

Educational Philosophy as Liberal Teacher Education: Charting a Course Beyond the Dilemma of Relevance

Chris Higgins

Teachers College, Columbia University

A HAPPY PLURALISM?

Two years ago, the Philosophy of Education Society was treated to an “Oxford Style Debate on Analytic vs. Non-Analytic Forms of Philosophy of Education.” This session pitted three “monists” — Denis Phillips, Jim McClellan, and Audrey Thompson — against three “pluralists” — Lynda Stone, Nick Burbules, and Barbara Houston. As Harvey Siegel, who moderated the event, freely admits, though, the central issue of the debate was never entirely clear.¹ Indeed, the session conflated two separate debates: a methodological one about the relative value of analytic and non-analytic styles of philosophizing, and a meta-methodological debate over whether we ought to commensurate our views on such matters or simply agree to disagree. Because the monists were busy arguing among themselves over the first issue, the pluralists won the second debate *nolo contendere*. As the monists lampooned each other’s positions (not to mention their own), the pluralists pointed out in various ways the folly of thinking that there might be one right way of doing philosophy of education.

To be fair, this session was offered more in the spirit of comic relief — much needed after years of an all-too-serious divisiveness — than that of genuine debate. Burbules, the most earnest of the pluralists, did set out in search of a real debate between monism and pluralism. After he failed to find even a single plausible argument on behalf of monism, he concluded:

Debates like this really are a symptom of the dangerous notion that monism and pluralism are somehow alternative choices. They are not. We (if ‘we’ means anything here, anything at all in this context), we are all pluralists. We have to be if we are even listening to each other.²

Whether or not Burbules is right that any version of monism will inevitably entail a performative contradiction, I think we can conclude that this particular debate was rigged from the start. Set up in these terms, pluralism has a powerful discursive edge. It is as if, to take the example of the abortion debate, defenders of a women’s right to choose were forced to counter “pro-life” rhetoric by rallying under the banner “pro-death!”

What concerns me is that, while there may be very good reasons for exchanging normative visions of the nature and purpose of our field for critical consideration, such a project now stands to be redescribed as anti-pluralistic. When faced with the calm voice of pluralism (“surely there is room for a diversity of voices in philosophy of education, or do you insist that everyone think exactly like you?”), one quickly withdraws one’s methodological arguments, retreating to a safe relativism. Judging from this session, methodological debate is not flourishing in philosophy of education. Rather, first-order methodological inquiry, debate, and commensuration

are now likely to be preempted by this meta-methodological debate, a debate that is always-already decided in favor of pluralism.

In what follows, I will suggest that this pluralism is only an apparent one. Behind the appearance of a happy pluralism lies a troubling uniformity, one that testifies to the enduring power of what I will call the “two worlds picture” of philosophy and education. It is my contention that this picture not only generates the intractable dilemma of relevance, but continues to animate our current talk of pluralism. The discourse of methodological pluralism arose as a stop-gap solution to the debate over rigor and relevance. The time has come to remove this band-aid, admit that we are still in the grips of the dilemma, and begin to devise a more lasting treatment for what ails us.

THE ROOTS OF THE DILEMMA OF RELEVANCE IN THE TWO-WORLDS PICTURE

For a solid decade, in the wake of the controversial 1981 NSSE yearbook, methodological debate in the field was centered around what came to be called “the dilemma of relevance.” Throughout the eighties, there were powerful calls to make our work more relevant to educators, and eloquent testimonials to the priority of philosophical rigor.³ Chief among those advocating relevance at that time was Jonas Soltis, the editor of the NSSE yearbook. Though Soltis was himself devoted to the rigors of analytic philosophy, he was also alert to the fact that philosophy of education no longer commanded the respect it once had among educators. While maintaining that “our first and primary audience is our fellow philosophers,” Soltis also wanted us to “come to appreciate the genuine and legitimate needs expressed by those not in the guild.”⁴

This is why, in passages such as the following, Soltis sympathetically acknowledges a growing frustration with philosophy of education:

