1   Why Study Philosophy of Education?

What Is Your Philosophy of Education?

Teachers typically encounter this question at the beginning of their careers, when they may arguably be in the least qualified position to answer it. A foundation course in a teacher education program may require an essay on the topic, a job application may request a written response, or the subject may arise during an interview. How would you answer this question? In particular, how would you answer this question without resorting to vague generalities and empty platitudes?

One may not give the matter of philosophy much thought, or even be aware one has a philosophy of education, until encountering practices or decisions with which one agrees or disagrees. An occasion to assess one's personal philosophy of education surfaces when confronted with outlooks different from one's own. What you believe becomes more apparent when you begin to implement practices compatible with your thinking. A feeling of uneasiness or even discontent can result if asked or required to teach in a manner that conflicts with your preferences. If you are certain about what you agree with or support, you can discover what it is you believe. You may also find you modify your beliefs when exposed to the ideas of others or adjust your outlook after spending time acclimating to a new or altered environment.

Studying the viewpoints of others offers a way to develop your own philosophy of education. How have other educators expressed their thoughts about education? In discussing beliefs, we may ask how philosophers have explored the subject. More importantly, we may wish to know how philosophy influences education and directly relates to the process of teaching and learning.

To begin, imagine you have successfully completed a job interview and have been offered a teaching position. After celebrating your accomplishment, your mind will turn to preparing for the school year. The following questions immediately arise:

- How will I arrange my classroom space? How will the use of space relate to instruction?
- What will I teach? In what sequence will I present the curriculum?
- How will I teach? What kinds of instructional activities will I plan?
- What resources, supplies, and materials will I need?
- What kinds of assessments will I choose and develop?
- What will be my classroom management plan?
- How will I manage instructional time?

These practical, concrete concerns all relate to philosophy. How you organize learning spaces, enact the curriculum, implement instruction, use resources, assess learning, conduct yourself in the classroom, and expect students to conduct themselves reflect a way of thinking about education. Your classroom may represent your own beliefs, be created in collaboration with others, or be prescribed by the school or school district. Some values and habits of behavior may conform to institutional, social, and cultural traditions spanning generations that are rarely called into

question. However your belief system is constructed, the practices observed in your classroom will convey to students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and others a particular mindset about the profession and the purpose of education. This textbook explores the influence of philosophy on the practice of education as it occurs in schools.

The Study of Philosophy

"Philosophy begins in wonder."

(Socrates)

Philosophy asks fundamental questions about the nature of reality and existence. The word philosophy comes from the Greek word *philosophia*. *Philo* means "loving" or "love of" and *sophia* means "wisdom." Therefore, philosophy means "love of wisdom." Philosophy is concerned with the search for meaning. What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of the things we think about? What is the meaning of the things we do? What does it all mean? "Philosophy begins in wonder," the Greek philosopher Socrates declares (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d).[1]

A common saying asserts, "Perception is reality." Philosophy reflects as well as examines one's view of the world. In turn, one's view of the world affects how one acts. If, for example, you believe an eternal and perfect reality exists beyond the physical and temporal world we inhabit, this affects how you view the world you inhabit and how you act in it. If, on the other hand, you believe the only true reality is the physical and temporal one that we experience in the here and now, and no other form of reality exists, that will affect how you view the world and how you act in it. One's belief system determines what knowledge is worth knowing and what values are deemed applicable to how one lives.

Philosophy as a field of study has a rich history. The original meaning of the word implies seeking truth and wisdom, which therefore can lead to pursing knowledge in any subject. For example, before the development of the field of natural sciences as we know it, the study of nature was known as *natural philosophy*. Universities retain the connection to the traditional connotation by awarding Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. Individuals with a PhD, however, have rarely attained an advanced education in philosophy. Professors and other professionals hold PhD degrees in the humanities, sciences, and many specialized areas. Someone who has earned a PhD in Education, for example, has conducted formal research that contributes to the knowledge base of the profession. In this sense, a Doctor of Philosophy is someone who has devoted extensive scholarship to an area of study. Philosophy as we will use the term connotes systematic inquiry into the nature and meaning of reality, existence, truth, knowledge, reasoning, and values.

