

That Which Has Been Bequeathed to Us: Stories in Educational Histories

Theodore Michael Christou

ABSTRACT: *This paper outlines the concepts used by John Dewey to articulate the importance of relating instruction to personal and broader experience. In other words, a Deweyan interpretation of the terms “correlation” (in part, the integration of disciplinary study and human experience) and “recapitulation” (in part, we can come to understand the evolution of human knowledge) hold the key to educational history’s resuscitation and reintegration into Ontario teacher education. Further, this paper argues that history of education, which is presently on the periphery of teacher education curricula across Canada, is vital. The key to justifying and securing a place for humanistic disciplines in professional teacher preparation programs, which are highly influenced by accountability considerations, is by repositioning them as vibrant disciplines of study that relate to or elucidate contemporary concerns and debates. In order to achieve this, we must place greater emphasis on the manner of instruction and presentation, the “how”, than on the content, the “what”, so that history will be perceived of as a purposeful reflective activity and not mindless drill and fact.*

KEY WORDS: *history of education, teacher education, literature, John Dewey, reflective practice, self-study, and teacher induction.*

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that deprived of opportunities to study educational history, teacher candidates, teachers, and professors are in a plight similar to the protagonist in Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (Eco, 2004). Following an abrupt and severe automobile accident, this protagonist suffers from an acute case of amnesia. Deprived of his personal history, the story’s main character is lost in a fog. He no longer knows where he stands, where he was headed, and from whence he came. Largely, we educators are lost in the present and immediate chaos of the classroom and must reconstruct our memories and stories. To achieve this

Dr. Theodore Michael Christou is a Lecturer and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education UNB (University of New Brunswick), Office 311-1A, PO Box 4400, Fredericton, NB Canada. He can be reached at: tmc@unb.ca

aim, literature is as valuable a source of information as any manuscript, narrative, or image.

Historical stories can be hinges to critical thinking about educational contexts and spaces. These stories can reach beyond and outside of the limits of an individual teacher candidate's personal experiences and background knowledge. They can connect new teachers to past and lost traditions, places, and faces in education. Factual stories about the teaching profession can dispel the fallacy that the swirling, swimming chaos of classroom pedagogy somehow happens in isolation, unique from all other experience. Our professional amnesia need not be neglected.

This essay outlines the argument that a Deweyan interpretation of the terms "correlation" (in part, the integration of disciplinary study and human experience) and "recapitulation" (in part, we can come to understand the evolution of human knowledge) hold the key to educational history's resuscitation and reintegration into Ontario teacher education. The key to justifying and securing a place for humanistic disciplines in professional teacher preparation programs, which are highly influenced by accountability considerations is by repositioning them as vibrant disciplines of study that relate to or elucidate contemporary concerns and debates. In order to achieve this, we must place greater emphasis on the manner of instruction and presentation, the *how*, than on the content, the *what*, so that history will be perceived of as a purposeful reflective activity and not mindless drill and fact.

HISTORY EDUCATION AND DEWEYAN INTERPRETATION

Despite historians' sensitivity to presentism,¹ history can be considered useful, particularly when its lessons relate to present anxieties and concerns. The discipline is most engaging when those lessons are drawn from and elucidate stories of real human dilemma and experience. Later, I will demonstrate how stories can be used to teach educational history. Firstly, I will return to the notion of correlation and how Dewey's interpretation of the term can relate to contemporary study of history.

Correlation has been defined differently over the last century of curriculum theory but the Herbartians (educational reformers who followed the writing of the Johann Friedrich Herbart's at the end of the 19th century), a group with which John Dewey was identified early in his career, used the term to refer to what we presently call "integration" or

¹Imposing contemporary standards of judgment upon the, or using history to justify and celebrate progress towards the present.

