

From Reflective Practice to Practical Wisdom: Three Models of Liberal Teacher Education

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, philosophy of education enjoyed a place of honor in schools of education. The foundations of education, as the name suggests, were thought to be fundamental to the edifice of educational practice, and philosophy was thought to be the quintessential foundational discipline. If schools of education have, by now, developed a healthy skepticism towards this idea that practices are generated from and built on theories, the irony is that it was philosophers themselves who took the lead in dismantling the foundational metaphor.¹ This is not to say that the activity of theorization is no longer respected in the world of education: just look at the immense scale of the yearly American Educational Research Association conference. But educational research, whether tilted toward the qualitative or quantitative, is largely understood in social scientific terms. When combined with the general tightening of resources across higher education, this makes the place of humanistic inquiry in schools of education rather precarious.

Philosophers of education have responded to this predicament in various ways. Some see the “dilemma of relevance” as a permanent challenge inherent in our work. Like it or not, they argue, philosophy of education, like any species of educational research, must learn how to communicate its theories in a language that is accessible to practitioners and must be able to show how these theories make a difference in practice. Others have warned against this urge to “go practical.” Harvey Siegel, for one, argues that philosophy of any type strives for a type of understanding that “like all theorizing must be distanced from and autonomous from the concerns of practice and practitioners.”² Siegel counsels that we would be better off returning to the philosophical fold than distorting our enterprise to fit this increasingly unfavorable climate in schools of education. It is high time, Siegel contends, to dispel the illusion that educational philosophy is a thing apart, separate from and less rigorous than what goes on in philosophy departments.

Since both of these arguments are compelling in their own way, many of us remain torn between these conflicting ideals. On the one hand, we feel that philosophy is only truly alive when it remains in contact with questions of human development that bear on our lived lives. Thus, we may not view it as a great prize to be re-admitted to mainstream academic philosophy, the course of which seems to flow away from such questions. On the other hand, it can be even harder to find a genuine philosophical pulse amidst school of education talk of “data,” “methods” and “findings,” and one cannot help feeling that the rush to applications is driven as much by a nagging anti-intellectualism as by a desire to solve problems. How can educational philosophy afford to bow to these institutional pressures if this means giving up one of its chief responsibilities? That is, regardless of what else we do,

must we not continue to bear witness that there is more to education than schooling, more to human beings than problem-solving, more to truth than method?

I have begun by rehearsing this familiar problem, because in what follows I will suggest that there is a new opportunity for philosophers of education to make a powerful case for our role in schools of education without compromising our philosophical nature. In the concept of the “reflective practitioner,” we have, as it were, a vessel which can help us navigate between this scylla of philosophical rigor and charybdis of educational relevance. Though built by social scientists and popular among a broad educational audience, it is nonetheless well-suited for a philosophical re-fitting.

The logic behind this claim is simple enough. In order to preserve our place in schools of education, we need to find a post-foundational language for articulating how we contribute to educational practice. This can be accomplished by showing that we contribute directly to the education of teachers. While more and more teacher educators have come to describe the goal of teacher education in terms of reflective practice, the time is ripe to remind the educational community that no discipline has a richer tradition of cultivating reflection than philosophy. But there is a catch. In the hands of Donald Schön and his followers, this concept still remains too narrow to encompass philosophy’s contribution to teacher education.³

Thus, the first task in what follows is to subject Schön’s work to a sympathetic critique, rooting out its troubling reductions and aporias. In particular, I will argue that the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom (as extended by Hans-Georg Gadamer) offers us a richer vocabulary for talking about the very kind of reflectiveness Schön is after. Furthermore, the move from reflective practice to practical wisdom helps us to capture crucial dimensions of educational reflection, like its inescapably ethical nature, which Schön fails to address. Once we build on Schön’s account of reflection in this way, his diagnosis of the sources of unreflectiveness and his prescription of reflective practica no longer seem sufficient. If the unreflective practitioner lacks *phronesis*, then unreflectiveness is not merely inflexibility but a kind of moral blindness. Unable to see what the new demands of us, we fall prey to various forms of repetition. In the end, I will argue that there are at least three very different causes of human blindness and repetition, each suggesting its own model of liberal teacher education and a role for educational philosophy.

