

Philosophy of Education

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Introduction

“How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?”

~ John Dewey, *Experience & Education*

As a young child, I attended a small K-8 school in the Florida Keys. The school housed around 500 students. It was the type of place where everyone knew everyone. Most of the kids walked to school or caught rides with friends. The teachers lived close and were often seen standing in the hallways with coffee cups in hand, chatting about their lives outside of school while they offered a smile and nod to the children who walked by. I entered this school in first grade after my family moved from Orlando, Florida to Key Largo, one of the upper Keys. I don't have many memories from my time before this school, so it is where most of my educational experience is situated.

Educational backgrounds are complex. We often carry stories and moments with us over time. These shape who we become, our habits, and our views on the educational process. While my past can't change, the way in which it influences my life can. Through my past, I will explain my present. As an educator and self-identified life-long learner, my educational experiences help develop my philosophy of education. My decisions as an educator are always influenced by this philosophy, though not always based upon it. My philosophy is the road I travel; it is the climate in which I exist. But my philosophy is not the city I visit or the stormcloud which passes through. This is why I say it influences my decisions, but my philosophy still operates within the context

of real world situations. In addition, like my educational background, my philosophy is complex and dynamic. I will remain with one story to narrate its current existence, but with the understanding that this is only to provide clarity of thought. It takes more than one story to illustrate what I believe to be true in education.

Identity & Agency

“Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals (. . .) and interacted with according to their needs (. . .).”

~ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

I remember the first time I met Mrs. Roberts. It was in second grade and I had been identified by my general education teacher as being a bit different from the other kids in class. I was a daydreamer, and I argue I remain so today. I remember the small room I was pulled into; the adult in the corner taking notes and another adult across the table from me asking questions. I remember the puzzle blocks on the table, I remember thinking these were silly games, and then I remember being told I'd be spending one day every week in a different room: Mrs. Roberts's room. I was different. I was other. I was labeled, yet felt undefined.

Mrs. Roberts was at her desk when I walked into our classroom for the first time. A blackboard hung on one wall, a whiteboard next to it. There was a fire-exit door in the far corner. That was all that resembled the classrooms to which I had become accustomed. The rest of the

space consisted of bean bags, low coffee tables, rugs, bookshelves, group tables, artwork, and kids. Not kids at desks, but kids in groups. Kids on their own. Kids talking. Not talking with adults or answering pre-formulated questions, but kids talking with each other. They shared books, brows furrowed in inquiry and interest. They wrote in black and white composition notebooks, fuzzy pencil toppers shaking furiously as their thoughts and wonderings poured onto the paper. They stared off into space, book open in their lap, eyes fixated on nothing, but mind whirring. They barely looked up to notice the new girl in the entranceway. Before I could say a word, Mrs. Roberts raised her head and met my anxious eyes with with a broad smile, teeth slightly apart, blonde hair in a care-free style, wrinkles formed around her eyes. She had a genuine expression. She came over and met my eyes with hers; she looked directly at me. She met me. She met *me*.

The labels placed on children by the education “system” can create a narrative about that child that may or may not be true, but ultimately affects their experience. I was lucky to have a teacher who didn’t believe in the stereotypes of labels. In this way, Mrs. Roberts influences my perspective on the students I work with, regardless of age. I was labeled “gifted”, but I never felt smart. I felt like an imposter on most days. The language adults used about me, towards me, and around me led me to create an identity of myself based on their perspectives which included an innate ability to answer any questions (I couldn’t) or accomplish any task (also a no). These ascribed abilities created self-doubt when my actual abilities didn’t meet these characteristics. As a result, every small failure felt like a full-blown identity catastrophe. Peter Johnston (2004) talks about how the things teachers say, or don’t say, affect the literate identities of students. I believe language is part of the origin of identity. Language creates the spaces in which students can find

who they are or who they are becoming. In this way, Judith Butler (1990) influences my beliefs on categorical labels and their effect on the self. Labels which exist in our language impose roles on people whether intended or not. The role is not the birth of identity, but rather works in a recursive pattern with language to form the expected, and eventually performed, identity of a person. I am labeled, therefore I am, and so then I am labeled.

