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*Response to the Presidential Address*

RESPONSIBILITY, NOT RELEVANCE

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It is clear to me that focusing on something like the “situated philosophy” that Burbules proposed or other efforts to enact some kind of marriage between philosophy and education, or even pursuing philosophical arguments about schools with the hope of institutionally transforming anti-democratic, anti-intellectual, and neoliberal policies is not the kind of thing that can preserve (create?) our relevance.<sup>1</sup>

I read Kip’s essay on the same day that my local National Public Radio station aired an American RadioWorks documentary called “Don’t Lecture Me.”<sup>2</sup> This documentary revealed (hang on to your hats) “lecturing isn’t the best way for college students to learn.” I was exasperated that this was news worth reporting, when it is so much common sense to anyone in my field. Of course, who were the pedagogues touted in this specimen of groundbreaking reporting? Physics professors. We all have our Rodney Dangerfield stories of feeling insignificant and ignored in today’s education climate.

I am drawn to Kip’s invitation to step into a post-institutional moment in education, but his reasoning and rhetoric make me pause, and I start to disagree. Let’s review Kip’s thinking here. One: he captures us with a funny image of the big philosopher sitting in the tiny elementary school chair, being schooled by an unenlightened teacher who reads to him from a report card; his own impotence in this funny scenario symbolizes our field. This rhetorical move sets us up for the claim. Two: Kip argues that the field of philosophy of education, in its current state, is impotent and irrelevant to schooling, or more explicitly to the work of “transforming” schools, and thus we should do something different. Three: The “something different” we should try is looking beyond schools in our scholarship, following postmodernist insights about the politics of knowledge and subjectivity, where we might prove to be more *intellectually* and *educationally* relevant scholars. Within postmodern insights about identity are liberating possibilities, particularly for young people trapped

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<sup>1</sup> Kip Kline, “Toward a Post-institutional Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Hanford, “Don’t Lecture Me,” *American RadioWorks* documentary, American Public Media, audio and transcript, September 2011, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/lectures>

within “identities borne primarily out of adult anxieties and fantasies within canned, cheap discourses.” This assertion, in particular, is compelling and merits good consideration from philosophers of education. But in my response I want deviate from this fundamental claim to focus a bit on the reasoning that gets him to this claim.

I first want to challenge Kip’s description of our “relevance” and our assumed purposes as a field. I don’t believe the work of philosophers of education is to “transform” schools as institutions. I then want to interject some materialist analysis into Kip’s diagnosis and then employ another postmodern philosopher to think about the problems Kip raises. I end with a gesture towards a notion of philosophy of education as a “situated practice of proximity,” building on writing I’ve done with Nick Burbules, but also working from Levinas’ ethic of unconditional responsibility.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE RELEVANCE QUESTION  
(OR, IF SCHOOLS ARE THAT BAD, MAYBE BEING  
IRRELEVANT IS GOOD)

What’s relevance? What would it look like? Surely not the teacher awaiting the spewing of knowledge from Professor Kline, right? I’m no psychoanalyst, but I have to think that Kip’s self-effacing fantasy that begins his wonderful essay reveals a broader professoriate desire for an age of respect, deference, and even idolatry that is long since gone. The professor professes, and didn’t we become professors so that someone would listen to us, would repeat our wisdom back to us, and trot off to schools to carry it out?

Was relevance ever the goal? If so, we can never really know if we haven’t been. That is, maybe we’ve been exceedingly relevant; there is no control group here we can look to by way of finding out. Maybe, without philosophers of education doing their work, schools would be worse (whatever that might mean); teachers would be less insightful, administrators would be less ethically reflective and careful; curriculum would be less thoughtful. Alternatively, maybe relevance (to schools) was never the goal to begin with; we instead always have been part of a credentialing institution that, while perhaps relevant to schools of education, never had any real connection with the day-to-day drudgeries of schooling, and perhaps it was never meant to.

