

Reintegrating Philosophy More Effectively Into Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract

The role of philosophy has gradually been minimized in initial teacher education (ITE), despite the benefits it can bring to teachers. One of the reasons it has been marginalized is because of the way it has been offered. I outline some relatively neglected critiques philosopher R. S. Peters laid out against the historical survey method of teaching philosophical foundations, as well as some of his suggestions for how to integrate philosophy of education into ITE. Backed by more recent proposals by philosophers of education, I argue that some of Peters's suggestions could help address some of the pressing challenges facing teacher education today. I then consider how these suggestions could be incorporated into a philosophical foundations course for ITE, involving, for example, a focus on practical problems faced by teachers in their practice and an analysis of the dichotomy between traditional and progressive education. Setting in motion and maintaining a learning process about more effective ways of integrating philosophy into ITE would help us make the case for its meaningful (re)introduction.

Keywords: initial teacher education, philosophy, R. S. Peters

Résumé

Le rôle de la philosophie a été progressivement minimisé dans la formation initiale des enseignants, malgré les avantages qu'elle peut leur apporter. L'une des raisons pour lesquelles elle a été marginalisée est la manière dont elle était enseignée. Je présente certaines critiques relativement négligées formulées par R. S. Peters à l'encontre de la méthode d'enseignement historique des fondements philosophiques, ainsi que certaines de ses suggestions sur la manière d'intégrer la philosophie de l'éducation dans la formation initiale des enseignants. En m'appuyant sur des propositions plus récentes de philosophes de l'éducation, je soutiens que certaines des suggestions de Peters pourraient contribuer à remédier à certains des défis urgents que rencontre aujourd'hui la formation des enseignants. J'examine ensuite comment ces suggestions pourraient être intégrées dans un cours sur les fondements philosophiques dans la formation initiale des enseignants, en mettant, par exemple, l'accent sur les problèmes pratiques rencontrés par les enseignants dans leur pratique et en analysant la dichotomie entre l'éducation traditionnelle et l'éducation progressiste. La mise en place et le maintien d'un processus d'apprentissage sur les meilleures manières d'intégrer la philosophie dans la formation initiale des enseignants nous aideraient à plaider en faveur de sa réintroduction efficace.

Mots clés : formation initiale des enseignants, philosophie, R. S. Peters

Introduction

The decline of philosophy in initial teacher education (ITE)—perhaps the most significant casualty in the gradual marginalization of the foundation disciplines in ITE over the past several decades—is by now well-documented (Abbott et al., 2019; Christou & Bullock, 2013; Colgan & Maxwell, 2020; Duemer, 2020; Heilbronn & Foreman-Peck, 2015; Higgins, 2011). In Canada, for example, only some 10% of teacher education programs currently have at least one mandatory philosophy of education course (Maxwell et al., 2023). Naturally, the decline of philosophy in ITE is not universal or complete. There are in fact many places where philosophy, as one of the educational foundations, is still offered to pre-service teachers. However, the trend in North America has been the marginalization of the foundations approach as a whole (except for psychology, which still tends to be central to initial teacher education), and of philosophy in particular. Various reasons have

been adduced for the decline, including misconceptions about the nature of educational theory and its relationship to practice (Newman, 1999); a growing culture of accountability and a narrow focus on “what works” that is biased against philosophical approaches (Biesta, 2007; Woodhouse, 2023); the fact that philosophy itself is often misunderstood in schools of education (Portelli & Konecny, 2013); and the rise of the learning sciences, which some researchers appear to think should be the exclusive source of content for teacher education programs (Goldman et al., 2022).¹

But why should we lament the decline of philosophy in ITE? Let me briefly defend the importance to ITE of reflection on concepts and values central to education, to which philosophy could naturally contribute. First, it is obvious enough that, regardless of whether a teacher has studied “educational theory,” they inevitably carry out their work equipped with certain understandings of relevant concepts. All a teacher’s practices are imbued with some degree of thinking. The question is whether this thinking is clear and coherent, or if it is confused and inchoate (Peters, 1977). For example, as a teacher, one *necessarily* uses and/or encounters the concept of “discipline” in discourse and in practices: teachers, parents, administrators, and students talk about discipline, disciplinary measures are applied, etc. There is a range of understandings of discipline “on offer,” as it were; for instance, seeing it as necessarily inimical to freedom, or seeing it as essential for learning, and so on. Not all these understandings are valid, and some can even contribute to problems in practice. Reflecting on the concept of discipline with teachers, a task with which philosophy can assist, helps clarify understanding and strengthen practice.

