

Viewpoint

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Philosophy in Teacher Education: Some personal reflections

Abstract

No longer content to remain at the margins of practice, philosophy of education has, in recent years, taken a new turn. It has come to see itself, at least in part, as a genre of applied philosophy, one very much concerned with developing students' awareness of the concrete ethical problems teachers and administrators face during their careers, and with increasing their ability to deal with these problems in a responsible, ethically informed manner. In concerning itself thus with practical issues, philosophy of education has entered a new and exciting phase, one that gives it a much more relevant and dynamic role in teacher education. The potential personal significance, for student teachers, of this new more practical approach is discussed.

Résumé

Pas jamais content de rester à la périphérie, la philosophie de l'éducation a récemment pris une nouvelle direction. Elle se considère, de plus en plus, une catégorie de la philosophie appliquée – c'est à dire, ce que s'occupe de développer un compréhension des problèmes moraux qui confrontent des enseignants et des directeurs d'écoles de nos jours. D'ailleurs, elle s'agit d'améliorer la capacité des étudiants de résoudre ces problèmes dans une manière morale et responsable. En embrassant des questions pratiques, la philosophie de l'éducation d'aujourd'hui est plus pertinent à la formation des enseignants. On discute l'importance de ce nouvelle conception pour les stagiaires.

Twenty odd years ago when I first encountered the philosophy of education (in an after-degree teacher education program) I found myself confronted with grand theories on whose comprehensive formulations of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics were founded ideas about the real, the true, and the good. All of these, it was assumed, provided comprehensive guidance to the educational enterprise as a whole.

We studied Jacques Maritain (1943), Alfred North Whitehead (1929), John Dewey (1961), and "Existentialism as Applied to Education." But while I loved it for its grand scope, its edifying aspirations and visionary connection with life as it perhaps ought to be lived, while I struggled as a first-year teacher with discipline problems in my Grade 8 classroom, it all somehow seemed very remote. Was I carrying out the high sounding ideas I had learned? I could not say. It seemed to me that although I had acquired some heady notions about the nature and scope of the educational enterprise, in the final analysis, for better but also alas for worse, I was teaching as I myself had once been taught.

Ten years later as a graduate student in the philosophy of education I found myself engaged in a radically different enterprise. Now, far from describing or defending comprehensive views of the world and the place of education in it, philosophy of education seemed to have become reduced to the logical, linguistic, and purportedly morally neutral analysis of words.

This time I grappled with Sheffler's (1960) views on the nature of knowledge and teaching, Paul Hirst's (1974) forms of knowledge, and R.S. Peters' (1966) concept of education as initiation. And as I fought to purify my language and wrestled with distinctions, clarifications, arguments, and counter-arguments (many of which utilized examples that seemed incredibly trivial and silly), I found myself asking in the words of the song, "Is that all there is?" Is philosophy of education never again to concern itself seriously with the normative questions traditionally addressed by educational philosophers? Are we really to "leave everything as it is?" And if we do, how do we avoid becoming mere apologists for the status quo?

As I became more conversant with the analytic mode of educational philosophy and indeed came to appreciate and see the point of the intellectual rigour and technical sophistication that alignment with mainstream philosophy had brought to the field, I began to realize that the official "purely analytic" view was perhaps less strictly adhered to than one might think, and that in fact many of the most influential exponents of the analytic approach wrote in a manner much closer to the tradition of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey than they themselves might care to admit. Nevertheless, the constant reiterations of the "purist party line" did much to convince practicing teachers of the ultimate irrelevance and impracticality of philosophical educational ideas. Philosophy of education found itself operating yet again on the margins of the practice. If

academic respectability was indeed secured through a marriage with mainstream analytic philosophy, it was bought at an enormous cost, that of isolation from the larger context of educational practice and enquiry.

As for myself, while ostensibly engaged in acquiring the skills of linguistic analysis, I covertly read and reveled in continental philosophy. I grappled with Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Foucault. And if my analytic training told me their formulations were often vague and imprecise, I found in them, nonetheless, something I sadly missed in the purely analytic mode and which reminded me of the traditional mode: I found that visionary connection with life as it might ideally be lived, I found my imagination engaged, I found myself inspired.

As may be gathered from that preamble I have two reservations about philosophy of education as I encountered it as a graduate and undergraduate student. First and foremost, it tended to be taught in a manner that made it very remote from the school or classroom. My second reservation pertains to the more purist version of the analytic mode of philosophy: not only does it hold itself aloof from the classroom, it totally fails to provide the kind of motivational force of the older traditional approach.

