
Phil Smith Symposium

USING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TO CREATE COMMUNITIES
IN DIFFICULT TIMES: ADULT LEARNERS AND NEW SPACES
FOR LEARNING TOGETHER

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In this paper I examine the kind of space created by philosophical discussion of education with lower-income, adult learners interested in finding their ways back to structured education amidst work and life responsibilities.¹ As more attention is given to falling rates of US college attendance relative to other countries, and as the US economic recovery continues its slow pace, addressing the needs of adult learners becomes all the more important. Important, too, is finding ways to invite learners of all ages and social classes into durable conversations about how education as a practice does and can more concertedly energize communities with a renewed sense of thinking and acting with others.

Because philosophy's texts offer particularly challenging lessons and because the form of the dialectic and task of creating better communities to which those texts point us offer a pedagogical way into risk and community, these texts map onto how adult learners renew their education. Philosophy helps us all to see the difficulties of learning together and thinking toward community. While I do not suggest only philosophy of education can do this work, I do want to show how philosophy's enduring questions and debates create an opening into which people grappling with their necessities of life can see a way into such public deliberation. Like Socrates's students engaged in the dialectic making risky, speculative statements that are up for dispute, or Du Bois's description of early African-American college-goers facing social obstacles to and required community support for their claim on education, today's adult learners are aware of how their return to education involves risk. They understand especially the risk of remaking or renewing social bonds to address challenges facing their communities. By engaging their own learning as a philosophical process, they also engage the social context that frames their experience. To get at what adult learners do with philosophy and community, in this paper I examine two new social contexts that define this experience of

¹ The students I work with are in the Odyssey Project, a series of courses for adults at or below the poverty level. Odyssey consists of four introductory, humanities-based courses: Introduction to Philosophy, Literature, US History, and Art History. The Odyssey Project I direct is supported by the Illinois Humanities Council and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There are many others across the country.

return to education. The first is the sociability of philosophical engagement with others and the second is the desire to give back to communities through opening conversations with school-aged youth or other adult learners.

SOCIABILITY: RECOGNITION AND EXCHANGE

The sociability of critical reflection is as key to Socrates as to adult learners. As Xenophon says of Socrates's dialectic, "The very word 'discussion,' according to him, owes its name to the practice of meeting together for common deliberation, sorting, classifying things after their kind."² Sorting through concepts together is more than simple classification, it creates a scene of engagement of the baseline definition—literally, what each means when he or she says something that seems to have words we all agree upon. Philosophy helps because it mainly involves words we all easily recognize, but the more-than-occasional, unusual sentences in which commonplace words are found confounds easy reading. Further, as students grapple with coming at the familiar from new angles, they are also pushed in conversation to think of others—and their interpretation of seemingly simplistic words—as they think through their own deliberation, literally widening the scope of their ideas. Certainly Socrates's definition of justice is one situation where we have to tread carefully on what we all assume justice to mean. Once we know Socrates's is a seemingly unique definition, we also wonder at the variations across the class, too. His decision that justice means everyone doing one thing well invites us to reconsider not only the strangeness of his definition but the broader social implications of the then-necessarily-interdependent community he designs.

His risky definition and its implications, then, invite further dispute and turn conventional ideas on their sides. As we think about what his move in the dialogue does, we think, too, about how the process of discussion is more than simply putting out an idea and letting it sit there. Our careful discussions of our own beliefs are, as Mill puts it, "a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded."³ Showing how discussion is meant to change ideas and even challenge habits and feelings is part of not only how we run our class periods, but also how the course texts model philosophy. The course starts, as so many foundations of education courses do, with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Students remark on the similarity between what they talk casually about with friends and the shadows on the cave wall: these are familiar and even difficult kinds of conversations rooted in the very habitual understandings they then take apart. As students discuss this parallel with the comfort of routine, they also think about how entering a class either later in life, or at least off-

² Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. E. C. Marchant (London, 1923), IV, 5, quoted in William M. Sattler, "Socratic Dialectic and Modern Group Discussion," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1943): 152–157, 154.

³ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 26.

schedule from how they understand college usually to work, changes their relationship to reading, thinking, and discussing. The discomforts of restarting or at least reshifting their education get expressed not only in change to their routine. Like any students they need to make time to study and come to class, but they also work full time or care for children or other relatives and so finding time to think in the course of the day can be a challenge. But, as they often say at the beginning of the course, this education is what they have wanted to do for a long time. They have thought about not only what education could mean to them in terms of returning to school or fulfilling a plan for lifelong education, they have also thought about what changes in habits mean for rethinking where they are and rethinking where they, their families, and their communities can go. For students of whatever age, their return to structured learning evokes memories of parents or grandparents who pushed them to stay to the straight-and-narrow when they were younger and also reminds them of various pressures that moved them off that track. In other words, the cave is both the obstacle to learning and literally where we all grow up, so leaving it, as students explain, may also entail leaving, in some way, the context that sustains them. So, connection and relations, problematized and reinforced through education, are all the more important to them.