I suspect that many educators have had reason to wonder what has happened to philosophy of education since mid-century. Where are the passionate debates between progressives and traditionalists, pragmatists and idealists, or between any philosophical factions warring over what education is really about? Where are the bold statements of aims and purposes, the comprehensive views that educators need? Have philosophers really just come to play with words or with their existential selves? Can they speak to each other only in a technical language incomprehensible to the practicing professional? Does philosophy have anything of worth to offer educators?⁵

Not only does Soltis face up to the fact that philosophy of education is increasingly perceived as irrelevant to the concerns of educators, but he seems to suggest that this perception is not entirely unfounded. In Soltis’s analysis, the increasing technicality of analytic and continental philosophy alike had come to create two problems. First, there was the fact that philosophers of education had largely abandoned their customary role of offering comprehensive visions of education, in favor of methodical research into more narrowly defined problems. At the same time, it became difficult to explain this change, or anything else for that matter, to educators who were uninitiated in the increasingly technical vocabulary of philosophers of education.

Thus, “if philosophy of education is to have renewed meaning,” according to Soltis, we must start with “the recognition of a serious professional mismatch

between expectation and delivery.”⁶ Of course, calling it a “mismatch” leaves open whether it is educators who are expecting too much or the wrong thing, or philosophers of education who are failing to deliver the goods. Judging from the twofold solution he proposes, this ambiguity is intentional on Soltis’s part. On the one hand, he suggests that we should “educate their expectations so that they . . . match the professional philosopher’s specialized skills and expertise.”⁷ On the other hand, Soltis maintains that “relevance of what we do to education must be the *sine qua non* of our professional commitment. It cannot be otherwise if we are honestly to call ourselves philosophers of education.”⁸ Expressed in this way, though, Soltis’s call for relevance is uncontroversial. Everyone will agree that philosophy of education must be related to education in some way. The question is, given the communicative barriers between philosophers and schoolpeople, should philosophers of education strive to make their work *accessible* to educators and relevant to educational *practice*? Soltis comes closer to answering this question when he suggests that philosophers of education ought to learn “to speak in the public idiom without sacrificing philosophical rigor,” but this still begs the question. Were it clear how to make our work both rigorous and relevant, everyone would choose this path. The question is, how is this possible?

According to Siegel and Phillips, the chief proponents of the rigor camp, it is not possible — at least not all, or even most, of the time. Burbules summarizes their position nicely when he writes the following:

Phillips and Siegel emphasize the importance for philosophers of education to protect the intellectual integrity of their scholarship. They are concerned that in practice making philosophy of education more relevant or applied has meant blunting the critical edge philosophers need to maintain, adopting the comfortable but vague vocabulary of practitioners, or neglecting subtle distinctions and points of argument when they get in the way of popular impact. Obviously, some writings in the field do justify their concern.⁹

When pushed by such arguments, Soltis finally comes down squarely on the side of relevance. Ultimately his argument for prioritizing relevance takes the form of a moral imperative:

Is the professional philosopher of education obligated to reach audiences beyond fellow philosophers? I believe so. Personally, I think that we philosophers of education have a moral obligation to use our special skills in the public sphere much as the medical practitioner is duty bound to aid the sick wherever found.¹⁰

According to Siegel, in contrast to Soltis, we are less like doctors and more like medical researchers. “Philosophy of education,” he argues, “is, first and foremost, a scholarly endeavor.”¹¹ As such, it aims at understanding, not changes in states of affairs.¹² “The job of the philosopher of education,” Siegel writes, “is to provide illumination, understanding, and perspective, of a philosophical sort. Who gathers in this goodness is simply whoever wants to. If educators want to, fine.”¹³ Of course, this is far too simplistic. As Soltis points out, on the one hand, there are those who want philosophical perspective, for instance, but cannot find it on their own in the thickets of professional philosophical argumentation. On the other hand, the arrogance of this take it or leave it attitude is refreshing in a field that spends too much time worrying about what others think of it. Siegel makes an important psychological point that people tend to respect those who respect themselves and

tend to become interested in those absorbed in their own interests. A public relations campaign is likely to worsen not improve our public relations problems.

