A HALF-CENTURY OF *EDUCATIONAL THEORY*: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Overview

Anniversaries are an occasion for celebration and reflection: celebration for the fact of longevity and persistence, sometimes in the face of difficulty; reflection as an opportunity to turn the looking-back of self-congratulation into an occasion for learning from the past as a basis for guiding new choices in the future. I am fortunate to be the Editor of *Educational Theory* during its fiftieth anniversary, because it has given me the chance to learn from the perspectives of the authors who have agreed to contribute to this Symposium, each reviewing a decade's worth of published issues of the journal.

When I commissioned these papers, I did not realize what a challenging task this would be for the authors: first, just for the sheer volume of material each had to consider; second, because the task of characterizing an eclectic mix of work within the framework of a "decade" is not the way that theorists or philosophers ordinarily cluster and interpret things. Nevertheless, I am delighted by the results: five personal and insightful engagements with the journal over its existence, each characteristic of its author's voice and philosophical perspective, and yet all of them together recounting a narrative that (to my reading) presents some recurring themes that echo across the years. Since the authors did not collaborate or read each other's papers, this suggests, if not a "true" historical accounting of the shifting fortunes of educational theory (and *Educational Theory*) across these decades, at least a plausible shared sense that despite conceptual, normative, and disciplinary variations, the problematic of doing educational theory has presented its practitioners with a set of challenges that keep resurfacing, in different contexts and sometimes under different guises, but pointing toward some of the same underlying tensions. The status of these tensions today, I would suggest, remains a challenge to the journal and to its mission and mode of operation for the future. I would like to take this occasion to celebrate and reflect on some of what these essays have to teach us.

My version of the narrative they recount stresses several recurrent themes. First, there is the triangulated dynamic among three relationships: the relation between educational theory and practice (both educational practice and social/political engagement); the relation between educational theory and educational philosophy (Is philosophy of education the governing discipline for educational theory, or merely one element in an interdisciplinary field?); and the relation between philosophy of education and professional philosophy (a relation that typically draws philosophy of

education away from more practical educational concerns). Over the course of *Educational Theory's* scholarly life, these authors relate, these factors have shaped and been shaped by each other, each given different weight in different eras by different editors and journal authors.

Another narrative strand concerns the relation of *Educational Theory* to the legacy of Progressivism. Because of the original sponsorship of the journal by the John Dewey Society, and its permanent location in the Educational Policy Studies department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (one of the longstanding centers of study in Progressivism as a philosophical tradition, and of progressive educational scholarship and commitment generally), the story of *Educational Theory* is in part a story about the peregrinations of Progressivism and progressivism. In the accounts that follow, a recurring theme is how, and whether, the journal's essays have engaged the critical debates that have shaped educational and social policies in the United States (and, in more recent years, in other countries as well). This dynamic can be read, in part, in terms of the co-sponsorship of the journal after 1953 by the Philosophy of Education Society as well as the John Dewey Society. The formation of PES was an overt move to professionalize the discipline of philosophy of education, to link it more strongly with "pure" philosophy, and to reduce its role in social activism and advocacy.[1] Here again the dynamics of theory and practice, philosophy and commitment, disciplinary credibility and social impact, were in tension with one another.

Yet another theme, to my reading of these essays, is a contemporary perspective read back upon these past years. Today, many in the field of educational theory reject the notion of disinterested theorizing, and stress the situatedness and responsibility of scholarship: every work is written by someone, from a position and outlook, within a context of issues and circumstances each of which impinges upon the pursuit of "objectivity" and each of which assigns to the author(s) an obligation to reflect upon the social and practical effects of what is written or said (for example, whose voices or perspectives it privileges, and whose it ignores or silences). It is revealing to see how each of the present authors, to varying degrees, applies this perspective to the periods under consideration — periods during which most of the journal's editors and authors did not see their work in this way. So, for example, Walter Feinberg and Jason Odeshoo, in their discussion of the 1950s, interrogate the journal's policies and contents in terms of neglected issues of sexual difference,

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1. See Nicholas C. Burbules, "Continuity and Diversity in Philosophy of Education: An Introduction," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 3 (1991): 257-63 and Nicholas C. Burbules, "Philosophy of Education," in *Routledge International Companion to Education*, ed. Bob Moon, Miriam Ben-Peretz, and Sally Brown (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3-18.

