/news/9450313/pretendians-canada-indigenous-ancestry/>.

children would especially benefit.¹⁹ However successful this approach might be academically, it has the effect of reinforcing racial distinctions and hinging a student’s academic identity on having an authentic relationship to some other facet of their identity. As we know all too well, right-wing legislators who feel threatened by anti-racism in education are quick to smack down such identity-specific educational movements with cynical appeals to color-blindness.

Narcissism

A second risk, which has long dogged the culture of authenticity in general, is that endorsing authenticity without further specification can license an attitude of narcissism. This is the flip side of the concern about essentializing group identity, where organizing around shared experiences of identity-based discrimination is supposed to foster solidarity and promote social critique. In contrast to movement politics, aspects of authenticity culture have been criticized for taking the Western European emphasis on individuality to a hyperbolic extreme. Identity that is validated just for being what it is may become self-absorbed and cut off from larger concerns. Christopher Lasch, writing in 1971, lamented how the burgeoning discourse of authenticity in the progressive social movements of the 1960s had given way to a depoliticized obsession with “psychic self-improvement.”²⁰ Weary from the tumultuous years of political struggle and spurred on by a culture of individualist materialism, middle-class (mostly White) Americans converted “authenticity” into the fulfilment of individual desires. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor lamented that “self-fulfilment” had eclipsed the “moral force” of authenticity, arguing:

It's not just that people sacrifice their love relationships, and the care of their children, to pursue their careers. Something like this has perhaps always existed. The point is that today many people feel *called* to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it.²¹

This iteration of authenticity—removed from collective struggles and focused on individual feelings—may translate into particular ways of raising and educating children. In addition to modelling a kind of entitlement that may have been foreign to children of earlier generations, parents who prize this conception of authenticity may indulge their children’s feelings as the be-all and end-all of

¹⁹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Teaching: The Key to Making Multicultural Education Work,” in *Research and Multicultural Education*, ed. C. A. Grant (The Falmer Press, 1992), 106; See also Molefi Kete Asante, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991): 170-180.

²⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (Norton, 1978), 4.

²¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 17.

developmental need. According to Lasch, this mindset signalled a transition in parenting styles in the 1970s:

Since the critique of permissiveness seldom challenged psychiatric orthodoxy, it soon hardened into a new dogma of its own—the dogma of authenticity. Earlier experts had advised the parent to follow one or another set of prescriptions; now the experts told him to trust his own feelings. Whatever he did was right as long as he did it spontaneously.²²

Lasch believed the narcissistic tendency was being promoted as children explored their identities during crucial formative stages, hardening into a lifelong orientation. While this attitude today rings conservative notes and might be heard as expressing nostalgia for traditional family values, the concern about celebrating the authenticity of children’s feelings remains significant. Reducing identity to authentic feelings and instincts may displace considered judgment or collaborative values as the marker of real identity and the source of moral guidance.

This brand of individual narcissism is also compatible with, or even amplified by, leftist politics, and a potential culprit in the mental health crisis affecting students. In the era of “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings,” critics have charged that new social justice norms translate into emotional coddling rather than genuine political transformation, with the result that we are more divided, not more unified.²³ In other words, a person’s subjective feeling of being made to feel unsafe or offended, once processed through the logic of identity politics, is reason enough to penalize others or censor particular texts, discussions, and points of view. This approach can be both politically ineffective and pedagogically bankrupt. We have seen longstanding liberal norms of open dialogue and respect for difference give way to closedminded and punitive educational spaces that are less concerned with the pursuit of truth than with deference to the most radical or self-assured voices. This type of reliance on self-proclaimed authenticity takes well-established liberal impulses, such as questioning objectivity and critiquing domination, to illogical extremes. Moreover, it misconstrues the authenticity of feelings as moral beacons instead of investigating questions of justice on their own terms—which is seemingly a pre-requisite for sustainable social justice projects. This atomizing effect of authenticity politics is also related to the third risk: relativism.

²² Lasch, *Narcissism*, 166.

²³ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2018).

 Relativism

Moral and epistemic relativism are favourite bugaboos of philosophers, communitarians, and culturally conservative critics. As much as liberalism can promote tolerance and freedom of thought, it can make it hard to adjudicate between competing accounts of the good. This risk has been thought to be exemplified in self-styled progressive educational spaces, as Allan Bloom famously railed against the culture of relativism that had overtaken universities in *The Closing of the American Mind*.²⁴ The pursuit of truth is conventionally thought to depend on a kind of objective insight that is impervious to feelings, whereas individualist conceptions of authenticity, such as the narcissism just discussed, seem to earn their value precisely in virtue of being rooted in individual feeling.²⁵ The relativism of authenticity, one might worry, is inherently anti-intellectual.

These longstanding concerns have taken on urgent significance in the era of so-called “post-truth” politics and ubiquitous conspiracy thinking. Yet while outrage about “moral relativism” has historically been a posture associated with the religious right, those concerned with social justice should be equally attuned to the slide from the politics of authenticity to truth by fiat. Identitarian politics tends to adopt an uncompromising approach to moral judgment, as seen in the crusades against microaggressions and the purification of speech, which insinuates that there are objective truths about justice. In reality, these truths are determined by deferring to hierarchies of identity. But if first-person experience is the arbiter of truth, there is no controlling what political pronouncements may issue from the authority of authenticity.

We see the appropriation of authenticity by right-wing movements all the time. The Proud Boys, a chauvinist men’s group, helps itself to the aura of authenticity in its celebration of white cultural purity and in its very choice of the word “proud”—a clear echo of “Gay by nature, proud by choice.” If queer people can be proud of who they are, the rhetoric implies, so can white nationalists. They are just unapologetically being who they are, which is a quality we seem to revere in other contexts. Gavin McInnes, the founder of Proud Boys and previous co-founder of the progressive media site *Vice*, explained his logic in unadorned terms: “I love being white and I think it’s something to be very proud of. I don’t want our culture diluted.”²⁶ Substituting a marginalized racial or ethnic identity for “white” in this sentence would yield a very different meaning, but the structure is identical to that of claims where dilution of a marginalized culture is perceived as a threat, possibly racist, and, when embraced by group members, a sign of inauthenticity—a posture that McInnes would have

²⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987).

²⁵ Taylor, *Ethics*.

²⁶ He went on to say: “We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.” Kerry Flynn “Vice Distances Itself — Again—from Co-Founder Who Started Proud Boys,” *CNN* (October 1, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/01/media/vice-gavin-mcinnis-proud-boys/index.html>.

seen during his days as a Brooklyn hipster. Authenticity language can provide rhetorical cover for ideology and imprecision, offering the veneer of a commitment to justice without having to spell out and defend any general account of justice.

We must be mindful of these distortions before encouraging students to assert their identities and expect unquestioned deference in return. Students do not have the authority to say or do absolutely anything. Liberal education requires finding a balance between respecting students' identity and promoting beliefs and habits that also communicate respect and integrity. What happens when identity becomes attributed to beliefs and attitudes that education is properly in the business of shaping? An individual's views on politics or ethics may demand respect on account of their authenticity while also deserving reproach on account of their content. This tension is particularly potent in the case of schooling, both because young people's identities are often unsettled and malleable, and because schools have normative obligations that require correcting students on beliefs that might loosely be coded as part of their 'identity.'

Some identity categories are particularly susceptible to being squared away with a quick appeal to authenticity, so that we are not supposed to ask further questions about the legitimacy of any pursuant commitments or their potential incompatibility with other norms. Religion is a paradigm example. There is widespread sentiment, especially in the United States and especially concerning Abrahamic religions, that religious identity is untouchable when it serves to ground controversial viewpoints. Consider the Catholic whose religious sincerity is proposed as a defense of homophobia, as policy documents in Catholic school boards suggest it can be.²⁷ Insofar as religion and sexual orientation are now firmly accepted as identities worthy of respect, the imperative to challenge homophobia falls between the cracks. We must either sacrifice the value of authenticity, or subordinate one type of identity-based claim to another, making the type of normative cut liberals are notoriously loath to make.

Combining authenticity with other ubiquitous values in education, such as empathy, can produce unrecognized paradoxes.²⁸ A student who proudly expresses his identity (e.g., Catholic) by disparaging or denying the identity of others (e.g., queer) may be *authentically unempathetic*. His authenticity consists in being uncritically loyal to whatever he feels or believes most sharply, whereas adopting the empathy that is expected of him would entail disavowing what he takes to be deeply true about himself. It would be a mistake to attempt to straddle the contradictory demands of authenticity in such clashes. The liberal has to

²⁷ Lauren Bialystok, "Respect without Recognition: A Critique of the OCSTA's 'Respecting Difference' Policy," *Paideusis: Canadian Journal of Philosophy of Education* 22, no. 1 (2014): 8-18.

²⁸ Lauren Bialystok and Polina Kukar, "Authenticity and Empathy in Education," *Theory and Research in Education* 16, no. 1 (2018): 23-39.

stand up on principle for the parties who are most vulnerable to discrimination and educate for the values of tolerance and respect.

This challenge exposes the deceptively simplistic calculus of relying on authenticity for normative guidance in education. Authenticity is purely schematic; it endorses an identity that has yet to be spelled out. Encouraging a student's authenticity may often be tantamount to encouraging their intolerance, their confusion, or their entitlement simply because it is *theirs*. The more such aspects of identity are valued as authentic, the more identity becomes a shield against ethical accountability. As the example of religious homophobia illustrates, the validation of certain identities may even endanger or delegitimize others.

It is not, therefore, merely a question of determining whether it is possible to teach for authenticity, but also whether upholding authenticity as an educational value is even ethical. The three worries about authenticity I have summarized, adapted from a different set of debates within the left and between progressives and conservatives in the last century, can shed light on our current pathologies. What do we gain, and who benefits, when we valorize some purported truth about young people's identities? Authenticity may be a key to meaningful education, allowing students to tap into mind-opening and empowering possibilities, but often it functions as a barrier to it. It may be a balm for the disaffected, but it may also be a cudgel wielded by those who already have more than they deserve. Without saying more concretely what identity is, why different identities matter, and how identity evolves, educational commitments to affirming students' "authenticity" may be vacuous or, indeed, perpetuate harmful forms of political exchange. Confronted with the breakdown of public discourse and liberal democratic norms, we would do better to focus on values that stress commonality than to encourage each student to "develop their personal authority."²⁹

²⁹ Baxter-Magolda, *Authoring*.

**CULTIVATING RELATIONAL AUTHENTICITY
IN ART, PHILOSOPHY, AND EDUCATION
TO REORIENT DEMOCRACY
TOWARD THE BEAUTIFUL, THE TRUE, AND THE GOOD**

Bruce Novak
The Foundation for Ethics and Meaning

This paper is going to explore an unorthodox understanding of “authenticity.” In its unorthodoxy, it may just, then, be more authentic, and more true, than the conventional understandings of this word, and less subject to attack than those conventional understandings.

I will propose here that the most authentic form of authenticity for human beings is relational and transcendental, not in any way *simply* personal and existential, as it is for the tradition extending from Kierkegaard through Heidegger and Sartre, at least as they are commonly read.

This notion of authenticity—surprisingly, considering how thoroughly modern the concept of authenticity is most often appraised to be¹—can be traced back to Socrates and Plato.

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When Plato has Socrates say, at the outset of the *Symposium*, “The only things I know anything whatsoever about are erotic matters,” what he may be referring to is Socrates’s experience that human beings only come fully and authentically to life in the presence of others, including what he calls the “two-in-one” of the thinking self.²

In that dialogue, Socrates is forced by all the other members of the drinking party, against his dialogic will, to provide, paradoxically, a monologue on the topic of love. He pretends in doing this to quote a long-ago conversation he purportedly had with the priestess and prophetess Diotima. But in the course of his speech he subtly—or perhaps *not* so subtly, given his echoing of many of the exact words they have each just uttered—disobeys his fellow partygoers: having Diotima dialogue implicitly with each of the positions on love just taken in the other speeches. Thus he manages, through this surreptitiously fictional surrogate, to live in erotically dialogical authenticity with each of his present fellows, at the same time exposing their *auto*-erotic, narcissistic lack of this authenticity, however clever and thought-provoking some of their previous monologues may have been.

¹ “Authenticity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authenticity/>.

² *Theaetetus* 130a.

When Alcibiades, at the conclusion of Socrates’s speech, invades the party and makes yet another speech—on the eros of Socrates *himself*, which he is both in religious awe of and horrifyingly ashamed before—he remarks perceptively on how Socrates’s discovery of the eros of soulful conversation is the greatest of all the many Greek contributions to human civilization: including those of all its highly esteemed artists, politicians, and previous philosophers. What Socrates has seen, in other words, is that all authentic being in the world—and, one might add, looking back to Parmenides, authentic transcendental Being itself insofar as we can come in contact with it—is an erotic, artful and political “being *with*.”

Plato directly echoes this understanding in his own voice in his Tenth Letter, which I give you here in its entirety:

Plato to Aristodorus wishes well-doing.

I hear that you now are and always have been one of Dion's most intimate companions, since of all who pursue philosophy you exhibit the most philosophic disposition; for steadfastness, trustiness, and sincerity—these I affirm to be the genuine philosophy, but as to all other forms of science and cleverness which tend in other directions, I shall, I believe, be giving them their right names if I dub them “parlor-tricks.”

So farewell, and continue in the same disposition in which you are continuing now.

Most of what we call philosophy—verbal disquisitions seeking “objective” rather than relational “truth”—Plato here depicts as mere “parlor-tricks.” “Genuine,” *authentic* philosophy is, rather, a moral “disposition” that seeks relational “well-doing” toward others: through love that is perseverant, reliable, and open-hearted. Strangely to us, Plato here holds that there is a “science” and intelligence of these erotic moral dispositions, and dubs everything *we call “science”*—natural philosophy seeking accurate verbal and mathematical descriptions of the world in fictive unerotic remove from it—to be mere artifice: an inauthentic, *because unerotic*, form of being.

||

We will return to Socrates and Plato. We have much more to learn from them about the ultimate powers of relational authenticity. At this point, though, let us simply pay extended attention to a phenomenal instance of this relational authenticity that will ground in a single, shared, concrete experience an erotic edifice I am hoping you will by the end of this essay find to have deeply and authentically edifying reach. This comes to us by way of Rebecca Sullivan’s 2023 Columbia dissertation “Bearing Witness to the Personal Core of Teaching”:

He speaks to the student softly, crouching down to put himself at the boy’s eye level: “Xavier.” [His] voice is calm, deliberate, and unhurried. The boy doesn’t look up. His face is

hidden in the shadow of his black hooded sweatshirt and he gives no sign of having heard his name. Gene continues in the same soft, slow cadence: “Xavier. Xavier.” As he repeats the boy’s name, Gene’s blue eyes look intently through the lens of his glasses at the shadowed circle where the student’s down-turned face disappears beneath his hood. Gene leans in slightly, rotating a packet of papers in his hands so that the words face the student. “In case you need it, here is your first journal.” Gene holds the papers firmly but gently, cushioning the pages from beneath with both hands. Xavier sits silently. He does not look up nor reach for the papers, but his head moves slightly as he eyes the packet. I think I see his slouched shoulders straighten a fraction of an inch, but he might simply fidget. Gene remains kneeling, extending the packet toward Xavier. A moment passes before he repeats in the same soft, deliberate tone, altered only by an added touch of finality: “In case you need it.” Gene gently places the packet on Xavier’s desk and begins to straighten and turn away. “Thanks,” Xavier says, as he removes one of his AirPods and looks up. Gene turns back to face Xavier, gives an almost imperceptible nod and blinks. He maintains eye contact with Xavier, even as he adjusts his posture to a standing position. In the same steady tone of voice, he responds: “You’re welcome.”³

This educative moment could be plumbed quite extensively, but I want to point you to three prominent features of it. First, this encounter lasting just a few seconds is packed to the gills with gestures that might be called “micro-affections” (the opposite of micro-aggressions) by a virtuoso of artistic teaching. Second, it is a relational moment that has an aesthetic, dramatic, artful beginning, middle, and end, co-created by teacher and student. Last, and, I think, most important, this moment of shared experience has a satisfying conclusion of gratitude and welcoming that might be seen as the central *results* of all teaching such as Gene’s: undertaken from an authentic, *relationally* personal core, and inviting authentic relational expressions from the personal cores of students like Xavier.

Sullivan’s spare, gentle, deeply observant writing depicting this experience is also a gesture of gratitude and welcoming. Her “bearing witness,” in her own teacher, David T. Hansen’s, terms, to the minutiae of this shared encounter—what Wordsworth once called “that best part of a good [person]’s life, those little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love”—helps readers feel gratitude for the artful, embodied existence of the many, many teachers *like* Gene

³ Rebecca Sullivan, “Bearing Witness to the Personal Core of Teaching” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2023), 102.

who help welcome the many Xaviers of this world into a broad *family* of relationally loving humanity.

Hansen in his 2021 *Reimagining the Call to Teach: A Witness to Teachers and Teaching*, calls relationally authentic teaching simply “being with”.⁴ And he also, in that work, has a somewhat fancier name for it: “psychagogy,” or “the pedagogy of the soul.”⁵ Though this term appears only very rarely in the Platonic corpus, it is, as is prominently noted in classicist Werner Jaeger’s classic *Paideia*, the implicit motivating, “epoch-making” force of every word Socrates ever spoke and Plato ever wrote: in quest of the “divine center” of human *qua* human life.⁶

At a recent talk,⁷ Hansen explicitly denied that there could be an erotic science of “psychagogy” that, above, we saw Plato at least point to, if not elaborate on, in the Tenth Letter. Yet Agnes Callard’s recent, deeply insightful *Open Socrates* concludes with a section entitled *Socratic Answers*,⁸ elaborating on the three deeply important and deeply connected things Socrates at various points in the Platonic dialogues claims to have expert and unequalled knowledge of—how to love, how to practice truly effective politics, and how to face death with soulful equanimity—though not because of any magnetic erotic charisma in any way special to him (despite what Alcibiades might think), but precisely through the entirely replicable practice of what, under various guises, we can call “philosophy,” “psychagogy,” or simply “being with.”

Hansen and Megan Laverty, in the introduction to their five-volume collection of essays *The History of Western Philosophy of Education*, make the intuitive claim that “Education is at the heart of the human experience.”⁹ The rest of this paper will attempt to begin to (erotically) scientifically explain something about why this is so, in ways that most human beings at some point in the future can both understand and personally exemplify: providing us eventually, perhaps, with democratic *nations* of Genes and Xaviers.

III

Let us look again at Gene’s “being with” Xavier. These few seconds are literally a work of art: a relational moment sculpted in time. Gene crouches down to Xavier’s level. The student’s name is then gently repeated three times until the teacher has his attention. Once that is gained, Xavier receives one “micro-

⁴ David T. Hansen, *Reimagining the Call to Teach: A Witness to Teachers and Teaching* (Teachers College Press, 2021), 141.

⁵ Hansen, *Reimagining*, 29-30.

⁶ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, Vol. II: In Search of the Divine Centre* (Oxford University Press, 1943), 40.

⁷ David T. Hansen, “Dewey, Pedagogy, and Psychagogy,” talk presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, April 13, 2024. After reading a draft of this paper, Hansen noted he is open to changing his mind about this.

⁸ Agnes Callard, *Open Socrates* (Norton, 2025), 245-370.

⁹ David T. Hansen and Megan Laverty, *The History of Western Philosophy of Education* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), xi.

affection” after another: gently intent eye contact, a slight bodily leaning in, then the careful offering of the gift of Xavier’s previous writing, extended on the cushioned altar of the teacher’s outstretched hands. “In case you need it,” Gene says twice, the second time marking the poetic end of the teacher/student encounter, as well as marking the poetic beginning of the student’s potential encounter with himself and the world by continuing his reflective journal.

Just as Plato said, the teacher’s authentic “being with” the student in “steadfastness, trustiness, and sincerity” bears the potential to open a space in the student to authentically be with himself. Sullivan, in her dissertation, names this turning of the soul oftentimes effected by personal teaching a “being given to oneself.”¹⁰ Precisely because Xavier feels cared *for*, he can come to care anew about his own existence in the world. The last full measure of Gene’s devotion to Xavier and his other students is *their* renewed devotion to life. The beautifully encased *interpersonal* moment bears the potential for *intrapersonal* impetus. The beauty of “being with” is the seed of the philosophical quest for truth. It is perhaps not just for the moment of personal care extended to him, but for that potentially *lifelong* gift of continual reflection that Xavier gives his thanks. Gene’s comment “In case you need it,” echoes the core of Socrates’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*: the core of *eros* is “need” (203b), above all our need for reflective, self-renewing philosophical life.

Last, regardless of whether this temporal seed ever blooms into a sturdy philosophical plant—given the many distractions Xavier is prone to—this moment of welcoming and gratitude, we feel, cannot but have at least some small residue of goodness in the student’s life. We have no idea whether this moment of welcoming and gratitude will Platonically bring Xavier to permanently emerge from the textile and aural caves of his hoodie and earbuds. But as Gene steps away from Xavier, we cannot help but feel that there is, in at least some small measure, a residue of his displays of affection that will remain in him. In this brief exchange, we get a clear vision of the possibility of what we might best call—drawing Hansen’s term of “psychagogy” out just a little further—an educative *metempsychosis*. Something of the goodness in Gene’s soul has in this moment of kindness poetically migrated into Xavier’s, and will remain implanted there, as a potential source of his own care for others, whether he retains a specific memory of this moment or not.

To sum up, the Platonically semi-congruent terms “being with,” “philosophy,” and “psychagogy,” can be seen to represent the three dimensions of how we are able to bring the Platonic ideals of beauty, truth, and goodness, in moments of relational authenticity such as this, to effectively emerge in the human world: showing how ideality, through poetically relational intercourse, can be brought to bear on reality.

This, of course, has bearings far beyond the field of education; or rather, bearings that can enable us to see how we can extend our understanding and

¹⁰ Sullivan, “Bearing Witness,” 29-31.

implementation of Socratic and Platonic erotic philosophical education to deliberately embrace the whole of authentic human life. So that we can do more than feel that “education is at the heart of the human experience,” but more deliberately, more intelligently, and far more broadly attend to and strengthen that heart’s beatings than we have hitherto been able to.

IV

This paper contributes to and seeks to extend a larger conversation I have been having over the past few years with Hansen, Sullivan, and other philosopher-educators, entitled “The Erotic Reconstitution of Democratic Life: From Socrates to Today.”¹¹ The basic premise of that conversation is that the current turmoil of global democratic life can be traced in important ways to the inadequate philosophical foundation of modern democracies in the Baconian, Hobbesean, and Lockean “mind over matter” atomistic empiricism, ultimately traceable to Socrates’s and Plato’s near contemporaries Democritus and Epicurus. This philosophy, though, through the seductive Baconian doctrine “knowledge is power,” while producing an exponential growth of our species’ ability to manipulate the forces of nature—and to construct ourselves and instruct

¹¹ Aside from a number of informal, contributory and ongoing conversations, there have been two conference panels and two talks of my own growing from those panels. “The Erotic Re-Constitution of Democratic Life: From Socrates to Today, at OVPES, September, 2023, featured myself, Kerry Burch, and Jane Addams scholar Marilyn Fischer. Then at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), April, 2024, it featured Burch and myself again, along with David Hansen, Rebecca Sullivan, Jill Frank (whose work is referred to below), Dean Stanton Wortham of the Lynch School of Education at Boston College who has led it in recent years to focus on formative, psychogogic education, and Cara Furman of Hunter College, a student both of Hansen’s and of my earlier, related work, *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom*, op. cit. The current paper is an overhaul of my 2024 OVPES presentation, “What Is Authentic Art? What Is Authentic Philosophy? and What Is Authentic Education?: And How Democratic Citizens’ Seeking Answers to These Questions Can Lead to the Constitution of Authentic, Soulfully Growing Democracies.” Then at AERA in April 2025 I presented “The Political Need for Philosophic Love in Classrooms: Empathic, Soulful Interbeing and Bona Fide Hope-filled Democracy.” It should also be noted that the original source of these conversations is Burch’s *Eros of the Educational Principle of Democracy*, Peter Lang, 2000, along with its essay-length review by Thomas Alexander, “Eros and Education: Postmodernism and the Dilemma of Humanist Pedagogy, *Philosophical Studies in Education* 21: 479-496, 2001, and Burch’s response, “The Love Problem in Education,” 497-503, *ibid.* And that Burch and I will be presenting a panel at OVPES 2025 in a panel entitled, “The Telos of Philosophy as the Constitution of Erotic, Educative Democracies,” Burch’s offering being “Eros and the Transformation of American Democracy: Interpreting the Declaration as a Civic Journey,” and my own being, “How Democracy Can Go On: Socratically Questioning the Philosophical Founding of Democracy in Order to Socratically *Re-found* It On an Erotically Educative Basis.”

others to center our lives around that supposedly most basic end—has left a gaping hole in our souls.

That hole, for many, is now being dangerously and insanely filled: by religious fanatics and political demagogues around the world, including in those nations once known for their political probity and sanity in the face of rampant demagoguery. This spectacle of global folly, though, gives us a chance to rethink the whole of the intellectual history that got us to this place. Here enter Socrates and Plato, and their understanding that the one chance for our species to cure ourselves from our *age-old* insanity is the marriage of authentic philosophical practice with authentic political power.¹²

What if we all were taught, at the core of our common life and the common good, to “be with” others, ourselves, and the world in relational authenticity the way that we have seen Gene be with Xavier in this educative moment? What if we are educated to desire, as central to our lives, erotic democracies of the soul—introduced in all of our institutions, not just our politics?

In this section we will briefly explore a few central educational implications of that prospect, applicable beyond our schools as well as in them, couched in the three central aspects of Socratic, erotic knowledge Agnes Callard referred to: the art of erotic “being with”; the inner freedom of erotic philosophical reflection that is both a “being with” oneself and the psychic prerequisite for erotic political freedom; and the transcendental erotic knowledge of psychagogic *metempsychosis*, that our authentic “being with” others perdures in them in our absence. Then in the next section we will briefly explore a few current political facts that somewhat surprisingly augur the erotic philosophical transformation of democratic life in the not too distant future.

First, if “being with” is an art, the co-sculpting of shared time, as we observed between Gene and Xavier, art itself can be conceived as paradigmatic of all “being with.” When we are immersed in art, we are immersed in a womb of co-existence in which an experience is carefully crafted for us by a teacher-artist as a gift of life, which, optimally, we receive with grace—and often very deep love for the givers of deep and soulful experiences—and then reflectively make a part of our own life. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and I, in our academically best-selling *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*¹³, call this aesthetic process a “mimeme,” as it is for culture what DNA is for life itself: the basic process through which human life chemically renews itself, through the soulful intercourse of art, artful teaching, and the constant potential for teaching of an artfully lived life.

Next, if “philosophy” is personal reflection that emerges out of this beneficent “being with,” that reflection appears as the erotic urge for authentic *self*-relationship. The modern notion of purely personal authenticity is here

¹² *Republic* 473d.

¹³ Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change* (Teachers College Press, the National Writing Project, and the National Council of Teachers of English, 2011).

cushioned by originating in and leading back toward authentic “being with” others and the world. We move here from beautiful poetic relationality to sublime freedom of thought: the freedom intrinsic to human being. Plato depicts this process in his Seventh Letter with one of his famous philosophical images. The soul, he says, is like a candle with a deeply buried wick. In our current social conditions, the wick of the soul is exceedingly difficult to excavate and spark. But when a philosopher teacher displays sufficient “steadfastness, trustiness, and sincerity” to the right student, once the wick of that student’s soul is finally lit, it is, Plato says, forever inextinguishable.¹⁴

These alit souls are also the potential citizens of authentic, relationally erotic democracies: Socrates’s second, political field of expertise. Here we enter a controversial area of Platonic studies. Karl Popper once dubbed Plato an out-and-out totalitarian for his seeming denunciation of democracy in the *Republic*.¹⁵ Yet, starting, perhaps, with Martha Nussbaum’s reading of the *Phaedrus* as signaling Plato’s endorsement of an always-embodied, universally embraceable *eros*,¹⁶ a significant body of thought has emerged arguing that both Socrates and Plato ardently hoped for a *philosophical* democracy of enfranchised and alit souls. In particular, Cornell’s Jill Frank (an important participant in Hansen’s, Sullivan’s, and my AERA symposium), in her *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato’s Republic*,¹⁷ argues—quite pertinently to the present historic global crisis of “democracy”—that empowerment of an egalitarian populace (or, in our case, a tyrannical voting majority of such a populace) to acquire a non-egalitarian empire through tactics of enslavement and oppression was bound to be self-defeating: as Athens, indeed, in the Peloponnesian Wars, met a humiliating historic defeat from which it would never fully recover. Like Danielle Allen,¹⁸ Frank thinks that Plato cast his philosophy in dialogic form in order to eventually bring about “a democracy of readers”: a democracy in which the conjoint, potentially universal search for meaning erotically encompasses and psychically subdues selfish personal and/or national quests for wealth and power. In this, Allen and Frank echo the Walt Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*: “Democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil until it finds and grows its own forms of art, its own religious and moral character...common to all, typical of all.”¹⁹

What we will explore in our next section is the seeds of these things to be found in our own time, that we can bring to soulfully blossom once the energetic yet cold-blooded dinosaur of unthinking democratic populism collapses through its self-contradictions, as did the Athens of old: opening space for the broad

¹⁴ Seventh Letter 524ab.

¹⁵ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Routledge, 1945), 93-130.

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, “This Story Is Not True: Madness, Reason, and Recantation in the *Phaedrus*,” in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), 200-234.

¹⁷ University of Chicago, 2018.

¹⁸ Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

¹⁹ Cited in Christopher Lasch, “Does Democracy Deserve to Survive?” in *The Revolt of the Elites* (Norton, 1996), 86.

spread of the moral culture of erotic philosophic friendship—the democracy of souls—long ago exemplified by Socrates, Plato, and some of their interlocutors, like Phaedrus, whose souls are enlightened and alit, rather than antagonized and stung, by the authenticity of philosophical dialogue. First, though, we need to at least briefly explore Socrates’s last area of erotic expertise: the affirmative relational encounter with one’s own death which, he says, philosophy uniquely equips us for.

If, as we have seen in this section, 1) relationally erotic art—and artful encounters like that of Gene and Xavier—provide a safe, womblike environment in which to experience relational authenticity, and to gradually have the wick of one’s self-wombing soul alit, and 2) the relationally democratic, dialogic politics of meaning-making is the space in which such souls can encounter one another and act together in the present, there is also 3) a diachronic and triachronic dimension to relational authenticity: a transcendental and religious dimension, referred to in the last section as *metempsychosis*, the poetic, educative migration of soul showing us the intrinsically “religious character” of authentic democratic life that Whitman hinted at.

One way that we can understand authentic teaching of all kinds—including the Wordsworthian “being with” of everyday life, in those “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love”—is as an audition process for becoming the “better angels” of our students’ natures. This is how teachers “touch eternity,” as Henry Adams famously remarked. If the nature of the soul is in large part the accumulated inheritance of others’ beneficence toward us, there is a *natural* immortality that we can readily perceive in such beneficence. We are, in Rebecca Sullivan’s words, “given to ourselves” precisely because so much has been given to us by so many others. That giving stretches infinitely backward and infinitely forward. Just as there is what Freud called “deferred action” in the afflictions of trauma—a lodging of stuckness in the soul that can symptomatically appear long after its initial affliction—the greatest gift of the experience of relational authenticity is how it can *flower* years later in new acts of free, soulful beneficence we suddenly find ourselves capable of, often without knowing their source or sources.

Socrates was, of course, condemned to death for impiety—for inculcating disbelief in the Greek gods and myths. In response he demurred that, as opposed to many others of his fellow philosophers—or those who called themselves such (including Democritus, whose Epicurean followers eventually laid the philosophical foundations of modern democracy)—no one could reasonably accuse him of a general disbelief in “divine things.” If what one *is*, primarily, is one’s soul, whose nature is as a cross-temporal gift from and to others, in relational authenticity, our beneficent acts live on, poetically and educatively, after us. That is the ultimate—spiritual and religious—truth of Socratic and Platonic eros: the relational consciousness of the perduring soul in time that has immortalized others’ beneficence in us and will in turn immortalize our own beneficence in others. Socrates died what seemed to others a violent death in

peace precisely because of this erotic knowledge. He was also lucky enough to be later poetically immortalized in writing through his student Plato, whose soul he had diligently helped alight. But he most likely could not have known this at the time of his actual death. It was enough for him to know that he had lived a life of “steadfastness, trustiness, and sincerity” that palpably assisted others, in possible perpetuity, to do the same. And here he is again, at a pivotal moment in world history, perhaps more alive than ever before.

