

Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One's Own Education

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About one fourth of the way into Plato's *Meno*, the self-confident, articulate youth Meno reaches such an impasse of perplexity that he accuses Socrates of being a torpedo fish:

Meno Socrates, I used to hear even before I met you how all you ever do is to be perplexed and to make other people perplexed too, and what I feel now is that you're applying your spells and potions to me and positively mesmerizing me, till I'm brimful of perplexity. If a little joke's in order, I think that what you're just exactly like, both in looks and everything else, is that flat-fish the sea torpedo. The torpedo fish always torpifies whoever comes near and gets into contact with it, and I think you've done something of the same sort to me now too, for I'm truly torpid in both mind and mouth and I've got no answer for you. And yet I've spoken a great many words about virtue in front of many people on thousands of occasions, and did it very well too — at least, so I thought. But now I can't even say what virtue is at all.¹

In case you think Plato's fish is fictitious, the torpedo fish, *Torpedo marmorata*, is the same fish that we call an Electric Ray. The shock is produced by contact with the pectoral fins; and the "power of the shock... is usually of sufficient strength to knock down a fully grown man if he accidentally steps on one of these fishes lying buried in the sand in shallow water."²

Plato's use of this powerful torpedo fish analogy conveys not only the force of Socrates' formidable presence and dialectic, but also the shock of suddenly realizing we do not know what we thought we knew. In this passage, Meno both blames Socrates for having "torpified" him, and he also acknowledges his own new found ignorance ("I've spoken a great many words about virtue... and did it very well too — at least, so I thought. But now I can't even say what virtue is at all").

Meno feels as if he is struck dumb when he realizes that what he thought he knew, what he confidently taught to others, he does not know. Now I regard such moments of stuckness as important occasions, as opportunities of significance for someone becoming a philosopher of his or her own education. But let me go back and begin at the beginning.

In contrast to Meno's experience with Socrates, I suspect that current experiences in education for large numbers of students resemble that of the stranger in a Sufi story, a stranger to whom the legendary Sufi Nasrudin serves a "soup of the soup of the soup." Here is the Sufi story:

A kinsman came to see the Mulla from somewhere deep in the country, bringing a duck as a gift. Delighted, Nasrudin had the bird cooked and shared it with his guest. Presently, however, one countryman after another started to call, each one the friend of the friend of 'the man who brought you the duck.' No further presents were forthcoming. At length the Mulla was exasperated. One day yet another stranger appeared. "I am the friend of the friend of the friend of the relative who brought you the duck." He sat down like all the rest, expecting a meal. Nasrudin handed him a bowl of hot water. "What is this?" "That is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck that was brought by my relative."³

Let me hasten to say I do not believe most teachers are like the exasperated Mulla, who intentionally serves a soup of the soup of the soup. Nonetheless, I do believe students often experience or perceive their own schooling as an interminable series of such soup of the soup of the soup courses.

It may be the nature of any basic form of education that it inevitably gets “watered down” to some extent. For example, the Harvard psychologist, Ellen Langer, describes this phenomenon in connection with her tennis lessons:

At tennis camp I was taught exactly how to hold my racket and toss the ball when serving. We were all taught the same way. When I later watched the U.S. Open, I noticed that none of the top players served the way I was taught, and, more important, each of them served slightly differently. Most of us are not taught our skills, whether academic, athletic, or artistic, by the real experts. The rules we are given to practice are based on generally accepted truths about how to perform the task.⁴

Yet Langer and I both believe there are ways to get students, and teachers, out of this soup. Langer advocates what she terms “mindful learning.” I suggest we help students to become philosophers of their own education who know how to make education their *own*.

