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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

In this friendly conversation between colleagues, Claudia Ruitenberg talks with Sam Rocha about philosophy of education through the experience of being educated and doing the work of teaching, supervising, and writing philosophy of education. Biographical stories, reading habits, remarks on the reputation of the field, notes on method, and more emerge—and remain up for discussion.

The Doings of Philosophy of Education: An Interview with Claudia Ruitenberg

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In this friendly conversation between colleagues, Claudia Ruitenberg talks with Sam Rocha about philosophy of education through the experience of being educated and doing the work of teaching, supervising, and writing philosophy of education. Biographical stories, reading habits, remarks on the reputation of the field, notes on method, and more emerge—and remain up for discussion.

The interview that follows began in a graduate philosophy of education seminar I taught in the summer of 2023 at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver campus, where Claudia Ruitenberg and I both work. Claudia joined us via Zoom from her home on Salt Spring Island. After transcription and initial clean up, it has been edited and extended through further conversation and correspondence.

“Interview” is a compound word that promises a look inside or, more precisely, in-between. This form of dialogue is often a form of subjective revelation, in which the person interviewed offers the interviewer and subsequent reader a mode of address that is more personal and more disclosing than other literary forms of address. In intellectual literature, interviews have their place as a unique sub-genre, close in some ways to literary journalism and the intellectual autobiography. This type of writing possesses a certain accessibility and ease that can help explain more difficult concepts, published in more technical works, and deliver ideas in the voice and tone of conversational speech. Even the most “conversational” writer will often sound even more so when being interviewed.

In this interview, our view is aimed at the activity or *praxis* of philosophy of education through a philosopher of education in dialogue with another philosopher of education. In many ways, philosophy of education as contemplative mode of thought or *theoria*, while important and necessary, sublimates philosophy of education unnecessarily. However, there is also a threat from the other direction: the threat of creativity or *poesis*. Activity falls strategically short of thought – I often think we could sometimes do with more philosophical activity and less high-minded “theory” – but also fails to actualize into creativity or production, aesthetic and economic modes of sublimation.

For these reasons, the literary form of the interview carries unique burdens that can be understood as necessary weaknesses. It is not well-suited to highly technical or systematic analysis. Its focus is not microscopic or granular. Breadth can easily overtake depth. The interview rewards digressions and rabbit chasing. The interview supplements the work but does not supplant it. These limitations mirror the strategic caution to avoid theoretical depth and poetic creativity.

What remains in between *theoria* and *poesis*, then, is *praxis* in all of its arbitrariness. After all, activity is just what happens. It need not be understood as willed action, although there certainly is that dimension to it (and there certainly was for Aristotle). How this admittedly arbitrary sense of activity squares with a nonetheless serious discussion of topics that are not themselves arbitrary is not meant to present the reader with a riddle or a contradiction. What happens may be mysterious in

some or even most ways, activity may truly be arbitrary, but these qualities, these secrets, need not be understood as willy-nilly chaos nor used as excuses for carelessness.

Perhaps it is this mode of address we find in the interview, in which the medium is more rhetorical, in the domain of conversation, than logical, in the domain of reason, which allows the activity of human interaction to take place with fewer external academic conventions or decorum? Language, and reasonable editorial oversight, are the only burdens of any substance. Perhaps there is music, too, in the call and response, but it is surely simple and folksy and, above all, friendly. It is important to also note that while I would never agree to call this contrived, it is by no means “natural” or happenstance. There has not been a journalistic concern for the truth of the “record” at work so much as trying to clarify our ideas in conversation through various stages of individual drafts, passed back and forth. We employ very light citation and deploy the tools of and experiences in our common discipline, but there is also a hint of something that, to some, may come just short of rebellious: a certain sense of latitude or license, a notable lack of anxiety. I do not think either of us take this lightly, nor would I call this anything like confidence or certainty. Much of this interview is born in the circumstances of not only our institutional and geographic location, with all of its mundane issues and vicissitudes, but also the privilege of doing our work in an environment and culture in which the arbitrary need not be dressed up in bullshit.

SR

Claudia Ruitenberg: I attended Lester B. Pearson College on Vancouver Island. That was a strong influence on what I do now, in part because it was my formal introduction to philosophy. I had never taken philosophy before but there was an opportunity to take it as an IB course and I had an absolutely fantastic philosophy teacher, Suzanne Tremblay. We read primary texts when we were 16- and 17-year-olds. We were reading Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche. Most of us had no background in philosophy whatsoever, and this teacher made reading philosophy completely *not* terrifying. That was a wonderful introduction. I also learned a lot about the technique of essay writing from her in a way that I haven’t learned as explicitly from other teachers. So being at Pearson was an introduction to philosophy. It also consolidated my interest in translation. I won’t go into that in this conversation, but being exposed to multiple languages at a grammar school in the Netherlands and living at Pearson College with 200 students from 75 countries were sources of influence for my interest in translation.

