Philosophers as Educators, Revisited

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Preamble
As I enter the last year of my professional philosophical career, I have begun to recall and reflect upon battles won and lost, causes that stirred me, ideas that have challenged me. Foremost among these has been my long concern about the role that philosophers can play as educators. All too often, the fact that we are usually paid to teach philosophy goes unnoticed and the sub-discipline of the philosophy of education is usually treated as a poor cousin to what are seen as more cutting-edge philosophies of knowledge, ethics, or logic. My exposure to the early pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Dewey) confirmed my view that attempts at conceptual clarification should take account of possible practical consequences. This, in turn, led me to consider what some philosophers have achieved in education and to try to relate it to their theories about education. I also identified some contemporary educational issues that are worthy of philosophical scrutiny. This paper represents a critical look back at that project and concludes with a proposal for a new agenda for philosophers as educators.

Philosophers as Educators
In 1986 I published a book entitled, Dewey, Russell, and Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators (Hendley, 1986). I wrote it out of frustration with the then dominant trend of analytic philosophy of education as represented by the work of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst in England. They took as their primary task the clarification of key educational concepts such as teaching, learning, indoctrination, authority, and the concept of education itself. Of course, such conceptual clarification is part of a time-honoured tradition of philosophers ever since Socrates, who realized that before we could argue about whether virtue can be taught, it was essential for us to be clear as to what we meant by virtue.
in the first place. A related question is what we mean by teaching and here Meno ironically misses the chance to recognize Socrates himself as a teacher of virtue because, unlike the Sophists, all he does is ask questions, not answer them. Part of Plato's message here is that we must first be clear about the meaning of key concepts, before we can begin to discuss ways and means of achieving our educational, social, and political ideals.

Peters and Hirst are indeed helpful in clarifying such issues in education, but they were unable to come up with what they call a strong definition of education which included its necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead they settle for a weaker definition that lists family resemblances among different educational processes and activities. The concept of education implies for them that something worthwhile is being intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. This, in turn, led them to espouse the 19th century ideal of an educated person as one with an all-round development morally, intellectually, and spiritually. Such an ideal has taken root in educational circles, they contend, and therefore “it is natural … for those working in educational institutions to conceive of what they are doing as being connected with the development of such a person” (Peters, 1972, p. 7).

When I tried to lead my philosophy of education students through the twists and turns of this analysis, they became restless and immediately asked the further pragmatic question: What difference does it make in education if this definition is true or not? What practical consequences would flow from it; what implications does it have for what should be included in the curriculum and how it should be taught? What constitutes all-round development, or even worthwhile subject matter in the first place? What sorts of criteria can we use to determine the best way to pursue such an ideal? Are such ideals culturally conditioned? Is there a problem of gender bias? What about the value of other ideals of education, such as vocational education or highly specialized education or the training of elites? I began to suspect that the finely wrought definition by Peters and Hirst was insufficient to deal with these practical questions and was thereby in danger of dissolving into the kind of trivial verbal philosophical issue criticized by William James in his lectures on pragmatism.

Enter the Pragmatists
James recounts the tale of a camping trip where he returned from a hike in the woods to find everyone engaged in a ferocious metaphysical