PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Philosophical Issues in Curriculum is a class offered twice a year, during the spring and summer terms. Although open to all students interested in education, the course gives priority to student teachers that are finishing their practicums. After experiencing the inherent complexities of teaching in their designated school districts, it is expected that the student teachers spend their last semester of training on campus, taking courses that problematize, complexify, and offer broader perspectives into teaching as a moral endeavour, in addition to being a professional or technical act.

Prioritizing the notion of teaching as a moral endeavour, I designed the course in a way to invite both student teachers and students whose major or minor degree is in education to think about specific nuances of teaching that are deemed difficult to manage, if viewed merely from a technical perspective. As an example, I took into consideration some elements that former students offered me throughout my teaching career: I have been told many times how hard it is to work in groups, how difficult it is to manage and organize students to plan presentations and discussions, and how complex it is to make curricular decisions. With these challenges in mind, I organized the course to invite my students to pause and reflect upon philosophical and educational issues that might permit them to find solutions to their dilemmas.

The first part of my suggestion for a pause to reflect philosophically was made through the way I chose the course readings. In our fast-paced intellectual environment, where my students openly acknowledge that they skim through information instead of thinking deeply about certain issues, I made the decision to challenge the prevalent ethos of speed. I made a point in making reading have a central role in the course, and I urged my students to try to do the most slow, concentrated reading they could possibly do. I suggested them to do this in the following manner: firstly, they should look for a time of the day in which they had energy. Secondly, I suggested they find a silent place and avoided taking their computers, phones or tablets with them. The readings were all basically on critical pedagogy, and I must admit that the reading load was intense, but I thought it would be important to invite my students to challenge the common habit of skimming rapidly through information. I chose four full-length books and a few book chapters, journal articles and films, hoping that if they did not read thoroughly, at least they would know where to find these resources in case they decide to consult them in the future. I think that making resources available as best as possible is a small yet important act, since the majority of students I have worked with from 2002 to 2012 seem to have lost the desire and taste for inquiry to chase ideas and resources on their own.

The second component of my invitation-to engage in deep inquiry- happened on week one of our studies, with the course syllabus itself. Having experienced some difficulties managing seminar courses in the past, I wrote a lengthy syllabus with the goal to read it in class after the introductory activities that I always bring at the beginning. I wrote the syllabus in a conversational tone, with many footnotes that had the intention to add some humour and lightness to the tremendous academic tasks I was inviting my students to engage in. Although my usage of colloquialisms and slang terms might have come across...
as campy, condescending, or egocentric to some students (it might have represented an immediate need to be liked, to be friendly, to be down-to-earth, etc.), my objective in using such style was sincerely selfless and empathetic. One might think that the best way to transmit a message is through linear and organized communication, but I suspect that this linearity is artificial, because the human mind does not function in a linear, organized way. Thought is chaotic and complex. There are many different voices and layers of complexity in the human mind. Just now, during my writing of the brief introduction of this syllabus and trying to focus on what I wish to communicate, I am also thinking about: a) polishing the language to make myself understood; b) the apple pie warming up in the oven; c) if I want coffee or tea; d) if it is too late for coffee or tea; e) if my meeting at the university tomorrow will be cancelled or not; f) how I haven’t heard from my mother in a week and I hope everything is fine, etc. There are many potential footnotes that I could open here to express the myriad thoughts passing through my mind, but I have to pretend that I am a vessel where all these thoughts pass through, and I must be able to somehow hold on to the one or two thoughts that are most important for me to accomplish my task of writing this introduction. It is probably happening to you right now as well. How many different things crossed your mind while you read this introduction to my course syllabus?

My point is—by writing my course syllabus in a manner that is similar to how I speak and think—I tried to make what is normally considered a dull task, *i.e.*, reading the course syllabus on day one, more engaging and fun for the students. By being fully engaged and having fun during the hours of contact with their peers and their instructor, they are bound to actually learn more. I claim that my style is truly empathetic and selfless (although I am aware that there always will be haters who consider what I do too over the map), because by exposing my complementary thoughts in footnotes, I like to think, invites my students to see me as a human being who thinks chaotically and has flaws, but is a real person who feels, and is also struggling to make meaning and communicate effectively. With the conversational tone and the footnotes, I hope that my students were able to take a look inside my head, and see how my thoughts are a result of a myriad of forces, and not *pure* rationality. My thoughts are a result of: a) if my love life is OK; b) if I slept well the night before; c) if some sad event happened or not on my way to campus; d) if I was able to eat before going to class, etc. My ultimate objective was to move away from logic, rhetoric, analytical language and bring in empathy (Kuokkanen, Wallace), imagination (Greene) and sensibility (care, if you *cf.*: Noddings, for example).

