Defending and Goading the Foundations of Education

Joseph L. DeVitis, Old Dominion University

I began my academic career in foundations of education in 1972. At that time, the analytic philosophy movement held sway and was the cornerstone of meetings of the Philosophy of Education Society. I attended such meetings only sporadically, sensing that the dominant movement in the field dug a black hole in terms of what was going on in what Harry Broudy then called "the real world of the public schools."[1] It was the start of a long marginalized sojourn in my chosen studies. Now, forty years later, I view the tail end of the postmodernist movement—and the same sinking feeling of marginalization erodes my existence. As one will note throughout this essay, it doesn't have to be that way. The foundations of education can offer powerful lenses for educational change, but we need to be astute as to what we intend, how we study policy and practice, and what our audiences are. If we want to continue to talk to ourselves, analytic philosophy and postmodernism may be just fine (at least for some of our sisters and brethren). If we want to alter public conditions in school and society (which has been my paramount aim), we should go beyond such movements that the public will only continue to ignore. In a word, we should require more relevant substance—and action—from foundations of education. More positively, I hope to show how we can emerge as more consequential in helping save our profession—and creating a better "real world" for educational and social institutions.

How Foundations of Education Can Help Higher Education

In their recent landmark study of undergraduate education in America, *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa question whether our colleges and universities are really able to justify their traditionally exalted reputations.[2] They paint a rather dismal portrait of how little learning may actually be taking place on our campuses. If their report is substantially accurate, academe will have to defend itself against strident calls for change from the public, policymakers, and politicians of all stripes. The latter will be asking these kinds of questions: do students, parents, and employers regard higher education as primarily a credentialing institution, regardless of how much or little learning is occurring? Are students reading and writing far less than previous generations? In particular, are they doing less lengthy, sustained reading and writing? Has academic rigor been on the wane for some time now? Is the academy nurturing critical thinking or simply giving lip service to that taken-for-granted goal? The foundations of education can offer significant antidotes to this assumed academic malaise if the public, policymakers, politicians, and even our teacher education colleagues understand and agree to unleash the full

1. Harry S. Broudy, *The Real World of the Public Schools* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972).

2. Richard Arum & Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

power of our field. Instead, our offerings have been marginalized and largely set aside. At the same time, university leaders continue to call for more preparation in civic and moral education. I know of few fields that can perform that function better than the foundations of education. To paraphrase John Lennon, all we are asking is to give us more of a chance.

How Foundations of Education Can Help Public Education

At the P-12 level, educational foundations can help the public identify underlying political intentions and enable it to better scrutinize policies and practices. Educational foundations can thus allow the public to go beyond ahistorical, asocial reasoning (assuming it is interested in doing so—and that is a huge question). The foundations of education can prod governmental entities to build and analyze evidence and to reach conclusions based upon legitimate research, and not just folklore and slogans (again, if the public really wants to rise above anecdotal tall tales and political sound bites). All this is to say that the foundations of education can coax greater depth and breadth from what seems to be a sea of plastic fish adrift in shallow waters. Cultural arguments will have to be immensely strong, indeed, to permit such a sea change. Is foundations of education ready for such a mighty task?

Foundations scholars should join with teachers and teacher unions, in the style of George S. Counts, in order to counter persistent public posturing among politicians, policymakers, government officials, and even some school leaders who play parlor games with one of our most precious human activities, namely, the education of our children.[3] We should work with teachers to foster fuller control of their wider social, political, and economic destinies, including more substantial responsibility for participating in tough and tender dialogue—and action—on the important questions their profession faces each and every day. And teachers do not have the luxury, as scholars do, of lengthy periods for reflection. They make thousands of decisions in the course of their work day. We need to get off our sometimes creaky rockers and join forces with P-12 teachers. In brief, our arrogance needs to stop.

