

A Revolution By Any Other Name

Jaylynn N. Hutchinson
University of Washington

Stone invokes a very strong word when she suggests a revolution for philosophy of education. One might ask, "A revolution for what?" While at the outset Stone's paper intimates an epistemological revolution, its conclusion is more soft in nature and seems to point only to a change in rhetoric or a change in the culture of inquiry. For example, Stone concludes that the implications for philosophy of education are that we "value our diversity of interests and orientations. It means, moreover, assuming a humility....Lastly it means that we are always open to new ideas and to recognition that for any of us there is always still much, much to learn, to do."

Throughout her essay, she enriches this conclusion by arguing that our inquiry must understand its own positionality, historicity, pragmatic role and adaptability. Stone then invites the philosopher of education to look anew at "traditions like the literary and the rhetorical," in order to overcome our estrangement from them. But in what sense is this a revolution? Surely even a friendly post-positivist could agree to inquiry that is more diverse in nature, that assumes a humility and an openness not generally associated with modernist Enlightenment thinking. So if her conclusion could be embraced by theoreticians of many stripes, I ask again, what kind of revolution is this? In hopes to clarify the sense of this revolution, I wish to raise three points to further the conversation to which Stone has invited us. These are: (1) Is this revolution postmodern, antimodern, or fundamentally rhetorical in nature? (2) Is there room in a rhetorical revolution for ambiguous terms that hint of their modern legacy? and (3) What *is* the public character of rhetorical sources, such as stories? I raise these questions with a welcome and healthy sense of postmodern doubt in hopes that it spurs further conversation.

To the first question then. Stone cites Burbules's paper, "Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education," and applauds his claim for "literary/rhetorical contributions to educational philosophy."¹ Burbules's paper indicates that postmodern doubt can be mediated by calling upon three narrative tropes, that is, the ironic, the tragic, and the parodic. (It has been suggested that these tropes are not inclusive of all experience. In this regard, I would nominate an additional trope of solidarity that speaks to the unique experience of cultures long dominated.) What Burbules offers is an acknowledgment that incorporating these tropes does not reject claims to "language, science, ethics, reason, and justice." Rather, they represent ways for us to make claims to knowing and meaning-making with "aesthetic coherence," rather than a strictly logical coherence. With this claim, Burbules distinguishes between postmodern doubt and antimodern rejectionism. Postmodernism tempers modernist claims to objectivity, totalizing metanarratives and a transcendental viewpoint in inquiry. Stone argues that one way to temper such claims is through the literary. Is this the revolution that Stone advocates?

Or perhaps Stone proposes a strong version of revolution. An antimodernist view would reject all claims to knowing and reason because there is no way to

suggest definitive propositions about our shared world with any certainty. As such, antimodernism leaves us with little reason to dialogue. Certainly, the richness of rhetoric lies in the complexity of conversation that it engenders. Hence, a revolution that provides little reason to dialogue appears as a fairly counter-productive revolution, and I assume is not what Stone suggests.

The last revolutionary sense that Stone may be proposing is one that centers on the culture of inquiry itself. The study of rhetoric is cross-disciplinary. As Nelson, et al. suggests, it

covers at once what is communicated, how it is communicated, what happens when it is communicated, how to communicate it better, and what communication is in general. Rhetoric of inquiry enlarges these meanings to encompass the interdependence of inquiry and communication, and to encourage connecting all the skeins of rhetoric into a commitment for better inquiry to inform action.²

Stone's conclusion points in this direction. Certainly philosophers of education have struggled with questions of what counts as evidence for knowledge-claims? What is the role of emotion, moral sentiment, or the literary in providing reasons for knowledge claims? Rather than a revolution that challenges our ability to know, it seems that this rhetorical sense challenges the traditional means through which we communicate our knowing. It is a revolution that asks us to broaden our conversations.

My second question points to modernist traces in our language and asks what difference these may make. At times, Stone relies on a language that is modernist in nature. For example, as she clarifies her topic, she indicates that her interest is in "literary theory as a *founding* source" (italics mine). If the rhetorical revolution is to reject modernist claims to certainty, then Stone must be wary of identifying anything that is foundational, even if it is literary theory. Relying on a foundational source appears to compromise the call for revolution. Hence the revolutionary must speak to the justification for a rhetorical revolution within a framework that does not rely upon foundations.

In tracing the history of rhetoric, Stone again draws upon the modernist strategy of utilizing a dualism. In this case, the intellectual dualism is constructed between the Platonists and Sophists, or between analytic intellectual inquiry and rhetoric which incorporates "poetics, literature, and even history." More revolutionary would be to recast this moment in time in a non-dualistic way in order to show how modernism rests upon a false dichotomy between the two divided and hierarchical domains. In fact, this is the point that Toulmin makes when he argues that the Renaissance humanists saw the realms as complementary and both leading to modernity.³ The task of the revolutionary would be to demonstrate that the notion of rationality incorporates both the literary and the theoretical, and that our intellectual tradition has wrongly cast these as opposing domains in human knowing.