Second, unless one thinks that teaching is simply a kind of technical skill, the kind of judgement required by teachers demands a sensitivity to conceptual and ethical realities (Biesta, 2015). Teachers do not work on inert objects; their students are not only alive, but also thinking and valuing, and a teacher needs to be able to “see” where their students are at in their thinking and how to advance it, as well as what they value and how to broaden their horizons. A math teacher, for example, is not only an instructor in skills, though such

1 I should hasten to add that I am not opposed to the learning sciences as such, only to their monopoly over ITE. Existing programs would no doubt be vastly improved by incorporating more insights from the learning sciences, especially when it comes to teaching literacy and basic mathematics, but this need not imply the marginalization of philosophy. In fact, I have often found there to be resonances between some of the basic findings of the science of learning and, for example, some of the key arguments of the London School philosophers of education.

instruction is essential; she also needs to be sensitive to her students' attitudes toward mathematics and their perception of the values embedded in the discipline. There is a big difference between a student who has glimpsed the values intrinsic to math and another who is only grudgingly, instrumentally dedicated to the subject. Reflecting on the concepts involved here—including the values embedded in a discipline—can help teachers perceive these dynamics, and philosophy is well-placed to assist in this regard.

Finally, teachers, especially today, face an inordinate amount of pressure from fellow teachers, administrators, parents, governments, and edtech providers to think about education or to teach in particular ways, some of which may be helpful, but others of which might be false or even harmful (Kerssens & van Dijck, 2022; Peters, 1977). Teachers need to be equipped to justify their approaches (or to choose new ones for good reasons) if they are not to be vulnerable to passing fads and fashions or slogans, with which education is notoriously awash. We might think of, for example, the pressure teachers sometimes face to adopt specific educational technologies. Psychologists can tell us about the negative effects of too much screen time, which is no doubt helpful, but philosophical analysis might allow teachers to perceive the values embedded in one or another technology and the way these shape human agency, sometimes in undesirable ways.

There are also some scholars who argue that there is a special relationship between philosophy and education, one that would demand that we retain a role for philosophy in teacher education. There are various sources for this view, including Dewey (1916/2001) himself, who famously wrote that “philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education” (p. 336). More recently, David Bakhurst (2020) has argued that education is central to philosophical reflection, and it is hard to imagine doing philosophy “without having education in view” (p. 257). Conversely, if we agree that education should at least include among its aims the cultivation of profound reflection, open-mindedness, or critical thought, one could easily make a case that offering teachers some training in philosophy could help them foster these intellectual virtues or habits of thought in themselves and in their students. These are just a few examples of some of the deeper connections that have been identified between philosophy and education.

Finally, the (re)introduction of philosophy into ITE could help address pressing challenges besetting teacher education and fulfill some of the requirements of quality teacher education programs that have been identified by scholars. One challenge, alluded to above, is that teaching is often reduced to “a set of techniques and routines” (Brooks,

2023, p. 30). These are naturally important in teaching, “but an exclusive focus on them as part of a teacher education programme erroneously suggests that teaching is predominantly a set of skills, and that teacher education should focus on the rehearsal and adoption of these skills” (p. 30). Absent from this picture, among other things, are the virtues teachers require (Prairat, 2021), which are related to skills but cannot be reduced to them. Philosophical content in ITE could potentially introduce a corrective to this tendency by, for instance, inviting student-teachers to read about, reflect on, and discuss the nature of teaching, and the role of virtues within the practice. Philosophy may also be able to help ITE embody some of the elements of quality that have been identified in the literature, such as the need to “help students confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning” (Brooks, 2023, p. 24; Darling-Hammond, 2006). These kinds of beliefs and assumptions are often woven into broader frameworks of thought that go largely unquestioned, but which the insights and methods of philosophy can help bring out.