V

Why, in 2024, did the people vote against democracy? Whitman, whom Dewey named “the seer of democracy,”²⁰ gave us an answer to this question that also provides us with a deeply positive political agenda: an agenda of evoking the artful, moral, and religious *soul* that is common to all that is the only thing that will finally ground political democracy in human reality, and thus make it, at long last, “beyond cavil.” His predecessor Ralph Waldo Emerson had a different way of putting this: “a nation of [*human beings*] will for the first time exist, because each believes [themselves] inspired by the [d]ivine [s]oul which also inspires all....”²¹

Perhaps you noticed the philosophical comment by Senator Chris Murphy recently recorded in the *New York Times*, in an article mentioning him as a future presidential candidate: “The challenges America faces aren’t really logistical. They are metaphysical.”²² Is it surprising that the “epidemic of loneliness” Senator Murphy often refers to—and that was prominently echoed by Obama in his recent DNC speech—should arise from a philosophy of atomistic materialism? Nel Noddings believed “there is no more important thought that anyone could have than Martin Buber’s insight ‘in the beginning is relation.’”²³ We are not, basically, islands of matter, but souls who matter *to one another*.

My conversations with Hansen, Sullivan, Frank, and others originated in my understanding that the history of philosophy can be coherently understood as the gradual development of a scientific system of relational idealism, initiated by Socrates and Plato, and culminating in the late, consciously “neo-Platonic” *relationally* transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. (And it was no accident that Husserl is the main philosophical influence in Sullivan’s dissertation.) This philosophy begins with a metaphysical grounding for Buber and Noddings’s insight, Husserl’s 1919 discovery of the “*correlational apriori*,” named by the great Husserl scholar Sebastian Luft as the “One Structure”:

²⁰ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Holt, 1927), 184.

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” <https://archive.org/details/americanscholar00emer>.

²² James Pogue, “The Senator Warning Democrats of a Crisis Beneath Their Noses,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/19/opinion/chris-murphy-democrats.html>.

²³ Personal communication, 2018.

Opposed to any idealisms that place the emphasis on either the ‘subjective’ or the ‘objective’ side of things, Husserl’s entire focus is on the thoroughgoing correlation of subjective and objective...where neither of the two poles may be privileged over the other...: the world and the world-experiencing [soul] are dancing—at all times, on all levels, in all forms and shapes—a tango.²⁴

This is the tango danced by Socrates and Plato, by Gene and Xavier, and by all teachers and students in and out of schools, as they learn, step by step, to “be with” others, themselves, and the world. It is advanced, step by step, by the transcendental logic of empathy, which enables the connection of souls through erotic perceptions of bodies. And it posits a hopeful philosophical telos for our species: “the phoenix of a new humanity”²⁵ centered in loving “responsibility for itself [and the ecological whole of the enviroing lifeworld to which it is lovingly bound in perpetual tango].”²⁶

Says the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion: “We encounter being when we first experience love: I am loved, therefore I am; and this love is the reason I care whether I exist or not.”²⁷ And, indeed, “Lovers of the world, unite!” may well serve as the mantra of the revolutionary educational movement that will encompass fascist appeals to national greatness with a global appeal to relational authenticity.

Who will make that appeal? Perhaps the strongest sign of this potential for radical positive transformation is that Michelle Obama outpolled Donald Trump 50-39. Michelle’s most famous phrase—“When they go low, we go high!”—is beautifully poetically embodied in her autobiography *Becoming*. Therein she details the process in which she escaped the voluntary slavery of being what she calls a “box-checker” obsessed with the outward statistics of her life, into a journaler and story-sharer—a process that crystallized through her experience of deeply loving and being deeply loved by Barack. She clearly represents to the American people a far deeper form of Obamacare than the Affordable Care Act. And I invite you to imagine her, if she does not run for President in 2028, as the next Democratic Secretary of Education: eloquently inviting a plethora of psychagogic “affordance of care” acts by plethoras of Genes and Xaviers for us to bear individual and collective witness to. Broadly experienced and appreciated, a widely befriending and welcoming “going high” of poetic

²⁴ Sebastian Luft, *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology*, (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 15.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences* (Northwestern, 1970), 299.

²⁶ Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*, 400.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

From web press description:

<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/E/bo4134284.html>.

metempsychosis may well have the power to dispel the many nihilistic social and political psychoses of our day.

It is highly possible, in other words, that one day not far off, the Platonic Genes of this world—borne sufficient witness to—shall joyfully, wholeheartedly, and whole-soulfully inherit the earth. That “steadfastness, trustiness, and sincerity” will become the steadily beating, poetically philosophic heart of a cosmopolitanly global, person-oriented, authentic democratic culture of soulful alightment. And that this will definitively, perhaps permanently constitute a kind of heaven on earth that we are now only able to sense—through a glass *lightly*—in the moments we are given, and can bear poetic witness to, of loving *metempsychosis*.

We shall see!

THE SQUARED CIRCLE OF AUTHENTICITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION INTO AN EDUCATIONAL AIM

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In 1987, fans of professional wrestling were scandalized to learn that the Iron Sheik and Hacksaw Jim Duggan, two of the sport's top stars and ostensibly bitter enemies, had been arrested for alcohol consumption and drug possession while driving together on New Jersey's Garden State Highway.¹ For many, this event pulled back the curtain to reveal the inauthenticity of the World Wrestling Federation. However, next to the laws of physics, few things are quite so real as live professional wrestling. Although the outcome of individual matches is typically determined in advance, the action is improvisational. Characters and storylines change from one town to the next. Fully aware that the wrestlers are not actually trying to hurt one another, the audience's enthusiastic participation—roaring cheers and full-throated expletives—is no less constitutive of the spectacle than body slams and clotheslines. Nonetheless, every performance carries a risk of serious injury. The creativity, intersubjectivity, and vulnerability of wrestling are characteristic of authenticity and apply equally to life beyond the squared circle.

Not long after the Duggan and Sheik arrests, authenticity and agency became issues of popular and artistic concern in American culture. For a high schooler in the nineties, authenticity felt relevant yet elusive. As Nirvana and Rage Against the Machine spread anti-establishment messages through their music, mass-produced clothing bearing their names and imagery served as symbols of teenage cool. All released in 1999, popular films such as *Office Space*, *Fight Club*, and *The Matrix* gave expression to teenage anxieties about a lifeworld increasingly dominated by corporatism, consumerism, and simulation. Seeking to assert ourselves against a culture of conformity, the accusation that one was a poser—pretending to be something other than what one truly was—struck a nerve. Today, college students frequently complain that their K-12 education failed to prepare them for “the real world.” Whatever this might mean, it conveys a sentiment that there is an ersatz quality to the contemporary school.

¹ Kevin Manahan, “WWE Legend Iron Sheik Dies: How a N.J. Arrest Almost Derailed His Hall of Fame Career,” *NJ.com* (June 27, 2023), <https://www.nj.com/sports/2023/06/wwe-legend-iron-sheik-dies-how-a-nj-arrest-almost-derailed-his-hall-of-fame-career.html>.

In 2023, against the backdrop of alternative facts, deep fakes, and artificial intelligence, Merriam Webster named ‘authenticity’ as its word of the year.² In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks us to understand that words assume meaning within forms of life and bear family resemblances to kindred words. While resembling words such as ‘reality’, ‘truth’, and ‘integrity’, authenticity also entails agency—the capacity to evaluate, imagine, and create. Conversely, and resembling words such as ‘fake’, ‘phony’, and ‘synthetic’, inauthenticity entails predictability, conformity, and vacuity. As humanity careens further into climate crisis and authoritarianism, our ability to resist inertia, change course, and generate novelty appears both tenuous and indispensable. Searching for wisdom to guide us, this essay investigates currents of thought and culture that have both promoted and discouraged human agency. Connecting historical, philosophical, and anthropological perspectives, we consider possibilities for bringing education into closer alignment with the ethic of authenticity.

Sources of Authenticity

As prevailing conceptions of authenticity derive from eclectic sources in our past, human agency appears to emanate from tensions between personal autonomy, sociability, the limitations of biology and environment, and mysterious forces beyond the ken of the rational mind. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor argues that the modern ethic of authenticity originates in the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century.³ Against the harsh repression of Calvinist societies, Romantic philosophers valorized the individual expression of will and conscience. As David Graeber & David Wengrow illustrate, the Romantic movement appears to have been robustly informed by Indigenous American culture and philosophy.⁴ The ideal of authenticity, of being true to oneself and not merely conforming to social pressures, appears emphatically in the Native American tradition. While maintaining ethics of solidarity and interdependence, Indigenous cultures have traditionally taught children to listen to themselves. Because excessive interference by others threatens to disrupt this process, children are instructed not to intrude in others’ affairs.⁵ Characterizing a Native American conception of philosophy of education, Gregory Cajete writes:

Individuals are enabled to reach completeness by learning how to trust their natural instincts, to listen, to look, to create, to

² Merriam Webster, “Word of the Year” (2023), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year-2023>.

³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 25-30.

⁴ David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

⁵ Michael Garrett, “Reflection by the Riverside: The Traditional Education of Native American Children,” *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development* 35 (1996), 13-14.

reflect and see things deeply, to understand and apply their intuitive intelligence, and to recognize and honor the teacher of spirit within themselves and the natural world. This is the educational legacy of Indigenous people.⁶

Respect for the sanctity of individual will and conscience persists in the contemporary ethic of authenticity. Throughout the modern era, Western philosophers have grappled with the personal, social, and spiritual tensions inherent to the concepts of authenticity and agency. Chief among these philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche accused modern people of unthinkingly surrendering their agency to forces of cultural and ideological conformity. Only the *Übermensch*, or *overman*, Nietzsche claimed, could heroically break from the herd and live according to his own lights. Similarly, Martin Heidegger charged that most people lead inauthentic everyday lives in which “everyone is the other and no one is himself.”⁷ *Eigentlichkeit*, the German word that Heidegger used for authenticity, can be interpreted as “being true to oneself.”⁸ Entangled as we are in being-with-others, however, our true selves become appropriated by the they-self, concealing our *lumen naturale*. The experience of bereavement, or being-with-death, he argued, held the potential to clear us of the they-self and reveal our inner light.⁹

For William James, the nascent life sciences seemed to demonstrate that nature and environment exert near total control over human thought and action, all but extinguishing prospects for free will. Once driven into deep depression by this knowledge, James would ultimately declare that the problem of free will is no problem at all and that people can lead lives of meaning and purpose with or without it.¹⁰ Whereas James suggested that we can live authentically in spite of self-knowledge, Heidegger believed that we can achieve some measure of authenticity by virtue of it. Human beings, Heidegger wrote, can be characterized by their ‘facticity,’ ‘fallenness,’ and ‘existentiality.’ ‘Facticity’ means that we are born into circumstances that we do not choose, but which substantially determine our lives. ‘Fallenness’ refers to the fact that we fall into activities and modes of living that are not of our choosing, but rather the results of social

⁶ Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (Kivaki, 1994), 227.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Harper & Row, 1962), 173.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 165.

⁹ Andrew Royle, “Heidegger’s Ways of Being,” *Philosophy Now* (April/May 2018), 6-10.

¹⁰ William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 145-183.

ressures and conventions. Lastly, ‘existentiality’ refers to the possibilities for authenticity that knowledge of our ‘facticity’ and ‘fallenness’ opens before us.¹¹

With fidelity to Nietzsche, and in reference to Nazi Germany, wherein the commandment “thou shalt not kill” had been perverted into “thou shalt kill,” Hannah Arendt observed that disobedience required uncommon intestinal fortitude.¹² Borrowing from Aquinas, she identified the will as the inner faculty of conscience capable of resisting pressures of social conformity.¹³ Distinct from Heidegger, who viewed authenticity as harmonious alignment with a true self, Arendt characterized the will as disharmonious and at war with itself. This friction, she maintained, is necessary for bringing our conscience to bear upon our actions. Her recipe for authenticity finds lucid expression in Wittgenstein’s experience as a schoolteacher.

During the 1920s, as his colleagues struggled to understand his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein took a job as a schoolteacher. He found the work maddening, and on several occasions became so irate at students’ failures to grasp his lessons that he beat them severely. Once retired from the town and its school, memories of these beatings caused him excruciating shame and literally brought him to his knees to beg his former students’ forgiveness. The source of Wittgenstein’s frustrations as a teacher, argues Calum Jacobs, was his assumption that the burden of understanding lay solely with others.¹⁴ In so assuming, he had denied his inherent mutuality with his students. Ultimately, Wittgenstein’s monstrous behavior and resulting shame led him to a core insight of *Philosophical Investigations*. Whereas *Tractatus* had assumed that truth is reducible to symbolic representations of thought corresponding to a noumenal order of reality, teaching—an endeavor teeming with intersubjectivity and vulnerability—impressed upon him that language is a medium through which human beings struggle not only to achieve common understanding, but also to realize a better version of ourselves.

Among the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Arendt all took interest in authenticity. Collectively, they tell us that conformity and coercion are human default settings. Authenticity is a product of cultures that encourage and safeguard both individual and collective agency. Through courage and hard-won self-knowledge, it may be possible to overcome that which blocks our authenticity—tentatively and incompletely, but meaningfully and worthily.

¹¹ Stephen West, host, *Philosophize This*, podcast, episode 102, “Heidegger Pt. 3—Authenticity,” May 12, 2017, <https://www.philosophizethis.org/podcast/heidegger-authenticity>.

¹² Shai Tubali, “Hannah Arendt and the Human Duty to Think,” *Philosophy Now* 125 (April/May 2018), 14-17.

¹³ Samantha Rose Hill, “Beyond Authenticity,” *Aeon* (July 18, 2024), <https://aeon.co/essays/what-hannah-arendt-proposed-as-an-alternative-to-authenticity>.

¹⁴ Calum Jacobs, “Wittgenstein in the Classroom,” *Aeon* (2024), <https://aeon.co/essays/learning-for-wittgenstein-is-a-whole-life-undertaking>.

Although schools seldom administer corporal punishment today, alternative forms of discipline and punishment—humiliation, exclusion, bodily control, etc.—nonetheless undermine student agency. This leads many young people to resent school and resolve to leave it as soon as possible. And yet, others may find in their school a refuge from the strictures or deprivations of their homes and larger social environments. While authenticity requires freedom from oppressive external constraints, it also requires cultural conditions and social provisions that encourage and nurture agency. The ethic of authenticity challenges us to conceive of an education that honors self-determination without encouraging solipsism and that respects intersubjectivity without crushing individuality. Our cultural and intellectual history offers guides and signposts to aid us in navigating these narrow waters.

Sources of Inauthenticity

Invested with the ethic of authenticity, our schools and society are simultaneously shaped by cultural and intellectual traditions that are deeply suspicious of, or actively hostile toward, human agency. When European colonists arrived on American shores, they carried with them laws and mores antithetical to the lifeways of the natives. Steeped in the doctrine of Original Sin, Calvinists believed that a good life consisted in hard work and obedience to patriarchal authority with the slim prospect of reaching heaven in the afterlife. Against the backdrop of an early American political economy rife with debt bondage, indenture, and chattel slavery, adults sought to break children's wills, commonly with the aid of corporal punishment.¹⁵ "There is in all children a stubbornness and stoutness of mind," stated John Robinson of Plymouth, Massachusetts, "which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down."¹⁶

By the turn of the twentieth century, a new disciplinary regime sought to replace physical force with psychic manipulation.¹⁷ Casting students as manipulable objects of science, educational psychologists sought to re-engineer children to more efficiently serve the industrial capitalist order.¹⁸ This order, observed Jane Addams, encouraged people to treat others as instruments to be manipulated.¹⁹ In his 1910 article, "The Contribution of Psychology to

¹⁵ Jeffrey Williams, "Student Debt and the Spirit of Indenture," *Dissent Magazine* (Fall 1984), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/student-debt-and-the-spirit-of-indenture/>.

¹⁶ James Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill: Education and Society in Colonial New England* (Norton, 1976), 195.

¹⁷ Campbell Scribner and Bryan Warnick, *Spare the Rod: Discipline and the Moral Community of Schools* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁸ Robert Church and Michael Sedlak, *Education in the United States: An Interpretive History* (Free Press, 1976), Chapter 9.

¹⁹ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (MacMillan, 1909), 9.

Education,” Edward Thorndike claimed progress toward the goal of complete knowledge of students in the interest of social efficiency and industrial progress:

A complete science of psychology would tell every fact about every one’s intellect and character and behavior, would tell the cause of every change in human nature, would tell the result which every educational force—every act of every person that changed any other or the agent himself—would have. It would aid us to use human beings for the world’s welfare with the same surety of the result that we now have when we use falling bodies or chemical elements. In proportion as we get such a science, we shall become masters of our own souls as we now are masters of heat and light. Progress toward such a science is being made.²⁰

Throughout the ensuing decades, and with grand promises of guaranteed outcomes, Thorndike and fellow psychologists colonized the field of professional education. Equipped with new psychometric tools, administrators sacrificed broader ontological conceptions of students championed by Dewey and James for one that encouraged passivity.²¹ Borrowing from Frederick Winslow Taylor’s strategies of workplace efficiency,²² scientifically managed schools aimed to fashion Americans into knowable subjects governable via data—what Colin Koopman terms “informational persons.”²³ Over the course of the twentieth century, technologies of behavioral prediction and modification would proliferate throughout social, political, and economic institutions.

Among the most consequential intellectuals of the twentieth century, B.F. Skinner charged that democratic faith in human agency was naïve at best and destructive at worst. If our species is to survive, he believed, it must empower modern philosopher kings to orchestrate human behavior much as a coach manages a champion football team. In *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, Skinner opined:

What is being abolished is autonomous man—the inner man, the homunculus, the possessing demon, the man defended by the literatures of freedom and dignity. His abolition has long been overdue.... He has been constructed from our ignorance,

²⁰ Edward Thorndike, “The Contribution of Psychology to Education,” in *Teacher Education in America*, ed. M. Borrowman (Teachers College Press, 1965), 175.

²¹ Kurt Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 103-105; Austin Pickup, “Problematizing the Digital Subject in the Age of Educational Technology,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024): 123-133.

²² Frederick W. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1915).

²³ Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

and as our understanding increases, the very stuff of which he is composed vanishes...and it must do so if it is to prevent the abolition of the human species. To man *qua* man we readily say good riddance. Only by dispossessing him can we turn...from the inferred to the observed, from the miraculous to the natural, from the inaccessible to the manipulable.²⁴

Scientifically valid and reliable, Skinnerian Behaviorism gained widespread application in schools, workplaces, and governmental agencies. And yet, various techniques of behavioral modification aroused revulsion and resistance from citizens and elected officials. Contemporaneous with Skinner's publication of *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, the US Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights—including Sam Ervin, Edward Kennedy, Robert Byrd, and Strom Thurmond—began investigating “a variety of programs designed to predict, control, and modify human behavior.” This investigation, writes Shoshanna Zuboff:

was triggered by a growing sense of public alarm at the spread of psychological techniques for behavior control.... The notion that ‘human material was changeable’—that one’s personality, identity, awareness, and capacity for self-determining behavior could be crushed, eliminated, and replaced by external control—incited a new sense of panic and vulnerability.²⁵

Authoring the preface to the subcommittee’s 1974 report, Ervin emphasized:

The behavioral technology being developed in the United States today touches upon the most basic sources of individuality and the very core of personal freedom.... Concepts of freedom, privacy and self-determination inherently conflict with programs designed to control not just physical freedom, but the source of free thought as well.²⁶

Half a century hence, behavioral modification is endemic to our digital world. Whereas industrial capitalists extract natural resources from the Earth, surveillance capitalists ubiquitously extract raw behavioral data from our lives in order to predict and then actively intervene in what we will do now, soon, and later. This “panvasive architecture of behavior modification,” warns Zuboff, endangers our “elemental right to the future tense.”²⁷

²⁴ B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom & Dignity* (Hackett, 2002), 200-205.

²⁵ Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Public Affairs, 2019), 321.

²⁶ Quoted in Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 322-323.

²⁷ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 331.

Viewed through the lens of behavioral psychology, vulnerability and unpredictability are bugs to be worked out rather than features of our humanity; wholly determined by biology and environment, human agency dissolves into the epiphenomenal. Although antithetical to behavioral psychology, the ethic of authenticity similarly acknowledges that the past shapes our possibilities for the future. “We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society,” wrote Dewey. “We must base our conception,” he continued,

upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one.... The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement.²⁸

Odd as it may seem, we look to professional wrestling as a metaphor to animate hopes for a more authentic form of education and living.

Authenticity-Friendly Education

In *Playing and Reality*, the British psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, argued that a person’s capacity to live authentically is established in childhood. The unrestricted ability to act selfishly, believed Winnicott, allows young children to wholly and without guilt express their genuine needs and desires. If we enjoy this immense privilege during our earliest years, then, as we mature, we will learn to follow social norms and customs without surrendering our true selves. However, children born into the care of adults who are too preoccupied to offer this privilege learn that they must comply with the demands of others in order to be loved or tolerated, thus arresting their authenticity. Although social structures are essential for nurturing authentic persons, Winnicott advised vigilance against suppressing children’s will and conscience.²⁹

Sadly, the past century of educational policy and rhetoric has cast students predominantly as human resources for the global economic war—knowable and governable subjects of the State rather than agentic participants in a democratic society.³⁰ In 2024, the Brookings Institution reported that American high school graduates have little experience identifying and pursuing their own goals, building strategies to reach those goals, assessing their progress, and course-correcting when they fall short. Only 33 percent of 10th graders say that they get to develop their own ideas in school. School feels like a prison to most teenagers,

²⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Echo Library, 2007), 63.

²⁹ Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge, 1971).

³⁰ Warren Christian, “The Constant Crisis: Education Rhetoric from Reagan to Obama” (YouTube, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sILRSOK0OLQ&t=5s>.

write Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop: “The more time they spend in school, the less they feel like the author of their own lives.”³¹

Notwithstanding the inspired work of conscientious and intelligent educators, many schools resemble managerial bureaucracies more than authentic communities. Districts operate within standards and accountability regimes that demand results. Hanging like the sword of Damocles, threats of budget cuts compel administrators to view students more as numbers and data sets than as young people deserving an open future of opportunity and possibility. Consequently, and in conjunction with disciplinary regimes that humiliate and exclude, multitudes of dropouts and graduates alike describe their experiences of K-12 education as dehumanizing and demoralizing. As no individual can be held responsible for this, few will ever receive the dignity of an apology.³²

Meanwhile, children and adolescents spend vast portions of their out-of-school lives in digital spaces that relentlessly surveil them in order to nudge, tune, and herd their behavior toward the desired outcomes of corporations and political actors. Although people utilize digital media in novel and creative ways, the predominant logic of their design militates against the ethic of authenticity. “The internet and nearly every digital space we willingly give our children to ‘play with,’” writes Jess Heybach, “operates on a digital design model, or architecture, that ‘locks us in’ to a limited set of options determined by the software engineers’ imagination.”³³ While enabling us to explore the world virtually, today’s internet confines us to a prison of the screen.

At its best, progressive education gives students latitude to follow their intuitions and make their own choices. By inquiring about student interests and encouraging kids to study things that they care about, teachers nurture self-knowledge and agency in their classrooms. In the spirit of play, authenticity-friendly schools privilege young people with resources and protections that they need to investigate and critique the world around them, imagine and try new things, evaluate outcomes, and act as their own arbiters. While there are inherent risks that this kind of education will yield unexpected results, such is the precondition of novelty and genuine hope for the future.

Given the horrors of the twentieth century and the precariousness of life in the twenty-first century, we face serious questions about how to responsibly educate children who are likely to face ecological and societal breakdown.³⁴ As

³¹ Jenny Anderson & Rebecca Winthrop, “Giving Kids Some Autonomy Has Surprising Results,” *New York Times* (January 2, 2025), www.nytimes.com/2025/01/02/opinion/children-choices-goal-setting.html.

³² Philip L. Smith, “Accountability at a Cost: The (Mis)shaping of Standards in Current Day American Education,” *American Philosophical Association* (Summer 2010).

³³ Jessica Heybach, “Addams Was Right, but Skinner Is Winning: Considering the Architecture of Contemporary Play,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (2023): 128-132.

³⁴ Bryan Warnick, “Educational Temptations at the End of the World,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (2023): 1-12. DOI: 10.47925/79.2.001.

the Nazi death camps grotesquely demonstrated, we are all capable of becoming monsters. Unspeakable cruelty is a frighteningly and authentically human trait. The pre-eminent responsibility of education after Auschwitz, argued Theodor Adorno, is to somehow reckon with this fact.³⁵ Such reckonings are fraught and tentative at best.

As the world heats, authoritarianism rises, and intelligence flattens into the artificial, it remains to be seen whether Dewey's democratic faith relied upon a naïve and overly generous estimation of human potential. Ultimately, this is something that we cannot know for certain. Regardless, the modern world puts too much potentially destructive power in the hands of individuals—guns, Twitter, and internal combustion engines—to leave people uninformed, uncritical, and irresponsible. We see little choice but to accept the challenges of teaching young people to assume the burdens and responsibilities of agency. Nonetheless, laden with cultural baggage of inauthenticity, educators in American schools face the task of nurturing agency within narrowly circumscribed parameters. Because schools themselves limit our possibilities, we propose looking to professional wrestling as an alternative and accessible form of life that exemplifies the creativity, intersubjectivity, and vulnerability that authenticity demands.

Whether heel or face, great wrestlers are those who know how to feed, and feed off of, the energy of the crowd. Most live wrestling shows take place in venues small enough that no seat is safe from the action once it spills out of the ring. Fans and wrestlers can look directly into one another's eyes as they trade insults or revel in victory. Although beginning as affectation, the drama of the spectacle grows to feel intensely real, as if the battle between good and evil were poised on the top rope, the fate of the world hanging precariously in the balance.

Although people play sports such as baseball, golf, and tennis, it would be an odd and equivocal thing to say that one "plays" combat sports such as wrestling or boxing, for the latter imply eros and death in ways that the former do not. Practitioners of these combat sports articulate a noetic quality about them. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described this quality as "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time."³⁶

Asked by a ringside reporter about a gruesome cut that she suffered during a particularly brutal match, the champion boxer, Amanda Serrano, responded: "Listen, every time you get a cut, it bothers. And you get blood in your eye. It hurts.... Listen, I'm a Boricua (Puerto Rican). I'm gonna die in this ring no

³⁵ Scott Ellison and Shehreen Iqtadar, "Aporia, Interregnum, & Pedagogy: Education in a Time of Crisis," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* (2023), DOI:10.1080/107144'3.2023.2247830.

³⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (The Modern Library, 1929), 371.

matter what. No matter how many cuts I have in my face, I'm gonna fight to the very end."³⁷ Augmenting Heidegger's contention that authenticity reveals itself to those who appreciate the fact that we are beings-toward-death, Serrano avers that it belongs to those who simultaneously embrace the fact that we are beings-toward-life.

Despite our best efforts to clothe it in words, authenticity maintains to a degree, mystery and ineffability. Akin to love, authenticity emanates from sources beyond the self. We love others not because we choose to, but because they give us life and love. For better or worse, the vast majority of wrestlers spend their careers performing before small crowds, for little to no money. Tragically, many who have attained fame and fortune have also suffered broken lives—chronic pain, addiction, and family estrangement.³⁸ Nonetheless, people fall in love with wrestling because it offers them a chance to venture beyond the circumstances into which they were born, to find community and fraternity, and to feel profoundly alive. Nothing guarantees that authenticity will prove a viable adaptation for individuals or humanity as a whole. And yet, here and now, between the wonder and terror of life, the ethic of authenticity stirs visions of an education that is worth the risk.

³⁷ Amanda Serrano, remarks following her second fight against Katie Taylor in "Paul vs. Tyson" (November 15, 2024), <https://www.netflix.com/title/81764952>.

³⁸ *Dark Side of the Ring*, directed by Jason Eisener & Andrew Appelle (2019; Vice TV).

AUTHENTICATING TRUTH IN A POST-TRUTH CLIMATE

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Introduction

In this paper, I will develop a more comprehensive notion of truth, one that goes beyond the epistemological correspondence theory, and I will argue for the importance of authentication as a crucial extension of truth, especially in a post-truth climate.¹ Hannah Arendt observes, “facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs.”² Authentication and truth are centrally related.

There are those who give false testimony. Many public figures now routinely make truth claims that are demonstrably false, and large segments of the population accept them at face value as true. These are repeated via social media and informal conversations and amplified via legislative decisions and policy changes.

This makes education’s—and teachers’—tasks harder. Legislative decisions stop textbooks from naming the reality of climate change³ and include disinformation about climate change in K-12 classrooms.⁴ Numerous states are banning talk about structured racial inequality (and critical race theory) from classrooms.⁵ Discussions about gender and sexuality have been banned in

¹ Jason T. Hilton, “When the Facts No Longer Speak for Themselves: Pedagogy for the Post-Truth Era,” *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal* 12, no. 1 (April 2019): 1–9.

² Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 18, 1971, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/11/18/lying-in-politics-reflections-on-the-pentagon-pape/>.

³ Sommer Brugal, “Climate Change Scrubbed from Florida Textbooks, Authors Say,” *Axios*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/local/miami/2024/07/11/climate-change-florida-textbooks>.

⁴ Scott Waldman, “DeSantis’s Florida Approves Climate-Denial Videos in Schools,” *Scientific American*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/desantiss-florida-approves-climate-denial-videos-in-schools/>.

⁵ Lauren Camera, “Bills Banning Critical Race Theory Advance in States Despite Its Absence in Many Classrooms,” *US News & World Report*, June 23, 2021, [//www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-06-23/bills-banning-critical-race-theory-advance-in-states-despite-its-absence-in-many-classrooms](https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-06-23/bills-banning-critical-race-theory-advance-in-states-despite-its-absence-in-many-classrooms); Caitlin O’Kane, “Nearly a Dozen States Want to Ban Critical Race Theory in Schools,” *CBS News*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/critical-race-theory-state-bans/>.

classrooms.⁶ Earth sciences, history, social studies, and biology have become flashpoints. Bold claims based in disinformation now are legislated to be given not only equal hearing but often center stage in classrooms. Truth in classrooms is now harder than it used to be.

My position is that truth remains crucial in society, now more than ever, particularly in social institutions such as education. In this paper, I will argue that the correspondence theory of truth, though crucial, isn't broad enough to carry the theoretical load—a robust notion of truth needs contextualization and an ethical depth. Building on Arendt's insight, I will draw on philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart to argue that the correspondence of factuality should be situated in a broader context, where truth is understood as a complex ethical relation between person and world; this situates authentication as an extension of truth, characterized as trustworthy ethical witness. I conclude that the crucial dimension of ethical truth-telling is central to truth-centered education, especially in a post-truth climate.

My argument can be sketched as follows. I first introduce a courageous example of truth-telling in education—the Zinn Education Project. I then examine what sort of notion of truth can support this sort of truth-telling. I do so by first sketching a standard view of truth, the epistemologically-centered correspondence theory. I then briefly introduce a criticism to show that there are always contexts that undermine the completeness of this epistemological vision of truth. I then introduce Lambert Zuidervaart's more complex and comprehensive understanding of truth, not to replace the correspondence theory, but to contextualize it and give it an ethical depth. Truth remains a relation between person and world for Zuidervaart, but his approach broadens it and shows the ethical depth of this dynamic relationship. Authentication becomes an important extension of this more comprehensive approach. Authentication designates the broad ways of truth-telling through which humans engage their dynamic relationships with the world.

