

Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education (Gereluk et al.)

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Review of

Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education

by Dianne Gereluk, Christopher Martin, Bruce Maxwell & Trevor Norris. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2016

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Introduction

Questioning the Classroom: Perspectives on Canadian Education by Dianne Gereluk, Christopher Martin, Bruce Maxwell, and Trevor Norris distinguishes itself by doing philosophy of education with teacher candidates in a way that is collaborative and practical. As a textbook, it maintains its promise of placing front and centre its audience of “reflective practitioners” (p. xv) rather than students waiting to be taught. The authors move away from the practice of teaching canonized philosophical arguments to then apply these to contemporary educational issues. Instead, they advocate for and practice a different form of philosophy of education: a “problem-based” approach. Doing philosophy of education, for educators, means thinking through issues related to education in a way that considers history and context, while clarifying personal views that move beyond “mere opinion” (p. xxii). Doing philosophy of education reasserts that the consideration of “big questions” in education provides more than fodder for classroom navel-gazing, that these questions are not rhetorical. *Questioning the Classroom* makes accessible the arduous task of doing philosophy of education by providing instructors and teacher candidates with a language and activities that see them through the task of thinking philosophically about education. In this review I will provide a synopsis of its format and content, pointing to how these enable a “doing” of philosophy of education rather than a mere “telling.” In the final section, I address the potential to further develop discourses that shed critical light on liberal democracy in subsequent editions of the text.

Format and Content: Doing Philosophy of Education

Questioning the Classroom includes six major sections that pose many of the questions that have historically propelled philosophy of education and that continue to play a significant role in public education discourse. The sections focus on the civic purpose of education; how education ought to proceed; what content should be taught and who should decide; where children should learn; and the

negotiations involved in teachers' professional identity and their rights to autonomy. Chapters within these sections include the background and educational implications of Canada's multiculturalism policy, consumerism and education, school choice, and teaching controversy. Each of these issues provides significant access points to teacher candidates as these matters are regularly discussed in the media and in schools; anyone with an interest in education will have some background in at least a few of these issues as the controversies that they promote are inescapable for any passing observer.

Two topics that are notably absent from this list are environmental education and sex education, both of which have prompted public debate and have significant bearing on the health and wellbeing of future generations. It is undeniable that authors of any text make decisions regarding inclusions and exclusions for practical purposes. While I believe that it is often intellectually lazy to critique what is absent in a text rather than engaging with what the text brings, within a textbook that promotes sustained reflection on issues that are of import for Canadian education and educators, these omissions strike me as significant. The topic of sex education is not altogether absent, however the dilemmas specifically associated with it might be further drawn out, specifically within the chapter addressing teaching controversial subjects (sex education currently appears as a prompt for further thinking about controversial topics in the classroom). The concept of environment might be extended to include natural environment. Currently, environment is discussed as physical space (in the discussion on place based education, see chapter 7: Place-Based Education and the Rural School Ethic) and an ethical environment (in the conclusion, chapter 12: Teaching for the Canadian Ethical Environment). Along with the place of religion in secular schools and funding of religious education in a liberal-democratic context, both of which are thoroughly addressed in the text, the place of sex education in schools and how environmental degradation ought to be presented to children are among the most intellectually thorny, personally challenging, and high-stakes issues that classroom teachers will have to face.

The Canadian audience for which this text is written is pervasive throughout. As many Canadian educators can attest, drawing from American or British material, particularly when it deals with social and political issues, can be too easily dismissed as not relevant to "our" context (as if, in an age of globalization that contexts can be viewed as discrete). At the same time, the text makes the strong argument that Canada does have a particular historical landscape that continues to shape our classrooms and this landscape warrants sustained exploration and analysis (p. xviii). There are multiple other ways in which this text speaks to the legitimacy of exploring Canada as its own cultural and political entity, distinct from, while also shaped by, other nations. Gereluk et al.'s discussion of Canadian civic identity in chapter 2 speaks to the multiple layers and considerations involved in even speaking of a national Canadian identity. Leery of delving into framing civic identity in a patriotic discourse, their treatment of civic identity itself as contested (p. 27) and yet necessary does a nice job of initiating a conversation on the "mixed feelings that Canadian have about education and civic identity" (p. 24). It becomes clear that the genealogy of these "mixed feelings" are well accounted for in Canada's histories and policies. The text's discussion of these histories and policies includes Québec's status as a nation within a nation and its struggle for cultural and linguistic preservation (p. 25, 29–30) as well as the rise of Canada's official Multicultural policy on cultural diversity (p. 32–33). These discussions provide entry points into the main debates and are aimed at having teacher candidates reflect upon and articulate their values surrounding civic identity.

