Subject: Philosophy of Education

Topics: Overview and branches of Philosophy

Implications to eduaction

LECTURE # 1& 2

**Overview**

Philosophy means "love of wisdom." It is made up of two Greek words, *philo*, meaning love, and *sophos*, meaning wisdom. Philosophy helps teachers to reflect on key issues and concepts in education, usually through such questions as: What is being educated? What is the good life? What is knowledge? What is the nature of learning? And What is teaching? Philosophers think about the meaning of things and interpretation of that meaning. Even simple statements, such as "What should be learned? Or What is adolescence?" set up raging debates that can have major implications. For example, what happens if an adolescent commits a serious crime? One interpretation may hide another. If such a young person is treated as an adult criminal, what does it say about justice, childhood, and the like? Or if the adolescent is treated as a child, what does it say about society's views on crime?

Your educational philosophy is your beliefs about why, what and how you teach, whom you teach, and about the nature of learning. It is a set of principles that guides professional action through the events and issues teachers face daily. Sources for your educational philosophy are your life experiences, your values, the environment in which you live, interactions with others and awareness of philosophical approaches. Learning about the branches of philosophy, philosophical world views, and different educational philosophies and theories will help you to determine and shape your own educational philosophy, combined with these other aspects.

When you examine a philosophy different from your own, it helps you to "wrestle" with your own thinking. Sometimes this means you may change your mind. Other times, it may strengthen your viewpoint; or, you may be *eclectic*, selecting what seems best from different philosophies. But in eclecticism, there is a danger of sloppy and inconsistent thinking, especially if you borrow a bit of one philosophy and stir in some of another. If serious thought has gone into selection of strategies, theories, or philosophies, this is less problematic. For example, you may determine that you have to vary your approach depending on the particular learning needs and styles of a given student. At various time periods, one philosophical framework may become favored over another. For example, the Progressive movement led to quite different approaches in education in the 1930s. But there is always danger in one "best or only" philosophy. In a pluralistic society, a variety of views are needed.

**Branches of Philosophy**

There are four major branches of philosophy. Each branch focuses on a different aspect and is central to your teaching. The four branches and their sub-branches are:

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| **Branch** | **Metaphysics:** What is the nature of reality? | **Epistemology:** What is the nature of knowledge? How do we come to know? | **Axiology:** What values should one live by? | **Logic:** What is the sytematic treatment of relation of ideas? |
| **Educational Examples** | *–Do you think human beings are basically good or evil? –What are conservative or liberal beliefs?* | *–How would an anthropologist look at this classroom? A political scientist? A biologist? –How do we know what a child knows?* | *–Is morality defined by our actions, or by what is in our hearts? –What values should be taught in character education?* | *How do children learn the concepts in analytical way?* |
| **Sub-branches** | –**Ontology** What issues are related to nature, existence, or being? *Is a child inherently evil or good? How might your view determine your classroom management?* –**Cosmology** What is the nature and origin of the cosmos or universe? *Is the world and universe orderly or is it marked by chaos? What would one or the other mean for a classroom?*  **-Teleology**  What purposes are there in the universe?  *This try to elucidate subjects pertaining to whether or not there is a purpose in the universe.* | **Knowing based on:** –**Scientific Inquiry** –**Senses and Feelings** –**From authority or divinity** –**Empiricism/posteriori** experience come first and the knowledge afterwards –**Intuition/priori**  Describe knowledge which is urged can be acquired through pure reason alone, before experience  **-Agnosticism**  **- Skepticism** *growth under varied conditions, stu-dents conclude plants need water and light* | –**Ethics** What is good and evil, right and wrong? *Is it ever right to take something that does not belong to you?* –**Aesthetics** What is beautiful?      *How do we recognize a great piece of music? Art?*      *Can there be beauty in destruction?* | –**Reasoning or Logic**        What reasoning processes yield valid conclusions?        –**Deductive:**  reasoning from the general to the particular *All children can learn. Bret is a fifth grader. He has a learning disability. Can Bret learn?*        –**Inductive:**  reasoning from the specific to the general. *After experimenting with plant*  **Syllogism:** an argumentation in which from two prepositions called premises, a conclusion is derived  Dialectic: considered as means of discovering the truth by proceding from an assertion or thesis to denial or anti-thesis |