BECOMING A PHILOSOPHER OF ONE’S OWN EDUCATION

On the question of how to define “Philosophy of Education” I shall resort to an appeal to authority, specifically to the authority of a Philosophy of Education Society Fellow in good standing, Nick Burbules, who after an extensive survey of definitional matters reaches this conclusion:

What this label “philosophy of education” will be taken to delimit, and by what criteria, will be the determination...as it has been for many previous generations, of participants in the field. The one lasting change may be that the question, “What is philosophy of education?” will never again be asked in the expectation that a single, unified definition is either possible or desirable.⁵

Let me add that I myself like to carry a large, inclusive umbrella here and when asked I appeal to the original Hellenic meaning attached to philosophy derived from “philos” and “sophia” — namely a non-erotic love, or friendly pursuit, of wisdom, which in our field means a pursuit of wisdom that focuses on education.

What does this focus on education entail? John Dewey characterizes the task when he writes in his final paragraph of *Education and Experience*:

What we want and need is education pure and simple, and we shall make surer and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan.⁶

To become philosophers of their own education students cannot leave these tasks to others but must “devote” themselves to “finding out just what education is” for them and “what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality” for each of them. In so doing, learners cease to be merely students *in* education, and they become students *of* education.

I am not saying most people need to become professional academicians, or should undertake study in the technical traditions and texts, ancient, modern, and postmodern, associated with advanced work in the field of educational philosophy — although I would certainly not discourage anyone from doing so if they were

interested or inclined to take up these studies. However valuable I consider an in-depth study of our field to be, this is not my primary agenda here.

Nor am I suggesting that we turn the education of young children or of youth in general over to their own charge. I quite agree with John Dewey's view that we neglect our responsibilities to the young if we carelessly free students from adult structures and guidance only to leave them abandoned to the whims of their own uncontrolled desires, to be manipulated by sophisticated media, pressured by peer groups, and tossed about by inward impulses.

I do not have the time, the space, or the acumen to give an exhaustive account of all the aspects entailed in becoming a philosopher of one's own education. My more modest aim is to call attention to just three characteristics, or capacities, that seem to me to be at work and to be worthy of our consideration and cultivation. Two of these include learning how to take different perspectives toward one's own education and how to move about among these perspectives. These "perspectives" are (1) the perspective of Distance; and (2) the perspective of Angles. The third characteristic is the capacity to be torqued as Meno was.

The extent to which persons could be philosophers of their education would, of course, depend partly upon their age. And I believe it is adults who may be most in need of these practices. Nevertheless, even young children can be taught to shift perspectives back and forth between engagement in learning activities and observations about their experiences. I have seen this work with my own children and with students at the elementary and middle school levels.

PERSPECTIVES OF DISTANCE AND NEW ANGLES

Talking about a perspective of distance is both crucial and troublesome. For some people it evokes the traditional "ivory tower" image that can carry negative connotations associated with abstract impracticality, theoretical abstruseness, and academic arrogance. Nevertheless, without the perspective to be gained from some degree of distance, most students will, I suspect, remain mired either in their existing educational tracks or else in their reactive responses against these.

A positive metaphorical case for acquiring the perspective of distance, which appeals to even my most practically minded, anti-ivory-tower students, comes from Charlotte Joko Beck's description of what she calls "intelligent zazen" practice. Where Joko writes of "practice" and "life," I have substituted "education" (for indeed "education" in its broadest sense encompasses most of the growth points in our lives); and I have pruned back her fuller account to fit into our present discussion.

The first part of our [education] is as if we were in the middle of a confused, busy street....We're so busy jumping out of the way of what's coming toward us that we can't understand our own entrapment in the traffic. But if we watch it for a while we begin to see that there are holes in the traffic here and there. We might even step up on the sidewalk and begin to take a more objective look. And no matter how busy the traffic, here and there, we begin to notice clear areas....Now our [next] step might be to go into a tall building and climb up onto the third-floor balcony and observe the traffic from there. Now... we can see the direction of it....If we climb higher and higher and higher, eventually we see...patterns...and we begin to see it as a tremendous panorama. We begin to see areas of difficulty as part of the whole....And in the final state of our practice we're back in the street, back in the marketplace, right in the middle of the hubbub. But seeing the confusion for what it is...We can love it, enjoy it, serve it.⁷

