

# Conceptual Analysis in the Contemporary Educational Landscape

Ian Winchester et Robert Manery

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Résumé de l'article

This introduction to a special issue on the value of conceptual analysis provides a historical context and reasons for continuing to engage and value conceptual analysis in the contemporary educational landscape.

# *Conceptual Analysis in the Contemporary Educational Landscape*

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IAN WINCHESTER and ROBERT MANERY  
University of Calgary and Simon Fraser University

Few people involved in philosophy of education need to have its value justified, nor are philosophers of education unaware of the diminishing influence of philosophy within educational policy decision-making processes, teacher education programs, and, indeed, within faculties of education. While philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology might once have contributed equally to decisions about policy and practice, psychology has now emerged as the more dominant field. Various reasons have been proffered for decline of philosophy of education. Some have blamed philosophers of education, particularly those working in the analytic tradition, for shirking from a responsibility to provide solutions to problems rather than “merely” analyze them. Others suggest that a rift between philosophers and philosophers of education in which the former perceived the latter as constituting a less significant sub-branch of philosophy contributed to a perception that philosophy of education had little to contribute. Still others (Colgan, 2018) have suggested that institutional structures have played a leading role in marginalizing philosophy of education. Robin Barrow (1974) addressed this question in the mid-seventies, during the so-called heyday of philosophy of education, and suggested, as per the first view, that philosophers had to overcome what he called a “castration complex” and acknowledge the value of philosophy to education. In particular, he called for philosophers of education to acknowledge their expertise and provide “practical directives” about educational matters. Paul Standish (2007) more recently argued a similar point and, in fact, cites Barrow’s analysis of the concept of skill as an example of the limits of analytic philosophy. Standish writes that “Something is needed beyond clarity over concepts” for a more fulsome understanding of the “urgency and implications of these [practical] problems” (p. 166). Standish argues that a broader embrace of different philosophical traditions is required for the full potential of philosophy to be expressed. Indeed even Bertrand Russell, who, along with his contemporary G.E. Moore, more or less founded the great development of analysis in philosophy generally, was critical of the kind of philosophy that was interested only in getting clear about something but had no interest in actually resolving issues. One remembers his critique of the Oxford fashion of “ordinary language” philosophizing in which he remarked that the Oxford school of the 1950s and 1960s was like the man who when asked if he knew the way to Oxford answered: “Oxford?”, “Way to Oxford?”, Yes said the questioner. “Dunno” said the man.

Standish’s arguments notwithstanding, “clarity over concepts” has been an essential, if not always achieved, philosophical activity. It was precisely this conceptual clarity that Peters sought to bring to the field of education in order to contend with the confusion—“the undifferentiated mush” (Peters, 1977, p. 89)—he felt characterized educational thought at that time. As the well-known story goes, Peters (along with Israel Sheffler in the United States) established analytic philosophy as the dominant approach to

philosophy of education in the 1960s and 70s, a period considered the halcyon era of the field of philosophy of education. Peters saw conceptual analysis as a limited first step to thinking about foundational questions in education. Peters claimed that “conceptual analysis can of itself contribute little to answering such questions [questions about what action to take or about why to value one thing rather than another], but it can pose them in a more precise form” (Peters, 1975, p. 14). For Peters, the next steps often involved engaging in moral questions. Barrow, who has been a fierce advocate for the value of conceptual analysis, notes that clarifying concepts bestows the added benefit of “revealing the logical implications of our concepts” (Barrow, 2010, p. 14). These logical implications offer guidance to the judgements that follow the first steps of conceptual analysis. In his long career, Barrow has not shied away from following the logical implications of conceptual analysis to arrive at prescriptions for action. Standish’s criticism of Barrow’s analysis of skill, despite Standish’s useful appeal to embrace the resources offered by other philosophical traditions, omits any mention of Barrow’s stance against the conception of cognitive abilities as skills. In particular, Barrow (1987) warns against viewing creativity and critical thinking as simply generic skills that can be developed independent of specific areas of inquiry and subsequently transferable to any domain. Indeed, Barrow explicitly argues that the results of his conceptual analysis of the terms *skill*, *creativity* and *critical thinking* entail that these abilities need to be cultivated within individual fields of activity. Whether or not we agree with Barrow, he provides example after example of why conceptual analysis is a necessary precursor to further thinking and judgements about an issue or problem. We should also note that Barrow, and for that matter, Peters as well, explicitly reject the idea that their analysis is the last word on whatever issue they are considering.

The title of this introduction suggests that there is a renewed need for conceptual analysis in the contemporary educational context. The need, however, is unchanged in the sense that conceptual analysis—as Peters, Barrow, and others have suggested—remains a necessary preliminary task to any further decision-making. We cannot determine what should be done in the name of education without first having a clear idea of what is meant by education. The “undifferentiated mush” that concerned Peters has been stubbornly difficult to settle and clarify. Standish, writing in 2007, found the state of educational research and teacher training alarming in their “attempt[s] to address matters of policy and practice *without the resources of traditions of enquiry*” (p. 160, emphasis in original). While not explicitly defined by Standish, these “traditions of enquiry” clearly suggest a philosophical analysis that includes, at least in part, conceptual analysis. Barrow (1997), writing a decade earlier, raised a similar concern:

The challenge for our time remains much the same as it was in 1960 although its form and context have changed. That challenge is for philosophers to persuade others of the practical value and necessity of the philosophical task, particularly analysis” (p. 123).