Courageous Truth-Telling in Education

Many teachers have responded courageously to the challenges of legislative decisions and populist pressure based on misinformation and power. For example, recently the Zinn Education Project reported that 8,700 teachers have pledged to teach history honestly, and to not lie to their students about US history

⁶ Kalyn Belsha, "Schools Grapple with New Restrictions on Teaching about Gender and Sexuality," *Chalkbeat*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/4/12/23022356/teaching-restrictions-gender-identity-sexual-orientation-lgbtq-issues-health-education/>; Jo Yurcaba, "Over 30 New LGBTQ Education Laws Are in Effect as Students Go Back to School," *NBC News*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/30-new-lgbtq-education-laws-are-effect-students-go-back-school-rcna101897>.

or current events.⁷ The Zinn Project has shared numerous examples of eloquently simple yet powerful pledges by everyday teachers—I want to give you a sense of the tone and clarity of their pledges:

“As an educator, I believe I have an obligation to tell the whole truth about our country’s past and our present.” -Collisa Lankford (Athens, GA)

“Children deserve to learn the truth so that they can become the unbiased citizens of tomorrow.” -Ana Bernad (Chapel Hill, NC)

“I will not be remembered as a woman who kept her mouth shut in the face of injustice.” -Rachel Purtell (Morgantown, WV)

“My students deserve the truth about their history.” -Carrie Young (Colorado Springs, CO)

“I owe it to the students I teach to honor them by teaching the truth.” -Nicole Post (St Louis, MS)

“Our students ... deserve to learn the truth—it is in fact their right—and it is our responsibility to teach it to them, regardless of how it makes us feel and our own personal political affiliation.” -Veronica Keefer-Germani (Woodbury, NJ)

“Educators must teach with their heads and their heart. This means we must filter out the fringe, ignorant chatter that is attempting to intimidate us into teaching selective history.” -Douglas Musco (Manchester by the Sea, MA)

“I can’t live my values as a teacher and librarian and lie to children. It’s that simple.” -Elisa Gall (Chicago, IL)

“I believe it is a moral imperative to teach the truth even when the truth may be difficult.” -Adam Machon-Carter (Jamaica Plain, MA)

“It’s the teachers who are the professionals and know their content—not these noisemakers. Let’s keep #TeachingTruth as we always have!” -William Goble (Birmingham, AL)

“As teachers, we are called to teach the truth.” -Megan Graziose (Burien, WA)

⁷ Deborah Menkart, “Teachers Refuse to Lie to Students,” Zinn Education Project, January 15, 2024, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/teachers-defy-gop-bans-on-history-lessons/>.

“I’m willing to die on this hill.” -Jeri Shaffer (Cantonment, FL)

“I was raised to stand up to bullies.” -Kevin Attaway (Madison, WI)

“I refuse to lie to my students.” -Nate Merrill (Dorset, VM)

“There must be truth telling in order for there to be justice, peace, and reconciliation.” Cecilia Campbell (Dania, FL)⁸

These teachers are suggesting that facts are stubborn, that their truth or falsity isn’t merely what we might desire, and that plain evidence justifies a fact’s claim. More importantly, these teachers are forcing their institutions to commit to teaching that is fact-based, arguing that it isn’t merely a choice, but a duty for the schools to tell the truth. These statements show a fascinating mix of epistemological and ethical commitments.

There are several dimensions in these statements—including their very existence—related to truth that I’d like to draw attention to. One concerns the nature and importance of facts; the teachers assume their readers know what facts are, although this is complicated philosophically. A second dimension is that these statements implicitly (if not explicitly) address the importance of schooling’s role for truth-telling in society. And a third is the existence of these statements themselves, as an explicit testimony to these teachers’ commitment to remain true to their duty with respect to telling the truth; although the teachers might not be fully aware of this dimension, the statements themselves tell a story of a broader kind of truth, a more existential, ethical, and comprehensive one.

In this paper I will be exploring the notion of truth along these dimensions, developing a more complicated and comprehensive idea of truth. And I’ll be introducing the idea of authentication to help conceptualize this comprehensive idea of truth later in the paper. I will first situate the idea of truth in some of the philosophy of education literature, and then I will develop a more holistic view of truth, including connecting it to authentication.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth

In the statements on the Zinn Project site, reference to facts stands out in these teachers’ commitment to “telling the truth.” What makes the truth claim valid, they suggest, is basing teaching on clear and compelling evidence to justify truth claims. Clearly this is an important push-back against post-truth notions of truth, as misinformation and disinformation disregard evidence in their truth claims.

Philosophically, we might assume that the idea of facts here roughly aligns with what sometimes is called propositional truth, as part of what constitutes

⁸ Menkart, “Teachers Refuse to Lie.”

knowledge—an epistemological approach. Philosopher of education Harvey Siegel, who has written extensively about this, describes this epistemological account of truth: “knowledge is justified true belief.”⁹ The three features he highlights are argued to be each necessary, and together sufficient, for something to be considered knowledge. First, although he leaves undeveloped the idea of “belief” (a disposition? a psychological state?), he assumes it supplies the sincerity condition required for a belief’s content to be considered knowledge. Second, the “truth” condition for Siegel signals the idea that a belief’s content should correspond to reality; truth is a correspondence relation between propositional content and the (external) world. The third condition, “justification,” refers to the idea that a person’s belief should be justified in holding to a content claim, where such justification is having reasons and/or having good evidence to rationally support the content of a true belief as corresponding to reality.¹⁰

The activities of reasoning and gathering evidence are crucial for Siegel, because they get us “to understanding how things *are* as distinct from how we *are inclined* to take them to be;”¹¹ we can’t just *wish* something to be the case and call it knowledge. Or, we can’t just blindly guess at the correspondence between mental content and the world; the justifications of reasons and evidence are crucial because they involve *reference* to some kind of “mind-independent order of objective reality.”¹² Truth, on his account, is a kind of *correspondence* between what is taken as propositions (i.e. representational mental content) and reality (external to the mind). That is, truth for Siegel isn’t merely a property of the proposition by itself, taken to be internal to the mind of the believer; rather, for Siegel, “this realist view of truth is that truth is independent of the beliefs of the epistemic agent.”¹³ That is, truth isn’t wishful thinking; rather, truth is a relation of correspondence between the mind’s mental representations and reality. Facts are firmly justified by evidence of such correspondence.

The references or allusions to facts in the Zinn Project statements align with Siegel’s ideas. The teachers give a central role to evidence in validating truth claims as facts. It suggests that claims about public events or historical facts are backed by evidence that justifies these claims, and thus, the claims rise to the threshold of established fact. Truth is not subjective, this suggests, not just a matter of subjective beliefs—held sincerely or otherwise—but rather must be justified by a relation between claims and reality. Clearly, this is an important,

⁹ Harvey Siegel, “Knowledge, Truth and Education,” in *Education, Knowledge and Truth: Beyond the Postmodern Impasse*, ed. David Carr (Routledge, 1998), 20–21.

¹⁰ Harvey Siegel, “Truth, Thinking, Testimony and Trust: Alvin Goldman on Epistemology and Education,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71, no. 2 (2005): 351–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2005.tb00452.x>.

¹¹ Siegel, “Knowledge, Truth and Education,” 22, my emphasis.

¹² Siegel, “Knowledge, Truth, and Education,” 22.

¹³ Siegel, “Knowledge, Truth, and Education,” 23.

crucial pushback against the post-truth world of misinformation and disinformation that teachers face.

Contextualizing the Correspondence Theory of Truth

There is much to be said about Siegel’s idea of truth. Intuitively—or perhaps more accurately, in popular parlance—truth as claims of justified correspondence between propositions and the way things actually are, seems commonsense. Society relies on this in many areas: in a court of law, the claims of a witness need to correspond faithfully to the way an event actually happened, to be received as true; in journalism, a claim needs to be an accurate account of events being reported on, to be true; in schools, a curricular claim needs to be true for something valid to be learned. The idea of truth as correspondence between claims (sentences, propositions, mental content) and what is the case (external reality, state of affairs, facts) rings true in our everyday use of the term. I agree that we need to hold onto this idea, in the face of our post-truth climate.

Educational philosopher Barbara Applebaum, however, insightfully complicates this view of truth. She argues that truth claims, especially in the propositional model of knowledge, are always situated in discursive practices, which she describes as “recurring pattern of ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and practices and by the effects of those ways of thinking and practices.”¹⁴ Discursive practices are not themselves sets of beliefs (propositions), but embodied human *practices*, ones that maintain dominant understandings of (social) reality. Applebaum’s critique makes clear, as Nicholas Burbules puts it, “Every truth claim is made by someone, in a position, in an historical context, in a set of discursive relations to other people.”¹⁵ Truth claims are always made by flesh-and-blood persons socially and historically situated, and actively participating, in power-inflected discursive practices. Truth isn’t merely an abstract relationship between mental content and reality, because those claims are themselves situated in embodied, active participation of embodied persons in discursive practices. Truth claims are always contextualized by human practices.

This insightful criticism undermines the interpretation that truth as correspondence is a straightforward agreement between mind and reality, between an isolatable content of belief (i.e., a proposition) and an isolatable something in the world as such. Contexts such as discursive practices, including conceptual schemes, always ground such agreements. One the one side, contexts

¹⁴ Barbara Applebaum, “Truth: The Importance of Understanding Discourse in Social Justice Education, the Truth and Nothing but the Truth?,” in *Keywords in Radical Philosophy and Education*, ed. Derek R. Ford (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 412, <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004400467/BP000037.xml>.

¹⁵ Nicholas Burbules, “The Role of Truth in Social Justice Education ... and Elsewhere,” *Philosophy of Education* 72 (2016): 16, <https://doi.org/10.47925/2016.015>.

frame what is intended in the propositional claim; on the other side, contexts frame what one construes, and interprets, as evidence.

This criticism brings to the foreground that humans are, as Merleau-Ponty has suggested, bodily subjects actively engaging the world. It is because we are always already in the world that we can make assertions that the world shows itself to us in such a way that the assertion is plausible and accurate.

This critique, therefore, does not undermine the continuing importance of a correspondence relationship between a subject's claims and external reality. The critique means instead that we need to modify how we describe the correspondence relationship in propositional truth claims. Moving away from representational (mental content) language and towards human practice language, we can say instead that the content of a proposition reliably discloses to someone (something about) the world, i.e., that its truth is a function of someone reliably describing the way (some aspect of) the world shows itself.¹⁶ A proposition then is construed as a person's claim intending the actual world to be a certain way, where something we call a fact is a situated description of (something in) the world that revealed itself in some manner. Said differently, a state of affairs in the world, upon reflection, is taken by someone to be amenable to certain *practices* of knowing—identifying, distinguishing, and relating—which disclose the world: “the truth of propositions resides in their accurately disclosing logically attained insight into knowable objects as states of affairs.”¹⁷ A bodily subject's *practice of identifying* something, *distinguishing* it from some other possible something, and *relating* it to a set of relevant things, are ways of being in the world that reveal it to be a certain way: certain ways of acting in the world disclose the world in particular ways. Truth, on this account, is taken to be a dynamic relation between human practices and disclosing the world. The correspondence idea of truth is then redescribed as grounded in a bodily and active way of being in the world.

Truth is More Comprehensive than the Correspondence Theory Suggests

Zuidervaart's idea of the truth relation also suggests that truth can be more than just the correspondence between propositional claims and the world. For example, in the social realm we might call someone “a true friend”; in the world of bicycling, we can talk about “truing a wheel”; in the world of construction, when installing a door into an opening, “true” means having the door level and plumb, with squared corners. We might also think of truth talk in areas as diverse as religion, ethics, and narrative; for example, the Christian Bible records Jesus as saying, “I am the Truth”; a story can “ring true.” All of these do mean something but aren't references to propositions. Religious truth, ethical truth, practical truth, and narrative truth are not propositional truths, where there is a

¹⁶ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Social Domains of Truth: Science, Politics, Art, and Religion* (Routledge, 2023), 63.

¹⁷ Zuidervaart, *Social Domains* 64.

correspondence between some mental representational content and an objective reality, justified through evidence or reasons. Yet, they reference something for which the language of truth is appropriate and insightful. Following Zuidervaart, we could say that although not propositional, each of these still involve a dynamic relationship between certain human practices and the disclosure of the world. It is this larger understanding of truth that situates the statements by the teachers on the Zinn Project. I'm suggesting their statements are true in a way that isn't reducible to propositional truth.

Their statements are not merely abstracted beliefs (mental representations, propositions), but are *pledges* situated in a social-political context. The teachers are *testifying* to their readers: their testimony is that *truth matters*, precisely because of the cultural post-truth landscape. Their concern for truth based in evidence (factuality) is contextualized by its importance in this moment of US history. They are speaking out against the current dynamic that suggests historical truth doesn't matter, or, if it does, that there are 'alternative' facts—as if one's wishes could become reality just by wishing it to be so. The teachers' statements themselves exhibit a truth dynamic that isn't reducible to a correspondence between mental content and reality. Yet, I want to maintain, they embody a profound truth, beyond the epistemological, in Zuidervaart's more general sense of a dynamic relation between human practices and disclosure of the world.

This truth is not primarily epistemological; rather, it is getting at something ethical. Zuidervaart's broad notion of truth involves a dynamic relationship between a subject's *normative* social practices and the resultant collective human *flourishing*. Each side of the dynamic is ethically inflected. On the one side, Zuidervaart suggests that a subject's action (social practices) can lead to something he calls "life-giving disclosure."¹⁸ By "life-giving disclosure" Zuidervaart means "a societal process in which human beings and other creatures come to flourish in their interconnections."¹⁹ The phenomenon of flourishing is in the realm of the ethical: it is a good—how life ought to be. On the other side, social practices that disclose the world as a place for flourishing, are "normative": normative social practices are those that can disclose the world as life-giving. We can put these two together: On the one side of the dynamic relationship is loyalty to normative social principles through one's actions; on the other side of the relationship is a (social) world that is disclosed—constituted—in an ethical, "life-giving" way.

Truth, in this comprehensive sense, involves having one's actions (thoughts, values, claims) shaped by normative practices, leading to—disclosing—the world developing in a life-giving ethical direction. A few examples such

¹⁸ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Truth in Husserl, Heidegger, and the Frankfurt School: Critical Retrieval* (MIT Press, 2017), 70.

¹⁹ Lambert Zuidervaart, "Truth and Authentication: Heidegger and Adorno in Reverse," in *Adorno and Heidegger*, ed. Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek (Stanford University Press, 2007), 45, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503626553-006>.

normative practices include: the practice of social justice, or the practice of stewardly use of earth's resources, or the practice of radical inclusion. Having one's actions (or communally, our collective actions) profoundly shaped or guided by these normative practices will disclose—lead to—the (social) world developing in life-giving ways. As ethical, these practices develop a world hospitable to human flourishing. Collectively, such practices disclose the world as life-giving: life-affirming for all human and other flourishing. In other words, constituting the world as a place of flourishing depends on humans being faithful to the promotion of such flourishing through being faithful to normative practices that lead in that direction. The teachers' Zinn Project statements are true not merely as epistemological claims; they more profoundly exhibit this ethical dimension, implicitly revealing an ethical connection between their *normative* social practice of truth-telling and the resultant human *flourishing* of their students, their schools, and society more generally.

There is an overall normative practice—ethic—which grounds normative actions fostering the world as life-giving: the practice of radical love. Feminist bell hooks argues that all humans “have a right to be free, to live fully and well.”²⁰ Loyalty to what hooks calls a “love ethic,” where love is envisioned as a politically transformative practice, leads to human and other creaturely flourishing. The public faces of this love ethic can be seen in concrete practices such as enacting public (social) justice and living simply for planetary health. And fidelity to the love ethic, grounding one's living in it, discloses the world as life giving—a place where all humans (and other non-human creatures) have the possibility of flourishing. The comprehensive idea of truth I am envisioning is the dynamic relation between grounding one's normative social practices in the ethic of radical love *and* disclosing (constituting) the world as a hospitable place where all might flourish as members of an interconnected living community. The teachers of the Zinn Project, I'm suggesting, are showing commitment to the practice of radical love.

The Crucial Role of Authentication in the Normative Practice of Truth-Telling

Up to now, there has been little explicit talk about “authentication.” However, despite its explicit absence, it has been implicitly present all along. As the everyday use of the term itself suggests, authentication is a normative social practice. In the service of truth, Zuidervaart notes, “authentication must be regarded as an extension of the truth.”²¹ For example, an art history expert might authenticate a recently found 17th century painting as a genuine Rembrandt. The style and content of the painting suggest it is a possible Rembrandt painting, but this remains ambiguous: it could be a cleverly produced fake, or it could be painted by one of his more than forty apprentices. The painting itself cannot tell us this but requires a supplement. The testimony of the art historian is needed

²⁰ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow, 2000), 87.

²¹ Zuidervaart, “Truth and Authentication,” 45.

before it can be reliably interpreted as a Rembrandt painting—as an extension of truth of the disclosure by the painting itself. The art historian attests to the truth of the claim that the painting is Rembrandt's. In general usage, authentication generally refers to a process of showing something to be real (as opposed to fake), genuine (as opposed to counterfeit), bona fide (as opposed to bogus). The need for authentication suggests that without it, something in the world remains ambiguous with respect to a possible claim about it. This echoes Arendt's and Burbules's observations about the crucial and inevitable role of human practices for truth to be visible. Truth needs a supplement, an extension that endorses the truth claim. It needs to be authenticated to remove possible ambiguity and bring it to life.

Authentication, as a normative social practice, is what Zuidervaart calls a "comprehensive attestation of truth."²² As a social practice, authentication is a form of attestation: testifying or witnessing. An everyday example of giving testimony—witnessing—might be an eyewitness of a crime, either a bystander or a participant, who gives testimony in a court of law, narrating their account of the event. Or we might think of an expert witness—an art historian perhaps—who is called upon to give testimony as an authority on something, say a Rembrandt painting. Both are in a justified position to give an authoritative accounting of what is true about an event or artifact. Their credentials—as eyewitness, or as a university-degree backed expert—are recognized as competent to attest to the truth of something by telling a story or judging the genuineness of a painting.

But there is also something more going on in authentication, i.e., attestation of truth. For example, a victim of sexist oppression, because of their gender, might testify to their experiences of the injustices they suffered, and as a result, suffer more oppression precisely in giving such testimony. Recent (and not so recent) testimony by women in US Senate hearings to confirm Supreme Court justices come readily to mind. Here the witness's testimony is a crucial extension of its truth. She isn't an impartial bystander giving a neutral report of what occurred to her at the hand of the possible Supreme Court judge; rather, her act of testifying is itself an event of importance as an interpretation and meaning of the events in question. The witnesses may express reluctance to testify but feel a demand to give meaning to the events in question, feeling compelled to confront the public with these inconvenient truths. This suggests that there is something deeper—more compelling—than merely 'accurate' accounts of past events; rather, a person's testimony offers an interpretation of events that discloses the world in a certain way along certain ethical dimensions, e.g., a potential supreme court judge's fitness for office. As a result, the women who testified before the Senate were themselves on trial, approached either with trust or with marked suspicion. This brings to the fore the crucial role played not only by the content of what is said in testimony, but by the one who testifies. The selfhood of the

²² Zuidervaart, "Truth and Authentication," 23.

witness is itself crucial in the truth of the testimony. The certainty of the testimony's content is grounded in the trustworthiness of the witness. Sincerity isn't enough; trustworthiness is crucial.

We can apply this more generally to the social practice of authentication: attestation of truth. Testimony is not so much the transmission of information as such, but rather the establishing of a social bond between the witness and those being addressed,²³ one of *trustworthiness*. Ironically, and perhaps with justified frustration, it is those being addressed who end up establishing the social bond of trustworthiness—or suspicion—between them and the witness. This is even more acute when—or because—their testimony often creates new and uncomfortable ways of understanding the world. The event of testifying often calls up short the current understandings by those being addressed: testimony is often an interruption. This is what makes the testimony itself an important event: attestation to the truth isn't the same as the 'content' of the truth which is being authenticated. The social bond that is part of authentication isn't directly about a 'belief that,' but rather a 'belief in' a person, believing in the person giving the testimony.²⁴ The supplement we're calling authentication has a role of establishing belief in a person giving the testimony as context for believing the content of what that person is claiming. Journalists, scientists, and particularly, teachers, authenticate the truth as they make visible factual claims about the way the world shows itself.

Authenticating Truth in Education

The teachers' commitments on the Zinn Project—in their very writing—are appeals to accepting the importance of factuality in their teaching. As statements, they authenticate: they are attestations of truth. The teachers aren't impartial bystanders giving neutral reports of their teaching; rather, their acts of authentication are themselves events of importance as interpretations of the role of teachers and schooling in truth-telling. The testimonies that constitute the Zinn Project's declarations create new and uncomfortable ways of understanding the social reality to which they draw attention: their authentications call up short the public's current understandings of truth as relative to desire. These authentications are inconvenient interruptions. The teachers are sincere, to be sure, but more than that, they are trying to establish a social bond between themselves and their readers, asking to trust them in their teaching. As noted above, it is the readers being addressed who end up establishing the social bond of trustworthiness—or suspicion—between themselves and the teachers.

²³ Gert-Jan Van Der Heiden, "Testimony and Engagement: On the Four Elements of Witnessing," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 21 (2021): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.5840/studphaen2021212>.

²⁴ Esteban Lythgoe, "Ricoeur's Concept of Testimony," *Analetica Hermeneutica* 3 (2011): 9.

This can help us understand our post-truth climate. The teachers of the Zinn Project didn't merely write factual statements as epistemic subjects dispassionately giving factual accounts of how things really are. Their commitments are ethical calls for loyalty to such factuality, rightly so. But this is embedded in a larger context. Publishing these commitments on the Zinn Educational Project website suggests that the correspondence of true propositions and world isn't self-evident, and thus isn't enough. It needs a supplement, a testimony: an authentication by teachers. Writing and publishing their commitments suggest that the teachers feel the need to authenticate the importance of their normative social practices of teaching factual (propositional) truth. This supplement takes the form of a testimony that commits the teachers to tell the factual truth in formal settings of school. This gets at what is at stake in the teacher statements, namely, addressing those who ignore obvious factual evidence in their propagation of misinformation and blatant untruths. Applebaum's and Burbules's insights into the social-cultural context gives us a start of why this supplement is required; however, there's a further reason, one that deals with the idea of truth itself. Claims of factual truth are (potentially) contextualized in a variety of ways: institutional contexts (e.g., news media, government, churches, higher education, courts), discursive contexts (e.g., liberal, conservative, patriarchal, feminist, radical egalitarian), and tribal/ideological contexts (e.g., MAGA, Christian Nationalism, Progressivism, Apocalypticism), among others. The teachers' testimonies are, at least, calls for commitments for the institution of formal schooling to be independent of other sorts of contexts, creating enough freedom to teach factual truths about society. But their statements also implicitly reveal the sort of society they envision—a society in which all humans might flourish. Their testimonies implicitly indicate a particular understanding of what Zuidervaart has called 'life-giving disclosure'—i.e., what constitutes human flourishing and what we need to do to foster it.

The statements of the Zinn Project are not merely public, but collectively so. They show that their authentication of truth is, at its core, intersubjective. Bearing witness here is a collective public action by these teachers that draws attention to the correlation between teachers' normative social practices about teaching and the resultant disclosure of (collective) human flourishing. Zuidervaart says, "To bear witness to the truth means to do what truth requires in a social context and with respect to others who co-inhabit that context."²⁵ And, although the addressees of the teachers' pledges make judgements about the trustworthiness of those witnesses, the teachers' bearing witness is itself an invitation to the addressees to join with the witnesses in enacting certain normative social practices and constituting the world in particular life-giving ways. The Zinn Project's teachers' statements are not merely a collective witness to their classrooms' (and schools') commitment to tell the truth, but an invitation

²⁵ Zuidervaart, "Truth and Authentication," 47.

to their readers to do the same, with the implication that enacting this normative social practice will disclose better ways of living well together.

The teachers' authenticating truth thus reveals a particular vision of human flourishing—a vision of what constitutes a good society. The teachers of the Zinn Project are appealing to an ethical vision of society where loyalty to factuality is a central value: a good society is one that values truth of factuality. Publishing these statements, then, is a social practice that itself discloses—constitutes—the world in a certain way. Their authentication of truth discloses the life-giving nature of the world in its loyalty to factuality. The teachers' testimony is an appeal to their readers to live with them a certain type of good life, one that they imply will lead to greater human flourishing for more people. This is itself grounded in hook's love ethic, the practice of radical love.

TOURISM, EDUCATION, AND THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY

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Introduction

There seems to be near-universal agreement surrounding the pedagogical value of travel. In the academic year of 2021-2022 alone, approximately 188,753 students from the US participated in a study abroad trip through their university.¹ If the students themselves did not think that their trip would be educational, their institutions did, at the very least. Outside of empirical data, we can observe a similar sentiment underlying the structures of numerous highly acclaimed media of storytelling. Whether it's Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Lucas' *Star Wars*, or Wu Cheng'en's aptly titled *Journey to the West*, travel is situated as the catalyst of growth for the protagonist(s) of many works of fiction. Through travel we experience difference, and through difference we grow.

If we understand growth—what John Dewey defines as the “cumulative action toward a later result” involving readaptation both of and to one's environment—as a central component of education, as Dewey emphasizes in *Democracy and Education*, we might identify the spurring of growth as being a central component to the educational merit of travel.² Travel, specifically to foreign countries, places us in a situation where we are predisposed to continuously acclimating to shifting circumstances in a way we might not when situated in a familiar environment. Through this predisposition towards continual acclimation, travel helps us grow, and through growth we are educationally enriched. An issue arises, however, when this idea of travel having pedagogical value is applied to tourism.

Tourism, distinct from other forms of travel such as immigration, can be characterized as distinctly short-term, involving the desire to impose control on one's experiences while visiting one's destination, and is undertaken in pursuit of difference.³ Related specifically to the second of these points, a tourist travels

¹ “Trends in U.S. Study Abroad,” NAFSA: Association of International Educators, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/trends-us-study-abroad>.

² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1961), 2, 41-42, 49-50. This idea of growth involving readaptation I glean from Tim Ingold's metaphor of going for a walk in relation to education in *Anthropology and/as Education*. Tim Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 41.

³ This sentence is not to claim that other forms of travel may not be, likewise, short-term, but to highlight that tourism *is*. If a tourist were to travel to one of their destinations and remain there for a decade, they may remain a foreigner but would not necessarily remain a tourist.

with a distinct outcome in mind, whether that be fun, relaxation, or educational enrichment. While one might immigrate or go on a business trip with a specific end in mind, what distinguishes touristic travel is the positionality of experience. The tourist travels *to* experience pleasure, *to* experience growth, or *to* relax. This position of experience contrasts the journey of an immigrant who might hope to *find* differing circumstances from their place of origin. The difference lies primarily in how the tourist might attempt to force a specific outcome during their travel.⁴ Tourists visit another geographic location for a short period of time with the intention of returning to their place of origin once the trip is complete and the desired experience fulfilled. Their experience is akin to a box being checked off on a list, rather than something dynamic, shifting, and *undergone*.

Beyond experience, tourism is further distinguished by its focus on difference. Despite the nuance of various tourists' pursuits, what appears to primarily motivate the tourists' travel is a pursuit of difference—specifically a difference from one's place of origin, whether that be geographic, culinary, linguistic, or any plethora of conceivable differences found in travel. One avenue this difference, or otherness, is often perceived and sought to be experienced is culturally. Tourists often travel to a *different* country to experience a *different* culture. In this paper, I focus specifically on tourists who travel for this difference in culture, whether their aim is educational enrichment or simply pleasure.⁵

In this paper I do not challenge the educational merit of travel broadly, but I do question just how educationally enriching tourism can be. I aim to challenge the pedagogical value of the touristic form of travel. I begin with an overview of the history of tourism, discussing grand tourism and the link between education and travel, subsequently developing a parallel between tourism and voyeurism. It is through this connection to voyeurism that I introduce the issue of self-effacement in tourism—the idea that authentic experience cannot be reached through a pursuit as its own end. I then delve into three main supporting arguments relating to self-effacement: i) the imposition of control on experience, ii) aestheticization in tourism, and iii) the imposition of otherness. In exploring the latter, specifically, I distinguish between two types of tourists and discuss how each fall prey to othering the culture of their destination. Lastly, I present an alternative form of short-term travel that may hold more educational merit, or de-centered travel.

Tourism Itself

The History of Tourism

The idea of tourism holding educational merit is not particular to our own day and age. Although the modern notion of tourism is relatively new, “[o]ne of

⁴ This discussion on experience will be expanded upon later in this paper.

⁵ Although immigrants and other forms of traveler do, likewise, appear to pursue difference, the tourists' pursuit of cultural difference alongside their imposition of control on experience position them in a unique place in the context of education, as will be expanded upon as we move through this paper.

the most consistent themes of travel literature in the Age of Discovery is that of the pedagogical value of voyages for those who undertake them.”⁶ The grand tour, what might be thought of as a precursor to modern tourism, was a practice indulged in by European noblemen in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries motivated by the pursuit of education.⁷ In this context, tourism is pursued for the educational enrichment of exposure to different cultures—specifically for the viewing of great human achievements such as art.

Tourism as a source of education during this period was not merely a sentiment held by nobility, but also by those with philosophical acclaim. Although related more broadly to travel itself, Michel de Montaigne argues that “travel shows us the diversity and variety of the world, forcing the soul to continually observe ‘new and unknown thing[s].’ Travel shows us *otherness*.”⁸ In a similar vein, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, critiquing the practice of the laymen’s grand tour, articulates a notion of travel pivotal to Emile’s upbringing in his work *Emile, or On Education*.⁹ Rousseau, unlike Montaigne, does not view travel as something inherently valuable to one’s education, but instead something that *can be*. To Rousseau, travel is “suitable only for men sure enough about themselves to hear the lessons of error without letting themselves be seduced.”¹⁰ It is a practice that needs instruction: one ought to know *how* to travel to reap its benefits.¹¹

Although Emile’s capstone trip and Rousseau’s contemporary grand tourists’ travel may have been situated over the course of months, we can understand these trips to be relatively short-term in comparison to other forms of travel such as immigration. The short-term nature of these instances of travel can be understood as being, at least in part, due to technological constraints. The travelers of the pre-airplane age did not have the luxury of flying to another continent in the span of a few hours. The point here is that the travel of grand tourists was short-term relative to other types of travel present in their respective period. In this way, we can include the travelers engaging in these trips in pursuit of education in the category of tourism insofar as their travel was relatively short-term and pursued for some very specific experience.

⁶ Emily Thomas, *The Meaning of Travel: Philosophers Abroad* (Oxford University Press: 2020), 69; Georges Van Den Abbeele, “Pedestrian Rousseau,” in *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 85.

⁷ Thomas, *The Meaning of Travel*, 72.

⁸ Thomas, *The Meaning of Travel*, 3.

⁹ Van Den Abbeele, “Pedestrian Rousseau,” 86-90.

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 455.

¹¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 452.

The Issue of Self-Effacement

When considering the educational merit of travel as opposed to tourism, the issue arises that tourism is distinct from other forms of travel, as mentioned in the introduction. In immigration, the length of one's time away from their place of origin is often undecided, and although the immigrant might have a desired outcome, their motivation in travel is not in pursuit of a specific experience—what we can refer to as an “authentic experience,” or an encounter in which one surrenders part of their control and finds themselves both contributing to and being changed by one's environment.¹² Likewise, when travelling for work, one might desire the outcome of a successful presentation or a better job, but the experience of differing culture, if desired, is tangential to the goal. Further, at least in the case of the immigrant, there is a reasonable length of time in which the traveler might properly immerse in a culture.¹³ With tourism, on the other hand, we find quite the opposite. Rather, in the tourist pursuing an authentic experience, the said experience becomes distant and more difficult to reach. In other words, the pursuit of an authentic experience can be thought of as a self-effacing end.

Borrowing the term (and definition) from C. Thi Nguyen, we might “call something a *self-effacing end* if it is an end that cannot be achieved through direct pursuit, but only through pursuit of some other end.”¹⁴ For example, happiness is something that cannot be pursued as an end in itself, but rather only reached through the pursuit of some other end. Likewise, falling in love can be thought of in the same light—one cannot force themselves to fall in love through sheer effort of will, but rather finds themselves in love only after the fact. We can view authentic experiences in a similar way. In the case of tourism, the tourist, pursuing an authentic experience, is denied that experience on the merit of authentic experience being pursued as an end. Rather, in traveling with some other goal in mind, one might engage in an authentic experience, but the authentic experience cannot be the goal at hand. We cannot *will* ourselves to engage in an authentic experience anymore than we can *will* ourselves to be happy or to fall in love. Although distinct, this tension between pursuit and grasp is not unlike one experienced in voyeurism.