The person matters in the educational experience. Their educational path will shape who they become as citizens of our global society. The perspectives and opportunities afforded to them will determine the lens they use to view this world. With this in mind, educators have a great responsibility to provide rich learning environments and diverse opportunities for students to use their voices and express their ideas, needs, and concerns in the learning process. This education is theirs, and therefore they should share in the responsibility of shaping it. It is not the educator's responsibility to create safe spaces, rather it is our responsibility to create productive spaces in which students can experience the world, grapple with dissonance, and find ways to act upon their purpose.

I believe in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy in which education is not politically neutral. Like hooks, I also pull from the ideas of Dewey (1938) and Freire (1970) as I question my role in education, examine issues of power, and critically consider who creates the valued ideas of traditional education and whether or not these matter to the lived experiences of the students in our classrooms. I aim to use my privilege not to *speak* for, but to *create the space* for omitted voices, to create space for the intersections of theory and experience, and to bring forth the power of the individual voice. I recognize education as powerful when reflecting the lives of those educated.

It is also in this space that my philosophy leans towards Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory. I believe not only in the ways text can shape who we are and how we reflect on who we've been, but that education is also transactional in nature. Education is a reciprocal process of give and take. It is more than facts, it is an experience that should not be predetermined to the point of prescription. Education is about the moment you're in, not about constantly preparing for a future which might not occur. As Dewey (1938) states, "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time" (p. 48). While we cannot leave behind the lessons of the past, we can consider how that knowledge shapes the present, and more importantly, how it can be used as a catalyst for purpose in students.

Dynamic Learning & Teaching

"None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills."

~ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*

In the five years I'd spend in Mrs. Roberts's classroom, I'd come to know two identities. The first as "other". I'd come to recognize this identity as my false identity. It was who I was when I was "out there", beyond the confines of Mrs. Roberts's classroom. It was where I carried the labels ascribed to me. I'd act in accordance to this context, often left feeling dishonest to myself, but unsure of why. Within the confines of my new classroom, however, I felt more free

and undefined; ironic to consider I felt freer within confines, but there you have it. While I was aware I carried labels, I never felt labeled in that classroom. I was never confined to a desk, never asked to keep quiet, never told “good girl”, and certainly never told, “You’re gifted. You should know the answer.” I was free to exist before and beyond the labels, and I was free to bring my experiences and interests into my education. Mrs. Roberts structured her classroom in the closest resemblance to what Dewey (1938) refers to as a philosophy of experience. We learned from doing, we brought our past knowledge to meet our present curiosities and moved forward, sometimes making mistakes which then lead us to new knowledge and inquiries. We weren’t defined by our grade, age, sex, gender, race, etc. We were humans who brought our human experience to human theory in order to develop human knowledge. In this way, Mrs. Roberts learned alongside us, our interests beyond her own, but her constant grounding in sound pedagogy allowed her to be both teacher and student, and for us to be both student and teacher (Freire, 1970).

I believe the role of any educator, regardless of title, experience, position, class size, location, etc. is not to impart wisdom on the unwise, but rather to lay down paths of opportunity, equip others with the tools they need to find their own success, and then learn alongside each other. This is not just for children, but for colleagues, communities, researchers, and administrators. Education is a tool, a resource, and a process. It is something we experience, as well as something we call on in the future to better understand our world, which then engages us in the process again. If education is working correctly, then educators serve as coaches and co-pilots guiding the way, but not directing the journey. The educator learns from and with the student, and remains a student themselves in this way.

We did not have a lot of technology in Mrs. Roberts's classroom, but I still grew up to feel comfortable with technology. I have experienced the shifts from dial-up to wifi, MySpace to Facebook, and pagers to cell phones. Technologies will continue to change, as will the skills and dispositions needed to effectively use, navigate, and communicate with these tools and in these spaces. It is here that my educational philosophy aligns with the work of Jenkins (2009) and the social skills and cultural competencies he outlines as essential for functioning in our dynamic digital society. While most of my educational philosophies remain broad across education as a whole, I find this particular philosophy to be more specific to my area of passion and research.

Technology is ubiquitous in education. It seems each day brings new devices, apps, or software programs, all promising to be the panacea to our educational woes. However, it is impossible for teachers and students to effectively stay aware of this constant influx of options, knowledgeably discern quality from inferiority, learn the new system, and successfully implement it in instruction and learning. However, what can stay constant throughout this wave of novelty is the dynamic nature of the dispositions teachers and students hold towards technology and its use for both personal and professional purposes. Mrs. Roberts allowed us to explore our interests and represent our understanding in ways that best met our needs.