There is an extensive literature on the above: noting the decline of philosophy in teacher education, listing reasons why this is happening, arguing why this is a bad thing, and justifying the importance of bringing philosophy back into teacher education (e.g., Colgan & Maxwell, 2020; Kerr et al., 2011). I hope the previous paragraphs have gone some way toward making an initial case for the value of philosophy to ITE—a case that will be strengthened over the course of this article. But my focus in this article is, rather, to go a step further and to consider *how* philosophy might be (better) integrated into ITE. One of the reasons why it has been marginalized is, after all, because of how it was being offered in the first place (Portelli & Konecny, 2013); for example, as an episodic historical survey, disconnected from the concerns of practitioners. If we want to bring it back, we should have a clearer idea of how it might be done differently, and better. And in places where it is still offered—and there remain many, if we take an international view—we should try to make sure we are offering it in a way that will strengthen teacher education and avoid its eventual marginalization.

Below, I first introduce the work of R. S. Peters, which I argue is timely and relevant for thinking through the role of philosophy in ITE. I proceed to consider some of Peters’s critiques of how philosophy was taught in ITE, which are mostly contained in a relatively neglected set of his papers on teacher education. He also made some positive suggestions, which, backed by more recent proposals from scholars, could contribute to resolving some of the ongoing challenges facing teacher education. Finally, I consider

what it might look like to apply some of these suggestions to the design of an undergraduate-level philosophical foundations course that is part of an ITE program, in part by sharing some of my own experiences in this regard from over the past several years.

Introducing Richard Peters

Richard Peters was very influential in the philosophy of education field during the 1960s and 70s. Unlike some philosophers of education, Peters had experience teaching in a high school and even worked in a youth centre; he was also heavily involved in teacher education at the London Institute of Education and in the United Kingdom more broadly (Cuypers & Martin, 2013; White & White, 2022). For a couple of decades, he and his colleagues were highly productive, writing a great deal and training many younger philosophers of education. Some of their attention was also dedicated to the theme of teacher education (e.g., Hirst & Peters, 1970). However, shortly after this boom of philosophical research in education, the analytical approach to philosophy espoused by Peters and many of his colleagues (usually called “conceptual analysis”) was widely critiqued and went somewhat out of style for a few decades. Among philosophers of education, there has been some renewed interest in Peters’s work of late, some of it no doubt stimulated by Peters’s passing in 2011 (Cuypers & Martin, 2011, 2013; see also the following special issues: *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Volume 45, Issue 2, 2013, and *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 54, Issue 3, June 2020). Even in the context of this quasi-revival, however, there has been comparatively little interest in his set of essays (Peters, 1977) on teacher education (the exceptions I have found are Chinnery, 2013; Clark, 2013; and a short section of a chapter of Cuypers & Martin, 2013).

An objection might be made to drawing on Peters’s work at all, given the existing critiques of his work and of conceptual analysis in general. Before moving on to consider Peters’s essays on teacher education, then, I will briefly address this objection. First, regarding conceptual analysis, it is important to note that critique of it was part of a general recognition in philosophy of the limitations of prevailing analytic approaches. Peters himself, in a later essay (1983)—also neglected, but nevertheless illuminating—noted the following limitations of conceptual analysis as it was practised in the 1960s and 70s:

Conceptual analysis has tended to be too self-contained an exercise. Criteria for a concept are sought in the usage of the term without enough attention being paid to the historical or social background and view of human nature which it presupposes. (43)

Peters was therefore quite aware, at least by the early 1980s, of some of the limitations of his generation's version of conceptual analysis. He elaborated a broader understanding of conceptual analysis on the next page: "Concepts cannot be dealt with in an abstract and isolated way. They have a social and historical context which must be taken into account and analysis of them must have a point related to some educational problem" (44). While much more could be said about conceptual analysis (Zrudlo, 2024), I think Peters's amendments to it make it a much more palatable approach (see Barrow, 2010 for a defence of the early Peters against the late), although it could never be the exclusive one in teacher education—nor would Peters argue that it should be, given his pluralist and interdisciplinary leanings (Cuypers & Martin, 2013).

So much for conceptual analysis. But what of the critiques of Peters's own work, such as Jane Roland Martin's (1981) critique of his ideal of the educated person? Do they justify overlooking his writings on teacher education? Again, Peters (1983) himself acknowledged in later writing that his earlier work suffered from mistakes. He admitted, for instance, that "a too specific concept of 'education' was used" and that he "failed to give a convincing transcendental justification of 'worthwhile activities'" (p. 37). "I was trying to extract too much from the concept of education," he wrote, "which is more indeterminate than I used to think" (p. 37). He points out, also, that his book, *Ethics and Education*, is often the target of critique, whereas his later collections of essays contain better arguments. Like most prominent scholars, Peters's work stimulated a lot of discussion, much of it fruitful, whether it was agreeing with him or contesting his arguments. I agree with many of the criticisms of his work, especially of what he was trying to extract from the concept of education, but I do not think these criticisms mean his work is without value, especially his somewhat neglected writings on teacher education, to which I now turn.

