

Statement on Philosophy of Teaching in the University
by
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Professor Dwayne Huebner of Yale University discusses the nature of public discourse surrounding teaching and learning in the university in an essay titled *Educational Activity and Prophetic Criticism* (Huebner, 1991) in which he contends that “education happens because human beings participate in the transcendent” (cited in Hillis, 1999, p. 396). With Huebner, I believe that education is a prophetic enterprise that seeks justice; curriculum is a public discourse that seeks transformation; and teaching is a moral activity that seeks compassion and understanding. Teaching is not simply a technical human enterprise; rather, it is a creative process of “healing, re-integration, remembering, and re-collection” (Huebner, 1991, p. 1). Education happens when we are confronted by the other and an image of what we are not, and yet remain committed to what we can become. Huebner writes, “Confrontation with the other brings us under question and enables us to shed the idolatrous self into which we have poured ourselves and which now contains us” (cited Hillis, 1999, p. 397).

I am inspired by Huebner, and I believe that *university* teaching is first and foremost a cosmological enterprise directed toward understanding the *universe*. This was the classical conception of university teaching from the middle ages through the Renaissance, a notion that has lost favor among technicians, empiricists, and vocationalists in the modern era. In my philosophy, university teaching must not simply be directed toward preparing students for a career, although career advancement is one of our secondary concerns. In other words, teaching in the university is not a preparation for a future life, it is an experience of life itself (Dewey, 1938).

In our contemporary global community university educators must speak with prophetic criticism and engage in public discourse. Dewey took a similar position in his book *A Common Faith* (Dewey, 1934). In this text Dewey expressed growing dissatisfaction with hypocrisy, scandal, and ineptitude in organized religions. Dewey's concept of the "religious" is dynamic—an outgrowth of his distaste for the static view of the world held by many members of religious denominations that the sacred is somehow separated from the profane. Dewey (1934) writes, "The actual religious quality in the experience described is the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its condition, not in the manner and cause of its production" (p. 34). I understand Dewey to mean "social consequences of value" when he explains that the ideal, through imagination and faith, conquers selfishness and produces a better world. I believe that the knowledge and experiences that must be promoted by university professors are those which produce a better adjustment to life experiences, create social consequences of value, and foster social transformation for students and society. Thus, to reiterate my initial position, teaching is a prophetic and transformative enterprise.

University professors must teach and write with a critical prophetic voice. I would like to offer the life and work of three people who have significantly inspired my philosophy of teaching as examples of such a posture. The first, Dorothy Day, was inspired in her youth to actively work for justice in American society after reading Upton Sinclair's (1906) novel *The Jungle*. At the age of twenty she was arrested in front of the White House with a group of 41 woman protesting women's exclusion from the electorate. The women began a hunger strike in prison and were later freed. Day is known today as the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933 with Peter Maurin. Their Catholic Worker organization established a network of hospitality houses for the poor which continue in operation to this

day. Dorothy Day often argued that the class structure in the United States is of our making and by our consent we must do what we can to change it. Likewise, I argue, that the “savage inequalities in educational opportunity” (Kozol, 1992) and the “invisibility of marginalized children in the society and its schools” (Books, 1998), not only within the United States but also globally, compel us to radically alter our priorities. In response to the question “What knowledge is most worthwhile?” Patrick Diamond includes the following information in his editorial introduction to a recent issue of *Curriculum Inquiry*:

There are approximately 100 million children throughout the world who identify the street as their home, while there are almost 90 million children between the ages of 11 and 15 who are forced into regularly contributing to the international workforce. Ten million children under the age of 17 systematically exchange sex for money; millions of others, having been orphaned by the AIDS epidemic and displaced as victims of war, have turned to the streets for survival. The existence of street children is not limited to the developing world, as the North American experience with homelessness attests. (Diamond, 1999, p. 1)

Along with Diamond, Books, and Kozol, I conclude that my work as a university professor in classrooms is social work directed toward uplifting the lives of students and those whom they will serve in society. My philosophical training in Liberation Theology and my theological study of activists like Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, among many others, convinced me that teaching must be directed toward social change, community empowerment, and the liberation of the mind, body, and spirit of individual human beings.

