

Exposure and Expertise: Philosophy for Teacher Education

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What can educational philosophy contribute to teacher education? Answering this question, Chris Higgins presents a solid critique of Donald Schön's reflective practice. Higgins demonstrates that reflection for Schön is a form of Aristotelian *techne* that is wholly unsuitable for teaching. What teaching requires, Higgins maintains, is better captured by Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Not only must teachers flexibly adjust means and ends. Teachers must also conceptualize and act on appropriate goals and adjudicate between worthwhile ends when they conflict. This is difficult, because practical situations always confront us with problems that are unfamiliar, different, or new. Thus to make wise decisions with respect to educational purposes, teachers must recognize that situations may not conform to their expectations. Failing to see what is different or new in a situation, teachers do not simply lack artistry or skill. More perniciously, they succumb to repetition: a form of moral blindness in which one perpetuates what one already knows at the expense of recognizing and learning from the "other."

For Higgins, then, philosophy is central to teacher education, because philosophy productively critiques prevailing assumptions about reflective teaching. Even more, philosophy attends to the cultivation of persons and the kind of people teachers must become if they are to genuinely engage in *phronesis*. Higgins's assessment and extension of Schön is convincing; his insights into how educational philosophy can contribute to teacher education are original and important.¹

With Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, Higgins admits that *phronesis* cannot be taught by philosophers or anyone else.² The problem is that *phronesis* is practical understanding *in-situ* (situated understanding). It therefore cannot be realized in advance or outside of the experiences that require it. Put differently, the kinds of experiences in which *phronesis* comes into play are understood only insofar as we actually live through them.

John Dewey helps us appreciate the problem this poses for teaching:

The mature person, to put it in moral terms, has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity for sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him....Accordingly, upon [mature persons] devolves the responsibility for instituting the conditions for the kind of present experience which has a favorable effect upon the future.³

It is not entirely clear, however, what sorts of present conditions might be instituted to engender understanding of experiences which by definition cannot be fathomed in advance. Nor is it clear how one person can convey understanding to another in the case of understanding that is nondisposable: impossible to formulate independently of the person who produces it.⁴ We thus find ourselves in an ironic predicament. On Higgins's account, teacher education requires education in *phronesis*. But the question of how we might practically *educate* such understanding remains elusive.

To his credit, Higgins confronts the dilemma his analysis underscores. Rather than take a frontal approach, Higgins considers three obstacles that can get in the way “of seeing the newness in new situations.” Allowing for the preliminary nature of Higgins’s remarks, I nonetheless have three concerns about whether out-flanking the circle can prevent its collapse and aid preservice teachers to acknowledge and learn from that which is “other” or new.

My first concern is a logical point of which I am sure Higgins is aware: naming the causes of repetition and offering strategies to circumvent or redress it will not necessarily help us advance moral perspicuity. All obstacles to moral wisdom may be removed. Nevertheless, moral wisdom may not arise. It remains for Higgins to tackle the question of whether and how *phronesis* can directly be realized, developed, and taught.

Second, I encourage Higgins to continue exploring questions that beset his three models of liberal learning. Echoing Higgins, Pam Grossman observes that preservice teachers unthinkingly tend to draw on and repeat their past as learners.⁵ Engaging her “English methods” students in an exercise called “literacy autobiography,” Grossman helps students become aware of the strategies they routinely use to understand texts. Explicating their own habits and comparing them with others’, students see that different people understand literature in different ways; by extension, individuals learn to understand literature differently as well. Developing this insight, Grossman and her students explore various pedagogic strategies and consider how different approaches to teaching might benefit different learners. It is not evident, however, that literacy autobiography requires the psychoanalytic apparatus Higgins suggests. For this exercise to be effective, students may not need to explain *why* they learn as they do. All that may be required is for students to realize *that* their learning styles may not suit their pupils.

Deeper challenges await Higgins as he develops his other two models. Regarding provincialism, Habermas argues that hermeneutic reflection cannot penetrate socio-historical matrices of assumptions that may be pathologically deformed. As Georgia Warnke explains, “the difficulty with ideology is not simply that the respective dimensions of a phenomenon it obscures and reveals may be hard to disentangle but that ideological elements may distort that very attempt to disentangle the various dimensions.”⁶ I encourage Higgins to confront the question of whether genetic explanation is required if we are to understand not only what provincialism *means*, but also what provincialism as a phenomenon *is*.⁷

Art, meanwhile, may wake us up and release the imagination. But it is not clear how or why liberation happens. Does artistic release come from being inspired, shocked, outwitted, or carried away? If so, how do these experiences preserve human agency and differ from anesthetization?