Peters's Critiques of Philosophy in ITE

Foundations courses, including courses in philosophy, became central to most teacher education programs in the first half of the 20th century. Peters was, however, critical of how philosophy of education was typically approached in this context. He noted that it was usually taught as a kind of historical survey, or as a history of ideas, starting with Plato, often touching on Rousseau and others in the middle, and sometimes ending with Dewey. Today, some teacher educators adopt a similar approach, cutting out some of the figures from the middle in order to add, for example, Freire or Noddings at the end. Others do a portion of the historical survey but then dedicate the remainder of the course to a series of contemporary topics such as feminism, post-colonialism, anti-racism, etc. Another common approach is what has been dubbed the “isms” approach, which surveys a variety of broad philosophical frameworks, including realism, idealism, positivism, and progressivism, and lays out their alleged educational prescriptions (Portelli & Konecny, 2013).

Peters (1977) pointed out a few issues with the historical survey of ideas approach, most of which also apply to the other approaches mentioned above. “Is it easy,” he asked, “both to do justice to Plato, Locke, Rousseau, and Froebel and to make what they said really relevant to the problems of the modern teacher?” (p. 146). In the context of a short introductory course during ITE, the answer is often negative, unless one is in the hands of an able historian of philosophy who is at the same time sensitive to classroom issues faced by contemporary teachers (unfortunately, such individuals are exceedingly rare in departments of education). Gereluk (2020) has made a similar point:

The brevity of these discussions within the limited amount of devoted time in an entry-level philosophy of education class leaves me to wonder whether students are able to grasp in any detail or depth the relevance or significance of the theorists. (p. 106)

There is even some debate among philosophers themselves whether the historical survey is the best way to teach philosophy, at least in some contexts (e.g., Estarellas, 2007).

If the “Introduction to Philosophy of Education” or “Philosophical Foundations of Education” course was one among many that student-teachers were going to take in the philosophy of education, it might be fine to use the historical survey as a springboard for further studies, but the reality is that most programs are only able to offer one course in

this area (if any). Then there is the question of making these thinkers' ideas directly relevant to the concerns of the modern student-teacher. Peters's worry was that the great ideas of the past might become reduced to "inert ideas," remaining stagnant in the student-teacher's mind. Peters also pointed out that the survey approach to philosophy of education made it difficult for the student to integrate what he or she was learning with what they were studying concurrently in educational psychology or sociology of education. In other words, the survey approach inadvertently reinforced the fragmentation between the foundation disciplines in education. He concluded that while major thinkers or texts from the past should certainly be referred to, "they should not dictate the form of the course" (p. 147) for student-teachers in ITE.

To add to Peters's critiques, another issue is that both the historical survey as well as the "isms" approach may appear to the student as a kind of buffet of ideas, which is often somewhat disingenuous on the part of the professor (who naturally does not value all the theorists or "isms" equally), and can even come across as relativistic. Students are often bewildered by the variety of ideas/theorists, each of which seems to have some merit, especially when professors steel-man everything they have students encounter. A series of inconclusive arguments, intended to foster critical thinking and intellectual curiosity, sometimes has the opposite effect: it can produce in students the impression that theory does not, in the end, matter all that much, since one can argue one's case no matter what, leading to a general lack of interest in theoretical discussion. One can simply "choose" one's philosophy (an impression reinforced by the questionable approach of having student-teachers write a "my philosophy of education" statement; see Bakker et al., 2019, for a critique of this practice and Waks, 2020, for a suggestion of a more fruitful approach to producing such statements), and the link with practice remains distant. There seems to be little at stake in philosophy of education from this perspective (Portelli & Konecny, 2013).

