

Becoming Philosophical in Educational Philosophy: Neither Emma nor the Art Connoisseur

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In this essay, I will make a case for philosophy of education's particular status, or its particular philosophical identity. To do this, I will first take a detour through modernity itself, or at least through one branch of modernity: the modern novel. I will use the work of Jacques Rancière in order to show the predicament of the modern novel, and I will liken that predicament to the philosophical status of philosophy of education. As I will argue, even though philosophy of education is an applied philosophy, the philosophical nature of what we do should not be underestimated. Even more strongly, I will contend that philosophy of education is *more* philosophical than nonapplied philosophies. In the end, I will use the notion of "becoming philosophical" in order to shed light on educational philosophy's philosophical distinctness, and to show how the current state of the philosophy of education curriculum, as well as the variety of successful teaching roles taken on by philosophers of education, result from this particular distinctiveness.¹

BEING EMMA BOVARY

Jacques Rancière's trenchant analysis of the modern novel has broad implications, especially for education. For Rancière, the central occupation of the novel has been to blur the distinction between art and nonart. As he notes,

Literature is the new art of writing that blurs the distinction between the realm of poetry and the realm of prosaic life. This new art of writing makes any subject matter equal to any other. In the good old times of *belles lettres*, there was a clear-cut separation between the realm of the poetical and the prose of ordinary life.²

Literature, in the form of the novel, is the artistic emergence of equality. It is, as Rancière puts it, "the collapse of the hierarchical distribution of the sensible."³

Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* is a prime example of this "collapse of hierarchical distribution."⁴ The novel is best known for its main character, Emma Bovary, whose mundane life as the wife of a rural doctor is spent lost in the images and actions of the novels she reads. *Madame Bovary* thus illustrates the fact that the fictional world of novels is available to everyone, even those like Emma who have mundane lives. It is a novel about the reader of novels. But *Madame Bovary* presents us with a situation wherein novels are taken *too* seriously. Emma believes that she can *actually* construct a life from the novels she reads. She believes too much in these novels. She tries to aestheticize her life. For example, she looks to fiction for information about how to furnish her *actual* home. She construes the availability of the novel, its "non-hierarchical distribution," as a sign that the novel's fiction actually can be used in her own life. In the end, of course, the result is disastrous for Emma. For her ontological confusion of life and literature, the author sentences her to death: Emma commits suicide in the novel.

Why would Flaubert sentence Emma to death? Because the novelist must, in a nonhierarchical world, engage with the repercussions of such a flat state of affairs. Emma had to die in order to show that her literalization of novels was unacceptable. If the distinctions between art and nonart are becoming thin, it is the artist who must keep vigilance at the borderline between the two. As Rancière puts it, Flaubert's

concern is to untie the knot that ties artistic equality to that new distribution of the sensible that makes the ideal pleasures [of novels] available to anybody...if the future of Art lies in the equivalence of Art and nonartistic life, and if that equivalence is available to anybody, what remains specific to Art? The new artistic formula might be the death of Art as well.⁵

To Rancière's analysis of *Madame Bovary*, I would add that Emma's uninformed literalization of art is not so uncommon. As I see it, there are three primary ways that people respond to art that is, like the novel, available to all. The first is Emma's. It is a response that one often hears in an art gallery: "That's not art. Even I could do that. It's just a few blobs of blue paint on a white canvas." Such a response literalizes art. Such an onlooker isolates the content of art, or its process of composition, and treats this content or process as if it is equivalent to one's everyday actions. Such a response reenacts Emma's ontological confusion between art and everyday life.

A second response to art is the one that is most common. It is the response of the quasiknowledgeable onlooker; it is the response of the initiated, if amateur, art lover. This is the response of one who understands the historical and aesthetic circumstances surrounding, say, the work of Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists. It is the response of someone who appreciates a piece of art, knows how the work has been situated in the canon of modern art, and certainly knows the difference between art and the rest of life. This person is a student of art. From this second perspective, it is just silly to claim, "I could have done that painting myself." The fact is that I am not an artist. I have not the credentials. I am not a part of what artists do. Real life is one thing, and what I experience in a museum or gallery is another.

