My Personal Philosophy of Education

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Philosophy is the underpinning of theory. It drives praxis – the interacting relationship between theory and practice (Freire, 1970). Without a solid grounding in philosophy and a continuous reevaluating and evolving of our philosophical beliefs in relationship to praxis, we do not have a solid foundation with which to act in the often confusing, complicated educational environment. By keeping philosophical knowledge in the forefront of our practice reflexively, we can communicate more than just opinions, thus we have a better ability to make a difference toward the changes that are needed in today’s educational system.

Before describing my philosophy, education, itself, needs to be defined. My definition of education derives from the contention that a more advanced form of logic should have a greater role in learning. While deductive and inductive logic, as presented by Gutek (2004) are no doubt important in the learning process, eductive logic pulls learners out of the reductionist forms of learning by acknowledging there are many possibilities. A simple notion such as 1+1=2 can be vastly altered with eductive thinking. 1+1 can be anything; suddenly possibilities are infinitely expanded. Eductive logic takes us out of what Dewey (1938) refers to as “either-or philosophies” so that we can recognize the multitudes of intermediate positions and the creative possibilities beyond (p. 20). Humans have inherent “impulsions.” Dewey (1934) defines impulsion as “a movement outward and forward of the whole organism” (p. 60). Education typically stifles these impulsions by omitting creative expression that allows them to develop. These expressions take on much greater significance than their simple material presentation, as Dewey eloquently expresses: “The work of art, however, unlike the machine, is not only the outcome of imagination, but operates imaginatively rather than in the realm of physical existences. What it does is to concentrate and enlarge an immediate experience” (p. 285). In this way experience can be existentially shared. Experience, according to Dewey, is the process of continuous interaction with our environment, surroundings, and other people and organisms – the process of living in the fullest sense of the word. Shutting down this process, as occurs in so many classrooms across the United States today, stifles the expression of innate human potential.

Long before the industrial and information ages, the ancients viewed education in light of eductive reasoning and the drawing out of the potential of learners. The root meaning of educate is to educe or “draw forth” and “bring out” (Jackson, 1978). Thus, education was a way of bringing out the students’ inherent interests and talents – the full potential of the learner. This changes everything. The focus is on bringing out inherent abilities, rather than measuring whether they have achieved random and arbitrarily selected bits of knowledge. The teaching role becomes one of a detective and mentor to identify the learners’ special abilities, interests, and experiences and to assist learners with connecting knowledge to these attributes (hooks, 1994). Today’s learners are “de-centered,” which has contributed to the rise in drop-outs (Webster, 2007). Learners should take center stage where they can express the “powerful self-determining freedom” that lies within them (Lacan, cited in Webster, 2007, p. 251). Learning is not something we do for or provide to students; it is something that they actively participate in, in order to create, providing we are teaching in a way that draws forth their creativity (Dewey, cited in Webster, 2007). Thus, as the teacher engages in an active pedagogy, education becomes “the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 13). Hooks asserts that in a free and transgressive learning environment that removes boundaries and opens up new spaces of opportunity, the classroom becomes a “radical space of possibility” (p. 12). An eclectic philosophy supports the interplay of this pedagogy of engagement and theory, or praxis.

While I practice an eclectic philosophy, a selective medley of all of Gutek’s (2004) traditional philosophies and from outside of these traditional philosophies as well, including the influence of my stepfather and his Cherokee heritage, my personal definition of philosophy is very simple: *Philosophy is the practice of wisdom that creates multiple pathways to serenity.* This derives in part from Dewey’s (1938) tradition of viewing knowledge construction of a process of incorporating what is “within” as well as what is in the world outside of us. One of the definitions of philosophy provided by the Oxford Dictionary (1996) is “serenity; calmness; conduct governed by a particular philosophy” and this is applicable here. My definition also derives from the postmodern contention that one need not define oneself in a strict Enlightenment sense as a single “rational” being (Kincheloe, 2008). Framing philosophy as the practice of wisdom that will lead to serenity is a reminder that education involves much more than merely educating the mind; we must be free to be ourselves as well as allow others the same freedom. Educating as a practice of freedom recognizes that, as bell hooks (1994) has stated, “there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred….our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (p. 13). Additionally, education involves learning to view all knowledges as being produced in complex social, political, and economic environments – and in multiple contexts within those environments. We are essentially viewing circumstances and their interrelating “objects” from various interesting angles and as in Dewey’s formulation, we reconstruct our knowledges through the enlightenment obtained through this approach (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). We need never be limited by one isolated perspective, but rather we assimilate and synthesize multiple viewpoints for a deeper understanding of how knowledge has been constructed and handed down to us, and why. Knowledge is tentative, always changing, always viewable from alternative perspectives or realities (Kincheloe, 2008). This opens the doors to interdisciplinary research and learning as well as to diverse ontologies that free us to take note of a more spiritual dimension to existence. This holistic nature by which we learn and create knowledge also opens the door to boundless creativity (Dewey, 1934; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). Research and learning become an art in and of themselves, but at the same time, it is recognized the important role music and the arts in all of its forms, in connection with a deep inner, albeit, idiosyncratic spirituality, have as an essential part of the knowledge construction process.

