

Introduction: What's the Use of Philosophy of Education?

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The worldwide economic crisis has led many countries to reconsider their educational priorities, particularly with regard to higher education. Not surprisingly, utilitarian arguments play a prominent role in this. There is not only the question whether higher education offers value for money. There is also a strong emphasis on particular domains of value — most notably economic and technological value — resulting in the often-heard argument that investment in the so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is the one and only way toward securing financial prosperity in the global economy. Thus we can see governments in many countries shifting funding away from the social sciences and the humanities toward those fields and disciplines that are supposed to be of more immediate and more tangible use.

While the current economic conditions may be rather unprecedented, the impact they are having — or are made to have — on educational policy and practice seems largely to reinforce a number of existing trends. These include an ongoing *commodification* of education (the idea that education is a product that can be bought and sold); *technological expectations* about education (the idea that education can “fix” things, such as individual children or society at large); and *economic reductionism* (the idea that the value of education should first and foremost be measured in economic terms, both with regard to the economic return for individuals and the contribution of the educational system as a whole to the nation’s gross domestic product). Underlying these views is an instrumentalist understanding of education as a kind of production process that is supposed to bring about certain predetermined outcomes. Hence the push for education to become more effective. Hence the idea that with more and better scientific evidence about “what works” the educational production line can be optimized and eventually become “perfect.” And hence the idea that higher education can and should “deliver” on a limited number of predefined outcomes.

Although working from the margins is not a new experience for philosophers of education, the combination of financial pressures and a shifting public discourse about education have definitely made questions about how the philosophical engagement with education might best be justified more urgent and pressing. One option here is to accept the utilitarian logic by trying to identify ways in which philosophy of education might contribute to what are deemed to be desirable educational outcomes. A common line of argument is to emphasize how philosophy can contribute to the formation of critical and creative thinking skills — skills that are often listed as crucial “key” or “core” skills for success in education, work, and life. One problem with this strategy, however, is that philosophy has so much more to offer than just the promotion of thinking skills. Justifying the philosophical engagement with education in these terms therefore hardly does justice to what

philosophy is, can do, and might achieve. (There is also the obvious danger that if another avenue toward the development of such skills is discovered — such as brain gym or pharmaceutical enhancement — this rationale can easily become obsolete.)

From this angle it might be better, therefore, to concede that philosophy of education is mainly useless — and to take pride in this. Or to put it in more nuanced terms: rather than accepting the utilitarian logic and trying to justify philosophy of education in these terms, it is important to question and to a certain extent even refuse utilitarian thinking where it concerns philosophy of education and, so I wish to add, education more generally. Doing so requires a number of things. First, it requires that we broaden the scope of what is considered to be valuable. Rather than focusing only on economic and technological benefits, there is a need to highlight the importance of personal growth and well-being, moral and political agency, the quality of democratic processes and practices, the ability to live together under conditions of plurality and difference, and so on. Even if we see education only as an investment, it is important to make the case that there is so much more that needs investing in than only the global economy. Questioning utilitarian thinking also requires that we problematize the view of education as an instrument for the production of certain outcomes and highlight the inherent complexity of all educational processes and practices. It requires that we continue to deepen our understanding of what makes education possible and difficult at the very same time. It requires that we reflect on what it means to be a teacher, what it means to be a student, what it means to educate, what it means to listen, what it means to know, what it means to think and reflect, what it means to be critical, and what all this does to selves: the selves of teachers and the selves of students. Finally, questioning utilitarian thinking requires that we continue to emphasize the inherent ethical and political character of all education, that is, the fact that education always involves choices about what to do and what not to do, where to go and where not to go, and that these choices are never simple and straightforward as they not only raise questions about *which* values should inform such choices but also about *whose* values should count.

It is my view that the essays brought together in *Philosophy of Education 2010* do not just provide a cross section of high quality work in the philosophy of education but are actually addressing what I have identified as some of the most pressing issues of our current condition. They remind us of the need to see the value of education in the broadest sense possible; they provide subtle readings of the complexities of educational processes and practices; and they continue to deepen our understanding of the inherent ethical and political nature of all education. While it is unlikely and probably also undesirable that philosophy of education will ever become “mainstream” — which does not do away with important question concerning the education of future generations of philosophers of education and the institutional reproduction of the field of philosophy of education more generally — they essays in this volume show that contemporary philosophy of education has a lot to offer. Offering this in a way that is self-confident, strategic, stubborn when needed and cooperative where possible, with a sense of urgency and an ethos of solidarity,

is how philosophers of education should aim to respond to the significant challenges that lie ahead.

The production of *Philosophy of Education 2010* is very much a collective effort. I first wish to thank all those who submitted their work for review in the knowledge that the possibility of acceptance always comes with the risk of rejection. I thank them for many nice e-mails and for accepting decisions in such good spirit. I also wish to thank the members of the 2010 program committee. They were a real pleasure to work with and their collective judgment has resulted in a superb conference and a fine publication. I have benefited greatly from the expertise of PES Executive Director Jeffrey Milligan and PES Managing Editor Joyce Atkinson. They have guided me through the process and were always at the end of an e-mail for problem solving and troubleshooting. I wish to thank Justin York and Joyce Atkinson for the care with which they have transformed a large pile of manuscripts into this publication. I also wish to thank 2009 PES Program Chair Debby Kerdeman for her guidance and advice. And I wish to thank PES President Audrey Thompson for her leadership and her confidence in me, and for the creative ideas she brought to the 2010 conference. With so much help around, there was little left for me to do — but what there was to do, I have greatly enjoyed doing.