Sam Rocha: Thank you for that active beginning. Let me explain why I use the word “active” to describe it. I am fascinated by all the doings you describe – the reading, the study, the teaching, the writing, the translating. I find this helpful in reframing the old question: “What is philosophy of education?” Instead, your response suggests that the question is not “What does philosophy of education do?” but rather, “What is the activity – what are the doings – of philosophy of education?” How did you go about doing things that led you to doing philosophy of education? Tell me more about the activities that led you to the activity of philosophy of education.

CR: I think part of it is figuring out that I had a fairly philosophical disposition, that those were the types of questions I tended to ask as a child. Sometimes I joke that philosophers never get out of the four-year-old stage of asking “why?” a lot. One of the places that manifested was when I was working. I had done an undergraduate degree in what was at that time called leisure studies, which was focusing on non-formal and informal education, with a focus on arts and culture. I was working for the Rotterdam Arts Council as a policy advisor, and my bosses really wanted to ask “how” questions: How can we get a more diverse audience into the theater? How can we get a younger audience into the museum? And I kept wanting to ask “why”: Why is this important? Why is this a good thing? Why are people more interested in getting 14-year-olds into the museum than they are in getting them to go skateboarding? Can somebody ground this value of the arts? It’s not that I personally don’t believe it—I mean, I work in the Arts Council, I like going to museums and theaters. But where does this idea come from that this is so valuable? That job wasn’t a great place to do that, to ask those “why” questions, because they wanted me to write policy documents. That was when I got the idea of pursuing a PhD in art education. I thought I would get some of these “why” questions out of my

system for a few years and then would likely return to the Netherlands to go back to a more practical job. That didn't happen and I'm still asking those questions. So, one part of it is just figuring out that the kinds of questions I had a tendency to ask were questions about value, questions about why we ought to do *this* rather than *that*. They were already more philosophical questions. The other part that characterizes my work is that it is often responsive, in that I like to respond to things that come up. My favourite way of writing is in response to an invitation or in response to a question, or in response to something that happens. One of the early experiences of that was when I was in my PhD program and I got quite angry about an email that was sent out to graduate students. I wrote a paper in response, trying to figure out why I was so angry about it. That paper became a plenary session for the Philosophy of Education Society. So that gave me an early experience of how, if I get really passionate, or in my case, really annoyed about something, and I get passionate about figuring out what's wrong with it in a way that holds some scholarly water, apparently that communicates something to people. So those are two moments, I think, that give you a sense of what I've been doing. One is figuring out my disposition to ask certain kinds of questions. The other is working in a mode of response.

SR: Those two elements make a lot of sense to me. They also remind me of a potential flaw in my framing this interview around activity, if we take that notion to overemphasize personal volition. Disposition and response take into account things that act upon us. That is a helpful and much-needed clarification. I do wonder, though, about one potential gap I see in your answer – this may return to the more volitional side of activity – which is that one studies, the “student” in an active sense. This may seem obvious, but disposition and response both require a kind of follow-up I might call study. So I wonder if you could talk about what you read, why you did it, how you did it. Maybe I am asking more about reading – the active reader – than about generic study?

CR: I've always been a reader, including as a child, of pretty much anything and everything. But one particularly significant experience has been learning to read in a way in which you can suspend your concern about not understanding what you're reading, sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph. If you only learn to read what I call the “Prentice Hall textbooks,” which I remember from the one year of business school that I did – you know, the kind of textbooks in which everything is either a diagram or a box or a bulleted list – if that is your mode of reading and you expect to understand everything you read as you read it, you're going to be very frustrated and probably rather nervous about reading certain other kinds of texts, certainly in philosophy, but in other areas of the humanities as well. It is important to develop the ability to read and keep reading when you know you're not fully grasping what you're reading, and to be okay with that in the moment because you trust that by the time you get to the end of the article, the end of the chapter, the end of the book, you have found some sort of understanding, even if you cannot trace it back directly to, “Oh, now I understand that in that sentence or in that paragraph the author meant *this*.” Maybe it's more the overall sense that at the end of the book I understand what was happening. For me, I had to learn that in reading Derrida, who was one of the key authors in my dissertation. I had not even heard of Derrida when I started my PhD program. It's developing that tolerance for not understanding while you're reading but reading nonetheless, and reading with the discipline of taking notes and marking up your margins and saying, “I think something important is going on here with this concept because it's repeated and I can't really put my finger on it yet, but I'm going to mark it up so I don't lose it.” My margins were full of smiley faces and angry faces and WTFs and exclamation points and sticky notes, to be able to process what I was reading. It's a very active reading, and some texts would really annoy me and others would excite me and I didn't quite know why. So, I would have to go back and read it again or read partway again. The idea that reading isn't just reading something through once, but maybe by your second full read through, you come to the end and you realize you're starting to get a glimmer of what's going on and what some of the main threads are that the author is pulling through. The ability to read in a way that is more patient is important, a way that is very engaged, a way that doesn't seek to extract the core thing out of the text, like, “Can you just give me the abstract and the bullet list?” No, I can't. I'm very fond of authors who resist that explicitly. Jeanette Winterson (1996) has a lovely passage in her book, *Art Objects*, where she writes: “The question ‘What is your

book about?’ has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did” (p. 165). In order to get a sense of what this book is about, you have to read it. That’s the only way in, isn’t it? Not through the abstract and the bulleted list. Just read the damn text.