A third response is that of an insider. It is the concern of an artist who is not an onlooker at all, but who instead looks outward, *through* his or her work. This is the concern of a Flaubert or a Duchamp. The artist must worry about two things: What the work communicates *per se*, and what it communicates about art itself. About these two matters, neither the naïve "I could paint that" museumgoer, nor the informed connoisseur of art, need worry. The modern artist, however, must worry about the tenuous boundary that exists between art and nonart. The artist knows better than anyone that there will always be Emmas out there who are trying to flatten the distinction between art and nonart to the point where art no longer exists. This concern will inform the artist's choice of subject matter, the way the work is crafted, and which media are chosen for its presentation.

FROM MODERN ART TO PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

One can note a few parallels that exist between modern art and philosophy of education. With regard to writings and teachings in educational philosophy, I offer three distinct ways in which people respond. These three ways echo the responses to modern art almost exactly. The first response to educational philosophy is much

the same as Emma Bovary's. These Emmas are students. They are teachers-to-be or current teachers who have not had much exposure to philosophy. These Emmas find something a bit too literal in what they read. They read Paulo Freire or Nel Noddings when such texts are assigned. Within a week, they have constructed a set of lesson plans to enact precisely what Freire or Noddings have suggested. Or, alternatively, they find a way to map Freire and Noddings precisely onto the way that they already teach. They read educational philosophy and say, "I could paint that," or, "I already paint like that." Needless to say, these are ambitious, diligent students. They know how to put philosophy into real terms. Two responses I have personally encountered many times run something like this: "I tried what Paulo Freire suggested. It just doesn't work in my classroom." Or, alternatively, "But what Noddings suggests — I already do exactly that with my students."

(As an aside, and to show that I do not intend to be disrespectful to our student-Emmas, I recount my first reading of Plato's *Republic*: I was a high school mathematics teacher, reading Plato for personal edification. It was *not* the first work of philosophy that I had encountered, but I was certainly no philosopher at the time. I followed Plato's writing, but I was not particularly impressed by the story of the cave and so forth. His ideas seemed sort of simplistic to me at the time. I had no idea that so much of Western philosophy was grounded in this, and other, Platonic narratives. I was, however, impressed by all the words that I did not understand in this book. I looked every one of them up in the dictionary, and thus increased my vocabulary by quite a bit. Of course, the vocabulary used to translate the Greek was the vocabulary of the translator. Those individual words had nothing to do with Plato's philosophy. I remember telling my father, "One great thing about reading philosophy is that it really expands your vocabulary." I am sure he smiled, and wondered what I was talking about. I was an Emma to be sure. I literalized that translation of Plato, making sure that it had something real to offer me. Like the naïve gallery onlooker who says, "I can paint that," I said, "I can use those sorts of words.")

A second reaction to philosophy of education is the more learned response of graduate students. Many of them read philosophy in the same way that the connoisseur of art peruses the halls of an exhibition. They know the background and the tenets of American pragmatism, for example. They read John Dewey with a keen eye toward his place in the canon of educational philosophy. Indeed, their close reading of John Dewey is far from being Emmaesque. They assume from the onset that educational philosophy is just that — educational *philosophy*. It is philosophical, but not practical. It is interesting. It is titillating in its intricacies. Knowledge of it lays a foundation for further educational thinking. It leads to great discussions, and impassioned debates. But when the bell actually rings, philosophy of education has nothing to do with what is going on in schools. Philosophy of education, from this perspective, is as far removed from the day-to-day workings of the classroom as the art in a museum is removed from real life.

APPLIED PHILOSOPHY VERSUS PURE PHILOSOPHY

And then there is a third response, one that comes from the philosophers of education. This response I will detail more thoroughly. It might sound brash to

compare educational philosophers to artists or novelists, and I am not claiming that those students who are Emma-esque should commit suicide. I am also not claiming that philosophers of education *are* artists; rather, I am claiming that their two *predicaments* are the roughly the same. Philosophy of education is an applied branch of philosophy. As such, it does roughly as is proposed by the following journal prospectus: “The *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* is committed to the view that philosophy can and should be brought to bear upon the practical issues of life.”⁶ In this sense, philosophy of education is in the same general predicament as the novel. The novel — literally, “the new” — was heralded as a new form of writing that was to be available to anyone and everyone, and dealt with “the practical issues of life.” The predicament of the novelist, as Rancière points out, rests in the fact that *rendering* the practical issues of life leaves one’s work exposed to the possibility of *becoming one* with the practical issues of life. To repeat Rancière’s words, “If the future of Art lies in the equivalence of Art and nonartistic life, and if that equivalence is available to anybody, what remains specific to Art?”⁷

This, too, is the predicament of philosophy of education. What philosophers of education write and teach is philosophy. But since what gets written and taught always bears on the practical issues of life, or, more specifically, on the practical issues of education, there will always be the possibility that philosophy of education will be subsumed under, or become indistinguishable from, the practical issues of education that it addresses. The closer that philosophy of education gets to educational practice, the more the distinction between philosophy and nonphilosophy blurs. Writings and teachings in educational philosophy are always at risk of being taken as purely educational, or purely instructional. Much more than pure philosophers whose philosophy need not deal directly with practical life, philosophers of education are always putting themselves in jeopardy *as* philosophers. Philosophy of education is to pure philosophy what the novel is to older, more hierarchical forms of art.