Another component of what I consider the embodiment of the philosophy/pedagogy of the course was the way in which the coursework was structured. I divided the class into four groups of eight students each. I did not give my students the opportunity to choose whom they wanted to work with. My objective was to suggest a reflection about school (and society) in general: school is the first place in which people leave the comfort of their families to spend hours in company of other people they did not choose to be with, and this certainly has drastic consequences, adding a layer of complexity to the educational experience as a whole. In a group with eight people whom they did not choose to be with, my students were forced to think about the reasons that led me to make such decision. It also served as an invitation for them to assume a substantial part of responsibility for their learning, as they had to organize film viewings, reading discussions, in-class and outdoors presentations on their own.

Besides the students’ presentations, I also gave presentations of my own. I called them “mini-lecture series” where I would present fresh material that I researched that week, and that conversed with the chapters from the required readings for the course. As an example, after reading Maxine Greene, students told me they wanted to know more about existentialism, so I revisited Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus, and connected their ideas of existentialism as gift and responsibility to Rauna Kuokkanen’s study on gift economies and transmission of knowledge in aboriginal epistemologies. Are there connections? Differences? All four authors talk about the responsibility and gift of existence. Are the authors talking
about the same type of gift? How does this inform our pedagogical practice? Asking these questions in my “mini-lecture” series, I offered some scaffolding, some structure, and also became part of the collective inquiry.

The assignments for the course were also an attempt to “embody” or “enact” philosophy. I gave them total freedom to choose whatever medium the group decided upon, in order to do a major project for the course. There were only two requirements: 1) The project needed to be informed by the philosophical ideas we were working with throughout the term, and 2) The project needed to be communicated in a way in which non-academics could understand the ideas. On the final week of class, we organized a potluck and invited members of academia (students, professors) and non-academics (staff, maintenance, family, friends, etc.) to a final showcase. The goal was to demonstrate that academic work does not necessarily need to be confined into a certain discursive order. Every member of that community should have access and be invited to participate in the scholarly work of a public institution for higher learning.

In addition to the major project, it was required that each and every student of EDUC 433 wrote an op-ed about social or philosophical issues in curriculum, school, universities, education as a whole, as long as the op-ed generated awareness of these issues in their potential readers.

Since there was no grading scale and the course was on a pass/fail basis, the students were assessed on their engagement, will to know, and depth of complex thinking, i.e., as long as they compromised and focused on learning and sharing knowledge, they would excel.

As an end note, I would like to say that this course was probably one of the busiest yet most gratifying ones of my teaching career thus far, and I owe this to the students who accepted certain aspects of it, challenged others, and modified quite a few of my ideas, making this pedagogical experience completely theirs and the community’s.

The one and only outcome expected from them, was to develop creative ways of teaching, moving from the mere transmission of facts and regurgitation of information towards an interactive, considerate and emancipatory pedagogy.

SYLLABUS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines fundamental philosophical issues involved in designing, evaluating, or changing educational curricula. Issues, such as the nature and justification of educational curriculum, the components of a rational curriculum, the nature of knowledge and its differentiation, curriculum integration and the education of the emotions will be studied from a philosophical perspective.

Format: 4 hour weekly seminar

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To help students of education appreciate the important philosophical problems underlying curriculum development and understand the nature and components of curriculum planning in education. Invite students to consider teaching as a moral act. Such tasks have become urgent today with the emphasis that is being placed in local curriculum development and place-based inquiry.
REQUIRED READINGS:


REQUIRED FILMS:

Stand and deliver, Warner Bros. Pictures; written by Ramon Menendez & Tom Musca; produced by Tom Musca; directed by Ramon Menendez. Published Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, (1998)