A significant but historically forgotten facet of Canadian identity is launched front and center in chapter 9: "Should Cultural Restoration Be an Aim of Education? Justice, Reconciliation, and

Aboriginal Education” (p. 170–190). The brief history of residential schooling in Canada, a history that has been omitted from many history textbooks, is a significant and welcome inclusion. Residential schooling and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission offer a foray into a line of inquiry that has teacher candidates think through whether education ought to play a role in reconciliation, and what it might mean if taken seriously in the context of education. The section begins by asking: “Should schools develop and implement curricula aimed at promoting Aboriginal cultural and traditional knowledge?” (p. 176). This section forwards the discussion of forms of knowledge in chapter 1 in which, drawing on the work of R. S. Peters, the authors present education as a series of activities that shape how students experience the world. The focus on Aboriginal perspectives as significant to how all Canadians ought to understand themselves (in relation) and the questions particular to educators is long overdue.

The presentation of the core content as well as the supplemental thought/discussion questions and activities facilitate the act of doing philosophy of education by detailing the processes involved. The authors present claims, counter-arguments, and evidence to examine perennial educational questions using philosophical tools. Keeping their audience in mind, Gereluk, Martin, Maxwell, and Norris lay out these processes clearly and in a way that is relevant to the topic at hand. For example, on page 178 they present “The Case for Cultural Restoration: a Counter-Argument” and, in a sidebar provide a quick definition of counter-argument and its role in an argument, successfully presenting high-level content without making assumptions regarding the audience’s background or level of comfort with philosophical analysis. A second example is the addition of an explication of “argumentation” (p. 8) in a philosophical context. The authors make philosophy accessible by rightly stating that everyone is a “closet” philosopher but then challenge students to take their armchair philosophizing further—to construct well thought-out arguments (p. xxii). Their presentation of content establishes philosophy of education as not only relevant but as a necessary and ongoing practice.

Questioning Liberal Democracy as Uncontested

The area that I believe could be further developed lies in the discursive repertoire of the text. *Questioning the Classroom* forwards a careful illustration of how Canadian histories have informed policy decisions in education. The authors are correct in stating that this text is not slanted toward a single perspective in that it lays out a range of positions and prompts inviting students to clarify their views and to construct arguments. In light of the probability that this will become the go-to textbook for philosophy of education courses in Canada, thereby having profound influence on how future teachers comprehend the relationship between philosophical views, arguments, and their teaching practice, the text might benefit from more sustained engagements with discourses drawn from outside of liberal democratic discourse, or at least that cast liberal democracy in a critical light. While the reader is given multiple glimpses into these discourses, these are usually in the form of supporting citations or cursory overviews. A deeper engagement with critical perspectives would reinforce the view that teacher candidates are reflective practitioners who may have different political impulses than what are forwarded by the dominant educational discourse. This struck me while reading the concluding section of chapter 9, “Should Cultural Restoration Be an Aim of Education?” In it, the authors state: “It was a failure of open-mindedness and perspective taking, we think, that contributed to the conditions leading

to the establishment of residential schooling in the first place” (p. 189). While this is a fair analysis of the rise of residential schooling in Canada, it might strike some as dangerously incomplete. From a critical and/or decolonial perspective one might argue that the rise of residential schooling was the result of colonialism or white Christian supremacy. The way in which residential schooling is framed is a matter of discourse and it cuts to the core of how educators come to interpret and practice education. It is important to note that I am less interested in advocating for the further development of a particular discourse than I am in calling into question liberal democracy as the sole legitimate educational discourse. If philosophy of education courses are intended as spaces in which teacher candidates work through the intersections of social norms, laws, histories, and politics, alongside their own perspectives, varied theoretical orientations need to be present. My suggestion for upcoming editions of what will certainly become Canada leading resource for doing philosophy of education with teacher candidates is to undertake the risk of holding up liberal democracy as a matter of debate rather than as an uncontested reality.

About the Author

Sarah J. DesRoches teaches in the Department of Educational Studies at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Her areas of expertise include history and citizenship education, Québec interculturalism, and social justice education. Her current writing projects discuss the roles of radical democracy in political education, specifically around the concepts of citizenship, community, and remembrance.