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Introduction: The Question of Method in Philosophy of Education

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It is possible to raise and solve philosophical problems with no very clear idea of what philosophy is, what it is trying to do, and how it can best do it; but no great progress can be made until these questions have been asked and some answer to them given.

(Collingwood, 2005, p. 1)

In a graduate seminar I taught in the spring of 2009 twenty students used and in effect brought into being in concrete ways a range of philosophical research methods. By telling the students we would study philosophical research methods, I had engaged in a very deliberate performative speech act that sought to bring about what it seemed to describe. When I say the students ‘brought philosophical research methods into being’, I do not mean that they invented or created new methods, but rather that by naming their ways of thinking and writing as philosophical research methods, they made these ways of thinking and writing available for explicit consideration. The work of philosophers of education and philosophers more generally has not been without method, but this has not commonly been taught under the term ‘research methods’.¹

My choice of the term ‘philosophical research methods in education’ for the course was based on a pragmatic recognition of the omnipresence and weight of the term ‘research’ in universities across the English-speaking world. The university at which I work—like many other universities—identifies itself as ‘research-intensive’, and its faculty are evaluated on their contributions to ‘research’. In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise is called just that, the *Research* Assessment Exercise, and scholarly work that is not labelled ‘research’ is not counted. Although philosophers of education may be more comfortable thinking of their work as ‘scholarship’ or ‘inquiry’ rather than ‘research’, the discourse of ‘research’ is so pervasive that it has seemed to me prudent to examine and explain, rather than to deny, the research aspects of our work. In this I felt supported by the American

Philosophical Association, which has adopted the following statement on the profession:

‘Research’ has come to be employed in contemporary academic life as a generic term referring to forms of inquiry pursued in all the many disciplines, from the natural sciences to the humanities. In this broad sense of the term philosophers have been engaged in research throughout the entire history of philosophy, and continue to be so engaged today, together with their scientific and humanistic colleagues in the many other disciplines descended from philosophy in which the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is still granted. (American Philosophical Association, 1996)

But even if the idea of philosophy as research is palatable, what about method? Does this volume cave in to what Richard Rorty has called ‘methodolatry’, the uncritical worship of method (Rorty, 1999, p. xxi)?² I would like to think it does not, and one reason for that is that it employs a much broader conception of method than its Baconian conception as technique that ‘can be applied reliably irrespective of the talent of the researcher’ (Smith, 2006, p. 157). ‘Methods’ in this volume refers to the various ways and modes in which philosophers of education think, read, write, speak and listen, that make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations.

The impetus for this volume is the fact that many philosophers of education work not, or not only, in departments of philosophy but in faculties and schools of education. Research methods courses are uncommon in departments of philosophy where it is assumed that students learn to read and write philosophy by, well, reading and writing philosophy. Faculties and schools of education, however, are interdisciplinary environments where students generally do not have the same experience of being immersed in philosophical discourse. Moreover, education is commonly seen *as* a social science, rather than as a field of theories, policies and practices that can be approached in a variety of ways, with perspectives *from* the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. One of the consequences is that philosophers of education are expected to be able to answer questions about their methods just as their social science colleagues do. Whether due to ‘physics envy’ or not, there seems to be a heightened concern with research methods in the social sciences. In addition, in faculties and schools of education, which may already suffer from ‘status anxiety’ in the academy, the desire to have one’s work be regarded as sufficiently scientific can lead to an even greater emphasis on the articulation of methods.

The challenge, as I see it, is for philosophers of education to talk about their research methods without submitting to the paradigms and expectations of the social sciences—especially the emphasis on ‘data’, technique and the tripartite breakdown of method into data gathering, data analysis and data representation. Without succumbing to the anxious concern with method to which I referred above, how might philosophical work be articulated on its own, that is,

philosophical, terms? How might we describe with precision and specificity the types of thinking and writing, of analysis, questioning, critique, interpretation and so on that philosophers of education engage in? What are our modes of thought and discursive operations?