A philosopher's outlook is general and reflective, examining major issues while attempting to account for a wide range of stances competing for attention at any given time. Many who are known as philosophers of education have been philosophers in the broadest sense, whose work has touched upon education within arguments dealing with matters on a grand scale. Others may have never referred to themselves as philosophers, but the contemplative nature of their work has impacted views on how to think about education. Some philosophers of education have been practitioners while others may have never worked directly in a school setting. Therefore, the field has sometimes been accused of lacking clear criteria for what constitutes philosophy of education, and who should be counted among its ranks.[2]

Notwithstanding such debates, schools offer educational programs and confer upon graduates a recognized status in the form of certificates, licenses, diplomas, and degrees. We acknowledge the existence of systems designed for the express purpose of providing education, and these systems make decisions affecting those they educate and society-at-large. Therefore, we will proceed by conducting an inquiry into beliefs about the purposes and practices of education.

## What Is the Relationship of Philosophy to Teaching and Learning?

> "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity."
>
> (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

The influence of philosophy on teaching and learning may not be readily apparent, especially within the demands of planning and implementing instruction daily. We need to see the connection between philosophical perspectives and educational practices to understand the influence one has on the other. Picture philosophy as the most comprehensive way of thinking about education, with learning theory and other aspects of teaching arranged in order from the most general to the more specific (Figure 1.1).

In preparing to enter a career in education, and in pursuing ongoing professional growth, teachers focus primarily on developing a repertoire of effective teaching skills. Learning theories and educational research that support instructional approaches receive a great deal of emphasis, while underlying philosophical arguments may be downplayed, ignored, or deliberately avoided. The application of skills in isolation from a larger context, however, can lead to haphazard or even incoherent practice. As one acquires each new teaching skill, two questions should be asked: 1) "Why am I incorporating this skill into my practice?" and 2) "How will this skill help me achieve my overall goals?" Educational philosophy can help answer both of these questions by providing an underlying foundation.

Philosophy of education answers *why* you might choose to include certain techniques, strategies, methods, and learning theories in your pedagogy. As Figure 1.1 shows, every teaching decision (moving from the most specific element upward to the more general) answers the "Why?" question: Why am I using this technique? (Techniques can fulfill a strategy). Why am I using this strategy? (Strategies can combine to create a method). Why am I using this method? (Methods can develop pedagogy). Why am I using this pedagogy? (Pedagogy can represent one's philosophy of education in the classroom). Pedagogy can be developed and refined as you gain knowledge and experience.

Pedagogy, learning theories, methods, strategies, and techniques answer *how* to put one's philosophy of education into action. To answer the "How?" question, move from the most general element (at the top of Figure 1.1) downward: How can I put my philosophy of education into action? (Through pedagogy, methods, strategies, and techniques, informed by learning theory.)

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

WHY?   HOW?

Pedagogy

Learning theories

Methods

Strategies
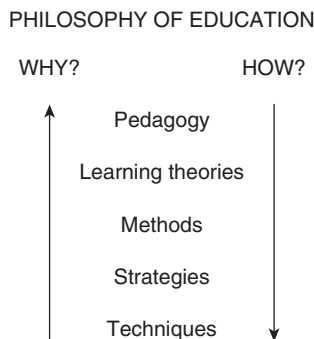
Techniques

Philosophy of education answers WHY to include certain techniques, strategies, methods, and learning theories in one's pedagogy.

Pedagogy, learning theories, methods, strategies, and techniques answer HOW to put one's philosophy of education into action.

Figure 1.1 Relationship of Philosophy to Teaching

How do I implement my pedagogy? (By selecting the appropriate methods, strategies, and techniques). Learning theory can support "Why" to select certain instructional techniques, strategies, and methods to include in one's pedagogy and help to justify each "How" decision.