A New Direction

Given the reservations cited above it will come as no surprise when I say that I am heartened indeed to see some new trends emerge in recent years in philosophy of education. First and perhaps most important I am happy to see philosophy of education slowly begin to take a more practical turn - explore topics in a manner which blurs the distinction between analysis and prescription without foregoing the hard-won rigour and sophistication of linguistic philosophy. Philosophy of education has come to see itself, at least in part, as a genre of applied philosophy. And in thus forsaking its puritanical self-image and concerning itself instead with practical issues, philosophy of education has entered a new and exciting phase, one in my opinion that gives it a much more relevant and dynamic role in teacher education.

What do I mean by "applied philosophy?" By applied philosophy I do not mean the borrowing of ready-made arguments from ethics, epistemology and the like, and the extraction thereof of general implications for educational practice. Rather I have in mind the sort of path Peter Singer forged in *Practical Ethics* (1979). Singer basically brought the philosophical tool of ethical reasoning to bear on practical moral issues such as the treatment of minorities, gender equality, animal rights, and so forth. So too philosophy of education as a genre of applied philosophy brings various tools of philosophical investigation to bear on educational matters, the express purpose of such investigation being the improvement of the practice.

What sorts of tools are involved? Basically they are the tools of philosophical thinking - analysis, clarification, critical evaluation, justification, argument - in short the tools associated with and employed in conceptual analysis. But, and this is the crucial difference, rather than employing those tools in a manner that makes their findings accessible only to those who are familiar with philosophical reasoning, i.e., to "professional" philosophers, applied philosophy instead tries to use them in a manner that while philosophically sound nevertheless seems accessible and relevant to teachers, student teachers, and administrators without any previous knowledge of philosophy or philosophy of education.

This is aptly illustrated in applied philosophy of education textbooks (Cohen, 1982; Bailey and Bridges, 1983; Dunlop, 1984; Smith, 1985). In the editors' forward to their series *Introductory Studies in Philosophy of Education*, Philip Snelder and Colin Wringe speak explicitly of aiming to provide a collection of short, readable works which will appeal to students who "quite understandably expect their theoretical studies to have a clear bearing on their practical concerns and on their dealings with children." Similarly, the *Thinking About Education* series (Strike and Soltis, 1985; Walker and Soltis, 1986) include realistic case studies, disputes, and dialogues, the express purpose of which is to "stimulate thinking about relevant issues in the context of practice." For example, rather than dealing with educational ethics in a highly abstract and generalized manner, including perhaps an erudite chapter on "discipline and punishment," "freedom" and "equality," Strike and Soltis' *The Ethics of Teaching* (1985) instead seeks to locate all of its discourse in the classroom. And it tries to show how employing appropriate tools of moral reasoning enables us to clarify and think more dispassionately about ethical issues which typically arise there, which clear thinking in turn enables us to be optimistic about coming up with appropriate solutions.

Recognizing, for instance, that teachers are expected to be effective at maintaining control in the classroom but that effective control is not always morally acceptable, Strike and Soltis present concrete situations in which teachers and/or administrators take particular courses of disciplinary action. Student teachers are asked to examine these actions in the light of appropriate ethical principles and thereafter to decide whether or not these courses of action are morally acceptable. Or, students are presented with a concrete situation in which a teacher, confronted with a bewildering diversity of students of different educational needs, asks herself, "Is it fair to give preferential treatment to the least able student?" "How am I justified in doing so?" "Do not other students in my class deserve this kind of special consideration?" Once again student teachers are asked to bring ethical modes of reasoning to bear on the case, to come up with an appropriate solution and also to come up with moral reasons as to why they think that solution is ethically right and appropriate.

Now it is important to emphasize here that Strike and Soltis' purpose in bringing modes of ethical reasoning to bear on these issues is not so much to present student teachers with ready-made solutions they can act on, as rather it is to enable them to hone and develop their own reasoning powers, to think deeply but nevertheless in a realistic, practical manner about such issues as punishment, equality in the treatment of students and so on, and to use the understanding they gain thereby in dealing with concrete problems in schools.