I believe that doing intelligent philosophy of education entails similar openings into higher level vistas which allow for more spacious perspectives on the busy educational “traffic” of everyday teaching and learning. These perspectives of distance can make room for new angles of vision, glimpses into contrasting interpretations of teaching and learning, as well as unfamiliar vistas of education altogether. For instance, in her work on “The Wealth of Cultures and the Problem of Generations,” Jane Roland Martin gives us, among other things, a radical road map filled with new educational streets not included on most of the official educational maps.⁸ Each teaching-learning street can thus be seen as just one of the numerous roads that could be traveled on an educational journey.

Students of almost any age could start to envision a plenitude of possible paths for their own learning, even though current educational practices bar most young students from the use of alternative routes. We do not generally provide occasions for students to make deliberate conscious shifts in their educational perspectives, to seek out more conducive learning conditions, environments and mentors, or to question the apparent purposes that determine the content of their studies. I shall, therefore, start with an adult example, close to the experiential world of most PES members, to illustrate an effective perspectival shift. For this example, I turn to a true faculty story told by Ellen Langer in her book *The Power of Mindful Learning*.⁹

To demonstrate the importance of introducing alternative perspectives for framing one’s own experience, Langer cites the following case:

Consider now an example based on data....Whether or not we accept given probabilities, we often don’t think about who determined the base rate, that is, we don’t consider what alternative probabilities could be if the issue were framed from other perspectives. This distinction can have far-reaching personal consequences. For example, a professor I know was being considered for tenure at a prestigious university. No one in her field had been tenured there for the past fifteen years, and no woman had ever been tenured there in that department. Friends and others outside the situation told her to look at the base rate, the probability of getting tenure in her department based on what had happened there in the past; their advice was to look for a position elsewhere. When she and I discussed her chances, I asked how many things she had attempted and successfully accomplished? That yielded a different probability for her potential success. We also looked up how many people tenured at the university had received their doctorates from the top schools she had attended. That yielded yet another base rate. After trying these and other perspectives, she ended up following her instincts....This professor received tenure, so this story had a happy ending, but it might not have. When our experience differs from that of the experts we can follow our own course or theirs and either one may yield a satisfying outcome or not. We cannot know in advance, or there would be no conflict to resolve. To my mind, there are advantages to following one’s own perspective even when one loses. Mindful decision making, as opposed to decision making passively based on data assembled by outside observers, is a process of active self-definition.¹⁰

The issues that Langer addresses at the close of her commentary on this tenure story prefigure tensions that arise between the positive emphasis on active self-definition and the more worrisome danger of unsatisfying outcomes.

On the one hand, Langer’s plea for the value of a “process of active self-definition” brings to mind similar educational emphases. Consider, for example, these lines from Adrienne Rich’s widely read, often cited essay “Claiming an Education,” which was originally a Convocation Address at Douglass College:

You who are students...cannot afford to think of being here to *receive* an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to *claim* one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb "to claim" is: *to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction.* "To receive" is *to come into possession of; to act as a receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true.* The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon, and...it can literally mean the difference between life and death.¹¹

Or, consider a teacher-oriented example where Nel Noddings recommends that teachers engage with students in processes of active educational self-definition. In a striking and controversial passage from her book on *Caring*, Noddings writes:

Suppose, for example, that I am a teacher who loves mathematics. I encounter a student who is doing poorly, and I decide to have a talk with him. He tells me that he hates mathematics....What matters to me, if I care, is that he find some reason, acceptable to his inner self, for learning the mathematics required of him or he reject it boldly and honestly.¹²

What makes Noddings's suggestion that the student might reject mathematics "boldly and honestly" so controversial is the fact that, on the other hand, as Langer admits, following one's own course instead of the "experts" may not "yield a satisfying outcome" and could increase one's chances of losing. This acknowledgment of potential losses evokes Mortimer Adler's observation that when young students are allowed to choose electives they may "voluntarily downgrade their own education."¹³

