
Presidential Address

TOWARD A POST-INSTITUTIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Kip Kline
Lewis University

The object of this study is the condition of knowledge . . .

—Jean-François Lyotard¹

Last fall I had my first experience as a parent of a child in a school. Since the birth of my child, which happened just about a month after I received my Ph.D., I had visualized what I thought would undoubtedly be my weighty presence in his school as the parent with a doctorate in education. In some versions of this visualization, teachers and administrators cowered in healthy fear of my expertise and my presence in their school made them appropriately nervous. In other versions I was pulled from classroom to classroom and office to office as practitioners tried to feed their insatiable appetite for my knowledge about education. Of course this is an embellishment and the anticipations of the daydreams are quite ridiculous. Yet, I did actually presume that my degree would somehow influence my dealings with the school and its practitioners. As it turns out, this was another ridiculous presumption. At the time, my son was three years old and so it wasn't a real school experience (some kind of pre-pre kindergarten). But don't tell that to "Mrs. G," who sent home various homework assignments complete with rubrics and who suggested at the first report card pick-up meeting that the reason my son received a "3" on a scale of "5" although he was "so good" at whatever skill or disposition being measured was because she didn't want to start too high with the grades lest the children be unmotivated to improve throughout the year. In this same report card pick-up meeting, instead of sitting in an adult-sized chair, I was asked to sit in the same chair that my three-year-old sat in in order to get a sense of what his experience was like (no one acknowledged that at 6'3" and 210 lbs., my experience in that chair was, no doubt, dramatically different than my 30-lb. son's). I was given a copy of the report card to follow along with as Mrs. G read her own copy out loud, word for word. So much for the dream of school practitioners being at all interested in the knowledge base of a philosopher of education. Not only did this meeting insult my intelligence, it also amounted to a kind of first-hand experience suggesting that much of the apparatuses of this school were, in some sense, meaningless. One report card pick-up meeting revealed that schools are colonized by scientism. They operate with extremely

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.

thinly veiled anti-intellectualism. They are completely beholden to corporate interests. The anecdote about the report card meeting, of course, doesn't really establish any of this. It has already been well established in the critical scholarship in educational studies. The report card meeting simply revealed it to me in an experiential way. And I left that meeting thinking, "Schools cannot be saved."

For this and other reasons stemming from this, I want to argue that we should imagine the field of philosophy of education to be in or at least moving into a post-institutional moment. I will articulate caveats to this argument and hope that they will clarify my position and not render it timid or less interesting. First, I want to be clear about what I mean by a post-institutional moment. I do not mean to suggest that there is no work in philosophy of education that is not explicitly tethered to institutions (read=schools). The journals in the field attest to that. Still, it seems the majority of scholarship in foundations of education and even specifically in philosophy of education is connected to the workings of schools in some way. I am suggesting a new *focus* is in order, not an altogether new kind of scholarship.

Also, it should be noted that I believe the work in philosophy of education and other fields that is explicitly about schools, that is critical of the status quo, has been and continues to be valuable. The work that has revealed and critiqued the anti-intellectualism, the scientism, and the corporatism that operates in schools has been necessary. Yet, I am claiming that it has been by and large inefficacious with regard to *systemic transformation*. This is perhaps the most important caveat to my argument. I do not at all want to suggest that the good work of many of my colleagues, of many in this room, has been without any meaning or effect. Not only has important and impactful scholarship been produced in our field critiquing the problems of schools, but also as teachers we have influenced individual students in our courses in questioning the status quo and in thinking differently about the practice of education. I do not question that local improvements have been made based on these efforts and I support the continuation of this kind of good work. Yet, I do believe that these are atomized improvements and cannot be mistaken for a plausible trajectory for the institution of schooling as a whole. The modern institution of schooling is now, in our contemporary moment, more beholden to the regimes of late capitalism than ever, and its total transformation seems to me unlikely, given that our critical efforts have had such limited impact on school policy and that after a half century or so of taking up Dewey's mantle our schools are still not the engine of social change and democracy that we think they ought to be. On the contrary. And it seems to be getting worse.²

