

When Do We Do What We Are?

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In his presidential address Bob Floden has put forward a provocative call to action. He urges us to be engaged in the educational issues of our time. He challenges us to offer more than philosophical criticism from afar, but rather to articulate criticism from *within* the circles where educational decisions are made. He beckons us to take a place at the tables where policy is fashioned — whether at the local, regional, or national level — and to help determine what is worth doing in education. A Deweyan spirit seems to run through this call, for Dewey enjoined people to bring to the difficulties and prospects of life whatever critical capacity they could muster. He argued that philosophers ought not to be solely preoccupied with each other's specialized arguments but should also attend to problems and possibilities that spring from lived experience.

An Emersonian spirit can also be discerned. In a famous passage from his essay, "Experience," Emerson writes:

Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed, that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us.¹

Such a creed turns us, Emerson adds, "to the present hour" and to the people and potential actions it contains.

Philosophers of education may prefer each other's company, as well as that of philosophical texts. However, the bare bones fact is that a sometimes significant portion of their hours on campus is spent interacting with teacher educators, empirical researchers, economists and sociologists of education, curriculum theorists, policy makers, school administrators, and teachers. These persons help guide and shape educational practice. Emerson counsels us to do them "broad justice." We should not stand back from the intellectual and institutional messiness of their debates, meanwhile "postponing, referring, and wishing." We should seek *with* these men and women to render things better than they would otherwise be without the modes of questioning and criticism that philosophy can bring to bear.

I suspect some in this audience resonate with Emerson's reference to "a vertigo of shows and politics." Whether they have worked with a teacher education policy committee, a foundation staff debating what initiatives to fund, or a group of experts on school restructuring, they have doubtless heard proposals that seem entirely unmoored from commitments to the good, the true, and the beautiful. Some in this audience may have asked themselves, in the midst of such meetings, is this for real? And yet, Emerson seems to urge us to adopt as a "creed" being receptive to our fellow educators and extending them a philosophical hand.

There appear to be many ways of doing so, as Bob Floden has suggested in his address. They range from working with people in schools, on school boards, in communities, and in various nonprofit organizations, to writing in accessible ways and publishing in practitioner-oriented outlets. In my own experience with teachers, I have been taken with how welcoming many are to philosophy, in substance if not in name. I have been moved by their joy and fascination in the work of educating, and struck by how hungry many are for serious talk about its meaning and significance. I have also learned to appreciate Floden's emphasis on the need for philosophers of education to become knowledgeable in the particular educational domains they wish to influence. When I served for a decade as coordinator of a secondary teacher education program, I found myself willy-nilly having to become conversant with the facts of teacher education policy and the debates surrounding them. This education was necessary if I was to interact meaningfully with colleagues from teacher education programs, administrators, people in schools, and teacher candidates themselves.

In short, I support the idea that philosophers have important contributions to make on the broad, macro level to which Floden refers. However, it seems to me important to balance that prospect with questions of scale, of circumstance, of modes of participation, and of fundamental identity. I want to turn attention in the remainder of this response to a familiar temporal and spatial domain when philosophy of education happens. I have in mind the pedagogical field that encompasses meetings with students and others during class, office hours, casual hallway conversations, lunch appointments, email messages and phone calls, and all the other points of contact. The field includes the philosopher of education's solitude as she or he contemplates these classes, meetings, and contacts. It is a potentially large pedagogical field, not in terms of gross numbers of people involved, but in terms of the possible depth of engagement and range or extent of influence and impact. I would characterize this field as one in which philosophy of education is potentially happening continuously.

This pedagogical field differs from the macro domain of policy making, which is marked by discrete rather than continuous moments when philosophy of education happens. As such, it also embodies a different conception of philosophy. Rather than operating instrumentally to analyze arguments, to make sounder cases, and to examine concepts, philosophy emerges here as a comprehensive, ongoing, dynamic enactment of questions and of understandings regarding purpose, value, and being. Philosophy becomes a comprehensive project of examining educational experiences, assumptions, methods, ways of communicating, ideas, and prospects. Moreover, for some philosophers of education, and I would include myself in this group, this pedagogical field becomes, over time, a ground or source for moving out to larger conversations, including at the level of policy, regarding such things as the nature and purposes of teacher education.

