

When “When?” May Not Be Enough

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I confess to some bafflement when I first read the title of Bob Floden’s presidential address, “When Is Philosophy of Education?” I wondered what would count as an appropriate answer to such a question. Two o’clock, perhaps? Or the second Tuesday of the month? Upon reading the address for the first time, I was relieved to note that our president appeared to have nothing of the kind in mind. Some chronologically specific answer would, it seemed on first reading, be an improper response. But then I read the paper for a second and a third time without being able to shake the suggestion that Floden is indeed pressing for a chronological answer to his question, “when is philosophy of education?” His answer, I believe, is “always.” If I am right in this surmise, my sense is that Floden cannot get where he clearly wants to go only by asking “when.” To accomplish what he argues for, he must also deal with where, how, and who is philosophy of education.

But it is terribly impolite of me to cut immediately to a critique of the person who thought enough of me to ask that I respond to his address. So, to put Floden at his ease, allow me to say first what is profound and beneficial about his address.

I have long been an admirer of Floden’s work. What I like most about it is that when he reaches into the philosopher’s toolbox, he comes out with philosophical tools to work on problems of genuine educational significance, not problems of interest only to his philosopher colleagues. As such, the audience for his work extends far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of this work. Not only has Floden grappled with many of the crucial educational problems of our day, he has done so in ways that garner the respectful attention of researchers and policy makers. He has, moreover, made significant contributions to each of the topics he mentions in his address: teacher effectiveness, teacher quality, teacher education, and scientific research in education.

His extensive experience with work of this kind, and the success he has had with it, are the likely basis for his entreaty that we become similarly engaged. His appeal to us, however, is quite different from what many of us have heard before. What Floden contends — in no fewer than nineteen instances in the draft he sent to me — is that the educators, policy analysts, and lawmakers with whom he wishes us to engage are already doing philosophy of education. And because they are already so engaged, we should find our entrée into their domain relatively easy, almost natural. What Floden does not explicitly state, but certainly implies, is that these other players are doing philosophy of education very badly and need our help to do it well. If that is indeed the judgment that sets the context for Floden’s appeal to us, I am less sure than he that we will find much of a welcome among those we are encouraged to aid.

That said, I do not wish to dissent from his core point that much of what is taking place in educational research and policy making desperately needs attention from

persons with skill and experience in analyzing arguments, exploring the meaning of words, and setting proper ends. I hope that should I ever be given a eulogy as a philosopher of education — and I know that there are those who believe I have deferred that possibility for far too long — the words spoken about me would reflect the very things that Floden wants us to do, and has done himself.

What distinguishes Fenstermacher from Floden in this instance is that I would be a good deal more cautious than Floden in recommending that we all become engaged with researchers and policy makers. My reasons go somewhat deeper than the fact that not all of us are cut out for such work. In order for us to do well what Floden is calling on us to do, we need colleagues who do other kinds of philosophical work. Two varieties of such work are especially pertinent to realizing success with Floden's call that we "seize the moment."

The first is the zealous pursuit of robust opposition to prevailing values and sentiments. We are all poorer when our ideas go uncontested by vigorous critique. Our current state of health on this score is not good. On the one hand, such opposition movements as we have today are quickly marginalized by intense concentrations of ideological power. On the other, today's opposition movements are, for the most part, far too intellectualized and otiose to gain much foothold with those who do not share them. As philosophers of education we should encourage more robust and effective oppositional thinking and critique, by both engaging in its development and working to prevent its marginalization through raw exercises of political and economic power.

This encouragement for robust and comprehensible opposition stems from my concern that rendering assistance to today's researchers and policy makers carries the risk of making us captive to their rhetoric, their worldviews, and their ambitions. The presence of thoughtful and enlightened alternative points of view diminishes that risk and helps those who are rendering assistance to mainstream educational research and policy keep their bearings. Floden's call for more of us to become engaged in constructive assistance to researchers and policy leaders is both noble and important, but there must also be a place for those who advocate positions and perspectives different from those in the mainstream.

The second activity that I believe necessary to successful realization of Floden's agenda is the critical scrutiny of our own academic settings. Here I have in mind a careful examination of what the current structure of higher education is doing to our capacity to serve society as public intellectuals — a role that is implicit in Floden's advocacy that we become more involved with researchers and policy makers. The modern college or university does not make it easy for faculty members to serve as public intellectuals. For example, with its emphasis on promoting faculty members on the basis of publications in peer-reviewed journals, it encourages us to speak the specialized language of our academic peers, not the language of the practitioner or policy maker. In addition, by ranking service a very distant third to research and teaching, colleges and universities offer little in the way of reward to those who would devote the significant periods of time required to build trusting relationships

with colleagues in related disciplines, practicing professionals, policy analysts, and policy makers.

There are difficult and complex tensions between the demands imposed by institutionalized research and scholarship and the demands imposed by assisting the profession to improve and advance the education of the young. Floden touches on these tensions when he mentions the challenged history of schools of education and the work of historian Ellen Lagemann. The overarching question is this: Can we simultaneously be involved in the improvement of educational practice while studying it in ways that accord with standards of scholarship currently revered by the academy? Some say that there is no problem here, that improving practice and engaging in scholarship are not in opposition. Others argue it is a problem, but solvable in ways that permit the harmonious union of the two. Still others argue that it is a problem that cannot be solved without choosing between them. Reason impels us to believe that such tension as there may be can be resolved in ways that favor both, but history and experience suggest the opposite conclusion.

What Floden calls on us to do in his presidential address is vital work. I wish, as he clearly does, that more of us were so engaged. But I would not go so far as to wish that we were all so engaged, for there is other work to be done. Some of us must also be engaged in fostering worthy challenges to currently dominant paradigms of thought while others are engaged in critical examination of the culture of scholarship being enacted in our institutions of higher education. Attending to these additional concerns calls for consideration of who is doing what kind of work in philosophy of education, as well as where that work is taking place. Floden may be correct if he is indeed claiming that philosophy of education is always going on in research and policy venues, but that claim cannot realize its promised potential unless it is accompanied by diligent exploration of answers to such questions as where, how, and who is philosophy of education.