The second example is David Orr, chair of environmental studies at Oberlin College. I know David through his collaboration on projects for curriculum and ecology with Professor Chet Bowers of

Oregon and his membership in the greening of higher education at Claremont Graduate School with David Purpel, William Pinar, and myself. David not only advocates for environmental sustainability, but he also directs projects for sustainability on college campuses—such as the construction of a prototype green building for Oberlin College in Ohio. David's work was featured in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 14, 2000). Orr's process for building community consensus and financial support, his attention to curriculum and teaching in every phase of the planning, and his orchestration of the building process as a pedagogical event in the community, all combined to so impress the American Institute of Architects that he received national recognition for innovative and imaginative design solutions. David Orr reminds me that my university teaching and curriculum work must be environmental work. In my teaching and research I must use every opportunity to connect students to the *universe*, especially the life sustaining dimensions of the global community on our planet.

The third example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was born in 1906 in Germany and studied theology at Tübingen before being offered a parish post in Berlin in 1933. He refused the appointment because “non-Aryans” were denied consideration, and the following year he was a founding member of the “confessing church,” a leading center of the Protestant resistance. In 1938 he was expelled from Germany and came to the United States to lecture, but he returned to Europe and became a member of the *Abwehr* military intelligence to gain support for resistance. In 1940 he worked with *Operation 7* to support smuggling Jews out of Germany. Bonhoeffer was forbidden to publish, teach, or preach, yet he continued to work with the resistance. He had many influential relatives who urged him to be silent; he also had many opportunities to sit out the war in peace while lecturing in America. But Bonhoeffer choose the path of critical prophetic resistance. When it was discovered that he participated in the

March 13, 1943, failed assassination plot against Hitler, an involvement that he anguished over and discussed in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was jailed and eventually sent to Buchenwald. He was court martialled and hanged on April 9, 1945, at Flossenburg, one week before the Allies liberated the camp. Bonhoeffer wrote before his death, “No one can think of freedom as a substance or as something individualistic. Freedom is simply something that happens to me through the other. Being free means ‘being free for the other’” (cited in Bax, 1997, p. 45). Bonhoeffer reminds me throughout his writings that freedom can be achieved not through what fancies the mind, but what is braved in the bold deeds of justice. This is accomplished not through ideas of soaring flight, but through action. And as if speaking directly to university professors, Bonhoeffer offers this additional challenge:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds: we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses or cynics or misanthropes of clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward people. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness? (Bonhoeffer, 1942, p. 56)

Bonhoeffer answered “yes” with his life and continues to inspire those of us who believe that teaching is the work of critical prophetic resistance. Therefore, I must include in my course syllabi a wide array of readings, field experiences, films, and projects that are directed toward justice in schools and society.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer is a model for those of us who seek to engage in public moral leadership for social reform and school renewal. As Huebner insisted in his challenge to the universities, a technical

curriculum is not enough; we must surpass the technical foundations of teaching and learning in education. In order for voices of resistance and justice to be effective, we must avoid safe research, hypocritical curriculum scholarship, and mundane technical classroom lectures that allude to empowerment while hiding behind the very corporate structures and political regimes that we deconstruct and condemn. Silencing the voices of critical prophetic resistance in our classrooms—whether out of fear or for financial gain or for political leverage—diminishes the credibility of university professors and makes us no better than the organized religions condemned by Dewey in 1934 for their hypocrisy, scandal, and ineptitude.

In the spirit of Huebner, Dewey, Day, Orr, and Bonhoeffer, I believe that university professors must foreground critical and prophetic public discourse for individual transformation and social renewal. University professors and their students must work collaboratively as partners in the cause of justice and ecological sustainability. I believe that university professors must advance a renewed public discourse for justice with their students—a discourse that can direct our classrooms toward social work, environmental work, critical prophetic resistance, and ultimately, social consequences of value. This is my philosophy of teaching in the university. I will now present specific examples of how I implement this philosophy in my classroom practices.