SR: I completely agree with this. The idea that one learns by doing the work directly, rather than trying to build some elaborate shortcut, often strikes me as a good antidote for a particular type of self-deception.

Moving along, one of the concrete sites of the doings of philosophy of education is the Philosophy of Education Society (PES). I don’t want to phrase this as an institutionalizing question. It’s more that this is a society or a field – the metaphoric field of sports or ecology, a pitch or a meadow – where we might continue our conversation about study and reading and doing within a social context, within a community of scholars. I wonder if you could talk a bit more about PES, not for the sake of the institution, but as a particular site or even place of a society of study, a society of reading, as a field for the activity of philosophy of education.

CR: I started going to PES in 2002 when it was in Vancouver and I’ve gone almost every year since. There is an article by Nick Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz (2008) in which they argue for an understanding of philosophy of education as a situated practice. They want to steer clear of both the completely ahistorical view of philosophy of education as asking only timeless and universal questions, and what they call the “radically historicized” view that sees philosophy of education as whatever a particular group of people who call themselves philosophers of education happen to be doing at a certain place and time (p. 268). By positioning philosophy of education as a situated practice, they also encourage a careful “look at the conditions of our own practice: the academic and nonacademic settings in which our work is done,” including conferences (p. 271).

Being introduced to a certain way of doing things at conferences has been very influential for me. In part it was the experience of being a graduate student and getting a paper accepted. This is significant and I know this hasn’t been the case for folks who came several decades before me in this society who didn’t necessarily have a positive experience if they were graduate students and/or if they were women and/or if they were people of colour. However, I have really only ever had positive experiences in the scholarly sense of being respected for what I was writing and people being really primarily interested in the work, not in who I was or where I was from. It was just, oh, you have a piece, we will engage with this piece. We don’t care about whether you are a second-year, third-year PhD student or whatever. So that was lesson number one. People will read the piece for what it is and can give you sometimes pretty direct feedback, but it’s about the piece. That I really appreciated. The second was seeing that anybody who clearly is serious about what they do in philosophy of education is appreciated. My experience with this was when I gave this paper in 2004, being brand new, knowing hardly anybody in that society. Megan Boler was my respondent and gave a good critical response, but she didn’t tear a strip off me. It was a critical but also respectful response. The paper was drawing from Derrida and Judith Butler. I was using speech theory to analyze this thing that had got me angry in that email I mentioned earlier. And afterward, Harvey Siegel, who is an analytic philosopher of education from the US, came up to me and said, “I don’t really do this Derrida, Continental stuff, but that kind of made sense.” That was his compliment. That was a really great, early experience, figuring out that here is somebody who I wouldn’t necessarily expect to be in scholarly conversation with, but he will engage with my work. He will take the trouble to come to a general session, to sit through it, on a topic or with an approach that may be exotic to him. I appreciate that serious engagement, where people will make an effort to engage with your work, will be open to learning new things – they’re not there for just that one author that they follow. So those are important experiences where the seriousness of the work is valued. And thankfully I’ve seen that continue at the conferences today.

SR: Me too, for sure. Before I mention some actual doings that I know of and ask you to talk about them, I wonder if I can ask you a question about reputation. Philosophy has a bad reputation in many circles, and this is not the sort of Socratic bad reputation that philosophers revel in (or perhaps it is?),

I mean the historical realities of the treatment of women and people of colour, for example. PES has two standing committees on this issue for very serious and real reasons. But even beyond our field, the word “philosophy” is often, and perhaps rightly, seen as more than just intimidating for epistemic reasons; it is seen as threatening for moral and political reasons, and not in a good way at all. Can you comment on that in this context of the doings of philosophy of education?

CR: Having told you that my introduction to philosophy was in high school, and by a teacher who made philosophy completely approachable without dumbing it down, I hope it makes sense when I say that philosophy, for me, never felt exclusive or disconnected from life. Of course, I now realize how being a White European also meant that the focus on other White Europeans didn’t feel exclusive to me at the time. It wasn’t until much later that I realized I was damn lucky that my introduction to philosophy hadn’t been by some professor who implied that women were too emotional for philosophical reasoning or some such nonsense. The questions we discussed in philosophy always felt completely grounded and relevant, so when I first encountered Hannah Arendt’s declaration that she considered herself a political theorist but not a philosopher, this puzzled me (Arendt & Gaus, 1964). Philosophy has always straddled the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, for me. Both during my PhD at Simon Fraser University and when I started teaching at the University of British Columbia, I encountered reluctance about and downright hostility to the term and field of “philosophy,” even by those who were reading works by scholars I would consider philosophers, such as Paul Ricœur or Michel Foucault. I suspect (but can’t be sure) that this was due to a mixture of considering “social theory” to be a more inclusive term and less associated with a Western canon, and wanting to escape the identification with a discipline that can police its methods. What I mean by that is that people can be challenged: “Is there an argument? Is it really philosophy that you’re doing?” And I think some colleagues just want to read and discuss philosophical works without getting bogged down in that discussion. I strongly suspect some colleagues see my work as not philosophical enough (or as not really philosophy) because I have also made use of psychoanalysis, cultural studies, political theory, environmental humanities, and so on, but I’m going to go on referring to it as “philosophy of education,” because the field moves and changes with its practitioners.

