

# Thinking about Education

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Ever since eighth grade I was deeply interested in my own education at a self-conscious level, wondering how I could find out educationally what human life was all about and how I should live my life. I read the Captain Horatio Hornblower novels and Leatherstocking tales on my own before meeting Shakespeare and Virgil's *Aeneid*. I joined the US Navy shortly after high school. After serving in Jacksonville, Florida, I enrolled in civil engineering at the University of Wisconsin. I was allowed to take an extra subject the second semester: philosophy. In Freshman English we read *John Brown's Body*, and I wanted to shift to the humanities, but not in Madison.

My old high school buddy recommended a liberal arts college in Tennessee, where I tried to learn what human existence is all about by studying history, religion, literature, and philosophy, as well as biology. I majored in English Literature, with almost a second major in philosophy. After two courses in the history of philosophy, I took courses in American Thought, political philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology, and all except American Thought went from Plato to the present. This gave me an historical perspective on Western Civilization that is not available in analytic or postmodern philosophies. The significance of the historical perspective shows in my papers, 'Education, Religion, and a Sustainable Planet', *Educational Studies* (2008, 43.1, pp. 58–72), and 'Critical Thinking about Truth in Teaching: The epistemic ethos', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2009, 41.2, pp. 155–165).

Back in Madison at the graduate level to qualify for teaching English in secondary schools, the professor stopped me as I was leaving the room the last day of class. He suggested I take the courses in philosophy of education and educational classics the next semester. They led to my masters thesis: 'Experimentalism in the Anesthetic Society: Existential education', *Harvard Educational Review* (1962, 32, pp. 155–187), to teaching eleventh grade English for two years, and to the University of Illinois for the doctorate in philosophy of education.

A student in my doctoral classes at Illinois was the Australian, Brian Crittenden. My third year there I met Ivan Snook, from New Zealand. The Australian, Brian Hill, studied for his doctorate there soon after that, and not much later two more Australians, Bruce and Felicity Haynes, earned their doctorates there. These scholars from Australia went there for the same reason I did. When I asked the supervisor of my master's thesis for the best place to earn a doctorate he recommended Illinois, mentioning that Harry Broudy had some background in existential philosophy. See my 'Identity Politics, Existentialism, and Harry Broudy's Educational Theory', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2001, 3–4, pp. 365–380).

The doctoral program at Illinois included a full year of coursework in Education to get students to the frontiers so their dissertations could be original investigations and to

prepare them to teach philosophy of education. It required a minor of four subjects in the Philosophy Department and two members of that department on one's dissertation committee.

The changes in doctoral programs that occurred during my two decades at the University of Queensland were borrowed from the British system and involved individual research for the Honors degree and subsequently. I thought it fraudulent to allow students in Queensland interested in philosophy of education to enter such a program and encouraged them to go to North America for their doctorates. The Philosophy of Education Society had asked us to severely limit the number of doctoral students due to shrinking employment opportunities.

It was significant to serve as Broudy's research assistant during my third year there, when he began the federally funded 'Broudy Project' to locate the legitimate literature of philosophy of education. Affecting my entire career were the days in the library looking through educational journals from their origin to the present, searching for articles that met both criteria—about an educational problem and philosophically competent.

Broudy outlined four problem areas of education: the nature and aim of education, the organization of instruction and schooling, the selection and organization of the curriculum, and teaching and learning. For a journal article to be considered as a legitimate contribution to the philosophy of education, it could not simply mention an educational problem in the first and last paragraphs and merely do something philosophical in between. It had to be about the educational problem throughout, or it was not thinking about education. It also had to involve a specific philosophical dimension of the educational problem, i.e. its ethical, epistemological, aesthetic, metaphysical, logical, or linguistic dimension.

Our field is like any other university discipline. Its members function at various levels of competence and some fraudulent things occur. As an educational theorist, I taught, researched, and wrote educational theory, i.e. thinking about education in various philosophically legitimate ways, with the help of the legitimate literatures of philosophy of education. My own background in the study and teaching of literature enabled me to become sensitive to phenomena in the lived world and use phenomenology and ordinary language analysis to articulate the grounding of education in the existence of children and youth, and to be equally concerned about the moral and epistemic dimensions of education and respectful of attempts of others to think about education ethically, epistemically, and ontologically.