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matters that clearly were not on the official agenda, but which had direct effects on the journal because of events largely held off the record (until now). Their point, in part, is that keeping these issues off the record did not prevent them from having serious personal and professional consequences; it simply meant that these silences prevented educational theory (and *Educational Theory*) from openly engaging them. It is difficult to imagine today that such elisions would not be pointed out and questioned in the journal's pages — as in fact Feinberg and Odeshoo try to do.

One element shaping these five perspectives is that all of the authors are educational philosophers, of different methods and outlooks, but sharing a broad disciplinary approach. This choice on my part reflects an assumption that comparatively speaking this shared disciplinary approach would provide more grist for highlighting shifting trends within the journal. But it is important to emphasize that the centrality of philosophy of education to the journal has itself been an issue during different periods of the journal's history; and that several editors, including myself, have endeavored to broaden the perspectives contributing to educational theory beyond educational philosophy per se. As the accounts here reveal, the centrality of philosophy of education — and what is counted as such — is a subject of ongoing debate within the journal's pages; and, as has become increasingly apparent, these decisions have had a crucial influence upon *who* has been represented in the journal, and whose issues have been on the agenda.

Finally, each of the authors fashions a narrative structure (or in the case of Phillips' essay, several parallel narratives) to tell a story about the period under consideration. This is useful, from the standpoint of giving each period the sense of an "era," with a distinct character — but also potentially misleading in the sense that the decadal division, the planned structure of this issue, is itself an artificial convention (as some have pointed out, for example, the "Sixties," in the popular imagination, actually comprise events that ran from about 1964 to about 1972). The distinctive narrative style or tone of each essay is in part what gives the issue as a whole its feel as a collection of personal reveries upon different eras of scholarly work and the contexts that shaped them.

<div align="center">THE ESSAYS</div>

RED SCARES (AND OTHER SCARES)

Feinberg and Odeshoo's essay on the 1950s recounts a time of presumed — and sometimes enforced — consensus: where "essentialisms" (in the contemporary sense of the term) were taken for granted, and where homeostasis and homogeneity were unapologetically held up as social aims. But the surface civility of the field hid underlying exclusions and tensions that were rarely held up for scrutiny; and what is most remarkable about this period, viewed through hindsight, is the questions that were *not* being asked, even within a progressive journal of education like this one: an almost total lack of attention to race (in the decade of *Brown v. Board of Education*); a complacent acceptance of women in a subservient role (as Susan Laird has pointed out, one of the first articles published by a woman in the journal was

authored by "Mrs. Vernon H. Smith"[2]). But undoubtedly the most memorable — and most moving — element in Feinberg and Odeshoo's story will be their recounting of the banishment of Ken Benne from the University of Illinois (and from the journal's Editorial Board), over an alleged homosexual encounter. The 1950s, in this narrative, were a time of paranoia and repression, when threats internal and external were being imagined — a time of loyalty oaths, witch hunts, and face-saving gentlemen's agreements behind the scenes. The fate of Benne, Feinberg and Odeshoo explain, reflects a haunting lack of theoretical reflection about the meaning of terms like "homosexual" ("whatever that means," Benne asks) and "normal," which were invoked throughout the controversy. Today, it is difficult to read this story without seeing it as emblematic of an era of silencing, exclusion, and obliviousness (and sometimes outright hostility) toward differences. And today we would take it as a more central role of theory to interrogate such effects of our ways of doing scholarship, to question categories that get taken for granted, and to ask who is *not* part of conversations in the journal.