¹² Tim Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 33, 41, 53.

¹³ In the sense of modern tourism, culture refers, likewise, to artistic achievements of specific peoples, but also to the way in which a people *is*. In engaging in tourism, tourists travel to immerse themselves in a mode of being perceptively different from their own.

¹⁴ C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020): 54.

Tourism and Voyeurism

Voyeurism, at its core, is characterized by an asymmetry between viewer and the viewed.¹⁵ Joel Rudinow describes voyeurism as entailing a knowing act of invasion by the voyeur “to avoid suffering himself.”¹⁶ The voyeur enters the perceptual (or physical) space of their object of viewing for their own pleasure. When describing the relationship of the voyeur to their object of spectacle, he goes on to say, “[the object] cannot be touched, one cannot be touched by it, one cannot reveal oneself to it ... the voyeur attempts not only to consume and destroy the spectacle, but also, and in the same gaze, to preserve it as a continuing object of view.”¹⁷ He describes this as a sort of paradox in which the voyeur “wish[es] to be in two places at once, both in and out of the presence of the object of interest.”¹⁸ To be a voyeur is to want the experience of some semblance of a relationship without necessarily engaging in one symmetrically. One might say that voyeurs want to experience a genuine, or authentic, connection with some object but are unable to by virtue of the act of voyeurism. In that sense, voyeurism is not wholly unlike tourism.

When engaging in tourism, individuals travel to a foreign land, uninvited, and often seeks to discard their appearance as a tourist in pursuit of an authentic experience. To truly experience a culture authentically, one cannot be totally alien to the culture. In attempting to shed one’s appearance as a foreign entity, tourists, in effect, aim to conceal themselves in efforts to experience the foreignness of a new locale without being easily identified as doing such. This attempt to obscure aims to create an asymmetry in the relationship between the tourist and the inhabitants of their destination, where the former is aware of their intrusion while hoping that the latter remains oblivious.¹⁹ Furthermore, in the tourists’ travel in pursuit of authentic experience for the sake of pleasure or education through a perceived otherness of their newfound setting, they commodify the experiences and culture of the people of their destination with the intent of experiencing sensory pleasure or personal enrichment. In other words, tourists *use* the culture of their destination for their own purposes. Much like the voyeur, however, the tourist wants what they cannot have by nature of their endeavor. Beyond this asymmetry that is present in the relationship of the tourist and the people of their destination, why is it that authentic experience eludes them?

¹⁵ Joel Rudinow, “Representation, Voyeurism, and the Vacant Point of View,” *Philosophy and Literature* 3, no. 2 (1979): 176; Elisabeth Schellekens, “Taking a Moral Perspective: On Voyeurism in Art,” in *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2012), 315.

¹⁶ Rudinow, “Representation,” 176.

¹⁷ Rudinow, “Representation,” 176.

¹⁸ Rudinow, “Representation,” 177.

¹⁹ Despite this attempt, tourists may often be unable to conceal their being tourists.

 Undergoing, Aestheticization, and Othering

The self-effacement of authentic experience in tourism can be explained through at least three conceptual lenses: i) the imposition of control, ii) aestheticization, and iii) othering. When considering the first of these approaches, i) the imposition of control, we can turn to Tim Ingold's discussion on the volitional and habitual "I" developed in *Anthropology and/as Education*. To Ingold, the former of these terms refers to an imposition of control on one's experiences. The volitional "I" is what, in engaging in the world, attempts to assert an end to a process before the process begins.²⁰ It is what determines, in the case of the tourist, that a trip is sought for the purpose of coming back having authentically experienced a culture. The habitual "I," on the other hand, Ingold characterizes as the "I" in which one relegates their control to the experience itself.²¹ Through the principle of habit, we engage in activity in simultaneous modes of undergoing and undergone—where we are in both an active and a passive role in experience, moving forward and yet reacting to the changing circumstances around us. To Ingold, it is the habitual "I" that allows for the sort of Deweyan growth desired.²² It is what separates an education from training, in which letting go of the need for total control over an experience allows one to be transformed by the experience, rather than resist and try to transform the experience itself.²³ In other words, it is the tourist attempting to impose control over their experience that prevents them from growing in their travel.²⁴

When it comes to ii) aestheticization, we can observe the self-effacement of tourists' growth through the lens of the "tourist gaze." In their work, "The Aesthetic Paradox of Tourism," Marta Benenti and Lisa Biombini describe what they refer to as the tourist gaze as "a way of perceiving or relating to place which cuts [tourists] off from the 'real world' and emphasizes the exotic aspects of the tourist experience."²⁵ The aesthetic paradox comes into play as the tourist gaze results in a situation in which tourists seek what they cannot have—to indulge in some sort of authentic experience while simultaneously being cut off from said experience. Benenti and Biombini state, "[the tourists] find themselves in the paradoxical situation of wanting by definition what they cannot have, exactly because they are tourists, i.e., grasping the authentic nature of the ordinary while

²⁰ Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education*, 33.

²¹ Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education*, 33.

²² Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education*, 41-43.

²³ Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education*, 53.

²⁴ This relationality between control and growth can likewise be observed in falling in love. Despite all the planning in the world, one cannot fall in love by attempting to control all circumstances within a relationship. Rather, in order to fall in love, one must relinquish an element of agency and allow for the experience of falling in love to change them.

²⁵ Marta Benenti and Lisa Biombini, "The Aesthetic Paradox of Tourism," *European Society for Aesthetics* 12 (2020): 9.

appreciating it aesthetically.”²⁶ Because tourists are tourists, they cannot have the relationship with their destination that they seek, much like the voyeur cannot have their desired relationship with the observed.²⁷ In aestheticizing their destination, tourists place themselves at a distance from what they seek to experience.

When discussing the parallels between tourism and voyeurism, a major connective thread between the two practices appears in the imposition of iii) otherness. Tourists, as we have been discussing in this paper, travel for the sake of authentic experience. The desire for that experience, however, is rooted in an idea of otherness. We can see the roots of this idea in the claim that tourists travel *for* difference. A tourist would not travel to have an authentic experience of sameness. In the case of tourists traveling for pleasure, it does not take a thousand-dollar trip to the Bahamas for one to experience what they pursue; pleasure can be reached anywhere in the world. Likewise, in the case of the tourist traveling for educational enrichment, sameness does not seem to spur growth in the same way that difference might. In that way, we can understand each type of tourist as *expecting* difference. The problem arises, however, that in expecting difference, a level of otherness is imposed on the inhabitants of one’s destination.

We can understand othering as a process in which a particular group imposes an identity on a different group.²⁸ The characteristics of this identity are distinct from the imposing group; i.e., the othered group is viewed as *different*. Further, these distinctions may often be negative. There are numerous dimensions to this process; however, what is relevant to our conversation is that through othering, differences are accentuated, people are reduced to objects, and homogeneity is perceived in the othered group.²⁹ To re-articulate this last point, the othered group is viewed without nuance. We can think of homogeneity in this concept as a form of stereotyping, where one is assumed to possess certain traits on the merit of belonging to the othered group.

In exploring this intensified notion of otherness through tourism, we may identify the traveler as venturing to some *other* land to view the *differences* between the tourist’s land of origin and that of the destination’s inhabitants. In the form of a tourist seeking pleasure, this otherness manifests in a slightly more straightforward manner than that of their education-pursuing counterpart—the person traveling commodifies the experiences and culture of the people of one’s

²⁶ Benenti and Biombini, “The Aesthetic Paradox of Tourism,” 16.

²⁷ The articulation of the parallels between tourism and voyeurism is not, of course, to claim that tourism *is* voyeurism, or to argue for a one-to-one equivalence between the two. Rather, the point is that much like the voyeur, the tourist is denied their goal of a particular experience through their method.

²⁸ Tariq Modood and Simon Thompson, “Othering, Alienation and Establishment,” *Political Studies* 70, no. 3 (2022): 782.

²⁹ Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi, “Writing Against Othering,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (2012): 299-300; Modood & Thompson, 786.

destination with intent of authentic experience for the sake of sensory pleasure. This commodification manifests through the accentuated differences between cultures for the purposes of entertainment in relation to the viewer. In other words, it is the *use* of the culture of one's destination for the purpose of entertainment.

In the case of the education-pursuing tourist, this otherness manifests through the relegation of occupants of the destination of travel to that of tools used in one's education or learning. This tourist travels *to learn*, emphasizing possible existing differences between one's own culture and another's, and using them for one's own gain. There would be no use to learning in travel if not for this initial presupposition of difference between oneself, or one's culture, and another('s). This is not to deny differences existing amongst cultures, but rather to point out there is a level of over-emphasizing the otherness present in the use of travel in relation to these cultural differences.

Additionally, as a group is homogenized through othering, it is necessary to ask what authentic experience is being pursued via tourism. Engaging in a genuine cultural experience might differ based on numerous factors present in one's community, whether those be demographic (gender, age, color, etc.) or dependent on one's relationship to one's culture. Stated differently, if I were to be a fly on the wall of two family's homes during the celebration of some holiday, those experiences might be totally different while both being wholly authentic. Although tourists pursue *the* authentic experience, what is pursued is an idea of a homogenized, cookie-cutter "authentic experience" like what one might see sold in advertising.³⁰

Through this lens, we can see that there is much more than meets the proverbial eye concerning the pedagogical value of tourism than one would otherwise think. While tourism may have some educational merit, it does not appear that its value lies in tourism's promise of growth.³¹ An alternative I propose to facilitate growth in short-term travel is what I refer to as "de-centered travel."³²

De-centered Travel

In contrast to tourism, de-centered travel does not entail the pursuit of an authentic experience qua authentic experience, but is rather indulged in through the lens that authenticity is found in how we relate to the journey itself. Much like the tourist, this form of travel may span a relatively short duration—it is not

³⁰ Another point in relation to this argument is that tourists often pay to participate in authentic experiences, purchasing them as though in a shop purchasing a souvenir.

³¹ Despite the difficulty developed in terms of growth, tourists could, for example, develop linguistic training through exposure to a community speaking exclusively in the language desired to be studied. This training, however, is distinct from growth (and education) as Ingold discusses. See Ingold, *Anthropology and/as Education*, 53, 64.

³² I would like to acknowledge and thank my anonymous viewers in suggesting "de-centered travel" as the form of travel mitigating the self-effacement of growth in tourism.

as though one must move to another country permanently to reap some educational benefit—as well as include some experience of pleasure (I am not posing radical asceticism). The key difference, however, as it pertains to growth, is that the de-centered traveler does not seek to impose control over their experience. Rather, in the vein of Ingold's habitual "I," the de-centered traveler surrenders part of their agency to undergo change in correspondence with their environment. For example, the de-centered traveler might visit a friend or family member living abroad, and so in their travel, does not pursue an authentic experience or difference, *per se*, but rather seeks to encounter their travel as it is and adjusts as needed. The end of this type of travel may be intended or desired, but it goes beyond simply a particular experience. It is not travel for some "authentic experience" of culture, but one in which the traveler *authentically experiences* their journey. The de-centered traveler is not merely ticking a box off a list, but is undergoing a transformation through their travel. Although this solution appears somewhat obvious, its value cannot be understated.

While the tourist may fall prey to the aesthetic paradox resulting from the tourist gaze, the de-centered traveler may avoid this hurdle by not pursuing the appreciation of some aesthetic pleasure. Although the de-centered traveler may impose otherness, via biases developed prior to one's trip, the way they relate to their trip, through de-centering oneself from the experience desired, might allow them to circumvent biases by reacclimating depending on the events of their journey. The de-centered traveler does not seek to conceal themselves in pursuit of authentic experience, but rather is earnest in their travel (and thus avoids the parallel to voyeurism). Further, the de-centered traveler may overcome, or emphasize to a lesser degree, the otherness of another culture, and so would not be prevented from having an authentic experience in traveling.

Conclusion

The idea of travel advancing one's education is not without its merit. Travel exposes us to difference, and difference helps us grow. Where travel for educational enrichment hits a hurdle, however, is in applying the same sentiment to tourism. As we have seen, the pedagogical value of travel is in its ability to help us grow through exposure to difference. Growth, in turn, is a self-effacing end that cannot be reached in its own pursuit as an end. Tourists, in pursuing authentic experience, are denied this growth by nature of their endeavor. We can understand the reasoning for this self-effacement through the lens of the tourist gaze and the imposition of otherness. Although tourism might not have as much educational merit as one would expect, the concept of de-centered travel may avoid some of the traps tourism has fallen into. In letting go of the desire for control, de-centered travel allows for short-term trips while mitigating the issue of the self-effacement of growth. And through de-centered travel, as well as the knowledge of *how* to travel, one may end up reaping educational benefits in one's journey.

“GET THEM TO DO THE RIGHT THING FOR THE WRONG REASONS”:
EXPLORING THE PARADOX OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND
CHOICE IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND SCHOOLING

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With very rare exceptions, the right things are done for the wrong reasons.
-Saul Alinsky, 1971¹

Dewey argued long ago that to learn something one has to undergo some experience.² In a classroom, teachers have a range of tools to engage, entice, or threaten students to engage in activities that are designed, in one way or another, as experiences that will lead them to learn something. In schools, teachers have institutional power and grades to (at least try to) compel students to participate in these experiences, however fully, whether they want to or not, or whether they really understand why they are engaging in them. Of course, this is not what Dewey championed—he wanted students to engage with activities that they were motivated to do themselves, intrinsically. This essay uses the case of community-based education, like community organizing, to explore the tensions and contradictions one can encounter when one cannot mandate that people engage in a learning experience. The point is not necessarily that Dewey directly informed organizing, but that a juxtaposition of these two related stances is illuminating for educators. I expand the discussion beyond experiences in general to talk about what L.A. Paul has called “transformative experiences,”³ complicating the challenges involved in the relationship between motivation and experience even more. Ultimately, this paper argues that there is a long history of educational approaches (including Dewey’s) that leverage student motivations for engaging in activities to learn things that the students themselves were not necessarily aiming for. In other words, getting students to do the “right things” for the “wrong reasons” is a long-established educational strategy. In fact, this article explores the possibility that, it may not actually be *possible* to engage students in “transformative experiences” in particular, perhaps the most effective “educational” experiences for the “right reasons.”

Implicit in most current institutional educational practice is the idea that education should be coherent, and students generally should understand why they are taking particular actions to learn. The increasing acceptance of rubrics for assignments⁴ is perhaps most indicative of this, but the championing of

¹ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (Vintage, 1971), p. 80.

² John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (MacMillan, 1938).

³ L. A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴ Tamara Fudge, “The Grading Rubric: A Short History,” *International Journal for Educational Media and Technology* 17, no. 2 (2023): 94-114.

explicitness in learning is perhaps more visible in the inclusion of learning goals and related information in syllabi for classes, where instructors explain what students will be learning and why. Exceptions include more open-ended forms of education, like internships, where there is less control over the “curriculum” of a “course.” And, of course, many classroom activities are assumed to be effective for learning without teachers or students thinking explicitly about why a particular task (like writing a paper) will produce a specific kind of learning. Implicitly, at least, we have seen increased efforts to encourage students to engage in classwork for the “right reasons,” to do “their work” because they want to learn what the syllabus says they will.

Students in upper-level grades and in higher education, especially, are assumed to have come to teachers to learn something, and are generally told what they will learn and how they will learn it. The core motivation (to the extent there is one) is supposed to be learning. Nonetheless, in most schools students do not get to decide they don’t want to learn something (or at least participate in the activities of learning) without consequences.

This vision of education as a transparently planned and communicated activity has not always been prominent, however. Of course, there have been plenty of examples of education where students were forced to do things (like the mind-numbing recitation process enforced in early colleges and schools) that did not clearly lead to much substantive learning, although these activities certainly had effects on those who participated. It is also the case, however, that within the most famous example of progressive education, John Dewey’s Laboratory School, the entire process of “education” was largely hidden from the students.⁵ Students often saw the teachers as older playmates, and experienced the work they were engaged in as simply a kind of play. At one point, for example, students decided that they wanted to build a club house.⁶ The act of building provided opportunities for learning a wide range of knowledge, from architecture to carpentry to history. They didn’t build the clubhouse to learn these things, but learned them better because they did. The activities in the Dewey School provided opportunities for students to have experiences and overcome challenges, learning as they went. But there was no syllabus, there were no rubrics, and no grades. In a sense, students often didn’t really notice they were “learning” as a separate activity from play.

Central to Dewey’s vision of education was the question of motivation (although he did not always use that term).⁷ As with the club house in the Dewey School, activities that students wanted to engage in were leveraged for their learning potential. Students wanted to bake, and this was used to help them learn science. But they were not necessarily told “you are learning science.”

⁵ Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (Transaction Publishers, 1936).

⁶ Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*.

⁷ See John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (University of Chicago Press, 1902).

From Dewey’s perspective, then, (and this leaves out quite a bit of his overall argument) for students to learn they need to have an “experience” that they are, at best, engaged in for its own benefit, if they are to learn most effectively and in ways that also prepare them for further learning. It is the job of teachers, within this vision, to help develop opportunities for experiences and to understand what kinds of learning can happen within them (without ever fully controlling what happens within them) and to connect different experiences together to produce a continuity of learning. From Dewey’s perspective, for a range of reasons, students are much less likely to learn (and to be fully engaged in education) if they are doing things they are told to do (that they are told will teach them something) as opposed to something they are engaged in for their own reasons.⁸

The situation encountered by community educators and community organizers necessarily requires close attention to many of Dewey’s commitments. When you approach people in a community, they are not necessarily looking to you to learn something. They are not part of an institution that can punish them if they don’t do what you want. If you mean to teach them something, you have a somewhat Deweyan problem: how do I get them to engage in an experience that they can learn from?

The fundamental goal of an organizer is to alter the social patterns of a particular community. They want a community that currently sees itself as relatively powerless to reorganize itself so it embodies a culture, strategies, and capacities that will allow it to determine more of its own destiny. “All organizing,” Saul Alinsky is reported to have said, “is reorganizing.”

Good organizers know that moving from powerlessness to power requires community members to go through a series of experiences that have the potential to change how they act together and to enable them to see themselves and others in profound ways. You can’t just tell them about these experiences—they have to actually participate in them.

But how can an organizer engage communities in these experiences? People in relatively powerless communities rarely believe that they could be powerful. They know, in a deep, visceral way, that “you can’t fight city hall” or anyone else—most of their life experiences have taught them this. Because they’ve never actually had power, it’s a very abstract idea for them; they’re not even sure what it means or feels like.⁹

So going up to people and telling them that you can help them become powerful and make at least some of their hopes and dreams about the world into a reality is generally a fool’s errand.

Alinsky once described it this way:

Suppose I walked into the office of the average religious leader of any denomination and said, ‘Look, I’m asking you to live

⁸ For the prior two paragraphs, see John Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

⁹ Schutz and Sandy, *Community Organizing*.

up to your Christian principles, to make Jesus' words about brotherhood and social justice realities.' What do you think would happen? He'd shake my hand warmly, say, 'God bless you, my son,' and after I was gone he'd tell his secretary, 'If that crackpot comes around again, tell him I'm out.'¹⁰

Organizers have to appeal to people based on who they are right now, not to the “persons” they might be (or that you want them to be) after they have these experiences.

In general, organizers argue, this involves appealing to people's self-interests (a term that for them is inclusive of a broad range of motivations beyond just selfishness).¹¹ An organizer who wants to get a congregation involved in a community organization, for example, will explain how participation will increase a congregation's income, draw new members, and the like. In other words, engagement makes sense given a congregation's *current* understandings of who they are and what they want. An organizer will also talk about social justice and power, but these, alone, are not usually sufficiently motivating factors.¹²

Let me give you a different example: Some organizers go into communities and just start knocking on doors.¹³ They look for issues that bother people enough that they might be willing to try to act to change them if given a reasonable explanation of how this might work. In a case like this, a block might come together because they want the garbage picked up. Since these people usually also don't really believe this will work, in this approach an organizer has to move fast so residents don't lose interest. And in two weeks or less, a good organizer can run a little campaign where people on the block will actually win something small.

Let me give you a taste of what this experience looks like. The organizer figures out what neighbors are angry about and figures out who might be willing to take a leadership role. With the encouragement of organizers, these leaders call a meeting in a few days with the most interested people. At that meeting members pick a “target”—the person who can give them what they want—and plan a meeting with the target, for the next week. The organizer starts preparing them for what it will be like to confront a powerful person. The organizer is in and out of their houses constantly during these weeks: checking in, answering questions, conducting role plays with residents to help them understand what

¹⁰ Saul Alinsky, "Playboy Interview: Saul Alinsky," *Playboy Magazine*, March 1972, 59-179.

¹¹ Schutz and Sandy, *Community Organizing*.

¹² Mike Miller, *A Brief Introduction to Community Organizing* (Euclid Avenue Press, 2012).

¹³ This example draws from Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller (eds.), *People Power: The Alinsky Organizing Tradition* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), as well as ongoing interviews with organizers.

might happen in this meeting, creating relationships, helping residents create relationships with each other, and initiating leaders, especially, into a particular culture of power. Leaders are encouraged to reach out to fellow residents to make sure they'll be at the meeting. At the meeting with the target, there is usually a confrontation which, because the ask is small, the neighborhood often wins. This results in the residents experiencing something that most of them never have before: engaging as relative equals with someone who has been oppressing them. If the target says no, the neighbors grow angrier and escalate. They set a new meeting in a few days to show up at the target's office or even home to demand changes. If the target doesn't show up, they become even angrier and escalate further. They may actually pile into cars right then and drive to a target's address to confront them. There is one story in Chicago that made it on to the nightly television screens of an organizing group driving around Chicago chasing down a target as he ran from spot to spot and having a great time doing it.¹⁴

Staying with the block example, participants believe that they are coming together to get their garbage picked up (just like the students think they are learning to bake). That's not really why the organizer is organizing them, however; while it's important, it's not an organizer's core motivation. The organizer wants to give people in the community an experience that changes their sense of themselves, of their own power, and of what they can accomplish together. The organizer wants to teach, through the practices of the campaign, a new way of engaging with the powerful and a set of capacities for working together. And the organizer will keep providing further experiences going forward to those who are "hooked," experiences that create the kind of continuity of learning that was so important to Dewey, so that people continue to grow in their understanding of their own power.

Unless people have the right kind of experiences, they will never learn to organize, and they will never transform their sense of themselves and their community (or of what is possible) and an organization will never develop. Since people generally cannot be engaged in these experiences for the "right reasons," Alinsky opined that "it is futile to demand that men [sic] do the right thing for the right reason."¹⁵

One key organizer, Shel Trapp, was a pastor before he became an organizer. He sounded very Deweyan when he talked about the personally transformative power of organizing:

See, I tried changing people for seven years as a minister. Nobody ever fucking changed from one of my sermons, I can guarantee you that. But the number of people I've seen change dramatically [in organizing].... The job of the organizer is to build an arena or create experiences where individuals get a

¹⁴ See Lynn Bachelor, "The Community Organization as a Political Representative" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1976).

¹⁵ Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*.

chance to have that revealed to them for maybe the first time in their lives. You don't change people by telling them.... But you can provide the arena."¹⁶

As Trapp notes, organizing can (and an organizer wants to) transform people into something that they could not imagine being before they engage in an organizing experience. As Paul has argued, what is interesting about transformative experiences like these is that they can change who one *is* and what one's preferences are (something Dewey argues is the hallmark of effective education in general).¹⁷ However, to some extent this transformation is not something that a person can rationally "choose." Because we don't know who we will be or what our preferences will be after having a profound experience, we (and the organizer/teacher) are choosing partly in favor of a person that doesn't actually exist yet. The people on the block come together to get their garbage picked up, not to become someone new.

After participating in organizing experiences, leaders in organizing may increasingly act for reasons that align better with the reasons organizers are actually organizing them. And many participants may see what they are doing as acting out the values they had (the *real* aims of the person they were) before they ever started. Except, of course, those values have been changed by the new person that organizing has created. To one extent or another they are not who they were before. Nor do they live (especially when engaged in organizing) in the same cultural world. Now they are surrounded by others engaged in organizing. In most cases, the person they were before the organizing experience simply would not have done "the right thing for the right reasons."

A few final conclusions of this discussion. First, as Paul noted, it may be that the most transformative forms of education necessarily come with moral quandaries. Even if you tell people who they are likely to become by participating in a transformative experience, this is of limited help since it is difficult to imagine being someone other than who one currently is. Neither Dewey nor organizers acknowledge the deep moral tensions of the decisions they are making about who they want those they are "instructing" to become. There is a kind of arrogance, here, perhaps unavoidable, that should be thought through by a larger community. The more transformative the experience, the more problematic the moral conundrum is.¹⁸ How much does the teacher or organizer really understand the consequences of the change they are initiating?¹⁹ What Dewey and organizers recommend is, in fact, the very kind of educational

¹⁶ Schutz and Miller, *People Power*, 155.

¹⁷ Paul, *Transformative Experience*.

¹⁸ Others writing about transformative experiences and education, including Paul, *Transformative Experience*, and Daniel Villiger, "Transformative Experience," *Philosophy Compass* 19, no. 6 (2024), have also noted the moral challenges this vision of education creates.

¹⁹ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for framing the question this way.

technology that Foucault was most worried about, involving strategies for transforming people without telling them what is happening or giving them the opportunity to choose.²⁰

Second, in part for the reason just discussed, it may be that people *mostly* engage in the most substantive educational experiences for the “wrong reasons.” What motivates learners to engage in an experience at the start may not be what motivates them after the experience (or this segment of a set of experiences) is concluded; and the more transformative the experience, the less students can predict their future motivations. In fact, in schools it has long been understood that schooling’s most profound effect is not what one learns in a classroom, but “who” one is formed into by the well-named “hidden curriculum.” In some cases, such as when working-class students in a simulacrum of a middle-class education are actually being taught to fit into working-class jobs, students are doing the *wrong* thing for the wrong reasons—learning the opposite of what they seek and that they are told they are learning.²¹

Ultimately, however, both in and beyond institutions like schools, Alinsky seems right that in many cases, especially when you are seeking more significant individual and collective transformation, you have no choice but to engage people in the “right things” for the “wrong reasons.”

²⁰ See, e.g. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Vintage, 1979). This is, in fact, why I teach Foucault right after teaching Dewey in my philosophy of education class. It leads to a useful “whiplash” on the part of the students. What is obviously the best way to teach in Dewey seems quite dangerous from a Foucauldian perspective.

²¹ One of the best discussions is in Jean Anyon’s famous “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” in *Childhood Socialization*, ed. Gerald Handel (Routledge, 2005), 369-439.

WHOSE PLACE? USING BIALYSTOK'S AUTHENTICITY TO COMPLICATE "PLACE" IN PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

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When I was in grade school, my school district was embroiled in a controversy. A new high school had been built, and a statue of the Ten Commandments was placed at the entrance of the building. A lawsuit was brought with the help of the ACLU, and the statue was ordered to be removed for a violation of the Constitution.¹ A church adjacent to the school ended up with the statue and placed it on a plot facing the school's entrance.

Regardless of the legal merits of this situation, the result felt *off*. My hometown is overwhelmingly Protestant Christian. Even though I was raised non-religiously, I was still steeped in Christian language and symbolism through my extended family and local community. In this sense, having this statue in front of the high school felt authentic to my hometown even if it was legally wrong. It didn't feel *out of place*.

Authenticity is a ubiquitous but difficult-to-define term.² Despite this, place-based education is an approach that seeks to have students engage *authentically* with the real, local contexts of their lives.³ In this paper, I will apply Lauren

¹ Ledger Independent, "Commandments Monuments Removed from Adams Schools—21 Arrested for Interfering with Workmen," *Ledger Independent* (Maysville, KY), Jun. 9, 2003.

² Lauren Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," *Dialogue - Canadian Philosophical Association* 53, no. 2 (2014).

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S001221731300111X>. In this piece, I engage with Bialystok's specific analysis of authenticity because the specific implications of her analysis serve as the basis for the argument in this paper. However, her analysis does connect with the broader scholarship on authenticity. For a more thorough understanding of authenticity, see Charles Guignon, "Authenticity," *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 2 (2008): 277-290, <https://doi-org.uc.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00131.x>; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1992); Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972).

³ Gregory Smith, "Place-Based Education: Learning to be Where We Are," *Phi Delta Kappan* 83, no. 8 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170208300806>; David Gruenewald, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," *American Education Research Journal* 40, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312040003619>; Nicole Ardoin, "Exploring the Dimensions of Place: A Confirmatory Factor Analysis Of Data From Three Ecoregional Sites," *Environmental Education Research* 18, no. 5 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2011.640930>

Bialystok's conception of authenticity to place-based education, specifically to analyze the idea of an authentic sense of place.⁴ I begin by summarizing Bialystok's authenticity. Next, I provide an overview of place and authentic sense of place as proposed by Edward Relph. Then, combining these, I examine place-based education through this lens of authenticity with the aim of showing how aspiring for an authentic sense of place falls short of the aims of place-based education and leads to paradoxical results. Finally, I consider concrete examples of place-based education with respect to this analysis and make recommendations for future theorizing.

Bialystok's Authenticity

In an analysis of authenticity, Bialystok identifies authenticity as a "convergence between what something is and what it claims to be."⁵ She goes on to identify multiple "entities" that must be present for authenticity: the true, authentic thing, the instance of a thing which converges with the true, authentic thing, and the thing or things which are inauthentic.⁶ Bialystok notes that for something to be authentic, there must also be ways in which the thing can be inauthentic.⁷ She adds that authenticity is readily conceived for objects but becomes more complex when applied to persons.⁸

Bialystok notes that personal authenticity presupposes the existence of at "least two ways of being a given individual, and that one is truer than the other."⁹ However, she points out that this leads to a paradox: how can one *be* anything but oneself? She states that when it comes to personal identity and authenticity, the above-mentioned entities all refer to the same individual: the authentic self, the present person who converges with the authentic self, and the cases of inauthentic selves.¹⁰ Thus, it is difficult to resolve how these separate entities are connected to the same individual.

Bialystok identifies three philosophical accounts that attempt to resolve the paradoxes of personal authenticity: the essentialist, existentialist, and virtue conception accounts.¹¹ Most prominent is an essentialist view that holds that one has an essential self and one is authentic when their actions converge with this essential self.¹² Existential authenticity champions "a way of life that best reflects

⁴ Edward Relph, "The Phenomenon of Place: An Investigation of the Experience and Identity of Places" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1973), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

⁵ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 278.

⁶ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 279.

⁷ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 279.

⁸ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 284.

⁹ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 280.

¹⁰ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 280.

¹¹ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 281-294.

¹² Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 282.

the free and value-neutral basis of human existence.”¹³ Existential authenticity denies the existence of an ideal self and instead posits that one is authentic when one is in a mode of being that is fully aware of and accepts the human condition of existence rather than shirking from this reality.¹⁴ Lastly, the virtue conception of authenticity, for Bialystok, functions primarily by identifying authenticity with “self-transcending” goods such that to be authentic is to live in alignment with these goods.¹⁵

Bialystok concludes that these philosophical accounts of authenticity fall short because of the lack of a full account of the self, and she notes that she is skeptical that such an account could be arrived at.¹⁶ However, she states that this is not a death knell for the concept of authenticity. Rather, she concludes that authenticity refers to something “more psychological (or phenomenological) rather than metaphysical.”¹⁷ Authenticity is a frame for organizing experiences and “reporting what is important to us.”¹⁸ Thus, “things we perceive to be authentic are more important or valuable to us in a way that inauthentic things are not.”¹⁹

This analysis of authenticity by Bialystok provides a framework for understanding the concept. However, while Bialystok distinguishes between applying authenticity to objects and to persons, what about places? In the following section I will detail the concept of place with the aim of showing how it is like the concept of self in Bialystok’s personal authenticity.

Place

Relph identifies place as a phenomenological concept that serves as “centres of existence and orientation in the world”²⁰ and is “the very foundation of [a person’s] existence.”²¹ Relph notes that place is “profoundly human”²² and distinct from mere geographic location or position. Here, place serves as the backdrop to, or object of, human thinking such that it is incorporated into the “intentional structures of all human consciousness and experience.”²³ When place is the backdrop of intentionality, Relph notes that we are not only “conscious of something, but of something in its place.”²⁴ As objects, places

¹³ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 286.

