

Does Philosophy of Education Have a Future?

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The apparently simple question, ‘Does philosophy of education have a future?’, is without a simple answer. Like so many other questions, it all depends on what we mean, and in this case what we mean by the expression ‘philosophy of education’. I shall look at it in all of three ways: as a social institution, as an academic activity and as an intellectual pursuit. By doing so, it will become evident that consideration of each of them in turn will give somewhat different answers, which not only adds to the complexity of the question, but also adds to the richness of the answer. From this we, as individuals and as members of a particular community, can begin to reflect on the sort of future philosophy of education might have and what, if anything, we ought to do about it.

Philosophy of Education as a Social Institution

As a social institution, globally and nationally, philosophy of education seems to be in pretty good shape. Around the world, a number of learned societies exist to promote the discipline, a number of internationally reputable journals continue to thrive as vehicles for advancing the discipline, and a number of conferences are held, usually annually, to among other things allow participants to renew personal friendships and professional relationships. These are worth considering in a little more detail to bring out some of the richness of the institutional life of the subject.

The oldest learned society is PES, the Philosophy of Education Society. Located in North America, its annual conferences rotate around major Canadian and US cities and are held in hotels. Its publications include the annual *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, which contains the refereed proceedings of the conferences and *Educational Theory*. There are also regional philosophy of education societies such as the Far West, Midwest and Ohio, which vary in their activity from flourishing to morbid. Then there is PESGB, the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, which in contrast holds its annual conference at the one venue – New College, University of Oxford. It has 3 publications – the regular *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, the less regular *Impact* series, and the so far once only *Questa*. The third major player is PESA, the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia, which differently again, has a more international approach by holding conferences often in Australia, sometimes in New Zealand and occasionally in other countries (Hong Kong, Hawaii), usually in a wide variety of city, urban and rural university settings. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* is its journal. There are three other societies of note. The Canadian Philosophy of Education Society which holds its annual conference in conjunction with that of the Canadian Educational Studies Society and publishes *Paideusis*; the International Network of Philosophers of Education that holds its biennial conference in various countries around the world and publishes *Ethics and Education*; and finally, the Nordic Society of Philosophy of Education that, in association with the Nordic Educational Research Association, holds regional conferences and contributes to *Nordic Studies in Education*. A second tier of activity is also worth noting, even if it plays a lesser role. Some of the larger research associations, including the American Educational Research Association, the British Educational Research Association and the European Educational Research Association all have Special Interest Groups or Networks in philosophy of education, which provide a further avenue at their annual conferences for philosophy of education to leave its mark. All of the above maintain websites to promote their presence to a global audience.

While there are philosophers of education, or enough of them anyway, who wish to maintain learned societies and participate in them as members and office-holders, to edit and publish in the journals, organise and contribute to conferences and the like, then at least in this institutional sense philosophy of education has an assured future.

Philosophy of Education as an Academic Activity

With regard to philosophy of education as an academic activity, the answer to the question, ‘Does philosophy of education have a future?’ is a bit more disconcerting. Whether philosophy of education has a future in universities depends on whether philosophers of education hold academic positions in them, or not, and if they do, then do they teach philosophy of education as such or under another guise.

A few universities have the good fortune of having two or more philosophers of education in post, some are fortunate enough to have one while many, if not most, universities around the world unfortunately have none at all. Since philosophy of education can only exist as a discipline in a university that has philosophers of education, and there are few such universities, then as an academic discipline philosophy of education, while perhaps holding its own against such kindred disciplines as the history and sociology of education, does not fare so well as other perhaps more applied areas of educational inquiry, including psychology, early years, administration, curriculum and the like. So it is only here and there, and widely here and there at that (unlike philosophy departments which are usually found here, there and everywhere), philosophy of education occupies a fairly tenuous position on the academic landscape.

The fortunes of the discipline have been less than encouraging if one measure of its wellbeing, the recruitment, retention and replacement of academic staff in universities, is considered. To drive home the point, take three institutions, the University of London Institute of Education, the University of Sydney, and my own university, Massey University. As a postgraduate student, from 1976-78 I studied philosophy of education at the Institute where, at the time, there were at least nine permanent philosophers of education (Peters, Dearden, Elliott, White, White, Cooper, Moore, Jones, Chapman) as well as part time staff (Freeman) and related staff (Pring). Today, there are only four. Sydney, at one time, also had a strong team including Walker, Roe, McKenzie, O’Laughlan and so on, but now have no permanent philosophers of education on staff at all. Massey, in the first two or three years following my appointment, had six philosophers of education (Bassett, Clark, Codd, Cooper, Snook, Stenhouse). Today, I am the sole philosopher. This situation has probably been replicated worldwide, so that unlike the glorious past (or the heydays of the 60s and 70s), if the trend of not appointing philosophers of education, at least to replace existing staff who retire, resign, or whatever, continues then the future of philosophy of education has a depressing feel to it. Although, based more on anecdotal evidence than on the results of a rigorous and systematic survey of the international academic scene, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there has been a slow but steady decline in the numbers of philosophers of education, which seems destined to continue into the foreseeable future. Whether the trend continues, levels off or takes an upward trajectory remains to be seen, but as the professoriate ages and the aged retire and are not replaced, then the future could become just that little bit more grim.