My final point is this. While the assumptions we tend to repeat certainly include socio-historical prejudices, our own past, and conventional habits, a deeper, more worrisome repetition underlies them all. To appreciate this claim, it is necessary to go beyond Higgins’s analysis and examine Gadamer’s term, “application.”

When Gadamer says we understand texts by applying them to our situation, he does not mean we use textual lessons to (re)make our lives. Human beings do not make themselves into what they ought to be in the way that craftsmen make things according to will or plan.⁸ Texts are not tools we ply or objects that lie in repose, waiting for us to act on them.⁹ Understanding is not wholly an operation that is subject to our desire and will.

According to Gadamer, understanding is an event that “happens to us over and beyond our wanting and doing.”¹⁰ Where texts are concerned, this principle means that “interpretation is an event that moves in two directions,” Gerald Bruns observes. “It is not possible to interpret a text without being interpreted by it in turn.”¹¹ Texts, in other words, become experiences that invade and overtake us as we encounter and enter into the mode of being that informs them.

Application thus describes an ontological rather than an exegetical relation.¹² To apply a text, I do not take its message and relate it to me. I recognize that I am caught up in a text’s world; it calls to me in a manner that compels my response. In Bruns’s words, “one is subject to the text, under its jurisdiction and power, exposed to it, answerable to it for one’s conduct, defined by its meanings.”¹³ The difficulty is that a text’s message may not simply be different or new. Texts often defy what we think we know; they can find us out, whether we like it or not.¹⁴ At base, Gadamer claims, all experience is like this: a radically negative encounter with limits, like suffering or living through disappointment. Our goal is to learn to be open to experience at this level. This goal is not realized through discussion, investigation, or planning. It is realized and made possible by exposure to experience itself.¹⁵

Most of us want to protect ourselves and avoid being exposed to experiences that are uncomfortable or threatening. We prefer to be in control. The alternative seems too scary. And so our desire for control is repeated over and over.

Following Higgins, we might say that philosophy could help preservice teachers become the sort of people who are not afraid to be exposed. As Aristotle, Dewey, and Gadamer make plain, the pedagogic challenge is tough. Moreover, we expect teachers to be professionals who can demonstrate competence and expertise.

How can we empower preservice students to become master teachers who command respect, appreciate research, and exhibit deep pedagogic content knowledge without using these resources as shields to defend themselves against losing control? How can we help students understand that the repertoire of pedagogic strategies we teach them, while useful, will not necessarily protect them from making mistakes and even failing? The tension teacher-educators face is less about relevance and rigor than about exposure and expertise. The challenge does not require us to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. Productive engagement, to paraphrase Gadamer, “consists in not covering up the tension... but in consciously bringing it out.”¹⁶

1. See Nancy Beadie, “From ‘Teacher as Decision Maker’ to Teacher as Participant in ‘Shared Decision Making’: Reframing the Purpose of Social Foundations in Teacher Education,” *Teachers College*

- Record* 98, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 77-103; and R.S. Peters, *Education and the Education of Teachers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 135-80. Also see articles by Steve Tozer and Eric Bredo in *Educational Foundations* (Fall 1993); the special issue of *Teachers College Record* 91 (Spring 1990) devoted to social foundations in teacher education; and articles by Kenneth A. Sirotnik and Phyllis J. Edmundson in *Phi Delta Kappan* 71, no. 9 (May 1990).
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 321.
 3. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1979), 38, 50.
 4. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 126-27.
 5. Pam Grossman, Sheila W. Valencia, and Fred Homel, "Preparing Language Arts Teachers in a Time of Reform," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts*, ed. James Flood, Shirley Brice Heath, and Diane Lapp (New York: MacMillan, 1997), 407-16.
 6. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 124-25.
 7. *Ibid.*, 126.
 8. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 314-15.
 9. Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 148.
 10. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxviii.
 11. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 156.
 12. *Ibid.*, 146. Gadamer notes that this type of relationship pertains to legal and biblical texts. He wants to extend it to all kinds of texts.
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. David Denby, *Great Books* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 293.
 15. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.
 16. *Ibid.*, 306.