

No Need to Worry: Multiple Profiles of Philosophy of Education in, and in Relation to, the World of Education and the World of Philosophy

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Article abstract

How concerned should we be about the state and status of philosophy of education? To this familiar worry, I maintain that there is no need to worry. In this essay, I try to secure this conclusion, not by shoring up the authority and identity of the discipline, but by asking the fundamental question: Who is and should be the audience for philosophers of education, and what does philosophy of education owe to whom? I argue that to be worthy of that name, philosophy of education ought to have educational significance and continue being philosophical, requiring the discipline to serve the interests of all the three audiences—other philosophers of education, non-philosophical educators, and non-educational philosophers. Through a close analysis of several important scholarly materials concerning the range, quality and relevance of philosophy of education, I urge that working out its disciplinary nature in a broad context of philosophy makes the discipline capable of fulfilling that promise.

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No Need to Worry: Multiple Profiles of Philosophy of Education in, and in Relation to, the World of Education and the World of Philosophy

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Familiar Anxieties and Three Types of Audience

How concerned should we be about the disciplinary position of philosophy of education, and how can we ensure its disciplinary character in, and in relation to, both the educational community and philosophical scholarship? In the debate over the state and status of philosophy of education, the question of *audience* often seems to be left out of the diagnosis. If the large and growing body of work produced under the banner of philosophy of education is not read or taken seriously except by other philosophers of education, then philosophy of education, although it appears to be flourishing,¹ may be losing its intended audience. This is obviously more than a mere psychological concern. So, before rejecting it as self-initiated and self-absorbed, it is, I think, worth asking the fundamental question of who, if anyone, is and should be the audience for philosophers of education, and what does philosophy of education owe to whom?

A radical pluralism can be found surrounding the question of audience. Whatever the details may be, however, we can presume, in a generic sense, that there are three audiences for philosophers of education: other philosophers of education, philosophers unconcerned with education, and educators who are not philosophers.²

Accordingly, it is not surprising that three familiar complaints are often made about work in philosophy of education: its seeming irrelevance (1) to matters of *education*; (2) to issues of *philosophy*; and (3) to both. Those who identify themselves, or are identified, as philosophers of education have addressed these accusations. In what follows, I will focus on some provocative and fascinating examples of such work: René Arcilla's and John White's concerns about the relevance of philosophy of education to the education community, Harvey Siegel's thinking about the standards

¹ Philosophy of education can be seen flourishing in terms of the number and scale of journals, books and conferences, if not in terms of the number of academic positions within higher education. For example, long-established English-language journals such as the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *Educational Theory*, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, and *Educational Philosophy and Theory* are expanding; some newly-established journals such as *Theory and Research in Education* (launched in 2003) and *Ethics and Education* (launched in 2006) have received considerable international acclaim; a number of edited compilations in the discipline have recently been published; the International Network of Philosophers of Education (INPE) has been developed, with its biennial conferences; and many educational research associations such as BERA, EERA and AERA have expanded (or at least maintained) space for philosophy of education. For more, see Standish, 2006; Chambliss, 2009; Haydon, 2012; and Biesta, 2015.

² Note that "educator" here is an umbrella term that includes educational researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and others.

of the discipline's philosophical rigor, and Paul Standish's views on the centrality of "the educational" in philosophical inquiry. Examining these observations concerning the range, quality and relevance of philosophy of education, I argue that to be worthy of that name, philosophy of education ought to have *educational* significance and continue being *philosophical*. This means that it should, as an academic discipline, serve the interests of all three. To that end, I claim that working out the disciplinary nature of philosophy of education in a broader context that is as old as philosophy itself, rather than shoring up the authority and identity of a unified discipline, makes it capable of fulfilling that purpose. This is to suggest that a broader conception of philosophy of education would, as a specifically *normative* academic discipline, make it possible to advance the study of education as well as broaden what philosophical inquiry *can* do. To make a compelling case for this, I begin with Arcilla's worry.

René Arcilla's Worry

René Arcilla (2002) poses the question, "Why aren't philosophers and educators speaking to each other?" Given the dominant influence in philosophy of education of John Dewey's idea of philosophy as "*the general theory of education*" (1916/2011, p. 383, emphasis in original), a radical break between the philosophical community and the educational community threatens to undermine the existential grounding of the discipline. Arcilla (2002) writes that the Deweyan metaphor of a "marriage" between philosophy and education has largely broken down and that "extra-philosophical, more empirical and positivist social sciences" (p. 10) have displaced philosophy as the most useful conversational partners for educators. Hence, philosophy of education is losing its intended audience, which Arcilla deplors.