“coordination” (Kliebard, 1992). Integration is a principle by which the rough divisions between subject areas are blurred. Often, project work is able to accomplish the goals of integration, because it immerses the learner in active and authentic (real-life) tasks that require the use of different skills and knowledge bases. In a unit where students are making a newspaper, for example, they are correlating (integrating/coordinating) reading, writing, editing, proofreading, media, technology, arts, social studies, and science, for starters.

Dewey’s conception of correlation went deeper than the Herbartians’, for he saw that all areas of studies, despite their abstracted and differentiated presentation, emerged from real human experience and history (Dewey, 1966). The idea that we have to integrate various subjects takes for granted the assumption that they are fundamentally different things we, from without, bring together; in fact, Dewey argued, they are united and made authentic through children’s lives and experiences (Kliebard, 1992). The correlation of knowledge, then, must not just happen between subjects, but also to the problems, needs, and concerns of human life and action. Educational history, it follows, should not be presented as an impractical or disconnected body of knowledge, for it emerged and emerges still from the lives and experiences of actual teachers and learners.

This history can be studied and learners can uncover the way that our present conceptions of knowledge reached their present forms. Here, the Deweyan notion of “recapitulation” requires some examining. At the risk of oversimplifying, recapitulation was initially interpreted as the belief that the development stages of human learning repeat the “progress” made by humanity over the course of history. Further, it was thought that student’s learning should emulate the stages of human development. The concept of recapitulation, in early curriculum theory, was able to answer the questions of what to teach (namely, what humans were doing and thinking at particular times in history) and in what order to teach it (the sequence was set out by history). In the early years of schooling, for example, a student would read and study the myths, symbols, and folklore of early, “primitive” civilizations.

John Dewey, reformulating the disreputed and debunked notion of recapitulation, introduced an epistemological question into the equation: how did knowledge and our understanding of knowledge take its present shape (Kliebard, 1992)? This question opens the door for educational history to reconstruct the evolution of educational knowledge; it is crucial, however, that history be rooted in practical and real human activity, where all learning and teaching happens. To achieve this end, educational stories,

drawn from archival and primary historical sources, can be used to engage student teachers in the same problems and dilemmas that educators have encountered throughout time, leading to our present frames and settings. In other words, we are not recapitulating history because we learn according to the same phases that Western civilization has pursued, we are progressively working through educational problems, reacquainting ourselves with our professional inheritance and, in so doing, arming ourselves to face present professional debates or concerns.

History can be a powerful tool, but it is, like all bodies of knowledge are, rendered meaningless unless it is wedded to human activity and experience (Dewey, 1916; and Kliebard, 1992). This is why actual stories drawn from and searched for in the archives and historical records of primary sources can be powerful media to support the reintroduction of history of education into teacher education programs. These historical anecdotes or narrations can reinvigorate the discipline, provoke critical thinking, and bridge the perceived gap between theory and practice.

Education, broadly considered as learning, is as ancient as the basic human need and desire to acquire skills or information. Human stories relating to education and drawn from historical records can be regarded as the places where people have stored and replicated cultural learning, having transcribed countless educational perspectives, imaginings, and experiences (Donald, 2001). These texts stretch out to all areas of the earth and to the near and ancient past.

Since the lessons are often embedded in longer narratives, the learners can engage in the work of history – examining primary sources, looking for biases, considering the broader intellectual and social context etc. – while developing an understanding of the way that stories explore the transitional space between enacted educational contexts and imagined learning situations (Ellsworth, 2005). Beyond their immediate pedagogical significance, historical stories can help disengage the false dichotomy between theory and practice, demonstrating the intersections between experiences that have passed, presently occur, and are imagined (Sumara, 1996). In this regard, at the very least, they make plain the fact that history is not too theoretical. It is not theoretical at all, in fact; history is deeply and profoundly rooted in human experience.