The class returns to this twinned sense of loss and gain in education throughout the year as we discuss how Socrates plans to remove as many variables and obstacles from his perfect state as possible. Students are quick to reply that, in fact, this is not possible, that what got them to reclaim their education was their experiences of all those variables, that without the lives that impeded their initial educational plans, they would not be back at school. Even though, as a few explain, their habits of studying during work breaks or while the family watches TV raise comments, they are glad to be studying in the company of others and happy if anyone wants to hear more than a little about Socrates or Du Bois or even a little bit about how hard it is to understand what the texts' authors are trying to relay. As they at least share their experiences of reading with their families, they also begin to think about their willingness to talk with strangers about their ideas, and their willingness to share their difficulties of learning with others. Their own context of diversity—across a wide range of meanings—provides the context for their learning. Their shared discussions of obstacles as enabling movement keep the challenges and risks of education apparent in all our conversations.

They identify these same enabling obstacles in the philosophy we read. We start our study of Plato's *Republic* right at the beginning—Socrates has made other plans and he is interrupted in the act of returning home and called to a conversation.⁴ That opening point is where students see that education and philosophy is not about a satisfied settling into rarefied conversation with known colleagues, instead these are processes that entail

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

moving into the world and being willing to answer an invitation, even if slightly coerced. They see in Socrates—however un-compelling his dialogues as dialogues are—a figure willing to take chances, willing to share ideas, and willing to see where other people’s ideas might lead conversation. Socrates gives us an understanding of learning as speaking with others who may or may not change the course of one’s own ideas but with whom one must engage in order to get somewhere. They are, not unreasonably, suspicious of Socrates’s refusal of his own knowledge and they are concerned he is manipulating the conversation. In this almost inevitable part of our discussion, students point out that while he seems to be critical of power, he also wields it in conversation and, as a result, they find themselves suspicious of his plans and his pedagogical techniques. This suspicion occasionally reflects back to whatever it is I am doing in the class at that point; I think the fact of discussion and sociability raises pedagogical techniques into high relief—students know what they as a group want to discuss as opposed to where I might want to go. Problematizing Socrates’s use of dialogue becomes the occasion to problematize what we are doing, who is participating and who is not; who draws on the text, who does not, and why. It has also caused students in one class (so far) to ask for a more-explicit rendering of where I want class to go so they can decide whether that is where they themselves want class to go. In other words, suspicious of Socrates’s manipulations, they become suspicious of what mine might be: do not nudge me, show me the map and we will tell you if that is our goal.

The Republic is also particularly good at stimulating students’ discussion of how to think about community differently—as this sketch of their demand I make my power evident makes clear. Socrates’s plan is not satisfying and the political status quo is not either, so the conversation creates a structured way to parallel not only a plan for a better community but a studied discussion of what are the elements of the problem: unequal distribution of wealth, power, wealth in the same and too-few hands, and no room to revise one’s occupation or hopes for the future. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* provides a similar opportunity to think about the impossibility of stopping the habits of gender for enough time to reorder gender more justly.⁵ On the one hand, *Herland* is implausible—the women of Herland are stranded from their men by a war, an earthquake, a well-placed landslide, etc. and in their isolation, begin to have female babies without men. Their society, like the Republic, is planned anew, but rather than Socrates’s plan for a well-thought-out and strategically viable society where diversity is stabilized, the women of Herland structure their society around the needs of children. In time, the women become newly regendered, having shifted away from the fragilities of their older, cultural gender into new women capable of providing food and arranging for children’s

⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (New York: Dover Thrift, 1998).

care (for a book insistent on the centrality of children...there are not any, but for now let us just leave that alone).

As implausible as the book's premise seems, as students have pointed out, it looks like their lives. For quite a few African-American women who come from and currently live in female-headed households, and who spend their days in conversation with other female-headed households, *Herland* is what they do. From the reverence of elders to constant care of children, *Herland* is organized to show students their lives and relationships are a valuable and inventive way to face not only daily obstacles, but also the racial/gendered context in which marriage does not make economic sense. And as a reversal of the narrative that this way of life is detrimental, *Herland* shows the values of care and cooperation as well as the roles of critic and inventor are important to teaching children to do well and helping adults to sustain themselves in difficult times. The mother-centered model of *Herland*, further, shows a position from which critique of "Ourland" can be made—this is not just a space of expediency but a critical vantage point itself. Like Gilman's use of *Herland*'s women to provide a position from which to ask questions about gender hypocrisy, African-American women claim the position of critical knowers of difficulties negotiating male-dominated institutions (in charge at home but derogated at work) and thinking through how to impart values of care and respect to male children. *Herland* occasions discussions about how to stretch a dollar or a meal but also how to respect the generations that have done just that: in other words, to see how such conversations and practices span not only relationships in contemporary times but connect to history as well. *Herland* also raises questions, in much the same style as the protagonists from *Herland* do of Ourland, about how our society can claim to value children but allow schools to go underfunded, public aid to stretch so thin, and, in general, a disrespect for what women do to circulate in cultural productions. Gilman, in other words, like Socrates, provides a method and scope for clarifying problems that invites an application beyond its initial scope: have we settled any of these issues? Have we as yet been able to create the kind of educational system, spaces, and relationships that would encourage such solutions?

