Nurturing a Democratic Community in the Classroom

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Abstract   Thayer-Bacon tells her story in a conversational tone that traces her personal and professional roots as she describes various chapters of her life: first as a philosopher, how she became involved in education, and then how that involvement became a career as a philosopher of education, in a large teacher education program, and now at a research institution. She sketches her philosophical contributions, as a pragmatist, feminist, post-modernist, and cultural studies scholar, to philosophy, philosophy of education, and education.

Introduction

I am a philosopher by nature. I don't mean that to sound like a brag, for my family would say it can be very frustrating to have a daughter, sister, parent, and partner who is a philosopher. As a child, I worried a lot about social issues and loved to analyze ideas. No one else in my family of origin claims to like to talk about social issues such as how to reform our schools. My family still can't figure out where I came from. Fortunately, I loved to read and had a library card I used. I also made friends easily. I found people willing to debate me and challenge my thinking.

I went to Penn State (The Pennsylvania State University) for college, which was a very opportune choice, as Penn State was one of the few colleges in the US at the time that emphasized continental philosophy, in particular existentialism and phenomenology. I am not sure I would have earned a degree in philosophy if I had been on a campus that

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emphasized analytic philosophy and language analysis. I don't think it would have caught my imagination in the same way. I took Dr. Alphonso Lingis's introductory course in philosophy, loved it, and signed up for more. I had no idea what I was going to do with a philosophy degree, except go on to graduate school in philosophy. I followed my heart, and hoped for the best. I was philosophizing before I earned a degree, and will be doing so long after I retire. I'm still surprised that someone is willing to pay me to do what I'd be doing anyway.

I start with this introduction for several reasons that have to do with my philosophy of education. One, I don't think philosophy should be elitist, and it bothers me that many people find it too abstract and disconnected from their daily lives to be worth their while to consider. I think many people are interested in philosophical ideas; they just don't label them as such. One key concern I have for philosophy is that philosophy needs to be approachable and available to all. Connected to this concern for approachability and accessibility is the strong belief that philosophy needs to help people solve real problems in their lives, be applicable, relevant, and useful. Our thinking has consequences; it is directly connected to action and needs to help improve our daily lives. That philosophical view is what makes me a pragmatist.

Third, I start with my voice being heard, as I am also a social feminist scholar who thinks the boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, as well as self and others, is very porous indeed. I do not think I can separate my private self from my public self, that I can remove myself from my context and step out of my own skin. My multifarious self is necessary for the construction of knowledge, it is not just something that gets in the way or deceives me. Feminists argue strongly that the personal is political, which brings me to point number four, the importance of addressing power and making sure diverse perspectives are included in the conversation. I did not read feminist philosophy in any course I took in college as an undergraduate or graduate student. Women doing philosophy was not part of the curriculum. I also wasn't introduced to postmodern theories concerning the relationship of power to thought until I was a doctoral student. It was Marxism, during the second half of my undergraduate degree, at Rutgers (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), that helped me to understand more about power. Still, the Marxist focus was on social class issues, and capitalism. I had to turn to feminist scholars in my outside reading and participate in the Feminist Movement to help me make connections to gender issues. I read books by Black scholars and participated in the Civil Rights Movement, to make my own connections to race issues.

Once I began to see injustice and inequality in our world, I couldn't help but see it. Once I realized I was privileged in some ways, because I was White and my father was a career officer in the Air Force, I couldn't help but see that my parents were better able to serve as advocates for me in school in ways that my enlisted friends' parents were not, while at the same time my high school guidance counselor had no expectation that I would graduate from college because I was a girl, and my parents saw no reason for me to continue in college once I married. I experienced gender discrimination directly in ways that helped me understand other forms of marginalization. All of the social context within which I grew helped me become the cultural studies scholar I am today. I understand my role as a philosopher to be a cultural critic. Let me turn my attention now to chapter two of my life, how I became involved in education, and then to how that involvement became a career as a philosopher of education in a large teacher education program and now at a research institution. I will sketch my philosophical contributions to philosophy, philosophy of education, and education in the process.

Chapter Two, Elementary Education

I married at the too young age of "almost 19" and finished my undergraduate degree in philosophy at Rutgers before I turned twenty-one. When I graduated I was 6 months pregnant with my first child of three that I had before I was twenty-six. I was also on my way to Germany, pulled away from the graduate school I thought I would attend and the philosophy I wanted to pursue. Consequently, I went back to relying on my library card and reading, as well as making new friends. My children sidetracked me in a very important way, as they pulled me into the world of education, at home and then in their Montessori school. I had no intention of being involved in teaching children prior to having children, considering that to be traditional women's work. Then, I started to worry about my own precious children's education. As I was living in Germany when my first child was born, I began to compare various ways of educating children in Europe to what was available in the US. I learned that there are many options for how to design a school and curriculum, something I had never considered before, and that was all my imagination needed to get me reading more and pondering various possibilities. During the time my children were growing up there was a strong push to develop alternative schools in America and parts of Europe.