Reading and discussing educational stories that represents educational contexts from different periods of time. “Doing” educational history, examining and thinking critically about actual pedagogy, can present teacher candidates with experiences that might run contrary to their own, enabling reflection upon educational practice and beliefs (Dewhurst &

Lamb, 2005). And if we conceptualize our belief systems as resembling a web, as espoused by philosophers W.V. Quine and J.S. Ullian, we begin to see the entire network as interwoven and interconnected. The re-evaluation, or rattling, of *some* of our underlying assumptions and beliefs influences all elements of our understanding (Quine & Ullian, 1978). This web can be understood as a complex system, where the individual component parts of a system cannot be entirely understood without taking into consideration the way they relate to other parts and to the whole.

The point is not for teacher educators to assign candidates a reading list composed of ancient and modern historical sources and set them out to read and think. Rather, teacher educators can draw pertinent passages from longer narratives and focus instruction on predicaments or crises that are pertinent to contemporary teaching and learning (Dewhurst & Lamb, 2005). Open-ended discussion of questions or points of controversy can operate as a pedagogical tool to encourage engagement with emerging epistemological or personal crises and to facilitate resolution of problems in the teacher candidate's own experiences (MacIntyre, 1977; and Hahn, 1991).

These discussions are a public crossroads for multiple perspectives, where considering "the other", as well as alternative or suppressed perspectives, can happen because of the intersection of differences in background, belief, privilege, and aims (Ellsworth, 1989). To be most effective as pedagogical tools, texts used for discussion and analysis should provoke alternative and dissonant educational beliefs or experiences in order to be most provocative and stimulating (Nozick, 1981). This might mean juxtaposing the narrative of a female teacher in rural Ontario at the beginning of the 20th century with that of a missionary Jesuit in 18th century in New France.

As a thought experiment, let us presume that we are reading a story concerning a teacher who espouses a thoroughly child-centred approach to pedagogy. This educator has even written up a personal philosophy overflowing with developmentalist slogans and acts according to its tenets. At no time will this teacher allow himself stand at the front of a classroom and lecture. At no time will he align desks in rows or espouse direct instruction.

Allow one further assumption: a student transfers to this educator's class from a different school board in the same province. This student is autistic and his Individual Education Plan dictates that he requires an intense behavioural approach to learning. The teacher, despite his philosophy and belief system, grudgingly follows the plan. By the end of a term, he notes

that the student is making significant social and academic progress. The teacher described has had a core element of his belief system tested and, while he refuses not renounce his earlier position, he writes in his journal that he no longer considers child-and-teacher-centred in mutually exclusive terms. A balance of both, he writes, like hot and cold water in the shower, are necessary. One event has, in a very complex way, provoked a change in the entire network of his pedagogical beliefs.

This thought experiment is not fictionalized; it is extracted from my personal teaching journal logged between 2001-2002 while I was a student teacher at the University of Toronto. Teaching memoirs and journals such as mine are historical sources that provide valuable information that can help teacher candidates understand that many of the dilemmas and problems they face in practice have been considered and debated by educators. The personal, first person, factual narratives are not anaesthetized textbook accounts and, consequently, they permit the reader to develop a personal bond with the writer. Memoirs, as exemplified by Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man*, draw the teacher into the minds of a community of teachers whose experiences and feelings paint vivid and accessible scenes of the otherwise forgotten, past, and distant.

What is most essential to note at this moment is the seemingly fine line between historical text and historical fiction. As post-structuralist and critical theorists have pointed out, literature and history have much in common: characters, setting, figurative language, and plot (White, 1973). Despite these and other similarities, historiography is measured more by its representations of true events than they are by their use and manipulation of language and metaphor; historical texts can be abandoned as false or untrue by the community of historians who critique and examine historical work (Lorenz, 2000).

History aspires to more than verisimilitude, the appearance of truth; it is bound by the evidence, the artefact, and the archive. In order to be credible, to give a fair account of the past, historical texts cannot be imbalanced by partial and misleading representations (McCullagh, 2004). Within that body of historical writing, granted, there are multiple perspectives and stories. It is those stories that, when juxtaposed with each other, compared, and examined critically, can powerfully represent the human experiences that shaped and were shaped by the past.