SR: “The field moves.” That moves me; I want to sit with your extension of the metaphor before exploring it further. Let’s continue our exploration of the doings of philosophy of education and perhaps move closer to the activity itself, the technical work. The first thing that comes to mind is the most immediate one: what you’ve done on the doing of philosophy of education. You’ve edited and curated the special issue (and book) *What Do Philosophers of Education Do? (And How Do They Do It?)*. In terms of the activity itself, I wonder if we might consider the work that claims can play in philosophical and empirical work, but we can get to that after this.

CR: I don’t remember exactly what year this was, but it was certainly earlier on, and there was concern about how to position philosophy of education in a social science–dominated context. Faculties of education, schools of education, are now pretty much social science dominated wherever you look. How can we talk about philosophy of education as research? Sometimes you describe what you do to other people, and they go, “But do you have a lab? Is that research? What data are you collecting? When are you writing up your data?” And I was getting annoyed by that (I work from annoyance quite a bit!) and thought, okay, look, you want us to explain to you in some way, to translate to your social science mind what we do and you expect to hear terms that you recognize, like data and evidence. Fine, I will figure out how we can answer that question, but we’re going to do it on our own terms. We’re not going to talk about collecting data. I saw that the American Philosophical Association had actually put out a statement on research in which they absolutely claim the term “research,” and I sided with that. I’d had conversations early on with senior colleagues in the UK and in the US, and I asked them, should we be talking about this as philosophical scholarship or inquiry or research? And they were adamant: “Claudia, we understand the question, but you know, that train left the station eons ago. It’s research. Our universities all focus on research.” And I was pragmatic and said, “Sure, works for me, right? I work at a research-intensive university. Therefore, what I do

is research.” There’s an argument for you. I mean, it’s a thin argument, but it’s very pragmatic. It’s very deliberate. The section on my CV is called “Research.” They want to know research outputs. They want to know research impacts. I think it’s often quite horrendous language, but if you want me to speak that language, I can speak that language. So part of that was really pragmatic. But within that category of research, I then said, okay, how can we explain it to people who are used to very particular kinds of research doings, namely: I am going to design a research question, I am going to recruit participants, I am going to interview participants, I’m going to transcribe my interviews, I’m going to analyze my transcripts, I’m going to describe my findings, I’m going to describe the limitations. Right? All the doings that people are familiar with, and these doings are verbs. People understand the verbs of the doings. So I asked people: What are the doings of our philosophy of education? The simplest description, which is I think in the introduction of that special issue, is: I read, I think, I write. Which is not very satisfying for most people and it’s certainly not satisfying to our social science colleagues who then raise an eyebrow and go, “Seriously? Can you be more specific?” And I thought, yes, we can be more specific, but I’m still not going to talk about data collection and data analysis. So then I said, okay, what are the much more specific ways we can talk about doing a conceptual analysis? What are the more specific ways we can talk about building an argument and doing a hermeneutic inquiry? Is there a doing of deconstruction? (There is ongoing disagreement about that one.) What are we doing when we’re doing a type of writing, a type of thinking, a type of reading in a particular school of thought? So that’s where that collection came from. And I then issued an invitation to people I selected to say, I would like you to write a piece, and I would then like you to write a kind of meta commentary on how you did what you did. And in some cases they did exactly that. They were very good. They took the assignment. Other people didn’t follow the assignment, but did something interesting nonetheless that I think we can do something else with.

As I have thought more about this question and have taught more students, my emphasis has shifted to dissuading students from finding a named methodological box that they can live in (whether it is quantitative, qualitative, mixed, philosophical) and instead spending much more time on their questions. I think in general, and this is cultivated in certain research methods courses, students are often concerned too quickly and for too long with what methodological box they are going to live in. Am I doing a multiple case study, a comparative case study, a visual ethnography? And I say: have you actually figured out what your questions are, and are you sure these are the questions you really want to ask? I think that questions need way more attention and the named boxes need less attention. That is where I am at the moment with questions of method. Now, what was your question about claims?

SR: When I first arrived at the University of British Columbia, I was teaching and using the expression “I claim” or “so I claim” over and over, a verbal tick I picked up from listening to Slavoj Žižek. An astute student raised her hand and asked me, “what is a claim?” That simple question sent me on a journey that has deeply impacted the way I teach how philosophy of education is done and my understanding of what a claim is and how it works. I find that “research” is often very question focused, with “research questions” being considered almost mandatory. I have long relied on making claims and developing them with argumentation (here I am invoking a distinction between a “claim” and an “assertion”), and while I would never discount the role of questions in philosophy of education, I have not relied on them methodologically, so to speak. All this to say, what do you think of the work of claims and argumentation in both philosophy of education and in educational research more generally?