I begin all of my classes with a reflection on a work of art that consciously foregrounds an issue of social justice related to the central theme of the course. The work of art may be a film, novel, short story, painting, sculpture, statue, or collection of poetry. However, the purpose of the experience is to evoke—in the postmodern sense of eliciting a visceral response of disequilibrium—an immediate and emotional connection to the theme of the course syllabus. For example, in my undergraduate teacher

education course on social foundations of education (TEFB 322), I begin the class with the novel and film *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines. This novel is set on a rural Louisiana plantation of the 1940s. The two central characters are Grant Wiggins, a black teacher educated in California who returns to his home on the plantation to teach the young children, and Jefferson, a young black man and school dropout accused of a murder he did not commit. Jefferson is condemned to die in the electric chair in thirty days, and Grant is reluctantly persuaded by Jefferson's Godmother to visit Jefferson in the jail and teach him to read and to walk like a man before his execution. The story explores the relationship between a teacher and a student and the complexities of social issues like slavery, racism, capital punishment, inadequate educational opportunities for the rural poor, religion and education, and a host of other important topics. This novel and film elicit powerful discussions with my students, and they also prepare us for field experiences later in the semester.

One field experience I organize each semester is a trip to Austin to visit several urban campuses. Each student spends half of the day at a wealthy white campus such as Westlake High or Bailey Middle, and the other half of the day at a poor black and Hispanic campus like Pearce Middle or Crockett High. At the end of the day I take my students to a restaurant in the warehouse district of Austin for a meal and discussion with the principals and several teachers from the schools we visited. During the dinner discussion the students can explore the discrepancies they noticed during the day. At the next class session following this field experience we discuss the chapters from the textbook on the economics of education, and I show the film "Children in American's Schools" by Jonathan Kozol which documents the plight of schools in high poverty communities. Having had the first-hand experience of the economic disparities, my students are much better prepared to explore the

complexities of economics and education in our class discussions. In my undergraduate classes I constantly connect art, literature, films, field experiences, and classroom discussions to issues of justice, economics, compassion, and ecological sustainability. I hope to inspire teacher education students to address social and economic issues in their own context.

I use the same teaching philosophy in my graduate courses. When I teach Philosophy of Education (EDCI 662) I always include a visit to an art museum in the course syllabus. The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston is one of my favorites. I spend an entire day with my students slowly walking through the museum, and we pause to consider the possible philosophical lessons inspired by certain works of art. While I note the parallel between the history of particular philosophical movements and schools of art, the primary purpose of the field experience is to evoke a visceral response to various works of art and allow the graduate students to express their aesthetic understanding. Once the students become comfortable philosophizing in an aesthetic context, I challenge them to apply this methodology in a historical context. Sometimes this will involve watching the film *Vukovar*, a dramatic and disturbing narrative about the 1992 Bosnian War. Sometimes I take my graduate students to the Holocaust Museum in Houston—and I am always surprised by the number of graduate students who have never visited the Holocaust Museum, the Fine Arts Museum, or any other museum in their lives! On another occasion I took my students to the Calvary Baptist Church for a poignant conversation with the pastor who is a community activist for education, and who was once arrested while marching with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A particularly interesting field experience with graduate students is a walking tour of the statues on the University of Texas campus following our reading of chapters from two books by James Lowen:

Lies My Teacher Told Me and *Lies Across Campus*. We stop in front of the statues of the confederate generals and white slave owners on the South Mall. We talk about why these statues may have been erected in the first place, considering the historical and political climate of the time. We ponder why Woodrow Wilson and Jefferson Davis receive places of honor facing the state capitol, and then we consider Lowen's critique of these two men in our course readings. Then we walk over to the newly installed statue of Martin Luther King Jr. on the East Mall and discuss the decades long struggle to erect this statue. A dramatic moment on the walking tour occurs when I point out the surveillance cameras in the trees. The students are visibly shocked. I ask my students why George Washington has eight statues of white male confederates surrounding him on the South Mall (without surveillance cameras), but Martin Luther King Jr. stands alone on the East Mall under constant threat of vandalism?

This brief description of my teaching strategies for TEFB 322 and EDCI 662 only provides a glimpse into my philosophy of teaching. Clearly, the world is my classroom, and the arts are my vehicle for exploring the terrain. My goal is to challenge students to connect the subject matter of the curriculum to the lived world experiences of their surrounding community. I ultimately hope to inspire them to become prophetic voices for justice in schools and society. In conclusion, I reiterate my belief that education is a prophetic enterprise in search of justice; curriculum is a public discourse seeking transformation; and teaching is a moral activity that demands compassion and understanding. Teaching is not simply a technical human enterprise; rather, it is a creative process of healing, re-integration, remembering, and re-collection.

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