Where universities do have philosophers of education, a second worry manifests itself, which is just as likely to have a bearing on the future of the discipline. Some philosophers of education will teach courses in programmes with the title of philosophy of education (London Institute of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) or courses with the title philosophy of education, which are located in various programmes (BA in Education). Apart from making it just that much easier to self-identify as a philosopher of education and for others to recognise staff as such, this arrangement has the far greater advantage of providing students with courses in the subject that can initiate them into the discipline at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study. Many who took this route went on later to enjoy academic careers as philosophers of education themselves. Such opportunities are considerably diminished if courses in philosophy of education are no longer available to students attracted to an academic career in philosophy of education.

A difficulty, related to this, at least in some parts of the world, is that at an earlier time the study of education in the universities was confined largely, although not exclusively, to the disciplines of the history, philosophy, psychology and sociology of education alongside things like human development (as in New Zealand) with teacher training undertaken in separate and autonomous teachers colleges, subsequent mergers

of the colleges with their local universities has resulted in a far greater practical focus on the preparation of teachers where philosophy of education is thought to have little relevance and a much diminished place for the more theoretical study of education so characteristic of education as a liberal arts subject. The effects can be severe. New Zealand offers a good example. The mergers saw the college retained on its campus, and the university education staff relocated off their home campus to the college site often quite some distance away. BA students studying on the main campus will not travel to the college campus just for education courses (even though the education books and journals have been relocated to the library on the satellite campus) and staff find obstacles stand in the way of getting to the main campus to teach their courses in philosophy of education (traffic delays, no parking spaces, no on-site staff office or departmental presence). Slowly but surely the enrolments in the philosophy of education courses (along with other BA education discipline courses) dwindle until such time as they fall below a minimum level resulting in the courses no longer being financially viable, hence no longer offered.

There is a partial way out, although a far from satisfactory one at that. As the opportunities diminish for philosophers of education to teach courses in the discipline, new opportunities may arise whereby philosophers of education are able to teach courses in other subjects and in doing so bring in either philosophical content or a philosophical orientation to provide students with different ways of thinking about, for example, administration curriculum, ethical practice, policy, research and the like. This may be an advance on no philosophical experience at all by students, and so is to be welcomed for this alone, but it nonetheless falls well short of providing them with a pathway to become immersed in the philosophical study of education to the level and extent that our students will be in a position to one day replace their teachers when they retire or fade away.

It is the replacement of an aging profession by younger philosophers of education which is most at risk, for if the opportunities to become a philosopher of education are no longer readily available and if the recruitment to vacated positions in philosophy of education continues to diminish, then the future of philosophy of education as an academic activity in universities looks rather bleak indeed. If there is no one to teach it and so it is not taught then there is no one who studies it and keeps it alive in the halls of the academy; in time it will wither, remembered by few and mourned by none, except perhaps by departed philosophers of education (and even they might not regret or worry about its demise upon their departure).

Philosophy of Education as an Intellectual Pursuit

Philosophy of education is an intellectual pursuit with a chequered recent history, a potted version of which goes something like this. At an earlier point in time, philosophy of education consisted of engagement in and with philosophical ‘isms’ as they might be applied to education. Academics wrote books about the various philosophical traditions and students studied how these philosophical traditions might provide them with insights into teaching practice. So, courses in philosophy of education introduced students to existentialism, idealism, Marxism, pragmatism, realism and the like and their practical implications for teaching were somehow teased out; what students made of this is anybody’s guess, but probably not much.

The 60s and 70s witnessed the rise of another way of engaging in philosophy of education, one shaped by attending to ordinary language and the analysis of concepts. The influence of Richard Peters and his colleagues at the London Institute of Education was widely felt as their approach to philosophy of education became the dominant paradigm even if it did not become exclusively so.

With its influence waning by the 80s, a new philosophical pluralism emerged which brought with it a raft of competing traditions seeking to establish their place on the philosophy of education landscape. Robin Barrow championed utilitarianism, Kevin Harris and Michael Mathews argued from a Marxist point of view, Jim Marshall and Michael Peters drew off postmodernism, while Colin Evers and Gabrielle Lakomski broke new ground with their version of neurophilosophy. The work of rival philosophers such as Freire, Gramsci, Habermas, Nietzsche, Popper, Quine and many others began to inform philosophical thinking about education. Different philosophical perspectives such as feminism took hold and found fertile ground,

especially among women philosophers of education. Over the last 30 years, some have fared a little better and some a little worse than others.