Acknowledging that students must have this freedom to grow both intellectually and in a spiritual sense bestows an extra responsibility on the active pedagogically-engaged teacher. Paulo Freire (1970) contended that we are to care for our students, with a radical love, as we would even our own children and in that sense, of course, we wish to protect them from harm, the most important framework within which to construct knowledge. The ultimate mission, as Joe Kincheloe frames it in all of his work, is to “alleviate human suffering.” First, people need to come to an awareness of what constitutes and constructs their pain and suffering. This involves empowering people through what Freire referred to as conscientization, or consciousness-raising. It is also referred to as critical awareness and critical thinking (hooks, 1994). Kincheloe (2008) has greatly expanded this idea of consciousness construction with his concept, complex criticality, which is associated with the emerging new paradigm.

With complex criticality, education is an endeavor in which the students and teachers are actively participate to create learning experiences and new knowledge in an often improvisational manner (Kincheloe, 2004; 2008). Most teachers recognize that every class is different. A philosophy should work to honor that and also result in the utilization of this knowledge as a tool to make each class experience the very best it can be for any given group of learners, both individually and collectively. Learners have a role in creating that experience for themselves and others through an egalitarian relationship in which the teacher learns, shares, and grows along with the learners (hooks, 1994). Thus, the teacher is free to share her experiences and her knowledges on an equal basis with the learners. As hooks (1994) contends, “When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (p. 21). This goes far in creating the atmosphere of egalitarianism within which learners feel free to learn from both their mistakes and their successes. Of course, this is where philosophy as wisdom has a role to play because teachers must wisely choose which experiences are shared and how they are communicated, always being mindful of not sending inappropriate or misleading messages or ideological influences. This demands a thorough understanding of philosophy, ideology, and learning theories so that appropriate tools may be wisely used. As is implied, I do not believe in being locked into one set philosophy, but rather view philosophy much like everything else around me: it is changing, morphing, improving and used more wisely with time.

Metaphysics is a component of my underlying philosophy, although it is not definable, and most certainly not dichotomized in the manner in which Gutek (2004) presents it, as mentioned previously. As the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009)presents, “metaphysics – however defined – is an impossible enterprise.” Yet, Gutek associates metaphysics with the curriculum (“what we know”) which essentially omits the consideration of diverse ontologies outside the Western worldview (p. 4). My preference is to define metaphysics so broadly that it allows freedom for learners to define their own unique pathways to understanding, both in the intellectual sense and for spiritual growth. These are highly individualized experiences that defy defining and to attempt to do so would be approaching the indoctrination of an ideology, thus preventing the freedom that my philosophy calls for.

Personal philosophies should be continuously evaluated in relation to praxis and adjusted to meet the rapidly changing and morphing world we live and work in, or they can come to feel more like ideologies than philosophies. Thus, we become entrenched within our belief system which can cause us to become inflexible and imprisoned. This, again, points to philosophical knowledge as necessary for the wisdom to discern relevant applications in given circumstances. Wisdom helps one maintain integrity in the face of inconsistencies that arise, according to Kolb (1984), and integrity is “the highest level of human functioning that we strive consciously and even unconsciously, perhaps automatically to reach” and it is the “the pinnacle of development” (p. 224). Thus, the need to understand the full range of philosophies available for the “good life” as well as praxis becomes ever more apparent. It is a never-ending, but very rewarding journey.

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