FROM “REFLECTIVE PRACTICE” TO PRACTICAL WISDOM

Schön develops his account of practice in response to what he perceives as a troubling technicism at the heart of the modern research university and professional school. This technicism, Schön argues, flows from three problematic epistemological dichotomies:

Given the separation of means from ends, instrumental problem solving can be seen as a technical procedure to be measured by its effectiveness in achieving a preestablished objective. Given the separation of research from practice, rigorous practice is an application to instrumental problems of research-based theories and techniques whose objectivity and generality derive from the method of controlled experiment. Given the separation of knowing from doing, action is only an implementation and a test of a technical decision (*ERP*, 78).

What troubles Schön about these dichotomies is that they set up a pernicious hierarchy among forms of knowledge. At the top of this hierarchy are the supposedly context-independent claims of basic science which gain their prestige precisely from their distance from the messy particularity of practice. One step down is the realm of applied science, where methods of basic science are employed to yield a set of technical solutions for practical problems. Finally, at the bottom of the pile, one finds practitioners understood not as knowers but as instrumental problem solvers who employ technical skills and apply propositional knowledge.

Given this conception of professional knowledge, it is not uncommon for two people with supposedly equal “professional knowledge” to turn in very different levels of performance. Rather than admit that such discrepancies point to a flaw in the conception, some would simply supplement the official hierarchy of knowledge with such unexamined, noncognitive personal qualities like intuitiveness, or knack. Schön, on the other hand, wants us to rethink this conception of professional knowledge itself. He wants us to see the artistry of a skillful practitioner as an exercise of intelligence that relies on knowledge.

To achieve this, Schön draws on the work of Michael Polanyi and Gilbert Ryle who argued that knowledge which remains tacit and takes the form of know-how counts as knowledge just as much as explicit claims about states of affairs. This move is enough already to disrupt the division of “theorists who know” from “practitioners who act.” All of our actions involve tacit knowledge. Such knowledge may only become explicit when we encounter an obstacle or something unfamiliar, but the point is that practitioners constantly find themselves amidst situations which do not conform to their expectations.

In this way, Schön exposes the technicist error of viewing practitioners as mere problemsolvers, and problem solving as mere application. “The problems of real-world practice do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures,” Schön writes, “indeed, they tend not to present themselves as problems at all but as messy, indeterminate situations” (*ERP*, 4). In other words, the controlled experiments of applied science remove the very “extraneous” factors which always intrude in real world problems. Any problematic situation worthy of our attention, meanwhile, will require that we sort out the extraneous from the essential in deciding what represents the most important of several problems to be solved. Even when a situation seems to contain a single problem, this problem will usually contain certain ineliminably unique features. Professional knowledge cannot be reduced to a simple matter of recalling which solution goes with which problem. The situations in which practitioners find themselves do not announce themselves as single, by-the-book problems calling for a memorized solution.

Schön draws the following conclusion from this fact: practitioners are never merely problem solvers, but are always problem finders, understanders, and weighers as well. Schön writes:

In the terrain of professional practice, applied science and research-based technique occupy a critically important though limited territory, bounded on several sides by artistry. There are the art of problem framing, an art of implementation, and an art of improvisation — all necessary to mediate the use in practice of applied science and technique (*ERP*, 13).

You will note that for Schön, even those stages of practice which follow the construction of the problem and design of the solution are cognitively richer than the technician conception would have it. A skillful practitioner continues to act reflectively throughout the implementation of the solution, adjusting the chosen means as she goes. Here is how Schön puts it:

Skillful practitioners learn to conduct frame experiments in which they impose a kind of coherence on messy situations and thereby discover consequences and implications of their chosen frames. From time to time, their efforts to give order to a situation provoke unexpected outcomes — “back talk” that gives the situation a new meaning. They listen and reframe the problem. It is this ensemble of problem framing, on-the-spot experiment, detection of consequences and implications, back-talk and response to back talk, that constitutes a reflective conversation with the materials (*ERP*, 157-58).

Thankfully, arguments like this have won the day against any crude technicism which would prevent us from seeing how practices, far from being mere applications of the fruits of theoretical reflection, are compromised of their own distinctively reflective activities.