¹⁴ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 286-290.

¹⁵ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 293.

¹⁶ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 295.

¹⁷ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 296.

¹⁸ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 296.

¹⁹ Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 296.

²⁰ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 56.

²¹ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 57.

²² Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 49.

²³ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 50-51.

²⁴ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 51.

focus our intentionality in a way that sets them “apart from surrounding space while remaining a part of it.”²⁵ For example, Relph notes how the same geographic space of Boston is divided into different meaningful places by a tourist to Boston (historical landmarks) and a resident of Boston (home, work).²⁶ Beyond this, place is inextricably tied to identity such that certain places, such as our birthplace or holy sites, serve as ways of orienting ourselves to the world.²⁷ This provides us a “deep psychological or existential link to place”²⁸ whether we are aware of it or not.

Place and Placeless

This deep connection to place can be authentic or inauthentic. When authentic, individuals are said to have a “sense of place,” or “full awareness of places for what they are as products of man’s intentions and the meaningful settings of human activities... [and] a profound and unselfconscious identity with place.”²⁹ Here, Relph’s authentic sense of place is built upon Heidegger’s existentialist notion of authenticity. Relph suggests that a person is in an “inescapable relationship”³⁰ with place. One can be aware of and present with this relationship, having a “direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of place identities,”³¹ or one can mediate or distort their experience of place through “arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be.”³² Thus, an authentic sense of place is a mode of being where one has a direct experience with a place.

However, when a connection to place is inauthentic, there is “no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities.”³³ Relph identifies two ways in which an inauthentic attitude to place may occur. First, there is a focus on superficial and mass-produced culture that homogenizes the diversity of places.³⁴ Second, through an emphasis on efficiency, attention is directed toward “narrowly defined ends”³⁵ rather than personal meanings. These forces erode places such that they become “placeless,” homogenized, identical locales that lose individual characteristics and meanings. Therefore, an inauthentic relationship to place is a mode of being where one is engaged with others’ ideas of how a place should be, rather than a direct experience with how places are.

²⁵ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 52.

²⁶ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 59.

²⁷ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 60.

²⁸ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 61.

²⁹ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 147.

³⁰ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 146.

³¹ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 147.

³² Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 147.

³³ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 173.

³⁴ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 210.

³⁵ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 172.

 Authenticity and Place

Bialystok writes that authenticity within the existentialist account means to “be unflinchingly human.”³⁶ Bialystok notes that this attempt to define authenticity as solely a way of being and divorce it from the idea of a true self falls short.³⁷ She writes, “regardless of how it is described, the authentic self must be differentiable from some inauthentic counterpart, and in order to do so it must make some claim about who a particular person ‘really’ is.”³⁸ Similarly, while Relph’s concept of an authentic sense of place emphasizes a mode of being where one is in direct experience with a place, floating in the background is an ideal of what a place *is*—and the place/placeless dichotomy sets up a way to assess how far removed a place is from this ideal. In the next section, I will examine conceptualizations of place-based education, relying heavily on David Gruenewald’s writings, with respect to the idea of authentic sense of place.

Place-Based Education

Gruenewald identifies the aim of place-based education as “reengagement with the cultural and ecological contexts of human and nonhuman existence.”³⁹ For Gruenewald, these “cultural and ecological contexts” are “place,” and “reengagement” is developing a sense of place. Like Relph, Gruenewald notes that place is deeply tied to human subjectivity. Further, he adds that place is both formative of and formed by human consciousness and, thus, place is “profoundly pedagogical.”⁴⁰ Gruenewald posits that place is multidimensional and can be thought of as existing along perceptual, sociological, ideological, political, and ecological dimensions, among others. While these dimensions can be detailed in insolation, Gruenewald notes that they are interrelated, forming a “culturally and ecologically complex construct.”⁴¹ Through the exploration of these dimensions of place, students not only create and gain knowledge, but also develop a deeper connection to their local context or a “sense of place.”⁴²

While Gruenewald articulates place as foundational to human experience, he simultaneously posits that there is an increasing “placeless” quality to modern life and education.⁴³ Gruenewald, along with Gregory Smith, note that the current climate of educational standardization and accountability disconnects

³⁶ Bialystok, “The Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 288.

³⁷ Bialystok, “The Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 295.

³⁸ Bialystok, “The Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” 290.

³⁹ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 645.

⁴⁰ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 621.

⁴¹ David Greenwood, “A Critical Pedagogy of Place: From Gridlock to Parallax,” *Environmental Education Research* 14, no. 3 (2008): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620802190743>.

⁴² Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place.”

⁴³ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 620.

education from lived experiences in community life.⁴⁴ This climate decontextualizes education such that it promotes a “generic kind of education for ‘anywhere’”⁴⁵ and “often distracts our attention from, and distorts our responses to, the actual contexts of our own lives (places).”⁴⁶ Such a decontextualized education is referred to as “placeless,” meaning it is generic and does not reflect or connect to the local context. This argument parallels Wayne Au’s assertion that the “means-ends rationality” of the standardization of education narrows the aims and practices of teaching.⁴⁷ However, while Au argues that this rationality “dehumanized [teachers and students] both by alienating them from their own creativity and intellectual curiosity,”⁴⁸ Gruenewald argues that such rationality alienates students from their *actual* local contexts.⁴⁹

This criticism of modern education’s standardization movement parallels the claim by Relph that an emphasis on efficiency leads to an inauthentic sense of place. As Relph states, an emphasis on efficiency results in focusing narrowly on defined ends, which undercuts a focus on personal meanings.⁵⁰ An instance of this would be when land is considered only for its development and resource potential rather than any aesthetic, spiritual, or psychological meanings. Combined, this claim by Gruenewald that standardization in education diverts attention to narrowly defined ends (e.g., abstract academic standards) means such education leads to an inauthentic sense of place.⁵¹ Rather than being open and fully aware of all the possibilities of place, student attention is either diverted completely away from place or focused solely on narrowed meanings.

However, this line between place and placeless is not so readily apparent. Jan Nespore’s critique of place-based education, “Education and Place: A Review Essay,” begins by detailing how much of his local place is made by interconnected global networks.⁵² Nespore notes that place-based education adopts a simple “idealized image of ‘place’ as a stable, bounded, self-sufficient

⁴⁴ Gruenewald; Smith, “Place-Based Education,” David Gruenewald, “Accountability and Collaboration: Institutional Barriers and Strategic Pathways for Place-based Education,” *Ethics, Place and Environment* 8, no. 3 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668790500348208>.

⁴⁵ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 646.

⁴⁶ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 620.

⁴⁷ Wayne Au, *Unequal by Design: High Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*, Second ed., (Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005179>.

⁴⁸ Au, *Unequal by Design*, 53.

⁴⁹ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 620.

⁵⁰ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 172.

⁵¹ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place”; David Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032004003>; Gruenewald, “Accountability and Collaboration.”

⁵² Nespore, “Education and Place: A Review Essay,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (2008): 475.

communal realm,”⁵³ but he points out that such an idealized, bounded image of place is difficult to pin down and counters instead that place appears continuous and dynamic. Further, Nespor and McInerney, Smyth, and Down state that place-based theorizers treat places as “romanticized relics of the past”⁵⁴ that have been corrupted by modern (placeless) forces. Thus, this place/placeless dichotomy then gives rise to a host of dichotomies: natural/unnatural, industrial/pre-industrial, global/local, native/invasive, and rural/urban. Within these dichotomies, place-based education favors one side as being aligned with an authentic sense of place (e.g., natural, pre-industrial, local, native and rural) while the others divert attention to an inauthentic, placeless orientation. Thus, borne out in Nespor’s criticism is Bialystok’s assertion that, despite denying an ideal, an existential account of authenticity carries with it a claim about what something really *is*.

Beyond the criticism that an idealized image of place ignores the complicated network, both spatially and temporally, in which places are created and evolve, Nespor argues that focusing narrowly on students’ distance from an idealized place diverts attention from differences along racial, gender, and class lines and ignores “their roles in place-making and environmental politics.”⁵⁵ Gruenewald attempts to address this problem with his “critical pedagogy of place,” which ties together foundational ideas of critical pedagogy and place-based education.⁵⁶ Gruenewald summarizes this by stating that place-based pedagogy, with its focus on rural and environmental education, emphasizes what should be conserved, while critical pedagogy, with its focus on urban and sociocultural education, emphasizes what needs to be transformed. Gruenewald notes how marrying these ideas causes us to think critically about what needs to be conserved or transformed.⁵⁷

Gruenewald details that this focus on conservation and transformation is captured in the terms of reinhabitation and decolonization.⁵⁸ “Reinhabitation” is the “learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation.”⁵⁹ “Decolonization” is “learning to recognize disruption and injury and to address their causes.”⁶⁰ Overlaid with the concepts of place and placelessness, we see that these concepts double down on the

⁵³ Nespor, “Education and Place,” 479.

⁵⁴ Peter McInerney, John Smyth, and Barry Down, “‘Coming to a Place Near You?’ The Politics and Possibilities of a Critical Pedagogy of Place-Based Education,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 39, no. 1 (2011), 3-16: 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2010.540894>.

⁵⁵ Nespor, “Education and Place,” 483.

⁵⁶ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds.”

⁵⁷ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds”; Gruenewald, “From Gridlock to Parallax.”

⁵⁸ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds,” 4.

⁵⁹ Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, “Reinhabiting California,” in *Home! A Bioregional Reader*, ed. Van Andrus (New Society Publishers, 1990), 35.

⁶⁰ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Words,” 9.

place/placeless dichotomy such that one should conserve and reinhabit place while transforming and pushing out placelessness, or generic mass culture. In concrete terms, this means planting “native” plants or supporting “traditional” culinary practices while removing “invasive” plants or boycotting McDonald’s. Further, these concepts echo the existentialist authenticity caught in the place/placeless dichotomy such that one must face up to their existential reality (reinhabit) as well as have full awareness of and responsibility for their possibilities (decolonize).

Again, in the background of this existential authenticity appears to be an ideal of how a place *is*: one that is free of disruption and injury. Gruenewald’s ideas for reinhabitation and decolonization have the same issues with an idealized place that “fell from grace” as detailed by Nespor and McInerney, Smyth, and Down.⁶¹ Thus, authentically living with respect to how a place *is* smuggles in how a place *should be* because it entails recognizing how the place has been disrupted or injured from its *true* state. This is particularly problematic because to have an authentic sense of place is to have “full awareness of places for what they are as products of man’s intentions.”⁶² An idealized place potentially diverts attention away from what places are to what they should be and narrowly focuses the meaning of a place to the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal. In other words, the focus on an authentic sense of place within Gruenewald’s conception of place-based education merely sets up the conditions for authenticity laid out by Bialystok: the discrepancy between the “true,” idealized thing and the instance of the thing purported to be authentic to this true thing.

Outcomes of Place-Based Education

Pulling these ideas together, Gruenewald identifies the goal of place-based education as the “reengagement with the cultural and ecological contexts of human and nonhuman existence.”⁶³ Such engagement has been characterized as a “sense of place”⁶⁴ that rests on an existentialist notion of authenticity.⁶⁵ This idea of an authentic sense of place means to be fully aware of the meanings and possibilities of place, to be responsible to these, and to not simply follow superficial meanings laid out by mass culture and efficiency.⁶⁶ However, this authentic sense of place brings with it notions of an idealized place that is unspoiled by placeless forces.⁶⁷ This idealized version of place undercuts the

⁶¹ Gruenewald; Nespor, “Education and Place”; McInerney, Smyth, and Down, “Coming to a Place Near You?”

⁶² Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 147.

⁶³ Gruenewald, “The Foundations of Place,” 645.

⁶⁴ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place”; Ardoin, “Exploring the Dimensions of Place.”

⁶⁵ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 146-153.

⁶⁶ Relph, “The Phenomenon of Place,” 182-184.

⁶⁷ Nespor, “Education and Place”; Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy.”

very idea of an authentic sense of place by diverting attention to what places should be rather than what they are and narrowly focuses the meaning of places. Evidence from place-based education scholarship appears to support this.

A review of literature by Yemini, Engel, and Simon indicates that place-based scholarship is “narrowly concerned with environmental and scientific aspects in schools.”⁶⁸ They state that “a majority of papers focused on biophysical dimensions of US places, aiming to implement a simplified understanding of place.”⁶⁹ Ironically, they also concluded that “most programmes are managed and implemented by external organisations, not by school staff... [and] that many programmes lack a critical dimension, focusing solely on improving educational achievements.”⁷⁰ While Yemini, Engel and Simon indicate that some scholarship includes aspects of social justice or whole-school reform,⁷¹ most of the research appears to fall short of developing this authentic sense of place and, instead, narrows the meaning of places to biophysical and environmental concepts.

Digging deeper, in detailing exemplars of place-based education, Nichols et al. describe a learning project in New Hampshire where kindergarten students used inquiry learning to examine local beaver dams.⁷² The project started with a student bringing in sticks they had found in a nearby creek.⁷³ The students examined the sticks, determined they were used by beavers, and, through both classroom-based and outdoor activities, sought out and learned about beaver dams.⁷⁴ These activities led to further questions and inquiries into other natural phenomena. Nichols et al. report, “When children investigate their local environment, resources, and history appropriately and with intentional instructional focus of the instructors, they begin to develop a “sense of place” and a connection to their environment simply because these encounters are authentic and dynamic.”⁷⁵ While this project was no doubt beneficial for students and utilized both student inquiry and experiential learning, it is unclear how the complex construct of place played a role or how a sense of place was beginning to develop, unless the educators and researchers were narrowly focusing the meaning of place to the ideal, natural, and local setting of the students.

⁶⁸ Miri Yemini, Laura Engel, and Adi Ben Simon, “Place-Based Education—A Systematic Review of the Literature,” *Educational Review* (2021): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2177260>.

⁶⁹ Yemini, Engel, and Simon, “Place-Based Education,” 13.

⁷⁰ Yemini, Engel, and Simon, “Place-Based Education,” 16.

⁷¹ Yemini, Engel, and Simon, “Place-Based Education.”

⁷² Joann Nichols, Patricia Howson, Betty Mulrey, Ann Ackerman, and Susan Gately, “Promise of Place: Using Place-Based Education Principles to Enhance Learning,” *International Journal of Pedagogy and Curriculum* 23, no. 2 (2016): 32-35, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7963/CGP/v23i02/27-41>.

⁷³ Nichols et al., “Promise of Place,” 32-33.

⁷⁴ Nichols et al., “Promise of Place,” 32-33.

⁷⁵ Nichols et al., “Promise of Place,” 33.

 Rethinking Authentic Sense of Place

Place as a concept is deeply intertwined with identity.⁷⁶ Thus, the complexities of personal authenticity, and the paradoxes it gives rise to that Bialystok details,⁷⁷ also apply to place. This seems to be borne out in how the existentialist account of an authentic sense of place gives rise to an idealized notion of place. But is this truly problematic?

Bialystok notes that while a philosophical account of personal authenticity is difficult to create, there is still a concept of authenticity.⁷⁸ Rather than it being a metaphysical reality, Bialystok notes that it is perhaps more phenomenological or psychological.⁷⁹ In this conception, authenticity is a way of organizing what is perceived to be important or essential.⁸⁰ Applying such a conception of authenticity to sense of place may give rise to new pedagogical questions.

For instance, rather than solely focusing on developing an authentic sense of place, where one has a direct, genuine experience with place, place-based education may consider focusing on what *feels* like place. In my example of the Ten Commandments statue, it *felt* authentic for my school to have that statue. The accounts of place/placelessness put forth by Relph and Gruenewald may have me examining if I'm being open and aware of all the complexities of my hometown or if the placeless forces of the ACLU were eroding local culture. Or, place-based education may have me ask a more fundamental question: Why does having this statue in front of my school *feel* authentic? What does this feeling communicate about what I perceive to be important or essential to my place and community? What other essential traits about my place does this feeling inquire?

Conclusion

When the Ten Commandments statue was removed from my school, it felt both right and wrong. Legally, it was the sound decision. However, having that statue in front of the school felt authentic to my hometown and its culture. It connected to something I felt essential about my place. Place-based education argues that I should have a direct and authentic experience with my place to learn about it and develop a more authentic sense of place. But, as I've argued, this rests on an idealized version of place and appears to skirt questions of who decides what the idealized place really *is*. However, Bialystok's concept of authenticity gives me new pedagogical questions to engage with. By examining how authenticity communicates what feels essential or important, I can ask "*why* is this place?" Why does the Christian milieu of my hometown feel more essential than the quintessential American value of separation of church and

⁷⁶ Relph, "The Phenomenon of Place"; Nespor, "Education and Place"; McInerney, Smyth, and Down, "Coming to a Place Near You?"

⁷⁷ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy."

⁷⁸ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 296.

⁷⁹ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 296.

⁸⁰ Bialystok, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy," 296.

state? Why does Protestant Christianity feel “in place” there? What underlying values do these feelings of authenticity communicate? Examining these questions may lead to further questions about how we conceptualize, prioritize, and essentialize places and the people within them. It may lead us to ask what forces, placeless or otherwise, get to determine what makes *a* place, a *place*. Such an inquiry is found not in exploring the dimensions of place itself but exploring one’s own thinking on the dimensions of place. Place-based education should seek to incorporate this thinking to ask, fundamentally, “whose place is this and why does it feel like theirs?”

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF EMBODIED TEACHER RESPONSE AUTHENTICITY¹

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At the 2023 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education conference, Kenneth Driggers and Deron Boyles had a conversation about grading student work when students use generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of ChatGPT to complete class assignments. Driggers and Boyles noted that their institution, Georgia State University, did not necessarily classify the use of ChatGPT as plagiarism, leaving open the question of whether student-use of ChatGPT was necessarily something instructors ought to notice and discipline. Driggers and Boyles used Charles Sanders Peirce's fallibility to argue that use of ChatGPT is educationally problematic because its answers do not allow for fallibility upon which reason can be improved and sharpened, leading to real learning.²

In their continued conversation on the podcast *Thinking in the Midst*, Driggers and Boyles, joined by Gabe Keehn, reflected on the issue of grading that this ChatGPT incident revealed. Boyles conceived of grading as authentic response to student work.³ If one accepts this view, student use of ChatGPT interferes with this fundamental responsibility of educators. Because students submit work that is not their own, the educator's impulse to respond authentically to the work is misguided and misused. Responding authentically to work created by ChatGPT wastes pedagogical resources.

This example demonstrates the problem of generative AI when used by learners. Such use steals the opportunity for learning that real engagement with course content from an assignment or prompt would provide for the learner. I generally agree with this analysis. In this paper, I explore educators' use of generative AI for their work. While educators might be more worried about their students farming out some of the tasks they are given to AI, I argue educators ought to also be concerned about the damage done when they offload seemingly administrative or time-consuming tasks to AI. I first investigate several examples of the use of AI by educators. Then I consider the nature of education including the teacher-student relationship to show that AI cannot replicate all the components of education. Finally, I worry that an AI-replicated education leaves the classroom vulnerable to a neoliberal conception of teaching.

¹ Thank you to the reviewer who suggested moving "embodied" to the title. I am lucky to have received embodied help on this paper.

² Cara Furman and Derek Gottlieb, hosts, *Thinking in the Midst*, episode 30, "On Grading," December 1, 2023, podcast, 61 min, 44 sec, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/30-on-grading/id1668433164?i=1000637179643>.

³ Furman and Gottlieb, "On Grading," at 18:31.

In sum, I ask the following questions: How are educators using AI in their work? What are the components of the work of education? Which of these components, if any, are lost when educators use AI for this work? And finally, what do the answers of these questions mean for AI in education?

How Are Educators Using AI in Their Work?

These questions are important to ask because perhaps to get out in front of the implications of AI, powerful organizations have already suggested ways teachers can use AI. The Office of Educational Technology at the US Department of Education released a report, *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations*, in May 2023.⁴ This report identifies three opportunities AI brings to educators: “Handling low-level details to ease teaching burdens and increase focus on students;” “Extending beyond the teacher’s availability with their students but continuing to deliver on the teacher’s intent;” and “Making teacher professional development more productive and fruitful.”⁵ It is worth analyzing these first two. (The third is beyond the scope of this paper, but some of what is argued below could apply to adult education and professional development as well. Although I recognize possible benefits to the use of AI, such as introducing original and unique practice opportunities for teachers, I worry that these opportunities could be divorced from reality in real and harmful ways, but I leave those concerns aside.)

In its explanation of “[h]andling low-level details to ease teaching burdens and increase focus on students” the report describes activities that sound like only higher-teched versions of voice-activated devices—“record-keeping, starting and stopping activities, controlling displays, speakers, and other technologies in the classroom, and providing reminders.”⁶ Generative AI is not needed for these listed delegations, and these do not substitute the AI assistant for the teacher’s pedagogical knowledge. Most of these are jobs a teacher might delegate to her students. However, the first activity listed should be more closely considered.

The records a teacher keeps often point to a particular vision of education. Keeping attendance, for instance, communicates that an important component of education is showing up and doing activities the teacher has determined will be useful for practicing and learning particular knowledge or a particular skill. Attendance being automatically recorded might save a classroom teacher five to ten minutes a day. However, if attendance is automatically recorded, a high school teacher who has multiple classes a day would have less motivation to learn the names of all her students. Although she may know the importance of

⁴ US Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations*, (Washington, D.C., 2023), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/ai-report/ai-report.pdf>.

⁵ US Department of Education, *Artificial Intelligence*, 28.

⁶ US Department of Education, *Artificial Intelligence*, 28.

learning first names, there would be no daily task forcing her to communally practice names at the start of every class. I do not want to belabor this point because as a college instructor teaching five sections of twenty to thirty-five students, I know I often find inventive ways to quickly take attendance especially in the first few weeks of a semester. It may be the case that other teachers already have systems buttressed by artificial intelligence to help them do this task.

Even with record-taking, though, one wonders how generative AI would be better for this practice when compared with other simpler AI. The same could not be said for the Department of Education's second opportunity for AI, however. AI, it is said, might be used for "[e]xtending beyond the teacher's availability with their students but continuing to deliver on the teacher's intent."⁷ In their explanation of this opportunity, the authors of the report give the example of a teacher helping a student to practice given math problems. They write, "A teacher may wish to sit with the student as they practice 10 more math problems, giving them ongoing support and feedback. If the teacher can sit with the student for only three problems, perhaps they could delegate to an AI-enabled learning system to help with the rest."⁸

This solution might succeed in giving the student support in additional practice, but it ignores pedagogical strategy. It assumes that students learn like computers process information—rationally and by trial and error. However, Jane Roland Martin writes that this rational view of teaching and learning is only one view. She describes another view offered by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in his writings about how a villager and mother Gertrude educates her children. Gertrude educates her children into good living with some of the principles of rational teaching but also relies on a more relational authority.⁹

The relational authority view of teaching requires connection between teacher and student. A teacher who spends the extra time with the student who is struggling with math problems uses the connection component of teaching and learning as much as the rational. She provides moral support to the student as he struggles through the learning process. It is an empirical question whether a trained chatbot could provide a similar level of support as a human teacher, but it may lack embodied authentic response. I argue, however, that education without connection is what Winston Thompson calls a "fantasy of education."¹⁰ The fantasy of education AI delivers paints a connection-less picture of teaching and learning, but this fantasy of education is little different than views of the internet that say all the knowledge of humanity is searchable there, so anybody

⁷ US Department of Education, *Artificial Intelligence*, 28.

⁸ US Department of Education, *Artificial Intelligence*, 28.

⁹ Jane Roland Martin, "Excluding Women from the Educational Realm," in *Education Feminism*, ed. B.J. Thayer-Bacon, L. Stone, and K. M. Sprecher (State University of New York Press, 2013), 51.

¹⁰ Derek Gottlieb, Winston Thompson, and Andy Karlson, hosts, *Mission Creep*, episode 44, "Edge of Tomorrow (2014)," June 10, 2024, 100 min, 33 sec, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/44-edge-of-tomorrow-2014-with-winston-thompson/id1633885507?i=1000658480939>.

ought to be able to learn anything they want through surfing the web. However, schools and teachers exist even with the internet. Perhaps a reason why schools still exist in a digitally connected world is because part of teaching and learning is guiding. The internet does not offer plans informed by years of experience to lead students through the content in a way in which ideas build upon one another or conflict with one another in a firework of insight. An embodied teacher can organize content in such a way for her students. Learning, after all, is not the same thing as surfing, where an internet surfer is experiencing the internet only through their state of mind and goals. For similar reasons, generative AI cannot replace every function of a teacher. When students ask their teacher questions, the teacher can use that questioning as a chance for students to make connections to what she knows they already know. Generative AI might answer the questions, yes, but I fear current AI models may be unable to do so with pedagogical knowledge.¹¹

Connection can be further defined if we consider the ways that people establish connections with each other. First, it is worth noting that people move through the world with bodies. An important difference between human intelligence and artificial intelligence is that the former is embodied and the latter is often disembodied. Evidence has found that there are important social components of embodied interactions that interaction with disembodied artificial intelligence does not capture.¹² This social difference is similarly seen in Charles Taylor's distinction between dead and revelatory uses of language. Revelatory uses of language, which he argues were prominent in Romantic poetry, communicate a connection with "the very nature of things."¹³ Dead language, in contrast, is language that has lost "its deeper meaning."¹⁴ Dead language, explains Taylor, can be seen in everyday, perhaps over-used metaphors, like "the politician playing his cards close to his chest."¹⁵ Artificial intelligence is built on large language models that are repetitions and predictions of already used language. Thus, even though these models may be built on revelatory uses of language, it is difficult to imagine how repetition and prediction of past revelatory uses of language can retain their deeper meaning and point to connections in the world. By this definition, humans, because of their embodied

¹¹ I thank a reviewer for asking me to expand the ideas in this paragraph. I agree that "Surfing and learning are distinct;" I hope my comments here are as clear and compelling.

¹² Xu Dong, Jun Xie, & He Gong, "A Meta-Analysis of Artificial Intelligence Technologies Use and Loneliness: Examining the Influence of Physical Embodiment, Age Differences, and Effect Direction," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (2025), 7. I thank a reviewer for asking for peer-reviewed articles about the use of AI in education.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (Harvard University Press, 2024), 41.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 17.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 17.

experience, have access to a revelatory language which communicates their connection to their environment and world, while AI only has access to dead language.

Returning to the math-challenged student after this brief digression will be useful. An important difference between the teacher and her chatbot double is that the teacher is embodied. She has access to the embodied reality of what math means in the shared world. The AI-generated chatbot has access to dead language that it can use to instruct the student; imaginative revelatory connection-forming language may be outside of the chatbot's reach. By contrast, the teacher can give meaningful examples to the baseball-playing student about baseball scores, for instance, or she can even show him how to use his fingers to help him visualize the mathematical principles at play.

This has been a valuable discussion so far of some of the suggestions the Department of Education makes regarding the use of AI in schools. But how are educators actually using these tools in their classrooms? David Cutler, an independent school history teacher, has written about his experience testing out CoGrader to cut down on the time he spent grading and commenting on student essays. Although Cutler returned to grading his students' essays by hand after entering a single student's essay to compare its comments with his own, he wonders whether there wouldn't be some advantages to using the program to cut down on time spent grading. For instance, he notes, "the platform provides a check against the unconscious biases that inadvertently influence grading."¹⁶

Kwame Anthony Appiah similarly advises a junior high school English teacher that using AI-assisted programs to help respond to student writing would not be hypocritical even when her department had made a big deal out of ensuring the students did not use AI themselves to write their essays. As part of his reasoning, Appiah writes, "As with many other skills, writing well and thinking clearly will improve through practice. By contrast, you already know how to grade papers; you don't need the practice."¹⁷ While this statement may be true, it misses the authentic response part of grading noted above. When I turned in essays as a student, I expected my teacher to respond to my writing in a way that engaged with my ideas. As a teacher now, I do not think that was an unreasonable expectation. While an AI program might be able to correct a student's grammar like a teacher might be able to, the AI program may struggle to foster connection with its dead language comments. Writing, even the academic schooling type, is an act of communication and demands authentic response and offers the chance for revelatory connection. Still, Appiah echoes Cutler by writing, "The hope is that they [the AI programs] can grade without

¹⁶ David Cutler, "How AI Can Enhance the Grading Process," *Edutopia* (May 8, 2024), https://www.edutopia.org/article/using-ai-grading-tools-enhance-process?s=09&utm_id=Spring24&utm_source=pocket_shared.

¹⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Can I Use A.I. to Grade My Students' Papers?" *The New York Times Magazine* (May 24, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/24/magazine/ai-essays-grading-ethics.html>.

inconsistency, without getting tired, without being affected by the expectations that surely affect those of us who hand-grade student work.”¹⁸

However, this optimism in AI’s ability to overcome biases and prejudices of human teachers is perhaps misplaced. Researchers have found that large language AI models display bias against people based on their dialect.¹⁹ The dead/revelatory language distinction is again useful here. AI may struggle to correct our worst biases and prejudices when it recycles centuries of our own dead language, and correcting biases and prejudices requires truly revelatory uses of language. While AI can certainly comment on comma splices or note that a thesis statement requires more support, these responses are only technical in nature and offer little hope for the kind of revelatory connection for which teaching and learning open space.

An (AI) Education

The above consideration of the ways educators use AI in their practices will be useful when theorizing the different components of education and determining if anything is missing when some of those components are offloaded to AI. First, an education involves some learning, and perhaps teaching, of information we have not seen before. While the heretofore unseen information is a necessary part of an education, it is not sufficient for something to be deemed an education. Consulting AI on a question might involve unseen information, but when we consult a digital calculator to find the product of two numbers, we do not say we were educated by the calculator. In providing information unseen before, AI cannot be said to be educating anyone. It is also worth noting that unlike a digital calculator that is always correct in its answers (unless broken), generative AI has been found to generate so-called hallucinations—“factually incorrect responses.”²⁰ Does the above teacher using AI to offer and support her student struggling with math have to worry about the possibility that the program will hallucinate and lead the student further astray?

Even if it is granted the information generative AI provides is appropriately heretofore unseen information, there are other components of education. One was mentioned above. Education assumes some kind of connection, some kind of relationship. One can say they were offered an education by a teacher, by a class, or even by a piece of media like a movie, a book, or a song. All these media, though, are communications of creators in which the creator enters into a kind of relationship with the spectator in a way similar to the relationship a

¹⁸ Appiah, “Can I Use A.I.?”

¹⁹ Valentin Hofman, Pratyusha Ria Kalluri, Dan Jurafsky, & Sharese King, “AI Generates Covertly Racist Decisions about People Based on their Dialect,” *Nature*, 633 (2024):147-154. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-024-07856-5>

²⁰ William H. Walters & Esther Isabelle Wilder, “Fabrication and Errors in the Bibliographic Citations Generated by ChatGPT,” *Scientific Reports*, 13 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-41032-5>

teacher has to a student. If it were said that generative AI offered an education, with whom would the student be entering a relationship? If generative AI is like traditional media, then that question might be answered by the creators of a specific AI program. This answer seems inadequate because since generative AI can answer differently any time it is queried, it does not carry communicative connection in the same way a book or a movie does.²¹

The only other alternative is to say that an AI tutor itself enters into a relationship with a student in the same way that a teacher does. This answer seems equally unsatisfying when we analyze the teacher-student relationship. The above example of a teacher sitting with a student struggling through a set of math problems is instructive. This teacher could offer new suggestions and illustrations even if the student has not prompted them. He may be sitting in complete silence not moving to solve the problems at all, and she may still offer new help and support. In other words, a human teacher can authentically respond even to the lack of student work. To my knowledge, contemporary generative AI does not act in this way. Even if it developed such an ability, it would still lack the embodied experience noted above. I include in this embodied experience concept the experience with human learning. Generative AI does not have the experience of learning math itself, but a human teacher can sympathize with a struggling student and commiserate with him by giving him tips and strategies that worked for her.