CR: I’m guessing that, by “assertion,” you’re referring to a mere assertion in the sense of an unwarranted claim? I tend not to use the term “assertion” and just refer to claims, so that we can then figure out whether they are warranted, as yet unwarranted but, in principle, warrantable, or unwarrantable. Regardless, yes, I would say claims and argumentation play an important role in all educational research, although they can show up a little differently. In empirical research, the conclusions researchers draw are claims, and if they provide recommendations, those are claims, too. One of the challenges I run into when teaching philosophical writing to students whose background

has almost exclusively been in empirical work (natural sciences, health sciences, social sciences), is to convince them that one can support a claim with something other than empirical evidence. There can be a deep dissatisfaction with not being able to “prove” that something is true (and that can send us off on a tangent about the difference between verification and falsification), and a dismissal of philosophical claims supported by arguments as just opinions. It often takes quite a few examples to show that they’re already quite used to reading claims supported by arguments, including those that are popular in theoretical framework sections of empirical research.

I have written elsewhere that we can “see research that begins with a philosophical claim and research that begins with a philosophical question as each other’s mirror image” in the sense that we can reason our way from question to answer or we can start with a claim (which is a kind of answer we have come up with to a question we don’t make explicit) and then provide the arguments that support that claim (Ruitenbergh, 2020, p. 833). In philosophical work, it is quite common (though by no means mandatory) to begin with a claim or set of claims that drive the argument, and this can be scary for students, who sometimes wonder, “who am I to say this so boldly?” Sometimes we have to work through questions and explorations before we arrive at a claim we dare to hang our hat on.

SR: Yes, I suppose my usage of claim versus assertion is epistemic, drawing a line between an opinion and justified true belief. But going back a bit, you talked about philosophers learning to translate, which reminded me of the notes on translation you made at the outset. I don’t think we have time to discuss the doing of translation now, but we should someday. I agree that translation is an essential and underdiscussed activity in our work individually and in the field. My question is about the other side of that phenomenon, which you didn’t name specifically, but which might be embedded in some of the things you’ve shared.

The social sciences often use words that are full-blown and prior established philosophical neologisms or jargon. It’s not that they are proprietary or trademarked, but there are now entire traditions working today under those names, decontextualized from their original usages while often appealing to them for credibility. There are the big ones like “ontology” and epistemology,” but there are other expressions that get used in the social sciences to the point that, if you’re within that set of family resemblances affixed to one of those terms, you have every reason to expect that it means the thing you think it means, but which, you may then come to find out, may have nothing whatsoever to do with the intellectual sources of that term, or with how it is being used. I know we can use some words loosely, like the word “logic” – you don’t have to be a logician to use it, and we can use the term metaphorically – but I’m talking about more specific words. (Okay, okay: I am mainly talking about phenomenology.) Do you have any thoughts from that side of translation? You talked about philosophers of education speaking the language of social scientists, and I agree we need to be multilingual, but what would you say about social scientists who misappropriate the language of philosophy? I hate to sound snarky, but I am trying to raise the issue of a particular type of bad translation or perhaps epistemic monolingualism.

CR: As you know, I am, to put it mildly, not very fond of whoever invented this idea of creating paragraphs that start with “my ontology is X” and “my epistemology is Y,” and that that should somehow be part of your methodology chapter. I don’t know who started this, but I would really like a word with them. I think this is completely useless. Yes, you can quote me on that. I think it is often actually counterproductive. And not because the underlying questions are not useful, but because by forcing people to use that terminology, they often find ways to avoid the questions they should be asking themselves. The question that I think is really important for anybody doing research is, what is the nature of the knowledge I’m after? What kind of knowledge am I after? Am I doing the kind of research where I would like to draw conclusions with a fairly high degree of certainty? There’s nothing wrong with that, but are you aware that that’s the knowledge you’re after? And are you aware that then, in order to make those kinds of pronouncements, you need to collect a lot of data and you need to do statistical analysis of large data sets? You may say, well, what I’m realizing is that the nature of knowledge that I’m after is actually understanding. I don’t need to be able to generalize, but I would like us to gain a deeper understanding of certain kinds of experiences that people have and what it’s like for them from the inside. So, if I take an example from medical education: what is it like

to be a certain kind of patient, for example, and how would it be valuable for doctors to know that? Again, the question is not, “what is my ontology?” or “what is my epistemology?” The question is, “what is the nature of the knowledge you are seeking to contribute to and seeking to produce?” That’s a question that matters, and if I’m being charitable, I think that’s the question that is behind this silly statement, “my epistemology is X.” Even if you don’t force people to use that term, what often happens is people find another “ism” or “ology” or box they can tick because they’re trying to find where they can “live” as researchers. Oh yeah, I’ve already found a methodological box I can tick; my epistemology sounds like bounded relativism or interpretivism or some other “ism.” And I often think, have you actually said anything now or have you just found a way to jump through the hoop, to tick the box? I want to see that you can think about this question, that you are aware of the nature of the knowledge that you will be seeking to produce with this piece of text, and therefore also the kind of knowledge you won’t be contributing to. So, again, the question “what is the nature of the knowledge you want to contribute?” is valuable, but do you need to speak epistemology to do that? No, and in fact, I’d rather you didn’t, because most of the time it’s a distraction. Same with ontology. I actually see really quite interesting things happening with ontological questions these days in post-humanism, where scholars are trying to displace certain understandings of what it means to be, and whether or not an entity can be on its own or whether it’s a product of a relation. And I think those are genuine ontological shifts. However, a lot of the time, speaking ontology doesn’t help students get there. I’d much rather you begin to think about whether you’re talking about persons or about individuals or about subjects, and what those differences mean. Do you believe that we are quite distinct entities and bounded individuals? Do you believe that we are quite stable beings? Do you believe that we are the product of relations or that we pre-exist those relations? If this is relevant to your research, those kinds of questions are good questions to ask. Do you need to speak ontology to do them? No. And often it becomes a distraction, because again, you’re just going to find a box that sounds like another “ology” or “ism,” and you’ll take it and then move on.

