

Good Questions and the Public Conversation

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Good philosophy starts with good questions. In the pages that follow, philosophers of education explore how the texts and tools of their discipline can shed light on a range of important topics.

Many of them explore the fundamental purposes of education: What is essential learning for all people? What is the value of a liberal education? What should be the purpose and process of moral education? In what ways should education equip us to succeed in society, and in what ways to rebel against it?

Others ask more specific questions about curriculum and assessment: What value does standardized testing provide? Is “ability tracking” at odds with democratic principles? How can we improve the instruction of particular disciplines and subject areas? And how can we provide effective critique of educational practice?

Many essays explore the nature of the teaching-learning encounter: What does it mean to teach, and to make knowledge one’s own? How can teachers create a hospitable space for students, and what are the possible contours of the student-teacher relationship? What is gained and lost when teaching and learning occur online?

Still others consider the task of teacher education: How can we prepare aspiring teachers to navigate the daunting challenges of their work? In particular, how can we help teachers and students develop greater multicultural understanding through careful interpretation and honest yet respectful dialogue?

These are all good and important questions. Good questions, I would suggest, are also what matter most when philosophers of education seek to participate in a public dialogue beyond our small academic community. How to engage with a broader audience has been a topic of particular interest for the Philosophy of Education Society in recent years. This 2011 edition is the final printed and bound version of the *PES Yearbook*, with future editions becoming more quickly — and widely — available online. Future conferences will include a policy-related theme that participants are invited to explore in their essays.

As we consider ways to exercise a stronger public voice, we face a daunting challenge. In the eyes of the public and even within the realm of academia, philosophers of education must increasingly struggle to have their work seen as relevant. This is reflected in, among other things, the steady attrition of philosophy positions within education departments and the ready willingness to remove philosophy of education courses from preservice teacher requirements.

Despite these circumstances, philosophers of education have a vital role to play in the public conversation, a role that has too often been missing. We need to be the best question-askers out there. In surveying the current landscape of schooling, this moment seems a particularly important one for asking good questions, questions that

we should be especially able and eager to address. With technology expanding the boundaries of formal schooling ever further, with cash-strapped governments debating what counts as essential, and market-driven reformers demanding quantifiable results — the narrative of educational purpose and process is increasingly up for grabs.

For example, the accelerating movement to privatize schooling and let market forces dictate its content, methods, and selection of teachers strikes many educators as profoundly misguided. For others, it is a fundamental shift long overdue. Regardless, such a phenomenon deserves our sustained attention as question-askers. And this volume and previous years' editions have seen plenty of such questions — but our challenge is also to voice these questions in ways that are heard beyond our own community.

Not everyone needs to be writing op-eds or providing “expert commentary” for radio and television — but we're hardly at risk of saturating the popular media at present. And of course much of our philosophical work doesn't translate readily into sound bites and catchphrases, but if we neglect that terrain entirely, then mindless mantras of “no excuses” and “blue-ribbon schools” become not only the dominant vernacular, but also the dominant paradigm.

When our questions about educational purpose, curriculum and assessment, teaching and learning, and preparation of teachers don't get asked in ways that puncture the world of policy and politics, then policymakers and politicians promote simplistic answers. Laptops or tablets for everyone. Letter grades for schools. Pass a content-area test, get a teaching license. Even if some of these ideas have some merit, the questions we ask, and the analyses they engender, can help illuminate hidden consequences and make clear to the public what these choices say about our priorities and values for education.

There are certainly times when an uncompromising, prophetic voice is needed, but being part of an ongoing public conversation typically requires a different approach. Our good questions will often need to move beyond “what is best?” and consider how multiple goods — and multiple bads — need to be weighed in relation to one another. Philosophy should often remind us of our highest ideals and aspirations, but it can also help us navigate a principled compromise between competing priorities, especially when some of those values are not easily packaged or quantified.

These observations are hardly novel, and my comments about the need for philosophers of education to further engage in public deliberations is certainly not meant to dismiss the value of conversations among ourselves. Conferences such as PES are an important opportunity to share our ideas, challenge our assumptions, and refine our questions, arguments, and answers. The essays in this volume are clear evidence of that. But here's hoping that the vital perspectives in the pages that follow will also find their way into a broader conversation, one that connects with current realities but also provides a vision of education that inspires and compels our society to do better.

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