1 Please observe that this is a reading-intensive course. Nothing is to be afraid of though. Some might find the readings challenging, but I urge you to not give up. Also please don’t just dismiss the difficulty as “academic jargon”, “gibberish”, “useless” or “boring”. I think there is something magic about reading. Reading is probably the closest one can get to entering someone else’s head, live for a few hours in someone else’s skin. We’re going to do plenty of dynamic and fun stuff in this course – trust me! But I’ve been reading a lot about the loss of our ability to concentrate and do some deep thinking about certain issues, so I urge you to take the readings seriously, i.e., try to create some “offline” time for yourself... I mean... please do some research online about the books, the authors, and beyond the topics that we are studying, but also try to find a silent spot for you to do some slow thinking, slow reading, take some notes slowly, ask the text questions, laugh if there’s something funny... feel the words becoming flesh and making you think and feel... try to find the magic in doing some slow reading. There is a lot of knowledge happening outside of the online universe. Try to stay away from your computer, cell phone, tablet or whatever, at least 4 hours every day... just a suggestion... I really hope you can find the magic, or at least that you can create your own form of magic, that doesn’t necessarily have to be like mine...

2 I really don’t know how and when to watch these films. They are all reserved in the Library – perhaps after I divide the class into groups, you can form your own film club, get together on a weekend and watch it together at someone’s house? Or can we all come to SFU on a Saturday and do a screening of the films, have our own EDUC 433 movie club? I’d also like to watch “To Sir with Love” and the Canadian films “Les Invasions Barbares” and “Monsieur Lazhar”. I have those films. Great stuff. Let’s talk about this and see what are your thoughts – I just don’t want to show films during our class hours, because 4 hours per week is really short... I will show some shorter clips though, of stuff that I will bring to share with you all.
Mr. Holland’s opus, written by Patrick Sheane Duncan, produced by Ted Field, Michael Nolin and Robert W. Cort; directed by Stephen Herek (1995)

Schooling the world: The white man’s last burden. Lost People Films presents a film by Carol Black. Published [Malibu, Calif.]: Lost People Films, (2010).

Changing Education Paradigms (On Youtube) by Sir Ken Robinson

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COURSE CONTENT

So here’s a didactic little story that people normally don’t tell you. At the Faculty of Education, there are three streams: the first encompasses the BA, MA and PhD programs; the second encompasses the B.Ed., M.Ed. and Ed.D. and are normally called “professional programs”. The third stream is called the “science education streams” (Mathematics, Science, etc.) The first is more theoretical in nature, and focuses on scholarship, ideas, critical thinking and inquiry. Not that the “professional programs” don’t offer these things – they do – but their main focus is on skills, techniques on how to teach, manage, design things that relate to schooling. One stream isn’t better than the other – they just focus on slightly different (but complementary) aspects of Education. The first stream trains one for academic work, the second focuses on methodology. The science streams normally focus on designs for learning, but this is a rough generalization. I know that many students from the Professional Programs come to Philosophical Issues in Curriculum, but here, I am forced to use my NBSA technique to tell you something: I know that some students come to this course attracted by the word “curriculum”. And that some people are put off by “philosophical issues”. So here’s the truth, dear friends- if you came here looking for techniques on how to build or design curricula, you should’ve enrolled in Curriculum Design, or taken workshops on that matter. But if you came looking for the ideologies, the theoretical paradigms that shape curricula, and you are willing to problematize, complexify and challenge curricula and teaching in a general sense, this is the right place for you. My aim is to demonstrate how philosophy is educational theory, and how philosophy is just the set of ideas that, allied to other discourses, shape what we call reality. There’s nothing scary about philosophy. Seriously.

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ENGAGEMENT

In a general sense, there is a strong conversational aspect to this course. I will ask a lot of questions, but not rhetorical or random ones. I ask true questions, ones that even I don’t really know the answer to. I don’t expect answers from you, but I do expect engagement and taste for inquiry. I also expect you to be curious and willing to share ideas, to be enthusiastic about learning and thinking about all the philosophical issues we’re going to study, all the educational issues we’re going to talk about. I challenge your thoughts and beliefs in a respectful manner, and I open space for you to challenge each other’s certainties always in a respectful and elegant manner. I will not lecture you. Instead, I will do ongoing research on a weekly basis and share my findings and reflections with you during the first hour of class. I think this is the best way to bring some fresh knowledge to the classroom. I’ll also lead a few outdoor