A concern similar to Adler's might be raised about my push for what may appear to be premature educational philosophizing by students. In reply to such a charge, I do not deny that given a choice, students sometimes do seem to make short-sighted course selections, electing not to study certain subjects simply because the material is perceived as difficult or demanding. Yet I would contend that this state of affairs is due not to any premature acquisition of a philosophy of education, but rather to the lack of one, and to the absence of explicit structures or guidance for developing a philosophy of one's own education. Furthermore, students also lack genuine opportunities for acting on philosophically sound educational directions if these point toward nonstandard educational paths.

Let us turn to another true story about perspectival shifts in angle. A high school student about to enter his senior year is tempted to "drop out" of school rather than endure another ten months of what he perceives as a prison sentence inside those high school walls. During the summer his troubled thoughts shift back and forth between two angles. At one angle he sees the situation from the perspective of a realistic student who knows that a high school diploma is a necessary credential for almost any further endeavor in his contemporary North American world. The other angle of vision comes from the outlook of an active, healthy adolescent who thrives on out-of-doors adventures, who longs to be exploring the world, skiing and climbing mountains, who knows he can earn his way as he goes. The first angle resembles the advice of experts, the second angle comes closer to active self-definition.

As this story unfolds, a trusted caring adult introduces a third angle. She suggests that the reluctant borderline student consider the possibility of graduating early, that is, in January, to be followed by a long-dreamed-of trip to Alaska, where he could participate in an early spring NOLS course in the Alaskan wilderness. To

accomplish this he must take and pass, during the fall term, all seven of the necessary courses he still needs to meet graduation requirements. With the active support of a sympathetic guidance counselor and the consent of the principal, this student succeeds in doing just that.

In our high school graduation story (as with the faculty tenure story), the decisive outlook is attained because another person introduces the student to a new perspective, to an additional angle of vision, from which to view the situation of their own education. Without such assistance, or intervention, from someone who can introduce students to broader perspectives or demonstrate shifts they might make to new angles of vision, most students will find it difficult to engage in non-conventional reflections on their own education. Even so, I also want to suggest that there may be considerably more attempts at educational philosophizing being done by students than we recognize or appreciate, albeit in rudimentary forms or as emergent, partial awarenesses.

SIGNS, SYMPTOMS, AND INTIMATIONS OF NASCENT EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIZING

Among the nascent attempts to become a philosopher of one's own education that I have in mind, there is one set which may be recognizable and even appreciated within the traditional halls of academe. These are the efforts that come from those "good" students who keep negotiating modifications in their study assignments, course structures, and requirements. The business of "making an assignment your own" is, in fact, something skillful teachers often promote or encourage, and with good reason. This process of adapting one's studies until they begin to feel meaningful can issue from and/or lead to conscious deliberate thoughts about overarching educational purposes and about what seems meaningful or sufficiently worthwhile to fuel one's efforts to learn.

Such student negotiators are not, however, generally perceived as budding educational philosophers. At best they may be seen as good students with a real interest in certain aspects of their studies; at worst, as troublemakers, "trying to get out of something."

In contrast to the more or less successful student negotiators, there are other students who do unquestionably "get out of doing things." These students manage to circumvent substantial portions of their school work, they fail to complete assignments and they steer clear of engagement in standard curriculum activities. Instead of the old Three R's, I suggest these students have taken on a new set of anti-school Three R's: Resisting, Rejecting, and Rebellious.

It is easy and tempting to lump all of the Resist, Reject, Rebel students together and call them "failures" or at least "at risk" or "special needs" students. Yet in doing so we ourselves "fail" to notice crucial differences among students who engage in these anti-school Three R's. And we thereby miss out on discerning who, among this disparate group, may be budding philosophers of their own education.

In order to become more discerning we first need to distinguish between Failing-to-learn and Not-learning. There are students who fail to learn, no matter how hard they or their teachers try. On the other hand, however, there are numerous

students who appear to be failing to learn when what is really going on is that they are Not-learning.

