Philosophy of Education, Being of Use, and Today's Crisis of Democracy

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In 2019, the Philosophy of Education Society (PES) celebrated its 75th anniversary. Through the decades, the organization has provided space for philosophers of education to explore a wide range of issues and questions, including many related to the value, purpose, and place of our work. Indeed, reflecting on the role and contribution of philosophy of education as a discipline has been a perennial concern in the field. We wrestle with what it means to be both philosophically sophisticated (consistent with traditions in philosophy) and practically relevant (as is often the demand in schools of education). We have regularly revisited the question of what philosophy of education is and how and why the work we do matters.

The theme for the 2019 annual meeting began with an affirmation of the usefulness of revisiting questions of purpose, especially in light of changing social, political, and educational dynamics. At a time when the liberal arts are under attack and instrumentally rational approaches to education are ascendant, and where commitments to the public and especially public schooling are waning in many contexts, revisiting this question is both timely and critical. The call for papers included an invitation to reconsider questions about our organization and discipline, for example: What counts as philosophy of education? What are our relationships to philosophy? To education? To teaching, learning, and other school-related practices? Who gets to do philosophy of education? Perhaps most importantly, we invited essays to place questions about value, role, and relevance into today's context. This Yearbook well represents this work. As others have pointed out, as far as editors' introductions go, the PES Yearbook is a particularly difficult one to write because of philosophy of education's wide scope of inquiry.[1]

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While engaging with the conference program, I was struck by the presence of a definitive undercurrent—or maybe even a *surface* current—of scholarship related broadly to democracy. Perhaps the fact that there is more topical unity than usual is indicative of the state of the world. Indeed, the papers support the idea that these are perilous times for our democracy. Though the call encouraged engagement with practical/political problems, it was left largely to the imaginations of each scholar to determine what sort of problems merited philosophical scrutiny. Furthermore, as is our custom in PES, the call was truly wide open, and submissions did not need to address the theme at all. Yet, not only did the papers specifically find ways for philosophy of education to matter, but questions of democracy in our times were ubiquitous.

In the remainder of this introduction, I consider how this theme played out in Richmond at our 2019 meeting. Following precedent with past PES editors' introductions, I do not touch on all of the excellent papers and responses included in this Yearbook. I encourage readers to set some time aside to peruse this volume, for from start to finish it is full of what we do best; namely, providing careful and novel scrutiny of educational issues. In order to highlight this strand of democracy-oriented work, Kathy Hytten's Presidential Essay is offered as a frame for thinking about how democracy is wrestled with throughout the Yearbook. One can see a sort of call-and-response between Hytten's address and the democracy-oriented articles. Hytten describes many of the ways in which the academy, as an institution, discourages meaningful work.

Hytten's essay, "To Be of Use: Resisting Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," beautifully puts into words much of what I have felt but not been able to fully articulate as I have reckoned with making a career in philosophy of education during a time of a rising neoliberal, pseudo-meritocratic tide in higher education (and in wider society) in the U.S. Among other things, she wrestles with what it means to do philosophy, to be an academic, and to engage in these pursuits in ways that matter. She starts with Irwin Edman's evocative if aspirational claim that "philosophy is a conversation in which the soul catches fire,"[2] and she goes on to articulate how she chooses to think about what philosophy of education can contribute given her interest in doing engaged, social justice-oriented

philosophical work. Her three areas of focus concern thinking clearly, listening openly, and acting ethically. She makes a compelling case that all three are valuable aims given the quest to be useful as a faculty member. For philosophers of education, I see these three directives as having great potential to serve as a litmus test for helping us think about how we can do meaningful work.

Particularly helpful was Hytten's recognition that we exist in a world that isn't all that conducive to producing meaningful work. She advocates for a mix of subversion and finding ways to do good work within the flawed constraining parameters of the academy. For example, her citations pay homage to some of the philosophers of education that have mattered to her. She pays heartfelt and thoughtful respect to those who have inspired her while also advancing these colleagues in the neoliberal system—very clever. Hytten describes what she sees as some of the problems in the academy that make doing meaningful work difficult, and she provides some prescription for what ails us.

Of the group of articles that foreground democracy, like Hytten's essay, most had elements of both description and prescription. In other words, the authors describe what they see as a particular crisis in democracy, and then, to varying degrees they offer/prescribe correctives. Ellis Reid's "School Closures, Community Goods, and (Mis)Recognition" serves as a clear example of an article that foregrounds the description of some aspects of the crisis in democracy. Reid provides three primary critiques: school closings, reductive approaches to decision making, and Brighouse's proposed remedy to these reductive approaches. Another example of work that focuses on articulating a problem is Barbara Thayer-Bacon's impassioned and even raw description of the immorality of zero tolerance approaches to justice, from school policy to immigration. In "Vulnerable Children and Moral Responsibility: Loss of Humanity," Thayer-Bacon suggests that an ethics that centers care and justice is needed as a foundation for ways of thinking that can begin to combat the loss of humanity that zero tolerance approaches have supported. Reed Underwood's "A New Heart Pulses: Democracy as Metaphysics, Poetics of Social Hope, and Utopian Pedagogies" is an example of prescription-focused work. Underwood makes a case for a redefinition and reinvigoration of utopian discourse, and

DOI 10.47925/75.2019.INTRO

of the development of utopian pedagogies as a way to equip citizens with the ability to blend technical and moral interests as we attempt to build a future for our democracy.

Space prohibits much more engagement with specific texts here, but I do want to point out some of the other excellent work on democracy present in this Yearbook. In "Every Tool is a Weapon if You Hold it Right: Solidarity, Civics Education, and Use-Oriented Politics," Derek Gottlieb and Amy Shuffelton critically engage with how identity politics and citizenship play out in our democracy. Adi Burton's "Now What? Encountering the Risk of Action in Activism and Education" draws on Arendt's theory of political action to point toward ways of rethinking aspects of schooling. Barbara Applebaum tackles the deeply disturbing plunge in civility in public discourse in "False Equivalences, Discomfort, and Crossing the Line of Civility: Who is Afraid of Incivility?" Finally, in "#NeverAgainMSD Student Activism: A Response to Ruitenberg's 'Educating Political Adversaries'," Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Dan Mamlok consider a specific instance of the challenges for citizenship education related to youth activism.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to encourage readers to spend some time with this volume—it is worth it. I'd like to thank the Philosophy of Education Society for the opportunity to serve as program chair and as editor of this volume. It was truly a labor of love, and if I played any role at all in shifting the focus of the Society and the field toward the contemporary crisis in democracy and a more general focus on the usefulness of our work, then I am proud and humbled. Finally, I'd like to thank everyone—particularly the program committee and the society's board/officers—who went above and beyond to help make the 2019 meeting and this Yearbook possible. You are too numerous to mention by name, but you are appreciated. The Society (and our discipline of philosophy of education, too) can only be as good, as influential, and as enduring as the work we are willing to come together and do on its behalf. I offer the *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2019* as an artifact of this collective effort.

1 Ruitenberg provides a concise discussion of the nature of the Yearbook and its introductions. Claudia W. Ruitenberg, "Philosophy and Lived Experience: A Phenomenological Revival?," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012): xi-xiv.
2 Kathy Hytten, "To Be of Use: Resisting Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2019,* ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019): 2.

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