No doubt, *some* student-teachers have benefited, and continue to benefit, from a historical survey approach to the philosophy of education. However, it is unclear whether this kind of approach or the others mentioned above are indeed helpful for the majority of teachers. Even in Peters's time, as undergraduate teacher education programs were just beginning to take their modern form, philosophers (and sociologists) were already "slapping on formal courses in their own disciplines too early, in too abstract a manner, and without the students being rendered ready for them" (Peters, 1977, p. 158). More recently, Leonard

Waks (2020) has echoed Peters's sentiment: "If philosophers are to contribute to teacher effectiveness, they need to find better vehicles than the conventional academic courses loaded with philosophy texts to be read and digested for their own sake" (p. 77). Perhaps those reforming teacher education programs, with the traditional approaches to philosophical foundations in their sights, were unclear about the benefit of philosophy for teachers, giving them yet another reason to quietly marginalize the role of philosophy in ITE.

I do not blame those who think this way, given how philosophy has sometimes been integrated into ITE. And in this sense, I do not think we (those who think philosophy has an important role in ITE) should be dead set on "bringing back" philosophical foundations courses, at least not in the same shape as they used to be offered. First, it seems unlikely that the foundations courses will be reinstated widely at this point. Second, even if they were, I would hesitate to endorse the idea if they were brought back mainly as conventional historical or "isms" survey courses. A fresh approach is required.

Suggestions for Better Integrating Philosophy Into ITE

In addition to offering critiques of the typical approach to philosophical foundations, Peters (1977) also put forward some positive proposals for how to introduce or mobilize philosophy of education in the training of teachers. Interestingly, he argued that philosophy of education should not be taught on its own in ITE. He favoured an approach that would centre on certain practical problems faced by teachers in their professional practice; for example, the issue of the authority of the teacher or the ethics of punishment and discipline. This would, among other things, "avoid the danger of philosophy becoming a corpus of inert ideas" and allow it to "arise naturally from the student's developing experience in training" (Peters, 1977, p. 159). Philosophy would be brought to bear on practical issues arising in the context of experience, "meshed-in" with knowledge from other foundation disciplines (history, sociology, and psychology).

Peters generally maintained that education was not a discipline in and of itself; rather that the foundation disciplines each contributed knowledge and insights toward resolving practical problems in the field of education (for a contrasting perspective, of education as a discipline in and of itself, see Biesta, 2011). Teaching educational theory therefore required both a differentiated and integrated approach: differentiating between the contributions of the different disciplines, while integrating their contributions into

a coherent whole in order to tackle common issues. He noted, in this connection, that student-teachers “are often brought up on too one-sided a diet purveyed by those with predominantly psychological interests” (Peters, 1977, p. 144). (As we noted earlier, this diet has only become more one-sided since Peters’s time.) This, Peters discovered, sometimes left new teachers with little grasp of the *reasons* behind the different techniques they were being taught, and they were left unable to adapt them to different situations. He thus emphasized “the importance of philosophy in this ‘meshing’ operation” (1977, p. 144) between the contributing disciplines to educational theory.

Peters also argued that, as much as possible, you would want to incorporate philosophy in such a way as to give student-teachers a glimpse of the values embedded in the discipline—such as clarity, rigour, imagination, or ethical sensitivity—and philosophy’s distinctive modes of thought and experience, as a partial initiation into the discipline. Moreover, such partial initiation, in the context of a teacher education program, would allow for the necessarily “vocational” character of such a training to be conceived of and implemented in a more “liberal” fashion (as in the “liberal” arts; see Yacek & Kimball, 2020, for a recent statement and defence of this same argument). This would, in turn, help overcome the reductionist frame of mind that conceives of teaching as a mere set of skills and techniques.

Another function of educational theory in general in ITE, in Peters’s view, “should be to remove certain naiveties that students bring to the educational situation” (Peters, 1977, p. 164). This resonates, of course, with what was mentioned above, about the importance of helping student-teachers confront their deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning. Some of these assumptions derive from culture or ideology—whether of the Romantic variety or the more recent technicist sort. Peters argued that the foundation disciplines, and especially philosophy, could help teachers “develop a critical, empirical, adaptable attitude to methods of teaching and encourage them to learn to think on their feet and experiment with different ways of teaching different types of subjects to different types of children” (p. 165). He was wary of approaches to teacher education that promoted one main teaching method as a kind of orthodoxy and felt that philosophy could help break up this naïve take on methods—for example, by emphasizing the link between means and ends, as well as the fact that the “how” of teaching (methods) should follow the relevant “what” (content) and “who” (students) in a given context.