The integration of these elements helps develop or reveal a philosophy of education. This is accomplished by consistently incorporating teaching techniques, strategies, and methods into pedagogy that are compatible with one another and with one's philosophical perspective. The role of philosophy is to question our assumptions, challenge our existing practices, and clarify our perspective. Wittgenstein (1922) asserts, "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity" (4.112).

To examine the relationship of philosophy to other aspects of instruction, we begin by discussing learning theory.

What Is the Relationship of Philosophy to Learning Theory?

Philosophy and theory are often used as interchangeable terms, but they can differ in significant ways. Philosophy contemplates complex and abstract issues about the nature of reality and the meaning of existence. Philosophy often asks questions that evade definitive answers, such as what constitutes happiness, virtue, beauty, and goodness. At times, philosophy seeks to explain a phenomenon or solve a problem, but not always. Philosophy sometimes analyzes and critiques the reasoning, use of language, and point of view of a given proposition. "Philosophy simply puts everything before us," Wittgenstein (1958) argues, "and neither explains nor deduces anything" (p. 126).

Learning theory seeks to identify, describe, and explain a problem or phenomenon occurring in education and offer solutions or suggest recommendations for practice, relying on empirical evidence to support its conclusions. In other words, learning theory depends on exacting scientific procedures, whereas philosophy can be an open-ended intellectual pursuit that asks fundamental, probing questions and challenges assumptions.[3] Learning theory describes a conceptual framework derived from systematic observation and empirical research to explain how students learn. Learning theory can support practice by justifying methods. The formulation of a learning theory follows the scientific method, posing and testing hypotheses. Theorists state conclusions they believe apply to learning in a variety of situations. Based on the findings, recommendations for practice may be implemented and evaluated.

Numerous learning theories have been proposed, such as behaviorism (B. F. Skinner), cognitive development (Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, David Ausubel), constructivism (Lev Vygotsky), multiple intelligences (Howard Gardner), and many others. Because competing theories exist, one may be skeptical that a theory can reliably predict what results will occur in every situation. For example, a law of nature (such as the Law of Gravity or the Law of the Conservation of Energy) provides verifiable results for every known instance. Although a learning theory may not be able to state with certainty its claims constitute unassailable proven fact, a large body of evidence can be cited indicating the degree to which a learning theory explains and predicts a particular phenomenon. Theory carries much more weight than opinion, anecdotal evidence, or speculation.

Theory may emerge from experience but is continuously tested to determine its validity. A hypothesis about how students learn can also arise from philosophical inquiry, but that hypothesis would need to be tested by collecting and analyzing evidence to move from the realm of philosophy to the sphere of learning theory. Some questions that philosophy poses may be beyond the reach of science to settle definitively, such as deliberations on moral, ethical, and spiritual matters.

Philosophy of education and theories about learning sometimes intermingle and reinforce one another. The questions raised by both areas of study can be examined to ascertain their impact on education. Philosophy, however, tends to dwell on a more abstract level, while learning theory attempts to produce tangible evidence to support its assertions. Figure 1.1 depicts this gradation from the most concrete and specific (techniques) to the most general and abstract (philosophy).

Learning theory is shown as engaging at all levels of instructional decision-making and practice. John Dewey, considered both a philosopher and theorist, offers this analysis: "Philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education . . . it is the theory of education in its most general phases" (MW 9:338, 341).

What Is the Relationship of Philosophy to Pedagogy?

Pedagogy comes from the Greek *pais* or *paidos* (child) and *ago* (to lead) and means "to lead a child." Pedagogy involves more than planning lessons, selecting learning activities, or applying instructional strategies and techniques. Pedagogy entails accompanying the student throughout the learning process and providing direction or guidance. Viewed in this context, pedagogy encompasses the entire scope of a teacher's relationship with the student.[4]

Content pedagogy refers to teaching within a specific discipline or subject area, such as language, mathematics, the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, and the arts.[5] Content pedagogy involves the interaction of knowledge about content matter, teaching practices, and learners. Delivering material to students with the objective of transmitting knowledge may not result in understanding. Even within the boundaries of a discipline, content pedagogy requires facilitating learning within a complex and diverse environment. How the teacher and students think about and express interest in the subject-matter, identify issues and define problems, apply learning, monitor progress, and evaluate performance transforms classroom activities into meaningful educational experiences.