My perception of the writings of others in philosophy of education is also structured by the framework of the Broudy Project. For example, see my recent, 'A Guide to Educational Philosophizing After Heidegger', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2008, 2, pp. 249–265) in which I gave four articles about Heidegger and education the review they deserved. My response to them is similar to my response to many articles in EPAT. Some contributors have not read the cumulative literature of educational theory treated philosophically, i.e. the field of thinking about education.

Philosophy of education is an interdisciplinary concern insofar as it is thinking about educational problems and phenomena in state-supported, public schools in philosophically responsible ways. One needs experience in teaching the young in these schools as well as training in philosophy to be able to think between disciplines. Someone with a

good training in philosophy cannot become a philosopher of education simply by teaching philosophy to teachers or supervising doctoral candidates in education within the British model.

I could not attend conferences in my first years in Australia. The universities closed down in August when academic conferences were held. In Brisbane a study school for external students was held that week. My appointment was in the Division of External Studies, and my students were mature, practicing teachers who began teaching with only one year of preparation due to the severe teacher shortage. They completed their bachelor degrees through external studies. Because of low enrollments in philosophy of education externally, I devoted all my time to teaching and after three years had the highest enrollments in the Educational section of External Studies.

The supplementary readings sent out for assignments were often the writings of PESA members such as Crittenden, Snook, Harris, Walker, and others, as well as British and American authors. Although it is tempting to complain about the lack of attention to educational problems as such in many *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (EPAT) papers, it seems more important to explain why my classes of mature, experienced teachers were given a variety of perspectives on important educational problems and encouraged to think them through to obtain their own perspective.

Philosophy of education, as educational theory, is about problem areas of education because educating the young is helping them develop into mature, adult human beings. Asking what is an adult human being, however, is a normative question about what a human being should become to be an adult. It is a substantive question because it is about growing, developing beings who enlarge their lives through learning about things and how to do things. Education is therefore a substantive, normative matter and its theorizing requires thinking about normative, substantive matters. Thinking about education is therefore substantive, normative thinking, about promoting good life and good society. For example, Plato was concerned with an education that would develop theoretical reason, whereas Dewey wanted education to develop pragmatic intelligence. This issue cannot be resolved by psychology or cognitive science, for it is a matter of epistemology, morality, social philosophy, genetic predispositions, and individual preferences. As Broudy recognized, the issues will remain regardless of what a specific philosopher says because philosophy necessarily deals with unsolvable problems. Briefly, philosophers are not messiahs. There will always be philosophical differences. That is an essential characteristic of *homo sapiens*.

To my knowledge very few PESA members have tried to ground education in the being of the child and youth, or in the human rights of the child and youth to develop moral agency and human dignity in schools, or to formulate the curriculum and pedagogy that would enable the young to become at home in the world through the disclosure of the truth of things in the world. Without moral agency and truth, however, philosophy of education is nothing. Learning something without acquiring human dignity and truth is also nothing.

This perspective may justify a PESA judgment made through comments on its official journal, *EPAT*. In my opinion, this journal has devoted too many issues to trivial matters unrelated to major educational problems. Too many editors of special issues were not adequately prepared and sometimes advocated narrow-minded ideologies. In some years there were too many issues of the journal; quantity is not quality.

It seems the use of the British system of doctoral programs as borrowed by Australian and New Zealand universities was doing it on the cheap, and has not strengthened thinking about education for PESA.

In general, my experience with the academic staff at the University of Queensland was that some lacked the academic acumen I had acquired elsewhere. My experience with some members of PESA is that they lacked the academic acumen that might have accompanied greater academic accomplishment in philosophy of education.

This is all the more reason to define philosophy of education as the substantive, normative thinking of how to promote authentically human existence, human dignity, human rights, moral agency, and truth in education. Is this not the Socratic legacy?

May thinking about education in Australia and New Zealand continue to explore its ontological, ethical, and epistemic foundations. Teachers need to learn a language to understand their professional conduct within an ethical and epistemic ethos, and philosophers of education are needed to help them learn this language. This is my conclusion from working with mature, experienced teachers for two decades in Queensland. I tried to help them become authentically human teachers by disclosing some of the professional teacher's possibilities in the existential, ethical, and epistemic ethos of education.

May teacher education continue to develop the existential, ethical, and epistemic understanding of education of teachers through the efforts of PESA and *EPAT*.