Sometimes we worked in our composition books, sometimes on poster boards, sometimes on the large whirring IBM computers, and sometimes through more tactile mediums in various scales. We were encouraged to be dynamic in our use of materials, communicate our meaning over various modes of representation, and learn to interpret the meaning of others as it is represented in various ways. This flexibility and inquisitiveness lends itself to life experiences, even as technology changes. Jenkins (2006) shares, "History teaches us that old media never die - and

they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content (. . .)" (p. 13).

We, as educators and learners, have yet to realize a system of true equity for all. The answer does not appear to lie within the old, nor does it seem to be in something new, rather it may be found in between, in the space of what we have tried and what we have yet to dream, within dynamic dispositions and approaches to teaching and learning.

Theory & Experience

"We have relied on experts and authorities to guide us. But expertise and authority are themselves a type of construction, created by groups of people as a form of power. That's why we must critically analyze and evaluate information that circulates in the context of a networked community."

~ Renee Hobbs, *Create to Learn*

My first assignment in Mrs. Roberts's class was a research project focused on medieval times. When I heard the assignment, I immediately pictured the hours I'd spend in our small school library, encyclopedias open around me, picture books with armor and battles spread across the table, and me with my head in my hands, hair falling over my fingers, and eyes closed in frustration. I hesitantly raised my hand in class and asked what specifically we needed to write about. "Write?" Mrs. Roberts asked, "I didn't say 'write'." A spec of hope ignited in the pit of my stomach. I think it was excitement, but how could I be excited about a report?

“Then...then...how will you grade us on what we know?” I looked at her with my expression frozen, my eyes already expecting the worst.

“However you want to show me that you know. It only matters that you immerse yourself in the work and learn about research from your process,” she replied as she passed out the project rubric. I sat in disbelief for a moment. It didn’t matter how I showed my work? I could research any minute topic and use my creativity to demonstrate my knowledge? Two weeks later, I showed up with a report on medieval torture mechanisms (I was a macabre child), a life-sized styrofoam replica of a guillotine, and a boombox to play the darkest music I could find in my CD collection as I presented my work in spoken word poetry. I was eight years old. I got an A.

Bell hooks (1994) discusses experience as a way of knowing. In this way, I believe Mrs. Roberts exhibited a pedagogical belief that experience may trump content. While hooks refers mostly to the experience of black women under feminism, this theory of experience overflows into my philosophy in how educators value the funds of knowledge students bring into the classroom. The endeavor of education is the act of illuminating the known so that we can discover what remains unknown. As an educator, I may prime the environment, materials, and expectations in such a way that scaffolds the experience and leads to knowledge of doing. In this way, my philosophy also aligns with Vygotsky’s (1986) ideas on constructivism and social aspects of thought and knowledge. Through experiences and social interactions, knowledge and the ways in which knowledge can be expressed are formed. Must students learn a predetermined set of content? Or should students learn the skills and dispositions necessary to answer their own questions about the world? Again, this brings me back to Dewey (1938) as I question who determines what must be learned in structured education settings? Who’s history and beliefs are

valued as priority for curriculum and standards? And do these matter to the students in our classrooms? We must question the old while also being considerate of the intentionality required of the new. As Dewey (1938) shares:

Just because traditional education was a matter of routine in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation. (p. 28)

Conclusion

“Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.”

~ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

What is learning and how should students know? I will continue to grapple with these questions as I evolve as an educator, but they are important questions to keep in mind. To go forth without consideration of the lived experience of the student is to continue oppression, to enact the banking concept of education (Freire, 1970). It is to maintain my privileged role at the front of the classroom and forget the implications of that privilege. And so I question, is my philosophy of education more about what I do as an educator or about what students experience in the classroom? Have I fully considered myself a student in this reflection of philosophy? Is my privilege called forth, exposed, questioned, and acknowledged for the power and pain it

represents? Have I effectively called into question the oppressive and institutionalized practices of education enough? The answer to these, at this time, is “not yet”. I have more work to do. But I acknowledge that work and enter into it with acceptance of the realities in which it exists.

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