BEING AND DOING

Maxine Greene's essay on the 1960s, like the era it describes, tells a story of dynamism, turmoil, and conflict. It is the time, she suggests, when educational philosophy came into its own as a vital discipline, and not just a sidelight or avocation of "real" philosophers, on the one hand, or an ambition of philosophically inclined educationists, on the other. During this era, the professionalization of the discipline was exemplified in the rise of analytical methods which promised objectivity, clarity, and methodological rigor that demanded respect from other fields of educational scholarship; but it was also a time of avowed distancing from the concerns of educational policy and practice, where the very idea that a philosophy or theory should "imply" educational actions was widely rejected. At the same time, this was an era of growing involvement with existentialist literatures in which commitment and situatedness were taken as the *starting* points of theoretical reflection (a movement in which Greene's own work played a pivotal role). Greene makes the striking argument that despite their differences, and the sometimes vitriolic debates between them (which continued on well into the 1970s), both the analytical and the existentialist trends shared an emphasis on *doing* philosophy, rather than on philosophical or theoretical system-building. In this respect, they both anticipated certain postmodern suspicions toward "metanarratives" that surface in the journal later.

MEMORY AND FORGETFULNESS

Denis Phillips' essay on the 1970s begins with the film *Rashomon*, a title that has become almost synonymous with the idea that every situation can be viewed from multiple, and sometimes incompatible, points of view. The film is emblematic of this decade, not only because it makes a handy narrative frame for Phillips's alternative versions of the period, but because, with the publication of an expanded

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2. Susan Laird, "Teaching and Educational Theory: Can (and Should) This Marriage Be Saved?" *Educational Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 131-51. Laird takes the journal, including the present Editor, to task for being insufficiently sensitive to issues of gender throughout its existence.

version of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1970, the idea of competing and incommensurable paradigms or worldviews became — in my own opinion — the most influential single theoretical notion of the next thirty years.[3] Of course, the film *Rashomon* could also be seen as an object lesson in the unreliability of memory, and here too Phillips provides an important service, since the decade he describes is not necessarily the one enshrined in contemporary accounts of that period. It was certainly a time when educational philosophy was represented, at least in this journal, as the paragon of educational theorizing; but it was not necessarily a time of hegemony for analytical philosophy of education, although that is how it is frequently seen in hindsight. Indeed, it was quite early in the decade (1972) when Abraham Edel's essay in the journal questioned the value of such philosophizing.[4] Phillips also argues provocatively (though here I must say I am inclined to differ in my interpretation) that the most active scholars in the journal during this decade have been largely neglected and underrepresented in the journal since that time.

DIVERSITY AND DIVERGENCE

Wendy Kohli's essay on the 1980s marks what must be seen as a pivotal era for the journal and the field of educational theory (at least, the journal and the field as they exist today). It was certainly the period when the slate of authors for the journal began to change, particularly in terms of gender; when feminism, neo-Marxist critical theory, and the first lines of postmodern thought began to appear as legitimate areas of educational theorizing; and when educational philosophy, and especially a certain type of educational philosophy, was no longer taken for granted as the governing discipline of educational theory. During this decade, curriculum theory and social and political theory (as opposed to social and political philosophy) became much more prominent in the journal. Yet Kohli also reveals the irony that despite an upsurge of more committed theorizing, and the legitimation of a radical as opposed to liberal Left perspective in the journal, the debates remained largely academic, well-ensconced in the conventions and privileges of scholarly discourse. She suggests that during a period of conservative ascendancy in the English-speaking countries that predominate in the pages of this journal, one of the basic underlying theoretical disputes among progressives was over the merits of optimistic versus pessimistic visions of social change. Finally, in all of this she credits the work of Ralph Page (my friend and predecessor in this position), who helped shepherd the journal through a time of not only fiscal and editorial instability, but of radical theoretical diversification. That the role of an editor is itself a position of social, as well as academic, responsibility was a principle I know he took seriously.

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Megan Boler's essay on the 1990s covers the period of my editorship, and so I am more reticent about offering my own observations on the period. Boler's account is

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3. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). For most people, this is the "standard" version, revised and with a substantial Postscript to the 1962 original.