² Here I am thinking of the rise of the language of "accountability" with regard to schools that has increased in intensity starting at least with *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the scientism and corporatism that is bound up in this language. This increase in

SHIFTING FOCUS

I think it is time, then, to imagine a field of philosophy of education that focuses on non-institutional lines of inquiry, though not to the complete exclusion of philosophical arguments about schools. I want to relate my argument to Henry Giroux's notion of the importance of both a "language of critique" and a "language of possibility," though I may have something slightly different in mind since I plan to apply the language of possibility to a related, but different location than the target of my critique.³ For me, the possibility of a more salubrious future for philosophy of education lies in the shifting of its primary focus. First, I want to describe the kind of work that has been worthwhile and will continue to be valuable related to critique of schools with the ancient Greek term *parrhesia*. According to Cornel West, *parrhesia* is "fearless speech ... that unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking."⁴ For West, *parrhesia* is part of a Socratic commitment to courageous opposition found in his claim from Plato's *Apology* (24a), "Plain speech is the cause of my unpopularity." Kristen Kennedy, in her discussion of the use of *parrhesia* by the Cynics, claims that, "Despite its multiple uses and changing contexts, *parrhesia* generally means freedom of speech, the practice of frank and open discourse."⁵ This reading of *parrhesia* meshes well with Cornel West's conception of *parrhesia* as "plain, frank speech" aimed at unsettling and unnerving for the purposes of providing the "lifeblood of any democracy." While I am not particularly convinced that any real semblance of democracy or its "lifeblood" exists here and now, I am persuaded of the importance of the educational *parrhesiastes* and the destructive nature of their arguments. That is to say, while I am highly skeptical of saving modern institutions like schools and the possibility of infusing them with democratic practices and possibilities, I am committed to the work that exposes the radically anti-democratic, anti-intellectual nature of schools to the degree that it can assist in dismantling the powerful institutional presence of modernity. What seems no longer viable is a belief in the potential for critiques of the status of schooling to have transformative effects institutionally, while keeping the modern institution, as we know it, intact. In 1998, Ken Howe called this distinction "transformationism" versus "postmodernism."⁶ My

intensity has been evident in centralized policy efforts like No Child Left Behind and the recent Race to the Top.

³ Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey, 1983); Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey, 1988).

⁴ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 17.

⁵ Kristen Kennedy, "Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance," *Rhetoric Review* 18, no.1 (1999): 33.

⁶ Kenneth R. Howe, "The Interpretive Turn and the New Debate in Education," *Educational Researcher* 27, no.8 (1998): 13-31. He argues that the differences between

argument here is that philosophy of education might serve itself well to shift its focus from transformationism to postmodernism in the sense that we are not likely to wrest modern schools from the grips of neoliberalism, yet we can pursue – with as much zeal as we have our critiques of schooling – philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge and of the self *after* the heyday of modern institutions and other lines of inquiry that are related to education conceived in the broadest sense in order to contribute to important conversations at the end of modernity and its institutions.

I will begin to develop this argument by picking up on an important conversation from about ten years ago that happened in *Educational Theory*. In 2002, René Arcilla wrote a provocative essay titled, “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?”⁷ and a special edition of *Educational Theory* followed in which several leading philosophers of education responded to him.⁸ What resulted was a kind of state of the field of philosophy of education discussion. I want to revisit Arcilla’s essay and the responses in an attempt to show why philosophy of education might need a shift in focus. From there, I will discuss the postmodern condition of the self and its relationship to the condition of knowledge in our society in an effort to both support my argument for a shift in philosophy of education’s focus and to provide a positive vision of what that shift might look like.

OF MARRIAGES AND COMMUNICATION:
PHILOSOPHY, EDUCATION, AND PHILOSOPHY OF
EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Arcilla’s concern was that, as a philosopher of education, he was caught in an identity crisis owing to the lack of conversation between educators and philosophers (“By and large, the philosophical community expresses no interest in thinking about education. The educational community does not seem to care about philosophy”).⁹ This lack of conversation left Arcilla the philosopher feeling “embarrassed” before educators and Arcilla the educator feeling likewise before philosophers. He expressed commitment to Dewey’s vision that philosophy and education complete each other and should be joined in marriage, yet he made clear that Dewey’s idea of it would have to be revised if such communication between the two disciplines were to be possible. He offered two versions of this revision. The first was for philosophers of education to reinvent themselves as theoretical social scientists (e.g., “feminist anthropological theorists, or liberal political science theorists, or postmodernist

them are overdrawn, yet, in my view, whether or not modern institutions should/could be saved from within seems irreconcilable.