If the definition of pedagogy extends beyond a technical set of teaching procedures to include all interactions with students, one's belief system comes into play. Teaching takes on moral, ethical, social, and personal dimensions. Separating the responsibilities of the teacher from principles and dispositions regarding equity, fairness, compassion, integrity, and credibility becomes problematic if not impossible. Reflecting on how one's actions in the classroom affect the emotional, physical, and academic well-being of a student has philosophical implications (Carr, 2006; Elliot, 1987; Elliot, 2000).

What Is the Relationship of Pedagogy to Instructional Methods, Strategies, and Techniques?

In planning a lesson, a teacher may search for an interesting activity to engage students in learning. Innumerable resources offer a vast array of activities from which to choose. How does a teacher decide which activity to select? A body of educational literature recommends selecting learning activities based on an intended outcome. Having an instructional goal in mind is preferable to choosing an activity that looks interesting or fun for several reasons. Students may enjoy participating in the activity but the teacher could find it difficult to indicate with confidence what the students learned and how the outcome relates to the curriculum standards. Meaningful instruction is purposeful.

Instruction is composed of techniques and strategies that combine to produce methods. Referring to Figure 1.1, begin at the bottom of the diagram and work upward. A technique is a specific applied skill. However, to achieve intended results or a particular outcome, proficient technique is not sufficient. Techniques must be applied strategically. A teacher must know not only how to apply techniques, but also when and why. Techniques are vital for success, provided techniques are not employed arbitrarily or erratically. Drawing on a repertoire of techniques, a teacher can carefully plan instruction to achieve consistent results. Over time, strategies reinforce and complement each other, helping the teacher develop a method.

Take, for example, the use of small groups. Dividing students into small groups is one technique for implementing instruction. One may have no more motivation for using small groups

than to try something new, to see if the students respond positively. The technique may be successful in improving classroom management for a brief time, yet fail to help the students learn the content or develop the skill being taught. However, if small groups consistently produce the desired results, the teacher will arrange students in small groups more frequently. Used as a strategy, the teacher intends for the use of small groups to achieve certain outcomes. Ultimately, the teacher becomes convinced that having students work together in small groups achieves a variety of outcomes. In other words, this technique, used strategically over time in a variety of situations to achieve intended outcomes, has developed into a recognizable, coherent method. The use of small groups has evolved from completing one task at a time to a strategic plan of action to eventually characterizing the teacher's overall approach to the teaching and learning process.

Instructional techniques, strategies, and methods constitute pedagogy, which we have defined as the relationship of the teacher with the student throughout the learning process. Taken together, these considerations form an overall perspective on educational practice. Returning to our example, the use of small groups during instruction may achieve short-term outcomes but may also support broader convictions about the benefits of individuals engaging in social interaction and collaboration to construct knowledge within a learning community. Learning theory can be consulted to provide a rationale to justify the practice. Reflecting on how this practice relates to one's beliefs can reveal one's philosophy of education.

Thinking about these aspects of teaching can occur at any stage. A bottom-up approach begins at techniques and reasons upward to consider how techniques build to strategies, methods, pedagogy, and finally form a philosophy of education. A top-down approach begins with philosophy, which influences pedagogy, methods, strategies, and techniques, and can arguably influence the selection of learning theory to support decisions. Starting at the mid-point, methods can be examined to determine if techniques and strategies align, and how choices are impacted by learning theory to create pedagogy compatible with an educational philosophy.

The "3Cs" Criteria: Consistency, Compatibility, Coherence

Three key words express the relationship of philosophy to education: *Consistency*, *Compatibility*, and *Coherence*. To philosophize, evidence from observations must be evaluated according to some criteria (Rescher, 2014). A coherent system of thought implies consistency and compatibility, demonstrating congruence and alignment.

