

Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain
Annual Conference
3rd-5th April 2009

The voice(s) of philosophy in the conversations of the educational community

A proposal for a symposium workshop
(ie three linked workshop presentations with a short introduction filling a 1 ½ hour slot)

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Introduction

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The four contributors to this proposed session have been invited to contribute a keynote panel session (a total of only 30 minutes of contributions followed by discussion) at the 2009 conference of the British Educational Research Association. We are offering at this PESGB workshop drafts of the 1000 word contributions we are developing for this session and would very much welcome the opportunity to receive comment, critique and suggestions for their development from the community that, in a sense, they are seeking to represent at the BERA conference. These will focus in turn, specifically, on three different parts of that community: educational policy makers; on teachers and teacher educators; and educational researchers.

Our ambition is to strike a balance between, as it were, promoting philosophy as a voice in the conversations of the educational community (which, however, feels like a rather un-philosophical thing to do) and adopting a more open, questioning and critical stance in relation to such a contribution. We hope additionally that the short statements will provoke wider consideration at the Oxford conference about how we represent philosophy of education as a voice or voices in the wider educational community.

Our title draws, of course, from Michael Oakshott's 'The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind' and other writings. The idea of philosophy as a marginalised or excluded voice may resonate with an educational agenda which emphasises inclusion; the idea of a conversation suggests a set of relations which are non-hierarchical and non-threatening; but the Oakeshottian metaphor also points to something enduring and shared among human kind, something without which our educational discourse will be deeply and non-trivially impoverished.

Does (educational) philosophy properly have a voice in the conversation of educational policy makers?

Morwenna Griffiths & Gale Macleod

Philosophers since Plato have argued that policy should be based on philosophy and, further, that it should be formulated by people who are philosophically educated. Philosophers of education are no exception. There are plenty of recent examples of well-argued papers demonstrating that policy would benefit from philosophy (Fielding, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; Biesta, 2007; Conroy, Davis and Enslin, 2008). Philosophers, including philosophers of education, have given much less attention to whether these exhortations are practicable in current education policy contexts. In this workshop we present the idea that if philosophy (of education) is to have an influence, then there has to be a way in which this influence can be exercised. We suggest further that this is most likely to occur using the ways in which influence (if it exists) is in fact exercised by philosophers these days – and, indeed by other educational theorists. The workshop addresses this issue by pursuing the following questions:

(1) How does (educational) philosophy have a voice in educational policy (if it does)?

Then (and only then), are questions raised about the value of such a voice:

(2) Are these influences good ones?

And

(3) Are there better ways for philosophy to have a voice in policy?

We focus on contemporary educational philosophy, but not exclusively. Contemporary philosophy and other theory are also of interest. If contemporary philosophy and theory has an influence, that should, we think, give us clues about how philosophy of education in particular may do so.

Various possible answers to the first question will be explored in the workshop. It is hoped that the participants in the workshop will enable us to sharpen these ideas and provide fruitful avenues for further exploration. Our answers draw on a number of theoretical, philosophical arguments and ideas. They begin with the observation that philosophy is embodied in those who have had a philosophical education. Anecdotal evidence suggests that influence is exercised by philosophically educated people who move from academic institutions into policy ones, and, sometimes, continue to move to and fro (Saunders, 2008). Alternatively it is exercised by individuals in informal contact or in contact for reasons other than discussing philosophy and specific policy agendas. This suggestion goes against commonly held views of a gulf separating academics and policy makers, and, indeed a presumption of homogeneity among those in both camps. Here we draw on notions of complex identities and embodiment (Merleau Ponty, 1945, Le Doeuff, 1989; Griffiths, 2006) and nomadic subjectivity (Lugones, 1989; Braidotti, 2001).

Further, we suggest that embodied philosophical influence is likely to be exercised during a continuing conversation, rather than in one-off encounters, let alone in reports

consisting of lists of recommendations or of issues. Individuals may carry with them a philosophical sensibility and approach which influences how they contribute to conversations related to educational policy making. This suggestion is predicated on an understanding of there being various stages of policy making (Nutley, Walters and Davies, 2007). These include the identification of the problem and agenda setting, analysis, creation, legislation and/or adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Some of these stages entail more exploratory conversation than others. Such conversational influence fits with a view of philosophy as concerned with wisdom and understanding rather than with information and techniques, a view which we hold. Here we draw on the concept of narrative sociality (Wittel, 2001) and also on an Arendtian discussion of the co-construction of narratives (Arendt, 1958) as part of what constitutes human action: an action, that is, in public space, as she explains.