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3 NBSA is my No-BullShit Approach. Please pardon my language for using “bullshit” in an academic course syllabus. But we’re all adults here, right? My NBSA means that I’m pretty straightforward, outspoken, and will not trick you or try to fool you. I try my best to be honest, clear and tell nothing less than the truth. I would never bullshit you. That’s why on day one, I decided to let you know what this course is about, where it fits, how we will embody certain philosophical ideas. I do this because many of my students enroll in courses with certain expectations that end up not being met, so I figured if I told you from the start what 433 looks like, and you don’t like it, you can always drop...
activities, a few experimental educational activities, a few discussions, and help you guide your own discussions. You will be responsible for a huge chunk of the learning process. But please don’t lecture us.

When your group is presenting in class, try to do presentations that are at the same time smart, substantial and engaging. If you stand up there and start talking to yourself to show us how smart, articulate and quirky you are, I will close my eyes and take a nap in front of you, and will authorize the entire class to do the same, if they want. This isn’t show business. There’s a fundamental difference between expressive writing and talking (in which you express your opinions, points of view) and communicative writing and talking (in which you are trying to reach out to your audience, i.e., the reader, the student, the classmate that is out there eager to learn with you). Please try your hardest to reach out to the audience, speak to each other, and ask each other for help to understand. Keep in mind: **there are no stupid questions about education or educational theory.** (Let’s read this out loud three times, and make this our mantra!) There are different perspectives on the same subject. I urge you to be open to each other’s differences and listen respectfully, even when you disagree with someone. There are no stupid people. Everyone is equally intelligent and capable. Therefore, if I see you not caring for what your classmate is saying, rolling your eyes sarcastically or disrespecting one another’s thoughts, I will talk to you in private the first time, I will ask you to leave the class a second time. We’re all in the same boat trying to figure things out, trying to live life the best way. It’s not that we have to be best buddies, friends forever, hang out after class in the coffee shop and always agree with each other; disagreement is encouraged (not to say recommended), but MUST be communicated in a respectful manner.

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**COURSE INSTRUCTOR’S EXPECTATIONS**

A calm voice, many ideas, a variety of questions that do not necessarily require an answer (I’ll be happy if my questions at least get you thinking for a while).

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**LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

Firstly, the class will be divided into four permanent groups. I will divide the class. On week 3, each group must nominate a leader. Maybe even come up with a name for the group. If the group wants, you can have a schedule and switch leaders on a weekly basis. The leadership thing is really up to you. The leader’s duties will be: a) take attendance of his/her group, and at the end of each class, hand me a sheet with the names of everyone who attended; b) organize film clubs and extra-curricular meetings (study groups, potlucks or whatever) and provide me with a brief report; c) organize meetings for the group to prepare presentations for our class; d) other things that we will come up with together. The leader must be open, organized, and non-tyrannical. She or he must be really good at listening to all group members and capable of trying to work for the group’s benefit. Please allow at least 3 weeks of getting to know each other before choosing leaders. Also, please keep in mind that there is NO COMPETITION amongst groups.

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**ENGAGEMENT**

- 50% - A major project informed by the ideas studied in the course (and other ideas you and your group discovered and developed on your own). This project can be in any format (a video, a curriculum, a poster, a booklet, a study group, etc. please feel free to discuss ideas with me and your peers, as well...) and must be written and transmitted in accessible language in a way that any person can understand these complex ideas.
50% - A 750 word max op-ed on educational issues, aiming publishable quality and submission to local newspapers. The op-ed must also be informed by the philosophy and pedagogy embodied and discussed in EDUC 433, but must invite your potential reader (i.e., the reader of the hypothetical newspaper) to be aware of social/philosophical issues in education, curriculum, school system, etc. Alternative ideas can also be discussed (again, with me and your peers!)

EVALUATION
This course has a pass/fail system. If you engage in activities, do the readings, actively participate in seminars and in work with your group, you will pass.

If you enrolled in this course and still do not attend class, do not read and discuss ideas, do not actively work with your group and fail to hand in assignments, except if something extraordinary happened (and I understand that “life happens”), you might fail.