The term metaphysics literally means "beyond the physical." This area of philosophy focuses on the nature of reality. Metaphysics attempts to find unity across the domains of experience and thought. At the metaphysical level, there are four\* broad philosophical schools of thought that apply to education today. They are idealism, realism, pragmatism (sometimes called experientialism), and existentialism. Each will be explained shortly. These four general frameworks provide the root or base from which the various educational philosophies are derived.

*\* A fifth metaphysical school of thought, called Scholasticism, is largely applied in Roman Catholic schools in the educational philosophy called "Thomism." It combines idealist and realist philosophies in a framework that harmonized the ideas of Aristotle, the realist, with idealist notions of truth. Thomas Aquinas, 1255-127, was the theologian who wrote "Summa Theologica," formalizing church doctrine. The Scholasticism movement encouraged the logical and philosophical study of the beliefs of the church, legitimizing scientific inquiry within a religious framework.*

Two of these general or world philosophies, **idealism** and **realism**, are derived from the ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Two are more contemporary, **pragmatism** and **existentialism**. However, educators who share one of these distinct sets of beliefs about the nature of reality presently apply each of these world philosophies in successful classrooms. Let us explore each of these metaphysical schools of thought.

**Idealism**

Idealism is a philosophical approach that has as its central tenet that ideas are the only true reality, the only thing worth knowing. In a search for truth, beauty, and justice that is enduring and everlasting, the focus is on conscious reasoning in the mind. Plato, father of Idealism, espoused this view about 400 years BC, in his famous book, *The Republic*. Plato believed that there are two worlds. The first is the spiritual or mental world, which is eternal, permanent, orderly, regular, and universal. There is also the world of appearance, the world experienced through sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound, that is changing, imperfect, and disorderly. This division is often referred to as the duality of mind and body. Reacting against what he perceived as too much of a focus on the immediacy of the physical and sensory world, Plato described a utopian society in which "education to body and soul all the beauty and perfection of which they are capable" as an ideal. In his allegory of the cave, the shadows of the sensory world must be overcome with the light of reason or universal truth. To understand truth, one must pursue knowledge and identify with the Absolute Mind. Plato also believed that the soul is fully formed prior to birth and is perfect and at one with the Universal Being. The birth process checks this perfection, so education requires bringing latent ideas (fully formed concepts) to consciousness.

In idealism, the aim of education is to discover and develop each individual's abilities and full moral excellence in order to better serve society. The curricular emphasis is subject matter of mind: literature, history, philosophy, and religion. Teaching methods focus on handling ideas through lecture, discussion, and Socratic dialogue (a method of teaching that uses questioning to help students discover and clarify knowledge). Introspection, intuition, insight, and whole-part logic are used to bring to consciousness the forms or concepts which are latent in the mind. Character is developed through imitating examples and heroes.

**Realism**

Realists believe that reality exists independent of the human mind. The ultimate reality is the world of physical objects. The focus is on the body/objects. Truth is objective-what can be observed. Aristotle, a student of Plato who broke with his mentor's idealist philosophy, is called the father of both Realism and the scientific method. In this metaphysical view, the aim is to understand objective reality through "the diligent and unsparing scrutiny of all observable data." Aristotle believed that to understand an object, its ultimate form had to be understood, which does not change. For example, a rose exists whether or not a person is aware of it. A rose can exist in the mind without being physically present, but ultimately, the rose shares properties with all other roses and flowers (its form), although one rose may be red and another peach colored. Aristotle also was the first to teach logic as a formal discipline in order to be able to reason about physical events and aspects. The exercise of rational thought is viewed as the ultimate purpose for humankind. The Realist curriculum emphasizes the subject matter of the physical world, particularly science and mathematics. The teacher organizes and presents content systematically within a discipline, demonstrating use of criteria in making decisions. Teaching methods focus on mastery of facts and basic skills through demonstration and recitation. Students must also demonstrate the ability to think critically and scientifically, using observation and experimentation. Curriculum should be scientifically approached, standardized, and distinct-discipline based. Character is developed through training in the rules of conduct.