The few books or articles that link problems and concerns in one discipline to those in the other tend to address only an increasingly marginal and shrinking community³ of other philosophers of education. Consequently, the philosopher in me, who has been raised on a specific literature, is embarrassed before an audience with my other half, and vice versa. When I turn from reading to writing, then, I wonder whether *as a philosopher of education* I have anything coherent to say, anything to say that expresses a coherent identity or reason for being, and *to whom*. (p. 1, emphasis added)

We must discern three different layers of problems here: the first is a kind of identity distress that Arcilla is experiencing as a philosopher of education; the second is the same kind of crisis for the whole discipline of philosophy of education; and the third is the scant communication between philosophers and educators.

I think we can, without feelings of shame or guilt, sidestep the demand that an individual philosopher of education have "all the answers" to all of these problems. More realistic and sensible is the idea that philosophy of education should, *as an academic discipline*, provide open channels not only to fellow philosophers of education but to both educators and philosophers.

It follows then that there can—and actually do—exist various types of philosophers of education, and this is a welcome development for the discipline. The underlying problem that motivated Arcilla to write his essay is his expressed existential distress as a *philosopher* of education. However, not all philosophers of education share Arcilla's concerns. For instance, Barbara Stengel (2002) claims:

³ As noted, this is probably not the case.

Arcilla comes to his cluster of problems as a philosopher of education with a *philosopher's* sensibility.... As a philosopher of education with an *educator's* sensibility, I find the first two layers of Arcilla's problem less compelling than the third layer captured in his title. (p. 284, emphasis in original)

Gary Fenstermacher (2002) elaborates the same point by illustrating two approaches to doing philosophy of education as "PE-I" and "PE-II." In PE-I, "both the problems and the methods of the discipline of philosophy are taken up by the philosopher of education" (p. 345). On the other hand, the PE-II approach is to "take up the methods of philosophy, but not its problems," and those following this approach are "so attentive to matters of practice that they would not be nearly so welcome in philosophy departments" (p. 345).⁴

In short, philosophers of education range across the spectrum from the most deep-seated PE-I types (or philosophers of education with a philosopher's sensibility) to the most radical PE-II types (or philosophers of education with an educator's sensibility). I do not consider it threatening to say that this diverse range is a sign of the health of the discipline rather than a source of distress, for it can attract a broad audience—a larger number of those interested in education, philosophy, and/or philosophy of education.

Nevertheless, the question "Which type, PE-I or PE-II, is the positive model of the philosopher of education?" continues to be reiterated within the discipline. Arcilla also seems committed to the dualistic question, and there appears to be some ambivalence in his attitude toward it. I thus draw attention to two contrasting views on this: Harvey Siegel's preference for PE-I and John White's contrary claims.

Two Contrasting Views of the Positive Model of the Philosopher of Education: Harvey Siegel and John White

Harvey Siegel has edited *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (2009), whose overarching aim is to reunify philosophy of education and general philosophy by inviting many eminent "general philosophers" to write chapters. Obviously, Siegel casts PE-I types as preferable and as the positive model of the philosopher of education. In fact, in response to Arcilla's question, Siegel (2002) argues: "[D]on't worry about the silence [between philosophers and educators]; focus instead on the intellectual health of the field" (p. 279). However, the most vivid statement of his stance is found in the following quote:

[T]he sole obligation of professional philosophers of education as such is that of striving to do credible *philosophy* of education, and that that obligation typically requires not special attention to educational policy or practice, but rather a distancing or autonomy from such educationally relevant concerns. (1988, p. 15, emphasis in original)

Grounded in the belief that credible philosophy of education should have a rightful place in the world of general philosophy, he finds its scholarly insularity from the rest of the *philosophical* disciplines much more problematic than its insularity from the education community.

⁴ As some examples of PE-I types, Fenstermacher (2002) mentions Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and John Rawls as well as R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst, and Israel Scheffler; as PE-II counterparts, he refers to Maxine Greene, David Hansen, Nel Noddings, Mary Ann Raywid, and Hugh Sockett (p. 346).

I have no quarrel with Siegel's project, and believe it is definitely a fine thing to (re-)open an avenue between general philosophy and philosophy of education. However, his project in the *Handbook* still seems one-sided and may only perpetuate the hierarchical structural and institutional relationship between them because such a relationship is implied and embedded in the enterprise *per se*, although it can be an effective short-term means of bringing philosophy of education to the attention of general philosophers.⁵

John White would have far greater sympathy with Arcilla's worry than Siegel's. Warning against overly inward-looking philosophical attitudes and dispositions in addressing educational issues, White (2013) expresses skepticism about "an endeavour to show that [philosophers of education] are not second-class philosophical citizens, but genuine members of that community" (p. 297). Here is his portrayal:

It has sometimes been a source of chagrin to philosophers of education who come from schools of education and not from philosophy departments, that some of our colleagues in the latter regard them with disfavour. If, for these philosophers, aesthetics is lower on their pecking order than philosophy of language, philosophy of education hits subterranean depths. (pp. 296–297)

White's own (re-)conception of philosophy of education is a rather *practical* kind, serving primarily to address contemporary educational *problems* (rather than philosophers), most of which are urgent, economy-related global problems of our time. Expressing suspicion about attempts to stress the standards of philosophy, White (2013) chastises some philosophers of education for "[turning] too far inwards, trailing brief and unexciting 'educational implications' from their in-depth studies of Leibniz or the nature of pragmatism" (p. 297).

