

Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions: Do I Need a Philosophy of Education, Too?

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A basic assertion of Ames Brown's essay is that the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requirement that teacher candidates be assessed for their "dispositions" does not go far enough; there should also be an additional standard that would require candidates to develop, and teacher preparation programs to assist in the development of, "an in-depth foundational philosophy of education." He suggests a protocol by which students can develop (would "discover" be a better word?) their philosophy.

Brown justifies this proposal by saying that developing a philosophy of education would be an expression of existing dispositions and an alternative to the present requirement of assessing dispositions directly, a practice that somehow leaves schools of education open to charges of indoctrinating or of being the "thought police." I am not sure that this latter claim is, or ought to be, true, for reasons I will explore below.

DISPOSITIONS AND ACTIONS

The relation between beliefs, dispositions, and actions is unclear to me. It is not so much that I disagree with Brown's observation that one's philosophy expresses one's dispositions, as that I am not entirely sure what he means; I do not know what the meaning of "express" is here. If I know a candidate's philosophy reliably enough, I can probably make some reasonably accurate guess at the candidate's preferred course of action. But knowing the candidate's preferred course of action tells me little about the beliefs that motivate it.

A candidate may reveal a disposition to treat all students justly (however "justly" is cashed out). This disposition may be a result of a firm commitment to social justice and a reflection of a deep-seated belief that all students can learn and it is the job of teachers to help them do so. Or, it may be a result of the candidate's realization that this is expected by his or her supervisors. As a certified and tenured teacher he or she may also demonstrate a commitment to justice — or may feel free to demonstrate a disposition to act consistent with his or her own racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist beliefs.

Furthermore, even with the "correct" disposition, expression requires knowledge and skill. A teacher may genuinely believe that all students can learn and be motivated to act so as to maximize the learning of all, yet lack the content knowledge to make that happen, the pedagogical knowledge to make that happen, or the skill to implement a well-intentioned and effective learning plan.

In any event, NCATE uses "dispositions" to refer both to the motives behind actions (beliefs, attitudes, ethical commitments) and to observed actions (fair treatment). But no reliable inference can be made in either direction: one may lack

the skill to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere; the other may lack any real regard for his students but realize and respond to the basis for evaluation. The relationship between dispositions and philosophy is a tenuous one at best. One can have a philosophical commitment to behave in a certain way and yet not demonstrate that disposition (as is the case where there is a lack of knowledge, a lack of skill, or “weakness of will”). More directly, the circumstances may be such that prudence dictates actions (apparent dispositions) that are chosen to please the teacher or supervisor. For whatever reasons, dispositions to act in certain ways do not tell us anything reliable about philosophies, nor can we make any confident predictions in the opposite direction, from philosophies to dispositions to act in certain ways.

“DOING” PHILOSOPHY

As a student of Tom Green’s, I agree that philosophy is an activity rather than a course of study. But there are at least two different ways in which we might do philosophy. On the one hand, doing philosophy is the process of articulating a credo. This seems to be the direction Brown is suggesting. That sort of “doing” lends itself to guiding candidates through the process of “developing their foundational philosophies” in the kind of exercise suggested by William Frankena.

There is a different sense in which one can “do” philosophy; we can use it as a tool of analysis, not so much beginning with our assumptions and ethical commitments as discovering them (or perhaps not) in the process of analyzing practice. Using case studies is an example of this sort of “doing philosophy”; the doing involves thinking carefully and rigorously about how one should act in specific situations and/or thinking carefully and rigorously about the sort of beliefs that would justify one’s actions. For practitioners, doing this sort of analysis can and does often enough lead to a change in professed beliefs or a change in practices as one comes to understand the relationship between the two. Doing philosophy thus may or may not lead to the sort of “synthetic system building” outlined by Brown.

Perhaps that sort of system building might be a capstone experience, coming after some experience thinking about questions of practice in a serious way and exploring the implications of choosing one action over another. I do not dispute the value of the exercise, but I might suggest it is one for which there needs to be a lot of preparation. And, though this is probably just a statement about myself as a learner, I would be much more likely to have it emerge from this process than through the Frankena model. The possibility is that this sort of thing has been stopped because it generally yielded unsatisfactory results; though John Dewey’s might be the model for such exercises, there are few Deweys among even professional philosophers.

However it is done, I do not think that doing a philosophy of education avoids the accusation from the right that we are playing thought police. It is not clear that asking candidates to develop a philosophy of education is less directly coercive than asking them to demonstrate certain dispositions. Nor do I think that we should try to finesse that issue. We in teacher education have a positive obligation to make certain that the people who become teachers will not hurt children, and this is true

whether we make that judgment based on dispositions (whatever they may exactly be), beliefs, values, philosophy, or something else.

In the next section, I want to consider that claim.

IN THE PUBLIC GOOD

Teaching is a profession that, even more than most, is defined by its ethical commitments. That is why the term “professional ethics” is properly a redundancy.¹ The implications of this include the proposition that ethical considerations are central to the process of professional formation. It is not just a matter of skills and knowledge; it asks the question, in effect, of whether we have a reason to believe that a particular individual is fit for the profession. Perhaps it is the other way around; perhaps we are asking if there is evidence the candidate is *not* fit for the profession.

Either way, Arthur Wise is probably being disingenuous when he says that NCATE “does not itself espouse nor expect or require its institutions to espouse any particular political or social ideologies.” Democracy is a particular political ideology, and belief in equality of opportunity is a social ideology as well as a political one. Citizens who pay for public schools have every right to expect those schools to foster a commitment to these social and political ideologies. I hope NCATE expects its member institutions to do the same.

Education should serve both democratic purposes and the good of the individual students. To the extent that we take that claim seriously, there will be candidates to whom ethical teacher preparation programs will properly deny a recommendation for certification precisely on the basis of beliefs. That is, although teacher preparation programs are not in the business of telling people what they should think, they most definitely are in the business of deciding who would make good teachers and, arguably more important, who would not.

Even if the candidate follows a “true philosophical process,” at some point the evaluation process should make a judgment on whether someone holding such a philosophy is fit to teach or a threat to children and democratic life. The problem with Ann Coulter’s homophobic attitudes is not that they might not be freely and authentically arrived at, but that they are vicious to individuals and dangerous to democratic life. If there were a tenth standard such as Brown proposes, it would be the job of teacher preparation programs to foster in their candidates philosophical commitments to democracy and individual thriving for all students. This, no less than attention to dispositions, would be seen by such as Coulter as mind control, deprivation of freedom of speech, and indoctrination.

She would still be incorrect. I am not sure what might be a responsible alternative.

1. Tom Green, “The Conscience of Leadership” in *Leadership: Examining the Elusive*, ed. Linda T. Sheive and Marian B. Schoenheit (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1987), 105–15.