Thinkers like R.S. Peters might deny this relational aspect of education, observing that “all education is self-education.”²² However, this claim might also be interpreted to reveal a third component of education. Peters asserts this claim after arguing that the teacher’s goal ought to be to move the pupil to intrinsic motivation for learning the taught discipline. This goal implies a change in the pupil—a change of values. Change is a third required component of education. I leave aside presently whether all education requires a change in values specifically. True education, though, changes the pupil whether that be because the pupil has new skills, new knowledge, or new goals. It is difficult to imagine any kind of change resulting from interaction with generative AI. Since current AI programs must be prompted, the pupil would have to want to change. A recent study suggests that AI chatbots can be used to reduce conspiratorial thinking, but this study involved AI chatbots that were prompted to respond to conspiratorial thinking in a way to reduce those beliefs.²³ In this study, the AI chatbots were not teachers themselves but rather sophisticated tools for a particular kind of education.

²¹ Spencer J. Smith, “Processed information: A definition,” *Philosophy of Education* (2024).

²² R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (George Allen, 1966), 62.

²³ Thomas H. Costello, Gordon Pennycook, & David G. Rand, “Durably Reducing Conspiracy Beliefs through Dialogues with AI,” *Science* 385, no. 6714 (2024), doi:10.1126/science.adq181

An education requires new-to-the-learner information, a teacher-student relationship even if that relationship can sometimes be had with different media, and change in the learner. As the above analysis shows, AI might achieve these components in some situations but faces problems related to hallucinations, lack of embodiment, and the need for prompting. This analysis attempts to answer the second and third questions posed in the introduction: What are the components of the work of education? Which of these components, if any, are lost when educators use AI for this work? In what follows, I handle the final question: When these uses of AI are popularized, with what view of the educator are we left?

In her analysis of a program promoting the use of Learning Management Systems, Morgan Anderson worries about what she calls the facilitated “standardization and data-fication” of education.²⁴ Anderson warns that EdTech always comes with philosophical assumptions that necessarily affect the philosophical and educational environment of any classroom using such technology.²⁵ She ties standardization and the data-collection of these EdTech solutions to neoliberal market logic.²⁶ My worry is that the use of generative AI in teaching will lead to similar neoliberal ends. This claim might at first seem puzzling if one considers the threat of standardization, for instance. The fantasy of generative AI is that it will allow educators to devote a personalized hour to all students in their classrooms. In this section I will show why this hope is little more than a “fantasy of education.”

Henry Giroux has considered the threats that neoliberal market creates for the work of teachers and for a society hoping to use education to create democratically sufficient citizens. He warns about the “commodification of knowledge.”²⁷ In Giroux’s conceptualization of the neoliberal school, knowledge is standardized and “teachers are often preoccupied with learning the ‘how to,’ with what works, or with mastering the best way to teach a given body of knowledge.”²⁸ When there is a noted teacher shortage in schools,²⁹ teachers wishing to find the best way to teach might be vulnerable to solutions like multiplying themselves by using AI chatbots. If one of the most important goals of schools is to work in the trade of knowledge, then this solution makes sense.

²⁴ Morgan Anderson, “‘Quality Matters’ and Matters of Quality: COVID-19 and the Techno-Rationalization of Teaching,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 52 (2021): 21.

²⁵ Anderson, “‘Quality Matters,’” 23.

²⁶ Anderson, “‘Quality Matters,’” 16.

²⁷ Henry A. Giroux, “Neoliberalism’s War Against Teachers in Dark Times,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 6 (2013): 460.

doi:10.1177/1532708613503769.

²⁸ Giroux, “Neoliberalism’s War,” 461.

²⁹ Joanna Greer Koch, “Help Wanted: Next Steps in Addressing the United States’ Teacher Shortage,” *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2024): 42-53.

However, such AI chatbots may only be able to trade in dead knowledge as I have argued above. Similarly, Giroux argues this neoliberal, commodified idea of knowledge closes off discussions of “the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power and draws attention to questions concerning who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge.”³⁰ Students become “happy consumers and unquestioning future workers” under this system.³¹ These are roles that Jane Roland Martin would consider part of the “productive processes” of society.³² An education focused on productive processes is necessarily interested in efficiency, and the use of AI could increase efficiencies. Cutler understood CoGrader as allowing him to use his time more efficiently, but he did not end up using it in the end. Although he did not provide reasoning for his decision, it seems likely that it is because authentic response to student work is necessarily an inefficient process. Importantly, a study by Chan, Lo, and Wong has found that while students might be motivated by feedback from AI, the students reported “feeling disengaged and uninspired” by it.³³

Sitting with a student as he struggles through ten math problems is not an efficient activity, but it might be necessary. Good teaching is having knowledge about when inefficiencies are necessary to achieve educational goals. When I assign a new paper in class, the efficient thing to do would be to direct all my students to the online assignment description and rubric. Because I know from experience the ineffectiveness of this direction, I inefficiently take the time to print off inefficient copies of the description to inefficiently pass out to my students. I spend personal time and important time in class to do this. It also creates eventual paper waste. In short, this practice is not efficient, but it is important for learning. As Morgan Anderson notes, “engaging in teaching and learning is *inherently* inefficient.”³⁴

The education fantasy of education without human connection has an embodied authentic response problem. First, if generative AI is going to be used to respond to student work, then attention needs to be given to ensure this response is educationally useful on pedagogical and emotional dimensions. Second, an important effect of authentic response is an increase in connection between teacher and student. Generative AI might be able to simulate these kinds of connections but then they might be perceived by students as misleading or

³⁰ Giroux, “Neoliberalism’s War,” 461.

³¹ Giroux, “Neoliberalism’s War,” 460.

³² Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (Yale University Press, 1985), 6.

³³ Sumie Tsz Sum Chan, Noble Po Kan Lo, & Alan Man Him Wong, “Enhancing University Level English Proficiency with Generative AI: Empirical Insights into Automated Feedback and Learning Outcomes,” *Contemporary Educational Technology* 16, no. 4 (2023): 12, <https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/15607>.

³⁴ Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools* (Routledge, 2023), 46. I thank a reviewer for wondering if Anderson’s book could also be used productively. I worry that AI will fall to the problems that Anderson has identified of other EdTech.

“uninspired.” Third, as was shown by the extended math problem example, embodied experience is essential to authentic response. Being able to share in the experience of learning is an important element of teaching.

Detractors to the views offered here might point to the same advantages of AI that were noted above by Cutler and Appiah. Wouldn't students benefit from not being graded by teachers who are half-asleep at two in the morning, and wouldn't this benefit equal out whatever harm they received from not having authentic responses? Perhaps this trade-off is correct, but this formulation is a false dichotomy. If authentic response is an important part of education, then schools, administrators, and policymakers ought to prioritize ensuring that teachers are not overworked instead of giving them tools to more quickly respond to student work. Similarly, it may be the case that AI offers a solution to biased responses to student work, but studies suggest this might not be always true. Educators should be given training to confront their biases and prejudices in order to affirm that AI does offer this solution.

The problem of teacher response authenticity is that it is inefficient and time-consuming, but shortcuts to get around this inefficiency risk seriously limiting the role of an educator. This study has demonstrated some problems of embodied teacher response that artificial intelligence will need to solve in order to replace teachers completely.

WHAT PARENTAL RIGHTS CAN'T BE

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Parental rights have become perhaps the most important concept in contemporary educational policy debates. Since 2000, nearly twenty US states have enacted legislation that fundamentally enshrines parental rights in the legal architecture of the state, according to the Parental Rights Foundation,¹ and dozens of additional pieces of legislation explicitly mobilize the concept for other more specific ends, e.g., Florida's well-known HB 1557: The Parental Rights in Education Act, commonly referred to by its opponents as the "Don't Say Gay" bill. In 2023, The United States House of Representatives voted to pass H.R. 5, which would have instituted a so-called "Parental Bill of Rights" nationwide, an outcome that has long been a goal of the parental rights movement. Pushes for parental rights legislation show no signs of slowing down and, in my view, the idea of parental rights is set to become, if it is not already, *the* central battleground in educational policy in this country for many years to come. This topic is also, happily, one of those rare moments when philosophers of education have something directly relevant to contribute to the larger policy conversation. Rights are centrally and unavoidably a philosophical concept, arguably the most important concept in Postwar political, moral, and legal theory, and, predictably, are also one of the most hotly contested concepts in all of those fields. In philosophy of education, while there is a fairly robust literature engaging with questions around the rights of children, itself an important question and one that is deeply related to parental rights, discussions of parental rights as such are, with some notable exceptions, comparatively less common.

This paper attempts to clarify some of the conceptual terrain around parental rights, their foundations, and how (or, indeed, whether) parental rights might fit into dominant theories of rights more generally. I will not be arguing directly that parental rights do not exist or should not be recognized by governments, though I suspect a fuller investigation than I have time for here would suggest those conclusions. Rather, the paper proceeds negatively, examining a number of possible approaches to grounding parental rights and arguing that each has fatal flaws. Thankfully, much of this work has already been done for me by Bryan Warnick in his important and thoughtful 2014 article "Parental Authority over Education and the Right to Invite,"² which takes a similar approach,

¹ Parental Rights Foundation, "Parental Rights: Fundamental in 18 States," accessed November 19, 2024, <https://parentalrightsfoundation.org/parental-rights-fundamental-in-18-states/>.

² Bryan Warnick, "Parental Authority over Education and the Right to Invite," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 53-71.

rejecting in turn a number of arguments in favor of parental rights. I hope here to build on some of Warnick's objections while also introducing and rejecting some views he does not explicitly engage with. Warnick's paper also, importantly, suggests an alternative way of grounding parental rights, or at least a limited type of parental right. Warnick attempts to ground parental rights in a unique feature of parenting, what he calls the "sacrificial labor" of raising children. This special type of labor grounds certain rights of parents over their children's lives and education. This includes a new right specific to the parent-child relationship, which he terms "the right to invite," i.e., the right of parents to expose their children to, and invite them to join, their preferred ways of life (including, but not limited to, religion, traditions, political views, etc.). I will argue that Warnick's approach fails as a grounding for parental rights in two ways: First, by inadequately distinguishing itself from the "children-as-property" view of parental rights, which Warnick himself (rightly, in my view) rejects; and second, through what I see as a conceptual confusion that treats rights as a type of social reward, a view that I will argue is untenable. Having considered and rejected a number of approaches to grounding parental rights, I end the paper by offering some palliative thoughts about what exactly we lose if we give up talk of parental rights entirely, suggesting that the losses may not be as severe as many seem to assume.

One final word of context setting: readers familiar with parental rights discourse may notice that in what follows I engage very little with the complex and fascinating legal history of parental rights. This history, particularly through landmark Supreme Court cases such as *Meyer v. Nebraska*, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, often features prominently in discussions of parental rights. While these cases and the legal arguments presented within them can serve as important case studies and intuition pumps, and are often telling about the dominant socio-legal attitudes of the times, I do not engage with them here for one main reason. As will become clear in the following section, I am here concerned with the moral dimension of parental rights, rather than the legal. That is, I am assuming that whatever rights are contingently recognized at a given time in a given legal system may or may not be coextensive with what our moral rights are, and that either way these are different things.

The Conceptual Structure of Rights: A Primer

For a concept with as long and complicated a philosophical history as rights, there is, it turns out, a surprising level of contemporary agreement about the basic structure of rights claims, i.e., what we are saying when we say things like "I have a right to X" or "What right do you have to Y?" Paradigmatic rights claims, following Leif Wenar's formulation, are generally articulated in roughly the following way: rights are "entitlements to perform or not perform certain actions, or to be or not to be in certain states; or entitlements that others perform

or not perform certain actions or be or not be in certain states.”³ To be “entitled” to perform an action here means something like “It would be wrong to prevent me from the performance of that action” and similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other scenarios. To have a right to the use of my car, means that you may not interfere with or prevent that use on pain of moral (and perhaps legal) wrongdoing. Note that this formulation says nothing about whether this right is absolute nor about what factors might limit the right. I, presumably, do not have the right to use my car to commit homicide by intentionally driving it into someone, and the police may *have* a right to interfere with my use to use the vehicle to pursue a criminal, for example, though people disagree about why this might be so. Different thinkers frame this fundamental structure differently or emphasize different aspects of it. Ronald Dworkin, for example, characterizes rights as a type of moral trump, particularly over concerns of utility or other goal-oriented social policy, so that rights violations are wrong *even in the face of countervailing* utilitarian arguments. As he puts it, “If someone has a right to publish pornography, this means that it is for some reason wrong for officials to act in violation of that right, even if they (correctly) believe that the community as a whole would be better off if they did.”⁴ There is, for Dworkin, and most contemporary rights theorists, a certain tension, even an opposition, between broader utility calculations and rights. Put differently, there is a distinct type of wrongness (Dworkin leaves open precisely what it is) in the violation of a right that is irreducible to harm, reduced preference satisfaction, frustrated pursuits of social goals, or other familiar utilitarian calculations.

Despite widespread agreement on these basic formal features of rights claims, there is equally widespread disagreement on a host of other more substantive questions about rights. If not utility, why is it wrong to violate rights? Where do rights come from in the first place, and why think we have any? Must rights violations be enforceable to really “count” as rights? What rights do we in fact have? How one goes about grounding and justifying moral rights—that is, how one answers these sorts of questions—is in large part, parasitic on one’s larger metaethical and jurisprudential commitments. While I, I hope understandably, will not be able to give each of these questions a full treatment here, in the next section I will sketch some of the most popular approaches as applied specifically to purported parental rights and argue that they all fail one or more critical tests of establishing a moral right in this context.

³ Leif Wenar, “Rights,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified April 18, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights/>.

⁴ Ronald Dworkin, “Rights as Trumps,” in *Theories of Rights*, ed. Jeremy Waldron (Oxford University Press, 1984): 153-167, 153.

 Approaches to Grounding Parental Rights
Legal Positivism

Perhaps the most economical and straightforward, if also among the most controversial, way of grounding parental rights (or a right of any kind), is to adopt the view of legal positivism, following thinkers such as H.L.A. Hart⁵ and John Austin.⁶ On this view, rights are treated as only an empirical legal concept without ties to extralegal or pre-political understandings of morality. That is, determining whether a right exists in a given society at a given time is, for the positivist, simply a matter of cracking open the books as it were; looking into the relevant legal texts and practices of that society to see if that right exists in practice. If it does, then there is such a right, and if it doesn't, then there is no such right. Grounding parental rights on this view would simply mean passing laws granting them. I have significant qualms with this view, suggested at the end of the introduction, but I will also not dwell on it because I don't take it to be what most advocates of parental rights are truly after in the first place. That is, I don't believe parental rights advocates would be satisfied with "rights" in this sense, which change with the social and legal tides. I believe that they are after a deeper sort of moral grounding of these rights that could withstand such contingent sociopolitical shifts, and indeed every defense of parental rights of which I am aware takes this approach.

Biological Connection

Another popular and intuitive view for the grounding of parental rights over children has to do with the biological connection between parents and children. On this view, parental rights are grounded in some putatively morally significant biological tie, whether that be shared genetics, bonds formed during gestation, or the bare fact of biological causality between parents and children. The reasoning as to why these biological features are morally significant in terms of grounding rights differs. Melissa Moschella, for example, suggests that the closeness of these biological ties generates for parents a unique, non-transferrable, and permanent obligation to foster their child's well-being, and since Moschella assumes, at least controversially and I believe falsely, that all obligations carry with them reciprocal rights, parental rights are grounded through biology.⁷ David Velleman suggests that ongoing connections with one's biological parents are critical for identity formation, meaning-making over the course of a life, and other goods of this kind, and grounds parental rights out of

⁵ H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, 3rd ed., ed. Leslie Green, Joseph Raz, and Penelope A. Bulloch (Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*, ed. Wilfrid E. Rumble (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷ Melissa Moschella, *To Whom do Children Belong? Parental Rights, Civic Education, and Children's Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

these goods flowing from biological ties.⁸ A number of worries immediately present themselves for these biological accounts of rights. First, these accounts have trouble dealing with cases of genetic material donation, surrogacy, and adoptive parenting. In the case of gamete donation, for example, who retains the rights with respect to the child? On this view, it would appear that the answer is the donors, but this seems to fly in the face of both current law and ordinary morality. As it happens, both Moschella and Velleman bite this particular bullet with respect to gamete donation, though attempt, I think without success, to avoid that implication with respect to adoption. Second, the scope of these biological rights seems at best difficult to specify. Do biological connections only generate obligations and rights for parents? Are there cousin rights, uncle rights, first cousin once removed rights, and so on? It seems that any cutoff here has a high risk of being arbitrary. This is not to deny outright any moral relevance to biological connections (that is a much larger and more complex question) but only to suggest that grounding parental rights in that way poses some specific challenges.

Welfare of Children

Another possible avenue for establishing parental rights is through consideration of the welfare interests of children. This view holds that parents are in a special type of epistemic position vis-à-vis what is best for their children, and so should be granted rights to pursue their child's welfare with this specialized knowledge. Put simply, parental rights are good for children, and hence should be respected.⁹ Warnick himself points out a number of persuasive objections to this view, such as the fact that it hinges on controversial empirical claims about parents *actually* understanding the conditions of their child's welfare, a claim that is clearly false, for example, in cases of abuse and neglect,¹⁰ and more controversially false, say, in cases of parents denying transgender children gender-affirming care or the social markers of transition. I want, however, to point out what I see as a more fundamental issue with welfare accounts of rights. If having a right to X simply means that X promotes my welfare (or someone else's), one wonders what work talk of rights does in justifying X at all when a direct appeal to welfare seems to do the job just as well. Rights talk appears, if rights are ultimately grounded in welfare, to be a sort of justificatory idle wheel. If rights are to really do any social work, to return to Dworkin's proviso, it seems that they must protect something particularly *in the face of* welfare-based counterweights. Moschella, whose account you'll recall is largely biology based, makes this point when she suggests that parental rights are important enough that even in possible cases of harm to children, the state

⁸ David Velleman, "Persons in Prospect," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 221-288.

⁹ See, for an example of this view, Sarah Hannan and Richard Vernon, "Parental Rights: A Role-Based Approach," *Theory and Research in Education* 6, no. 2 (2008): 173-189.

¹⁰ Warnick, "Parental Authority," 56.

should avoid violating them even if that policy “might occasionally leave children vulnerable to harm that could have been avoided by intervening sooner or more aggressively.”¹¹ This points to a related issue with welfare-based accounts of rights, which is that welfare interests change over time, sometimes quickly and frequently. What is best for me right now may be different than what is best for me in ten years or in ten minutes. Does the content of rights then change with these interests, tracking considerations of welfare? This is, I think, counterintuitive to how most people talk and think about rights, and leaves us again with the question as to why we need talk of rights at all if they are simply a proxy for talk of welfare.

Children as Property

To end this section, I want to say a brief word about the view that children are in some sense property of their parents, and that therefore parents have rights over them. This view is highly unpopular for what I take to be obvious reasons, namely that it cuts against dominant modern theories about the nature of the person, respect for individuals, human dignity, and so on, though some parental rights advocates do speak this way, as when Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, in a 2015 CNBC interview claimed that “the state doesn’t own your children, parents own the children.”¹² I raise it here not because it is a genuine contender in terms of how to ground parental rights, but because Warnick raises and (rightly) rejects it in his paper, and because, as I will suggest in the next section, it is a view that his own view of parental rights skirts perhaps uncomfortably close to.

Warnick and the Right to Invite

In Warnick’s 2014 article “Parental Authority over Education and the Right to Invite,” Warnick, as mentioned, surveys a number of arguments for parental rights and rejects them as unsatisfactory. Importantly, he recognizes that many of these approaches to justifying rights claims can work perfectly well in other cases but do not seem to apply with equal felicity in the case of parental rights (such as paradigmatic property rights claims over inanimate objects versus over people), meaning that parental rights require some sort of special type of justification and grounding. To this end, he argues for a new type of parental rights, grounded in a unique way as compared to other welfare, interest, or property rights. Specifically, he suggests what he refers to as “the right to invite,” formulating the concept in the following way: “Parents should have the opportunity to expose their children to their preferred way of life and to attempt

¹¹ Moschella, *To Whom Do Children Belong?*, 69.

¹² Perry Stein, “Sen. Rand Paul Says Government Should Not Force People to Receive Vaccinations,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sen-rand-paul-says-government-should-not-force-people-to-receive-vaccinations/2019/03/05/bfae6534-3f6e-11e9-9361-301ffb5bd5e6_story.html.

to persuade—or invite—they to participate in that life.”¹³ For Warnick, the right to invite allows parents to achieve certain specific relational goods of family life, a sense of shared life and interests, and other important aspects of the parent-child relationship. This right allows parents to invite their children into the various practices, belief systems, and modes of living that they themselves prefer. As Warnick says, “These practices can include going to church, being involved in political campaigns, attending cultural events and festivals, observing rituals and rites of passage, reading certain books, taking certain classes, and so forth.”¹⁴

Interestingly, Warnick is clear that this right to invite, in a way perhaps belied by the title he has chosen for it, is also actually a right to compel and require. That is, the right to invite,

includes the authority to temporarily require one’s children to participate in the practices that constitute their way of life... If parents are to be allowed to fully expose their children to their way of life, they should be allowed to require their children to engage in certain practices constitutive of that life.¹⁵

For Warnick, implied in the notion of giving to another a full sense of one’s way of life is the active and full participation of that other in the attendant practices of that way of life, and so the right to invite cannot be said to have been genuinely fulfilled without the right of compelled participation. Warnick is, however, careful to limit this right by building in certain concessions to those, like Joel Feinberg for example,¹⁶ who insist on a counterbalancing right of children not to have their future autonomy or choice spaces artificially restricted by the actions of their parents when the child is young.

So what then does Warnick have to say about the grounding of this parental right to invite? Having already rejected child welfare, parental interest, and property claims as grounding for parental rights, Warnick suggests a new type of grounding for parental rights, namely what he terms “sacrificial labor.” Sacrificial labor, in Warnick’s view, captures the difficulties and sacrifices of things like time, energy, money, freedom, and so on, associated with becoming a parent, and suggests that these sacrifices can serve as a grounding of the right to invite. Warnick articulates the structure of justification in this way:

Because of their prolonged and intense sacrifice for their children, we give parents certain privileges. Rather than paying parents for their physical and emotional labor, as we would in other spheres of justice, or granting them title of

¹³ Warnick, “Parental Authority,” 63.

¹⁴ Warnick, “Parental Authority,” 64.

¹⁵ Warnick, “Parental Authority,” 64.

¹⁶ See Joel Feinberg, “The Child’s Right to an Open Future,” in *Whose Child? Children’s Rights, Parental Authority, and State Power*, ed. William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Rowman and Littlefield, 1980): 124–53.

ownership to their children, society honors the labors of parents by giving them the right to influence their children through education. In other words, it is not what parents get from being parents that establishes parental rights over education but what they give.¹⁷

I want to raise two worries about this approach. First, anyone familiar with traditional Lockean accounts of property rights might notice certain structural isometries between those views and Warnick's vision of parental rights here. The hallmark of Lockean property rights is the mixing of one's labor with some unowned resource, which generates a right. Warnick suggests that parental sacrificial labor in the process of raising a child generates parental rights. Warnick has rejected the children-as-property view, but his justification of parental rights seems to be quite similar to the justification of rights over property. Warnick of course anticipates this worry, and adduces a related example, borrowed from Michael Walzer, to attempt to show that there is precedent for granting rights on the basis of sacrificial labor, namely the soldier returning from war who is rewarded with medals, certain types of recognition, and so on.¹⁸ It is, to be frank, unclear to me how this example is supposed to alleviate worries about children-as-property seeping into Warnick's account. In the case of medals, for example, the returning soldier is, seemingly, directly rewarded for their sacrificial labor with a piece of property. In the more nebulous (and I imagine, important, in Warnick's understanding) cases of things like social respect or honor, it is hard to see what the relationship is between these things and rights at all. Does the soldier have a direct claim right that every person they encounter in their society grant them honor, or thanks, or would it merely be a good thing for others in the society to give that thanks and honor? It is, as an empirical matter, true that many in society do behave this way, but just pointing this out does not go particularly far toward showing that they have a duty to behave so, or that others have a right that they do, or that a soldier's rights are violated when someone neglects to thank them for their service. Warnick says that the soldier example demonstrates that "We do not have to fully subscribe to a theory of children-as-property to acknowledge that parental labor should matter in systems of obligation and social prerogative."¹⁹ Indeed, we might readily admit that parental labor matters *in some way* in determining how parents should be treated socially, but I don't think Warnick has gone far enough here to demonstrate that the specific way it should matter is at all rights-generating.

This leads to my second broader worry with Warnick's account, which is that it plays, I think, a bit too fast and loose with related but importantly distinct terms such as rights, privileges, desert, and the like. I think the reason that the soldier example is implausible as an account of the grounding of rights is that it

¹⁷ Warnick, "Parental Authority," 60.

¹⁸ Warnick, "Parental Authority," 59.

¹⁹ Warnick, "Parental Authority," 59.

is undergirded by a conceptual confusion about what rights are. Rights are not social rewards, given out or withheld based on salutary or virtuous behavior, or lack thereof. Rather, rights are independent moral entitlements that may accrue to us in virtue (usually) of our bare status as equal human beings, or citizens, or in virtue of a mutual agreement made with another party, as in the case of promise-making or contracts. Even on legal positivism, which holds that all rights are stipulatively granted by the state legal apparatus, they are not things to be *earned* in the way Warnick suggests here (whether certain rights can be *forfeited* is a related but separate question). The soldier may be said to have earned or to even deserve certain types of social respect, but this is not equivalent to saying they have a right to it, particularly when that right entails claims on the behavior of other rights holders. A sports team might play better, harder, and with more passion and skill than an opponent but still lose due to an unfavorable call by a referee at a critical moment. The team may have deserved to win, but it is a mistake, I think, to say they had a right to win. Parents may deserve social respect for their labor in child rearing, may even deserve certain types of recognition and benefits such as tax breaks, but the question of whether they have *rights* to these things, let alone rights to the control of the lives of their children, remains a distinct, and I think unanswered question in Warnick's account.

Conclusion

I have argued that many commonly articulated approaches to grounding the rights of parents fail to establish these rights. I have not demonstrated that there are no parental rights, nor have I addressed every possible approach to their justification (Warnick addresses what he calls “the expressive interests of parents,” for example, a view that I think is probably the likeliest to succeed but which still faces critical problems that would require a different paper entirely to address). What I have attempted to do is clarify some of the considerations at play and rule out some of these views. I want to conclude by suggesting that giving up talk of parental rights entirely may not be as odious an option as some may think. Many worry, for example, that losing claims to parental rights eliminates any argument against widespread and even capricious state invasion into the family, perhaps up to and including the Platonic suggestion that all children be removed from their parents at birth and raised by the state. I think this worry is overblown, as there are of course many types of wrongdoing that do not involve rights violations, and there is no reason to think that arguments against this type of state intervention could not be produced without appeal to rights at all. Though I cannot argue for this here, I am also optimistic that much else of what even advocates of parental rights claim to want out of the concept (maintenance of subjectively valuable relationships, the ability to present one's own worldview to one's children, and so on) can be captured without much loss by limiting ourselves to talk of something that virtually everyone agrees does exist, namely parental duties. Because of the usefulness and comparatively uncontroversial nature of parental duties and because of the problems with

accounts of parental rights outlined here, I suggest a provisional abandoning of the concept of parental rights, at least until a more plausible account of their grounding can be articulated.

FORGING A PEDAGOGY OF HOPE IN THE FACE OF ACADEMIC FATALISM

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In conversation with my colleagues, it has been repeatedly addressed that the field of education research, whether philosophical, historical, or political, can be wildly depressing. One source of frustration is the subject content. Discussing historical and contemporary injustices in education, such as forced assimilation through residential schools, inequitable educational outcomes, institutional reproduction of hegemony, disproportionate discipline practices, and a seemingly insufficient progressive response to these injustices, seems to take a toll on the collective psyche of my peers.²

Another source of frustration is the process of becoming a credible name in the field. This requires many graduate students to leave the stability of their professional lives to accept, where graciously offered, either a fellowship year or a graduate teaching position. While these options are helpful, they are often insufficient to cover the costs of the education, yet alone compare with the yearly earnings of the students before entering academia.³ There is also the consideration that being a part of this academic community can be isolating for individuals, particularly when they come from family contexts that do not have a history of pursuing higher education.⁴ Once the dissertations are defended and the academic laurels conferred, the job market is not exceptionally welcoming for newly minted PhD's, with many new doctorates unable to find positions for

¹ This work was completed while the author was a doctoral student at The Ohio State University; he can now be found at Ohio Northern University.

² Jarvis R. Givens and Ashley Ison, "Toward New Beginnings: A Review of Native, White, and Black American Education Through the 19th Century," *Review of Educational Research* 93, no. 3: 319-352; Kenneth Shores, Ha Eun Kim, and Mela Still, "Categorical Inequality in Black and White: Linking Disproportionality Across Multiple Educational Outcomes," *American Educational Research Journal* 57, no. 5 (2020): 2089-2131; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2020); Lily Lamboy, Ashley Taylor and Winston C. Thompson, "Paternalistic Aims and (Mis)attributions of Agency: What the Over-punishment of Black Girls in U.S. Classrooms Teaches Us About Just School Discipline," *Theory and Research in Education* 18, no. 1: 59-77; Robin DiAngelo, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (Beacon Press, 2021).

³ Jaymes Pyne and Eric Grodsky, "Inequality and Opportunity in a Perfect Storm of Graduate Student Debt," *Sociology of Education* 93, no. 1 (2019): 20-39.

⁴ Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

which they receive adequate pay for their knowledge, often settling for part-time adjunct faculty, visiting faculty, or postdoctoral positions.⁵

The third source of frustration concerns the broader public. The United States has a well-documented history of anti-intellectualism, which Barker and colleagues describe as “an expression of negative *affect* toward intellect, intellectuals, and/or the intellectual establishment.”⁶ This anti-intellectual sentiment may manifest itself in practices such as cancelling or doxing academics whose work runs counter to certain political sentiments at the extreme end, or simple disregard of empirical research in favor of personal opinion and experiences at a more moderate end.⁷

These sources of frustration contribute to what I consider “academic fatalism.” As I see it, academic fatalism is a pessimistic orientation which questions the value of efforts to achieve within academia and questions the value of contributions to the academic’s field in light of sociocultural circumstances. It is against this pessimistic and self-deprecating orientation that academics must forge a pedagogy of hope in order to sustain their work and orient it towards creating more just educational systems and practices. Academic fatalism plays into a logical determinist mindset that assumes that the future is a settled outcome, one in which current decisions hold no sway.⁸ However, this logical determinism is at odds with the deontological imperative that people with the capability of acting have the obligation to do so, regardless of the future consequences.⁹

In this paper, I begin by positing a conception of academic fatalism. Then, I address the work of scholars on critical hope and critical pedagogies. I conclude by bringing the literature together within the metaphor of a forge. This metaphor addresses the material and communal aspects of academic fatalism and pedagogies of hope with a call to action for the academy.

⁵ Joanna Ganning, “Doctoral Education and the Academic Job Market in Planning,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 44, no. 3 (2022): 1063-1077.

⁶ David C. Barker, Ryan Detamble and Morgan Marietta, “Intellectualism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Epistemic Hubris in Red and Blue America,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 40-41.

⁷ Sigal Ben-Porath, *Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Revive Democracy* (University of Chicago, 2023); Hannah Shankman, “How to Close Pandora’s Box: A Case for the Federal Regulation of Doxing,” *University of Florida Journal of Law and Policy* 33, no. 2: 273-308; Barker, Detamble and Marietta, “Intellectualism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Epistemic Hubris,” 40-41.

⁸ Dorothea Frede, “Aristotle and the Discovery of Determinism,” in *Free Will: Historical and Analytical Perspectives*, eds. Marco Hausmann and Jörg Noller (Palgrave Macmillian, 2021), 47.

⁹ Misselbrook, David, “Duty, Kant, and Deontology,” *British Journal of General Practice* 63, no. 609 (2013), 211.

