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Philosophy of Education is Bent

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Abstract Troubled times in education means that philosophers of education, who seem to never stop making defenses of our field, have to do so with more flexibility and a greater understanding of how peripheral we may have become. The only thing worse than a defensive philosopher is a confident and certain philosopher, so it may be that our very marginality will give us renewed energies for problematizing education. Occupying our marginal position carefully and in concert with other marginal inquiries, I think, will do our field good. Because of its attention to what it takes to be willing to learn and to approach theoretical and real world obstacles with open if cautious interest, philosophy of education is about holding concepts and movements in tension, bending the implications of commonplace, commonsensical ideas about education, and carefully examining the all of these maneuvers for the exclusions they wittingly and unwittingly produce. Problematizing the certainties derived from majoritarian positions, be it whiteness, Westernness, or any other dominant perspective, can provide us with a diversity of claims to scrutinize and epistemological positions to be wary of.

Keywords Philosophy of education · Accountability · Queer · Marginality

In a political context where colleges of education come under fire for their attention to peripheral topics like "democracy and education" when, according to critics, they should be more interested in accountability, those of us in social foundations of education and philosophy of education now find ourselves trying to conserve the radicalism of past critiques of education in the face of new right attempts to expunge not only the radical intervention of so-called "identity politics" but the "classics" like Dewey and Plato. These are hard times, like other times. It seems like every generation of philosophers of education run up against some kind of hard time or other that encourages us to assert the need to stop and think, to be aware of the structuring tensions of education, and to also push for hopeful

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responses to those tensions. Yet now as the definition of education seems to be set by local governments and school supervisors who think mass firings will solve all the problems caused by underfunding and accountability, there are moments, too, of unexpected transnational hospitality and common cause, examples of difference finding connection. At the same time the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island decides to fire all the teachers to give himself the budgetary flexibility he needs, protestors in Egypt send dozens of pizzas to support demonstrators in Madison, Wisconsin who are trying to protect the collective bargaining rights of public employees, teachers included. Protest signs in Wisconsin urge the public to "Walk Like an Egyptian" and join mass protests to reinvigorate democracy, just like our northern African counterparts are doing—a parallel nearly unthinkable and even more remarkable when the Egyptians are modeling democracy for a US state with a long, vibrant labor history. In a context where innovations that would race us to the top while undermining the labor that might get us there, philosophers of education, more interested in critical engagement than definite outcomes, may look all the more out of step and disconnected. But I think we are also conservationists, pushing those in educational institutions to resituate their activities in enduring questions about knowledge, ethics, and progressive educational movements.

We are also facing a sense of ourselves as conservative on a related front. Educational institutions seem less interested in what we take to be the deeper and more complicated questions that define education and are increasingly more interested in science-based measurements that only measure a thin range of what learning might mean (largely because that's all that can be measured). In higher education, also driven by new financial pressures and the same ideological and economic interests that have shifted public education, the humanities are passé. Whether works are from ancient Greece, the Harlem Renaissance or contemporary feminist and queer political theory, they are increasingly viewed as all of a piece. Now more than ever, thinking about how to build democratic societies that respect diversity and difference is crucial, not only to critique the kinds of educational reforms that are turning learning into test taking but also to reassert how the humanities and engagement with others enables political and educational development. For philosophers of education, this means rethinking or at least more strongly articulating why we critiqued the canon but also coming to the defense of canonical studies that are as under fire for irrelevancy or lack of certain financial benefit. This means bringing together what had seemed to be the study at the center of the world, philosophy, and the studies of those on the margins. Over the last few decades in philosophy of education I think there has been quite a bit of grumbling on either side of that divide—either philosophers are all elitists who don't examine the implicit racism and sexism of their approaches or feminists and people of color are destroying the rigor of philosophical work. At this point, we're all in the same sort of trouble and need to be thinking and working together, even if we disagree. We may need to return to some points of contention during the canon wars and rethink how to bridge some of our disciplinary differences in the humanities and perhaps more fully understand—as some suggested at the time—that our methods of inquiry are quite similar, with similar aims. Though our textual choices may be different and yes, we may have distinctly different epistemological starting points, we at least have in common our relative remove from the new technocracies. I think what those of us still committed to broadening the canon might bring to such a discussion is perhaps a repetition of our earlier points as well: methods of critical thinking and learning that canonical texts in the humanities engender points not only to forms of citizenship and thinking but also to a rationale for expanding beyond traditional disciplinary studies. But our colleagues can also say back to us: yes, and

part of the way you learned all that was through the criticality and forms of reading made possible by texts millennia in age.

Whatever different texts and traditions we work from, philosophy of education is increasingly seen as either irrelevant or disparaged. As education races to the top of science-driven research and programs to improve outcomes to forms of education that seem to have spawned administrative cheating on tests and dissolution of teachers unions, our attention to the ends and means of education seems to miss the point, seems to queer the project of accountability. Maybe those with a longer view can see this has happened before with teacher-proof curricula, some other technocratic ascendency, or critique of the humanities. Maybe these aren't the only times of crisis in the field but this crisis and the claim that higher education will never be the same again, means that philosophers of education, who seem to never stop making defenses of our field, have to do so with more flexibility and a greater understanding of how peripheral we may have become. The only thing worse than a defensive philosopher is a confident and certain philosopher, so it may be that our very marginality will give us renewed energies for problematizing education. Occupying our marginal position carefully and in concert with other marginal inquiries, I think, will do our field good.