Of course, and largely thanks to the influence of Peters and his London School colleagues, one can certainly find introductory textbooks to the philosophy of education, accessible to teachers, that do not offer historical surveys of great thinkers or a series of “isms” (e.g., Bailey, 2010; Barrow & Woods, 2022; Carr, 2003). The extent to which these and similar textbooks are used in teacher education programs is a matter for empirical investigation (Barrow and Woods’s [2022] volume appears to be at least somewhat popular, given that it is now in its fifth edition). I assume that, where one can find teacher educators with some level of training in philosophy of education, the use of such textbooks may be more prevalent. But such individuals are increasingly rare in departments of education, at least in North America. Nevertheless, their experience would be worth gathering and examining. While I did not use such textbooks per se, my overall approach is closer to them than to the approaches Peters had criticized.

What Might This Look Like in an Undergraduate Course?

I was in the process of building my own syllabus for my first offering of a mandatory philosophical foundations course for Bachelor of Education students at my university (somewhat of a rarity in North America at present) when I encountered Peters’s papers (1977) on teacher education. I found many of his suggestions pertinent and tried to incorporate several of them into my course outline. I ended up teaching the course three times over a period of four years, refining it each time in light of experience and further reflection on Peters’s work. Since then, I have continued to refine it in new contexts. Below, I describe the structure of the course and reflect on my experience designing and refining it over the past several years—not in order to recommend this particular course of action, but more to illustrate what it might look like to incorporate some of the suggestions described above in the design of an introductory course in ITE. It will also help illustrate some of the questions and reflections that arose along the way, which will interest teacher educators especially. Given that my primary responsibility to the student-teachers in my classes was their own education, and that I was not acting at the time as a researcher, it would be inappropriate (not to mention unethical) to treat this as a typical empirical research project. I have therefore written this section of the article in the style of reflections on practice and experience, and will not, of course, name any students, nor cite from any of the work they produced.

Focusing on practical concerns of teachers. Peters's insistence on focusing on the practical problems encountered by teachers resonated with me as this was already foremost in my mind. Part of my course design involved making lists of these practical problems, especially the ones that had a close link with conceptual issues, which philosophical analysis or critique could help clarify.

One way of identifying these problems was for me to put myself in the shoes of teachers, and especially student-teachers, who are in the process of delving more deeply into society's ongoing discourse about education, now as teachers-in-training. This discourse is peculiar compared to other professional discourses in that it involves many more individuals and groups in society beyond the professionals themselves (students, parents, journalists, politicians, etc.), takes place more publicly, and is more intimately intertwined with the everyday world of people and ordinary language. The discourse in, say, engineering, is much less public and its language is more specialized; engineering students come to their professional training with much less prior exposure to the relevant discourse. Bachelor of Education students, even before they have entered their program, have already absorbed some educational jargon from their environment and have opinions about educational issues. Each time I taught the course, I tried to get a sense of this by asking them, on the very first day, to each write down a few burning questions they had about their upcoming professional practice. Collecting these and analyzing them gave me a sense of their assumptions, as well as their interests and concerns.

Concerns about how to engage students were very common (e.g., How do we grab students' attention? How can I make learning interesting?), as were worries about teaching diverse classrooms (e.g., How can I teach to different learning styles? What's the best way of finding the right teaching methods for students with varying needs?). There were also many questions about classroom management (e.g., How are we meant to discipline in a positive way? How can we appropriately punish students?) and relationships with students (e.g., How can I earn the respect of students? How do I set boundaries? How can I exercise authority? How can I guide students without being mean or scary?). There were other questions about evaluation and technology, as well as other themes.

The dichotomy between traditional and progressive education. Unsurprisingly, many of the student-teachers' concerns revolved around the old dichotomy between so-called traditional and progressive education. Their discourse was largely focused on the diverse needs and interests of children, and they wanted to make learning as fun and en-

gaging as possible. At the same time, they were aware of the need to create a disciplined environment in their classrooms, but anticipated that this would be challenging, and their questions revealed that they were uncomfortable about exercising their own authority, or how it would be perceived by their future students. The wider social discourse about education, at least in North America, is largely “progressive” in tone (Labaree, 2004; Waks, 2020), and this shapes student-teachers’ initial concerns and worries. I felt, then, that tackling the (false) dichotomy between traditional and progressive education would be a good starting point. Under this umbrella, we could analyze a number of concepts that were immediately relevant to their practical concerns (“needs,” “interest,” “discipline,” “authority,” etc.).