When we moved back to the States I helped to develop a Montessori school so that my children could attend, and ended up going through Montessori elementary training so that I could teach in the school my children attended. Their joy in their school was contagious. I discovered teaching is the most challenging and rewarding job I can imagine doing and I still love it. When my children were old enough, I went back to graduate school, first earning a public school teaching credential, then a Masters in Education, both while still working fulltime as a Montessori teacher. Then, I learned about the possibility of earning a Ph.D. in philosophy of education. I was so excited! Here was a degree that would allow me to bring together my love of philosophy with my love of education. I felt like I had come full circle, and now that circle was complete.

Even though my children are grown, I still try to design my research so that I spend time in classrooms with children. My experience as an elementary Montessori teacher still informs my thinking. My (Thayer-Bacon 1991) dissertation was on critical thinking theory, in particular Richard Paul's theory in comparison to other current philosophers working on that topic. I was trying to understand why the children in my classroom scored so high on the annual proficiency exams I was required to give them, even though my curriculum did not match the public school curriculum for which the tests were designed. My hypothesis was that my students were using their critical thinking skills to reason out the most logical answer. Thus began my inquiry to try to understand what my students were learning and how they were learning *it*. In my research on Richard Paul's critical thinking theory, I found that what was significant about his theory for education was his requiring that the critical thinker become aware of their egocentrism and ethnocentrism. Such a requirement opens the door for others to be heard, and have their ideas considered before they are dismissed. However, I was disturbed by Paul's view of the self's contribution to knowledge in only a negative way, that the self can get in the way of knowledge obtainment, because it is selfish and self-centered. I began to develop a redescription of critical thinking that critiqued the current critical thinking work (Ennis, Paul, McPeck, Siegel, Lipman), and extended the current paradigm for thought in a new direction that incorporated feminist theory (Gilligan, Noddings, Ruddick, Grimshaw, Flax, Code, Jaggar), pragmatism (Peirce, James, Mead, Dewey), as well as postmodern theory (Habermas, Lyotard, Derrida,

Foucault, Rorty). That theoretical work was published as *Transforming Critical Thinking: Thinking Constructively* (2000).

I am currently working on developing democratic theory beyond liberal democracy in schools and once again Montessori's (1909/1912) model for schools and classrooms informs my thinking, in comparison to other models such as Dewey's (1990) Chicago Lab School and Horton's (1990) Highlander Research Center. I spent 5 years in schools with students whose cultural backgrounds have a more collective, "it takes a village to raise a child" focus, instead of the strong individualism so prevalent in American schools. I (Thayer-Bacon 2008) argue that individualism can be traced back philosophically to Locke and Rousseau and the classical liberal concept of 'democracy' America embraced from them. I am still absorbing my field notes from visiting nineteen schools on three different continents, and trying to further enlarge my thinking through reading as I continue to develop a relational, pluralistic theory of democracy-always-in-the-making.

However, I am getting ahead of my story. Chapter Three for me began when I took my first job in higher education as an assistant professor at a large teacher education program, Bowling Green State University (BGSU), with four children in tow, my oldest a senior in high school and my youngest a toddler. This is a woman's story, after all.

Chapter Three, Higher Education

I taught future teachers in Bowling Green, Ohio for 9 years, with a teaching style that was influenced by my years as an elementary Montessori teacher. I still teach this way, in my second higher education job at the University of Tennessee (UT). Montessori taught me that I am not the only teacher in the room, my students are teachers as well. She also taught me to trust that my students want to learn, and to let them choose what they will learn. Self-directed learning is the most powerful, in terms of engagement, motivation, and retention for the learner. I position myself as a student and try to help my students see themselves as teachers. I truly hope to learn as much from my students as they learn from me. I try to create a classroom where students feel safe enough to risk sharing their views, and I encourage them to listen, attend, discuss, seek alternative ways to look at issues, critique, and offer solutions. I consider us a democratic community of inquirers. We discuss ideas, in small groups, large groups, and now on line. I encourage them to discuss the ideas we look at with others beyond our classroom too, to help further enlarge our community of inquirers. I often serve as a translator for obtuse, difficult theoretical arguments. We read diverse scholars in every course I teach, and we read those scholars' original work, not secondary sources. I want students to feel confident they can engage with the ideas directly, and I want them to use care in making sure they are not misreading others' work. The only way to really test one's understanding of another author's work is to go back to the original writing.

The students do presentations about the readings as a way to break them down into reasonable amounts and share the responsibility for leading discussions. They write journals in which they describe, interpret and critique key points from their readings, position papers wherein they debate an author on a key issue, and longer philosophical papers where they develop their own ideas in more depth. I try to build into the curriculum and the writing assignments as much choice as I can. Same thing with our discussions, I come in with a basic outline of possible topics and issues, but I follow the students' interests and go where they want to go in our classroom discussions. There are always current events and examples that we can bring in to make connections, amend, and extend

the ideas we discuss and write about. The students also bring in other scholarly connections from their diverse educational backgrounds.

