DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE AGM, 2020

Members: Steve Bramall, Richard Davies, Andrea English, Patricia Hannan, Mary Healy, Ruth Heilbron (Chair), Eri Mountbatten O’Malley, Janet Orchard, Dorret de Ruyter, Adrian Skillbeck, Judith Suissa, Carrie Winstanley

1. Teacher Education

Diana Murdoch stood in for Andrea English (maternity leave) and welcomed the teacher bursary recipients to conference. They are Paul Moore-Bridge, Ciarán Caulfield, Molly Jantz, Sonny Johnson, Greg McGuinness. Their reports can be seen here - https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/events/teacher-scholarships.html

The teacher bursary recipients to the 2020 conference are Andrew Chan, Jess Biddulph, Oswald Tantti Rigos, David Heaton and Philip Gaydon. Their reports will appear on the website in due course.

As part of the activities of the branches we are encouraging at least one seminar per year that is particularly relevant to school teachers to be included in branch programmes. Day conferences are also part of these initiatives, on topics relating to teachers’ dilemmas in values education, teacher-parent relationships and teachers’ professional wisdom.

2. Student Pre-conference 2019

The pre-conference was attended by more than 30 students. The report written by Lydia Townsend in the current newsletter gives a lively account of proceedings and quotations below are taken from her report, available at https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/doi/abs/10.9785.jb75-4db1-9510-551e89d389a5.pdf.

The 2019 pre-conference theme was ‘Transitions in academia’, with Adrian Skillbeck in the chair. The first speaker was Diana Murdoch on writing a research proposal, advice applicable to a PhD proposal or a grant application. Diana stood in for Sarah Beard who was originally due to speak due to illness. Diana and Sarah’s presentations are available at https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/resources/students/readings-listing.html.

‘Diana’s talk took us beyond her personal experience and encouraged us to think about our own approaches to research. She presented the audience with different questions that it is useful to ask oneself whenever we are conducting an academic study. These questions helped us to question the merits and weaknesses of our own research, both academically and personally’

The second transition point related to working with a supervisor. Richard Pring presented his long experience in this role. His focus was on the relationship between supervisor and student and what a student should expect and look for in a supervisor.

‘He emphasised that the supervisor ought to be truly able to critically engage with literature – not just someone who knows how to name-drop prominent authors. His approach emphasised the power that a student has in the relationship, which can be forgotten. His talk highlighted how differently universities approach supervision of students, and this theme continued into the discussions’

Richard Smith then spoke about the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

‘He took the audience step by step through the REF process. He explained many of the misconceptions that exist about the REF and gave a compelling argument for its use. His focus was to demystify. He talked of his own experience in reading materials submitted for the REF and how fairness is ensured. This talk was greatly received by the audience and was an excellent addition to the programme. While digesting the messages after the talk, it struck me that this talk could do with being repeated to academics and policy-makers across the university sector. Richard Smith’s account of the REF was so different from the account I had previously heard, that it has led me to question how much is understood about the REF by university staff.’

There was a lively discussion following the presentations, as Lydia has said:

‘After each speaker, the students were invited to discuss the talk among themselves and then question the speakers. This introduced students nicely to the etiquette at PESGB events. It also gave us an opportunity to gather different perspectives on the presentations and the questions varied hugely in content, but largely reflected students’ concerns about being prepared for what happens after completing graduate study. Concerns about getting an academic post or a post-doc were mingled with questions about making the most of your supervisors. This workshop was an extremely worthwhile experience.’

3. Writing Retreat

A fourth writing retreat was held on 2–4 September 2019 at Madingley Hall, the country house venue that is home to Cambridge University’s extramural division, with five funded participants. The Society recognises that academics with squeezed research hours on their workloads are short of time to initiate, consolidate and complete research projects. The retreat aims to give a small group of people a chance to help them kick-start projects, or complete some reading, thinking or writing in a congenial and scholarly atmosphere with like-minded colleagues. The retreat was organised by the Development Committee, funded by PESGB and co-ordinated by Oli Belas. Feedback was positive, and very much in line with that from previous cohorts who reported on Madingley Hall as an excellent environment, conducive to academic work (peaceful, comfortable, suitably isolated from the ‘real world’) and the collegiality and support of the group.