The present collection complements two special issues of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* published in 2006, entitled *Philosophy, Methodology and Educational Research*. These special issues focused largely on philosophy (or philosophies) of research in the face of empiricist tendencies and threats. This volume focuses not on philosophy *of* research but philosophy *as* research—a possibility included in Bridges and Smith's (2006) introduction to the first of the two special issues (p. 131) but not elaborated in detail. The essays in the current volume are not critiques of lack of philosophical self-awareness and solid conceptual frameworks in educational research, nor do they take on 'data-driven' or 'evidence-based' policy discourses. Rather, they provide articulations of particular modes of philosophical thinking, reading and writing that are of value for the elucidation or critique of educational questions.

WHAT IS TO BE GAINED? WHAT IS TO BE LOST?

I introduce this collection of essays with excitement, but also with some hesitation. Even if the project does not fall victim to 'methodolatry', might there be drawbacks to a focus on method in philosophy of education? An oft-heard objection by philosophers of education to requests for, for example, abstracts or keywords prior to the completion of an article is that they don't know what they'll write until they've written it. Likewise, 'selecting' a method or set of methods prior to actually using them in philosophical research is problematic. Although some philosophers of education may be able to articulate a particular operation—say the analytic differentiation of a concept from related yet distinct concepts—before approaching a new philosophical quandary, many others are able to identify their methods only in retrospect. This, however, need not be an insurmountable problem. The order in which a text is presented to the reader hardly ever represents the order in which the ideas were formed and the text was written. More importantly: the intentions of the author—methodological or otherwise—cannot contain the effects of the text. Jacques Derrida has observed that the foreword is 'essential' but also disingenuous, as it gives the impression that it was written before the rest of the text while it was more than likely written afterwards, and bound to fail, as it indicates the central theme or thesis that is presented in the text but cannot control what the reader will emphasise or de-emphasise in her or his reading:

From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written—a past—which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future. . . . This is an essential and ludicrous operation: not only because writing as such does not consist in any of

these tenses (present, past or future insofar as they are all modified presents); not only because such an operation would confine itself to the discursive effects of an intention-to-mean, but because, in pointing out a single thematic nucleus or a single guiding thesis, it would cancel out the textual displacement that is at work 'here'. (Derrida, 2004, pp. 6–7)

If philosophers of education believed that announcing a methodological nucleus or guiding methodology before the 'work itself' could contain the displacements the text incurs, we would similarly be mistaken. Philosophers of education may make explicit in what ways they have analysed a certain concept or critiqued an idea, but their readers may discern other, perhaps even more powerful, discursive operations at work in the text. If we keep the necessarily self-limiting nature of methodological delimitation in mind, however, and accept that the prefatory methodological statements required in certain professional communications (such as grant applications) are a 'false appearance', then I believe that we stand to gain from the methodological reflection these falsely prefatory statements can encourage.

A second concern philosophers of education may have is that research methods in philosophy of education cannot be divorced from content. It may be all well and good to study the design of questionnaires or the coding of interview transcripts as methods, these hypothetical objectors will argue, but this is not how thinking and writing in philosophy of education proceed. But if this is the concern, I wonder if we have grown a little too fond of our status as 'research outsiders' to recognise our similarities with other kinds of research. After all, good researchers do not select a method irrespective of their object of inquiry or theoretical framework. In good research, the methods have to be understood within a methodology or theory of method, and this needs to be congruent with the theoretical framework of the study, which in turn has to be pertinent to the research question.

Methodological statements about philosophy of education can perhaps be understood by analogy to artists' statements about their work. Artists' primary concern is to make art, yet most art academies also teach their students to communicate about their work through the medium of the artist's statement. It can be argued that the artist's explanation of what he or she has done and why does not enhance the work itself and may actually detract from it; at the same time, many viewers, especially those not expert in the particular discipline, appreciate the additional information or perspective the artist's statement provides. Derrida notes that works of art, *erga*, are surrounded by many *parerga*, a term he borrows from Immanuel Kant and that denotes elements that surround but are not, strictly speaking, part of a work of art, such as the artist's statement but also the frame, title and signature (Derrida, 1987). As I have written elsewhere (Ruitenberg, 2009), Derrida discusses the supplementary functioning of *parerga*. They are outside the work but at the same time contest the borders of the work and what can be counted as inside and outside of it: 'I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a