With Not-learning, it is the case that students *will not* learn rather than that they *cannot* learn. It is these students who are not-learning because they refuse to learn who may, I submit, be becoming philosophers of their own education. They have shifted their perspective enough to have “stepped up on the sidewalk” and they are no longer caught in the street traffic of mainstream schooling. Out of all the possibilities for viewing education they have found at least one (however short-sighted) nonstandard angle of vision from which to look upon their mandated school studies and curriculum.

A number of these students are described in Herbert Kohl’s book *I Won’t Learn from You!* where he talks about his own experiences with thoughtful, committed “won’t learn” students. Kohl makes it clear that he is talking about what he calls “Willed not-learning” and he notes the social, ethical values of this phenomenon when it occurs outside of schools. Here is Kohl’s account:

Willed not-learning consists of a conscious and chosen refusal to assent to learn. It manifests itself most often in withdrawal or defiance....Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion is stigmatized....However, not-learning is a healthy, though frequently dysfunctional, response to racism, sexism, and other forms of bias....during the 1960s in New York, students who maintained their integrity and consciously refused the racist teachings of their segregated schools became leaders in school boycotts and teachers of reading in African American history in Freedom schools.¹⁴

For example, Kohl writes about Jamila L.:

Jamila L., the student-body president of an alternative high school I worked at during the late 1960s, told me that in the regular school she had spent four years in a special education class drinking orange juice, eating Graham Crackers, and pretending she couldn’t read. The whole act was to keep from hitting several of her teachers who she knew were racist. In fact, she was an avid reader of romances and of Black history. She used special education to keep herself in school because her grandmother wanted her to graduate from high school. At our [alternative] school she was a representative to the school board, helped develop projects and write proposals, and led students in a struggle against racist officers in the juvenile bureau of the local police department.¹⁵

Another form of Not-learning that is especially salient for my present discussion is what Kohl terms “Unlearning.” For example, many of us from my own generation have had to unlearn our previously habitual, thoughtless, insensitive use of sexist and racist language. In order to unlearn racist or sexist language it helps if one can shift perspectives and take up an angle in which they imagine themselves listening or reading as a person of color, and/or as a girl or woman.

THE CAPACITY TO BE TORPIFIED

Yet making perspectival shifts may not be sufficient for most of us to undertake true and lasting unlearning. I, for one, need to be stopped in my tracks long enough to become so aware of my ignorance that I realize I cannot continue as I have been. This occurs when I am faced with such an undeniable gap in my education that I can no longer ignore it. Like Meno I become “truly torpid in both mind and mouth and I’ve got no answer.” Indeed occasions when I have suddenly seen and become aware

of my own internalized, ingrained, hitherto unsolicited racism have left me feeling just as “torpified” as Meno was. Now, such torpification experiences are not generally viewed as achievements. Quite the contrary. Yet, I submit that the capacity to be torpified in this way is an achievement and an important one.

This capacity to be torpified bears close family resemblances to the ability to be awed, to be surprised, to be astonished, to be moved in a deeply moral, or ethical, or aesthetic, or epistemological, or ontological way. It takes considerable courage, self-knowledge, a brave heart, and honest openness to face one’s own ignorance and to stay present to the concomitant experiences of discomfort, perhaps feeling horrified as well as torpified. It is easier to avert one’s gaze, to change the subject, to resort to rationalizations, justifications, explanations, or trivializations. Nonetheless, if we are serious about pursuing our own education because we love wisdom, then to be willing to face encounters with our own torpedo fish moves us in the right direction. For when someone is willing to be perplexed and torpified by their significant realizations, she or he will, I believe, almost inevitably also experience perspectival shifts which open up more room for new angles of vision and expanded investigations into unexplored territory.