4. BERA conference and SIG

The Philosophy of Education Special Interest Group is convened by Janet Orchard and has a second new co-convenor, Kate O’Shaughnessy, who took over Richard Davies in January 2020. Richard has been unstinting in his support for the SIG and we are very grateful for the hard work he has sustained over many years to leave it in such a strong place for his successors. Kate and Janet’s first project as new co-convenors has been to support a joint initiative led by the Human and Artificial Intelligences SIG: a one
day conference called ‘Being Human’ to take place in Cambridge on Tuesday May 5th 2020, coronavirus permitting.

The 2019 conference was held at Manchester University in September. This was preceded by the BERA AGM and a meeting of SIG convenors and BERA Council members. PESGB members led and participated in a number of symposia, hot topic and alternative sessions which engaged audiences who would not usually attend philosophical papers or events. SIG members presented a range of individual papers with strong philosophical content both within the PoE SIG and in other SIGs. This is in line with our strategic policy to seek to engage with non-philosophers as part of this broad educational conference. Feedback from the conference has been positive. Concerns about the reviewing process were shared at the SIG Convenors meeting in May 2019; in line with other SIGs we were concerned that some ‘rogue’ judgements had been made by non-specialist reviewers.

The 2019 conference will take place in Liverpool in September 2020, coronavirus permitting.

5. World Philosophy Day

Richard Davies organised a series of events in celebration of World Philosophy Day in November 2019. The aim was to show what philosophy of education is doing to support educational policy and practice.

Liverpool Hope University celebrated with a discursive ramble around the university gardens and local woods to the theme of nature and childhood. Around 20 people divided into groups of three/four to discuss three provocations around a consideration of what nature is, what children are and what the relationship between the two might be. Richard writes ‘The sound of philosophical chatter harmonised easily with bird song and crunching autumn leaves. Whether it was the philosophy or the unexpected sight of blue skies and sunlight above the trees, it felt a very relaxed party that ambled back an hour later to hot chocolate and debrief. In these days of continuous aspiration to well-being, much of the feedback veered away from childhood to thoughts on time, peace, colours and companionship; but these are the happy stuff of philosophy too’.

UCL hosted a World Café on the theme of ‘valuable education experiences’. Participants explored their formal and informal educational experiences remembered as formative, as academics, professionals and, students. They also discussed the time perceived as ‘wasted’ in education and whether it was really wasted or just meaningless at the time.

Liverpool’s Centre for Higher Education Research hosted a seminar led by Amanda Fulford, with response from Liverpool’s Thomas Schramme entitled ‘The Idea of the University, Present and Future’. It explored a range of questions and issues in contemporary higher education, including some controversial new directions, discussed in the light of Henry David Thoreau. Scholars in a range of disciplines discussed issues of common concern and this stimulated an animated discussion.

Manchester Metropolitan University hosted a series of short presentations where empirical educational researchers discussed the pedagogical and philosophical dimensions of their recent projects (thanks to Steph Ainsworth, Tony Brown, David Mendendez, Chris Hanley, Dominic Griffiths, and Alex Pais). The themes varied from the relationship between knowledge and affect, mathematical learning, philosophy as a pedagogical tool, some ethical issue in teaching fiction, and interrogating neurodiversity. The evening gave rise to lively discussion about the specific issues raised, as well as a broader concern with the importance of thinking philosophically about these issues for all educational researchers (regardless of sub-discipline).

PESGB Online. Richard reports that we attempted to host a series of discussions on social media which, while less successful than the face to face events, did encourage a few people to ask about philosophy of education and what philosophers of education do.

6. Development Committee Grants

The Development Committee meets twice a year, in the autumn and at the spring Annual Conference, to consider and initiate new developments. Many of the developments that have become part of the calendar of the Society, such as the summer school, the pre-conference workshop and the various initiatives and events in teacher education, started out as suggestions from members that the Development Committee has taken forward and established over the years. This year we have introduced grants of up to £3,000 and we are inviting members of the Society to suggest future developments that meet the Society’s and the committee’s aims and objectives that might not attract funds under the Small Grants Scheme. Full details and application form at https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/about/development-committee.html

Ruth Heilbronn

March 2020