Introduction to Philosophy of Education

Tues/Fri 12:30-1:50 • EDUC 159b • Fall 2014

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Brief Course Description

From the Course Catalog: What are the goals of education? What does it mean to be educated? What deserves to be in the curriculum? What does it mean to teach? What is critical thinking, and how might it be fostered? How can we educate for moral character without indoctrination? The course engages with these and other major issues in contemporary philosophy of education, through close examination of classical and recent theoretical texts.

Introduction to the course

This course is an opportunity to read, think, write and talk about philosophy of education.

What, you may be wondering, is “philosophy of education,” and why would a person be interested in reading, thinking, writing and talking about it? Roughly, there are two ways to think about what philosophy of education is.

A. One approach is to think about philosophy as a method. In other words, just like we can investigate certain questions empirically (by gathering data and analyzing that data systematically in order to discover something about reality that we didn’t previously know about), we can also investigate certain question conceptually (by being very careful and critical about the concepts that we use, what they mean, what their implications are, and by constructing arguments on behalf of better or sharper understandings of the issues at hand). Interestingly, philosophy-as-a-method is less concerned about the way things are and more concerned about the way things ought to be.

B. Another way is to think about philosophy as a set of topics. Big, scary, incredibly important topics that are fundamental to the enterprise that we call “education.” Like, what are the goals or purposes of education? What does it mean to be educated? What
does it mean to think, or to think well? Who has a right to education, and what kind of right is that? And the idea of the “liberal arts” – what’s that all about?

This division between Version A and Version B is somewhat artificial, for reasons that I’m happy to talk about at length. But it’s helpful for now, because it allows me to say that this course encompasses both. The course is organized around Version B. Those big questions are the topics of the course. At the same time, we are going to be reading philosophical literature, constructing philosophical arguments (orally and in writing), doing philosophy, developing our skills at making philosophical arguments. So, we are going to be practicing Version A with regard to the topics of Version B.

(You might be thinking, isn’t that obvious? No, it’s not. We could, for example, tackle some relatively narrower questions in education and still approach that question philosophically. We could ask a question such as, “How should science educators accommodate a student’s belief in Creationism?” Or, “At what age should a child be permitted or encouraged to make curricular choices?” Those are terrific questions that good philosophers of education have spent some time discussing. But we’re not going to. Likewise, we could try to get smarter about the big, scary questions through empirical research rather than through philosophical inquiry. For example, we could try to understand what the liberal arts are all about by finding out how the term is currently used in various institutions, or by surveying students about their attitudes. Those are fine approaches, from which – if we were to pursue them – we should surely learn a lot. But we’re not going to do that either.)

Given what I’ve said above, it follows that this is not really a course about Philosophy of Education. I will not be delivering lectures in which you will be expected to absorb details about the major figures and major positions in the field, in order to repeat those details at some later time. At the end of the course, you probably won’t feel like you’ve gotten a sense of the entire field, because the approach is not designed for what is sometimes called “coverage.” That’s the bad news.

On the other hand, the good news is that you just might feel like you understand something about the business in which you’re currently engaged, namely, the business of being educated. That’s a nice little side benefit of studying philosophy of education; most of our questions will be immediately relevant to our present circumstances. It’s like studying philosophy of law while you’re waiting to be tried for a felony that may or may not have committed.

So how will we proceed?

My aspiration is that the course will feel like one long, extended, shared conversation, that is launched at the beginning of the semester, that continues before, during, and after each class session in various ways, and that ends at the end of the semester because our time together is over but never really concludes. At times, it may seem rather intense.

In general, you will be reading and writing before each class, talking about the reading (and sometimes writing about the reading) during class, and sometimes writing after class as well. You may have heard about “experiential education.” You may have taken some “experiential education” courses at Brandeis. This is not like that. It’s not that I don’t believe in experiential education; on the contrary, I think it can be extremely powerful and, at times, far more
appropriate to a particular set of learning goals. It’s just that, in this class, the particular experience you will be having is one of reading and talking and writing philosophy.

