Book Review

Leaders in Philosophy of Education: Intellectual Self Portraits

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I have had the great pleasure of reading a very interesting book that was brought to my attention by the editors of Education and Culture, not a book I had as yet picked up on my own, but one I was planning on reading. Len Waks has put together a wonderful collection of autobiographical essays by top scholars in the field of philosophy of education for our enjoyment; I have had the pleasure to know many of these scholars, some of whom I hold dear as teachers, some of whom I consider good friends, and some of whom I am discovering for the first time. It is my sincere hope that this review will help draw others’ attentions to Leaders in Philosophy of Education as well.

Waks tells us in his introduction that he was motivated to work on this project by a Philosophy of Education Society (US) presidential panel session he attended in 2003, where these questions came up: Why are leading scholars from just a few decades ago now ignored? Why has a field that has developed significantly since the 1950s not done a better job of keeping its best work alive? Waks set about to to capture “the best work in the field since the 1960s” from philosophers of education in North America and the United Kingdom. The twenty-four scholars invited to contribute their intellectual self-portraits were all selected by Waks based on his knowledge of the field and checked against the table of contents of four philosophy of education journals: Educational Theory, Studies in Philosophy and Education, The Journal of Philosophy of Education, and Educational Philosophy and Theory, “to confirm the selected authors had been active in the field over at least a quarter century” (vii). Scholars whose contributions have been for less than twenty-five years
were excluded, as well as senior scholars who had been absent from conferences and journals for many years. Waks hopes to put together a second series that includes younger scholars and any who should have been included in this series but were inadvertently left out. He does not claim that those included are all the leaders in the field, but that that they are “among the leading philosophers of education in the post-analytical revolution period” (vii).

I give you Waks’s criteria for selection as it affects the collection of authors included in the text. Among these twenty-four authors, there is a good balance of thirteen US and eleven UK philosophers of education. However, from a gendered perspective, there is a strong imbalance, with seventeen men and seven women, which is an accurate reflection of the period under consideration, the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of approaches to philosophy, this text strongly represents the analytic philosophical leaders of the time, and the minority voices present during this timeframe are almost nonexistent. The result, like all stories captured, is a reminder to us that history is the telling of what happened by the winners, not the losers. During the 1960s and 1970s the winners in philosophy in the UK and US were analytic philosophers. They got the upper hand and became the leaders in their field of study, thus becoming the gatekeepers for conference programs and journal publications. Given Waks’s criteria for selection, only the majority voices of analytic philosophers were going to come to the top. But there was no holding back the tides of change coming from European scholars as well as pragmatists. One will not find continental philosophers in this volume: existentialists, phenomenologists, and Marxists are not represented. As Maxine Greene would say (someone who is strikingly missing from this text), there are no toads in this garden.1 This collection of scholars is a fair representation of what was considered good philosophy during the time frame Waks is trying to capture (eleven of the thirteen US authors are past presidents of PES, for example), but it may also go a long way toward helping him and other senior philosophers of education understand why the collected works are not cited today. Analytic philosophy had its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s; by the 1980’s, critiques by feminists, neo-Marxists, neo-pragmatists, cultural studies scholars, and postmodernists were turning the tide. Philosophers were finding that they needed to either engage in the world as situated knowers or they would be left behind.

Leonard Waks’s own intellectual journey reflects the history of analytic philosophy I am pointing to, as he entered the University of Wisconsin as a sophomore in 1961, intent on studying philosophy. Like all the scholars in this text, Waks entered a department that was dominated by analytic philosophers. In fact, for most students of philosophy during this period in the US and UK, one either became a good analytic philosopher or one didn’t graduate with a degree in philosophy, let alone earn a doctoral degree, get a job, and become a tenured professor. Waks did graduate with a degree in philosophy and stayed on at Wisconsin to earn his doctoral degree in philosophy in 1964. He taught for two years at Purdue before taking a joint position in philosophy and philosophy
of education at Stanford. In 1971, Waks moved to Temple University’s College of Education at the invitation of Paul Komisar, where he worked in “analytical philosophy of education central” with Jim McClellan, Paul Komisar, and Robert Holtzman. Along with Len and another graduate of Wisconsin, Peter Goldstone, there were five philosophers of education in this program (does anyone have that many colleagues today?).

