

An Introduction, a Wager

Long Live Radical Philosophy and Education!

*Derek R. Ford, Anneliese Waalkes, Savannah Jo Wilcek
and Clayton Coopridge*

This book is the product of a wager. We bet that such a thing as radical philosophy and education not only could exist, but did exist, was in fact germinating in different social movements, departments, academic fields, and social networks. In the midst of incessant and panicked shouts about the death of philosophy, philosophy of education, and all of the humanities, we were drawn to the powerful silences that pointed us out of the sparsely populated—and freezing—hotel conference rooms. Against the proclamations of death, we turned to the inventiveness of the keyword and the new nuclei of theoretical and practical possibilities budding in people's struggles against exploitation, oppression, and dispossession across the globe.

We didn't want to create some new field so much as initiate the development of a collective vocabulary to cohere and release new educational and political encounters. This is similar to what Raymond Williams' (1976) did in his classic *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, from which we took some inspiration. When Williams returned to university after a four-year war deployment, he was struck by the linguistic changes that occurred in his absence, such that he wasn't sure if he was indeed speaking the same language as his peers. Williams was particularly concerned with the ever-elusive idea of culture, and he explored the meanings and developments of words pertaining to culture that were key in the double sense that (1) they were important and (2) they unlocked or opened up ways of seeing and understanding the world. By exploring the evolution, trajectories, contexts, and attendant problems of certain words, Williams' inquiry searched for clarity in understanding. This was and remains a crucial issue facing not only cultural theorists but, more germane to this project, political organizers and student activists. One of us was recently at an activist meeting in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana, in which one participant early on exclaimed, "We don't need to talk about imperialism, we already know what imperialism is." In some of the comments aired over the hour or so that followed, it became very clear there was significant disagreement—or, more accurately, significant misunderstanding—about what

imperialism is and means. This project, however, is concerned with more than clarity. We're not after investigation so much as invention. And, of course, we're not aiming to clear up what culture is but rather with opening up what education is and can be as it relates to political movements.

We asked activists, organizers, and scholars to write entries on a singular concept related to radical philosophy and education. We didn't ask for a literature review or a survey of any particular field. After all, there isn't really any intellectual territory delineated by the term "radical philosophy and education." There's no established canon to object to or reference, no journals or book series to fit into. Our pitch was simple: Protest movements across the globe are intensifying. The global arrangement of forces, stable for the last few decades, is significantly shifting and in crisis. New social forces and political groupings are seriously contesting the era of US unipolar imperialism (Becker & Majidi, 2018). These developments are educational in two ways. For one, in the neoliberal part of the world, struggles often spring from educational disposessions, as schools close and *enclose* working-class and oppressed communities. For two, in all struggles, education is increasingly explicitly seen as a key site of and tool for organizing. At this historical juncture, then, we wanted scholars and activists to contribute entries on keywords that spring from the borders of radical philosophy and education. What word do people interested or living in this borderland need to encounter, challenge, disrupt, or question? What formulations, arguments, histories, stories, examples, provocations need to appear right now? The selection of words to serve as *keywords* were left up to the authors, and this book is (obviously) not exhaustive.

The debate over the relationship between philosophy and education is highly contested and worth a brief exploration. Situated primarily in philosophy of education, the dividing line is often drawn around relevance. Nicholas Burbules (1989) identifies this line as the "relevance issue," as "philosophers of education have long debated the need for making their work accessible and relevant to practitioners and scholars in other fields of education" (p. 229). He cites D.C. Phillips' position that the relevance issue presents a dilemma for philosophers of education: in order to make our work relevant, we need to turn away from philosophy; in order to contribute to philosophy, we need to turn away from educational concerns. On the one side, some maintain that limiting philosophy of education to a conversation with educational practitioners hamstring the philosophical pursuit. On the other hand, the other side holds that philosophy of education is meaningless without this conversation and, more dramatically, that it would constitute a dereliction of duty. While one confines the field to philosophy, the other confines it to education. Burbules shows that the relevance issue is a misnomer because nothing is relevant *in*

itself, relevance isn't an intrinsic quality of something but "is a context- and person-specific judgment requiring an active connection of ideas" (p. 233). Relevance, that is, is *produced*. In dismissing a work as irrelevant, we cover a judgment with the appearance of an observation. It's a rhetorical tact. Burbules contends that the production of relevance is itself an educative process. Philosophy of education then becomes the examination of "the communicative processes of *explaining*, of *negotiating*, of *listening*, of *arguing*, of *understanding*, or *correcting misconceptions*, and so on" (p. 247).

This is a fairly clear definition of the relationship between philosophy and education, but it's ultimately undercut by the *and so on*. Where does this *and so on* end? In his introduction to *The SAGE handbook of philosophy of education*, D.C. Phillips (2010) ultimately argues that any ending to this *and so on* is arbitrary. Early on, he's clear that he's offering a particular reading of philosophy and philosophy of education. He clearly prioritizes the former over the latter, turning to educational concerns only in the last two pages. While his introduction asks, "what is philosophy of education?" he only sarcastically offers a necessarily inadequate answer: "Philosophy of education is a field where philosophical inquiry is pursued that focuses upon issues arising within the domain of education" (p. 14). More substantively, he posits that the field exists at the meta level, engages in speculative, normative, and analytical work, and occurs in certain educational domains. Regarding this last point, he asks: "are questions or issues about knowledge the focus, or morality and ethics, or beauty, or citizenship and individual and group rights in a pluralistic society..." (p. 12). The ellipses indicate another refusal to pin down the field. *And so on...*

Phillips and Burbules both want to keep the relationship open, but they simultaneously position the relationship at the level of analysis, inquiry, question posing: in short, in the realm of thought. Stephanie Mackler (2004), by contrast, returns philosophy of education to the disciplined art and practice of learning and teaching to live well. Philosophy and education are about the good life, or the life lived well. She offers writing as a philosophical activity located at the nexus of thought and life, describing it as "the nexus of abstract views and lived life, the place where a real person works out the principles that guide his life—and hence define his personhood—in writing" (p. 300). Philosophy entails both the imagining and theorizing life "as ends in themselves" as well as the everyday practice of those ends of thought. Philosophers of education find themselves in this second area as they "help people orient their lives in relation to ideals and thereby to live well" (p. 301). Philosophy and education, thought and life, abstract and concrete, no longer separated but joined by *philosophy of education*.

