Beyond Saints and Canons

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In "The Use and Abuse of the History of Educational Philosophy," Avi Mintz suggests that philosophy of education's identity issues might be addressed by paying greater attention to its history.[1] To support this idea, he notes that history has received little attention, citing evidence that most articles in the field do not mention a "great thinker," and even fewer a pre-twentieth century one. He also criticizes the idea that greater practical relevance would resolve the field's issues, because this would distort it by serving extrinsic rather than intrinsic interests. In this vein, he argues against the "history + implications" approach, which may seem historical but, as it is driven by present relevance, is likely to distort the work of the "great thinker" being considered. Mintz concludes that paying more attention to history would bring a number of benefits. It would: reveal limitations of present thought; help avoid reinventing the wheel; provide a common vocabulary; suggest internal criteria of goodness; make disciplinary expertise clearer; teach students to wrestle with good arguments; and contribute to understanding vital human problems.

I am sympathetic to the idea that the history of philosophy and philosophy of education are under-appreciated. Who here has read Boyd Bode? Or even Israel Scheffler? If not, you have missed something. I often use an historical approach to philosophy of education myself because I believe it helps students to see larger patterns of ideas and institutions and how and why they took their present forms, which is helpful in freeing them from the tyranny of received ideas. I'm also sympathetic to the idea that over-concern for present relevance can undercut more general consideration of the implications of a given approach.

Nevertheless, I have reservations about Mintz's approach. It seems passive and retreatist, like a conservative religion's backward-looking celebration of historical saints and a canon of authorized texts. One can see how this might address our field's identity issues, in a conservative way, but it is unclear how it addresses present educational issues, not to speak of our field's existential problems. It also seems as though Mintz started with a solution and then went looking for problems that it might solve. Having adopted this strategy, he is critical of those who adopt the opposite strategy of first identifying a problem and then searching for solutions. Both of these strategies neglect a third possibility, which is to let problem and solution select one another.

In considering Mintz's proposal more fully I would like to compare it to some others, which will require a bit of history. In 1983, Denis Phillips sounded an early warning to the field, suggesting that philosophy of education was possibly *in extremis*, and might soon need to be offered last rites.[2] This was because philosophers of education faced a dilemma to which they were responding badly. They sought to be practical "supermen," on one hand, radical critics battling social injustice, while, on the other, they sought the prestige of academic philosophy. In attempting to pursue

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two incompatible goals, they were doing neither well. A more sensible approach, Phillips suggested, would be to adopt more modest goals, such as analyzing the language, concepts, and assumptions of educational thought. In other words, it would be better if philosophers of education adopted the methods of analytic philosophy and apply them to the contents of educational discourse. This would allow them to be recognizably "philosophical" in method and educationally relevant in content. I take Harvey Siegel's suggestions, to which Mintz alluded, to be similar.

Wendy Kohli argued for a different approach in her *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*.[3] Unlike Phillips, Kohli drew primarily on interpretive and critical philosophy, and clearly did not want to forego wider social criticism. She noted that the field was changing and becoming more pluralistic, such as in the increasing participation of women. She admitted that this sometimes resulted in a certain amount of confusion or incoherence, as different views and approaches were brought in, but saw it as representing an opportunity to learn from differences. The way to deal with the field's dilemma, posed by a desire for both coherence and diversity, was to place greater emphasis on conversation, rather than argumentation. If the field became more of a community, rather than a discipline, everyone could have a place - even argumentative analytic philosophers - as long as they behaved themselves.

René Arcilla articulated yet another proposal in "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?."[4] Arcilla suggested that educators and policy-makers ignore philosophers because social scientists have become more effective in giving theoretical guidance to society, presenting philosophers of education with the dilemma of either aligning with the social sciences and giving up philosophy, or aligning with philosophy and talking to themselves. Arcilla suggested that philosophers face a second dilemma, as well, when they criticize others and make positive proposals of their own, because they then become as dogmatic as those they criticize. The way around these difficulties, Arcilla suggested, is to adopt philosophical skepticism. This approach is recognizably philosophical, socially useful in criticizing convention, and non-contradictory, since no positive claims are made. In effect, philosophers of education could emulate Socrates (while hopefully avoiding his fate).

I responded to Arcilla's article, asking, "How Can Philosophy of Education Be Both Viable and Good?."[5] I accepted the idea that our principal dilemma is how to be both good philosophically *and* useful to others. I also acknowledged the need to avoid becoming self-contradictorily dogmatic. However, I thought Arcilla's excessive fear of becoming an "author" led him to adopt an overly restricted approach. Historically, philosophers have not only criticized conventional ways of thinking, but have also made important and valuable positive suggestions for better ways to think and organize ourselves. One need only think of Plato, Augustine, Locke, Rousseau, Dewey, or Noddings, to see the point. While such suggestions have sometimes been presented dogmatically, they can instead be treated as testable hypotheses about good ways to behave, rather than apodictic pronouncements.

In criticizing current visions *and* proposing new ones, philosophers of education move beyond mere analysis. They also move beyond critique, which by itself suggests

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no way forward. By adopting an experimental attitude toward their own ideas, they may have something positive to suggest, while avoiding dogmatism. This approach is philosophical in the sense that it takes philosophy to be the search for ways to become wiser about the world and ourselves, and how to act to actualize ideals. It is also practical as it offers suggestions for how to respond to present educational dilemmas. Furthermore, it suggests a role for which philosophers of education are uniquely positioned, unlike philosophy departments and other education school programs. Like Phillips, Siegel, Kohli, and Arcilla, I think we would do best by being ourselves, but have construed this somewhat differently than they did.

With this history in mind, let me return to Mintz's suggestions. First, these other views make clear that problem and solution, ends and means, can be fitted to one another. They show how it may be possible to be both philosophically good and practically helpful. This contrasts with Mintz's analysis, which not only seems to be a solution looking for a problem but also leaves unclear what *kind* of history or philosophy he is advocating. Without a clearer conception of the field's mission and how it addresses educational issues, it is unclear how we can be valuable to others, or why anyone should care. A more active sense of philosophy of education as seeking a response to the dilemmas of our time results in less emphasis on "great thinkers" and an historical canon of works in themselves, although they remain important resources. If we are responding to present dilemmas we will do our own thinking, adapting general ideas from the past, in the present, to create a more desirable future. We will view the work of iconic individuals in context, as responses to the problems of their time that we can now evaluate in historical perspective. We will also see the set of core texts as changing as times and issues change, although some may have general or enduring significance. In critically considering current visions of education and social life, and suggesting new ones that better address the dilemmas of our time, philosophy of education has a vital job to do. Whether taking up this mission will save the field remains an open question, however, and Phillips was probably right that the wise will hedge their bets.

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1. Avi Mintz, this volume.

2. Denis Phillips, "Philosophy of Education: In Extremis?," *Educational Studies* 14, no. 1 (1983): 1-30.

3. Wendy Kohli, *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

4. René Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Talking to One Another?," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1-11.

5. Eric Bredo, "How Can Philosophy of Education Be Both Viable and Good?," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 263-271.

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