Finally we consider ways in which such influence may be structured and intentional or, alternatively, the result of chance – and serendipity. Here we expect to draw on the concept of smooth and striated spaces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). They explain how this concept is related to the concept of the nomad. Nomadic encounters are those that do not take place in designated places or spaces (sedentary, striated space), marked by the existence of ‘walls, enclosures and roads between enclosures’ (p. 420). Instead the nomad has encounters in spaces he happens to inhabit. These spaces do not come labeled *as* philosophical space. Nomadic encounters are, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, rhizomatic (p.532) That is, they occur in smooth spaces which have dissolved from the striated (p. 524). We also note that more formal, striated, attempts to enter the conversation through, for instance, *Impact*, or through specific consultation exercises, also occur. In order to consider these, attention will also be given to auto/biographical stories of specific philosophically educated voices in the conversation of policy makers in recent times in the UK (e.g. Bridges, 2003; McLaughlin, 2000). It is hoped that the workshop participants will be able to offer further examples.

Interestingly, for us, working as we do in Edinburgh university, this account of a conversational nomadic process would fit well with one (contested) reading of the Scottish tradition of commonsense philosophy and of the philosophically educated public: the ‘democratic intellect’ (Davie, 1961; Barr, 2008). This tradition is one which is in opposition to the rise of experts and specialists. Rather, it expects philosophical education to underpin all public decision making, for public life to be open to all, and for all to approach it with a ‘disciplined intellect’, but, equally, to expect that philosophy is respectful of ‘commonsense’ empirical understanding of the world, which it takes as the first, if not the last, word in wisdom. Whether this attitude is specifically Scottish is debatable (Paterson, 2003; Barr, 2008). The significant point for our argument is that it points to a way of understanding public life and policy making that does not depend on simple identifications of individuals as ‘expert’ or ‘lay’.

We hope to draw some conclusions from these explorations in order to begin to consider question 2, especially as responses to question 1 will have implications of value (as can be seen by the reference to ‘commonsense philosophy’). It is hoped that question 3, the question of what is to be done, will also be illuminated by the discussion.

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The voice of philosophy in the conversation of teachers and teacher educators

Janet Orchard

A gadfly on the wall, in the right place and at the right time, could overhear conversation between teachers and teacher educators involving philosophical thinking about educational practice. Explicit opportunities to apply philosophy to thinking about practice during initial teacher education in Britain are, however, very rare; even if philosophical ideas may still be informing critical reflection implicitly. Teacher educators may be able to draw on a training in educational philosophy (though fewer and fewer will have this background); teachers with good honours degrees and/or post-graduate degrees in philosophy, practitioners with an interest through wider reading in, for example, art, literature, politics, theology or linguistics may also have intellectual resources which will enable them to discuss their practice in relation to philosophical ideas.

Where these practitioners bring a developed interest in philosophy already to their work they are unlikely, unless the experience was particularly frustrating or traumatic, to block this knowledge out entirely from subsequent professional thinking. Teaching is a graduate profession; why is the potential value of a teachers' philosophy degree perceived in narrow terms of 'knowing about' certain curriculum content? Where teachers bring methodological skills and interests relevant to critical reflection on educational practice using this and other foundational disciplines, why are there so few explicit opportunities to develop them through optional courses? Courses in the foundational disciplines at M Level should be available for the interested few at least even if they are no longer regarded as a necessary component of core provision. Teachers and teacher educators may draw implicitly on a philosophical training in other kinds of conversations about educational practice because they recognize ways in which reasoned and systematic thinking about values can be relevant, indeed helpful to them. Notions of 'good' educational practice are contested: an emphasis on philosophical thinking will, distinctively, encourage teachers and teacher educators to consider 'why' particular established conventional educational practices are as they are and whether or not this should be the case. Not all philosophically trained teachers do this consistently; and some teachers may do this without formal philosophical training; but since philosophy encourages people to think in this way, it might be assumed that those who are 'philosophically literate' might be more likely to bring this thinking to their practice..

Reflective thinkers of this kind make useful contributions to conversations about practice when they keep 'common sense' in check. 'Classroom management' is a regular preoccupation of beginning teachers and so with the tutors who mentor them. The dominant preference in schools in England and Wales in the early years of the twenty

first century is to emphasize, broadly speaking, the value of a behaviourist approach to this particular aspect of the teacher's role, and beginning teachers will be initiated into this through their school based teaching. Philosophy can be used to good effect here, for example, to highlight possible discrepancies between ways in which children's behaviour might be controlled and curricular aims or pedagogic values. Philosophical issues might be introduced into a conversation about behaviourist modes of classroom control at the level of principle: should they be used in the classroom; can intuitively sensed limitations to them be developed into a reasoned critique?

The philosophically literate teacher educator moreover might initiate conversations about observed lessons with a distinctive focus on questions of moral value and purpose. Taking again the focus on 'classroom management', after praising other aspects of the lesson, she might ask the beginning teacher to reason through with her the basis on which her formal authority over pupils rests. This can be useful, for example, where the beginning teacher is unassertive, appears not to expect pupils to follow through the instructions she has given. "Shall we think for a moment of the reasons 'why', on principle, the children in this class ought to do what they are told to? Can we think of any reasonable grounds on which that might not be the case?"