Peters himself, along with one of his colleagues, Paul Hirst, had developed accessible yet compelling analyses of some of these concepts, precisely for teachers (Hirst & Peters, 1970), and I availed myself of some of them for my syllabus. For example, their analysis of “interest” distinguishes between the psychological “interests” a student happens to have at a given point in time, and what is “in the interest” of a student. It may be “in the interest” of a child to learn mathematics, but this same child might not (currently) be interested in learning mathematics. Examining further the educational value of “psychological interests,” they point out that not all interests are ethically sound (e.g., one might be interested in torturing frogs); that others might not be desirable to build on in an educational setting; that interests, particularly children’s interests, are somewhat ephemeral in that they are likely to vary quite a lot, sometimes even week to week; that many of children’s interests do not necessarily spring from deep within them but are actually acquired through peers or, worse, commercial propaganda; and that education is, after all, meant not only to speak to one’s current interests, but ideally to awaken new interests in students (Hirst & Peters, 1970, pp. 36–39). Considering this series of arguments carefully helps teachers nuance their concern about teaching to the interests of their students, protecting them from the extremes of progressive educational rhetoric, which can inadvertently narrow the horizons of students.

Addressing common misconceptions. There were other concepts mentioned by the student-teachers that were not addressed by philosophers of education such as Peters, in part because they were not as ubiquitous in his day as they are today. For instance, the concept of “learning styles,” mentioned above, has now become widespread in even pre-service teachers’ minds and in the broader culture in North America. In addressing

this concept, I thought to “mesh-in” some insights from psychology, as Peters (1977) had recommended. Psychologists have, after all, now thoroughly debunked the notion of learning styles (e.g., Husmann & O’Loughlin, 2019; Pashler et al., 2009). Nevertheless, it is reported that nearly 90% of teachers in many countries still believe in learning styles (Newton & Salvi, 2020). Thus, I thought to dedicate a class to the concept of learning styles, critiquing the theory from the angle of philosophy, but also psychology, bringing both foundation disciplines to bear on this particular concern—which, in this case, happens to be entirely misplaced (Zrudlo, 2023).

Another instance of “meshing-in” I was able to carry out was for the concept of “self-esteem.” This was another concept that often appeared in student-teachers’ concerns (e.g., How do I teach in a way that boosts students’ self-esteem?). In this case, I thought that a genealogical approach, examining the history of the concept—where it came from and how it became popularized—would be a helpful complement to the philosophical and psychological perspectives. This is, of course, in line with the broader sense of conceptual analysis later alluded to by Peters, which I mentioned above. I therefore drew on a historical analysis of the term (Storr, 2018), which brought out the shady origins of the popularization of self-esteem: a public relations trick of an eccentric Californian politician engrossed with the convictions and methods of the infamous Esalen Institute. This enriched an analysis from Kristjánsson (2010), who drew on both philosophy and psychology in his study of self-esteem. While still employed by some psychologists, self-esteem is no longer thought to be the educational panacea it once was, and issues with its promotion have become abundantly clear (Smeyers & Smith, 2014). This kind of study can help student-teachers approach the use of this term with a little more caution, as opposed to unthinkingly considering its promotion a central aim of education.

Offering a positive account of education. While it is tempting to build a syllabus entirely out of such debunking and problematizing moves, I realized after my first time teaching the course that I would need to offer a positive account of education if student-teachers were going to have something to hold onto as we blasted away various misconceptions they had absorbed from current educational discourse. I therefore tried to organize the course in a way that would provide this positive account early on (positive, not in the sense of optimistic, but in the sense of going beyond critique). Returning to the (false) dichotomy between traditional and progressive education, I noted that one way of overcoming this dichotomy is to point out and keep in view an intimate link between

the two poles of “student-centred” and “curriculum/subject-centred” approaches. While so-called traditional educators were focused on “what was to be taught,” and so-called progressive educators on “who was to be taught,” it was clear to Hirst and Peters (1970), for instance, that education involved paying attention to both. The very task of education could be described as helping students (the “who”) develop a close connection with the content (“what” is to be taught): to approach, say, mathematics in such a way as to begin to be able to think mathematically by coming to a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts, to appreciate the value of mathematics, and to develop some of the skills associated with this domain. This was to be the basic positive account, then: that education involves helping students connect to certain objects of understanding, with the teacher’s role being to facilitate this connection, this process of understanding. I conceived of objects of understanding in a very wide sense, including purposes and perspectives, and thus encompassing the discussion of the aims of education.