Siegel makes this same point in another way. The lesson of basic science, he reminds us, is that even if one aims at a particular practical goal, like curing a disease, one's time is better spent in basic research. Mapping the genome, for example, may unintentionally point to a cure faster than testing specific treatments. This is especially true in the case of humanistic inquiry. Like any conversation, it loses its power to redescribe what is at stake if it is tethered to pre-determined ideas of what is relevant. Arguments like these lead Siegel to conclude that "philosophy of education, like all theorizing must be distanced from and autonomous from the concerns of practice and practitioners."¹⁴

Ultimately, though, he does not advocate the practical payoff argument, in either its short-term or long-term version. According to Siegel, the best way to address our concerns about our institutional future is to establish ourselves as philosophers who happen to be work in a particular sub-field. "Now is the time to wipe out the distinction," he argues, "between 'pure' philosophy and philosophy of education."¹⁵ While I agree with Siegel that we have unproductively internalized the notion that what we do is not as "real" philosophically as the work carried on in philosophy departments, I think Siegel draws from this the wrong conclusion. Impaling ourselves on the rigor horn of the dilemma and turning philosophy of education into a franchise of academic philosophy is not an acceptable solution.

Many of us were drawn to the field, in the first place, precisely in the hope of doing something more "real" philosophically than what passes for philosophy in most philosophy departments. Indeed, the liberal arts face their own crisis about their meaning and value. For solving our identity crisis, as William Arrowsmith remarks, "professionalism, scrappy or fastidious, will not do."¹⁶ Many of us came to the field with these words of Dewey in our ears:

Education offers a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical significance of philosophic discussions. The student of philosophy "in itself" is always in danger of taking it as so much nimble or severe intellectual exercise — as something said by philosophers and concerning them alone.¹⁷

As a realm that resists the distinctions between pure and applied, descriptive and prescriptive, education offers a way of reinvigorating philosophical reflection by returning it to its home in lived experience. We may be far from realizing this calling, but the solution cannot lie in simply modeling ourselves on existing professional standards. Though they are right about each other, we can follow neither Siegel nor Soltis, for we can afford to impale ourselves on neither horn of the dilemma of relevance.

I think Harry Broudy sums up our dilemma nicely when he writes:

Today philosophy of education, Janus-like, is facing two ways at once. It speaks to philosophers of education...but it also speaks to educators at all levels of schooling. It is concerned with problems of philosophy on the one hand, and with problems of schooling on the other. This duality of audiences engenders differences in language, interest, and channels of communication.¹⁸

This conception of our situation, which we might call the “Two Worlds Picture,” is the common starting point, even for those like Soltis and Siegel, who are otherwise sharply divided on our fundamental priorities. That is, while we may disagree on the moral of the story, there is remarkable agreement about the story itself.

We imagine ourselves poised between two worlds, the world of philosophical texts, tools, and discourse, and the world of educational institutions, practitioners, and problems. We struggle to find a place for ourselves that is close enough to philosophy to be rigorous and close enough to education to be relevant. We would seem to be unique insofar as we speak a philosophical language to an educational audience, or bring philosophical tools to educational problems. The problem is that we are able to reach our educational audience only in inverse proportion to how well we speak philosophy’s strange tongue, and the problems that plague education do not strike most people as the type to admit of philosophical solution.

There seems to be no way to escape the dilemma of relevance with both our uniqueness and value intact. If we attempt to salvage our value by “popularizing” our discourse, we lose our distinctive claim to philosophic rigor and seem like a needlessly arcane and clumsy curriculum theory. On the other hand, when we take refuge in our philosophical integrity and distance ourselves from concerns of educational relevance, we come off even worse, as a sort of ersatz philosophy. As a result, we have settled for carving out a place whose only distinction is that it is equally far from the respect of philosophers and the interest of educators alike.