Indeed, what is particularly valuable about the case study approach is that it does not at all foster the illusion that moral reasoning is a straightforward, cut-and-dried affair. On the contrary, by introducing concrete particulars all of which influence one's judgement as to what is the right thing to do, the case study approach presents moral reasoning as a highly complex affair, one that takes deep thought and practice. And the hope is that by challenging student teachers to think for themselves, they in turn will be prepared and ready to nurture this kind of thinking in their own students.

How then would one describe the role of the applied philosopher in teacher education? Basically her role resembles that of the bioethicist whose task is not so much to tell medical practitioners and hospital administrators what to do as rather it is to help them develop the thinking skills necessary to face up to and cope with the ethical dilemmas they are increasingly encountering in medical practice. So too the role of the applied philosopher of education is not so much to tell teachers and administrators what to do as rather it is to help them develop the thinking skills necessary to face up to and cope with the ethical dilemmas they are increasingly encountering in our schools.

But just as bioethicists insofar as they want to "improve," i.e., make more critically self-reflective and morally perceptive the practice of medicine, have to talk to physicians and hospital administrators, so too applied philosophers of education insofar as "they" want to improve the practice of educating, have to enter into dialogue with teachers and policy makers. I use the word dialogue *advisedly* because the type of relationship that is at issue here is not just one where the applied philosopher is heeded by the practitioner; it is also one where the practitioner constantly alerts the philosopher as to developments and subtle changes in the practice itself.

This dialogue may occur in any number of ways: with student teachers in the philosophy classroom or with practicing teachers and administrators in seminars or professional workshops; but, most of all, I see it occurring through philosophers taking a more active role in the teaching practicum. For by working there with teachers and students, philosophers are constantly alerted as to the practical realities teachers face up to every day of their lives and which form the context within which moral educational decisions are made. And thus

alerted, they are encouraged (it is hoped) to render constantly relevant their classes in philosophy. Participation in the practicum reminds philosophers that while the life of the intellect and abstract contemplation are indeed perhaps wonderful, nevertheless, as Aristotle so rightly saw, we also need practical wisdom to live well in this world. And practical educational wisdom is not to be found in education theory. Rather it can only be achieved through participation in the practice of teaching itself, a participation which while necessarily informed and guided by theory nevertheless must also always be capable of going beyond the latter and taking into account educationally significant concrete variables that theory by its very nature cannot accommodate. Participation in the practicum effectively encourages philosophers to distrust the sometimes rarified atmosphere of the academic ivory tower and ever to be meaningfully aware of the sometimes harsh but no less intellectually challenging light of concrete reality.

Aristotle Revisited

Now what is articulated above is a rather Aristotelian approach to pedagogical ethics. But adopting an Aristotelian approach in philosophy of education does more than simply encourage student teachers to develop their practical thinking skills, important as this may be. It also encourages them to see the whole enterprise of education from a broader perspective; one that inspires them, enables them to see themselves as more than a mindless cog in an insensitive bureaucratic education machine; encourages them to view the whole business of education as a worthwhile, lifelong commitment in which one continually asks the question: "What does it mean to be a teacher?" "How may I teach well?"

In short, an Aristotelian approach encourages student teachers to develop their own personal philosophies of education, not so much to submit reverentially to the ideals and admonitions of the great pedagogues and thinkers of the past as rather to enter into dialogue themselves with those thinkers, bring to bear on the educational enterprise not just inherited beliefs and values but also their own creative ideas and, working thus in dynamic interaction with the wisdom of the past, to formulate their own personally meaningful views as to what education should be about.

This necessitates a radical shift of emphasis in the philosophy of education classroom. It suggests that the role of the philosopher in teacher education is once again not so much to tell students about philosophy as rather it is to help them become themselves philosophers of education - someone who loves doing wise things in the classroom and who accordingly seeks constantly to exemplify that wisdom in the crucible of daily educational practice.

And here we touch on something of absolutely vital importance. For what is at issue here is "meaningfulness" - those indescribably satisfying moments when we do exactly the "right thing," when from something we've

said or done, a whole new world of ideas and possibilities opens up to a child. It is moments like these which make the profession of teaching worthwhile. And it is the importance of moments like these that analytic philosophy of education has too easily ignored, perhaps even oppressed.

But one needs to go gently here. For if philosophy of education cannot indeed capture moments like these in well-wrought, erudite practical principles, it can facilitate their "being." Studying philosophy of education can make student teachers more perspicaciously aware of the ultimate purpose of this their art. On those days when the hum-drum bureaucratic realities threaten to engulf us, philosophy can serve to remind us of that purpose and of its infinite worthiness.

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