But there are a lot of other concepts, too, right? So when you ask, does it matter whether social science scholars “speak philosophy” just like we are expected to “speak social sciences,” I think that is, in a way, the work that has been called by some colleagues “the underlabourer” function of philosophy, which is the clarification of the key concepts used in the sciences, including the social sciences (see the helpful discussion in Winch, 1990/2003, pp. 3–5). Let’s take one that is getting a lot of traction these days, which is, pardon the horrible neologism, “resiliency.” We have a number of psychological colleagues who use “resiliency.” This is fascinating. Do we need “resiliency”? How is resiliency different from resilience? Where does this idea of resiliency come from, and what does it mean for something or someone to be resilient, and resilient to what? What is this concept? Where does it come from? What does it do? What does it bring about in our thinking and in the text? That kind of philosophical work often underpins good social science work, and philosophers can help with that clarification. Some people have called that the service function or the underlabourer function of philosophy that shows up most of the time in the form of, hopefully, a solid theoretical framework.

SR: There is obviously a lot to say about this “underlabourer function,” that is, the service role of philosophy of education. (One the one hand, it fits the Socratic midwifery depiction of the philosopher. On the other hand – or is this still the same hand? – it clearly has the potential to shackle philosophy of education into the command of those who seem to know and care little for it.) In my own teaching, despite not being an ethicist, I often teach what could be called service courses in ethics. You’ve obviously taught and worked more directly on ethics within philosophy of education. And then, of course, there are your interests – which I think are still within the realm of ethics – in ecological education and environmental philosophy. I wondered if you might want to pick one of those doings or talk around them together.

CR: Questions of ethics, I think, are extremely difficult to avoid in education because education is fundamentally normative. Education inevitably involves a selection of texts, experiences, environments, and relations that we find valuable. And it means we don’t select certain other kinds of texts, experiences, relations, right? Because we all are mortal and have a limited amount of time. So, it involves selection based on certain values: what do we find important, and for what reason? It

involves maintaining relations, in a certain way. It involves guiding and steering people less or more forcefully in a certain direction. So, it's normative. And I think that therefore, ethical questions are always present. For me, the most interesting ethical questions in education are not the moral dilemma cases. Yes, we can talk about those: there is a critical incident, and what is the right way to respond? You know... the student in this context, in that classroom, did such-and-such to that student, and what is a justifiable kind of discipline or what is the right way to respond? Sure, we can work through those, and sometimes in teacher education they are of value, especially when there are certain types of incidents that happen repeatedly. But that is not the most interesting thing in education for me. It is more the overall normative direction of education. Do we still understand how we justify making schooling mandatory, having children sit in classrooms for X hours a day, without those children choosing to do so? And how we spend that time – can we justify that morally? Those kinds of questions, I think, are important. What are we doing that passes on certain understandings of value, that passes on certain understandings of what it means to be human and what it means to live together and how to live together? I have been teaching the Ethics and Education course in our EdD program, where the focus is on ethics and educational policy and leadership. And I use a sentence from Paul Ricœur (1990/1992) to help guide the structuring of the entire course, in which he defines “‘ethical intention’ as aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” (p. 172). And the only thing I add to that, which is an aim Ricœur did not include, is, “within planetary boundaries” (Richardson et al., 2023). So: how do we live well, with and for others, in just institutions, and within planetary boundaries? Those questions are much, much bigger than education, but education touches on all of them. And so, for me, that's why you can't avoid some understanding of the fact that you're involved in a normative enterprise. That's the reason for asking ethical questions.

Then the questions of the climate emergency and ecological degradation more generally. Yes, in some ways they are ethical questions. I think they change some of the directions of education. For me, the biggest curiosity may be, dare I say it, almost more an ontological and existential one than an ethical one, in the sense that, when the future of the future is called into question, what do we do with the dominant future-orientedness of education? The value of education in the sense of people spending time together in particular ways, that doesn't go away. But education in the sense of preparing for a future when the future itself is uncertain and the whole sense of futurity is called into question? That's a big question for me right now, where education and ecological issues intersect.

SR: It might be worth going into a bit more depth on your claim that education is fundamentally normative. I realize that to say that something is fundamentally X does not entail that it is exclusively X or even necessarily X, but I do think it is worth clarifying, especially in light of other distinctions we might make between what is normative and what is prescriptive. For my own thinking, the descriptive nature of education is important here as well – perhaps my metaphysical zeal is making a comeback? Care to elaborate?