The quantity of reading will be fairly small. The point is that you should read carefully, think, take notes on what you’re reading, mark up your texts, and formulate questions and connections as you go. I will not generally ask you to read stuff as background. On the other hand, if you want to understand something that you encounter, or want to know something about an author, then by all means feel free to do some digging around online. That, too, is part of what it means to read closely and carefully.

Learning Goals for the Course

1. Students will develop their capacity to critically examine educational purposes and practices.
2. Students will develop their capacity to articulate arguments on behalf of positions on educational issues.
3. Students will enrich and improve their own educational experience through the development of meta-cognitive capacities (i.e., the ability to think about their thinking, or specifically their learning).

Course requirements

As I have already indicated, the course will be taught as a seminar, with an emphasis on discussion of the texts both in class and outside it (i.e., online). The goal is for students to think, and to express ideas, and to build on each others’ ideas, rather than to listen to the instructor.

The planned formal requirements of the course are as follows. These are subject to change, depending on how the course proceeds as well as how many students end up remaining in the course. Some instructors maintain that a syllabus is a sacred contract between the instructor and the student. I understand that position, and I understand how it may be appropriate to certain courses. But with regard to this course, I do not hold that position myself. The course is a shared journey, some of which is not predictable in advance. The syllabus provides you with an understanding of my intentions and my pedagogic approach, but not with a guarantee of the future.

1. **Thorough preparation and active participation (10%)**: 
   Student should come to class having read the text, annotated the text, and thought about the text. Please print and bring the text itself to class, along with the questions and thoughts that it raises for you. You will be learning via substantive encounter with the texts and with each other. (Every once in a while, I might say something worthwhile – but don’t count on it.) Printing out the texts can be a hassle, I know – but on the other hand, it’s much cheaper than buying a textbook.
2. **Reading Responses (10%)**:

Prior to most class sessions, you will be expected to post a response to the reading online. Sometimes I will provide specific prompts, although not always. This serves two functions: first, it gets you thinking much more actively about the text; and second, it provides a window for me (and your classmates) into how the group is thinking, what the challenges of the text are, what’s exciting, etc. These will not be graded. You are permitted to miss two (2) reading responses over the course of the semester with no penalty.

3. **Discussion Leading (10%)**:

There is some benefit to having the instructor lead a class discussion. I’ve been doing this for a while, and although I don’t always get it right, experience does help. Also, presumably, I know something about our subject. But that latter point has a downside as well, because the expectation that the instructor knows the answers is a wonderful way to ruin a free and open exploration of the questions. Likewise, as much as I committed to fostering a collegial atmosphere, students will understandably fall back on the familiar student pattern of looking to the instructor for approval. To shake things up, therefore, I will be asking students to lead discussions. The details about this (when, how many times, how big the groups will be) will be forthcoming, when we know more about how many students are in the course. Discussion leading will be peer-evaluated, but not graded.

4. **Session reporting (10%)**:

Each session, one student will be assigned to take notes on the discussion. Following the session, the student will write a report on the discussion and post it to the class list by the end of the day. These reports are not minutes of the discussion. Let me repeat that, because there’s always confusion: I am not seeking a transcript or play-by-play description of what happens in class. We do not need to know who said what. Usually, rolling up your notes into one or two paragraphs will suffice. In addition to being brief, the reports should also be in the students’ own voice, not in the voice of a disembodied and dispassionate observer. This about this a contributing to an ongoing conversation by catching us all up, rather than playing the role of journalist or anthropologist. Feel free to add observations or comments as appropriate. Finally, and this is important, the report should close with a question or two that remain or that is raised by the discussion.

5. **Online Discussion (10%)**:

Students will post at least 5 contributions to online discussions (following session reports) over the course of the semester. This is a way to hear more voices and to hear them in a different format. Sometimes you say something in class but change your mind. Sometimes you want to expand on something you said. And sometimes you didn’t get a chance to talk, or didn’t know what you thought until later. Feel free to be informal in your writing. But be coherent; don’t use the medium as an excuse for unfocused ramblings. Re-read your postings to make sure they make sense, and that they actually say something. These postings are not graded by me. However, you are putting forward your words into a semi-public space, and you don’t want people to think you’re an idiot!