That is not to say that works of fiction such as novels, theatre scripts, and verse cannot be used as valuable resources for historians looking to gain insight into the cultures and educational experiences of humans from the past and from far-away places. In fact, serious historical examinations

should consider the cultural influences and products of a period. That said, history and literature are two different disciplines with disparate expectations, traditions, and paradigms that frame the writing and analysis (Lorenz, 1998 and 1999).

It is precisely here, at the mention of literary analysis, where I wish to bridge back to Dewey's ideas about integrating and correlating students' studies to their lived experiences. While stories drawn from historical records can be engaging, particularly when they relate directly to learners' actual lives and preoccupations, *how* they are presented and used is of the gravest significance. I argue that educational history courses using stories as a means of instruction should engage in the kinds of critical textual analysis and discussion common in many advanced literature classes.

Critical dialogue and discussion that emerges from focussed reading of literary texts enables critical interpretation and fosters deep insight of educational contexts and scenarios reaching beyond student teachers' immediate lived experiences (Eco, 1994; and Sumara, 2002). Teacher education can, through the use of historical stories of relevance and the critical study of those texts, become a site where the study of curriculum is not reduced to focussing on ministry documents; the relationships and intersections amongst teaching, learning, culture and language can be examined and explored (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000).

In order to make this point clearer, I will provide one very brief example of a dynamic, powerful, and relevant story drawn from history. For the sake of laconic narration, I will be as concise as possible in my treatment of this example, forsaking many of the rich details that could be drawn out the historical record, examined, and elaborated upon. To this end, the following paragraphs will suggest several *possible* subjects for study and relate a number of questions that can lead to powerful discussion and debate in an educational history classroom.

Let us consider the case of Mary McLeod Bethune, whose life experiences elucidate some of the struggles that women of colour had to overcome in order to be pursue higher education (Murphy, 2006). The daughter of former slaves in South Carolina, Bethune had sixteen siblings and the first to be born "free", following the U.S. Civil War (Poole, 1994). She worked in the fields until a single one-room schoolhouse was opened miles away from her home (Benner, 2002). Following her elementary schooling, because there were no high schools for blacks nearby, she returned to the fields until receiving a scholarship to study until the age of twenty (Benner, 2002). For most of her life, Bethune was the only African-American student in her school (Johnson, 1999). Throughout her life, she encountered resistance

and prejudice, but she succeeded in working as a teacher, directing a school, founding an institution for the education of African-American girls, assuming the position of college president, becoming a national leader for the black education movement, and touring the world as an international advocate and spokesperson for equity in education (Johnson, 1999; Benner, 2002; Hanson, 2003; and Murphy, 2006).

I acknowledge that the above paragraph does very little justice to the complexity of Bethune's story. Still, my shortcomings as a storyteller quash neither the powerful lessons nor the rich opportunities for debate and discussion that emerge from the summary. How did the Canadian context of the same historical period compare to this US situation? Are there, in the present multicultural environments that make up our classrooms and schools, students and educators whose family histories or personal experiences resemble Bethune's? How might such experiences affect the worldview of my students, their parents, and my co-workers? Do women today, particularly women of colour, deal with the same kinds of discriminatory social behaviours that Bethune overcame? Do I, as an educator, unaware of my underlying assumptions or biases, contribute to discriminatory practice?

I could formulate a litany of questions and, perhaps, offer much less in terms of responses. This is the stuff upon which truly emancipatory education is made. Not only could stories like Bethune's represent imbalances in power, they stimulate personal reflection and, potentially, transformative action. The questions posed above are the products of the kinds of analyses that pounce out of the texts when we engage with, discuss, and debate powerful stories. These stories emerge from the historical record and are extremely relevant to present classroom action and practice, as demonstrated by the Bethune story.