work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper . . . , for example the frame' (Derrida, 1987, p. 63). The artist's statement is neither essential nor accessory to the work of art itself; it *supplements* the work. At first glance, a supplement is an addition, but Derrida observes that 'the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void' (Derrida, 1976, p. 145). The supplement is both complementary and compensatory (*suppléant*); it is not merely something that can be removed as easily as it was added but rather something that 'instills itself as a *natural* part of that which it supplements' (Bingham, 2002, p. 269). Although the 'work itself' is considered complete, once it has been supplemented with an artist's statement, this statement completes the work and, if removed, it will leave the work incomplete. The methodological commentaries that were invited as part of the chapters in this volume function perhaps as supplements to the 'real work' of philosophy of education. Although philosophy of education was considered sufficient unto itself, once methodological statements are added and readers grow used to such statements—in the way that art audiences have grown accustomed to artist's statements—their absence may be perceived as a lack in 'the work itself'. The point is not that this is either desirable or undesirable: it is just that it is a possibility.

There are, then, reasons for misgivings about the present project, and it would perhaps have been rash to have embarked upon it without considering these. Once these questions of philosophical method are broached, however, they generate real excitement. This was evident in my graduate seminar, it has been evident in conversations I have had with colleagues about the subject, and it is there to be seen in the various contributions to this collection. As a result, I believe now more strongly than when I started this process that there is something to be gained from an explication of philosophical work in methodological terms. So what did my students do? To give just two examples: Stefan Honisch, a trained pianist and composer, conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of playing the piano. Through a stripping away of what he knew about playing the piano, he came to pay attention to his corporeal consciousness of the movement of his arms, the weight of his fingers and the sensation of his breath. This type of inquiry, he noted, is valuable but rare:

The embodied connection to sound is attenuated too often in Western art music's (admittedly necessary) emphasis on technical fluency, stylistic propriety, and the general cultivation of perfection . . . In observing my teachers and other pianists whom I admire, I focused on replicating the appearance of their gestures and failed to ask what their bodily experience of those gestures might be—all the more troubling given that, as a musician with a physical impairment, my embodied connection to music was likely considerably different from their own. (Honisch, 2009)

A second example comes from Lian Beveridge, who examined how children's picture books multiply the hermeneutic circles between reader and text, as both reader (child and adult) and text (words and images) are doubled. Analysing the ways in which text and image can reinforce or contradict each other, the ways in which the adult mediates the picture book, and the ways in which the book as read by the adult reinforces or contradicts the book as seen by the child, all helped her clarify the complex conditions of interpreting children's picture books. Such clarification is helpful, she argues, because:

[c]hildren's literature is generally understood as an educational tool, teaching moral lessons, literacy, and how to engage in literary meaning making, among other things. Therefore, picture books can be reluctant to open themselves up to the play of meaning between text and reader, as they have a strong investment in a particular reading. (Beveridge, 2009)

These then were some of the inspired ways in which my students used philosophical methods in their research. I suspect methodological reflection on philosophical work was as uncommon for many of the contributors to this volume as it was for my students, and I sensed many a raised eyebrow on the other side of the correspondence I carried on with them about the unusual task I asked them to engage in. So let me say something about what the contributors have written about and how this collection is organised.

THIS VOLUME

The contributors to this volume demonstrate and explicate a wide—although, of course, not comprehensive—range of philosophical methods. The contributors work in Finland, Cyprus, Canada and the United Kingdom and draw on philosophical work that ranges from Plato to Hannah Arendt and from Israel Scheffler to Jacques Derrida (to name just a few). The collection is organised not by region or tradition but begins with essays that outline more recognisable methods and moves increasingly into terrain that is methodologically less usual. The first piece is by Katariina Holma, who has undertaken a retrospective reflection on a research project that entailed an analysis of the philosophical debate between Nelson Goodman and Israel Scheffler on constructivism and realism. Her chapter provides a peek behind the curtain of a piece of Anglo-analytic research focused on both analysis and synthesis and gives a detailed account of the many rounds of reading, categorising, and rethinking that were involved. In “‘Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better’: Arguing Across Paradigms in Philosophy of Education”, Daniel Vokey uses dialectical argument of the kind elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre to compare and analyse the relative merits of two competing approaches to teaching professional ethics. The common argumentative mechanisms of opposing, comparing and evaluating are made uncommonly

visible here. Michael Bonnett offers a phenomenological commentary on recent work in which the nature of selfhood and subjectivity in education is at stake. He argues that the structural and abstract claims in such work do not necessarily hold up when tested against the rich and varied lived experiences of those actually involved in education. Bonnett's chapter combines phenomenological inquiry with critique and argument, thus illustrating how philosophers of education rarely use just one 'method'.