The Republic and *Herland* function as spaces for conversation and given they themselves are spaces constructed through and for conversation, they create a fulcrum for the interchange of ideas and a concrete, if fanciful, place to imagine what ideas might become. Learning, then, is not only about what happens in the mind but also about how the world, that is, literally, how location shifts through thinking and acting together. The way these two texts as well as Du Bois's historical examination of the South as a space of difference bring together the possibilities of philosophy and world-changing activities, I think, helps resituate learning within particular places and relations.

Earlier I raised the function of what a reading parent or coworker does to the habits of people around them. Every year, a couple of new students will join *Odyssey* on the strength of these side conversations, interested to see more of what has altered their friends' habits. So, the sociability of class goes beyond what happens in class and raises questions for them about how they want to share their interest in learning. We read, among other things, "Of the Coming of John,"⁶ a story that doubles the story of the white, privileged, Eastern-educated John who comes back to town and power, and the Black, also-educated John whose return to the Black community is awaited and whose learning, initially, causes him to disrespect community members. Eventually things go very badly when white John tries to rape Black John's sister, but in-between it is a story of the difficulties of becoming educated and beginning to learn about distinctions in a social context where race is the overwhelming distinction and where such differences in education between people ought not translate into differences in value. In other words, the story provides both an overarching social critique of race relations and a cautionary tale about how to think about learning and sharing value. I find this a difficult read for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it troubles the role of teacher. One challenge of teaching adults is to make my respect for them clear but also to negotiate the tangle of their respect for the teacher, and to realize that part of their respect for the teacher is bound up in their own value of education. John's distance from his community after years away at college is, of course, different from the class and race divide I as a professor represent and philosophy itself as a discipline represents, and with which they are unfamiliar and initially intimidated. Students often say at our orientation session philosophy is the course to which most of them least look forward. But despite their initial, academic-discipline-based trepidation and distance, philosophy is also the class most likely to be remembered at the end of the year as the hardest—with the joy of mastery wound in. But even in that joy, philosophy also reminds them of the distance education creates between those whose education moves onward and those in the community who wonder why these adult students would want to do something to create distance from their community.

John's story also is then theirs, returning to the cave but also finding values in the cave that those leaving may have neglected. John's story, like Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* that we read next, brings the history of African-American education more firmly into the present and ties students as well to past struggles for education.⁷ As with readings in *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Kindred's* story resituates not only who students are in relation to their communities, but also puts them in the narrative position of a teacher—what do they do when they return? What do they owe the stories of the first generation

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Thrift, 1994), 141–153.

⁷ Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 2004).

of African-American, US college-goers at whose numbers they show surprise—both so few and, then again, so many in comparison with Northern colleges (1875–1880: 22, 1855–1890: 43, 1895–1900: 100, while in the South, 143, 413, and over 500).⁸

They note this process of engaging educational history is like Socrates's decision the individual is too small a unit so instead refocuses discussion on the state—what can we say about a state that does not value or prioritize the education of African Americans and working people? How can we rethink what the value of being educated does for communities? Their shift from developing a sense of individual learner to class community and on to community relations carries forward conversations of course texts and also reflects an approach to philosophizing that stresses the need to be out in the world addressing critical issues under discussion. Such philosophical interventions may be as simple as working more closely with school-aged children to share what their experiences of studying as adults can show younger learners—a few parents have explained their own studying has refocused their children's studying and that, by carefully explaining how we prepare courses, professors also show in detail the kind of effort and organization necessary for thinking through texts with others. For others, philosophical action's outward social gesture means drawing in neighbors and friends to conversations similar to those in class. Still others think about their church or community activism in their usual critical ways but with new critical vocabularies that push against the locality of the issues with which they deal, not to obscure the local but to maintain connection to longer, ethical issues in which the local is immersed. Critics argue educational programs like *Odyssey* in themselves will not solve poverty.⁹ Many things do not solve poverty. But restarting conversations and action on such issues, if not definitively an end to social problems is a way to reinvigorate responses to social problems and help sustain spaces and connections in which to do so. What these students do with philosophy reshapes habits, re-ignites interest, and draws more people into conversation in spaces that, even if slightly apart from the necessities of life, still recognize the need for connection with those necessities. Students' ability to weave the space of daily life together with and against spaces created by philosophical texts creates communities of dispute and support in difficult times.

⁸ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 65.

⁹ John Marsh, "Neither Necessary nor Sufficient: Community Education and the Fight Against Poverty," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2009): 205–218.
