

Only Connect: Collaborations and Interdisciplinarity in Philosophy of Education

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The changing nature of universities makes thinking philosophically both nearly impossible and all the more necessary. For the field of education, a forerunner in the move to metrics rather than aims of education, philosophy of education continues its sense of intense mission and embattled context. Where an earlier context of epistemological shake-up might have occasioned a circling of the wagons, philosophers of education seem now more likely to go out and connect with others also interested in preserving the edge and joy of the humanities. Philosophy of education — with its tendencies to self-examination, laments over its earlier demise, or stabs at its resurrection — is itself a diverse field, inviting thinking about the diversity of ways of thinking and acting about ideals, contexts, and wonderments about what might come next. Our current financial and academic contexts, further, push us to engage others in related fields and to think together about the future of education, the future of the humanities, and the future of philosophical inquiry in universities increasingly short on funding and long on assessments. Our challenges aren't new, of course; we're well situated to understand the relationship between knowledge and economic/political corruption through Socrates's (ant)agonistic relationship to the Sophists.

Some of this diversity of engagement, too, emerges from changing consideration of what constitutes knowledge, who can know, how the social position of knowers alters what they take to be important, and how, in conditions of such diversity of understanding, some forms of shared vision can emerge, however fractured or contingent or committed and engaged.

Those participating in the 2013 annual meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society were invited to reflect on what it means to think of philosophy of education as an interdisciplinary field or to engage how philosophy of education can learn from interdisciplinarity.

The interdisciplinarity pushed onto philosophy of education from foundations and from the gendered, raced, and classed critique emergent in some of our colleagues' work decades ago also stimulated philosophers to be part of conversations and interventions from diverse communities. Those diverse communities pushed us to consider, too, what they want from education as an institution and pushed us to recognize how diverse forms of education emerge from diverse communities (including geographical, racial, ethnic, language-based, and scholarly communities). Relatedly, innovations across disciplinary networks can help provide new ways of thinking, acting, and researching. Whether working with diverse communities and/or diverse scholars, our philosophizing moves into conversation and connection with others. Such collaborations remind us of the risky business of knowing that our own perspectives are partial, however intensely committed we are.

Working across disciplines, perspectives, and communities entails mistakes, risk, and interruption. We need to be perpetually open to new ways of doing research and teaching, and of the contingencies that all learners face, the difficulties of being set in our ways or not even yet knowing what our ways are and then bumping into somebody else who will cause us to stop and reconsider.

Trying work between disciplines first and foremost reminds us that there are other ways of expressing ideas, that there are people who think, speak, and act differently from us, and that practices help to shape the forms of knowing, inquiry, and research that we might attempt together. We may grow wary of institutional shifts that make philosophy of education either the handmaiden of science (philosophers can help scientists hone their arguments) or the cheerleader of teacher education (philosophers can inspire students to hold to their ideals amid public mistrust) or the underfunded remnant of a golden age of applied ethics (philosophers always look backward as well as forward to our next generation). Our students, at whatever level, need to grapple with the difficulties of shifting their own disciplinary/subfield commitments to larger projects in educational inquiry/studies/research, to understand gendered, raced, and classed experiences in educational institutions, and to see how institutions shape their expectations for what is normal in terms of those categories, as well as ability and sexuality. Our students, too, need to be able to translate the goals and purposes of education to their own students, who may be either smartly critical, unquestioningly enthusiastic, or cynically distant. Moreover, as the ruminations on interdisciplinary work here show us, there are other disciplinary and interdisciplinary configurations that can also helpfully form our practice.

Authors in this volume help us to think about the educative potential of cross-public and cross-disciplinary work, as well, reminding us that education takes place in a transnational and global context and understanding that translation is not a simple equivalence of meaning. In the act of engaging, all parties experience shifts, challenges, lost nuance, refound connections, and so on. The process of thinking about how to work across methodologies and communities reminds us that many of our students and families are already global, and that whatever sense of local may sustain us all, there are also networks we're already participating in, whether or not we recognize them all around us. Understanding that philosophy of education is located in a global context provides a way to decenter certainties or reconfirm parallel attachments or do both. Some of the authors in this volume remind us, too, that sometimes philosophers of education are late to the process of making these connections, enter conversations already begun, or feel excluded for our own delays. They help to remind us that work as philosophers can get us thinking about our particular propensities for such delays, even as we also rush to catch up, to make new connections, and to re-engage the urgencies that led us to study education in the first place.

Interruption of habitual practice is nothing new to philosophers. Rethinking the kinds of interruptions we all face either through collaborations or new priorities and possibilities in higher education can help us address these with more than exhaustion. It's part of our tradition. Socrates was often on his way somewhere else or even

talking about another topic when he was interrupted by a rival or a student. He took every interruption as an invitation and he took every opportunity to embrace the kind of stalled moment of thought that risk and exaggerated statements invited. His method of dialectic was perhaps not dialogic education at its finest, but it showed that one person could not adequately think alone, that other people would bring in either too conventional or unexpected ideas and that together learners would stop in the midst of what they were thinking and doing and try to begin again with each other. One of the most profound things that philosophical analysis of education does is to interrupt mistaken convention, bring into notice key things that too often go missing, and recognize the urgency of education in the midst of lives defined by contingencies of mortality, oppression, and institutional pressures.

Finally, I want to highlight the productive engagement of interruption undertaken by adult students in a program to introduce them to college-level humanities courses, including an introduction to philosophy. These “returning” students are reminders that philosophers of education have many possible points of connection in any community, that we as professors need to understand that even if a formalized process of school-based learning was interrupted, there are ways to re-engage those former students and re-engage our own approaches to teaching and learning. Their narratives of return to the classroom are full of other examples of critical thinking and learning outside of organized education, whether marching in their communities against toxic waste dumps or civil rights organizing or Bible study. Their experiences in different contexts of learning and organizing exemplify the drive to think together and to translate thought into action. They also show that these students understand all too well how their own children’s or grandchildren’s or neighbor’s children’s education is threatened and that they want to be part of stopping that cycle of dropouts and pushed-outs by pitching in to do mentoring and tutoring. More than anything else, working with these adult learners has reminded me that philosophers of education have much to do in many communities and that, in some sense, simply by determining to learn together, we can create the bonds necessary to reinvigorate the yearning to study together and to encourage the next generation of students to do the same.

This same productive back and forth of disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiry, I think, can give us a new way to build the collaborations that are so necessary to continuing the work of philosophy of education. Seeing ourselves as both in it together, and also diverse in identities and methodologies but willing to interrupt and to consider interruptions, shows that collaborations are necessary, sustaining, and more than occasionally difficult.

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