To evaluate a philosophy of education *in action*, we can ask three questions. Does the teacher demonstrate:

- Consistent use of educational practices?
- Compatible educational practices?
- Coherent overall educational design?

Consistency

Consistency implies that practices are regularly and systematically applied rather than implemented occasionally or sporadically. For example, a teacher may believe she has created a student-centered classroom that includes hands-on learning activities. However, she may inconsistently implement practices. A lesson may open with the teacher didactically presenting information, demonstrating a procedure, or modeling a skill. After several minutes of supervised guided practice, the students complete a worksheet that records single correct answers to basic recall questions. The practice portion of the lesson includes activities that incorporate hands-on materials (such as using manipulatives, objects, or technology) but the students follow a rigid step-by-step procedure. The teacher demonstrates or models and the students follow directions

or imitate, with little or no opportunity for exploration or discovery. In this example, handling objects may appear to be student-centered practice, but instruction as a whole is teacher-directed and centered on the teacher's decisions, prescribed procedures, and pre-determined outcomes.

A teacher may exhibit consistent practices within lessons in a given subject area, but switch to different practices for lessons in another subject. For example, in reading or literature lessons, the teacher asks open-ended questions, encourages students to ask questions, probes student thinking with follow-up questions, and facilitates discussion. However, in social studies, this same teacher delivers information to students, who record notes or complete worksheets. Assessments consistent of quizzes requiring memorization and recall of material.

In another example, the source of content may be inconsistent across subject areas. The teacher may rely exclusively on a textbook during math instruction, yet supply primary sources for analysis during social studies or prepare labs for science lessons that investigate physical objects collected from natural settings. In certain subjects, the content comes from secondary sources while in other subjects the teacher values primary sources or items from the surrounding environment.

Therefore, depending on when one observes, a teacher may use different kinds of curricular materials and implement different instructional methods, offering the students widely disparate educational experiences during the school day. Choosing a variety of materials or techniques may be highly recommended, but the absence of a decision-making process that justifies each selection, and the lack of a strategy for applying these techniques, fails to exhibit consistency. Teachers should be prepared to explain and defend practices, not simply implement them.

Compatibility

Practices may be consistent yet not compatible. For example, a teacher may consistently drill students to memorize and recall material. However, the objectives focus on developing critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. The instructional method and the outcomes are incompatible.

In another example, a teacher consistently leads discussions to foster an exchange of ideas, but the reading material consists of information sheets that only furnish bulleted facts. As students respond, the teacher confirms accurate answers and corrects those in error. Only one child responds to each question, directing their remarks to the teacher. Students do not interact with each other but focus on supplying correct answers to teacher questions, limiting participation and closing open-ended discussion. No interpretation of multiple points of view or evaluation of complex issues occurs. The discussion focuses on teacher questions while restricting the number or kinds of student questions. The results of the discussion are assessed using an objective-style test that does not allow for any divergent thinking. The instructional method, curricular materials, and assessment may be consistently implemented, but they are not compatible.

Incompatible practices can arise in all subject areas. A teacher may wish students to understand and practice civic responsibilities within the democratic process. However, students do not participate in decision-making during instruction but passively accept and follow rules determined by the teacher in advance. The teacher may state she expects students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, but this ends up simply requiring students to adhere to a checklist of behaviors, such as promptly submitting completed worksheets in the proper folder.

Incompatibility is often ironic, though not deliberately. Those enrolled in a teacher education program are familiar with lectures and PowerPoint presentations admonishing prospective teachers to avoid lecturing students in the classroom and engage students in active learning. The lecturer, however, may be reliably predictable in his methods, therefore remaining consistent. Consistency alone does not assure compatibility.

Coherence

Consistent choices and educational practices compatible with one another develop a coherent pedagogy. On a larger scale, the overall design of the school or educational program would reflect a philosophy of education. An observer in one classroom at a certain grade level in a particular subject area would perceive practices consistent and compatible with those in another classroom at the same grade level in the same subject area. This leads to a coherent grade-level approach to the teaching of that subject area. Furthermore, one could observe consistent and compatible practices in that subject area across grade levels. Not necessarily identical instructional methods, but methods consistent and compatible with the purpose of education for that discipline.