Gert Biesta (2012) takes a different approach. He insists that philosophy of education should be relevant only to educational matters. The field “has a distinctive contribution to make, one that makes use of the ‘tools’ of philosophy to engage with issues that are distinctively educational” (p. 581). This isn’t an “applied philosophy,” but the use of philosophy “as a ‘device’...for dealing with the problems of education as *educational* rather than as philosophical problems.” This means that education is a distinctive and consistent field in itself and that education is an isolatable thing or process. Biesta, in a sense, flips philosophy of education around and subordinates philosophy to educational pursuits. The primary way he approaches education is by contrasting it with learning. Whereas learning has no end or entails no purpose, education is always pursued with an end in mind. What makes learning educational is that one learns some particular content. Yet this is no act of transmission. That there are at least two subjects involved in educational processes means not only that education is a relational endeavor, but more fundamentally that it is a terribly open, unpredictable, and therefore weak one. There is never any guarantee that the ends or purposes that constitute the educational engagement will be met or adhered to in any way. Moreover, education is about the whole being, it’s about orienting all of subjectivity through generative encounters rather than simple exchanges. What makes education educational is the fact that the new, unexpected, and unforeseeable can arise.

It would make sense that we position this book as a work of philosophy of education. There is no doubt that some authors in here identify as such. Yet we wanted to open up both radical philosophy and education in a new way, one that was open yet oriented to political struggle. Our method is similar to the way Claudia Ruitenberg (2009) taught her philosophical research methods class. Students in her class “brought philosophical research methods into being” not by creating them anew but “by naming their ways of thinking and writing as philosophical research methods,” which “made these ways of thinking and writing available for explicit consideration” (p. 313). She asked students to do what they do but do it as a particular thing, which drew their attention to different aspects of their regular activity. Similarly, we asked people to do and write as they do but under the sign of radical philosophy and education, and we let each author define what radical philosophy, education, and radical philosophy and education are. As such, the following entries aren’t united in their political viewpoints, philosophical orientations, methodologies, or approaches to education or politics, but rather in their desire to radically transform our world in the interests of the many, and not the few. Consequently, we don’t see this book as *representative* of any field, but instead as *constitutive* of

a field. It's not a field we have any particular allegiance to, however. We just want to organize and contribute educational resources to those imagining and fighting for radically better worlds.

Radical comes from the Latin "radicals," which is translated as "of or relating to the root." The entries here are radical not in the sense that they adhere to a particular revolutionary worldview, but in the sense that they identify and address educational and political questions, problems, and proposals at their roots; that they dig around for these roots; that they develop new roots for future questions, problems, and proposals. The roots here are neither Aristotle or Socrates, nor Dewey or Rawls, nor intellectual contradictions, knots, or omissions in research. And this perhaps distinguishes the present volume from any other in philosophy and education: Each entry finds or develops roots in present concrete and material conjunctures of social struggles to search for a way to move forward (or backward, or in suspense, as the case may be). The entries take on philosophy *and* education as equals, as co-determinants in praxis. In other words, education isn't in the service of philosophy, nor is philosophy in the service of education. Instead, both work together to flesh out concepts relevant to our present movements.

The concept is another way to think about the keyword. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) define philosophy as the practice of developing concepts. Concepts arise in response to a problem, and their development sheds light on or produces new elements tangential to that problem. More precisely, the concept arises in response to combinations of problems to which other concepts already respond and in which they already intervene. The concept doesn't just reflect or shed light on a problem: it actively shapes the problem. It's not just epistemological. A concept is totalizing in that it wants to extend itself immanently to capture all that it can. But this is always necessarily a partial process, which is why they call the concept "a fragmentary whole" (p. 16). There is, as such, a principal distinction to be made between *totalizing* and *totalization*: the former is in motion, the latter is static; the former is drive, the latter is stasis; the former is actual, the latter is an impossibility. A totalizing force need not aspire to totalization. It needs only to extend. Because problems originate within concrete conjunctures, concepts are transitory and contingent themselves. And because concepts only exist in relation to other concepts, a shift in one changes others. As "centers of vibrations," they "are not even the pieces of a puzzle, for their irregular contours do not correspond to each other" (p. 23). These connections "do form a wall, but it is a dry-stone wall, and everything holds together only along diverging lines...They are movable bridges" (p. 23). Concepts are, therefore, *internally related* to others, are literally *part of* others (see Ollman, 1992).

Each keyword is a concept that necessarily draws in—contains, defines, shapes, problematizes—others and the relations therein. It's for this reason that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) insist that the production of concepts “is really an activity that combines the intelligence and the actions of the multitude, making them work together. Constructing concepts means making exist in reality a project that is a community” (p. 302). Our hope is that the reader will discover and intervene in these relationships, joining us in this common activity and this construction of a philosophical and educational community joined and paradoxically united by disparate political aspirations. The custom for introductions is to give a preview of what's to come, briefly outlining the flow and logic of each chapter. While such a preview doesn't in any way determine how the book is read, we nonetheless want to stop here, lest we prefigure the traces to be drawn any more that we already have.

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