What Do Philosophers of Education Do?

(And How Do They Do It?)

Edited by
Claudia Ruitenberg

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This edition first published 2010
Originally published as Volume 43, Issue 3 of *The Journal of Philosophy of Education*
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Editorial organization © 2010 Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

What do philosophers of education do? : (and how do they do it?) /
edited by Claudia Ruitenberg.
p. cm.
"Originally published as volume 43, issue 3 of The Journal of Philosophy
of Education"—T.p. verso.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4443-3297-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Education—Philosophy. 2. Education—Research. I. Ruitenberg, Claudia.
LB14.7.W5 2010
370.1–dc22 2010000775

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 9 on 11pt Times by Macmillan India Ltd.
Printed in Malaysia

01 2010

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Foreword

The question of method in philosophy is a vexed one, and for good reason. Empirical research into education constructs its research questions and then determines the best means to find answers to them; and sometimes the methods that are available, or those in which the researcher is adept, determine the kinds of questions that can be asked. In philosophy too there can be this fit, and sometimes philosophy is none the worse for this. But one does not go far in philosophy without realising that one has embarked on an on-going engagement with the literature, and the consequences of this are multiple: the presuppositions one brings to the enquiry are challenged, the questions with which one starts change their shape, and whatever one might have thought of as one's method becomes caught up in the substance of one's research interest. Sometimes content and method are one. This is found most obviously to be the case when we examine the words we use, for surely language is the very stuff of the philosopher's work, messily entangled, as it is, with the conceptual clarity, perspicuity or theoretical alignments we seek to achieve, and inseparable, as we can scarcely deny, from the practical purchase the enquiry yields. Philosophers, then, are rightly wary of being too quick to explicate their methods.

Yet this is something philosophers are now commonly asked to do. This is most plainly the case in the context of applications for funding, where a box asking for a stipulation of 'the research methods to be used' remains to be filled. But it is there also in a more pervasive way where the politics of educational organisations requires the case for a subject's importance to be made in terms not so much of its realm of enquiry, the distinct modes of its understanding, but of its particular methodological expertise. Philosophers can easily feel that they are caught in a game they do not wish to play.

By contrast, however, a different response is possible: it is not as if there is nothing to be said about what philosophers do. Nor is it erroneous to talk of the different methods they employ. And for anyone new to philosophical enquiry—for anyone, for example, on a research methods course in Education or social science—there is much that can be said about the different ways one might go about philosophical research into education. Experienced philosophers too should be sensitised to the benefit that reflection on such matters can bring. Insight into this variety of approaches is not only practically useful: it also opens possibilities of thought that otherwise escape the agenda of research. And in the end these release the kinds of enquiry into education that answer to the demands of practice in unparalleled ways. Hence, there is every reason to attempt some kind of examination of what philosophers of education do and how they do it.

The collection of essays that follows was the brainchild of Claudia Ruitenberg, and she is to be congratulated for her perception of the need that the above paragraphs identify and for her creativity in imagining the kinds of account that might answer to that need. In the introduction that follows, she explains more fully, and in a more personal vein, the thinking and the context that brought the child to life, as well as offering an indication of the substance of the chapters that ensue. Her conscientious and skilful editing has contributed greatly to the coherence and focus of this volume. Claudia Ruitenberg and her contributors have made a multi-faceted and practical contribution to the philosophical study of education. Given the complex and in some ways controversial nature of the task, this is no mean feat.

Paul Standish

1
Introduction: The Question of Method in Philosophy of Education

CLAUDIA RUITENBERG

> It is possible to raise and solve philosophical problems with no very clear idea of what philosophy is, what it is trying to do, and how it can best do it; but no great progress can be made until these questions have been asked and some answer to them given.
>
> (Collingwood, 2005, p. 1)

In a graduate seminar I taught in the spring of 2009 twenty students used and in effect brought into being in concrete ways a range of philosophical research methods. By telling the students we would study philosophical research methods, I had engaged in a very deliberate performative speech act that sought to bring about what it seemed to describe. When I say the students 'brought philosophical research methods into being', I do not mean that they invented or created new methods, but rather that by naming their ways of thinking and writing as philosophical research methods, they made these ways of thinking and writing available for explicit consideration. The work of philosophers of education and philosophers more generally has not been without method, but this has not commonly been taught under the term 'research methods'.[1]