Expanding our scope, a philosophically coherent school or educational program would enact practices in all subjects across all grade levels that are inherently consistent and compatible with one another. For example, all science teachers conduct labs, all language arts teachers facilitate class discussions, all math teachers implement problem-based learning, and all social studies teachers assign projects. Beyond that, classes in all subjects also engage in discussions focused on higher-level thinking, students collaborate to problem-solve, and conclusions rely on evidence to support conclusions. Teachers in the different subject areas, even at different grade levels, exhibit a pedagogy that aligns with a broader purpose of education that represents the school as a whole. This creates a coherent framework that connects techniques, strategies, and methods into an integrated approach. One could observe school-wide decisions emerging from the same philosophical perspective. Moreover, all teachers and administrators in the school could articulate a rationale for their choices that corresponds to a stated purpose of education and shared philosophy of education.

If, however, individual teachers randomly select learning activities with no criteria (other than they might be fun to try), daily instruction in the classroom may appear arbitrary, disjointed, and even contradictory. The teacher becomes frustrated that students are not producing expected results, and students become aware each teacher is merely throwing different techniques against the wall to see which ones stick. Teachers try a variety of approaches—small groups, direct instruction, drills on facts, individual seatwork, discussion—but with no apparent strategy. Although each teacher may have a reason for each choice in isolation, no one is able to detect a rationale to explain the overall pattern of decisions at the classroom, grade, or school levels. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1797/1996) asserts that "the method of teaching . . . must be treated methodically; otherwise it would be set forth chaotically" (p. 221, 6:478).

Curriculum and pedagogy that lack the "3Cs" (consistency, compatibility, coherence) lack direction. According to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, "If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading."[6] In other words, if you are frustrated or discouraged by choosing techniques without relying on a strategy, or implementing strategies that do not integrate with a broader method, by continuing in that manner you will remain frustrated and discouraged as you head down the same path. If a teacher continues to randomly grab learning activities from arbitrary sources, the teacher should come to expect random results and arbitrary outcomes. Having a destination in mind helps one make informed choices. In selecting activities, a teacher will begin to critique each one and decide how they help achieve the intended outcomes. Working collaboratively, teachers can examine and reflect on practice to determine a sense of purpose.

Lao Tzu calls a clear direction to knowledge and truth *Tao* or "The Way." Confucius beseeches his followers to act in accordance with "The Way" or Truth. The Buddha speaks of finding "The Path." Socrates urges his students to seek "The Good." By consistently selecting and implementing compatible choices, a coherent direction can emerge. Otherwise, in the words of the proverb, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."[7]

Notes

1 Also translated, "For this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." Aristotle also states, "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize" (*Metaphysics*, 982b).
2 Recommended reading on issues in philosophy of education: Phillips, D. C., & Siegel, H. (2013). Philosophy of education. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/education-philosophy/
3 Recommended reading on distinctions between philosophy of education and learning theory: Carr, D. (2010). The philosophy of education and educational theory. In R. Bailey, R. Barrow, D. Carr, & C. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of philosophy of education* (pp. 37–53). Los Angeles: Sage.
4 Recommended reading on pedagogy: 1) Hansen, D. T., & Laverty, M. J. (2010). Teaching and pedagogy. In R. Bailey, R. Barrow, D. Carr, & C. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of philosophy of education* (pp. 223–235). Los Angeles: Sage, and 2) Smith, M. K. (2012). What is pedagogy? *The encyclopaedia of informal education*. Retrieved from http://infed.org/mobi/what-is-pedagogy
5 Recommended reading on content pedagogy: Shulman, L. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher, 15*(2), 4–14.
6 Widely attributed to Lao Tzu, although a precise citation remains elusive.
7 Variously attributed to several ancient sources, including Hindu texts and the Talmud. Lewis Carroll paraphrases the saying in *Alice in Wonderland*, and the line appears in the George Harrison song, "Any Road" (on the album *Brainwashed*, 2002).

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