At the same time, as philosophers of education we cannot help but have some concerns about Schön’s account. The most obvious problem with using his defense of practical reflection as a mandate for philosophical teacher education is the fact that Schön himself describes what such an education in reflectiveness would look like, and it is nothing like a philosophy seminar. Despite his belief that reflectiveness is learnable, Schön does not think that reflectiveness is teachable in any ordinary sense. This is why he proposes the studio or practicum as the centerpiece of professional education; it is a setting where neophytes can practice the above described arts with modeling and coaching from experienced practitioners.

This is not the only concern we should have about Schön’s account, though. I believe we have cause to fear that even while he fights off a narrow technicism, that his account of practice ultimately remains an instrumental one. True, Schön helpfully dispels the notion that practice is a one-way application of previously determined ends by highlighting the way that skillful practitioners reflectively adjust their means in light of their ends and vice versa. The point is, though, that reciprocal means-end reasoning remains at bottom a form of means-end reasoning. My concern is that Schön is only describing reflection within the sphere of instrumental rationality, whereas teaching calls for a kind of reflection that goes beyond this.

Perhaps the best way to make this point is to recall Schön’s description of practice as a “reflective conversation with the materials.” The question we must ask ourselves as we attempt to apply Schön’s account of reflection to education (it was originally developed through his observations of an architectural design studio) is what does this mean when the “materials” are human beings? Since education ultimately amounts to attempts to facilitate the development of human beings, all educational actions presume more or less explicit visions of human flourishing. Even if teaching is artisanal in certain respects — insofar as teachers strive to execute certain techniques efficiently, reflectively, and artfully — it also demands reflection on whether the ends themselves are worth pursuing.

Here it is helpful to recall Aristotle's distinction between craft knowledge (*techne*) and moral knowledge (*phronesis*). Whereas Schön fought to move beyond the modern technicist separation of art and science, art and science are still intertwined in the ancient conception of *techne*. Thus the *technai* involve for Aristotle, as practices do for Schön, a reciprocal adjustment of means to ends, but in a *techne* someone may be said to do something well in this way without necessarily acting for the good. Since education, in contrast, is essentially concerned with facilitating human flourishing, teaching well is inseparable from realizing (a particular conception of) the good. For this reason teaching cannot be thought of as a *techne* in Aristotelian terms and educational reflection is closer to ethical deliberation. Teachers must cultivate not only flexibility in application of educational methods, but practical wisdom about educational aims.

Tellingly, Schön mentions wisdom but once in his book and does so only to acknowledge that it is beyond the scope of his project:

I would like to say what I have not tried to do in this book.... I say little here about wisdom in response to ethical dilemmas of practice in bureaucratic institutions where professionals spend increasing amounts of time. Nevertheless, ...I am concerned with institutional forces that restrict discretionary freedoms essential to the exercise of wisdom and artistry alike. And I believe that education for reflective practice, though not a sufficient condition for wise or moral practice, is certainly a necessary one. For how are practitioners to learn wisdom except by reflection on practice dilemmas that call for it? (*ERP*, xiii).

Here Schön acknowledges that his reflective practica are designed to foster artful practice which need not correspond to morally wise practice. For practices where normative questions intervene primarily in the form of moral dilemmas brought on by the presence of bureaucratic forces which interfere with practitioners' free play with the materials, this is perhaps a significant but acceptable exclusion from his project. It is not even remotely acceptable, though, in a practice like education where the free play with the materials itself is always already ethical.

THREE MODELS OF LIBERAL TEACHER EDUCATION

How can we extend Schön's conception of reflective practice so that it applies to a "moral art" such as teaching? What educational experiences should supplement the reflective practicum if our aim is not merely that of flexibility in the application of pedagogical principles but practical wisdom? As I have argued, Schön's account of reflective practice approaches but falls short of the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis*. Like Aristotle, Schön emphasizes the singularity, complexity, and indeterminateness of practical situations which make them utterly unsuited for the one-way application of general rules. His conception of the mutual adjustment of means and ends in a reflective conversation certainly evokes the unique form of perception first theorized by Aristotle. Consider Martha Nussbaum's apt description of *phronesis* as "a process of loving conversation between rules and concrete responses, general conceptions and unique cases."⁴ Furthermore, when Schön speaks of listening for "back talk" and "reframing one's experiment," he seems to be struggling to find the words to name the hermeneutic implications of *phronesis* so brilliantly drawn out by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*.