What emerges from these conversations, others like them, is the responsibility resting on the shoulders of teacher educators to be aware themselves and raise awareness among others of different, sometimes conflicting yet both legitimate interpretations of educational practice. Teacher educators need to see beyond their own accounts of the 'good' in education in order to help other teachers become, within reason, the kind of teacher they want to be. Within reason, of course, because teachers need to be aware of logical, legal and practical constraints on the kind of teacher it is possible to be. Were philosophical training implicit in the conversations new teachers have about their practice they might be clearer about limits to the professional knowledge of teachers and the degree to which their understanding of what 'ought' to be taught are educational principles and values rather than on simple matters of fact. Teachers with some exposure to political philosophy through conversations about practice might be clearer that while 'Every Child Matters' and has an entitlement to equality of opportunity, equal provision need not demand the same provision. Ethical understanding rooted in conversations about practice might support new teachers developing a capacity to interpret principles in a nuanced manner, to navigate each day the morally complex terrain of the classroom.

For these philosophically informed conversations to take place, though, teachers and teacher educators beyond the initial stages of professional development need explicit training in philosophical method so that as mentors they can model good practice to other teachers at an earlier stage. Unlike the explicit form philosophy of education might take where it is explored among those predisposed already to be interested in it, a new breed of course is needed, developed through case study perhaps and giving substance and content to the popular notion of 'reflective practice' (something substantial to reflect *with* and to reflect *on*). Given the considerable interest among educational practitioners in 'P4C' ('Philosophy For Children') a 'P4T' (Philosophy For Teachers) community of enquiry, engaged in philosophical dialogue, could prove both 'useful' and popular.

The voice(s) of philosophy in the community of educational researchers

Alis Oancea

In “Fiction written under oath?” (2003), Bridges distinguished between philosophizing *about, as, and in*, educational research. In this brief contribution I will draw on that distinction to comment on the role and the condition of philosophy of education and of education research in departments of education in UK HEIs.

a) Philosophy of, and beyond, education research: reflecting on the conversation and on the voices involved

Philosophy engages education research at the level of “meta-reflection”: first, about the latter’s philosophical underpinnings, including the analysis of epistemic standards and ethical issues of existing research projects; and, second, about its relationships with other fields of research and scholarship (including mainstream philosophy) and with other communities (practice, policy), nationally and internationally. Such reflection is not generic philosophy of social science, but, rather, it connects with, and supports, practical deliberation in education research and educational practice and policy, while engaging critically with current discourses about “social science” and with educational problems at the heart of these discourses.

Education research employs concepts, seeks evidence, works with data, develops themes and puts forward claims - all in ways that raise profound philosophical (epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical) problems about, for example, truth, meaning, reality, knowledge, explanation, evidence, facts, values, or ends. As such, education research is always underpinned by philosophical beliefs, although often they are left implicit (Carr, 1995), or, when articulated, stop short of full engagement with either the age-old traditions in mainstream philosophy, or the current debates traversing education research communities (Bridges, 2003). Leaving the philosophical underpinnings of research “unacknowledged” or treating them in a “cavalier manner... brings that research into disrepute” and leaves it open to swift dismissal by other researchers and practitioners alike (Pring, 2000, p. 7). In 2003, Bridges (pp. 14-15) blamed this “failure of awareness and communication” equally on philosophers of education and on researchers themselves – but the current climate of research funding and accountability does little (if anything at all) to encourage and support them in doing otherwise.

Furthermore, philosophical analysis, critique and argument about how education research may contribute to education practice and policy, and the kind of warrants it provides to policy-makers and practitioners acting on its claims, are an important part of what “philosophy of educational research” does. Such work has become increasingly important over the past decade, as mutual pressures and criticisms between the policy and the research communities intensified. Although much of these pressures resulted in “assimilatory” collaborations (whereby research was paid attention to, but selectively,

and within externally-defined demands and parameters), the contribution of education research to policy and practice has nonetheless grown more sophisticated and diverse. These arguments echo those in a recent special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Bridges, Smeyers and Smith, 2008), which included a collection of papers commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) to clarify "the underlying reasons why different kinds of research in education can and should be deployed as forms of trustworthy knowledge, together with the conditions under which they may be trusted" (Saunders, in preface to the special issue, 2008).

My first point, then, is that philosophy is intimately connected with the development of education research as a field and as a practice; giving in to pressures for relevance and effectiveness that leave little time and space for philosophical analysis or critique can only happen at the latter's peril.

b) Philosophy as, and with, education research: part of the education research community(-ies)

Philosophical enquiry into educationally relevant issues can also be seen as "a valuable research project in its own right" (Suissa, 2006, p. 550). Recent funded work on faith schools and spiritual education, on multiculturalism, or on environmental education illustrates this well.