Knowing that we need to assert our diverse presence clearly does not mean that we answer this new educational industry in ways its machinery can easily understand. In times that demand easy answers that have been destructive, philosophy of education, I think, needs to maintain its problem-posing approach and encourage students to think through the dangers caused by certainty but to also maintain a curiosity about how to approach these problems. Because of its attention to what it takes to be willing to learn and to approach theoretical and real world obstacles with open if cautious interest, philosophy of education is about holding concepts and movements in tension, bending the implications of commonplace, commonsensical ideas about education, and carefully examining the all of these maneuvers for the exclusions they wittingly and unwittingly produce. Problematizing the certainties derived from majoritarian positions, be it whiteness, Westernness, or any other dominant perspective, can provide us with a diversity of claims to scrutinize and epistemological positions to be wary of.

How do philosophies and practices of education encourage learners to have the confidence to name their concerns and identities without falling into certainties that cannot be disrupted by further critical engagement? To get to some of these issues I have been interested in forms of communication and subjectivity that seem to have inbuilt appreciation for complex communication. Rather than relying on certainty and directness, they have a tactical understanding that one not only may not say all one means to say in the interests of civility but that still try to maintain and complicate connections across differences. The forms of indirect communication and partial understandings that derive from interactions across differences may be helpful reminders that everything does not need to be clear and measurable in order to have a positive effect. Because as close as we may get to one another, we may not come to easy understandings or even enduring concord but at least we're trying. Philosophy of education, with its attention to the difficulties of knowing and ethics, may help us to understand that even if that we cannot get to central problems of living together and thinking together in a context of difference because things are not resolvable nonetheless we can continue to uneasily approach these challenges sideways. Bending the time and meaning of discussions itself stops, however momentarily, the machinery of educational institutions and easy superiorities.

Educational philosophy, I hope, gives students pause enough to think about openness to innovation and challenge and also yet gives us a sense of why it would be important to stay

committed to at least some, however open and indeterminate sense of justice. I recently heard myself described as a philosopher of education who wants everyone to be a lesbian. It seemed an odd description at first but as I think about what philosophy of education can do to encourage people engage in blatant forms of critique, and to make them sensitive to the kinds of disapproval that those critical acts may engender, especially in these times of tighter budgets and irrational accountabilities. When funds that would have been used to improve public schools are now allocated to smaller charter and other schools that will not necessarily even need to indicate an interest in serving the public good, and when in the US colleges of education are encouraged to make common cause with political forces trying to disempower teachers unions, I think it is becoming clearer that careful philosophical engagement with foundational issues in education are seeming queerer and queerer. As programs that centralize philosophy of education, too, are becoming fewer and far between, it may appear that philosophy of education has been broken by the new accountabilities. I'm hoping for the sake of education as an actual undertaking as opposed to an industry that philosophy of education is just bent, it isn't yet broken.

While I don't want to overuse queer or turn it into just another form of critical rationality, queering education and doing the kind of philosophy of education that is cheerfully queer may entail turning to tentative judgments and sideways forms of thinking and speaking, trying to use puzzles of invitation and challenge to get at difficulties of understanding among people, thinking through the problems associated with teaching and learning, and thinking more about the institutional structures that are turning energetic education into routines of testing and measurement. Philosophy of education is hospitable in its attempts to sort out diverse and divergent commitments and challenging in its unwillingness to let any aspect of those commitments go without critique and intervention. Queer interventions seem a way into these sorts of strategies for engagement: queerness is both a way of looking at the normative world sideways and has historically deployed subtle forms of communication and knowing that operate out of intuition, rage, and affection. Queerness, like other forms of critical knowledge, draws on desire, speculation, and even blatant, spectacular curiosity. Because everyone lives under normative systems to which they cannot possibly conform, the ability to be queer and to engage in acts queering concepts and practices, I think, extends to everyone. Although the kind of philosophy of education that emerges from queer experiences may undertake these strategies of discerning, yearning for, and disrupting as almost second nature, they are also strategies that most people have some ability to engage, especially from the margins. And clearly philosophy of education is being pushed to the margins of educational discourse. Indeed, the trickiest thing in these days where education is becoming more and more normatively framed as accountability, is to stimulate criticality. It may well be that give the very strong turn to education-science and evidenced-based education, philosophers of education cannot easily find discursive traction to mount a head-on critique of this institutional shift and now have to find more sideways and bent tactics.