Nevertheless, I would argue that philosophy of education actually has a more authentically *philosophical* position than pure philosophy. If modernity, and postmodernity even more so, have been marked by a distinct flattening of hierarchies among philosophers, theorists, and practitioners, then it is applied philosophers who are left to worry about these borderline intersections. While pure philosophy need not worry about melding into the practical, and while some folks in educational philosophy lament the fact that their field is not given the status of pure philosophy, they should actually give up this lament and realize something quite different: Applied philosophers are the vanguard of philosophy *per se*. Applied philosophers stand at the border, negotiating what counts as philosophy and what does not. Philosophers of education negotiate what they do as philosophers *vis-à-vis* what is done in the practical world of education. And, in this sense, philosophers of education actually fortify the hinterland for pure philosophers. Though this fact is seldom talked about, philosophy departments are very lucky that applied philosophers are around! *Applied philosophers do the work of keeping pure philosophy pure*. The pure philosopher need not worry about being read *à la* Emma Bovary. His

or her work will rarely be mistaken for anything close to reality. Why are educational philosophers *more* philosophical than pure philosophers? Because they must, like the modern artist, be hypervigilant about their own artistic genre — about the philosophicalness of educational philosophy.

CURRENT DISCUSSIONS ON EDUCATIONAL RELEVANCE

I have offered three responses to the work that educational philosophers do. One was Emma Bovary's, one was the learned student's, and a third was the educational philosopher's. And, further, I have claimed that philosophers of education are distinct from pure philosophers primarily because of this third response: The concern with how educational philosophy does or does not intersect with nonphilosophy, and especially with educational practice. That said, I want to emphasize a particular sort of borderline work that gets done by educational philosophers that is not often enough emphasized. I call this borderline work "becoming philosophical," and I feel that it should come to fill a gap left by something that is missing in the typical discussions that take place regarding the borderline relevance of educational philosophy. I offer the following example of these typical discussions, first, as a *contrast* to "becoming philosophical."

The Summer 2002 issue of *Educational Theory* focused on the theme of educational relevance. Its contents, following Nicholas Burbules's review essay, yield three ways that philosophers of education negotiate the border between their work as philosophers and their work with educators. One stems from the dismal situation in many schools today. As Burbules puts it,

The current scene in K–12 schooling is pretty grim. The rise of high-stakes testing, top-down standards, the deskilling and undervaluing of teachers, the resurgence of "choice" models and tracking schemes...are all depressingly familiar news. Not one of these trends would be defended by most philosophers of education.⁸

In this grim situation, many philosophers of education do not even want to be engaged with educators, since such engagement entails partaking in what is already noneducative. Many stay at the level of critique, engaging with educators by not engaging, and by encouraging educators to fight the system.

A second way that philosophers of education negotiate the border between their work as philosophers and their work with educators is what Burbules calls "situated philosophy." This "is the work of the philosopher who is involved on site. It associates philosophy not with system-building, but with thinking and problem-solving."⁹ Burbules goes on to say that situated philosophy is relational. It is where the philosopher says to the educator, "You help me to see what is philosophically interesting and important about this matter, and I will help you to think more philosophically about it; eventually you may not need me at all."¹⁰ Many philosophers of education are indeed "situated" in this way, using philosophical expertise in very practical situations.

The third version of this negotiation: Philosophers of education are already talking to educators enough. What philosophers of education need to do is to talk with them less, and instead do more philosophy. As Harvey Siegel maintains in the

special issue, educational philosophers need to “throw off their Deweyan shackles and get on with their pursuit of the field’s longstanding (but always changing and developing) intellectual agenda.”¹¹ What is striking about all three versions of the negotiation is that each of them presumes to know exactly what the philosophicalness of philosophy of education is, and what it is not. The field’s philosophical distinctness is not questioned when borderline matters are examined.