4. Abraham Edel, "Analytic Philosophy of Education at the Crossroads," *Educational Theory* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1972): 131-52.

the most overtly narrative in style, beginning with an image of a bleak, lifeless, trash-ridden school yard, and emphasizing throughout themes like tragedy and feelings of loss and uncertainty. Why this tone? one might ask. The key questions of her essay, it seems to me, are: What does educational theorizing come to look like when, for many writers, the very activities of prescriptivism and generalization are viewed with suspicion? How should one regard the abandonment of a certain heroic conception of Theory (or of Philosophy) — with celebration or with disillusionment? She notes that in the journal, and in the field of educational theory more broadly, a central dispute arose over the relative merits of consensus or dissensus as outcomes of social or scholarly debate (and so, in a different guise perhaps, the Kuhnian problematic persisted). What styles of writing should we follow? What stance toward the reader or the subject of research should we adopt? What social *telos* should we work toward? All of these grounding assumptions, so frequently unquestioned during previous periods of the journal's existence, were centrally up for challenge and reformation during this decade.

As I mentioned before, one way of drawing a thread through these five tales is, starting with Feinberg and Odeshoo's point that the theorists involved with the journal could not critically reflect on many of their own categories and assumptions, to then trace the growing self-awareness of theory as itself a socially and politically responsible endeavor: that the way in which one does theory and writes about it is not just a disciplinary or methodologically driven determination, but an act, a choice, with its own consequences for silencing certain voices and perspectives while foregrounding others. Seeing the work of theory as embedded in these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion vastly complicates the job of scholars since, as Boler's examples of the new scholarship reveal, the three-sided relation of author, audience, and those written about sets up a complex series of responsibilities that are, from this standpoint, always situated, always implicated, and always fraught with potentially conflicting understandings or conflicting interests. What these challenges yield up, in Boler's account, is a period of remarkable creativity and experimentation in attempting to find new forms for educational theorizing.

THE CURRENT SCENE

If Boler's recent picture of the field is accurate, what does it mean for the role of a journal like *Educational Theory* (and, not incidentally, what does it mean for the role of the Editor of such a journal)? Where does this journal stand on its fiftieth birthday — a birthday that, for friends and colleagues of my generation, almost always precipitates a taking-stock of what has come before and what is still to be accomplished?

If I can be permitted my own perspective on *Educational Theory* entering the first year of a new decade (century, millennium), let me highlight five highly interdependent conditions that, in my view, are challenging and changing not only this journal, but the journal publishing and scholarly endeavors generally.

First, as Boler describes, the rise of work from what is broadly termed a "postmodern" theoretical orientation has expressed a growing distrust of standards such as rationality, objectivity, and other universal prescriptive norms

("metanarratives"), and an increasing interest in notions such as difference and dissensus as affirmative social goals. It is one thing to acknowledge that such work has intellectual merit, has a significant audience, and therefore deserves space in a scholarly journal that endeavors to reflect the full span of a field's concerns. At a deeper level, however, such ideas — if one takes them seriously — constitute a direct challenge to many procedural principles on which any journal's operations depend: the principles of anonymous peer review, of editorial impartiality and balance, and of the more or less objective evaluations of "merit" that determine which articles are accepted for publication and which ones not. It might be said that scholars who totally reject such ideas want to have it both ways, since they excoriate the very procedures and principles that serve them in getting published at all. But on the side of the journal editor who wants conscientiously to respect such arguments, does it entail treating certain submissions differently, or trying to experiment with a totally new way of reviewing and accepting papers for publication? And if one were to abandon principles such as anonymous peer review, editorial accountability, and evaluations of "merit," would journal publishing, particularly in flagship journals like this one, lose the cachet that academics (including postmodern academics, frankly) depend upon in their own evaluations for tenure, promotion, and salary review?