NOTES ON LEARNING ACTIVITIES
Organize a studying schedule for Philosophical Issues in Curriculum. It’s not difficult at all. Saying you don’t have time is unacceptable. Everyone has 24 hours a day and has the same amount of time. You might say you failed to organize your time – that’s possible and acceptable. Here are some organizational tips: If you sleep 8, you have 16 hours. If you work full time, you have 8 hours left. If you stop to eat and rest, that should be something around 2 hours per day (including 3 meals). You still have 6 hours per day. Let's say that you work full time and are going to University part time. You still have 2 hours left in the day. Use that to study at least 1 hour per day for Philosophical Issues in Curriculum. If you’re a full-time student, want to become an academic, and are interested in research, I strongly recommend you organize at least 4 hours of your day just to read, and read a lot, read outside the course materials, and organize at least an hour a day to write and think. If you want to become an elementary or high school teacher, I suggest you read at least 3 hours every single day of your life and find an hour to write and think. It’s possible; you just have to want to be organized.

READING SCHEDULE AND PRESENTATIONS
- **Week 1** – Introductory game + meaning of Philosophical Issues in Curriculum + go over this lengthy course syllabus (hoping that it won’t be boring to read this together!) + Talk about Mrs. Kuokkanen’s book.
- **Week 2** – Group 1 – Maxine Greene + Instructor’s mini-lecture series: Inventing the Trans-subjective Imagination.
- **Week 3** – Group 2 – Maxine Greene + Q & A with your course Instructor (readings)
- **Week 4** – Group 3 – Maxine Greene + Outdoors activity: exploring the parks around campus (Environmental curriculum, eco-philosophical issues)
- **Week 5** – Group 4 – Ranciere + Instructor’s mini lecture series: Paulo Freire and the Brazilian Reality: Educational Insights for Canada.
- **Week 6** – Group 1 – Ranciere + Instructor’s mini lecture series: The Gift Economy versus the Culture of Narcissism
- **Week 7** – Group 2 – Ranciere
- **Week 8** – Group 3 – Paulo Freire + Instructor’s mini-lecture series: The Gift and Responsibility implied in Existentialism + midterm check-in about projects and op-eds
• **Week 9** – Group 4 – Paulo Freire + Outdoors activity: Exploring the Land and the impact that the University has on Nature (Environmental curriculum, eco-philosophical issues).

• **Week 10** – Group 1 – Cote & Allahar + Instructor’s mini-lecture series: Analytic philosophy versus Continental philosophy.

• **Week 11** – Group 2 – Cote & Allahar

• **Week 12** – Group 3 (first half) – Paul Theobald + Group 4 (second half) – Paul Theobald, Teaching the Commons.

• **Week 13** – Showcase of projects, potluck, hand in op-ed.

*I know there’s a lot of information here, but please keep in mind a few things: there’s no pressure, no rush, no hurry, no reason to be anxious. Stay light. Breathe. Don’t worry about organizational stuff – just try to relax and enjoy your learning!

**POLICIES**

*Students in all Faculty of Education courses are encouraged to review policies pertaining to academic integrity available on the Undergraduate Programs website.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This syllabus was inspired by syllabi previously written by Charles Bingham, Ann Chinnery, Robin Barrow, Sean Blenkinsop, Lewis Hyde, Maxine Greene and David Foster Wallace. Thank you all for being such inspiring masters! All imperfections in this syllabus are my responsibility. My teachers, favourite authors and favourite philosophers of education should not be blamed for my incompetence. They did their best to teach me through their work and their writing.

This course was highly experiential, and, fortunately, it received outstanding reviews from the 27 students who took it. Many reviews considered the course “a life-changing experience”, “a new and fresh way of looking at pedagogy”, “a great way to live the critical ideas academics often profess”, etc. and the main critique was the heavy reading load and lack of time to do in-depth reading of specific chapters and/or topics.

I’d also like to thank the reviewers of this syllabus for their time, commitment, comments, and infinite generosity in contributing to this paper. It is quite moving that reviewers devoted time to read about a course that I fifty per cent taught for real last summer, and fifty per cent dreamt of. It is this dialogue and the sharing of different perspectives that can allow us to become good educators. Beyond the “constructive feedback” or “destructive feedback” dualism, I’d like to say that I learned a lot from all feedback, tracing the rhizomatic-nomadic signifiers of the reviewers’ words.