CR: Note that I didn't say that philosophy of education is fundamentally normative; I agree that phenomenological and other descriptive work is part of philosophy of education. But the practice of education always has an intention, some conception of what those involved in it see as worthwhile, that informs it. Just because there are a limited number of years in a human lifetime and limited number of hours in the day, we can't escape choosing what we do and what we spend our educational time and energy on. I should clarify, though, that when I say “normative,” I don't necessarily mean “prescriptive.” Stella Gaon (2019) uses this distinction in a way I find helpful when she discusses Derrida's work. She explains that Derrida's work, including on deconstruction, is obviously concerned with responsibility and is normative in the sense that it indicates that responsibility is something to strive for. However, it then proceeds to question repeatedly what responsibility is, to the point that a definitive answer about what we ought to do in situation X is constantly deferred (pp. 247–249). I understand that, in educational practice, we have no choice but to decide what to do; however, philosophically, I would like to prevent that particular decision from congealing into a more general prescriptive formula, precisely because of the normative impulse to keep questioning things and to keep trying to make them better. So, in philosophy of education, while it is often helpful

to sidestep or at least defer the “what should we do on Monday morning?” question, which is asking for a prescription, we can’t escape our normative commitments.

SR: I cannot disagree with your careful clarification and can also not quite find my way into what seems a bit too deterministic about the totality of the no-exit ethical situation. But don’t get me wrong, I am not trying to construct a libertarian door here, just a window maybe. (I am reminded of a remark I think you made one time, saying that Kant’s categorical imperative was insufficiently demanding!) I think I’m going to package the last three questions into a giant question, or a “pick your own adventure.” My operating assumption is that our work as philosophers of education happens across at least three distinct activities: teaching, research, and supervision. I’m not invoking the standard teaching, research, and service triad here. I’m wondering if you can, as a parting shot at how you do philosophy of education, talk a bit about that triad. Perhaps there’s an overarching sense of doing philosophy of education in all three sites or perhaps they really are quite different. I have told my students that I think I’m a different philosopher in every class that I teach because the topics are different. I’ve been an American pragmatist in one class, and warned students that I plan to be a strong moral realist in a course to follow. In my written work, I do not think this sort of thing would work out. If I change a view I have published, I would simply correct or retract it in later work if I returned to it. It seems more developmentally accountable and less pragmatic, but maybe I am deluding myself. Then, in supervision, I have a number of views that seem to be classed by my supervisees as emblematic of a philosophical approach (though I consider it idiosyncratic to my own disposition, which like yours is a philosophical one). I wonder if there are ways in which the kinds of philosophy of education that you do might be markedly different between the teaching that you’re doing, the writing that you’re doing, and the supervising that you’re doing.

CR: Let me tell you a story about somebody I met when I was at Pearson College. My philosophy teacher invited a guest speaker who came for a whole week, and we did a kind of world religion unit. It was Harold Coward, a university professor from the University of Calgary and he was amazing. He introduced a number of religions to us, in particular Eastern religions, Eastern philosophy. So he was doing introductions to Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and so on in the context of our philosophy class. By the end of it, we were all convinced that he was a Hindu or Buddhist of some sort because the man talked so passionately about all of these topics. It turned out he wasn’t; in fact, he has a background in Christian theology. He was not a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Daoist, but he could teach about all of them so passionately that that you thought he was speaking about his own perspective. And in some ways, I think that may be what you’re getting at with the question, “what kind of philosophy of education do you do depending on the topic?” I mean, there are probably classes I’ve taught in which students would have said, “you’re an analytic philosopher in epistemology,” because my obsession has been with helping them figure out that truth and justification are not the same thing, having them figure out what a justified true belief is and why it isn’t enough to have a warrant – why belief is required, too. If I’m working through that, then at the end of it, students don’t get that I might be writing what would be called continental philosophy in some other area. Because that’s what matters in that context, in that moment: for students to grapple with a particular kind of question.

This past spring I taught a course on environmental philosophy and education, and found myself being a staunch defender of utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, because I felt he was getting an unfair rap; people hear “utilitarianism” and just love to hate it. And while it’s not ultimately how I would reason through things, I think Singer has done amazing work. Of course we can critique it, but you don’t critique something before you’ve made a really, really solid effort to understand it thoroughly. And so, I was constantly postponing the critique because I felt we weren’t there yet. So, there were moments where I would be a utilitarian in that class or I would be the analytic philosopher in epistemology, and I think that’s what you’re getting at with the doing of philosophy in teaching. There are different types of things you do based on the questions that come up and what we’re reading and why. I think it’s important to be introduced to things thoroughly and charitably before we figure out what our own original contribution is going to be. We can’t jump to that too quickly.

SR: Before you get to writing or supervision, I am really taken by this story about Coward. It does create a tension between the ability to be an informed expert and the added need for judgement – the normative no-exit situation you described earlier (which I objected to!). I am certain you are not trying to make a case for a kind of neutral teaching, but on the other hand, perhaps there is an important place for a kind of neutrality or objectivity that is salutary – or even necessary – for teaching. I suppose this is the age-old issue of power to some degree, but I am only asking this for the teacher in the room (the student seems to have different responsibilities). Care to elaborate on that key element?