Consider briefly a familiar classroom in which some philosophers of education toil. This classroom is where teacher education takes place, typically with curriculum and course titles that feature the words "educational foundations." In describing

this classroom, I may not offer anything that people who teach these courses do not already know. All the same, when it comes down to the question, why philosophy of education? — which is one of the underlying questions Floden has answered in his address — this perhaps familiar knowledge merits a hearing.

On the Philosophy of Education Web site, there is a link by Lucille Eckrich that takes one to a wide range of syllabi from courses in educational foundations. These syllabi feature many well-known writings, a host of questions about the nature and meaning of education and of educational practice, a set of course requirements and expectations, and a calendar of meetings with the associated readings and other activities. The syllabi sketch portraits of how to conceive the place of philosophy of education in the preparation of teachers. However, to the extent that syllabi are like travel guides rather than like actual traveling, they provide no more than hints of what to expect. The pedagogical field to which they point may have familiar contours to those who have taught such courses, but what unfolds is sometimes impossible to anticipate. Absent a rigid blueprint, teaching and learning have to be engaged as the unscripted, unique expressions of educational life that they are.

For some philosophers of education, teaching these courses becomes much more than fulfilling a faculty load or disseminating a lot of information about philosophies of education. They become unbroken experiences of doing philosophy, at least to the extent that philosophical inquiry and wonder thread their way into preparing for class; into leading discussions, lecturing, or working with small groups; into responding to and assessing student writing; into troubleshooting and problem-solving with students not keeping up or otherwise having difficulties; into office-hour conversations and e-mail and phone communications; into talk with colleagues, friends, and significant others about the courses; and even into professional dreams that variously puzzle, startle, please, or unsettle. In short, for some philosophers of education, working with men and women preparing to become teachers constitutes a portion of their way of life.

Moreover, to judge from presentations at these annual meetings and from the considerable talk about teaching that goes on among some gathered here, the answer to the question, When is philosophy of education? encompasses more than the important activities of working with teacher candidates on how to fashion arguments, how to make a case for their ideas, and how to criticize their terms and concepts. Philosophy of education also includes fundamental questions about the conduct of life, the art of living, where ends come from, the relation between the individual and society, the formation of human identity, the very meaning and substance of “human influence,” and why or how education can bring into being something that was not before, such as a new understanding, insight, or outlook. Professors and students alike can realize philosophy of education continuously in their quest to find ways of characterizing teaching and education that seem right, and that articulate in one fashion or another — not always harmoniously, much less easily — with their motivations, dispositions, values, convictions, fears, concerns, and hopes. In the pedagogical field that encompasses this classroom and all the associated contacts that orbit around it like satellites in a new solar system — and

yet satellites that as every teacher knows can exert a powerful gravity of their own — philosophy's switch is never turned off.

In conclusion, I support the call Floden has issued to engage the educational life of our time. I also believe it important, given the diversity of philosophical bent and educational practice represented in our Philosophy of Education Society, to keep in view questions of scale, of circumstance, of modes of participation, and of fundamental identity. While recounting the influences on his own sense of identity, John Stuart Mill at one point remarked:

With those who, like all the best and wisest of mankind, are dissatisfied with human life as it is, and whose feelings are wholly identified with its radical amendment, there are two main regions of thought. One is the region of ultimate aims; the constituent elements of the highest realizable ideal of human life. The other is that of the immediately useful and practically attainable.²

Do these two regions belong to the same country? Mill avers that he could not dwell in either, but sought an “intermediate region.” What about philosophers of education? Perhaps there exists a continuum between the macro scale of policy making, to which each of us may from time to time have access, and the micro scale of the individual professor's pedagogical field. Or it may be that these are two distinct domains, each embodying a particular conception of philosophy, such that the imperatives of one simply cannot mesh or accord with those of the other. Each philosopher of education will have to weigh and respond to this uncertain condition, to the extent that it is felt, in his or her own ways.

Meanwhile, wherever we move and work it remains valuable to confront what it means, to recall Floden's parting words, “to seize the moment.” Emerson urged the teacher and scholar to be an opener of doors to others. Not only are there many different doors to open, but as the recent “Gates” exhibit in New York City demonstrates — with its 7,500 saffron colored, flowing gates which generate for the pedestrian a remarkable sense of lightness and prospect — it is possible to generate doors or entryways we never knew existed, and to cross thresholds into new places in which to do philosophy of education. I join Floden in summoning us to walk through them.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 479.

2. John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 148.