The climate of the recent years has however not been particularly propitious for philosophical education and philosophical inquiry in university departments of education. Even the most cursory survey of higher education departments of education would reveal that the happy days of the "discipline", once at the centre of teacher, as well as of researcher, training, have long been gone. Analysis by Oancea and Bridges (2009, forthcoming but currently embargoed) of the submissions to RAE 2001 and 2008 and of all articles published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* between 1988 and 2008 gives some idea of the current disciplinary infrastructure and activity in the field of philosophy of education. It shows only XX active philosophers of education in the whole of the UK, in 2007, most of whom were located in pre-1992 institutions (and XX of these, in the London Institute of Education). Philosophers of education have had to find ways to survive in universities, as they secured personal merit chairs, kept a thriving society going, and maintained a journal of leading international standard.

It is however not clear whether a large-enough new generation of philosophers of education has the means and willingness to carry on with the same degree of resilience and inventiveness. Part of the problem resides with impoverished provision of philosophical education at postgraduate level, despite the requirement from the ESRC, specifically for the field of education (unlike some other fields, such as demography), that "in addition to the generic research training, the student in Education should have training in philosophical issues in educational research" (ESRC postgraduate training guidelines, 2005, F5, 3.1).

The available evidence suggests that relatively few departments of education are equipped to fulfil this requirement. The provision of philosophical training for those preparing to engage primarily in empirical research is very patchy. According to Pring (2007), the ESRC requirement is “honoured more in the letter than in the spirit”, as, more often than not, the philosophical training on offer to research students in education consists in fact of philosophy of social science courses in other departments in the same university (e.g. sociology). Out of the 15 (of a total of 22) departments with full ESRC recognition for their postgraduate research training provision, which had responded to a survey by Pring in 2001, only 7 had an identifiable philosophy component (mostly consisting of research ethics). My informal, and less systematic, survey of 16 university departments of education with high research rankings in November 2007 showed no indications of improvement.

In addition, very few departments have the capacity to foster and develop new philosophers of education, and to put in place appropriate teaching and supervision provision for them. Beginning philosophers may struggle to fulfil the requirements, and reap the benefits, of short-term training schemes that allow little time for independent reading and reflection and for learning as a form of apprenticeship, or immersion in a research culture (see Suissa, 2006, Stone, 2006, Standish, 2007).

My second point is therefore that, despite its important contribution to the field as a whole, work in philosophy of education (and of educational research) is not adequately supported, in terms of funding and of “training”, in the current research climate.

c) Philosophy in, and for, education research: in conversation with other parts of the research community(-ies)

Notwithstanding the “intractable disagreements about how the philosophy of education is to be conducted and understood” (Carr, 2005, p. 1), the contribution of philosophers of education to empirical and theoretical education research is substantial. Philosophical interrogations, philosophical analysis (of substantive issues), and philosophical argument and critique support and complement other types of work in research projects across the field of education. In doing so, philosophers of education draw on traditional mainstream philosophy, as well as on contemporary sources (Oancea and Bridges, 2009, forthcoming; Carr, 2004; Standish, 2007; Pring, 2007). A glance at the contents of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* over the past decade or so reveals the extent of philosophers’ engagement with substantive empirical issues and their participation in empirical research projects and programmes – from conceptual clarification (philosophy as “underlabourer”), to “advancing ... a substantive conception of good education” (Standish, 2007, p. 333).

However, in the current climate for research philosophers’ participation in empirical research projects may often be as much a result of strategic decisions and pressures throughout the research system in response to anticipated assessments and funding constraints, as it is an expression of genuine engagement driven by the nature of the questions asked, of the methodologies developed, and of the needs of the field of

education as a whole. Arguably, performance-related research funding and output-based assessment, research agendas dominated by quests for efficiency and effectiveness, and technique-focused approaches to researcher development may have contributed to a divide between philosophy and empirical education research.

Resistance to this growing divide should come from both so-called “empirical” researchers and “philosophers”: “educational researchers should resist traditions which identify some people narrowly as ‘empirical researchers’ and others narrowly as ‘philosophers’ and embrace an intellectual world in which the two constantly inform and challenge each other” (Bridges, 2003, p. 30). This “world” is not that of instrumental takes on the nature and purposes of education research as an institution, but one close to Oakeshott’s “unrehearsed intellectual adventure” in the “meeting-place” of a diversity of voices and discourses (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 197-198).

My final point is that the future of both education research and philosophy of education would be much brighter if their relationship was, less one of debate and competition for resources, and more one of reflective participation in a never-ending “conversation”. In such conversation, philosophical argument, as well as empirical inquiry, would be only “passages” (ibid.) – mutually enriching, but nonetheless unfinished.

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