This challenge remains today and is evidenced by a continued imprecision in the use of terminology and concepts. Anecdotally, most teachers, teacher-candidates, and university instructors claim to be student-centred while pursuing very different instructional strategies and teaching practices, making it unclear what it is, in their minds, that constitutes student-centred teaching. Similarly, the development of critical thinking as an aim of education is ubiquitous in mission statements, but again, what this entails seems to vary widely. We should also express concern that British Columbia has recently implemented a new competency-based curriculum for its K-12 education without any significant analysis (excepting Claudia Ruitenberg’s work in this issue). The fact that this model seems to be widely embraced despite significant conceptual difficulties is worrisome and strongly suggests a need for a more public

philosophical analysis of this model. In addition to the conceptual confusion Ruitenberg critiques, we could question claims made in regard to the specific competencies. Why, for instance, does one need to share one's feelings in order to attain competency at social awareness and responsibility? Is "a sense of joy and wonder in learning" (Creative Thinking, n.d.) a necessary condition of being a creative thinker? The battles currently being waged, yet again, over class size in Ontario and British Columbia cannot be settled without a reference to a definition of educational success. Government arguments draw upon research that suggests that class size does not significantly affect test scores, but surely this is not the only measure of educational success. These conflicts and confusions forcefully indicate a necessary role for conceptual analysis, a role clarifying what is meant by the concepts we use, but also the logical implications of this analysis.

The articles in this special issue demonstrate the value of conceptual analysis in the contemporary educational landscape. While the papers do not, for the most part, make explicit claims about the value of analytic philosophy, they engage in the method(s) of analytic philosophy to critique research practices, policy decisions, and educational approaches. In doing so, these papers present a strong case for conducting conceptual analysis as a necessary first step in educational endeavours. First presented at a symposium in honour of Robin Barrow held at Simon Fraser University in the fall of 2018, these papers respond to his work, which, as already mentioned, has long advocated the value of analytic philosophy and argued that conceptual confusion has been responsible for a great many missteps made in the name of educational progress.

The purpose of the issue is not to revisit any rift between analytic and continental philosophy, and we should recall Standish's suggestion that philosophers of education should embrace resources offered by other philosophical traditions. Indeed, Ann Chinnery is explicit about her affinity for the work of Derrida, Levinas, and Blanchot. Likewise, Claudia Ruitenberg's work has often drawn upon Continental thinkers, especially Derrida. The intent in this issue is to draw attention to the constructive benefits of conceptual analysis as demonstrated by the investigations undertaken by these papers.

The papers examine a broad range of educational concerns. Ann Chinnery builds a case, drawing upon the work of the analytic philosopher Cora Diamond, for the centrality of a concept of "human being" to moral philosophy. In so doing, she seeks to broaden the aims of moral education that Robin Barrow articulates in his essay, "Moral Education's Modest Agenda." Claudia Ruitenberg critiques British Columbia's new curriculum and its institution of a competency-based model. Ruitenberg analyzes the conception of competency in the curriculum, drawing upon Barrow's critique of the skill, and argues that this conception commits a category mistake and explains the consequences of the commission of this error. Jack Martin examines a conceptual confusion in the conflation of two senses of the term *general* as "common to all" or "on average." Martin argues that this conflation has led to a proliferation of unsubstantiated claims about generalizable laws regarding education made by educational researchers who fail to recognize the difference between a claim that is true on average and one that is true in all instances. Robin Barrow explicitly argues for the necessity of conceptual analysis and presents arguments to demonstrate problems with an overreliance on scientific research in the social sciences, with special emphasis on the dangers posed in educational research. Ian Gregory argues for the centrality of reason and rationality to education and to democracy. His argument posits a view of democracy as necessarily involving "deliberative discourse," which is itself dependent upon reason, objectivity, rational justification, and truth. Howard Woodhouse responds to an earlier special issue entitled "What is the Good University?" Woodhouse provides an informative analysis of an idea of knowledge as a public

good and serves as a timely call to action for philosophers of education to actively defend the role of the university as a provider of a public good—namely, knowledge—and to resist the privatization of this good.

Taken together, these essays suggest the continued relevance and vital importance of conceptual analysis to every aspect of education, from curricular planning to policy creation to educational research. This does not mean that because we believe that conceptual analysis continues to have an important place in educational thought and educational research that we think that there is not more to be understood about or gained by philosophical work in an educational context. Indeed the work of thinkers like Plato or Wittgenstein, both of whom begin their thinking in circumstances where they did not know their way about and who openly display their struggle, seems to be of continuing importance in philosophical thought that is to be of any use either theoretically or practically in educational contexts. It might be argued that philosophical thought is much more widespread than we normally recognized in our philosophical silos because in all disciplines the approach of Plato and Wittgenstein may well occur but is not recognized as such though it may well be central to advance in such disciplines. But this will have to wait for another issue.

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