⁷ René Vincente Arcilla, “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1-11.

⁸ Nicholas C. Burbules, ed., special issue, *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002).

⁹ Arcilla, “Why Aren’t Philosophers,” 1.

sociological theorists”).¹⁰ He thought that this route might result in the eventual abandonment of philosophy by philosophers of education but did not seem particularly bothered by this. The second solution was for philosophers of education “to discover how to make those parts of philosophy which are precisely *not* featured in the social sciences pertinent to educators.”¹¹ Arcilla does not provide a full explanation of this, but as Gary Fenstermacher put it, he seems to be “directing us to consider skepticism and skeptical questioning as something unique to the work of the philosopher that is also not contributed by the social scientist.”¹²

The authors who responded to Arcilla in the issue of *Educational Theory* that followed raised appropriate criticisms of Arcilla’s concerns. In the end, most of them thought he need not be as bothered as he was. The reasons for this ranged from thinking that the lack of communication between philosophers and educators was overdrawn to the notion that perhaps there are good reasons to think that philosophy of education can remain relevant without an active conversation between philosophers and educators. Some of the specific questions raised by the responses are contextually important for my purposes here. Was Arcilla’s argument more dependent on empirical or normative claims? Was he right about either? Who counts, exactly, as a philosopher, an educator, and a philosopher of education? All of these questions inform my own argument about the need to re-imagine the focus of the field. The questions are also mutually informative. For instance, the accuracy of the empirical claim that Arcilla made may be dependent on the question of who he means to include in the category of educator.

If we take Arcilla to mean that philosophers are not in any kind of conversation with educational practitioners in K-12 schools (and we may want to assume this since the empirical claim is on shaky ground otherwise, as Frederick S. Ellett, Jr. pointed out),¹³ then we may find it rather easy to agree since critical scholarship in foundations of education has revealed rampant anti-intellectualism in schools that indicates, among other lamentable realities, a lack of engagement with philosophical ideas that might inform the practice of education. As Nick Burbules claimed in the conclusive article in the *Educational Theory* issue that followed Arcilla’s article,

Today the circumstances of public schooling are such that even good progressive liberals, of a Deweyan, Rawlsian, or other stripe must feel uneasy with the direction school

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Gary D. Fenstermacher, “Should Philosophers and Educators Be Speaking to Each Other?” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 339.

¹³ Frederick S. Ellett, Jr., “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other? Some Reasons for Hope,” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 315.

policies and practices have taken. And, as Fred Ellett points out in his essay, this headlong plunge in the wrong direction has largely ignored educational research of *all* types (or only selectively followed what suits its predispositions), not just philosophy of education.¹⁴

Since Burbules wrote this, school policies and practices seem to have been influenced even less by the critical scholarship on education. This is why I want to join the camp of those who were not particularly bothered the way Arcilla was about educators and philosophers not talking to each other. The marriage that he spoke of between philosophy and education, if it ever came close to existing, is further away from it now than ever. The situation described above by Burbules led him to question Arcilla's solution of philosophers of education joining the "theoretical wing of the social sciences" since school policy has thwarted any potential influence from that source as well. What this suggests to me is that whatever philosophers of education end up doing in the 21st Century, we might consider not continuing to force a conversation/marriage with an unwilling or unavailable partner.

In the end, the problem with Arcilla's wish/hope for the future relationship of philosophy and education is that it relies on (at least) two failed modern institutions, one figuratively and one literally. In postmodernity we can no longer feel confident about the metanarratives that have long attempted to prop up the institution of schooling, nor can we feel secure about the institution of marriage (even, perhaps, as a metaphor), which more and more adults are opting out of because of what seems to be its general failure in our contemporary moment. We are also on less than firm territory to even think of the existence of something like the idealized communication within a marriage, between disciplines.