 Academic Fatalism

Academic fatalism, as I characterize it, draws heavily from Cohen’s analysis of academia and nihilism.¹⁰ Cohen contends that nihilism is a social process, one that is “legendary in foreclosing on a better, positive future.”¹¹ This process is based primarily on “the act of falsifying someone’s discourse and sense.”¹² This falsification may circle back to previous concerns of cancelling, doxing, or rejecting academics in favor of personal opinions. However, Cohen is careful to note that there are various definitions and interpretations of nihilism, which makes its usage contentious.¹³ Cohen focuses primarily on arts and humanities in higher education, citing unjust practices such as officials in the University of California system giving themselves salary increases in private meetings, graduate student editors gutting the work of a prospective book twenty years in the making, and inflated costs of academic conferences as examples of the culture of discursive nihilism that exists in academia.¹⁴ The conditions which Cohen addresses echo concerns of my colleagues, as addressed in the introduction.

While Cohen provides a detailed account of discursive nihilism in the context of academia, the expansive usage of nihilism in general makes the language imprecise. As such, I opt for the term *fatalism*, though there is some overlap. The application of fatalism in an academic sense can be seen particularly well in the work of Knight-Abowitz, who urges for a Deweyan construction of higher education in a democratic society as a means of opposing neoliberal “temptations.”¹⁵ Knight-Abowitz examines the case of Miami University over the course of her career there as an example of a larger cultural shift away from public-serving aims and toward policies which “no longer necessarily reflect the interests of the average voter but more often the interests of economic elites and organized party groups.”¹⁶ Knight-Abowitz uses fatalism as an understanding that the fate of universities, and the academics who work within them, is already

¹⁰ Sande Cohen, “Academia and Nihilism: Some Critical Perspectives,” *Rethinking History* 15, no. 3: 393-417.

¹¹ Cohen, “Academia and Nihilism,” 393. For a considerably different conception of academic fatalism, see: Brian P. Godor, “Academic Fatalism: Applying Durkheim’s Fatalistic Suicide Typology to Student Drop-Out and the Climate of Higher Education,” *Interchange* 48: 257-269. Godor uses the term to apply to students who drop out of higher education (academic suicide) due to a supposed foreclosure of possibilities in a parallel to Durkheim’s fatalistic suicide typology.

¹² Cohen, “Academia and Nihilism,” 397.

¹³ An earlier conception of this paper was titled “Forging a Pedagogy of Hope in the Face of Academic Nihilism.” Thanks to a suggestion by one of the anonymous reviewers, I reconsidered the terminology and framing of the paper towards fatalism.

¹⁴ Cohen, “Academia and Nihilism,” 401-402.

¹⁵ Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “Imagining Democratic Futures for Public Universities: Educational Leadership Against Fatalism’s Temptations,” *Educational Theory* 66, nos. 1-2: 181-97.

¹⁶ Knight-Abowitz, “Imagining Democratic Futures,” 183.

decided. However, despite the pessimistic outlook that may provide to be “tempting,” she encourages us to push back with Deweyan conceptions of democracy and education. The orientation which she advocates for is one that is a purposeful reconstruction of educational institutions toward what they could or ought to be. This goal is not based on the “hokey hope” that Duncan-Andrade warns against but is grounded in a critical understanding of the circumstances that exist for each individual within their given context. Towards the end of her article, Knight-Abowitz ties together her notions of oppressive conditions, fatalism, and Deweyan aims of higher education with the statement that “Within that democracy of association is a realistic hope that we might develop democratic futures for public universities.”¹⁷

Drawing from the works of Cohen and Knight-Abowitz, I propose the following conception of academic fatalism.¹⁸ Academic fatalism is a pessimistic orientation to the value and meaning of one’s work as an educational researcher. This is in no small part due to the higher education process, which focuses on inequitable and unjust examples throughout educational research fields as exemplars without being balanced with examples of success and resistance. While it is important to understand the roots of oppression, there must also be guidance for advancing a more equitable response in future action. Without the inclusion of support, guidance, and action, the higher education process runs the risk of tempting researchers towards a resigned attitude regarding the inescapable nature of the future, as Cohen and Knight-Abowitz address, or tempts them to embrace a false hope that all will be well without the need to get involved, as Duncan-Andrade contends.¹⁹

Additionally, academic fatalism must contend with the logistical and professional implications of higher education. Entering into these spaces requires one to endure considerable financial hardships, with little promise of reward on the other side.²⁰ This is mingled with the public atmosphere of anti-intellectualism which devalues research at best and poses real threats to researchers at worst.²¹ Given these circumstances, it is understandable why my colleagues have voiced concern over their own work. This leads to the necessity of engaging in a pedagogy of hope.

¹⁷ Knight-Abowitz, “Imagining Democratic Futures,” 196.

¹⁸ Cohen, “Academia and Nihilism,” 393-417; Knight-Abowitz, “Imagining Democratic Futures,” 181-197.

¹⁹ Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade, “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 2 (2009): 181-94.

²⁰ Ganning, “Doctoral Education,” 1063-1077.

²¹ Barker, Detamble and Marietta, “Intellectualism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Epistemic Hubris,” 40-41; Shankman, “How to Close Pandora’s Box,” 273-308.

(Critical) Pedagogy of Hope²²

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* forms the basis for the contemporary understanding of critical hope.²³ Freire's central argument in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is that "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity."²⁴ This construction of critical pedagogy has two key points. First, liberatory education must come from a critical understanding of root causes of oppression. Second, the ultimate goal of this pedagogy is an action-oriented engagement in social reconstruction. The notion of action-oriented engagement is echoed in his later work, *Pedagogy of Hope*, where he states that "hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice."²⁵ However, Freire is quick to say that hope itself is insufficient, but *critical* hope is necessary for conscientious social reconstruction.

Freire's notion of critical hope speaks directly to Duncan-Andrade's conceptions of false hope versus critical hope.²⁶ Duncan-Andrade examines three forms of false hope in the context of education. The first form, hokey hope, is the spectator's notion that things will simply get better without active involvement. The second form, mythical hope, is "a false narrative of equal opportunity emptied of its historical and political contingencies."²⁷ This mythical hope speaks directly to the root causes of oppression to which Freire referred. The final form, hope deferred, places hope in some potential future, which Duncan-Andrade describes as "either a collective utopia of a future reformed society or, more often, the individual student's future ascent to the middle class."²⁸

Contrary to the three forms of false hope, Duncan-Andrade advocates for critical hope as a means for combatting unjust educational systems. Critical hope is material, as it provides students with the resources that they need to be successful and is based in the realities in which the students operate.²⁹ Critical hope is Socratic, as it requires those involved to be engaged in dialogue with

²² A note on language: While I use "pedagogy of hope," which borrows from Paulo Freire (see: *Pedagogy of Hope*, 1994) and bell hooks (see: *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 2003), the terms "critical pedagogy" and "critical hope" are also used. The interchangeable nature stems from a critique leveled at critical pedagogues, which is the lack of a systematic definition of hope (see: Katariina Tiainen, Anniina Leiviskä and Kristiina Brunila, "Democratic Education for Hope: Contesting the Neoliberal Common Sense," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38, no. 6.).

²³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Bloomsbury, 1968).

²⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47.

²⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (Continuum, 1994), 9.

²⁶ Duncan-Andrade, "Note to Educators," 181-194.

²⁷ Duncan-Andrade, "Note to Educators," 183.

²⁸ Duncan-Andrade, "Note to Educators," 184.

²⁹ Duncan-Andrade, "Note to Educators," 186-187.

others and to be critically reflective of the contexts of their experiences.³⁰ Critical hope is audacious, as it “stands in solidarity with urban communities” and “defies the dominant ideology of defense, entitlement, and preservation of privileged bodies at the expense of policing, disposal, and dispossession of marginalized ‘others.’”³¹

Hytten picks up on the threads of Duncan-Andrade and extends them by addressing pragmatic approaches for cultivating what she terms as “democratic hope.”³² Hytten invokes the language of critical hope with the statement that democratic hope “involves an activist sense of making choices in the present so as to bring about the kind of future we imagine, specifically one marked by democratic social arrangements.”³³ In order to cultivate this democratic hope, Hytten encourages educators to cultivate four specific habits of hope in schools: storytelling, creativity, mindfulness, and community building.³⁴ These acts work to position hope not as an individual trait, but as a collective action, a thread which will be continued in Stitzlein’s work, *Learning How to Hope*.

Stitzlein continues Hytten’s call for encouraging educators to cultivate habits of hope for democratic means by framing hope as a means of reviving democracy through schools and society.³⁵ Stitzlein challenges various conceptions of hope, such as those which focus on individual dispositions of optimism or grit, and builds upon hope as a pragmatic notion which is built through community and guided by action.³⁶ She additionally challenges conceptions of hope which are only future-oriented by pointing out this consideration: “Many people think of hope as goal-directed and future oriented... It helps us to unify our past, present, and future.”³⁷ Here, Stitzlein recognizes building on past victories, recognizing past failures, connecting them with present actions, and reinforcing them with habits of hope which create more just futures.³⁸ Stitzlein further reiterates Hytten’s notions that education is one proper venue for cultivating these habits of hope, which contributes to democratic hope through community, storytelling, and inquiry.³⁹

While both Hytten and Stitzlein typically refer to K-12 schools in their works, there is something to be said about how critical hope, democratic hope, or habits of hope may be advanced in higher education spaces. McLaren cites the

³⁰ Duncan-Andrade, “Note to Educators,” 187-189.

³¹ Duncan-Andrade, “Note to Educators,” 190.

³² Kathy Hytten, “Cultivating Democratic Hope in Dark Times: Strategies for Action,” *Education and Culture* 35, no. 1 (2019): 3-27.

³³ Hytten, “Democratic Hope,” 10.

³⁴ Hytten, “Democratic Hope,” 3.

³⁵ Sarah Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Our Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁶ Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 16.

³⁷ Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 29.

³⁸ Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 3, 101, 116-117, 128.

³⁹ Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 127-128.

work of critical educators as being used as a “bulwark against fascism throughout countries across the world” and draws attention to the need of this work in higher education spaces by reminding readers that “the future of critical pedagogy can also be found in cramped university offices jammed with metal desks and cheap Office Depot swivel chairs.”⁴⁰ If this work is so important, then why is it so devalued and what should we do about it? For that question, I turn to my final section.

Forging a Pedagogy of Hope in the Face of Academic Nihilism

How do we forge a pedagogy of hope in the face of academic nihilism? There are several points of consideration which may be helpful in this process. I would like to summarize these points in brief as community, resources, exemplars, and context.

The first point, community, focuses on the need for a space of solidarity and cooperation. Duncan-Andrade, Hytten, Stitzlein, and Knight-Abowitz all recognize the need for community building as a form of resistance against oppressive forces.⁴¹ It is within these spaces that we learn from each other, get feedback to strengthen our work, and engage in the restorative practice of simply sharing the same space as people who intuitively understand some of the issues with which we are struggling.

The second point, resources, focuses on the idea that those working in higher education spaces need the material resources to support their actions. This may not only be physical, but financial and organizational, so that they have not only the opportunity but the means to achieve their goals. It does little good to tell someone to do a job if they have neither the tools nor the knowledge to do it.

The third point, exemplars, focuses attention on the need to be given examples of where we have failed, but also where we may find examples of success. Being fed example after example of human cruelty and indifference may help to show where work needs to be done, but it misses the key ingredient of showing where resistance and action have led to positive change. What might be learned from resistance and action? Society didn’t just happen to become less oppressive; it took the conscious acts of many to work towards a more positive future.

Finally, context is key. It does little good to create a sweeping mandate in any space without understanding the issues, assets, resources, and histories that are represented in each specific context. Each person, each struggle, each concept worth researching has a history that has led to the present. Each present has the opportunity to become any number of potential futures. But the actions that one

⁴⁰ Peter McLaren, “The Future of Critical Pedagogy,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52, no. 12: 1244, 1247.

⁴¹ Duncan-Andrade, “Note to Educators,” 181-94; Hytten, “Democratic Hope,” 3; Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope*, 116-117; Knight-Abowitz, “Imagining Democratic Futures,” 181-197.

must take to move from the present to the future must come with a critical understanding of the contextual factors of past and present, assets and issues, which will lead to informed choices.

I use the forge as a metaphor to explain the response which higher education spaces might make in order to push back against academic fatalism. It is highly unlikely that anyone who works a forge is involved in all aspects of gathering and preparing the materials, from mining the ore to chopping the firewood to feed the forge. On the other side, they also are unlikely to be the person to put all of their work to use after the metal has been forged. As such, there is a community involved which gives the work its meaning.

From the community, the one working the forge gets the resources necessary for the forge to operate. Surely, there is some investment on behalf of the forge work, but the work cannot be sustained without a steady supply which allows the forge to operate. No metal, no fuel, no forge.

What of the learning of the forge worker? Surely, during their training, they find examples worthy of emulation. Likewise, they find the metalwork equivalent of Edison's "thousand ways not to make a light bulb." Each of these are educative, but there must be a focus on what good work looks like so that the forge worker may have a direction to work towards.

Finally, the context of the forge is important. Where is the forge operating? What are the needs of the community? Surely forging a sword and forging a plowshare, while having similar skill requirements, take place in different contexts. Likewise, contextual factors such as location influence the available materials.

At the root of this paper is the idea that academic fatalism is a presence with which we must contend in higher education. As tempting as it may be to give in, there is a pedagogy of hope which may help to bolster our academic community, giving meaning to the work and sustaining the researchers and theorists. It is our obligation to ensure that we are providing the academy with the resources, exemplars, and community that its context determines is needed so that we may forge a pedagogy of hope in the face of academic fatalism.

WHY TRADE-OFFS ARE UNNECESSARY

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Imagine if there was no scarcity when it came to education and every child received the same quality education, for schools to actually be the great equalizer. At first glance, this idea may seem too utilitarian and too good to be true. It is indeed possible, however, it requires a sustained investment.¹

Saldaña et al. take on a project of providing the logistics that would be required if schools were places where every child thrived by assigning a price tag on such a school in North Carolina:

Starting with an analysis of North Carolina’s public schools, the report finds that the provision of true educational opportunity in the state would be \$36.6 billion to \$43.4 billion per year. This would move the per-pupil spending from one of the worst in the U.S. (approximately \$11,300), to one of the best—at roughly \$23,600 to \$28,000 per pupil.²

Although this doubling of per-student investment and spending may seem daunting, as Saldaña et al. have shown, it is feasible. According to the 2024 Forbes ranking of countries by GDP, America, one of the top ten wealthiest countries in the world³, can afford to fully equalize educational opportunities if we (the collective will) truly desire it. Yet, there is increased competition for spots at selective magnet schools, outweighing their supply. This scarcity problem requires schools and school boards to make decisions about how enrollment is equitably distributed. Let us take Thomas Jefferson High School of Science and Technology (TJ), a magnet public high school in Virginia that holds the reputation for being one of the best public high schools in the United States as an example.⁴

¹ Chris Saldaña, Anna Deese, Kevin Welner, Kathryn Wiley, Tatianna Grant, Adam York, Michelle Renée Valladares, and John Myers, “Taking Equal Opportunity Rhetoric Seriously: Envisioning and Costing-Out a P-12 Public School System in North Carolina Where Every Child Thrives: A Working Document,” *National Education Policy Center* (2024).

² Saldaña et al., “Equal Opportunity,” 2.

³ Katharina Buchholz, “Continental Shift: The Biggest Economies Over Time [Infographic],” *Forbes*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2024/02/15/continental-shift-the-biggest-economies-over-time-infographic/>.

⁴ “Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology,” *US News & World Report*, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/virginia/districts/fairfax->

In 2019-2020, TJ reported that there were only 1.72% and 2.6% Black and Hispanic students respectively enrolled. To address concerns of low enrollment of minoritized students, the school board revised the admissions policy, eliminating the required standardized test and waiving the \$100 application fee.

Acknowledging that educational decision-making is laden with value judgments, Brighthouse et al. developed a decision-making framework⁵ that emphasizes the clarity of educational goods and their valuable distribution. The framework is a four-part procedure. First, decision-makers ought to identify the valuable outcomes that are to be achieved. For TJ, the Fairfax County School Board sought to improve diversity in the student body. Second, the decision-makers need to identify key decisions and feasible options for achieving the outcome identified in the first step. The feasible options that the Fairfax County School Board could have used included improved outreach methods, computerized lottery, zip code preferences, removal of the standardized entrance test, and waiving of admissions fees. The third step of the Brighthouse et al. framework is the evaluation of options considering pertinent values. This evaluation is rooted in research and empirical evidence. According to a research report by the Office of Research and Strategic Improvement at TJ's admissions office, efforts to improve diversity at the school began in 2011 and continued every other year after that. Several strategies were implemented; for instance, in 2011-12, TJ created an outreach specialist position with the intent to improve outreach for minoritized students. Again in 2013-14, the TJ school board revised the admissions policy for a holistic review of candidates. In another year, TJ experimented with a sliding scale, and they revised the tests by introducing a problem-solving essay in a different year. All these revisions over the years did little to improve the diversity of the student body at TJ. The fourth and final step is that the decision maker chooses the best expected overall outcome. The Fairfax School Board County unanimously voted to eliminate the required standardized testing in TJ, waive the admissions fee, and guarantee admission to the top 1.5% of each Fairfax County middle school.

Although robust, the decision-making framework by Brighthouse et al. does not eliminate the tensions of values that exist in achieving educational equity in the real world. The application/conceptualization of equity in education has been butting heads with policy and politics. For instance, a coalition of Asian American parents challenged, in court, the policy of TJ intended to promote equity, on the basis that it was inequitable and discriminatory to Asian American students. At the core of this lawsuit is the application of equity. The term equity is rhetoric that everyone uses, but it means different things to different people

[county-public-schools/thomas-jefferson-high-school-for-science-and-technology-20461](https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicschools/thomas-jefferson-high-school-for-science-and-technology-20461). Accessed 9 Apr. 2024.

⁵ Harry Brighthouse, Helen F. Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift. "Educational Goods and Values: A Framework for Decision Makers." *Theory and Research in Education* 14, no. 1 (2016): 3-25.

because people, parents, and school boards have different notions of fairness.⁶⁷ Levinson et al. attempt to dispel some of the misconceptions with the common application of equity and argue that educational values can and do conflict with equity. Since educational values and equity can sometimes conflict, Levinson et al. assert that there is the need to be transparent, especially when educational values do not align/are not treading similar grounds and to acknowledge tradeoffs in equity talks. Schools make judgement calls about what values are more important and what values can be forfeited. In these highly competitive and selective schools with limited slots, admissions policies focus on tradeoffs. Since this concept of trade-offs is rooted in political liberalism, this research utilizes the theoretical frameworks of political liberalism to rationalize and understand the concept of equity in admissions policies in selective admissions magnet schools.

Political Liberalism: A Justification for Why TJ's Revised Admissions Policy is Equitable

In contexts where resources such as enrollment slots at selective schools like TJ are limited, political liberalism provides a framework for understanding and justifying difficult policy. Political liberalism is a term that is used to describe a particular trend in liberal political philosophy. Political liberalism is a particular group of ideas associated with a political theory, one based on an old, western Enlightenment-era set of ideas about how political power gets distributed in a pluralist state where individual rights are enshrined in a constitution.

This idea of political liberalism is borne out of Rawls' critique of liberalism. Liberalism is rooted in showing that the arrangement between the state and the people is justifiable to the people, a social construct of some sort⁸. In this social construct, the liberal political order is best at respecting individual rights and liberties, and is protective of what is good for human beings, giving individuals a conclusive reason to consent to the state. However, Rawls critiques and articulates a problem within liberalism: a plurality of conceptions of what is good, what is right, and what human nature is. Rawls argues that a liberal state creates minds that diverge over issues. This plurality and divergence over issues make it difficult to justify the liberal political order to everyone; there is a

⁶ Meira Levinson, Tatiana Geron, and Harry Brighouse, "Conceptions of Educational Equity," *AEA Open* 8 (2022).

⁷ Cara Furman and Derek Gottlieb, hosts, *Thinking in the Midst*, episode 28, "On the Concept of Equity," Philosophy of Education Society, October 27, 2023, 60 min., <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/28-on-the-concept-of-equity/id1668433164?i=1000632826314>.

⁸ Harry Brighouse, "Is There Any Such Thing as Political Liberalism?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 75, no. 3-4 (1994): 318-332.

disagreement about what the nature of political order should be. This pushback by Rawls is where political liberalism originates from.

Specifically, political liberalism acknowledges that in a pluralistic society, citizens hold a variety of reasonable but sometimes conflicting conceptions of the good life⁹. As a result, the distribution of scarce educational opportunities inevitably involves trade-offs among competing values, such as fairness, merit, and diversity. Drawing on principles such as Rawls's difference principle, political liberalism aims to ensure that inequalities in educational opportunity are justified only if they benefit the least advantaged. The goal is to create a system that is fair and legitimate in the eyes of all citizens, even amid deep diversity and disagreement. From a political liberalism perspective, the TJ case exemplifies the kind of trade-offs and contestation that arise in a pluralistic society. The school board had to balance competing claims: the demand for greater diversity and inclusion, as well as the protection of individual rights and meritocratic principles. Political liberalism recognizes that in a pluralistic society, no single policy can fully satisfy all groups. The TJ case illustrates this reality: efforts to promote diversity and inclusion required trade-offs that reduced the representation of a previously dominant group. The policy was upheld by the courts as race-neutral and constitutional, but it remains controversial because it necessarily privileges some values (diversity, broader access) over others (merit as measured by tests, continuity for high-achieving groups).^{10,11,12}

This approach does not eliminate conflict or guarantee perfect outcomes, but it does provide a coherent rationale for making collective decisions in a society committed to both individual rights and the common good. However, political liberalism, while offering a principled framework for managing pluralism and trade-offs in democratic societies, faces significant limitations when confronting the entrenched inequalities of wealth and power that divide the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Critical Policy Analysis as a Critique

Will political liberalism alone really help us get at the vast inequalities of wealth and power between the “haves” and “have-nots” in our society? Diem et

⁹ Blain Neufeld, “Political Liberalism, Autonomy, and Education,” *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 35-51.

¹⁰ Sarah A. Cordes, “Enhancing Diversity in Selective-Admissions Schools: Are Centralized Lotteries and Geographic Preferences Effective? An Essay for the Learning Curve,” *Urban Institute* (April 26, 2024),

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/enhancing-diversity-selective-admissions-schools-are-centralized-lotteries>.

¹¹ Suzanne Eckes, “Diversifying K-12 Public Schools: A Federal Court Finds Admission Plan Unconstitutional,” *UCLA Law Review: Discourse* 70 (2022): 302.

¹² Janel George and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Advancing Integration and Equity through Magnet Schools,” Learning Policy Institute (2021).

al. make the argument against political liberalism particularly eloquently using critical frameworks to question the “deliberate, linear process where an identifiable set of actors apply reason and research strategies to ensure the best policy outcomes.”¹³

Trade-offs, the central idea of political liberalism, rely on pluralism, and the general acceptance, or what Rawls calls the “overlapping consensus,” that one value is being passed over either for a more important value or for the greater good; the overlapping consensus holds out hope that people can agree on the conception of equity in admissions despite differences. This approach assumes that, even amid disagreement, citizens can accept that some values may be set aside for the sake of more important ones or for the greater good. In the context of admissions at selective schools like TJ, this means hoping that stakeholders will accept a particular conception of equity, even if it does not fully align with their own interests or values.

Additionally, critical policy analysis (CPA) scholars protest this narrow approach to equity in admissions, arguing that it is context-blind in its rational deliberation and its seeking of a consensus. One major context for policy that Diem et al. assert is the distribution of power. CPA acknowledges a power dynamic, that there are winners and losers, and, as a result, that not all voices have equal standing; thus, the emphasis of political liberalism on a consensus depoliticizes equity in admissions, which is rarely the case due to systemic power imbalances.¹⁴ Influential critical policy scholars like Diem and Young emphasize that policies like those that determine an inequitable distribution of knowledge or resources may often be presented as a reality but more often are political rhetoric and, regardless of the intent, manage to reproduce a stratified society.¹⁵

Furthermore, the political liberalism conception of comparing just and fair educational values may not be as just as perceived because selective magnet schools have used standardized tests as a neutral way of distributing resources equally. Bialystok defines neutrality as not giving preference to one group over another.¹⁶ This method of solving the scarcity problem—used by highly competitive magnet schools in large urban areas—by using a modified form of meritocratic criteria has sufficiently been critiqued by critical policy scholars as a system that advances students from wealthier backgrounds over poorer students. Merit-based policies often lead to disparate impacts on marginalized communities. As a result, policies that appear fair or just on the surface can

¹³ Sarah Diem, Michelle D. Young, and Carrie Sampson, “Where Critical Policy Meets the Politics of Education: An Introduction,” *Educational Policy* 33, no. 1 (2019): 3-15

¹⁴ Diem, Young, and Sampson, “Critical Policy,” 2.

¹⁵ Michelle D Young and Sarah Diem, “Introduction: Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis,” *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis: Moving Beyond Tradition* (2017): 1-13.

¹⁶ Lauren Bialystok, “Politics Without ‘Brainwashing’: A Philosophical Defence of Social Justice Education,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2014): 413-440.

perpetuate or even exacerbate disparities, leading to disparate impacts on marginalized communities.

Diem et al. and other critical scholars contend that policies governing the distribution of knowledge and resources are not merely technical solutions to scarcity but are deeply political acts. They argue that the rhetoric of neutrality and consensus often serves to legitimize and reproduce a stratified society, rather than challenge the underlying structures of inequality. Even well-intentioned reforms can fall short if they fail to address the broader context of power and privilege that shapes who benefits from educational opportunities. Critical policy analysis urges us to look beyond formal procedures and consensus-building to confront the deeper, often invisible, dynamics of power that shape policy outcomes and perpetuate social stratification.

It is well within the capacity of a wealthy nation like the United States to provide high-quality education for all its citizens. The resources exist to ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to excellent educational opportunities. Yet, in practice, our educational systems, particularly admissions to selective schools, are structured around scarcity and competition. Policymakers must decide how to allocate limited seats in elite schools, weighing competing values such as merit, diversity, and equal opportunity. These decisions are not merely technical; they reflect deeper philosophical commitments about what is fair and just in a pluralistic society. Rather than treating policy as a neutral or technical exercise, CPA exposes how policies often reproduce existing hierarchies and inequities.

If we acknowledge that the resources to educate all exist, we might imagine a radically different approach: one that moves beyond managing scarcity and trade-offs.

CULTURAL HISTORY AND THE OHIO VALLEY PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY: MEMORY AND THE CREATION OF A USABLE PAST

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Cultural historian Hilda Kean explains the field of public history, both historically and epistemologically, writing that, for public historians, the “output” varies due to the way that history is constructed. She quotes Geoff Eley and Keith Nield as saying: “the past can be made knowable only through an active process of construction, which shapes not only the resulting interpretations, but even the evidence and documentation on which the latter have to be based.”¹ In other words, source material and those who interpret the source material create history. There is no guarantee, according to Kean, that “the history and the past” are one and the same.² Kean underscores the value of the process of creating history, rather than merely placing the focus on the output itself. Because the process is always going to be a product of interpretation, recognizing this allows for more flexibility and transparency in the way that histories are created and told.

In this paper, I contend with the concept of a “usable” past and employ cultural history as a philosophical framework. More specifically, I analyze the use of cultural history to interrogate the founding and subsequent trajectory of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society (OVPEs). I investigate how cultural history and public history allow the historian to create a “usable past,” and how the historian can use limited resources to their advantage to create a historical account.

What roles do the public and the historian play in the creation of public history? The audience and the historian share a “common humanity.”³ Kean argues that “the creation of history by ‘a thousand different hands’ resulted in a social form of knowing.”⁴ The public historian works alongside the public to construct histories through shared inquiry. Thus, the known becomes a more active process—one of know-*ing*.⁵

According to historians Katherine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, “public historians serve as mediators between the past and the present, between the truths

¹ Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, qtd. in Hilda Kean, “Public History as a Social Form of Knowledge,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, eds. James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton (Oxford University Press, 2017), 403.

² Kean, “Public History,” 403.

³ Kean, “Public History,” 404.

⁴ Kean, “Public History,” 404.

⁵ Kean, “Public History,” 404.

we want to tell and the truths people want us to tell.”⁶ That is, public historians are charged with keeping and maintaining important myths and truths, but also with shaping the ways that those myths and truths are presented. Unlike in more traditional, academic forms of history, the concepts of shared inquiry as well as shared authority are essential in the creation of what public historians call a “usable past,” or a historical account that is meant to tell an accurate and relevant story to people in the present about their own histories. Public historians must reflectively engage and share authority with the public they are writing histories about, but they must do so in an epistemologically responsible way. Ultimately, by prioritizing shared authority and shared inquiry, popular histories can be created *with* the public meant to engage with these histories. Using this framework, I discuss how I can work with the OVPES membership to create and maintain a usable historical account of the society.

A Brief History of the Development of Societies for Philosophy of Education

Philosophy of Education Society

According to Clint Collins, there were three academic philosophical societies developed in direct response to the social changes initiated during the first several decades of the twentieth century.⁷ These three organizations, the Progressive Education Association, the John Dewey Society, and the Philosophy of Education Society (PES), provided roots for the several regional societies that developed throughout the second half of the twentieth century.⁸ The Progressive Education Association, founded shortly after World War I, promoted innovation in American schools. By 1935, a global economic depression led George Counts and Harold Rugg at Teachers College in Columbia to create the John Dewey Society to encourage educators to respond to American economic and social change. By 1941, the changing political scene, instigated by the world wars, prompted philosophers of education to form a more academically rigorous and less politically driven scholarly community. This became the Philosophy of Education Society.⁹

According to its website, PES was the brainchild of R. Bruce Raup from Columbia’s Teachers College.¹⁰ In 1940, Raup penned a letter suggesting that an association be formed to create a formal network of those who engaged professionally with perpetuating philosophy as it pertains to education. The first

⁶ Katherine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry,” *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (2006): 38.

⁷ Typescript of historical account of OVPES, “A History of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society,” by Clint Collins, 2008. Folder 3, Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Records, Atlanta, Georgia, United States.

⁸ Typescript of historical account of OVPES, 1.

⁹ Typescript of historical account of OVPES, 1.

¹⁰ “About Us,” The Philosophy of Education Society, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://www.philosophyofeducation.org/About-Us>.

members were expected to be “possessed of working knowledge in the history of philosophy, and having given evidence of positive work done in the field; able to work with the ‘tools’ of the field and devoted to the promotion of philosophy in and of education.”¹¹ These thirty-four members held their first meeting on February 22nd, 1941, where they chartered the organization and official named it the “Philosophy of Education Society.”¹²

Regional Societies: OVPES and SEPES

In addition to the more prestigious national level society, there are also several regional associations. The Southeastern Philosophy of Education Society (SEPES) held its first meeting in 1948 in Albany, Georgia at the direction of S.G. Brinkley and J. W. Norman.¹³ The intent of the creation of this society was to provide a regional division that could potentially be more inclusive of the topics of concern at a more local level. The society originally included South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, but it ended up expanding to Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Virginia, and West Virginia by the late 1980s.¹⁴ By their third meeting, SEPES received letters from John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, H. Gordon Hullfish, and Bruce Raup.¹⁵ Dewey wrote “work to keep open the channels of communication, to prevent ‘curtains’ of class interest or national interest, or any other, from shutting out light and preventing freedom of inquiry and expression.”¹⁶ While there is ambiguity around the full context of Dewey’s letter, the quote does highlight some tension around the purpose of education and the aim of these professional philosophical associations. Moreover, his letter also potentially emphasizes disagreements stemming from regional conflicts. This also indicates the direct influence of progressive education reform in the development of these professional organizations. The initial meeting did not involve reading and responding to papers, but instead centered around discourse and group conversations about topics deemed important to the profession.¹⁷

The founding dates for OVPES are difficult to pinpoint. Clint Collins notes that the only source he located prior to his own first attendance in 1961 comes from Philip G. Smith’s papers left behind at his death.¹⁸ Smith, described by Collins as the society’s most honored member, began graduate study at The Ohio State University in 1950, and provided artifacts from OVPES meetings beginning in 1952. In addition, in the minutes of the 1969 meeting of OVPES, A. Stafford Clayton included a tribute to the recently deceased Stanley Ballinger,

¹¹ “About Us,” The Philosophy of Education Society.

¹² “About Us,” The Philosophy of Education Society.

¹³ Robert P. Sherman, “History,” SEPES, accessed 27 February 2024, <https://sepesociety.wordpress.com/about/history/>.

¹⁴ Sherman, “History.”