For me, the moral of the story is this: the one advantage to being stuck in the middle is that at least we get the place all too ourselves. While there are advantages to such independence, there is also the brute fact of our dependence on institutional support. And with the waning of the metaphor of philosophical foundations, our place in schools of education is not as clear as it once was. Thus, I am arguing that, (1) we must find a new post-foundational language for articulating what makes us unique and valuable, and (2) since we cannot afford to impale ourselves on either horn of the dilemma, we will have to challenge the two-worlds picture itself to find this language.

AN UNHAPPY HOMOGENEITY

Now some will argue that the dilemma of relevance was put to rest some time ago, after the decisive contributions of Burbules and Leonard Waks. It remains for me to show, therefore, that these pluralist interventions did not so much lift us clear of the dilemma as force it to fly under radar. Talk of rigor and relevance may have subsided, but the successor discourse of pluralism, I will show, retains the fateful assumptions of the two worlds picture.

Rejecting the positions of both Soltis and Siegel, Waks joined the debate in 1988 with a call for pluralism in philosophy of education. According to Waks, the field can and should contain a range of activities from work which amounts to a “narrowly intellectual exercise,” to attempts to “advance life within social institutions,” to the creation of “a new ideological language to restore the possibility of committed action.”¹⁹ As sensible as this sounds, I entirely concur with Burbules when he suggests that Waks’ pluralistic solution is compromised by its retention of “the basic

dichotomy between a disciplinary and practice-based account of philosophy of education.”²⁰

In other words, Waks retains the two-worlds picture, leading him to argue, for instance, that we should not

expect the philosophical needs of... educators to be met directly by imports from the special philosophical literatures. The needed inputs from the intellectual community in institutional and ideological contexts are determined by specific problematic circumstances, not by any general, background of interests in abstraction, generality, sharp distinctions, or tight reasoning.... When those with institutional or ideological needs are provided merely with narrowly intellectual responses which fail to nourish them...we may speak of cross-contextual misfires.²¹

While Waks is correct that merely dumping a bunch of philosophy journal articles in the laps of educators will not do as teacher education, he gives up too quickly on the possibility that teachers may need something more than practical solutions. Furthermore, because he constructs rigorous intellectual work as something narrow, he does not entertain the idea that what teachers need is precisely some sort of invitation to be intellectuals themselves.

If Waks suggests that we ought to pursue both rigor and relevance through a division of labor, Burbules’s position is that neither rigor nor relevance, understood in this dichotomous way, is acceptable. Rather, he suggests, no work is inherently relevant or irrelevant, since relevance is made not found. Thus, one need not, and indeed cannot ensure relevance, in Burbules’s view, by making one’s work less complex or demanding. One can however work to establish the relevance of something for a particular audience, and he goes on to give reasons why we might want to do just this. Burbules explicitly contrasts his approach to Soltis’ talk of relevance as a moral duty. To make his case that we might seek relevance out of self-interested rather than altruistic motives, he argues that “relevance is the outcome of a process of translation.”²² According to Burbules, translation “involves finding points of association, similarity, and contrast that broaden one’s understanding by relating it to new and unexpected points of comparison.”²³ Not only is translation basic to all communication and thus, in Burbules’s view, the quintessential educational activity, but its educative effects flow in both directions. That is, in seeking to make her ideas speak to an audience who is differently minded, the philosopher of education stands to learn as much as her audience does as she comes to see her own ideas from a new angle.

While the bi-directionality of translation does helpfully move us beyond ascetic talk of relevance as a moral duty, we have some cause to worry that it nonetheless remains essentially tied to the two-worlds picture. For Soltis and Waks we are couriers ensuring the “delivery” of our “imports” from philosophy to education; for René Arcilla and Burbules, we are marriage counselors or translators.²⁴ In every case, the basic set-up remains the same. The philosopher of education is a mediator, striving to pull together, or shuttling back and forth between, the separate worlds of philosophy and education. Burbules is right to suggest that becoming bi-lingual is to our own advantage, but why do we always begin from the assumption that philosophy and education are foreign lands, each speaking its own strange tongue?