At the risk of pushing the queer metaphor too far, philosophy of education is increasingly described as elite (rich over educated people with who don't have to teach children), debauched (we spend too much time thinking and don't plan for Mondays), and perverse in our attachment to obscure and rarefied things (like those odd antique store owners)–and maybe, oddly, not promiscuous enough in our attempts to make the educational philosophy seem more appealing to more people. We do need to recruit, building on the latent forms of critique that go with any connection to education and making more of a spectacle of philosophy as a form of thinking and acting that is not interested in reproduction of norms. I think that queering philosophy of education means that we can think about futurity—our

own as well as more generally– without being tied to the increasingly stringent and purportedly "practical" concerns that are so damaging to education's potential.

The tasks I take to be central are encouraging time out from the normal routine, taking a bent perspective on reading and acting, and recruiting others. Time out has probably always been a challenge but now that our students are working more hours than ever to support themselves through school or returning to graduate school. They do this while working full time or attending classes online in time zones that don't match well for synchronous sessions, that time apart from routine becomes more difficult to access. Ubiquitous learning may be encouraging us to see micro-forms of time apart, squeezing in contemplation between waiting for the bus and jostling for a seat. Time to think, let alone time to read and time to communicate with others about reading and thinking, seems a luxury. Trying to encourage students and colleagues to make time when there simply isn't time is a daunting task. Refiguring the times we have together into something like stolen moments for deep thinking becomes all the more important. But attempts to take time or make time also punctuated by students who do want to know what this thinking has to do with them and what it will do for them specifically on Monday (a phrase I would like to outlaw but one that I also recognize is an indication that there is no time for luxuries like thinking and only time for acting, these are the pressures we all work under in a system of accountability that does not account for education but rather replaces it).

As irritating as it may be to shift the meaning of key concepts in education as students and teachers of philosophy of education, redefining the time of education gives us a place to start. Shaking students out of their habitual relationship to action means interrupting them, literally stopping the time of activity to make it an object of scrutiny. Interrupting people is always an affront, a confrontation that demands attention where there had been none and that entails a refocusing from whatever the background to one's habits is to the sudden appearance of another. Interrupting normal time is I think always startling, irritating, and after a while, when students have been in school for a long time or our colleagues are trying to get on with what they are accustomed to doing, also a sort of boring interruption too. Thinking that does not produce an immediately identifiable and quantifiable product is wasteful in a context that is structured to only understand bottom lines. So our interruptions are not only irritating and boring, they are unproductive, the sort of excess that needs to be cut in order for responsible thinking and acting to take place. To return to queerness, though, excess in the midst of normal time is meant to be a disruptive spectacle that in turn shows the problems in time and practice as usual, literally how much time is spent avoiding thinking about the pressures of time and the requirement of quiet time or time talking together. For teachers, this is not a remarkable problem—their own experiences with having professional development periods and free periods cut in order to make education more efficient easily shows them the value of such time. Increasingly, this time apart is harder to find and harder to justify because it does not fit with the reproductive norms of education.

In education, where so many students don't want to talk in class because "that's so gay," it is hard to be nonconforming and passionately involved with studies or ideas. So the desire to learn is itself is queer. It's remarkable that wanting to learn is marked out as something odd enough to comment upon. It isn't normal to have passion for one's studies. Still, for all the weariness we may experience when trying to teach students who are themselves weary at the pressures that will be put on them as teachers to produce, not inspire, our students do enjoy—despite their initial protestations– the intimacy of intellectual connection and the intensity of learning, debate, and classroom discussion. Discussion, after all, is where they appear, make themselves anew through engagement with

new ideas. Even in times where education appears stultifying in so many places, students remake themselves through ideas and interchange, they also identify with and as identities that they may or may not wind up being. And that also makes the scene of education a very queer place.

There are imaginative possibilities that arise in the process of learning together and that shift people, challenging who they were and moving them into places and ideas they hadn't anticipated. These dynamics are happening in every energetic class and may even happen in classes that don't intend to generate that kind of energy. And sometimes the process of rethinking and remaking relationships can create anxieties. Coming at this task obliquely, inciting rethinking rather than demanding it, suggesting new possibilities for education and encouraging critical engagement, rather than setting out clear plans, in short, setting out the dilemmas and puzzles of education and trying to work them out together are, I think, the tasks of philosophers of education. Part of an engaged philosophy of education may involve coming to students and issues where they are, shifting in a more mobile form of philosophy of education that engages in conversations with stakeholders who are working through problems in education.

From the older tradition of Socrates wandering around Athens and getting waylaid by people with whom he disagreed, philosophers of education can also, with the approval of the district, school, institutional review board or whoever, take our projects to schools and talk with people, bringing philosophical tools to bear on what have been ethnographic and qualitative research's purview. While philosophy has prided itself on having questions and answers that endure beyond particular contexts, particular contexts themselves can bring out new ways of thinking. So it may be that focusing on the subtleties of intersubjective communication and not only philosophizing but doing research with actual subjects is a way for us to take philosophy of education back to where people are making diverse meanings out of their education and to find out what they're doing and how they're communicating with one another. By finding more spaces in which to do philosophy of education with others, including engaging these questions with people in public schools, we can help to underscore how people are critical, despite policies intent on having them be otherwise. This means making more of a spectacle out of the process of philosophizing about education, marking the time for thinking as ubiquitous but also distinctly bent.