A second challenging condition, related to the first, is the acknowledgment that dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are implicit in every social judgment; that one of the responsibilities of intellectual work of any sort is to reflect upon the ways in which it is implicated in silencing, privileging, overlooking, or normalizing diverse group interests and perspectives. This stance is implicit in critical theories of any sort, but has come to occupy a heightened concern today, not because the world has become more diverse (probably the opposite is true), but because it has become more aware of its diversity, and more interested in preserving and celebrating diversity as a good in itself. The promotion of difference, viewed within a journal context, means not only that a journal ought to try to accommodate a broad number of different authors, perspectives, theoretical orientations, and styles of writing — but that in doing so the journal has to try to foster a scholarly climate within an academic community in which those differences can be recognized and understood.

Someone might point out the historical bookends (to take just one pair) between the undeserved fate of Ken Benne, in the 1950s, and the appearance in this journal, in the late 1980s and 1990s, of the first articles by openly gay authors dealing with queer theory and related themes. But I can tell you that in one of those instances, a significant dispute arose between an author and myself over who the audience was for the article. I held out the value of revising the piece in such a way that those not personally familiar with a set of issues, or literature, would (1) choose to read the article and (2) appreciate it as raising issues that they ought to consider and take seriously. The author maintained, quite understandably, that the article spoke to a particular audience and that they would know what the article was about and what the author was referring to. The fact that this audience might only comprise a small handful of the journal's readers was my problem, not the author's. This is a

reasonable dispute, and I do not think that it can always be settled in the same way (for example, the first articles published in a particular genre might bear an obligation that the tenth or twenty-fifth do not). But extended generally, a principle that says that articles only need to speak to an audience of initiates (and this example is far from the only instance of such a dispute in the journal's recent history) puts the journal, and its editor, in a difficult position if it is trying at the same time to bring new voices into a wider conversation and trying not to exclude voices and perspectives just because some readers may find them difficult, obscure, or controversial.

A third, and again related, condition is the circumstance of globalization. Any journal with an international authorship and readership, as *Educational Theory* has, needs to preserve its credibility as a forum for bringing the culturally and historically different theoretical traditions of different countries into contact with one another. But the perspective of globalization brings another dimension to this endeavor: that international scholarly journals are one of the forums that reinforce globalizing tendencies, because scholars write in a single dominant language, cite and refer to many of the same sources, and frame arguments around many of the same concepts and issues ("discipline," say, or "critical pedagogy"). A journal is not just an intellectual forum, but a product; even when it is not-for-profit, considerations of readership, subscriptions, library purchases, and cost occupy a considerable amount of an editor's time and attention; and while it is certainly true that such considerations cannot drive editorial decisions, it is simply unavoidable to think about the international reputation and representativeness of a journal as one factor in judging the themes and authors one wishes to represent.

One way to minimize this problem is to align the journal with a commercial publisher, preferably one with international marketing and distribution capacities, and let those people think about all of the fiscal matters. More and more academic journals are doing just this. But really this only pushes the questions back a level, it does not remove them: Can a journal be an international forum for scholarly debate without becoming, at the same time, a vehicle of globalization, promoting a kind of imperialism of predominantly English-speaking, Western perspectives? Some would say that this is not a problem, that the more modern, advanced theoretical work of scholars at leading universities, foundations, governments, and nongovernmental and other educational institutions (themselves globalized and globalizing entities) deserves a broader hearing because it truly is better work. But whether this might be true or is simply a self-fulfilling prophecy is a dilemma that any reflective editor needs to struggle with.

Another of these globalized and globalizing institutions, and the fourth condition I want to mention here, is the rise of the Internet and the vast possibilities it raises for new kinds of publication — and not just as a new worldwide "delivery system" for standard academic articles. I cannot rehearse all of these issues here.[5]

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5. See Nicholas C. Burbules, "Digital Texts and the Future of Scholarly Writing and Publication," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30, no. 1 (1997): 105-24 and Nicholas C. Burbules and Bertram C. Bruce, "This is Not a Paper," *Educational Researcher* 24, no. 8 (1995): 12-18.