I do not mean to deny the obvious differences between the culture of a philosophy conference and that of a high school staff meeting. What we must call into question, though, is the equation of philosophy with contemporary academic philosophy, and education with school problems and talk.

Burbules also questions these assumptions. Indeed, he introduces his discussion of translation by noting that the original and perhaps quintessential activities of philosophy are themselves pedagogical. Pointing out how activities like dialogue are at once philosophical and educational should help us avoid the mistake of equating philosophy with theory, education with practice, and our task with a torturous crossing of the great divide. In his conclusion, though, Burbules' position collapses back into that of Waks:

Waks' position, that there are different roles in philosophy of education, all of which are necessary for the vitality and institutional survival of the field, comes closer to the point. Some people will be better at translation than others.... This sort of pluralism is healthy. But Waks embraces the dichotomous characterization of service versus discipline....I have tried to point out the personal as well as professional interest we may have in undertaking the translation of philosophical ideas so that they will be seen as relevant by practitioners....²⁵

Burbules compromises his effort to conceive of a more organic connection between philosophy and education when he joins Waks in a call for a pluralism of roles. He does improve on Waks' position by reminding us that it is in our own interest to explore points closer to the practitioner end of the spectrum. And yet, how can we consider any position pluralistic if it calls for only a diversity of roles along the same old spectrum stretching from "philosophical ideas" to "practitioner" concerns? In the end, Burbules and Waks remain just as captivated by the two-worlds picture as the denizens of rigor and relevance. Their call for pluralism may tally well with celebrations of diversity, but in the crucial respect we remain homogenous, sharing the same problematic picture of our predicament with each other and our predecessors. Once these assumptions are on board no amount of specialization or division of labor will ease the Sissyphian task we have set ourselves.

Earlier we concluded of the Oxford style debate that pluralism won the day, but now we must ask ourselves whether methodological pluralism was even in attendance. Consider how Burbules argued for pluralism. After showing that monism was an incoherent view for post-positivists, liberals, critical theorists, pragmatists, and post-modernists alike, Burbules concluded "that philosophy of any stripe needs difference." Whereas I have been concerned with our uniformity in thinking about how philosophy relates to education, Burbules surveyed (and defended) our *philosophical* diversity. The monists, on the other hand, did attend to this space between philosophy and education, but in so doing, they divided into the familiar camps of rigor and relevance. Phillips defended a particular aspect of rigor, namely clarity, while Thompson and McClellan insisted that we must learn to speak in a way that will get us heard by those we want to affect. Given that rigor and relevance are just two sides of the same coin, the two worlds picture, we can say that true methodological pluralism was absent on the monist side as well.

In other words, what I want to claim is that we have gotten ahead of ourselves. We are defending the principle that there must be room for multiple perspectives

before seeing if there is any genuine controversy to begin with. In one crucial respect, philosophy of education is all too monolithic. What the debate in Cambridge ultimately shows is that while we are approaching our plight with more humor these days, we are all still in the same boat, weathering the stormy seas between the rocks of philosophy and the shoals of education. In the spirit of initiating debate — the sign of genuine pluralism — I will, in the space remaining, outline an alternative account of our enterprise.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AS LIBERAL TEACHER EDUCATION

First, we must reject the founding premise that philosophy constitutes a kind of discourse or tool and education a set of practices or institutions and the problems in them. Educational philosophy is itself an educative practice. Rather than accepting this picture of two separate worlds each beyond our ken, which we strive to connect or relate in some way, we should attend to the way that philosophy and education are already inseparably related in our practice as teacher educators. This practice, I want to suggest, is central to who we are as philosophers of education. Of course, this begs the important question: how do we contribute, in a distinct and valuable way, to the project of teacher education?