Parenthetically, why are we so ashamed to be referred to as professors of education? Here I refer to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, whose editor is Harvey Siegel (it is important to acknowledge that he is a professor of philosophy).[4] Professor Siegel devotes large sections of the massive handbook to "The Relation of Philosophy of Education to Philosophy" and "Bringing Philosophy of Education Back to Philosophy." Alas, there is no section on "Bringing Philosophy of Education Back to Education." As Tony Johnson has argued, we have been further marginalized by acting in the vein that *The Oxford Handbook* (which presumes to speak for the entire field) recommends: "In embracing this narrow, more professional role—in preferring what Harold Rugg labels 'the conforming way' to the 'creative path'—the field chose academic respectability over social (and educational) relevancy."[5] Many of us have sought the status of being identified with the parent discipline, be it philosophy, history, sociology, et cetera. It hasn't gotten us very far. (Harry Broudy once told me that his biggest regret was not being part of a philosophy department. My heart sank for a few moments on hearing those words.)

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3. George S. Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932).

4. Harvey Siegel, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-7.

5. Tony W. Johnson, *Discipleship or Pilgrimage? The Educator's Quest* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1.

Not to pick on Professor Siegel too unduly, I now proceed to ask: Why are we so enamored of abstruse forms of postmodernism when the public interest could care less about Derrida or Lacan? My guess is that, like Freudian theory, it offers a rather facile process of sexy academic pigeonholding: everything becomes a matter of asymmetrical power. (Of course, it was Freud who said that a cigar could be a cigar.) To be blunt, I do think that many postmodernists are awful writers—even though they espouse awakening the public via liberationist means. (Should they not imagine that communication might be a nice start toward liberation?) Moreover, cheap and easy deployment of seemingly *a priori* postmodernist categories can dampen any use for reflective thought; that is to say, we know *the* answer beforehand—and it has to do with asymmetrical power! The following dreadful "sentence" from John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* clearly illustrates (for once) what I have in mind, in both form and substance, in my critique of postmodernism:

> A politics presuming the ontological indifference of all minority social identities as defining oppressed or dominated groups, a politics in which differences are sublimated in the constitution of a minority identity (the identity politics which is increasingly being questioned within feminism itself) can recover the differences between social identities only on the basis of common and therefore commensurable experiences of marginalization, which experiences in turn yield a political practice that consists largely of *affirming* the identities specific to those experiences.[6]

Now, we can take a breath before moving on to the next section.

How Foundations of Education Can Be a Potent Area of Study

With that frank foreshadowing, I will now attempt to show how foundations of education could temper public concerns, higher education, teacher preparation, and P-12 schooling. First, let us focus on the familiar clarion call for more liberal arts in teacher education. It has always amazed me that relatively few academicians outside of educational studies seem to realize that foundations of education is as vital to liberal education as most any of the liberal arts. Parenthetically, I would also contend that teacher education, in general, has not been as antagonistic to liberal education as have some other professional fields (e. g., engineering). Indeed, Jencks and Riesman commended education scholars as far back as 1969: "Education professors are…eager to expose their students to the liberal arts…Educationists have never had…self-confident contempt for the humanities and social sciences."[7]

I would make an even stronger claim for the role of foundations of education vis-à-vis the liberal arts. In a certain sense, educational foundations could be described as a rather nuanced form of the liberal arts. Our courses are accepted in any number of general education curricula across the country. I might further claim that the scope and function of educational foundations is actually wider than many of the traditional liberal arts disciplines. Foundations of education integrates a whole host of humanistic and social-science disciplines (e. g., history, philosophy, the arts, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, among others).

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6. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 12.

7. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 230.

In a word, the foundations of education is much more interdisciplinary and thus wider than most circumscribed liberal arts fields. To be an effective foundations scholar, one must be firmly grounded in many more areas of study than the typical liberal arts professor might care to study. The foundations of education offers a truly authentic preparation in practical liberal arts in that it also ties liberal education to many structures and processes within social institutions that any human being will face in "the real world." What more could outside publics ask for—even as some insist on curtailing educational foundations course work in favor of more and more strictly prescribed liberal arts requirements?