6. **Journal (0%)**:

As a pedagogical experiment, students will keep a class journal – one place where they do their writing for the class. This is different that taking notes on a lecture. You may find that, in some class discussions, your journal has only a few lines. In others, we may pause so that
you can do some in-class writing. Your journal can be a file on a computer or a paper notebook, but the idea is that you have one place where you can do the writing that you will be doing – at home in response to a text, in class in response to a question from me, notes and ideas that come up in class, etc. The purpose here is to elevate the writing for the course as a mode of thinking (not just reporting what we think we think), and to increase the possibility that we will surprise ourselves by what we discover as we write. I will not be grading your journals. In fact, I will not be evaluating them at all, which is why it counts for zero percent of your grade. But I am including it here because it’s my expectation that you will have and keep a class journal. We will call on your journal writing in the course of our work together.

7. **Two Short Papers (20%):**
   Each paper will be 2-3 pages, and will use journal entries as a springboard for a deeper reflection on a topic or a text.

8. **Exams, Midterm (10%) and Final (20%):**
   There will be both mid-term and final exams in the course. For each, I will give you questions to work on at home and a date to submit the exam by email to me. These exams are, inevitably, highly imperfect instruments to assess your learning. I do hope, however, that they provide you with opportunities to go back to certain texts, and to your own writing, to develop some new ideas, establish connections and synthesize arguments.

**Disabilities**

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me, with your letter of accommodation, as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact the Office of Academic Services (6-3470). Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

**Student conduct**

As you know, every member of the University community is expected to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. Given the requirements of this course, I do not expect that questions of academic integrity should arise. Discussion of philosophical arguments and issues with others is permissible. Indeed, it is encouraged! However, all writing should be your own. Please do not hesitate to consult me if you are unsure about these guidelines or about the appropriate course of action in a particular instance.

More generally, I expect that this course will be a place for serious intellectual inquiry. In order for this to happen students must listen carefully to each other; must accept the responsibility to ask questions of each other (or of the instructor, but especially of each other) when something is unclear; and must strive to conduct the discussion with both critical rigor and respect. Please
note that critiquing to another student’s point is perfectly acceptable, as long as it is done in a courteous and specific manner.

Course Outline

The following course outline provides a projected sequence of readings. As I noted above, this is not a sacred contract but rather more like a plan for the journey, which is subject to change. Specifically, there are more texts than class sessions. So you can be sure that things will change.

The readings will all be available in PDF, and should be printed out and brought with you to class. (There are no required books to purchase.)

These readings are mostly philosophical, but some are more technical or closely argued (journal articles, for example) and will require more time to work through. There are a few texts that I would not consider to be philosophical at all, but still be valuable to us in our explorations.

A. Introduction
   1. Fran Schrag, Back to Basics, 2005.

B. The Question of Purposes, Part One: Some American Perspectives
   4. Thomas Jefferson, selected
   5. W.E.B DuBois, from Souls of Black Folk

C. The Question of Purposes, Part Two: Culture and Curriculum
   8. E.D. Hirsch, from Cultural Literacy

D. The Question of Purposes, Part Three: Thinking and Thoughtfulness
   10. Siegal on critical thinking
   11. Langer, Mindfulness, ch. 5
   12. Burbules on rationality
   13. Ritchhart, Intellectual Character (2002), Part One (pp. 3-51)

E. The Question of Purposes, Part Three: Dispositions and Virtues

F. The Question of Purposes, Part Four: Higher Education, Liberal Education
   17. Lewis, Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education (2006), Intro, Chs. 1-2 (pp. 1-72)
G. How can people be taught to be good?
   22. RS Peters, “Reason and Habit”
   23. MacIntyre from *After Virtue*

H. Who has a right to education, and what kind of right is that?

I. What is learning?
   27. Skinner and Behaviorism
   28. Piaget and Constructivism
   29. Social Theories of Learning
   30. Cognitive Scientific Theories of Learning

J. Classical Perspectives
   32. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, selections
   33. Rousseau, *Emile*, selections
   34. John Dewey, *Experience and Education*