CR: I try to teach all the texts on the syllabus in a way that shows they merit serious attention. I sometimes tell students they don't have to like or agree with what they read, and they are welcome, after the class, never to read anything by that author again, but they should assume there was a reason I put the text on the syllabus, and make an effort to read it. I may add that I include texts on the syllabus whose arguments I don't agree with, and, typically, it would be impossible for me to agree with all the texts we read for a class because some of them contradict others. I heard of a friend and colleague who bans the words "like" and "dislike" from class discussions of texts. So students are asked to comment on a text but they can't say whether they "liked" it. I can see how that can be very helpful to counter the Facebookification of our discourse. I haven't used this approach but have tended to emphasize that one's feeling of liking or disliking a text should be a point of departure, not an end point. I, too, can read texts that I fall in love with or that I find irritating, but the question should be: why? What is it in the text that provokes that response in me? Is it a stylistic matter, perhaps an arrogant or bombastic tone? Or is there something else going on?

However, much as I try to be evenhanded in how I treat texts on the syllabus, I do, of course, show my views through the texts I select in the first place. For example, I mentioned that I have used Paul Ricœur's "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" as the guiding motto for my Ethics and Education course, but I have added "within planetary boundaries." In doing so, I take a clear stance, which is that, regardless of our role (teacher, administrator, curriculum developer, etc.) and the particular kind of education we are involved in (for example, K–12, post-secondary), we can't afford today not to talk about the transgression of planetary boundaries.

SR: That is very helpful. Now, on to supervision?

CR: In supervision, ultimately, my goal is to make sure students think well and write clearly. Whether or not they are pursuing a question that I would pursue is not relevant to me; I want to help you pursue the best question you can pursue, and I want to help you do it as well as you can. So if I see that your thinking is sloppy or your concepts are muddled, or you seem to treat three concepts as interchangeable where I don't think they are, my job is to constantly tug at things to make the thinking more precise, to make the writing tighter, to make it more communicative. That's my job, in my view, as a supervisor or a member of the committee. You might be drawing from sources that I wouldn't draw from in my own writing, but again, that's immaterial, right? I'm not trying to turn students into replicas of me. That would be extremely boring in my view. My job in supervision is to help people's work, to make it stronger and more precise: Are you sure you're ready to make that claim? Can you claim that? Do you have enough evidence? I've just read three pages of abstractese – I need an example. That kind of stuff.

My main aim is to support graduate students in finding their burning question, and then to pursue that question with the approach that fits it (sometimes without me, if it turns out I don't have right expertise). I would much rather that someone articulates a great empirical question and pursues it rigorously, than that they muddle along in philosophical work because they have some vague idea that they want to do philosophy of education but don't actually have a burning question or claim that suggests this is the right field for them. At the same time, it's important students realize early on that philosophical work is a completely legitimate way to write a thesis or dissertation, no matter what anyone else says, as long as their burning questions or claims suggest a philosophical approach. I remember a moment with a doctoral student whom I pressed and pressed to drill down to the question she really wanted to pursue. When she finally told me her quite wonderful question, and I

enthusiastically told her that was a fantastic question, she burst into tears because she had just spent the prior months on a massive detour, trying to find a different kind of question because she thought her (philosophical) question wasn't something she could pursue. Obviously, I believe that students with good philosophical questions about education should be supported in pursuing those in schools and faculties of education.

SR: And, finally, what about your writing?

CR: First of all, this interview has been one of two recent reminders of how much I like conversation – spoken, written, or in a blend of the two – as an activity of philosophy of education, part of the very doing of philosophy of education and not, as some more empirically oriented colleagues may think, as a representation once the doing is finished. I just submitted a draft of a set of responses to written interview questions by a Brazilian colleague. That interview was a follow-up to an online paper presentation I gave for a conference in Brazil. To be honest, between me not having a great sense of the audience, the technical challenges of an online presentation, and the presentation being translated live by an interpreter, I'm not sure how well that paper presentation worked. However, the follow-up written interview has been a generous opportunity (and challenge!) to clarify my thinking further, figure out what key concepts or distinctions seem to get lost, give better examples, and explain things more accessibly.

Earlier you mentioned the possibility of taking up an already published view and correcting or retracting it. I have been doing some of that correcting, reading some of my earlier work with a critical eye to where it was too simple, was not precise enough, or contributed to misunderstandings. I have been writing some critical commentary both on my work on an ethic of hospitality and on my work on agonistic political education. The broad strokes have remained the same but there are definitely areas where I agree with critics that more work is needed. The question of educational hospitality in the context of the climate crisis and the transgression of other planetary boundaries is one example.

Finally, if I return to writing in the mode of response that I mentioned earlier, I would like to (in the full aspirational sense of this phrase) distinguish this from writing to a deadline. I love the mode of response (including in an interview such as this), but I want to get better at separating that from responding to every invitation or opportunity that arises. Yes, perhaps there is a great special issue theme or conference theme, but if my writing needs more time, it needs more time. I would like to take more distance from the academic economy in overdrive, focused on getting another publication on the CV, another title in the catalogue, another conference submission in before the deadline. So, while I will likely still write in the mode of response, this can be a response that takes its time.

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