I admire White's conception of philosophy of education, but only insofar as it is *a* working and important view of what the discipline ought to be. Nevertheless, White (2015) goes so far as to give priority to the practical conception when he insists that "educational aspects of wider social policy should be 'at the centre of [philosophy of education's] work'" (p. 229). We can, however, join both Siegel in raising the standards of philosophical rigor *and* White in acquiring more educational relevance, without needing to assume or promote a particular type of philosopher of education as the positive model. In this respect, the common criticism that "philosophy of education is all-too-often either philosophically good and irrelevant to practitioners, or practically relevant but philosophically weak" (Bredo, 2002, p. 263),⁶ is misguided. This sort of criticism simply misses the forest for the trees, not acknowledging that philosophy of education does not conform to a single conception. To the criticism cited above, Eric Bredo adds that "[e]ven worse, [philosophy of education] is sometimes weak in both respects" (2002, p. 263). This makes us face the doubt introduced in the first section: the concern that philosophy of education may be only a self-contained and self-congratulatory discipline if what is being done under its banner is circulated only among philosophers of education, even if this circulation is increasing. I thus shift our attention to a view that resists such a narrowly-conceived philosophy of education; one that makes the discipline salient for other audience members. Such a view is suggested by Paul Standish.

Philosophy of Education Broadly Conceived: Paul Standish

⁵ Siegel himself makes the case that there can be (non-one-sided) interactions between general philosophy and philosophy of education (see, e.g., Siegel, 2008).

⁶ It is not that Bredo himself is committed to this criticism.

Paul Standish actually does more than ensure two-way traffic between general philosophy and philosophy of education; he repeatedly urges us to reverse the conventional way of looking at the relationship between them.⁷ Once it is fully recognized that “the educational” permeates philosophy’s classical problematic in particular and the human experience in general, then traditional philosophical questions are not allowed to remain unchallenged. Standish (2007) is adamant:

[F]orms of enquiry central to philosophy (into ethics, epistemology and metaphysics) themselves necessarily incorporate questions about learning and teaching: they ask questions not only about the nature of the good (for the individual and for society), but also about *how we become* virtuous; and not only about the nature of knowledge, but also about *how it is acquired*. In other words, these essentially educational questions of teaching and learning are not external matters to which the philosophy is applied but internal to philosophy itself. (p. 162, emphasis in original)

What Standish sets out to show is an *intrinsically* interwoven character of “the educational” in philosophical inquiry, thus placing philosophy of education *not* on a par with some “branches” of philosophy like, say, philosophy of science and philosophy of law (Standish, 2011, p. 45), which is quite contrary to Siegel’s view.⁸ In Standish’s picture, philosophy of education is not a branch of philosophy, but lies at the *heart* of philosophical inquiry.

I applaud Standish’s insights into what it is for philosophy of education to be *philosophical*. Nonetheless, it might be debatable whether philosophy of education is at the center of philosophical inquiry. This argument may not prove convincing to many of the non-educational philosophers in “general philosophy” because the same could be said of virtually any branch of philosophy we address. We could say, for example, that political philosophy is at the core of philosophical inquiry because “the political” in an extended sense goes “all the way down” in human experience. Much the same would be true of “the linguistic,” “the scientific,” or “the religious” (in their broadest possible senses).

In other words, this fascinating view of the robust conception of philosophy of education is also likely to face the audience problem, but this is chiefly due to the institution-related disciplinary barriers in the compartmentalized academy today. So, although we need not go so far as to assert that philosophy of education is in fact at the center of philosophical inquiry, we also need not dislodge the Standishian idea that casts philosophy of education as as old as philosophy itself. In the remainder of this essay, I distill five related lines of thought from this broader conception of philosophy of education, with the conclusion that philosophers of education have “no need to worry” about the familiar uneasiness many of them experience.

Working out the Disciplinary Nature of Philosophy of Education

First, in the broad conception of philosophy of education made possible by Standish, it would be mistaken to see it as different in character from philosophy in general. They often, though not always, have the same subject matters in view, such as the issues of rationality and normativity.

⁷ See, for example, Standish, 2007 and 2011.

⁸ Siegel (2014) claims that “[philosophy of education] is like other areas of practical philosophy” such as “philosophy of science, philosophy of law, bioethics, environmental philosophy, and so on” (p. 121).