Let us take up this idea of communication first. Burbules also mentioned in his essay that philosophy of education is today (in 2002) an "enormously eclectic" field in terms of approach and the intellectual traditions it mines.¹⁵ This is certainly no less true ten years on. The situation poses some amount of challenge for an internal conversation, to say nothing of the hurdles involved in engaging other fields. This is related to the kind of hyper-specialization of knowledge that has impacted all disciplines and all fields of inquiry, but perhaps more so than others, hybrid fields like philosophy of education. One of the results of this is an intensification of communication distortions that threaten Habermas's ideal speech situation in which power between communicating parties is neutralized.¹⁶ This ideal speech situation is

¹⁴ Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education: 'Relevance' or Critique, Part Two," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 353.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

treated by Habermas as a *limit case* or the situation that is presupposed or referenced although it is most likely never empirically reached. The point is that power acts externally as a distorting force in communicative action. And while Habermas is committed to at least the approximation of undistorted communication, the challenge of Foucault is that we have to feel, to some degree, uneasy about whether communicative goals can ever be successful in the Habermasian sense in a time when truth and power are (nearly) indistinguishable.¹⁷

In the same essay mentioned previously, Burbules made a statement about the influence of postmodernity on the field of philosophy of education. He said,

The conventional postmodern stance is to cast suspicion on “metanarratives,” prescriptions which rest upon arguments about universality and necessity. For a long time, this is what many philosophers (and philosophers of education) thought they ought to be offering: What should be taught, how it should be taught and what a properly educated society should look like. Even most postmodern writers in education cannot resist offering such prescriptions from time to time. . . . Prescriptions, however, can take a different form; they do not have to be metanarratives or grand schemes.¹⁸

He then articulated his own non-metanarrative prescription called “situated philosophy” (an idea that was developed further in 2008 with Kathleen Knight-Abowitz)¹⁹ in which philosophers of education are engaged in “thinking and problem-solving” “on site” (presumably in schools or with practitioners of K-12 schooling). In this way, the philosopher is involved in conversations with the educator animated by a relational moment Burbules described as “You help me to see what is philosophically interesting and important in this matter, and I will help you to think more philosophically about it; eventually you may not need me at all.” The beauty of this is that it is “an *educational* relation, for all parties involved,” and it is “reciprocal, not authoritative or pedantic.”²⁰ Yet, the problem with this vision is that it not only fails to take seriously the challenge of Foucault regarding knowledge and power, but it seems to ignore Burbules’s own argument about the direction of school policies and practices and the disinterest in research and theory that has accompanied that direction. What

¹⁷ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; repr., New York: Vintage, 1995).

¹⁸ Burbules, “The Dilemma of Philosophy of Education,” 354.

¹⁹ Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, “A Situated Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald D. Glass (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009), 269.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

evidence exists that educational practitioners are interested in such a relation with philosophers? Why should we think that educational practitioners desire to communicate to us what is philosophically interesting or important about their work?

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE SELF

I want to continue the conversation about the (potential?) relevance of philosophy of education. And while I am interested in practical considerations related to the relevance of the field, I am more concerned here with intellectual relevance. That is to say, I am, no doubt, interested in all of us keeping our jobs, but my argument for the time being focuses more on making relevant contributions to the marketplace of ideas. I am fully aware that the latter is likely dependent on the former (or perhaps the other way around); yet, I will focus on relevance of ideas and save the other discussion for another time or perhaps another scholar.

Like Burbules, I hope to offer a prescription that avoids metanarratives and grand schemes regarding philosophy of education and the conversation about relevance. It is clear to me that focusing on something like the “situated philosophy” that Burbules proposed or other efforts to enact some kind of marriage between philosophy and education or even pursuing philosophical arguments about schools with the hope of institutionally transforming anti-democratic, anti-intellectual, and neoliberal policies is not the kind of thing that can preserve (create?) our relevance.

My prescription—and I hope that it is somehow at the same time relatively modest *and* provocative—is to shift the *focus* of our efforts away from a marriage between philosophers and educators and to instead focus on securing our rightful place in philosophical conversations about ideas germane to education (*conceived in the broadest possible sense*): a place that we have, by and large, not established for a number of reasons, among which is the fact that we have focused on critiquing schools and attempting to transform schooling.