What are our current roles? Descriptively, we’ve become more particularist in the knowledge we pursue and often rewarded more lucratively for publication than teaching. Our roles are ever limited by the constraints and confines of the modern university, where departments are becoming profit-centers and the public purposes of any field, much less education, are rarely discussed and even more rarely contemplated.

So I want to purposefully muddle the questions of whether we are really less relevant and more isolated today as a professional group and whether relevance was ever what we might have been seeking in the first place.

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And really, are we more isolated and irrelevant than in 1980? Than in 1957? I have no idea, and think we should be careful in constructing such comparisons. Oh I know, I should have been at Teachers College in 1928, I know! Ah, those were the halcyon days, when George Counts, John Dewey and I could have gone clubbing down in Tribeca after long hours of lecturing grateful education students who were ready to march into the streets to demand, or better yet, build progressive schools at our direction. (John always bought the first round.)

In my own, admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic practice of philosophy of education, I have never hoped for “transformation” of schools. My own department uses that word incessantly and frankly it gives me—brace yourselves here for the philosophical jargon—the willies. Transformation smacks of professor-knows-best pedagogy and, frankly, magical, mystical thinking. It also suggests the hegemony of critical theory’s influence in educational theory in many circles. While not enamored with the goal of transformation I must admit to desiring relevance. Yes, I have dared hoped for “relevance” if that means my words and actions might enable teachers, administrators and education-reading public to think differently about long-held assumptions related to morality, politics, and democracy. I have dared hope that something we discussed in class, or that I wrote in an article, might impact children in a school, or more inclusive governance of a school, or promoted more justice in the resolution of an educational ethical dilemma. But I hope to educate students in my teaching and inform the larger field and practices of education in my research. True “education” changes people, but not in pre-determined ways that the professor can easily predict or understand. And no one body of research or theory “transforms” an institution as rooted in history and culture as schools.

I suspect that many of us have indeed shared Kip’s longing for more: more esteem, more students, more acknowledgment, more credence in pedagogy, policy, and politics of education. This is about desire, the desire to be seen, viewed, heard, understood, loved. It is part hubris, part understandable human longing, and a sensible response to a chilly age for most academics unaffiliated with a business school. Far from being alone in our frustrated desires, many of our professorial colleagues, particularly in humanities-related fields, now feel them with us and acutely. I think it has as much to do with the state of higher education today as it does with our particular field of educational philosophy—as marginalized as it might be as a humanities-oriented field within a feminized profession.

So I have doubts that the relevance question can even be properly answered; it begs too many other questions that are not unique to our field at all. If we did decide to stop obsessing with the relevance question, where might we go next? If we can acknowledge the hubris and human longing that feed our professional angst, where might we productively take our philosophical projects? Kip suggests that we need a new focus and a new way of thinking

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about our work beyond the questionable task of transforming untransformable institutions. I disagree with his reasons but agree with this claim. Old ways of doing philosophy of education may no longer—if they ever did—captivate education students and provide them with philosophical meaning in their professional quests in education. Kip’s suggestions regarding questions of subjectivity and identity point to ripe areas of study that are important. Building on his call to focus more on subjectivity and identity using postmodern sensibilities, I want to make a pitch for the “situated practices” idea that Kip dismisses, but re-interpreted with a Levinasian ethical frame. This suggestion might provide not just a new focus for philosophical projects in education, but a new way of looking at the practices that construct the work itself.

#### RESPONSIBILITY AND SITUATED PRACTICES OF PROXIMITY

As conceived with Burbules in a 2008 essay, I have argued that a “situated philosophy of education” brings a focus on “how people do philosophy, and on the ways in which it is done by particular people, under particular conditions of place and time, and in particular prototypical ways that are deemed proper by the norms of the practice itself.”<sup>3</sup> It is a way of framing our work that is explicitly “self-reflexive, recognizing how its conditions and circumstances of practice influence the content of the work that is done.”<sup>4</sup> It is conscious of the contexts, cultural influences, identities and spaces that comprise, enable, and limit its work.