¹⁵ Sherman, “History.”

¹⁶ Sherman, “History.”

¹⁷ Sherman, “History.”

¹⁸ Typescript of historical account of OVPES, 2.

his colleague at Indiana University, that reads in part, “He was a member of the society [OVPES] since 1950 and was therefore one of the early participants.”¹⁹ It is likely, then, that OVPES began meeting in 1950. Collins notes that it is likely that OVPES received similar welcoming letters as SEPES from scholars like John Dewey.

What is Cultural History and What Can it Offer?

Cultural history lies at the nexus between anthropological and historical research. Throughout the twentieth century, the two disciplines found themselves intertwining, both in content and method. While earlier iterations of both disciplines often relied on empirical research, by the latter half of the twentieth century, new interpretations of both history and anthropology made way for what we know today as cultural history.²⁰ That is, theorists worked to establish cultural history as a field that made room for hermeneutical and semiotic interpretations based on more nebulous concepts such as race, gender, and class through the lens of culture.

The work of nineteenth-century anthropologist Émile Durkheim precipitated changes in the ways that we conceive of the role of society and culture in anthropological studies. Specifically, he advocated for the concept of functionalism, or that “human behavior is fundamentally shaped by the moral, religious and social society in which the individual lives. The social cohesion of any society is achieved through communal rituals and ceremonies, and these therefore fulfill important functions in that society.”²¹ For anthropologists, this led to the inclusion of a more historical approach, i.e., examining societies within their specific temporal location.

Furthermore, for historians, this functionalism led to an understanding that culture and society functioned similarly to organic bodies, implying that various aspects of society and culture work in tandem as parts of a whole.²² By 1961, historians such as Keith Thomas argued for this “holistic” approach to history. Thomas argued that social anthropology offered historians a chance to examine smaller moments and everyday life for the average person. Unlike traditional historical accounts offered up to that point, Thomas pointed out that, for most people, most of their time was spent participating in everyday activities. In other words, Thomas is pointing out the shift from focusing on the public sphere to the goings on of the private sphere.²³

¹⁹ Typescript of historical account of OVPES, 2.

²⁰ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, “Anthropology and Ethnohistorians” in *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York University Press, 1999), 172-173.

²¹ Green and Troup, “Anthropology and Ethnohistorians,” 173.

²² Green and Troup, “Anthropology and Ethnohistorians,” 173-174.

²³ Green and Troup, “Anthropology and Ethnohistorians,” 174.

While the 1970s saw the movement towards cultural anthropology, by the 1980s and 1990s historian William Sewell began discussing what he calls a “kind of academic culture mania”—a turn towards culture across several disciplines.²⁴ He credits poststructuralists Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault for this new reliance on culture vis-à-vis literary studies, philosophy, and history.²⁵ Sewell argues that by the late 1990s, this transdisciplinary permeation of cultural studies resulted in a fairly nebulous, muddled conception of culture. Sewell writes, “If, as Derrida declared, nothing is extratextual (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*) literary critics could direct their theory-driven gaze upon semiotic products of all kinds... and seek out their intertextualities,” leading to the increasing tendency of literary studies to result in the study of cultures.²⁶

Sewell argues that the nebulous nature of the concept of culture can lead to a sort of cultural incoherence. His solution is two-fold. First, he argues that in order to access a more complete and legible cultural historical account, historians must not only look at the moments of resistance, but also at largescale, dominant cultural ideologies. At the same time, however, he argues that there are not inherently divisions of “discrete ‘societies,’ each with its corresponding and well-integrated ‘culture.’”²⁷ Instead, he concedes that there are thin sites of cohesion. That is, there are “worlds of meaning” that “hang together.”²⁸ Both place and time play a part in the creation of these sites of cohesion, but their boundaries are both “relative and constantly shifting.”²⁹

Though there are criticisms of cultural history, this lens allows the historian to both give voice to those who have been historically silenced and also widens the type of source material that can be utilized. Because of this, we have access to what life might have been like for women, people of color, and, in general, the everyday lives of people, both elites and non-elites. The contributions of cultural historians can be seen in the works of Robert Darnton, for example, who drew much of his method of analysis from anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, explains the concept of “thick description” in his discussion of the role of cockfighting in Balinese culture.³⁰ Critiquing a merely functionalist approach, Geertz writes:

What sets cockfighting apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status

²⁴ William Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, eds. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (University of California Press, 1999), 36.

²⁵ Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 37.

²⁶ Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 36.

²⁷ Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 57.

²⁸ Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 58.

²⁹ Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 57-58.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973).

discriminations (such reinforcement is hardly necessary in a society where every act proclaims them), but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.³¹

In other words, Geertz is arguing that scholars may investigate the deeper meanings behind performances, celebrations, or rituals to better understand and disentangle complex social and emotional meanings and truths about a specific society. This, according to Geertz, would allow the anthropologist to not only be able to describe the functions or roles of peoples within a society, but to be able to understand the significance of certain performances in their own words. That is, the anthropologist can witness “a story they tell themselves about themselves,” allowing an outsider to move closer to attaining insider access.³²

Cultural History: Implicit Roles

In this vein, I argue that regarding the history of OVPES through a cultural historical lens is beneficial. While the explicit aims of the society tell us its contemporary goals, there are possibly other aims of the society that can only be ascertained by “reading against the grain.” That is: not reading what is explicitly mentioned, but using the experiences of members of the society, evaluating the historical membership of the society, examining programs, meeting minutes, and financial records, all to examine what is not there, or what (or who) is missing.

Though cultural history is often done “against the grain,” it is broadly used to examine “topics related to society as a whole.”³³ Rather than exploring a topic as if it were disembodied from the rest of society, cultural history explores the ways in which certain topics might symbolically explain cultural phenomena in specific geographic and temporal locations. I argue that by examining the history of OVPES through a cultural lens, we may not only ascertain the history of philosophy of education, but we may also better understand the cultural function of these professional societies.

Finally, a compelling reason to examine the history of regional societies through a cultural historical lens is due to the types of source material we have access to. Because many of the records made available to historians regarding these professional organizations are created through the memories of members of the society, a cultural and public historical approach is useful. Source material such as meeting minutes, financial records, or membership records may

³¹ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

³² Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.

³³ Green and Troup, “Anthropology and Ethnohistorians,” 174.

potentially be more straightforward, but the narrative histories of these societies could be approached from a more Geertzian perspective—that is, as a “story they tell themselves about themselves.”³⁴

To illustrate this point, consider the story of how the OVPES archives have historically been created and maintained. At an OVPES meeting a few years ago, members of the society approached me with the idea of helping OVPES to update their historical narrative, as the last time it was updated was in 2008. The members mentioned OVPES archives, but they were in a general state of disarray. I was subsequently mailed a large brown box full of folders, ephemera, and loose papers. I then began the process of archiving the records. I organized the records into several smaller boxes by folder and created a finding aid to accompany them. I ultimately digitized the archives, which are in the process of being made available online.

I share this story to highlight two important things about the active role of the society’s members. First, that there is a concerted effort by its members to preserve their history, indicating a strong desire to actively participate in the creation of a historical account. Second, that the records are created, maintained, and interpreted by its members as well. This is why I argue that, because of the unique tensions between the emic and etic nature of this project, a cultural and public historical methodology would prove useful. Though I do not have personal experience with other regional societies to this degree, I anticipate that they may be experiencing those same tensions when it comes to creating an epistemologically responsible history of their organizations.

This cultural historical approach values the stories told by members of these regional societies by sharing inquiry with these members. Additionally, however, the historian must potentially come to view themselves as a mediator among entities like OVPES, historical myths, and historical truths.

Perennial Issues in Philosophy of Education

When examining the writings of leaders in philosophy of education at the inception of the national organization (PES), we can begin to understand some of the ongoing topics of disagreement that facilitated the need for the creation of spaces to engage in debate, and eventually, in the creation of regional societies. For example, we see John Dewey’s response to the creation of SEPES. Again, he wrote: “work to keep open the channels of communication, to prevent ‘curtains’ of class interest or national interest, or any other, from shutting out light and preventing freedom of inquiry and expression,” highlighting a couple of potentialities. One possibility is that regional societies might make possible this “freedom of inquiry,” thus also implying that national forums for discussion stymied efforts to encourage that freedom. On the other hand, it is possible that Dewey is cautioning regional societies with the expectation that *regional*

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 101, no.1 (1972): 448.

societies would risk obfuscating the freedom of inquiry.³⁵ Here, the mention of “class interest” is also worth noting, as this suggests that these organizations might have acted as spaces for the reification of social class in America, which is invariably also tied to race and gender exclusion. This insinuates that one of the perennial issues affecting philosophy of education was that of class structure and social mobility.

Furthermore, early meeting minutes for OVPES mentioned debates over the role of philosophy of education as well as the role of philosophy of education in teacher preparation programs—an issue mentioned in the current OVPES mission statement as well.³⁶ The 1958 OVPES meeting saw the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defend the lack of philosophy in teacher education programs. This defense was met with philosophers of education arguing that the absence of philosophy in teacher preparation programs marked the divide between teacher training versus teacher education.³⁷

Additionally, a perennial issue in the history of OVPES, and the history of philosophy of education more broadly, is how to maintain academic rigor as well as maintain membership. Thus, there have been attempts to be more inclusive, which is made evident by the current inclusion of other forms of education research. Debates over the hierarchy of various research methods in education are ongoing and were debated in the early years of the society as well.³⁸

Future Implications

There are a variety of implications for further research of the cultural history of regional philosophy of education organizations. First, further research would require both a more thorough interrogation of sources already mentioned, as well as tapping into a wider variety of source material. In addition to the sources mentioned, oral histories could provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the history of the philosophy of education as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the social network created by these regional organizations. Working *with* members of regional organizations, like OVPES, would allow the historian to begin engaging in the shared inquiry, or shared authority approach championed by cultural and public historians.

Additionally, widening the interrogation to all of the regional societies would potentially bolster or refute the arguments surrounding the perennial issues in philosophy of education. Examining other societies would allow the historian to make patterns clearer, more apparent, and more convincing.

³⁵ Sherman, “History.”

³⁶ Typescript of historical account of OVPES.

³⁷ Typescript of historical account of OVPES.

³⁸ Typescript of historical account of OVPES.

So What?

We are left with the so what question. Why do we care about the cultural history of these organizations? If, as this initial investigation suggests, one of the primary functions of these regional societies is to create a space for new academics to be mentored by current members of the society, the organization is serving as a site for social reproduction. In other words, these regional organizations are created by academics to perpetuate a relatively exclusive space for the creation of new academics to engage in convivial debate about perennial topics in philosophy of education. While these spaces are integral to working through philosophical problems and challenges, tensions between inclusivity and rigor remain at the forefront. If these societies wish to engage in the change associated with the progressive reform movement that led to their existence, their histories as well as their contemporary practices may not align with the change they seek.

Additionally, the “so what?” may also lie in the demand and interest of regional society members to preserve their history. If the researcher takes a cultural and public historical stance, a “usable past” for the members of these regional organizations should be created simply because these communities value their past and their histories. Historians may also begin to examine the question of “why now?” What can we learn about the social history of these societies by unpacking their renewed interest in preserving the past?

Finally, I argue that framing our understanding of the history of regional philosophical societies as a “usable past” is beneficial to the survival of these regional societies like OVPES. The creation of a “usable past,” or a historical account that is meant to tell an accurate and relevant story to people in the present about their own histories, requires the historian and those they are working with to create this “usable past” to remain seekers of truth throughout the historical process. In his recent study on the evolution of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, James Campbell wrote that “Our Society can help to create a “usable past” for individual members, and our members can help to do this for the Society. Any living society can be an evolving society; however, without a deep connection with its roots, a society disintegrates rather than evolves.”³⁹

³⁹ James Campbell, “The Evolution of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy,” *The Pluralist* 19, no. 1 (2024): 1-13.

THE STUDENT FUNCTIONAL UNIT:
REVISITING HOW WE CONCEPTUALIZE STUDENTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

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As philosophers of education, we rely on a set of concepts. We refer to students, teachers, learners, schools, classrooms, etc. to theorize about what education is and ought to be. In employing these concepts, however, two ambiguities arise: variation among conceptualizations and gaps between a conceptualization of a thing and the normative valence it holds. A concept can refer both to the thing as it is and the thing as it ought to be.

Among higher education theorists, ‘student’ can mean a variety of things. ‘Student’ is consumer, citizen, citizen-in-training, learner to be transformed, apprentice, stakeholder, young person, person who enrolls, etc.¹ Each conceptualization of the student has empirical grounding in higher education, while also holding some normative valence about what ‘one who is student’ is owed and what an institution—including administrators, trustees, faculty, and staff—ought to do for them. Consumers are owed a service for their investment; citizens owed their rights; learners owed developmental entitlements, etc. The variation among conceptualizations of ‘student’ in higher education, however, can pose problems for cooperation between institutional actors when they understand students differently.

The reminder that colleges are “for” students is often invoked pragmatically in instances of disagreement between institutional actors in an attempt to find common ground. The idea goes something like, at least we can all agree the institution is meant to serve students. But this approach is not necessarily a path

¹ Louise Bunce, Amy Baird, and Siân E. Jones, “The Student-as-Consumer Approach in Higher Education and Its Effects on Academic Performance,” *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 11 (2017): 1958-1978; Mike Molesworth, Richard Scullion, and Elizabeth Nixon, eds., *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* (Routledge, 2011); Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); Sigal R. Ben-Porath, “Cancel Wars: How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy,” in *Cancel Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2023); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University, 1997); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, updated ed. (2016); Laurie A. Paul and John Quiggin, “Transformative Education,” *Educational Theory* 70, no. 5 (2020): 561-579; Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Mortimer R Kadish, *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

to common ground or even mutual legibility between competing conceptions. Imagine two campus administrators debating over how the institution should respond to student protestors. One might think allowing the students to protest on campus grounds is what it means for the institution to be “for students” (i.e. a place for students to exercise their rights). The other administrator might just as easily think college is “for students” in the sense that it is there to teach them, to train them as citizens, perhaps by shutting down their protests as a lesson in appropriate civic engagement. In this case, invoking the phrase that “college is for students” does little to establish common ground between the administrators; they disagree about the normative entailments of this conceptualization of the institution, which means each other’s proposed response would be dissatisfying. Their divergent conceptualizations of students are a barrier to problem solving in response to student protests.

I propose a different approach that, rather than resting on a normative account of higher education institutions—about which institutional actors can reasonably disagree—looks to what is true of students descriptively: students are necessary for and to the institution such that the institution can only be *for* them through their own participation. This institution exists *because of* students; they are the institutional functional unit.

I explore this underexamined conceptualization of students as the institutional functional unit. Though not a definitive solution, I suggest this overlooked dimension of students underlies all other conceptualizations of students in ways that might assist institutional actors in finding mutual legibility across competing conceptualizations.

It is worth noting, in referencing institutional actors and their conceptualizations of students, I am primarily referring to actors within higher education institutions who are *not* students. That is not to say that the ways students conceptualize themselves are not important. How students approach and understand their participation in the institution can be a substantial barrier to institutional success, as will become clear in my account. Yet, I focus on institutional actors *other* than students due to limitations of space and because of a difference in stakes. Understanding students as the institutional functional unit might be useful for cooperation and problem solving among institutional actors other than students. Though also useful to students in this way, the implications of this shared understanding for them as a class of institutional actors is far greater than the mere potential for mutual legibility. To review the extent of these implications is beyond the scope of this paper and a topic I take up elsewhere.² My purposes here, rather than rallying student awareness of their mutual and collective institutional positioning (though a positive potential byproduct), is to convey to other institutional actors the possible epistemic overlap and common ground they could find by acknowledging this descriptive aspect of students.

² Jamie Herman, “Is US Higher Education Legitimate? Institutions, Political Legitimacy, and Student Consent” (manuscript).

'Students' in Higher Education

First, let's review conceptualizations of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) to see how they can contribute to disagreement and inhibit problem solving. There are various ways to conceptualize 'student' in higher education, each of which corresponds to a way of understanding HEIs and their purpose. At a basic level, each institutional actor—administrators, faculty, staff, and students themselves—understand 'students' from their position within the institution. To residence hall directors, students are people seeking a space to call home while navigating campus life; to librarians, students are explorers learning the ways of scholarly discovery, or ignorant beneficiaries loudly occupying spaces intended for study; to student life staff they are future leaders championing important causes; to campus custodians students are their ungrateful, messy occupants. These caricatures, though purposefully reductive, begin to outline the varied ways students are framed within the institution. One can begin to see how different institutional actors might disagree about how students ought to be treated, what they are owed, and how best they are to be supported, especially given their different positions within the institution. This can cause problems for decision making and cooperation.

Conceptualizations of students can also vary among institutional actors who are similarly positioned in relationship to students, causing problems for cooperation. Consider the ways faculty talk about students. Students are future researchers, confused sheep, budding academics, independent adults, a necessary evil, peers, departmental lifeblood, co-creators, collaborators, professionals-in-training, artists, ignorant know-it-alls, citizens, and children, among other things. To some faculty, students are all these things. To others they are essentially irrelevant. Imagine you are in a department meeting with a variety of colleagues who hold each of these views. You are assigning teaching loads and redesigning student feedback surveys to better capture students' opinions on instruction. Though you might be inclined to shut down the colleagues who conceptualize students in ways you consider inaccurate or wrong, arguing that they fundamentally misunderstand students and their role as faculty likely will not generate the cooperation you need to finish the department meeting.

Even disagreement *within* a given conceptualization can inhibit problem solving. For example, many educational theorists and practitioners agree that HEIs have some role to play in fostering students' civic development. What this entails and the justification for it, however, rests on different conceptualizations of students. Some theorists suggest college classrooms have a role to play in civic development because students are citizens, owed the rights of free speech and dignity of persons; others suggest classrooms ought to play this role because students are citizens-in-training entitled to a space where they can try out their ideas and practice democratic dialogue.³ Though conceptualizing students as

³ Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free Speech on Campus* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Eamonn Callan, "Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces," *Philosophical Inquiry*

citizens and citizens-in-training might not appear terribly different, in arguments over students' rights related to speech, safety, and educational entitlements, whether students are understood as citizens or persons in need of training for civic life distinguishes what is permissible, justifiable, and legitimate from what is not. Recall the disagreement between the administrators over responding to student protests. How they understand students informs what each believes is a justifiable response (e.g., to allow vs. to shut down student protests). While resolving these disagreements is important for considerations of justice, it can be counterproductive to decision making and problem solving when HEIs require some cooperation across difference to function.

In HEIs, as in all institutions amidst pluralism, individuals need to coordinate to achieve their diverse goals. When people with divergent views need to coordinate, debating whose understanding of the institution, its members, and its purpose is 'correct' is distracting. Acknowledging diverse conceptualizations is important, but arguing whose understanding is correct can be counterproductive, only serving to corrode possible mutual understanding and future cooperation. Additionally, in arguing over how best to understand students, institutional actors can *miss* the purposes they do share.

Regardless of one's position as an institutional actor pursuing their varied life plans via HEIs, all should be able to find some epistemic overlap in the fact that the institution would not exist and function as it does without students; students are the institutional functional unit. This dimension of students in higher education underscores all the ways we might explain HEIs and conceptualize students' presence and role therein. Exploring this underexamined, descriptive aspect of students could lend to mutual legibility.

'Student' as Institutional Functional Unit

Rather than higher education being 'for students'—invoking diverse normative conceptions about which actors disagree—I argue higher education cannot be *for* students without their participation. This section provides a descriptive account of students as the institutional functional unit: an aspect of students that remains true across conceptualizations.

If HEIs exist to serve students (as citizens, trainees, customers, emerging adults, etc.), all institutional practices, to some degree, are carried out in service of students, for their benefit. The opposite is also true: students are necessary for and to institutional practices such that the institution can only be for them through their own participation. This institution exists *because of* students; they are the institutional functional unit. I outline two ways institutions rely on students to function: to achieve their aims, regardless of the aim, and to sustain basic institutional functions. Among varied conceptualizations of students that

in Education 24, no. 1 (2016): 64-78; Christopher Martin, "Should Deliberative Democratic Inclusion Extend to Children?" *Democracy and Education* 26, no. 2 (2018): 4; Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*.

can make cooperation difficult amidst disagreement, I introduce this underlying aspect of students to highlight a potential area of common ground upon which institutional actors with divergent views of students could potentially identify epistemic overlap, improving upon the mutual intelligibility required for cooperation.

'Students' as Functional Unit of Institutional Success

Students play a clear functional role in HEIs such that they are essential to any HEI mission. Consider a couple oft-cited aims of higher education: civic and vocational education. Each requires some participation from students. For the HEI to succeed at civic education, students need to be civically educated, however construed. Success at vocational education requires students to undergo some preparation for a vocation. HEIs cannot claim to civically or vocationally educate without persons to undergo that education. Without students to participate, HEIs could only claim the potential to educate. The institution only succeeds if students undertake the educational process. Student participation of some degree is essential to the institution achieving success in its various aims. Even aims that do not typically require students (e.g., knowledge production or defending freedom of thought) render HEIs to mere thinktanks without students to learn, practice, and disseminate the knowledge and free thought achieved by faculty researchers.⁴ For an HEI to be successful in achieving its aims, however construed, some group must occupy the student unit position to participate, learn, practice, or change in the ways necessary to demonstrate institutional success.

What qualifies as 'success' at some mission varies. Yet, all missions, at any level of success, require some level of participation from students. Consider how an HEI might pursue civic education and what might be required of students for the institution to succeed at this mission. For successful civic education in an HEI, a student would have to undergo anything from mere enrollment in courses to full dispositional transformation into a civically-engaged citizen. An institution might claim success in civic education based on the enrollment and attendance rates of students in courses with a discussion or deliberation component. Even if students do not participate in the course activities or learn anything, an institution could claim to successfully civically educate. If this bar seems too low, further along the 'success spectrum,' success might look like students not only attending but actively engaging in class either via attentive listening and/or exercising their voice. This requires more from the student than mere attendance. Their cooperation with the educational project—some level of active engagement—becomes a necessary condition of successful civic education. If, however, civic education means not only exposure to certain content knowledge and democratic practice, but also dispositional development to act civically beyond the classroom, institutional success towards this aim requires more than participation from students; they must also change as persons.

⁴ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*; Ben-Porath, "Cancel Wars."

It might be insufficient to merely expose students to civic knowledge and skills if they do not acquire the disposition to *use* it. If student participation is a success condition of civic education, which we understand as being along a spectrum from merely showing up to developing a civic disposition, student participation in the project is essential.⁵

Something similar can be said of vocational and liberal education in higher education. It seems a low bar to claim that an HEI succeeds at vocational education because a certain number of students attend courses where instructors cover content related to some profession. Mere attendance is likely a low bar for success, though matriculation numbers (rather than grades—a loose indication of content and skills acquired—or post-grad hiring numbers) are often used as a measure of program and departmental success. Likewise, liberal education—depending on how one defines it—could be successfully pursued via student enrollment and attendance in general education courses, though many would argue successful liberal education is transformative, requiring the student undergo personal transformation.⁶ The difference between mere attendance and personal transformation is substantive. Yet however an institution understands their liberal, civic, or vocational educational goals, student participation is required; students are functionally essential to any claim of institutional success.

This is true of other aims of higher education, even those pursued by individual institutional actors. For a professor who understands their occupational relationship to students as training future scientists in the joys of physics, their proof-of-concept, success, and the viability of their work as a profession relies on students. The professor may consider their work successful if X number of students enroll in an entry-level course in physics, certain their lectures inspire students to become physicists. Or perhaps this is insufficient for the professor to feel successful. Instead, maybe they have succeeded in their goal when one of their students enrolls in additional classes, when they ask to join their research lab, or further yet, when they land a job as a physicist. Regardless of the level of participation or change the student undergoes that signals success for the professor in their occupation, the student is the functional unit of their project; they are a necessary condition and anything ranging from their mere enrollment to full transformation into a career physicist is the success condition for this professor's aims.

For institutional actors who conceptualize students in ways that relationally tie students to their own role in the institution (e.g., students are athletes if you're a coach; residents if you work in residence life; trainees if you are a research lab lead, etc.), it is easy to see how student participation (of some degree) is necessary for success. Athletic programs would cease to exist without students, but they also may fail to be successful without a high level of participation from

⁵ Jamie Herman, "Democratic Aims and Student Participation: The Problem III-Preparation Poses to Institutional Success," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* (2024): 455-458.

⁶ Paul and Quiggen, "Transformative Education."

students. Something similar can be said of academic departments, student life programs, cafeterias, and residence halls, among other campus entities. Not only are students required for success at the institutional level and among most institutional units, but their mere presence is also functionally essential to the institution maintaining itself at all.

Students as Functional Unit of Institutional Existence

Even if one denies the functional role students play in achieving the institution's aspirations (however construed), it is difficult to deny the functional role students play in mere institutional existence. Their functional role is built into the institutional structure itself. However one conceptualizes students, the institution would not exist without them. This alone should be common ground on which institutional actors agree. Undergraduate enrollment numbers directly affect department budgets, graduate student numbers, and, as a result, time available for faculty research. In existing institutional arrangements in US higher education, undergraduates sustain faculty research, regardless of whether the researcher's role is student-facing. Course enrollment numbers sustain doctoral and faculty research ventures in many disciplines such that departmental hiring is tied to undergraduate enrollment numbers, even in departments with grant funding.

Additionally, campus facilities created *for* students rely *on* students to remain open and functional. Even facilities that are not directly student-facing or student-serving depend on tuition dollars, labor from student workers, and, in a broader sense, a student body to sustain their existence. Often, current student demand for campus services does not determine the sustainability of a given office, facility, or institutional practice. In some instances, enrollment and attendance certainly affect a campus office or department's future. But student enrollments in certain departments, for instance, are secured by courses required for the general education curriculum. Student choice does not dictate institutional priorities or functionality. Existing budget allocations and course requirements do. HEIs function, and students are guided into their role assisting them towards that end.

This relationship has been mechanized to the extent that HEIs functionally rely on students to sustain the institution's existence, regardless of the students' wishes or presence. While some institutional arrangements ensure students are physically present wherever needed to pursue the HEI's aims, HEIs are also arranged to ensure students—via enrollment numbers, tuition dollars, fees, enrollment requirements, demographic information, etc.—sustain the institution's basic functioning regardless of actual student participation beyond enrollment. Think of the numerous fees students pay to sustain campus spaces; the common requirement to live on campus in residence halls; the class action lawsuits against HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic where students sued institutions for charging them fees associated with on-campus instruction while

they conducted class virtually.⁷ These fees and requirements sustain the institution whether they are demanded by, necessary for, or used by the student for whom they exist, and by whom they are funded. In a sense, sustaining the institution requires students participate in certain ways regardless of their motivation to do so. Their presence via enrollment, fees, attendance, and physical occupancy of spaces is the basis of HEI functioning.

Students are integral; their absence would pose a substantive threat to the institution. Their presence across the institution—whether required or recommended—sustains the basic functioning of HEIs, even in areas of campus that are not student-facing (e.g., accounting offices, marketing departments, compliance offices). They are the largest population at most institutions. If attendance—bodies in seats—is the baseline for existential functioning and a low level of institutional success, any substantial disruption to attendance numbers—mass exodus, revolt, boycott, disease—would disrupt the institution’s ability to function. That reality, if recognized, could, and perhaps should, serve as common ground for non-student institutional actors in instances of disagreement when problem solving.

Common Ground in the Student Functional Unit

However one conceptualizes ‘student’ in higher education, one thing remains true: students are the essential institutional functional unit. Regardless of one’s position within the institution—anywhere from HR personnel to Provost to landscaper—their role within the institution and any success they might claim therein, rests on student participation to some extent.

Under current arrangements, without students, there would be no departmental research agendas, no graduate programs, and no faculty salaries other than those provided by grants. Academia as a field, job, lifestyle, or profession would not exist outside of thinktanks and non-profits, all of which would rely on donor, private, or philanthropic investment. I will leave it to the reader to deduce which academic professions would be supported in this model. Mind you, without students occupying their institutionalized role, determined by course requirements in general education and major disciplines, some departments would cease to exist. Without HEIs to house and sustain them in this way, some disciplinary professions would be extinct. Large scale dissatisfaction, boycott, or exit from the institution by students would be a threat to more than just institutional sustainability. It would disrupt the livelihoods and life plans of all those employed by HEIs.

My goal here is not to argue that students ought to be understood primarily in this way, but rather that this feature of students in higher education

⁷ Lisa Gerson and Michael Ferrara, “Covid Lawsuits Plague Colleges,” *Inside Higher Education* (December 6, 2023), <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2023/12/06/covid-era-lawsuits-continue-plague-colleges-opinion>.

underscores all the ways institutional actors talk about students. Let us return to the disagreement between the administrators over responding to student protests. Two administrators might reasonably disagree about what is owed to students by the institution in this instance: the freedom of speech afforded citizens or the civic education in norms of civic engagement to which citizens-in-training are entitled. Though each might prefer to rehearse all the reasons students ought to be understood as citizens or citizens-in-training, their lack of mutual understanding and resistance to potentially finding common ground across conceptualizations will only make problem solving more difficult. If a source of their disagreement lies in the ways they conceptualize students, one way to proceed in solving the problem is not to convince the other that students and the institution are better understood differently, but rather to find some common ground, an area of mutual legibility. The essential, functional role students play in either of their civic projects/democratic ideals of the institution might serve as common ground from which to cooperate and problem solve.

However each administrator understands the institutional imperative to serve students, both need them. Their roles exist because students are present and any aspirations they might have to succeed at their chosen professions rely on student presence and participation to some degree. Additionally, in their position as institutional decision makers, problem solving without acknowledging this fact not only denies their own reliance on students, but also that of the institution and every actor pursuing their varied life plans therein.

Acknowledging the student functional unit might not initially seem like a path toward mutual legibility and cooperation in institutional decision making and problem solving. If two administrators are arguing about whether students are correctly conceptualized as full-fledged citizens or emerging adults in need of civic education, reminding them that students are the institutional functional unit might not appear as all that helpful. But the reminder of the institutional reality in this instance of disagreement recenters the problem-solving conversation on existing institutional arrangements and the necessity of retaining students to sustain institutional functioning. The common ground is that students are and will remain essential, regardless of how one conceptualizes students. In moments where problem solving and coordination must take precedence, acknowledging that students are existentially necessary might provide some common ground.

Current controversies and public debate over whether HEIs are bastions of democracy, hotbeds of controversy, knowledge producers, sites of indoctrination, resorts for affluent young adults, innovators, credentialing monopolies, defenders of humanity amidst technological encroachment, gateways to the middle class, funders of genocide, or places of hope for democratic renewal amidst political polarization, can make decision making and problem solving difficult. But that is not because problem solving requires a definitive answer on what the institution is and what it does or ought to do for students; rather it is because we often let differences in our conceptualizations of

higher education distract us from finding the common ground we do share as institutional actors.

My hope is to have shown there is a dimension of students in higher education upon which most institutional actors could agree despite their views on the purpose of higher education, their position within the institutions, and the aims they pursue as individuals via the institution. Cooperation among actors with divergent views is essential to HEIs' functioning. But establishing what cooperation ought to look like and negotiating how practices will be carried out requires some level of mutual understanding amidst actors with diverse perspectives. Across competing conceptions, finding grounds for mutual understanding can be difficult, especially when individuals are preoccupied with arguing for the precedence of their view in guiding institutional practices. The goal of this paper has been to articulate a potential area of shared interest and mutual legibility between institutional actors upon which they might agree without compromising their existing commitments.

Due to space limitations, I will not take up how this shared understanding of the student as institutional functional unit could guide cooperative problem solving in higher education, though I have much to say on the ways problem solving and who is invited to the table might look different if more institutional actors viewed students as the institutional functional unit alongside their existing conceptualization. I will, however, suggest that amidst plurality and diversity in HEIs, including across institutional units, it is worth recognizing that practical cooperation is possible without definitively establishing what exactly higher education is for and what role students play therein, by first attending to what is true of the institution: that students are essential and without them, the positions and institution over which decision makers are arguing would not exist. Hopefully, making space for this dimension of students in existing conceptualizations of 'student' in higher education will foster mutual legibility between institutional actors with competing perspectives in ways that lend to cooperation in decision making and problem solving amidst plurality.