The last modernist tendency that Stone evidences is in making a claim that a "rhetorical perspective for philosophy of education *resolves* these problems." Promising a resolution sounds rather final and certain; these are two claims that any respectable postmodern would eschew! Her point is that while perhaps philosophy

of education has embraced a rhetorical revolution, its members have not made a “self-conscious choice of revolutionary membership.” Talking in this way creates two quandaries for a rhetorical revolutionary. First, in making a distinction between the field itself and making a self-conscious choice of revolutionary membership, Stone abstracts the academic field of philosophy of education away from any particular, local and timely individual who “does” philosophy of education. Yet postmodernism makes the point that academic disciplines do not exist “out there,” but are instead, a shared social creation unable to be separated from those who “do it.” In her own rhetoric then, Stone continues the modern split between the abstracted discipline and the individual who practices in it.

Secondly, in choosing revolutionary membership, can a revolutionary postmodern be certain enough of her position to call for self-conscious revolutionary membership? Revolutionary membership generally precludes commitments to humility, perspectival knowledge construction, and a healthy dose of doubt that one’s group may not “have it right.” Since these are all ingredients that Stone describes as part of the rhetorical turn, they contradict a call for revolutionary membership. The vestiges of modernity are hard to shed!

My third question has to do with the public character of rhetorical sources. As I indicated earlier, there are points where Stone leads us to believe that the revolution she is advocating is indeed deeply epistemological in nature and not simply rhetorical. Twice she indicates that all forms of explanation, analyses and narrative tropes, are “just more stories.” She quotes Hernandi who states that “all discourse...turns out to be situationally figurative storytelling.” If this is truly the case, then we are confronted with two interlocking problems. First, given that all discourse is storytelling, is there a need for differentiating stories, and if so, upon what grounds do we differentiate? Saying that all discourse and all explanation are just more stories is like saying “All snow is white.” While surely it is in one sense, when we are surrounded by it, we might find ourselves making multiple distinctions about its whiteness in order to serve different social purposes. (Hence comes the fabled “1000 Words for Snow” in the Inuits language.) Engaging in a revolution that says all discourse is storytelling does not move us far enough. While this claim may be fundamentally true (hence, the epistemological issue), in practice we are left to make sense of better stories or worse, coherent stories or not. In other words, we are still left to define criteria about shared public meaning. Rosenwald discusses how we make sense of stories when all discourse is seen as storytelling. He indicates that

What keeps the narrative from being free fictions is not that they represent anything in particular but that they “summarize and justify” the work from which they arose and our comprehension of the obstacles that had to be surmounted in the construction of these narratives....That is why the vertical coherence of the “better” story is never cheaply bought....The truth of a narrative is therefore not representational and not pragmatic but dialectical: the narrative is true in that it enshrines the toil of undoing repression and social perplexity — both forms of routinized suffering; it is true as the laborious negation of the prior self-consciousness.⁴

Perhaps it is in carefully defining what would count as provisional and dialectic criteria that we find the most important work of this revolution. Here we may join others such as Nussbaum and Rorty, Gadamer and Buchmann, and others who have already begun this exploration.⁵

I am sympathetic to the call for stories and other forms of rhetoric. Yet I am not ready to say that because stories are in *some* way public, we have a *consensual* public. This is the second problem. Unfortunately, a strong antimodern revolutionary claim for rhetoric challenges the very creation of a public. The problem with giving up the necessity to provide reasoned argument for a position is that we can never move beyond speaking and listening. Your story is as good as mine. Most troubling then, is that we have no way of making social or public sense of the stories we share. We can create no public sphere in which social action, including education, can take place. Therefore, it is critical that we explain how rhetoric that draws upon literature and emotion does not represent the irrational. Literature is an attempt to convey meaning and as such is rational. Neither is emotion irrational; there are reasons we have the emotions we do. Hence, accepted as rational, rhetoric becomes more than just stories, but can be drawn upon as resources in reasoned argument.

Forms of narrative rhetoric point to ethical issues which have recently been explicated by Newton in *Narrative Ethics*.⁶ Newton argues for “narrative as ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process.” In other words, rhetoric’s domain is more than epistemological. Rather, the use of rhetoric itself places us in an ethical position. Newton explains: “narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text.” In calling for a rhetorical revolution, we need to consider its domain carefully because the questions, consequences and implications will be different for distinct domains. Newton indicates that when we give up the “totalizing pretensions” of ontology, we move from questions of theoretical necessity to questions of human freedom. Perhaps understanding rhetoric and narrative as ethics with its attendant questions of human freedom will be the strength of the revolution.

1. Nicholas C. Burbules, “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 39-47.

2. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, “Rhetoric of Inquiry,” in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald McCloskey (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 16.

3. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 22-30.

4. George Rosenwald, “Conclusion: Reflections on Narrative Self-Understanding,” in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, ed. George Rosenwald and Richard Ochberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 286.

5. For examples of works that begin to sketch out the parameters of narrative conversation, see Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1990); and Margret Buchmann, “Reason and Romance in Argument and Conversation,” in *Detachment and Concern*, ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert Floden (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

6. Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-33.