What I have in mind—and this is more of an example than it is a description of the focus shift as a whole—is engaging in inquiry at the intersection of the postmodern condition of knowledge/the uncertainty of the self and the yet powerful presence of modern institutions and discourses. This is a place of great potential intellectual ferment for philosophers of education since questions about the construction and maintenance of a self, identity (especially as it relates to youth), and the contemporary condition of knowledge are currently and will continue to be of *educational* importance. Again, there *is* work being done in philosophy of education at this intersection, but it is clear to me that this kind of work is not the focus of the field.

The incongruence between modern institutions and postmodern lives strikes me as a particularly important phenomenon for philosophers of education. Most scholars who mention Lyotardian postmodernity in their writing tend to, as Burbules does, focus on the “incredulity toward metanarratives.”²¹ I want to pick up on another idea in Lyotard that is made visible by the breaking up of our grand narratives. He says, “A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”²² This begins to capture the great tension and uncertainty regarding questions about selfhood in postmodernity. The self is both more and less than it has ever been. The fractal self spins out across rapidly developing technological platforms and weaves social relations with too many layers to count (Facebook counts our friends, but not our friends of friends or friends of friends of friends, and so on). At the same time there is enormous uncertainty about selfhood. In our particular historical moment, questions about the self are, at best, wobbly. Perhaps some of our grandparents experienced a world in which ultimate questions of Being and selfhood were much more stable, rooted in largely unquestioned religious narratives that produced secure and water-tight notions of selfhood. Yet, after Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, those narratives could not be returned to with much certainty.²³ I am not suggesting that religion cannot or has not been returned to since being put through the critical paces of these three writers, but it cannot be returned to in the same way. That is to say, to try to locate a secure sense of selfhood now in religious narratives is a tricky and tenuous endeavor that barely resembles what it was at the last part of the 19th Century. We can also no longer feel on solid footing by replacing our religious narratives with scientific ones after Thomas Kuhn. One of the more striking locutions in 1962’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is that paradigm shifts in science are akin to religious conversions for individual scientists.²⁴ As such, after Kuhn’s work, it is difficult to avoid troubling the special epistemic status science has enjoyed since The Death of God. Later in the 1960s, with Derrida, questions related to the condition of knowledge in late modernity were raised through the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.²⁵ After this, neither traditional forms of sense certainty nor Husserlian phenomenology could provide

²¹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961); Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

security with regard to knowledge. Finally, the latest wave of French postmodern social theory, through Jean Baudrillard, has us wondering if reality has already disappeared and human beings are soon to follow.²⁶ Yet, while our lived experiences reveal that we have a kind of intuition that agrees with any number of these postmodern ideas, our modern institutions, in various ways, largely ignore them and tend to cling with white knuckles to modern discourses.

We should not necessarily be persuaded by all the postmodern arguments above. If we were, it would be difficult to give this address that has, as its animating force, a concern for questions of the self. What is hard to dismiss, though, is that we no longer have a place of ultimate comfort to turn to with regard to cut-and-dried notions of the self or of knowledge of any kind. Put another way, the security of our parochial assumptions has disappeared.

If all of this sounds pessimistic, I do not mean for it to be. In fact, this is the precise place at which I want to invoke Giroux's language of possibility. A self may not amount to much, but combined with its uncertainty, the postmodern self has liberating possibilities when contrasted with modern ideas about the self. Modern institutions have made, perhaps, too much of selfhood and also, therefore, been violently prescriptive. I am thinking here of the impact of modern institutions on youth and adolescents with regard to selfhood and identity. These institutions have continually forced upon young people cheap, canned identities borne primarily out of adult anxieties and fantasies. A self that does not amount to much can be preferable if the content of the "not much" can be filled in in the context of radical contingency, unending interpretations, and the disappearance of parochial commitments.

To be sure, there are a great many philosophical lines of inquiry related to these ideas about the self at the intersection of postmodernity and the remaining presence of modern institutions and discourses. I contend that most of these lines of inquiry are educationally significant. Philosophers of education can find and assert their relevance in this space.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