Gadamer's reconstruction and extension of the concept of *phronesis* is part and parcel of his attempt to recover what he calls "the fundamental hermeneutic problem":

If man always encounters the good in the form of a particular practical situation in which he finds himself, the task of moral knowledge is to determine what the concrete situation asks of him — or to put it another way, the person acting must view the concrete situation in light of what is asked of him in general. But — negatively put — this means that knowledge that cannot be applied to the concrete situation remains meaningless and even risks obscuring what the situation calls for. This state of affairs, which represents the nature of moral reflection, not only makes philosophical ethics a methodologically difficult problem, but also gives the problem of method a moral relevance.⁵

Gadamer begins by describing the circularity built into ethical reflection. In order to see what a situation demands, I must view the particulars of the situation in light of my general notions of good and right. Without the aid of such generalizations, which make salient and organize the particulars we notice, we would confront only chaos. And yet my generalizations remain vague and uninformative until I encounter them in a “particular practical situation.” Without a particular concept of justice, for instance, I would not be able to understand some particular event as an injustice, but at the same time, it is not until I work through whether or not this really counts as an injustice that I begin to grasp what justice can mean. This renewed, concretized conception of justice then helps me see more of what is demanded of me in future situations.

It is important to note that Gadamer describes this circularity as “methodologically difficult” but not vicious or incoherent. For Gadamer, the circle is a potentially productive one, spiraling outward in increasing moral knowledge, rather than collapsing in self-referentiality. This is why he goes on to claim that it also gives the problem of method a moral relevance. The circle described by Aristotle is the hermeneutic circle. Up until this point, Gadamer has been trying to understand the nature of interpretation and historical understanding. With his discussion of *phronesis*, he finally unveils the hermeneutic triple crown: Understanding = Interpretation = Application. To understand a traditional text (including received moral ideas) is to attempt to apply it one’s present situation. In trying to understand what the text is saying to you, you help it speak in a new tongue, thus offering a new interpretation of the text, revealing a hidden facet that could not have come to light before its encounter with you and your new situation.

This circularity also means that *phronesis* is not teachable in any ordinary sense: *phronesis* leads to educative moral experience (in which the circle is productive) which leads to greater *phronesis*. Rather than seek to understand how to foster *phronesis* directly, then, I propose that we take an indirect route. Let us consider what obscures this perception and leads the circle to collapse.

For Gadamer, every situation potentially demands something new of us, but only if we approach it with *phronesis*. The circle collapses if we see the new situation only as another iteration of a pre-existing type. Thus our question becomes, what gets in our way of seeing the newness in new situations? Or in other words, what are the causes of repetition? In the space that remains, I would like to point out three such causes and show how each suggests its own model of liberal teacher education and role for educational philosophy.

The first cause of repetition is provincialism. This type of blindness flows from the fact we are all of us situated in a time and place. This means that we are bound

by historical and cultural horizons, and these traditions supply us with a necessarily limited repertoire of questions we know how to ask. Even the questions we do have submerge much of the world into background in order to foreground and open us to some of the complexity of the world. Thus, as historical, cultural beings, we run the risk of a blindness to that which represents the answers to all of the questions we do not know how to ask. The circle can be productive here but only if it includes an encounter with historically recessed, culturally other primary texts which stand to put us in touch with other questions. In other words, there is not direct "back talk" in which the new situation directly shows us those prejudices of ours which stop us from seeing what is new in the situation. However, as we move into each new present, new aspects of the past begin to seem salient to us. As we begin to dialogue with these facets of the past, we come to understand something about our contemporary horizons. This awareness of our prejudices enables us to hear more in the present which in turn opens our ears to new voices from the past. Thus the antidote for this first kind of repetition is the hermeneutic model of liberal teacher education. This would involve close reading and discussion of historically recessed, primary humanistic texts that speak (in somewhat foreign tongues) to our contemporary questions about the nature of human flourishing and how to foster it. Thus, this first, hermeneutic model of liberal teacher education aims at a kind of untimeliness or cosmopolitanism.