Second, it may not be as difficult as is often assumed to break through some of the institution-based disciplinary barriers that prevent one area of expertise from having an essential interaction with its intellectual neighbors. As D. C. Phillips and Siegel (2013) put it, “philosophers of education—to a far greater degree ... than their ‘pure’ cousins—publish not primarily in philosophy journals but in a wide range of professionally-oriented journals.” To make *mutual* understanding and commitments more feasible, philosophers of education, especially PE-I types and philosophers of education with a philosopher’s sensibility, are to be encouraged to publish their work not just in “professionally-oriented journals” but in philosophy journals.

Third, more concretely, quite a few “general” philosophers may work up much interest in what is being done in philosophy of education, perhaps most notably in interdisciplinary programs in which philosophy plays a substantial role in addressing the issues of *social practices* like education. General philosophers are also—in a sense, more desperately—struggling to address the questions of, “Who is the philosopher and what is he or she hoping to accomplish? ... [F]urther, to what or to whom is the philosopher obligated? Why philosophize?” (Ragland & Heidt, 2001, p. 7) There is an obvious isomorphism here—between philosophy of education and general philosophy—in terms of their urgent concerns with justifying and enlarging their roles and responsibilities in confrontation with the dominant scientific culture. Here, philosophers of education are well positioned to take the lead in dialogue with scientific and empirical researchers in addressing social practices and public concerns. This is to indicate that work in philosophy of education broadens what philosophy *can* do. At this point, without any implication that the place of philosophy of education would be secure if it could only belong to general philosophy, its relationship with general philosophy can no longer be seen as one-sided.

The broader conception of philosophy of education never leaves out of the picture other variants of the discipline, nor does it exclude PE-II types and philosophers of education with an educator’s sensibility. Fourth, therefore, it does not allow the discipline to restrict its range of considerations to the so-called analytic philosophy of education. The broader conception supplies the often-missing requirement that the Anglo-American analytic tradition be relativized to other intellectual traditions. Thus it can perfectly well accommodate, for instance, Gert Biesta’s suggestion regarding a way of connecting “philosophy and education differently” (Biesta, 2014, p. 72).⁹ The point here is, of course, not whether his tradition is more convincing than its analytic counterpart, but that it can have a lively voice in the broad conception.

However, my fifth line of thought is that approvingly stressing the broader conception is never meant to diminish analytic philosophy of education. No sober philosopher of education would deny the fundamental importance of conceptual analysis, linguistic clarity, logical forms of argument, and questions of justification (of educational concepts) that the tradition has developed.

Concluding Remarks

Thus far, my discussion has revolved around the old issue of the state and status of philosophy of education, and it may seem that what I have done is just to give a nod to the consensus view that the discipline, at present, is diverse. But it is one thing not to worry about the status quo of philosophy of education, and quite another to ensure that the diversification of methods, conceptual resources, and traditions of inquiry leads to an enrichment of the discipline.

An enrichment of the discipline, I have argued, requires itself to be worthy of the name

⁹ Biesta (2014) recommends the German/Continental tradition as an important antidote to its English-speaking counterpart, in terms of what it is to philosophically study education.

philosophy of education. This is to say that philosophy of education should both continue being philosophical and have educational significance. In order for the discipline to fulfill that promise, it needs to range more widely than most academic disciplines, with the result of serving the interests of all three components of its audience—educators, philosophers, and philosophers of education. It might not necessarily be important to increase the number of those who identify themselves, or are identified, as philosophers of education, but it *is* indispensable to enlarge the group of those who recognize that the philosophical study of education does matter, both to the world of education and to the world of philosophy. Philosophy of education helps educators understand properly *normative* dimensions of education; non-educational professional philosophers who lack continued involvement with education will not do, because the real social practice of education is so messy and complicated that only those engaged seriously in both philosophy *and* education can illuminate the normative aspects of education. But we need not create or settle on a single, unified discipline called philosophy of education. Instead, I have emphasized the importance of working out its disciplinary nature in the direction of the broader conception that sees it as being as old as philosophy, which I have suggested would make it capable of exemplifying and even expanding what philosophy *can* do in today's anti-intellectual, global capitalist culture. So philosophers of education should never think of themselves as isolated intellectual laborers, either from the world of education or from the world of philosophy. Good work in philosophy of education will be most welcome to both educators and philosophers, as well as to philosophers of education.

I have been arguing for a wide spectrum of philosophy of education as an academic discipline. However, I want to close this essay with an important reminder: *one* philosopher of education *can* occupy different positions along the spectrum on different occasions. What is required of the philosopher of education is thus not to feel uneasy with being a philosopher of education, but to expand their own intellectual horizons in order to move adroitly along the spectrum of their field. Like many colleagues, I am trying to do this.

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