

Review of

A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Contemporary Landscape (vol. 5)

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The five-volume collection that Laverty and Hansen have put together, *A History of Western Philosophy of Education*, is a masterwork of scholarship that will help define philosophy of education for years to come.

I want to highlight that the title of the series says *Western* philosophy of education, not just Anglo-American philosophy of education; several of the contributors for this book, along with the editor, are from Europe. Presumably, “Western” also comprises the Northern and Southern hemispheres, and that too shapes the outlook and approach of this book. One of the strengths of this collection is the diversity of perspectives across different national regions.

As an aside, it is interesting that we use these regional categories (for example, “Western” versus “Eastern,” “Anglo-American” versus “Continental”) as a shorthand to contrast broad philosophical outlooks – even though there may be as much variation within these regional categories as between them.

Here I focus on the fifth volume in the series, *A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Contemporary Landscape*, edited by Anna Pagès, from the University of Barcelona, in Spain. The book combines a retrospective look at philosophy of education over the past several decades, along with a forward-looking view of where it might be headed. There is a chapter on decolonialism and indigeneity, for example, which has not been very much a part of philosophy of education’s past – but might well be a bigger part of its future.

One of the features of the contemporary period, for our field, has been an ongoing debate over the nature and boundaries of the field itself. When I was in graduate school, we were reading books like Christopher Lucas’s *What Is Philosophy of Education?* The point and purpose of philosophy of education was itself a contested question within the philosophy of education. (This meta-philosophical attitude toward our own work is *so typical* of philosophers, one might say.)

It was also, it seems to me now, a certain kind of navel-gazing that betrayed some insecurity about the status and importance of the field, vis-à-vis “real” philosophy. And, I think, it was also an exercise in boundary drawing. When I was in graduate school, one of the worst criticisms you could receive was, “I don’t know what it is you are doing, but it isn’t philosophy of education.”

That was in the 1970s and early 1980s, beginning the period that roughly corresponds with the scope of this book. Analytical philosophy of education was losing its dominance over the field. Many were drawn to so-called “Continental” philosophy of education – at that time mainly existentialism and phenomenology. (Later this would turn more into an interest in French and other sources on poststructuralism and deconstruction, as some philosophers of education gravitated toward “postmodernism.”)

This was also a time when the struggles over the boundaries of the field intensified. Critical theory, feminism, multiculturalism, and later, queer theory and critical race theory had vigorous

advocates among the younger (and some more senior) members in the field, and with these debates came new questions about the boundaries between philosophy and empirically grounded social and political theories. Many scholars saw their academic work as continuous with their political activism and identities.

Epistemology became situated social epistemologies; teaching became pedagogy, and then critical pedagogy; justice became social justice; and so on. Inseparable from these intellectual debates was a growing change in the composition of the field, who taught and who published, and who attended and presented at conferences. At my first Philosophy of Education Society paper, in 1979, nearly all of the 200 people in the audience were White men.

So the “contemporary” period explored in this book is not just a period of calendar time; it is a period that coincides with a fundamental contestation over disciplinary boundaries *and who gets to draw them*. This collection both recounts some of those debates and illustrates them in its own composition.

The book contains nine chapters: an opening reflection by Chris Higgins on issues of pluralism, identity politics, and difference, which sets the keynote for the collection; a chapter on feminism and philosophy of education, by Lovisa Bergdahl and Elisabet Langmann, from Sweden, focuses on the “pioneers” Maxine Greene, Jane Roland Martin, and Nel Noddings, and then the “third wave” feminist scholars who followed; a chapter on analytic philosophy of education, by Chris Martin, from Canada – which, revealingly, is the only chapter that is explicitly critical about its subject matter; a chapter on Paulo Freire and critical pedagogy, by Peter Roberts from New Zealand (Freire was the first scholar from below the equator to exert a major influence on educational theorizing up north); a chapter on anarchism and education, by Robert Haworth, from the US; a chapter on philosophy for children, focused on the work of Gareth Matthews, Matthew Lipman, and Ann Sharp, by Maughn Gregory, himself one of the leading figures in that movement, also from the US; a chapter on Derrida and Agamben, by Agata Bielik-Robson, a Polish scholar working in the UK; a chapter on decolonization and Indigenous peoples, by Troy Richardson, a native American scholar from the US; and a chapter on liberal education, by René Arcilla, also from the US. The diverse national settings of these authors reflect a conscious effort to represent a more inclusive “Western” perspective.

I do have to say that some of the choices are puzzling. Anarchism is hardly a major influence on educational thought. I would not have thought that Derrida and especially Agamben would be worth an entire chapter. Meanwhile, as a quick glance at the index confirms, there is almost no mention of Michel Foucault, Martha Nussbaum, or John Rawls – and no mention at all of Alasdair MacIntyre or Charles Taylor. John Dewey and pragmatism are touched upon, but not as a central thematic focus. “Liberalism” or “liberal theory” is cited only twice – both critically (the chapter on “liberal education” is a slightly different matter).

I do not mean this as a great criticism, but more as an observation: any book like this is going to reflect to some extent the emphases of its editor, and any collection of finite length is going to leave something out that somebody thinks is important. This collection tells its version of the contested history of philosophy of education over the past few decades; and, as I said, it illustrates it too.

To be sure, balancing the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of building a collection like this can be challenging. Having said that, undertaking a project meant to provide a definitive and relatively comprehensive overview of a discipline over a period of decades comes with a responsibility to reflect the scope of the work actually done during that period. In this, the final volume of the series represents a missed opportunity.

About the Author

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