That the philosophicalness of philosophy of education remains unquestioned in this general discussion on relevance is underscored by Burbules, in his review essay. He commends the work of D.C. Phillips as follows:

He is undoubtedly one of the most widely visible and influential philosophers of education in the field of education today, and no one I know has ever described his work as inaccessible or irrelevant. Why? Well, it helps to be a good writer, and it helps to have a great sense of humor. But Phillips has long made a career of collaborating with nonphilosophers, and I believe he would say that it has made his *philosophy* better.¹²

This sort of description is fine, if one takes the view that philosophy of education is the same as pure philosophy applied to education — that educational philosophers are philosophers like all others. Whether philosophers of education reject education for its hopelessness, whether they engage with educators on site, or whether they just get on with the business of philosophizing, something is missed if the philosophical particularity that enables such rejecting, engaging, or just-getting-on is not attended to. Philosophy of education has philosophical particularity going beyond the simple fact that it is applied (or perhaps is vehemently *not* applied).¹³

BECOMING PHILOSOPHICAL

Becoming philosophical describes this philosophical particularity. Becoming philosophical, as I am formulating it, is consistent with the borderline concerns of the modern artist, but goes a bit further, since philosophers of education are also concerned with *teaching* what they practice. Thus, becoming philosophical means attending not only to Emma, but to the art connoisseur as well. Becoming philosophical happens when a person’s real life becomes *informed* by philosophy, but not *guided* by it. It derives from a primary *philosophical* concern, as opposed to the many *practical* concerns, of philosophers of education: to create circumstances for life to be lived philosophically. Becoming philosophical harkens back to the fine line to be negotiated between everyday literalizing (*à la* Emma Bovary), on the one hand, and pedantic knowledge-mongering (*à la* the learned student), on the other. It consists of making sure that the border between philosophy and nonphilosophy is porous in a way that is healthy to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Incidentally, becoming philosophical is a practice that many philosophers of education worth their salt already cherish, if, perhaps, only implicitly. It is, I believe, a practice that many of those working in philosophy of education have succeeded in passing on both to their students, and to other nonphilosophers with whom they engage.

Let me offer an example. Let us say that I assign my students a reading: Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.¹⁴ Let us assume further that my students are all practicing teachers. When I assign this text, I am asking my students to think through a particular philosophical paradigm. I hope that this paradigm will inform

how my students understand their own classrooms. I even hope that this paradigm will inform how they see the world in general. My aim is to create among my students a Rancièrian interest, a Rancièrian sensibility, and an understanding of their own teacherly actions that was heretofore unexpected. There is no prescription for how this Rancièrian sensibility will take hold, but I hope that it will. It may or may not be obvious to one who observes these students as they teach. It may or may not be testable. Whatever the observable or unobservable outcome, my students will have become philosophical about Rancière if they read the text and attach to it their own particular sorts of educational significance. Although mine may sound like an obvious aim of all good teaching, I insist that the *negative* formulation of becoming philosophical — namely *that it entails neither direct application nor academic knowledge garnering* — is central to philosophy of education. To assign my students a reading from Rancière is, in this sense, to hope that this reading will inform their practice, but it is also to hope that students will take this reading neither too literally (“I did what Rancière said. I taught a subject that I had no knowledge of.”), nor too scholastically (“I understand Rancière’s significance. I understand his insistence on intellectual emancipation, and his idea that anyone who can learn a first language can learn anything. Do I pass?”).

Becoming philosophical sheds light on why so many philosophers of education choose to share with their students work that is not, strictly speaking, philosophical. Philosophers of education ask students to read psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, history, and, yes, novels. All the while, students are encouraged to become philosophical about these various genres. Students are encouraged to consider these works as paradigmatic, rather than as instructional or academic. If you have ever taught a work of recent psychoanalysis in your philosophy of education course, then you have probably experienced the two poles that I have been describing throughout this paper: On the one hand, one finds practicing teachers who have had little contact with psychology wanting to become armchair analysts with their own students as soon as possible. On the other, one finds psychology majors who want to explain how this has all been said before, only better, by Abraham Maslow. Somewhere between these (armchair-psychoanalyzing) Scyllas and those (survey-of-Western-psychology) Charybdises, the philosopher of education goes home after class in optimistic anticipation: “Perhaps by the end of the semester my students will have become philosophical about the readings.”