If the motto of the first type of moral blindness is "he who fails to understand the past is doomed to repeat it," the motto of the second is "he who fails to understand one's own past (as a learner) is doomed to repeat it as an educator." Psychoanalysis complicates the notion of development as a simple progression with the idea of repetition. Growing up, according to Freud, might constitute a development, but never in such a way that the outmoded stages of development are ever really left behind, and because of this what looks grown up is often an adult veneer barely concealing a repetition of the archaic in us. Again and again, Freud showed us how to read some piece of present behavior, seemingly inexplicable in the face of current beliefs and desires, as a repetition of an earlier situation. For Freud, one cannot escape the influence of the past, but one can strive for an awareness of the ways in which our current situations echo older ones and in this way retain at least partial authorship of our actions.

In a way, this second type of repetition is more active than the first. It is not merely that we are unable to see what is new in the situation, but that we are drawn to construct situations which echo our own ongoing dramas. The cure for this type of repetition is of course psychoanalysis itself. But perhaps there is an application of this aspect of psychoanalysis in teacher education. What I have in mind is modeled not on psychoanalytic therapy per se, but on psychoanalytic supervision. When training to be an analyst, one meets with an experienced analyst to discuss one's responses to one's patients. The supervisor helps the therapist in training see where her perceptions of her patients seem colored by her own past. Just as a patient will imagine things about an analyst which have more to do with the patient's own past than with the analyst, so do analysts respond to patients in ways that betray their own preoccupations, fears, and needs. The same holds true for teachers and learners I

would argue; forces akin to transference and counter-transference operate in education as well. Thus, another model for teacher education lies in helping student teachers and in-service teachers reflect on how their past as learners has shaped the fact that and the way that they have taken up the role of educator. Through one-on-one dialogue or autobiographical journaling, teachers in training could be invited to reflect on the personal sources for their tendency to recreate the same situations over and over in their practice. This second, psychoanalytic model of teacher education aims at a kind of recognition of how the personal past lives on in the present.

Human beings not only run into the limits of our historico-cultural horizons, and run into what they need to run into in order to rework old traumas, but also tend to run in grooves, governed by habit. Thus, in addition to hermeneutic and psychoanalytic considerations, we must also consider what aesthetics can teach us about repetition. Here our great guides are John Dewey and Maxine Greene, who taught us that the aesthetic inside and outside the classroom is whatever opposes the “anaesthetic,” that is the numbing, thoughtless, and automatic. The arts are valuable only insofar as they release imagination, helping us break through the “crust of convention.” Here repetition is the clichéd, habitual, and truistic. The third, aesthetic model of liberal teacher education seeks to foster, through encounters with artworks, what Maxine Greene calls wide-awakeness.

Once one takes seriously the idea that teaching requires practical wisdom, reflective teacher education comes to look like something quite different than Schön had in mind. Each new situation demands a fresh and novel response from us and offers in turn a chance to meet oneself in a new way and re-examine one’s views. To prepare teachers to renew themselves in this way is truly to offer opportunities for liberal learning. Such learning helps us combat the forces that obscure our vision of the new and trap us in existential clichés. In this essay, I have examined three quite different enemies of *phronesis* and suggested what teacher education might look like when designed to meet each challenge. In these models, I suggest, lie possibilities through which philosophy of education might discover afresh how its longstanding interests and commitments speak to a new educational horizon.

1. Two philosophers of education, who, following Richard Rorty, have attacked the foundational metaphor are René Arcilla and Jim Giarelli. See René Arcilla, “Edification, Conversation, and Narrative: Rortyan Motifs for Philosophy of Education,” *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 35-39; see, also, James M. Giarelli, “Philosophy, Education, and Public Practice,” in *Philosophy of Education* 1990, ed., David P. Ericson, (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society: 1991), 34-44.

2. Harvey Siegel, “The Future and Purpose of Philosophy and Education,” *Educational Theory* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 15. For a more detailed treatment of this topic with additional bibliography, see my “Educational Philosophy as Liberal Teacher Education: Charting a Course Beyond the Dilemma of Relevance,” in *Philosophy of Education* 2000, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 271-9.

3. Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987). This book will be cited as *ERP* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95.

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., rev. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 313.