Andrew Davis's 'Examples as Method? My Attempts to Understand Assessment and Fairness (in the Spirit of the Later Wittgenstein)' shows an analysis of issues pertaining to assessment and fairness in a variety of educational settings. Davis's concern is with the role of examples in philosophical writing, and rather than seeing them as illustrations in a more general and linear argument, he uses them in this analysis to argue from the ground up, from the specific and complex to the more general. This chapter also illustrates how different genres of writing—in this case the addition of a 'Brechtian' voice that addresses the reader directly—are part of the philosophical repertoire. Gert Biesta, in 'Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why Quasi-Transcendentalism Matters', explains why deconstruction, in the Derridean tradition, cannot be understood or used as a method and argues that, instead, we must attempt to 'witness' deconstruction as it occurs. While 'witnessing' may be an uncommon term to include among the more common descriptors of what philosophers of education do and how they do it—such as analysing, questioning, arguing and interpreting—Biesta argues compellingly that witnessing the event of deconstruction in education opens up an ethico-political register that exposes education to newness.

Charles Bingham distills a method from his own work and the work of Jacques Rancière and names it 'presumptive tautology'. Having named a new method, he also raises provocative questions about what it means to operate with such a 'named' method, and how the name can be understood literally as well as metaphorically. In 'Distance and Defamiliarisation: Translation as Philosophical Method', I propose thinking of translation, both in the interlinguistic and interdiscursive sense, as one of the methods philosophers use. Translation can be said to be the 'philosophical condition' that prevents self-presence in all thought, but it can also be used more deliberately to shift a concept or text into a new linguistic or discursive environment where it raises new questions. Like 'witnessing' and 'presumptive tautology', 'translating' does not refer to a new method but is proposed as a new term to help philosophers of education think in more fine-grained ways about their work.

The final two pieces demonstrate methods and 'talk back' to the assignment of attending to philosophical research methods. Richard Smith in 'Between the Lines: Philosophy, Text and Conversation' provides us with a provocative dialogue, a fictionalised seminar that both demonstrates and troubles distinctions between speech and writing, between teaching methods and research methods, and between systematic and edifying philosophy. In 'Method, Philosophy of Education and the Sphere of the Practico-Inert',

Marianna Papastephanou incites philosophers of education to, as it were, become less dependent as philosophical importers and more confident as philosophical exporters. Calling into question the assumed subject and object connected by the genitive 'of' in 'philosophy of education', she argues that, while the transfer of more general philosophical categories and concepts to education is not without value, philosophers of education stand to gain from revaluing the singularity and everydayness of education and its disruption of philosophy.

To respond to R. G. Collingwood: I am not sure if 'great progress' can or should be made now that questions of method in philosophy of education have been asked and some answers to them given. I do believe, however, that greater methodological awareness can improve both the aim and communicability of philosophy of education. Moreover, it encourages reflection on the rich *methodological* inheritance that philosophical traditions have left us but that is easily ignored. As two of the fictionalised students in Richard Smith's contribution to this volume demonstrate:

Anna: Descartes? Why Descartes?

Aisha: His *Discourse* is the *Discourse on Method*, Anna. On *method*.

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NOTES

1. There has been little recent work that explicitly addresses philosophy of education in explicit methodological terms, but Frieda Heyting, Dieter Lenzen and John White's edited book *Methods in Philosophy of Education* is a notable exception. This edited collection stems from a symposium on methodological issues in philosophy of education, held in Amsterdam in 1998. With objectives similar to those of this volume, the symposium organisers and book editors sought to examine what philosophers of education do, to ask them to demonstrate the 'methods of working' of certain approaches, and to use this for the facilitation of 'the training of new researchers in the field' (Heyting, Lenzen and White, 2001, p. xi).
2. The term 'methodolatry' was used earlier in psychology by Rollo May (1958) and David Bakan (1967) to protest a similar 'reductionist confusion [of research] with a particular methodology' (Leitner and Phillips, 2003, p. 162).

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