The kinds of textual analyses and debates, I am arguing for correlate history to the lives of teacher candidates and to the kinds of problems that exist in contemporary classrooms. If the historical stories are presented in chronological sequence, they can recapitulate part of the evolution of educational problems, helping student teachers understand how the schooling system they will work in came to look as it does. Further, historical stories should help teacher candidates to develop the interpretive tools that enable them to reflect deeply upon the implications of the setting and situation in which education happens.

With this statement, I mean to consider that education is intimately related to the situational learning context (Ellsworth, 2005). In order to uncover where we "are", it is essential that we consider where we came

from, who came before us, and how our living, learning and working environments were shaped (Chambers, 1999). These considerations all relate to educational history and they are all topics that should be explored through stories and critical discussion rather than with textbook summaries, drill, and recall of dates.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, I argue that history can provoke educators' imaginations and critical sensibilities. This does not mean that teacher candidates should pursue a backwards-looking attitude towards pedagogy. They need not consult with professional ancestors for approval, nor do they have to emulate the past. But a forward-looking, hopeful, and imaginative pedagogy requires some inspirational and motivational point of departure. History, (re)presented through the medium of factual, actual, human stories, situates the educational past in the realm of real life. It is from this lived realm from which the discipline has been abstracted and removed. Ultimately, "*much of the value of studying the history of education lies not in providing us with answers, but in daring us to challenge the answers and assumptions [...] bequeathed to us*" (Kliebard, 1995:194).

References

- Benner Jr, L. (2002). "Chronicles of Black Courage" in *Ebony*, 57(11).
- Chambers, C. (1999). "A Topography for Canadian Curriculum Theory" in *Canadian Journal of Education*, 24(2), pp.137-150.
- Davis, B., D. Sumara & R. Luce-Kapler. (2000). *Engaging Minds: Learning and Teaching in a Complex World*. Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1966). *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Random House.
- Dewhurst, D. & S. Lamb. (2005). "Educational Stories: Engaging Teachers in Educational Theory" in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37(6), pp.907-917.
- Donald, M. (2001). *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Eco, U. (1994). *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eco, U. (2004). *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. Orlando, FA: Harcourt, Inc., Translation.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). "Why Doesn't this Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy" in *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(3), pp.297-321.

THEODORE MICHAEL CHRISTOU,
That Which Has Been Bequeathed to Us

- Ellsworth, E. (2005). *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Hahn, C.L. (1991). "Controversial Issues in Social Studies" in J.P. Shaver [ed]. *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*. New York: MacMillan.
- Hanson, J. (2003). "Mary McLeod Bethune" in *Black Women's Political Activism*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Johnson, C.S. (1999). "Interview with Bethune - 1940" in A.T. McCluskey & E. Smith [eds]. *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kliebard, H.M. (1992). *Forging the American Curriculum: Essays in Curriculum History and Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Kliebard, H.M. (1995). "Why History of Education?" in *The Journal of Educational Research*, 88(4), March/April, pp.194-199.
- Lorenz, C. (1998). "Can Histories Be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the 'Metaphorical Turn'" in *History and Theory*, 37(1), pp.309-330.
- Lorenz, C. (1999). "You Got Your History, I Got Mine" in *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, 10(4), pp.563-584.
- Lorenz, C. (2000). "Some Afterthoughts on Culture and Explanation in Historical Inquiry" in *History and Theory*, 39, pp.348-363.
- MacIntyre, A. (1977). "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" in *Monist*, 60(4).
- McCullagh, C.B. (2004). "What Do Historians Argue About?" in *History and Theory*, February, pp.18-38.
- Murphy, M.M. (2006). *The History and Philosophy of Education: Voices of Educational Pioneers*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Poole, B.A. (1994). *Mary McLeod Bethune: Educator, Black American Series*. Los Angeles, CA: Melrose Square Publishing Company.
- Quine, W.V. & J.S. Ullian. (1978). *The Web of Belief*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, second edition.
- Sumara, D. (1996). "Using Commonplace Books in Curriculum Studies" in *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 12(1), pp.45-49.
- Sumara, D. (2002). *Why Reading Literature in Schools Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight*. Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum.
- White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.