**Pragmatism** (Experientialism)

For pragmatists, only those things that are experienced or observed are real. In this late 19th century American philosophy, the focus is on the reality of experience. Unlike the Realists and Rationalists, Pragmatists believe that reality is constantly changing and that we learn best through applying our experiences and thoughts to problems, as they arise. The universe is dynamic and evolving, a "becoming" view of the world. There is no absolute and unchanging truth, but rather, truth is what works. Pragmatism is derived from the teaching of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who believed that thought must produce action, rather than linger in the mind and lead to indecisiveness.

John Dewey (1859-1952) applied pragmatist philosophy in his progressive approaches. He believed that learners must adapt to each other and to their environment. Schools should emphasize the subject matter of social experience. All learning is dependent on the context of place, time, and circumstance. Different cultural and ethnic groups learn to work cooperatively and contribute to a democratic society. The ultimate purpose is the creation of a new social order. Character development is based on making group decisions in light of consequences.

For Pragmatists, teaching methods focus on hands-on problem solving, experimenting, and projects, often having students work in groups. Curriculum should bring the disciplines together to focus on solving problems in an interdisciplinary way. Rather than passing down organized bodies of knowledge to new learners, Pragmatists believe that learners should apply their knowledge to real situations through experimental inquiry. This prepares students for citizenship, daily living, and future careers.

**Existentialism**

The nature of reality for Existentialists is subjective, and lies within the individual. The physical world has no inherent meaning outside of human existence. Individual choice and individual standards rather than external standards are central. Existence comes before any definition of what we are. We define ourselves in relationship to that existence by the choices we make. We should not accept anyone else's predetermined philosophical system; rather, we must take responsibility for deciding who we are. The focus is on freedom, the development of authentic individuals, as we make meaning of our lives.

There are several different orientations within the existentialist philosophy. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish minister and philosopher, is considered to be the founder of existentialism. His was a Christian orientation. Another group of existentialists, largely European, believes that we must recognize the finiteness of our lives on this small and fragile planet, rather than believing in salvation through God. Our existence is not guaranteed in an after life, so there is tension about life and the certainty of death, of hope or despair. Unlike the more austere European approaches where the universe is seen as meaningless when faced with the certainty of the end of existence, American existentialists have focused more on human potential and the quest for personal meaning. Values clarification is an outgrowth of this movement. Following the bleak period of World War II, the French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, suggested that for youth, the existential moment arises when young persons realize for the first time that choice is theirs, that they are responsible for themselves. Their question becomes "Who am I and what should I do?

Related to education, the subject matter of existentialist classrooms should be a matter of personal choice. Teachers view the individual as an entity within a social context in which the learner must confront others' views to clarify his or her own. Character development emphasizes individual responsibility for decisions. Real answers come from within the individual, not from outside authority. Examining life through authentic thinking involves students in genuine learning experiences. Existentialists are opposed to thinking about students as objects to be measured, tracked, or standardized. Such educators want the educational experience to focus on creating opportunities for self-direction and self actualization. They start with the student, rather than on curriculum content.

***Think about It:***

1. *Which general or world view philosophy best fits with your own views of reality? Why?*
2. *What have you learned from the history of education that is related to these metaphysical philosophies?*
3. *It is said that an image is worth a thousand words. What might be your image metaphor for each of these world or metaphysical philosophies?*