In brief, my answer is that educational philosophy is a paradigm of liberal teacher education. Philosophers of education are prone to wonder how they can reconcile the two parts of their name. I want to suggest that the education in our name stands for the ongoing conversation about the ends and means of human development which attends the fundamental educational questions, and that philosophy corresponds to a love, in Rilke's words, for the questions themselves. Philosophers of education, I argue, direct this devotion to three questions in particular which define the limits and extent of this educational conversation: what is human nature? what constitutes human flourishing? and, what facilitates growth for beings like us toward that which is good for us?

Though these questions are hypothetically open, they become foreclosed by institutional imperatives, timely truisms, and the contemporary dilemmas which define and confine our relation to these basic educational questions. By sharing our love for the questions — and for the historically removed, humanistic texts which maintain, in their treatment of questions of human becoming, an untimely relation to the present's foreclosed and shrunken questions — we invite educators into this larger conversation. Building on the interest in "reflective practitioners," educational philosophy fosters a crucial variety of untimely reflection. Such an education helps put teachers in touch with the questions we have forgotten how to ask. It encourages them to be more circumspect about the social fabric they have been enlisted to renew, and, at the same time, to convert from a practice that runs on the fast burning fuel of altruism to the sustainable commitment of an ongoing apprenticeship to questions worth loving.

1. Harvey Siegel, "Moderator's Remarks," 1. After the event, five of the six presentations, and this new introduction from Siegel, were published at www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES/debate-intro.html

2. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Pluralism and Monism in Philosophy of Education"; remarks delivered as part of the "Oxford Style Debate on 'Analytic vs. Non-Analytic Forms of Philosophy of Education,'" Alternative Session, Fifty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, Cambridge, MA, 27 March 1998, 4.
3. See, for example, Jonas Soltis, "Introduction," in *Philosophy and Education: Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Jonas Soltis (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1981), 1-11; "Philosophy of Education for Educators: The Eightieth NSSE Yearbook," in *Philosophy of Education Since Mid-Century*, ed. Jonas Soltis (New York: Teachers College Press, 1981), 225-47; "Afterthoughts," *Educational Theory* 31, no.1 (1981): 91-4; "Perspectives on Philosophy of Education," *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 2 (1983): 14-21.
- See, also, Harry Broudy, "Between the Yearbooks," in Soltis, *Philosophy and Education*, 13-35. As for philosophical rigor see, for example, Harvey Siegel, "How 'Practical' Should Philosophy of Education Be?" *Education Studies* 12 (1981): 125-34; "The Future and Purpose of Philosophy and Education," *Educational Theory* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1981); and "On the Obligations of the Professional Philosopher of Education," *Journal of Thought* 18, no. 2 (1983). See, also, D.C. Phillips, "Philosophy of Education: In Extremis?" *Educational Studies* 14 (1983): 1-30.
4. Soltis, "Perspectives," 19 and 14.
5. Soltis, "Philosophy of Education for Educators," 225.
6. Soltis, "Philosophy of Education for Educators," 225 and "Introduction," 2.
7. Soltis, "Perspectives," 19.
8. Ibid.
9. Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Dilemma of Relevance," in *Philosophy of Education 1989*, ed. Ralph Page (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1990), 188.
10. Soltis, "Perspectives," 17.
11. Siegel, "Future," 15.
12. See, for example, Siegel, "Practical," 131 and, Siegel, "Future," 15.
13. Siegel, "Obligations," 34.
14. Siegel, "Future," 15. See, also, Siegel, "Practical," 131.
15. Siegel, "Future," 15.
16. William Arrowsmith, "Teaching and the Liberal Arts: Notes Toward an Old Frontier," in *The Liberal Arts and Teacher Education: A Confrontation*, ed. Donald Bigelow (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 14.
17. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 328.
18. Broudy, "Between the Yearbooks," 15.
19. Leonard Waks, "Three Contexts of Philosophy of Education: Intellectual, Institutional, and Ideological," *Educational Theory* 38, no. 2 (1988): 172-73.
20. Burbules, "Dilemma," 189.
21. Waks, "Contexts," 172.
22. Burbules, "Dilemma," 194.
23. Ibid.
24. René V. Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" In Press.
25. Burbules, "Dilemma," 195-96.