In 1978 Waks became a full professor, but by then Temple was experiencing a sharp drop-off in undergraduate applications, and strong graduate students no longer arrived as jobs in philosophy of education had dried up. In 1979, Waks entered a second doctoral program in applied social and organizational psychology in anticipation of faculty retrenchment, earning a second PhD. By 1981 he received the long anticipated pink slip with his job terminating in 1983. Gone were the heydays of analytic philosophy of education at Temple University. Waks survived the 1980s by joining Penn State’s Science, Technology, and Society program on soft money. By the early 1990s, as the soft money for technological literacy was drying up, Temple made peace with the AAUP, who had blacklisted the University for violating the academic freedom and tenure provisions of the academic code of ethics, and Waks returned to Temple, which is where he worked until his recent retirement. Waks’s intellectual work contributed to the rereading of Dewey and pragmatism of the 1990s, and in the 2000s he’s been contributing to globalization discussions.

Waks argues for a qualified pluralism in philosophy of education today. I agree with him completely. I cannot help but admire his ability to adapt and survive tough times, a good lesson for all of us. We cannot forget that philosophy of education must adapt and adjust in tight economic times, when state funding for higher education becomes soft money, or in conservative times, when education’s focus becomes one of accountability with a heavy dose of assessment, not a desire for reflective teachers. Currently, educational foundations courses are being cut from teacher education programs again, which means the jobs our graduate students hope to get will dry up too, as they did in the late 1970s and 1980s. When our graduate students go, so do we. If we want to survive we must adapt, for teachers and students, indeed our society at large, needs us most when times are tough.

One cannot help but think of one’s own intellectual journey when reading these wonderfully varied essays that include personal stories, some more so than others. I am a child of the 1960s, having come of age during that time in California, reading philosophy and the I Ching while in high school as race riots and Viet Nam war protests went on around me, as I waited for the chance to study philosophy full time when I went to college in 1971. I did not attend the colleges that most of the scholars in this volume attended, places like Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, Teachers College, Boston University, Northwestern, Temple University, University of Illinois, or University of Wisconsin. I was fortunate and landed at Penn State, the very campus that rescued Waks in the 1980s. In the 1970s, Penn State was one of the few
universities in the US that offered a continental focus in its philosophy department. Alphonso Lingis was my teacher, an existential French philosopher who went on to translate Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas for the English-speaking world. Lingis’s dramatic class performances captured my attention and confirmed for me that philosophy was where I wanted to be. I finished my undergraduate degree at Rutgers, with Marxist philosophers influencing me. On the side I was reading all the pragmatist and feminist theory I could get my hands on.

I come to this text as an outsider who purposely avoided analytic philosophy, and as someone who would never have majored in philosophy, let alone come back for a graduate degree in philosophy of education, if that were my only option. My PhD is in philosophy of education from Indiana University, another stronghold of educational foundations in the US, as the Midwest seems to be, with three professors schooled in analytic philosophy, Elizabeth Steiner, George Maccia, and Dennis Senchuk (one of Israel Scheffler’s students). However, I was more influenced by Milton Fisk (a Marxist) and Karen Hanson (a pragmatist) in the philosophy department; it was there that I discovered postmodernism.

I did not come back for a PhD until the late 1980s, after having three children and getting excited about the possibilities of an alternative nonpublic education for them from reading the likes of Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, and A. S. Neill. I helped to start a Montessori school for my children to attend, getting an elementary Montessori teaching credential and becoming their teacher so that I could pay their tuition. I came back to school for a graduate degree in philosophy of education, after discovering such a thing existed, with three children in tow, and my own philosophy of education already developed. I was not influenced by analytic philosophy as expounded by the contributors to this book, although I do appreciate the importance of good analysis and a well-made argument, as well as the need to bring clarity to the common language philosophers must rely on to do their work. My story may help to explain why many of us do not cite some of the very scholars Waks seeks to rescue.

One of the fun aspects of this book is the fact that there are a variety of ways to read it. The essays average ten pages in length, making them easy to pick up and read in one setting. They all follow a general format: the writers trace the path of their intellectual journeys by sharing with us what brought them to philosophy of education, the background of their school and college years and key influences on their lives, and the jobs they took that put them in contact with colleagues who continued to influence their thinking. The scholars share with us what they think are their major contributions to philosophy of education, starting from their dissertation up to the present. In sidebars within the essays, they share with us their favorite works of their own or of others that have deeply influenced them. All the works discussed by each writer are referenced in detail in a bibliography at the end of each essay. It is a wonderful amount of information to get into a ten-page essay, complete with the flavor and tone of each of a number of diverse scholars. What a joy to read!
I started my reading journey by selecting some favorite philosophers of education whose work I am familiar with, just to have the fun of reading their stories. Most of us don’t share much about our personal lives in the philosophical work we do, and certainly this group of scholars were not encouraged to do so during the time frame this collection covers, so it is fun to just learn where people went to college, what got them interested in philosophy, what other interests they had, and who influenced them along the way. I then read the essays by scholars who have most influenced me as teachers. I followed with the essays based on teachers and their students who had gone on to make names for themselves and have successful careers of their own. There are several scholars in this book who had Israel Scheffler as a teacher, for example, as well as many from the UK who had Richard Peters as a teacher. At one point Peters came to the US and as a visiting scholar and colleague with Scheffler at Harvard University, as they were both trying to develop philosophy of education programs in their own countries at the same time. It was fascinating to see the US-UK philosophy of education connection. My next choice was to read the essays of the scholars I knew nothing about—those whose names I am sad to say I did not recognize. That was fascinating too, and probably a reflection of the cutbacks on philosophy of education programs during the late 1970s and 1980s as well as a reflection of my own interests. However, I have attended PES conferences regularly since 1990, and INPE conferences regularly since 2000, and maybe it will give Len good comfort to know there were few scholars in the text that fit into this category for me.