Let’s go back to the encounter between Kip and his son’s teacher. The public school teacher is met by a large man, who is a teacher-of-teachers at a nearby University. The former’s day is tightly controlled, the curriculum she teaches externally designed and monitored, and the personal creativity and joy she might find in the work are increasingly constrained, by most accounts. As I write this paper on a Friday morning, I sit at home in my professorial running shorts, drinking a cup of scholarly coffee, and may soon even take a break to use the bathroom without anyone’s permission. This week I met with two different classes, teaching material that I selected in a syllabus of my own design. If one’s professional status is measured by autonomy alone, professor and teacher are worlds apart.

Yesterday I was in a meeting with a teacher, with whom I am collaborating on a community project, and she was discussing another professor who will be in a forum we’re sponsoring next week in our town. This teacher said, “we don’t want this professor to go ‘all academic’ on us, going on and on and taking up too much time.” What she meant was, academics go “on

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, “A Situated Philosophy of Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald D. Glass (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009), 268.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

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and on,” and often take up a lot more time than they should. As professors, we have higher status relative to teachers, and we have reputations as blowhards who won’t shut up. How’s that for putting a fine point on some of our worst philosophical practices?

Kip points out that teachers or administrators don’t seem to want relationships with philosophers of education and are “unwilling partners” in any kind of give-and-take conversation that involves mutual learning about philosophical issues and problems in situated contexts. He’s likely right about that. A relational ethics is a modernist, optimistic ethic, and the ways in which Burbules and I describe philosophy of education as a situated practice are infused with its assumptions of mutuality. These types of relations are not often available to philosophers of education and the people in schools they wish to engage. Following Kip, I think a more postmodern view might be in order. Levinas’ writings on unconditional responsibility, which presents the challenge of proximity over the mere pursuit of relevance, might help us situate practices of philosophy of education in these difficult times.

Responsibility, in Levinas’ rendering, is a radical ethical stance without rules but with a jaw-dropping requirement of unconditionality to and for the Other. It calls us to a radical openness with our students, a kind of unknowing which prevents us from believing we can truly know them or deeply understand that contexts of their work in schools. It calls us to *be* for the Other—the teacher, the administrator, the student, the secretary, the parent—and respond and witness. In this response and witnessing we attempt to lessen the distances between ourselves and the Other, to be more proximal.

To encounter the unknowable mystery of the Other means to *be* for the Other and attend to him/her (Todd, 2003). It is precisely the *ethical* responsibility of educators to *respond* to their students by stimulating and inspiring students’ reflections in new directions; directions that will enable them to develop their capacities in discovering the meaning of ethics within a rapidly changing cultural environment.<sup>5</sup>

Responding to the Other should not be with the goal of solidarity. As Levinas writes,

The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we

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<sup>5</sup> Michalinos Zembylas, “A Pedagogy of Unknowing: Witnessing Unknowability in Teaching and Learning,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 24, no. 2 (2005), 151.

recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship with the other requires a kind of proximity or attention; Bauman calls this a “suppression of distance.”<sup>7</sup> This distance is not so much physical but ontological, as well as political and social, in the case of professors and K-12 educators.

How does our field become more proximal, less distanced? How can we do this working within modernist institutions that are caught up, as Kip reminds, in the assumptions and constrictions of neoliberal educational discourses? We are each responsible for finding ways to do this, for revising old practices and building new practices that help us situate ourselves within the places that matter to students, teachers, administrators, and parents. We can indeed learn from postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard and Levinas in this work, but if our motivation is relevance rather than responsibility, we will likely continue to be disappointed. On the other hand, if we can embody responsibility in our teaching and our scholarly endeavors, relevance may occasionally be our reward.

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), cited in Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics and Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2010), 65.

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