Let me give you an illustration from last year’s PES presidential address. I believe that Dwight Boyd’s 1997 address to us, in Vancouver, contains an excellent example of how he faced one of his own torpedo fish, how he felt torpified, how he changed and survived to tell us the tale. Here is Dwight’s own account, told in the form of a dialogical “Interlude”:

I was reading a paper the other day by a guy named Mills, a black philosopher at the University of Illinois, a paper called “Non Cartesian *Sums*.” Well, I was really struck by something he said. He was talking about one of my heroes, someone I studied with, who asked me what I thought to be penetrating moral/political theory questions in my oral comprehensive for my doctorate, someone whose precision and purity of abstract rational reconstruction of some of my most basic, inchoate moral intuitions about justice literally enthralled me. What Mills said was this: “The only slavery Rawls mentions is that of antiquity.” I haven’t checked, but I suspect he’s right....So what?...The “so what” is not something about Rawls, or Mills...or you. The “so what” is about me. *I missed this!* Yeah, I know...it’s quite easy to miss things in *A Theory of Justice*. But that I missed this one for thirty years is the kind of “non-accident” that matters to me....I find myself in this, and I don’t like it. It pins me down.¹⁶

In closing I want to draw attention to an implication for all of us philosophers of education, a point to be found both in the *Meno* and in Boyd’s account. Let us return again to Plato. Here is what Socrates says in reply to Meno’s accusation that Socrates has torpified him:

it’s not that I myself have the solutions when I make other people perplexed, but that I’m utterly perplexed myself and that’s how I come to make other people perplexed as well. That’s how it is with virtue now; I on my side *don’t* know what it is, while you on yours *did* know, perhaps, till you came into contact with me, while now you’re just like someone who *doesn’t* know. *All the same I’m ready to consider it with you and join you in searching for what it might be.*¹⁷ (Italics mine.)

It is significant that Dwight Boyd allows himself to be pinned down, that he does not conceal or run away from his torporific realization of having “missed this one for thirty years.” Instead he *joins* Peggy Phelan in their mutual willingness to “attempt

to walk and live on the rickety bridge between self and other.” If we can join “in searching for what education might be,” by contributing our perplexities, by admitting that we “don’t know what it is,” by allowing our selves to feel torpid, and by telling our own torporific tales, we might increase the chances for all of us to become wiser philosophers of education.

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1. Plato, *Meno*, 80a-b, in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, ed. and trans., Jane M. Day (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 46.
 2. J.R. Norman, *A History of Fishes*, 3d ed. (London: Benn, 1947) 145-48, cited in R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 268.
 3. Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1964), 69, as quoted by Helen Palmer, *The Enneagram in Love and Work* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 6.
 4. Ellen J. Langer, *The Power of Mindful Learning* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 14.
 5. Nicholas C. Burbules, ‘Philosophy of Education,’ in *International Encyclopedic Dictionary of Education*, ed. Miriam Ben-Peretz (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
 6. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1938), 90-91.
 7. Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen*, ed. Steve Smith (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), 87-88.
 8. Jane Roland Martin, “The Wealth of Cultures and the Problem of Generations” (in this volume).
 9. Langer’s understanding of what she terms “mindful learning” bears a close resemblance to what I would consider being a philosopher of your own learning. Langer says that her “mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics.” Her call for “an implicit awareness of more than one perspective,” carries a similar emphasis on perspectives to the one that I have been advocating. In addition to their awareness of other perspectives, Langer wants mindful learners to engage in “a continuous creation of new categories,” and to maintain an “openness to new information” — dispositions which most of us philosophers applaud.
 10. Langer, *Power of Mindful Learning*, 124-25.
 11. Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1979), 231.
 12. Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 15.
 13. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Collier MacMillan, 1982), 21.
 14. Herbert Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You!: The Role of Assent in Learning* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1991), 41-43, reprinted in Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (New York: New Press, 1994).
 15. *Ibid.*, 43-44.
 16. Dwight Boyd, “The Place of Locating Oneself(Ves)/Myself(Ves) in Doing Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 8.
 17. Plato, *Meno*, 80d.