But, speaking broadly, new information and communication technologies support a host of new styles of writing, collaborating, reviewing, revising, and ultimately representing scholarly work (as well as a range of new forms and genres, which I will address in a moment). It is not just a matter of taking a journal online, of reproducing standard essays in a digital form and allowing readers to access them through a Web-link as well as through paper subscription. It is also to rethink the unspoken assumptions that govern paper production itself: the idea that a book or article must exist in one and only one form; that it cannot be revised *after* it is "published"; that authorship must be attributable to discrete individuals; that determinations of merit in deserving publication are partly driven by the finite physical space of a journal's pages, so that only a fixed number of articles can make the cut for each issue. As this journal and others move online, what are the implications for rethinking such assumptions? As authors can effectively publish their own work by posting papers (papers?) on their Web pages, or through group self-publishing efforts, how crucial do journals and their editors become? Do the status and credibility that refereed publication provides outweigh the benefits of going directly to one's potential readers, without intermediaries (or compromise)? For well-established authors in particular, is this tradeoff worthwhile, or even necessary?

Finally, and this is the fifth condition I want to explore here, new technologies for production and distribution of scholarly work have also facilitated new modes and styles of representing ideas: multimedia presentations, nonlinear or hyperlinked forms, blurred distinctions of authorship, and intermingling to the point of indistiguishability "primary" and "secondary" source material — raw data and interpretations, quotes and glosses, subject interviews and authorial analysis, and so on. These are just a few of the possibilities that are making an increased appearance in scholarly writing, not only because new information and communication technologies make them easier, but because prevailing theoretical discourses encourage such challenges to the conventional forms of scholarship (one can see, for instance, how such styles might be adopted to undercut traditional norms that privilege the "author's" perspective over the ethnographic "subject's"; or to allow multiple voices, cultural styles, and perspectives to occupy the same textual space; and so on). These innovations can create headaches for journal editors simply at the level of producing the publication (I had a pair of co-authors a few years ago who refused to allow their names to be listed sequentially with the article; a few years before that Ralph Page had to negotiate with an author who refused to allow the footnotes to an article to be cited in the conventional fashion). But more important than any of that, such challenges contest many of the assumptions that underlie the structure and shape of what is taken to constitute viable scholarship.

It is well and good to say that all of this should be up for play, but as Wittgenstein says you can only doubt some things when you hold other things constant; not everything can be doubted at the same time. In the journal context, as Feinberg and Odeshoo point out at the very beginning of the first essay in this series, this means a tension between innovation (both in form and in intellectual avant-gardism) and credibility; because the very point of pushing certain boundaries of form and content

depends on its being taken seriously (even if playfully also), and this means that the context featuring such a departure attaches to it sufficient legitimacy that it merits attention at all. I have chosen to highlight such instances not only because it expiates a certain editorial angst that such key decisions should not be made solely behind the scenes; but also because I hope that reflection upon the deeper issues raised by these sorts of challenges to scholarship and to our conventions of knowledge has its own contribution to make to that area we call "educational theory."

So, at this juncture marking the first fifty years of the journal, coinciding with the rhetorical dawn of a new millennium (itself a privileging of one culture's calendar over several others) and with the five conditions I have outlined here — conditions that might be termed broadly conditions of postmodernity — where does *Educational Theory* stand? I think it is inevitable that the framing of this sort of question, too, needs to be questioned: one stance? this editor's stance? the stance today, or tomorrow? There is no way to respond honestly to the conditions cited here, it seems to me, that does not acknowledge an instability behind any fixed set of intentions or standards. This journal will continue to occupy the conflicted spaces between authoritativeness and experimentation; between respect for scholarly tradition and continuity, and transgressing the conventions and boundaries of what constitutes "the field" of educational theory; and between intellectual exploration and expansion for their own sake, and an ongoing engagement with concerns of pedagogical practice, political responsibility, and justice. Living with such conflicts and tensions, without seeking easy compromises, is part of what fosters creativity and dynamism, for a journal as for many other human endeavors.

But that is enough of my own stories about the journal; now on to those of our distinguished contributors.