I enjoyed learning which scholars were teachers in K-12 schools and what subjects they taught. I learned that Sharon Bailin taught French and Theatre Arts at the secondary level and has a passion for directing. Denis Phillips taught biology in a middle-class suburban high school but says he really learned how to teach in a school on the outskirts of Melbourne, near a migrant camp. There he was head of the math and science department at the ripe age of 24. Richard Pring went to Rome at the age of 17 to enroll in a seven-year training program for priests, taught all in Latin, which explains the Latin title for his selection. Michael Peters wrote his essay as scenes from a play, and in Scene 71 we learn that he grew up in Wellington, New Zealand on a poultry farm, where the sources of his early readings were comic books and women’s magazines. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon wrote her essay as a poem divided into seven sections, each with twelve verses, each verse consisting of two rhyming couplets in iambic septameter. I knew that Sophie plays the piano beautifully but I did not know she sings soprano and is a poet as well. This book is full of wonderful surprises!

Philosophers who had a significant influence on this rich collection of scholars include Aristotle, Max Black, Dewey, Foucault, Gadamer, Goodman, Heidegger, Hegel, Kuhn, G. E. Moore, Nietzsche, Quine, Piaget, Plato, Popper, Putnam, Rawls, Ryle, Toulmin, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein. This list is not exhaustive, of course, but gives the reader a flavor of the various directions the authors’ scholarship took. Leaders in Philosophy of Education includes some philosophers of educa-
tion who were strongly influenced by John Dewey, such as Jonas Soltis, but it also includes many who were strong critics of Dewey, such as Denis Phillips and Ken Strike. There are scholars that contributed to the revival of Dewey’s philosophical work today. Besides Len Waks, these scholars include Jim Garrison, Jane Roland Martin, and Nel Noddings.

Debates about where philosophy of education should be housed are noticeable in *Leaders in Philosophy of Education*, with several of the authors believing philosophy of education needs to be positioned within philosophy departments, while others believe it is important for philosophy of education to be located in colleges of education. Also striking to me, as a reader who purposely attended state schools for my higher education, are the number of scholars in this text who attended exclusionary, elite schools for their degrees, although many of them came from working-class backgrounds. They were able to benefit from the expansion of higher education during the 1960s, with more students attending college than ever before, and more teachers needed to meet the demand. Times are different now; as the baby-boomer generation retires, higher education institutions are using their retirements as opportunities to drop academic lines and save money.

From the writings in this text, it is clear that R. S. Peters had a significant impact on philosophy of education as a field of study in the UK. Many of the UK scholars in this text crossed paths with Peters at some point or other and had him as a teacher or colleague. Paul Hirst, and others that joined up to work with Peters at the University of London, including Patricia White and John White, made an impact as well. On the US side of the Atlantic Ocean, teachers like Israel Scheffler, who wrote the foreword, Ken Benne, Bob Ennis, Jim Macmillan, and Don Arnstine were having an impact in drawing philosophers into philosophy of education programs, often cross-listed with philosophy departments. Many of the scholars listed in this book had joint appointments at one time or another with philosophy departments and philosophy of education departments, and some of them have spent their entire careers in one home or the other. Their students have gone on to become important teachers for the next generation of scholars.

Waks promises to edit a second series that is full of younger scholars, the students of these significant scholars and those he was unable to include in this first collection. Maybe there we will see more toads allowed into the garden, for we can see in this issue that some scholars, such as Jim Garrison, Francis Schrag, Nel Noddings, and Jane Roland Martin, had a crisis of faith in their early analytic training and a felt need to push beyond their roots. I strongly recommend this book to all who have an interest in the history of philosophy of education during the 1960s and beyond. I thank Waks for his efforts to help capture this history, even if it is a story told from the perspective of the victors of the time. Times change, and even philosophy, which seems to move so slowly in comparison to popular culture, has moved on beyond analytic philosophy. More versions of the story can be told now.
Note


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