I do not grade students on the positions they take, I grade them on their ability to be fair in their representation of the other scholar's ideas and clear in describing their own. I teach students to use what I call "caring reasoning" in our discussions in class as well as in their writing. As authors, we learn that we are responsible for being as clear as possible about what we want to say, so that others will not misunderstand us. Since language is ambiguous and continually changing, this is a very difficult task, but one in which authors must engage. When I taught at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) I encouraged the students to think about how learning to use caring reasoning was going to help them in discussions with their students' parents, as well as with their co-workers and administrators. They have to be able to show they can fairly describe the other's views with generosity, presenting the ideas in their best light, not their worst. Then they have to be able to present their own argument in agreement (extending the ideas) or in disagreement (amending the ideas). They have to imagine the other person's response, and take their concerns seriously, as they seek to address those concerns.

Now, at a research-one level university where I work only with graduate students, I tell my students to imagine the authors they are reading are in the room having a conversation with them about their ideas. I give students lots of feedback on their writing, and the opportunity to rewrite as often as needed. I encourage them to read each other's writing too. My method of assessment is a mastery approach, much like what I learned as a Montessori teacher. I try to put students' grades in their hands as much as possible, and let students work on their writing until they have mastered it. I become a writing coach. All my grades are "in pencil" until the end of the semester, and if a student runs out of time due to life encroaching in on them, I will give them an incomplete to provide more time. What I care about most is that they have the chance to do their best work.

In the classroom I do not hide who I am, just as I haven't here, and encourage my students to do the same in class and in their papers, at a level they are comfortable. At the same time, I encourage us to push ourselves into discomfort zones, as that is where real growth takes place. I rarely have students with strong backgrounds in philosophy. I also rarely have students who walk into my classes thinking philosophy is important and relevant to their lives. Many walk in feeling intimidated by philosophy. I (Thayer-Bacon with Bacon 1998) wrote my first book, with contributions from Charles Bacon, my partner, for my students at BGSU, to help them see the value of philosophy and how it contributes to education. I wanted them to understand that in fact they are dealing with philosophical issues all the time as classroom teachers; it is unavoidable.

I did not realize it at the time, but *Philosophy Applied to Education* has become an outline of my career, as I have developed several of the original chapters into other texts. I (Thayer-Bacon 2000) first worked on developing chapter four more, concerning critical thinking. I finally felt like I managed to describe what was going on in my elementary Montessori classroom that captured how students were learning to be constructive thinkers. When I was working on *Transforming Critical Thinking,* I realized I needed to develop further a relational epistemological theory that supports my description of constructive thinking. Thus, I (Thayer-Bacon 2003) turned my attention to epistemological theories more (chapter two), and wrote *Relational* "(e)pistemologies".

My relational (e)pistemological theory is a pragmatic social feminist perspective calling for active engagement, aiming at democratic inclusion, joining theory with praxis, striving for awareness of context and values, tolerating vagueness and ambiguities. Knowledge is something people begin to develop as they have experiences with each other, and develop

ideas and understandings about what those experiences mean. A relational (e)pistemology views knowledge as something that is socially constructed by embedded, embodied people who are in relation with each other. It relies on a pluralist view of truths, not Truth as an absolute, which is why I place ( ) around the "e" in epistemology, as traditional Epistemo-logical theories are based on a concept of Truth as Absolute. Like other feminists, pragmatists, and postmodernists, I do not believe philosophers have a "God's eye view of Truth."

I completed the first draft of *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* just as I was offered a new job at UT, thus giving me a chance to work with students seeking graduate degrees in philosophy of education as a specialization within UT's Cultural Studies in Education program. Cultural studies scholarship has pushed me further on understanding the categories of culture and race as well as sexual orientation, and helped me to make important philosophical connections beyond the boundaries of teacher education to include sports studies, community health, instructional technology, and now applied educational psychology, as I have worked with various colleagues from these diverse fields of study since arriving at UT.

I began further developing the application of my relational (e)pistemology through my research on community and caring in education, as I describe in section two. I started this social-political philosophical theorizing about democratic communities in the classroom once again in *Philosophy Applied to Education* (chapters one and five). This project has taken me to schools in countries as far away as China, Japan, Ghana, and Mexico, and as close as my own backyard (where there are schools with 90% + African American children). I also am working on writing essays about my experiences as a teacher, professor, and administrator that focus on caring as an ethical approach to education (*Philosophy Applied to Education,* chapter three). And, I have come to the realization that I need to address a void that exists in *Philosophy Applied to Education,* in terms of overt theory development, for I inadvertently left out a key branch of philosophy (metaphysics). I need the chance to think through at a deep level the warp of relational ontology that goes with the weft of relational (e)pistemology and forms the weaving of the net that is my relational philosophy, and philosophy of education. I continue to experiment with ways of presenting philosophical work that are approachable and accessible to "non-philosophers," such as using narrative stories, vivid metaphors, and a conversational tone.

Conclusion

I hope it is clear from my description of my teaching and research agenda that issues concerning equity are central to my work. As a feminist, gender is always part of my focus. However, as a social feminist with a pragmatic perspective my focus includes race, class, and other diversity issues. I am committed to the value and importance of understanding cultural diversity, and I embrace a democratic society always-in-the-making as the place where there is the greatest opportunity for social diversity to be valued. I am also committed to translating theory to practice, as a pragmatist, and this brings my work continually into the arena of public policy concerning these issues.

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