The focus more recently has moved beyond the study of often quite practical problems in education to encompass the most abstract forms of thought about educational theories, policies and practices. And this raises the question of who we, as philosophers of education, are talking to? Less and less, so it seems, is the conversation directed towards engagement with teachers and policy-makers, let alone students; more and more it seems to be we are talking to ourselves. There is, to be sure, a place for working at the boundaries of the discipline, to be at the cutting edge of new thought. To some extent this is difficult because, being located in education units rather than philosophy departments, philosophy of education is somewhat divorced from the philosophical mainstream. Yes, it can take advantage of advances in philosophical thinking in the literature, but it is cut off from many of the advantages being located in a philosophy department would bring. On the other hand, philosophy of education has another audience in a way that other 'philosophies of...' do not. For example, philosophy of science rarely has an audience of scientists in a way that philosophy of education speaks almost exclusively to educators. Philosophy of education, then, like Janus, must look both ways – to the interests of the discipline and to the interests of practice. We do well meeting the interests of the discipline, as noted above, but the interests of practice fare less well. One indicator of the declining fortunes of practice is the paucity of introductory student texts, which can be used to introduce undergraduate students to the discipline. There was a time when such books were reasonably plentiful; Barrow and Woods (1975) *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*, Gribble's (1969), *Introduction to Philosophy of Education* Hirst and Peters (1970) *The Logic of Education*, Kleinig's (1982) *Philosophical Issues in Education*, Langford's (1968) *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction*, Lloyd's (1990) *Philosophy and the Teacher*, Marshall's (1981) *What is Education? An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*, Moore's (1982) *Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*, Wilson's (1977) *Philosophy and Practical Education*, plus many more, all provided an entre into the discipline. That they were published in such numbers was presumably an indication of the numbers of students taking courses in philosophy of education. Today, there are few, if any, really suitable introductory textbooks that can introduce undergraduate students to philosophy of education, presumably because there are few students taking the subject because as a subject it barely exists any longer in universities. Where philosophy of education remains in liberal arts BA education programmes at least it retains a foothold, but it barely rates a mention in initial teacher education where it is most needed. In short, philosophy of education no longer speaks to students, teachers and policy makers in the way it once did, and is paying the price for doing so.

If philosophy of education struggles to retain its position as an intellectual pursuit in the universities, then it also faces another challenge on a second front – where does its philosophical future lie? The influence of Peters and his colleagues at the London Institute has long gone even if not forgotten. Marxism flourished for a while then disappeared. Postmodern thought held sway for a while, but is on the wane. Wittgensteinian puzzles jostled with Popperian problems; if the philosophers fade the issues remain. Reagonomics (USA), Thatcherism (UK) and Rogernomics (NZ) generated a generation of vigorous philosophical activity generally opposed to the policies enacted, but philosophical responses are now much more muted. People talk past each other, if they talk to one another at all. If any conceptual analysts remain then everyone else avoids them; Marxists and libertarians pass silently by; postmodernists and philosophers with a science bent have little to say to one another, and so on. The fragmentation of the field into few, if any, highways and the proliferation of many byways meandering across the philosophy of education landscape with fewer and fewer travellers does raise the question of where does the future of philosophy of education lie as an intellectual pursuit? That is always hard to predict for who, a century ago when Russell was at the height of his philosophical powers, could have foreseen the direction twentieth century philosophy took in the hands of Wittgenstein, Popper, Quine, Rawls and others, nor at mid century could philosophers of education have had any inkling of what was to happen in philosophy of education when Peters, Hirst and Scheffler put pen to paper.

What philosophy of education will look like between now and, say, 2050 remains to be seen (and few of us will still be around to witness this). At a guess, advances in digital technology are likely to have an effect on how philosophy is done. Already, the main philosophy of education journals are published electronically rather than in print, and with academic books becoming increasingly available in digital form then those in philosophy of education are likely, sooner or later, to follow suit. All of this is likely to impact on the teaching of philosophy of education – with course materials, such as administration booklets, study guides and readings now in formats such as Moodle – then it is possible that face-to-face classes at universities might give way to independent learning and distance learning. New discoveries in the sciences are likely to force us to dramatically revise our conceptions of ourselves away from common sense folk psychology notions and towards those of the neurosciences. The way philosophers of education in the future talk about people may be so different that, if transported forward by time travel, we would struggle to even begin to understand what they were talking about when they talked about themselves and they might well think it so quaint that we were stuck in the everyday language of propositional attitudes. What sorts of social forms emerge on the back of unforeseen economic and political events cannot be predicted but these will inevitably impact on educational policies and practices in ways, which will require renewed interest by philosophers of education. New technologies, new employment opportunities, new social formations, new personal relationships, new theories, new knowledge, new values and new attitudes, as well as calamities and disasters, natural and social, will all leave their mark on how we think about education as well as how we go about thinking philosophically about education.

Conclusion

Does philosophy of education have a future? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is with some optimism and with some pessimism. It seems destined to survive as an intellectual pursuit embedded in the practices of various social institutions, and may even flourish if all goes well. As an academic activity, philosophy of education can only have an identity if there are both philosophers of education employed by universities and university courses in philosophy of education that by this name are taught - its future seems far from secure with staff not always being replaced and courses not always being taught. Perhaps, in the end, all we can do is be cautiously optimistic; that just as an earlier generation passed on the philosophy of education baton to us that there is, hopefully, a later generation for us, in turn, to do the same.

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