On a related matter, I have long been chagrined about so-called blue-ribbon commissions on education that boast a panoply of liberal arts professors, very few actual P-12 personnel, and no one from any area of teacher education. For instance, one might refer to the influential 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*.[8] Granted, it is hardly a testament to rigorous provision of educational evidence; but its effect on educational policymaking was admittedly profound. Membership on its National Commissionon Excellence in Education included four college presidents and several liberal arts professors. None of them were from the world of teacher education, let alone the foundations of education.

Foundations scholars might have helped the Commission see that its view of "more is better" (e. g.,more homework, a longer school day and school year) had been proffered without supporting evidence. (I recall that the likes of Ted Sizer, Maxine Greene, and Nel Noddings were around at the time. Too bad they were never asked to aid the Commission in its deliberations.) Instead, the Commission employed strident military metaphors to stir up the public and unleash the pre-eminence of using education for industrial and commercial gain in the global economy. I dare say that most foundations of education scholars would have taken a more sober, rational path.

Why Foundations of Education Needs More Public Intellectuals

I would contend that the most vital pathway for educational foundations should be to adopt the role of public intellectuals. That aim should be integral to our profession, not simply an incidental byproduct. That is, foundations of education professionals need to be accessible to the general public and seek to transform school and society—and not just speak to perhaps several dozen mutually attuned collegial specialists. We need to go beyond rarefied academic jargon to a more complete universe of discourse and practice. Our risk in doing so is minimal in that many of us have been marginalized for at least a half century by going the route of arcane specialization. The independent scholar, Russell Jacoby, puts it well: "Academics…create insular societies…The professors share an idiom and a discipline…(that) constitute their own culture."[9] It can, indeed, be a deadening culture.

As some readers might have already guessed, I am calling for a revival of the social foundations tradition that was so lively in the heyday of John Dewey, *The Social Frontier*, and Teachers College, Columbia University, from the 1930s to the 1950s. I am beseeching us to act more in that tradition and less like ordinary language analysts or hegemonic authorities on post-modernist obscurantism. We need to communicate knowledge and wisdom—and not attempt to mystify as if we were High Priests with few followers.

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8. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education, 1983).

9. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 7.

Why do I promulgate the latter course of action for foundations of education? The public, policymakers, and politicians have little felt interest in more esoteric, specialized realms, however helpful they may be at times for us as scholars. If we become more broadly substantive—and more realistically active—I do believe our overall influence would at least be less marginal. To have a public, we must speak to some of its interests. (Please keep in mind that I am not implying any creation of a quest for consensus or trying to instantiate the status quo—far from it.)[10]

Conclusion

What I am ultimately arguing is that foundations of education scholars and practitioners would be more valuable to schools and society if we kept our public-intellectual role at the forefront of our activities. In fulfilling that role in its widest sense, we could be assisting in solving some of the most important issues of the day, both practical and moral. To do this, we need to develop more generalizing vocabularites so that we can more directly affect public discourse and policy. We need to soften our ties to discipleship. We need to restrain ourselves from overweening focus on esoteric articles and useless grants that pad our curriculum vitae and rob our students of our presence.

Too many of us have been content to play the role of armchair philosopher—one who swings robust imaginary clubs at The Establishment while barely lifting him or herself out of the Lazy Boy. Yes, we need to analyze and reflect deeply on contested issues and come to deliberative conclusions—and then we need to get off our arses. A pro-active foundations of education professoriate should be in position to act on what has been seen to be well-nigh impossible: to help bring truly democratic practice to our institutions, especially in school hallways and classrooms. We need to do so while our public life is still worth living.

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Joseph L. DeVitis is a visiting professor of educational foundations at Old Dominion University. Recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he is a widely published scholar and public intellectual in social foundations of education and educational policy studies. He is a past president of the American Educational Studies Association, the Council of Learned Societies of Education, and the Society of Professors of Education. His most recent books are a notable series of readers for Peter Lang Publishing: Contemporary Colleges and Universities (2013); Critical Civic Literacy (2011); Character and Moral Education (2011, AESA Critics Choice Award); and Adolescent Education (2010, AESA Critics Choice Award).