



***Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and
Consciousness: A New Epistemological Framework
for Education***
Neil Hooley

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Reviewed by Andrew Rabanal, Georgia State University

Abstract

In Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and Consciousness: A New Epistemological Framework for Education, Neil Hooley highlights the importance of philosophy in education. Grounding his ideas in a strong philosophical foundation, Hooley argues for a progressive, pragmatic approach to education that stands in stark contrast to current neoliberal models of learning. Hooley addresses the most significant obstacles to adopting a pragmatic approach to education in today's world, describes his Critical Praxis Bricolage, and makes a critical first step towards reimagining how educators prepare students for a lifetime of inquiry and growth.

Keywords: *epistemology, pragmatism, critical knowledge, praxis, bricolage, neoliberalism*

In *Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and Consciousness: A New Epistemological Framework for Education*, Neil Hooley places the issue of philosophy back at the center of formal education discussion. Hooley draws on many of history's most famous philosophers—Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and John Dewey, just to name a few—as he provides advice for bringing pragmatist philosophy into education spaces. However, Hooley's goal in this work is not to provide detached classroom activities or curriculum guides for educators. Rather, the goal of this book is to connect, as clearly as possible, philosophy and formal education and ensure philosophy informs teaching and learning for a more holistic, equitable, and democratic system of education. Hooley's book is a laudable starting place.

In the book's beginning, the author explains his view of education and the connection of freedom to the “generation of personal knowledge as humans interact with and reflect upon their worldly experiences.”¹ He refers to this freedom- and philosophy-focused approach to education as progressive. Progressive education is contrasted with conservative education, which aims to reproduce ideas and beliefs, is focused on the political/economic good of a nation, and dominates

1. Neil Hooley. *Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and Consciousness: A new epistemological framework for education* (Routledge, 2023), 8.

education systems in the current neoliberal world.² As Hooley challenges the conservative model of education, he directly states his pragmatist view of education, in which students engage in holistic inquiry over what it means to be human, reflect on their experiences, and revise their beliefs as they interact with the world.³ To implement a pragmatic approach in formal education settings would require a dramatic reconceptualization of the U.S. education system, and Hooley proceeds to address what he labels eight philosophical dilemmas in doing so: Schooling and child/state interests (Chapter 3), Tradition and Identification of knowledge/content (Chapter 4), Curriculum and dialogue/language connections (Chapter 5), Teaching and transmission/inquiry options (Chapter 6), Assessment and the perplexity of knowing/not knowing (Chapter 7), Learning and the schism between epistemology/sociology (Chapter 8), Society and the significance of subjectivity/objectivity (Chapter 9), and Professionalism and the ethical agitation of ought/is (Chapter 10). Finally, Hooley ends the book by discussing philosophers that inform his own philosophy and his idea of education and learning through a Critical Praxis Bricolage (CPB)—an idea I explain in further detail.

One of the strengths of Hooley's case for CPB is the foundation on which he lays his argument. Before discussing his specific idea for how to implement a pragmatic, progressive approach to education, he ensures the reader is well-informed on what he means when he refers to pragmatism as a philosophy. For many readers connected with education, parts of Hooley's foundation may look familiar. Educators will likely have studied Lev Vygotsky to some extent, Jean Piaget is discussed in even introductory psychology courses, and John Dewey and Paulo Freire loom large in education philosophy. These points should help many readers find a connection between past ideas they have encountered and Hooley's own philosophy.

However, even for readers not familiar with the philosophers on which Hooley draws, this text is accessible. The author provides various references to the educational thinkers in most cases but also presents a less dense paraphrase of the philosophers' ideas. For those who may struggle to navigate Ludwig Wittgenstein's writing or Immanuel Kant's ideas on ought/is, Hooley lays out these ideas plainly in the authors' own words—translated where necessary, of course. Then, he explains his interpretation of those ideas and how they contribute to his own thoughts on knowledge, learning, and education. Perhaps philosophy purists will bristle at the idea of having someone else interpret philosophical works for them, but those who are less likely to wade through those works themselves will likely appreciate the summaries and paraphrases of the philosophical concepts that form this book's foundation.

Despite the strong foundation, the argument Hooley constructs is not as sturdy as its supports. The culmination of this book is the idea of Critical Praxis Bricolage (CPB). CPB is a practice in which the sociocultural context in which learning takes place is considered and learning strategies emphasizing the principles of pragmatism are formed. In CPB, participants observe and collect data on issues they encounter in the world, and students use their experience and cultural practices to inform inquiry.⁴ CPB is a clearly pragmatic approach to learning, not limited to formal education, but meant to apply to the learning that is part of every aspect of life. Hooley connects CPB back to the ideas of Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and even Marx, but he offers few concrete ideas for its application to current education contexts.⁵ Learning circles and feedback are suggested—

2. Hooley, 10.

3. Hooley, 26-28.

4. Hooley, 162.

5. Hooley, 168-169.

even potentially inviting input from the broader community.⁶ Learning circles are not unknown to the field of education, yet little else is offered to guide current practitioners. Again, as Hooley acknowledges early in the book, implementing a truly pragmatic approach to learning would require a considerable shift in how societies approach formal education, from how curriculum separates learning into distinct subjects to how learning is assessed. The need for broader change does not wholly invalidate Hooley's argument, but it weakens his proposal of CPB, as it is not yet practicable in formal education. Educators who read this book hoping to find a new approach to teaching may not find much they can implement in their classrooms.

Consequently, *Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and Consciousness* seems aimed at the wrong audience. At multiple points, Hooley states his work is meant to aid practitioners in a variety of fields as they address issues.⁷ However, for practitioners in formal education today, there seems to be little that would directly aid their practice. A book specifically on philosophy may not be of immediate interest to educators wishing to change their practice at all. As Hooley and other pragmatists have pointed out, many in society have long considered philosophy to be divorced from actual life, akin to thought exercises for potential future problems instead of guidance for living. Hooley's work here seems better aimed at those already primed for these discussions. Of course, Hooley's desire for practitioners from many fields to read this text does not preclude any potential readers, but there would need to be a change in how these ideas are presented (or in society itself) for formal educators, broadly speaking, to apply these ideas in their current contexts.

On the whole, *Pragmatist Philosophy for Critical Knowledge, Learning and Consciousness* provides a strong foundation for a new epistemological approach to education. Hooley's idea to blend theory and practice, philosophy and action, is welcome for any pragmatist or likely many educators who have seen their role reduced to ensuring students retain the "necessary" ideas needed to pass a series of assessments. Hooley provides a persuasive argument for how to reframe education. The next step is to ensure that this argument moves beyond theory. Whether by turning Hooley's ideas into more practical guidance for educators or persuading policymakers of their value, the goal is to bring these ideas into practice, into real classrooms and spaces.

Bibliography

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Andrew Rabanal is a doctoral student studying Educational Policy at Georgia State University. He has a MA in Cognitive Studies in Education from Teachers College of Columbia University and a BA in Theatre from the University of Georgia. He currently works as a Deputy Clerk with the Fulton County Superior and Magistrate Courts.

6. Hooley, 172.

7. Hooley, 173, 177.