My choice of the term 'philosophical research methods in education' for the course was based on a pragmatic recognition of the omnipresence and weight of the term 'research' in universities across the English-speaking world. The university at which I work—like many other universities—identifies itself as 'research-intensive', and its faculty are evaluated on their contributions to 'research'. In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise is called just that, the *Research* Assessment Exercise, and scholarly work that is not labelled 'research' is not counted. Although philosophers of education may be more comfortable thinking of their work as 'scholarship' or 'inquiry' rather than 'research', the discourse of 'research' is so pervasive that it has seemed to me prudent to examine and explain, rather than to deny, the research aspects of our work. In this I felt supported by the American

Philosophical Association, which has adopted the following statement on the profession:

> 'Research' has come to be employed in contemporary academic life as a generic term referring to forms of inquiry pursued in all the many disciplines, from the natural sciences to the humanities. In this broad sense of the term philosophers have been engaged in research throughout the entire history of philosophy, and continue to be so engaged today, together with their scientific and humanistic colleagues in the many other disciplines descended from philosophy in which the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is still granted. (American Philosophical Association, 1996)

But even if the idea of philosophy as research is palatable, what about method? Does this volume cave in to what Richard Rorty has called 'methodolatry', the uncritical worship of method (Rorty, 1999, p. xxi)?[2] I would like to think it does not, and one reason for that is that it employs a much broader conception of method than its Baconian conception as technique that 'can be applied reliably irrespective of the talent of the researcher' (Smith, 2006, p. 157). 'Methods' in this volume refers to the various ways and modes in which philosophers of education think, read, write, speak and listen, that make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations.

The impetus for this volume is the fact that many philosophers of education work not, or not only, in departments of philosophy but in faculties and schools of education. Research methods courses are uncommon in departments of philosophy where it is assumed that students learn to read and write philosophy by, well, reading and writing philosophy. Faculties and schools of education, however, are interdisciplinary environments where students generally do not have the same experience of being immersed in philosophical discourse. Moreover, education is commonly seen *as* a social science, rather than as a field of theories, policies and practices that can be approached in a variety of ways, with perspectives *from* the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. One of the consequences is that philosophers of education are expected to be able to answer questions about their methods just as their social science colleagues do. Whether due to 'physics envy' or not, there seems to be a heightened concern with research methods in the social sciences. In addition, in faculties and schools of education, which may already suffer from 'status anxiety' in the academy, the desire to have one's work be regarded as sufficiently scientific can lead to an even greater emphasis on the articulation of methods.

The challenge, as I see it, is for philosophers of education to talk about their research methods without submitting to the paradigms and expectations of the social sciences—especially the emphasis on 'data', technique and the tripartite breakdown of method into data gathering, data analysis and data representation. Without succumbing to the anxious concern with method to which I referred above, how might philosophical work be articulated on its own, that is,

philosophical, terms? How might we describe with precision and specificity the types of thinking and writing, of analysis, questioning, critique, interpretation and so on that philosophers of education engage in? What are our modes of thought and discursive operations?

The present collection complements two special issues of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* published in 2006, entitled *Philosophy, Methodology and Educational Research*. These special issues focused largely on philosophy (or philosophies) of research in the face of empiricist tendencies and threats. This volume focuses not on philosophy *of* research but philosophy *as* research—a possibility included in Bridges and Smith's (2006) introduction to the first of the two special issues (p. 131) but not elaborated in detail. The essays in the current volume are not critiques of lack of philosophical self-awareness and solid conceptual frameworks in educational research, nor do they take on 'data-driven' or 'evidence-based' policy discourses. Rather, they provide articulations of particular modes of philosophical thinking, reading and writing that are of value for the elucidation or critique of educational questions.

WHAT IS TO BE GAINED? WHAT IS TO BE LOST?

I introduce this collection of essays with excitement, but also with some hesitation. Even if the project does not fall victim to 'methodolatry', might there be drawbacks to a focus on method in philosophy of education? An oft-heard objection by philosophers of education to requests for, for example, abstracts or keywords prior to the completion of an article is that they don't know what they'll write until they've written it. Likewise, 'selecting' a method or set of methods prior to actually using them in philosophical research is problematic. Although some philosophers of education may be able to articulate a particular operation—say the analytic differentiation of a concept from related yet distinct concepts—before approaching a new philosophical quandary, many others are able to identify their methods only in retrospect. This, however, need not be an insurmountable problem. The order in which a text is presented to the reader hardly ever represents the order in which the ideas were formed and the text was written. More importantly: the intentions of the author—methodological or otherwise—cannot contain the effects of the text. Jacques Derrida has observed that the foreword is 'essential' but also disingenuous, as it gives the impression that it was written before the rest of the text while it was more than likely written afterwards, and bound to fail, as it indicates the central theme or thesis that is presented in the text but cannot control what the reader will emphasise or de-emphasise in her or his reading:

> From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written—a past—which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future. . . . This is an essential and ludicrous operation: not only because writing as such does not consist in any of

> these tenses (present, past or future insofar as they are all modified presents); not only because such an operation would confine itself to the discursive effects of an intention-to-mean, but because, in pointing out a single thematic nucleus or a single guiding thesis, it would cancel out the textual displacement that is at work 'here'. (Derrida, 2004, pp. 6–7)

If philosophers of education believed that announcing a methodological nucleus or guiding methodology before the 'work itself' could contain the displacements the text incurs, we would similarly be mistaken. Philosophers of education may make explicit in what ways they have analysed a certain concept or critiqued an idea, but their readers may discern other, perhaps even more powerful, discursive operations at work in the text. If we keep the necessarily self-limiting nature of methodological delimitation in mind, however, and accept that the prefatory methodological statements required in certain professional communications (such as grant applications) are a 'false appearance', then I believe that we stand to gain from the methodological reflection these falsely prefatory statements can encourage.

A second concern philosophers of education may have is that research methods in philosophy of education cannot be divorced from content. It may be all well and good to study the design of questionnaires or the coding of interview transcripts as methods, these hypothetical objectors will argue, but this is not how thinking and writing in philosophy of education proceed. But if this is the concern, I wonder if we have grown a little too fond of our status as 'research outsiders' to recognise our similarities with other kinds of research. After all, good researchers do not select a method irrespective of their object of inquiry or theoretical framework. In good research, the methods have to be understood within a methodology or theory of method, and this needs to be congruent with the theoretical framework of the study, which in turn has to be pertinent to the research question.

Methodological statements about philosophy of education can perhaps be understood by analogy to artists' statements about their work. Artists' primary concern is to make art, yet most art academies also teach their students to communicate about their work through the medium of the artist's statement. It can be argued that the artist's explanation of what he or she has done and why does not enhance the work itself and may actually detract from it; at the same time, many viewers, especially those not expert in the particular discipline, appreciate the additional information or perspective the artist's statement provides. Derrida notes that works of art, *erga*, are surrounded by many *parerga*, a term he borrows from Immanuel Kant and that denotes elements that surround but are not, strictly speaking, part of a work of art, such as the artist's statement but also the frame, title and signature (Derrida, 1987). As I have written elsewhere (Ruitenberg, 2009), Derrida discusses the supplementary functioning of *parerga*. They are outside the work but at the same time contest the borders of the work and what can be counted as inside and outside of it: 'I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a

work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper . . ., for example the frame' (Derrida, 1987, p. 63). The artist's statement is neither essential nor accessory to the work of art itself; it *supplements* the work. At first glance, a supplement is an addition, but Derrida observes that 'the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void' (Derrida, 1976, p. 145). The supplement is both complementary and compensatory (*suppléant*); it is not merely something that can be removed as easily as it was added but rather something that 'instills itself as a *natural* part of that which it supplements' (Bingham, 2002, p. 269). Although the 'work itself' is considered complete, once it has been supplemented with an artist's statement, this statement completes the work and, if removed, it will leave the work incomplete. The methodological commentaries that were invited as part of the chapters in this volume function perhaps as supplements to the 'real work' of philosophy of education. Although philosophy of education was considered sufficient unto itself, once methodological statements are added and readers grow used to such statements—in the way that art audiences have grown accustomed to artist's statements—their absence may be perceived as a lack in 'the work itself'. The point is not that this is either desirable or undesirable: it is just that it is a possibility.

There are, then, reasons for misgivings about the present project, and it would perhaps have been rash to have embarked upon it without considering these. Once these questions of philosophical method are broached, however, they generate real excitement. This was evident in my graduate seminar, it has been evident in conversations I have had with colleagues about the subject, and it is there to be seen in the various contributions to this collection. As a result, I believe now more strongly than when I started this process that there is something to be gained from an explication of philosophical work in methodological terms. So what did my students do? To give just two examples: Stefan Honisch, a trained pianist and composer, conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of playing the piano. Through a stripping away of what he knew about playing the piano, he came to pay attention to his corporeal consciousness of the movement of his arms, the weight of his fingers and the sensation of his breath. This type of inquiry, he noted, is valuable but rare:

> The embodied connection to sound is attenuated too often in Western art music's (admittedly necessary) emphasis on technical fluency, stylistic propriety, and the general cultivation of perfection . . . In observing my teachers and other pianists whom I admire, I focused on replicating the appearance of their gestures and failed to ask what their bodily experience of those gestures might be—all the more troubling given that, as a musician with a physical impairment, my embodied connection to music was likely considerably different from their own. (Honisch, 2009)