Becoming philosophical thus refers not only to the interpretation of works of philosophy. It is a way of engaging with texts of all sorts. In my opinion, the success that philosophers of education have experienced in embracing a wide range of topics rests on a keen ability to negotiate the negative formulation that I have been detailing. Indeed, it is par for the course for philosophers of education to engage their students *philosophically* with texts that might seem to some neither educational nor philosophical. One need only look at the admirable work that we do in crosscultural dialogue; in antiracist, antihomophobic, and social justice education; in queer theory; in media studies; and in literary theory, to mention just a few areas. I would say that we have educational acumen in all kinds of curriculum areas precisely

because we know how to encourage becoming philosophical. In each of these areas we encourage a certain porosity between theory and practical life that is not often attained, even in the academic departments that carry official university sanction for teaching such subjects: Communication, Women's Studies, Comparative Literature, and so forth. Philosophers of education are successfully educative not because educational philosophy is applied, but because it is *not too* applied; and educational philosophers are successful not because they are philosophers, but because they are more philosophical than philosophers.

This practice of becoming philosophical also points to an important connotation of the phrase "philosophy of education," even if this connotation is usually overlooked. Often philosophers of education make philosophy *out of* education. Yes, one can become philosophical about pure philosophy, educational philosophy, and a wide range of other textual genres. In addition, though, philosophy of education often evolves out of educational practice itself. Some of the best writing in educational philosophy is grounded in concrete stories of what has transpired in particular classrooms. And some of the best work that students do entails making philosophy out of their own classroom experiences. In their writings, philosophers of education, as well as their students, draw upon educational vignettes to realize poignant insights. Such writing does not pretend to speak *the* literal truth about all education — it does not Emmaize. Nor does such writing claim to add some "new research finding" to the "existing body of educational research" — it does not scholarize. Rather, it demonstrates the philosophical potential of educational practice. Philosophy *out of* education is the reverse of philosophy that is *relevant to*, or *applied to*, education. And it certainly is more philosophical than the relevant or applied sort.

And even when writing is not involved, students often are asked by philosophers of education to become philosophical about their *practice*. When practice is encountered in such a way, becoming philosophical gains purchase in the classrooms of those who teach. This does not mean that students become smarter or more keenly analytic about their teaching. It means, rather, that they take their own work as educators philosophically in the sense that I have been describing in this essay. They do not literalize their teaching, nor do they scholarize it. They do not let the educational system *as it is* establish the parameters of their practice, nor do they let the foundations of their teaching convictions fix them into an abstract idealism that is unworkable in the real world of what they do. They do not let their teaching become all that reality has to offer, nor do they philosophize it to the point of abstraction. Instead, they use their teaching as a text, as a lens to look through, and as a paradigm to inform everyday life. They use practice as philosophy.

CONCLUSION

I have offered a three-part analytic grid for the way that philosophy of education is received. And I have offered the notion of "becoming philosophical" to characterize the work that philosophers of education do, both in their writing and in their teaching. I conclude by offering some limitations to this formulation. I have made a certain generalization, repeatedly using the locution "philosophers of education"

to describe those who encourage becoming philosophical — as if there were such a steadfast person out there who encourages this becoming philosophical. While I would not agree to any homogenous formulation of the “philosopher of education,” I am still convinced that there is something identifiable that *often* goes on in the writings, and in the classrooms, of those who are associated with philosophy of education. I am convinced that this often-something deserves to be identified, since it is unlike what goes under the name of “philosophy” or “education” elsewhere. That is why I have sought to name it. Something more philosophical than pure philosophy happens in philosophy of education. Exactly who practices it, and whether the limitations of my formulation invalidate the analysis I have offered, are precisely the literalizing and scholarizing questions that I hope philosophers of education will continue to avoid.

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1. Jacques Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2008), 237.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid., 238.
 4. Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857; repr., New York: Penguin, 2002).
 5. Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed,” 238.
 6. The journal’s prospectus can be read in full at https://secure.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/journal?openform&journal=pdc_ijap.
 7. Rancière, “Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed,” 238.
 8. Nicholas Burbules, “The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education: ‘Relevance’ or Critique? Part Two,” *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (2002), 351.
 9. Ibid., 354.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Harvey Siegel, “Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy,” *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (2002), 280.
 12. Burbules, “The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education,” 355 (emphasis in original).
 13. Thus the debate positing educational philosophy as either an applied branch of pure philosophy or a distinct branch with a distinct agenda actually misses the mark. Educational philosophy is applied, but it is also made distinct, through the practice of becoming philosophical.
 14. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

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