This positive account was inspired by Hirst and Peters’ work, but also by the educational philosophy of an NGO called the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science (FUNDAEC), based in Colombia (see Arbab et al., 2025 for an account of FUNDAEC and its educational philosophy). One of FUNDAEC’s founders offered the following, very simple observation: that the verb “to understand” has, necessarily, both a subject and an object. One cannot speak of understanding without mentioning *who* is understanding (the subject), and *what* they are understanding (the object). From the perspective of teachers, we are concerned with helping subjects (students) understand a variety of objects (to be found within mathematics, history, etc.). This insight helped me structure my course.

Potential objections. At this point, I would like to address a couple of potential objections. The mention of Hirst and the discussion of “objects of understanding” may suggest that I am implicitly approving the “forms of knowledge” thesis for which Hirst (1965) is famous. Like Peters’s early work, Hirst’s epistemological argument about the different forms of knowledge and their importance for education was the subject of vigorous debate (Barrow & White, 1993; especially Phillips, 1993). Hirst himself later (1993) amended his thesis considerably, focusing on the notion of “social practices” instead of forms of knowledge. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of this debate (for one such analysis, see Farid-Arbab, 2018, pp. 202–211). For the purposes of my course, my aim in talking about “objects of understanding” was simply to help student-teachers

develop a more substantial sense of these objects (I am wary of the extremes of constructivism; see Bakhurst, 2011) and their vast range, so as not to treat them in an identical fashion. The concept “fraction” is different in nature from that of, say, “the Renaissance,” or “justice”—all of which may feature in the curriculum. I remain undecided about how differences between these and other concepts should, can, or cannot be systematically cashed out, but their investigation is surely important for education.

It may also be objected that the focus on understanding and objects of understanding would result in an overly “intellectualist” conception of education—this was one of the key critiques of the forms of knowledge thesis. What about, one might ask, the development of concrete skills, or emotional dispositions? These are important questions, and I do not have the space to respond to them adequately here, but suffice it to say that it depends on how one conceives of the conceptual and understands the relationship between mind and reality. I tend to follow David Bakhurst (2011) on this point, defending a very broad view of the conceptual, in which exercising skills and abilities and fostering the right emotional dispositions in a given situation is an expression of “mindedness,” and therefore involves some form of conceptual understanding, at least implicitly, even if it cannot be articulated in language. In any case, I believe it is defensible to argue that nurturing understanding is at the heart of education (see Brewer, 2009 for a spirited defence of the centrality of understanding in ethics and epistemology), provided one’s notion of understanding is broad enough and that related aims (e.g., the development of skills) can also find their way into the process.

Structuring the course. Returning to the structure of my course, I began, then, with the dichotomy between traditional and progressive education, covering a number of excerpts from essays and books by Peters and some of his London School colleagues. Having firmly grasped the dichotomy and understood it as false, we moved on to consider some examples of objects of understanding—say, mathematics or history—thinking together about what was distinctive about teaching and understanding them. Incidentally, spending time examining a few subjects that are taught in primary and secondary school, the nature of their educational content, and how to go about teaching them was helpful in overcoming yet another dichotomy in teacher education: between methods and content knowledge. I am sympathetic to Shulman’s (1987) effort to bring these two together (with the oft-cited concept of “pedagogical content knowledge”), and it seems to me that insights from the foundation disciplines, especially philosophy, can help in this respect.

After having covered a few areas such as these, we turned our attention to the “who,” the students themselves, and analyzed some related concepts, such as self-esteem and learning styles. Finally, we shifted to studying the role of the teacher and teaching, and in this context further examined concepts such as authority and considered the theme of educational technology. Thus, the overall structure of the course tried to convey the basic positive account of education as connecting students to objects of understanding.

The approach I adopted also allowed me to offer student-teachers an intimation of the values embedded in philosophy itself by exploring a variety of philosophical genres and traditions and touching on certain themes relatively deeply. Together, we read texts that employed an analytical style, continental sources, more Ancient-inspired approaches, and phenomenology, as well as texts belonging to political theory, ethics, pragmatism, and intellectual history. I only briefly pointed this out to students in passing—the aim of my course was not to survey all the diversity of philosophical approaches, nor was this its organizing principle. I did not expect that students should subsequently be able to define these different traditions or approaches or even distinguish one from another. Rather, the side effect I was aiming at was that students might be able to briefly glimpse the variety of values embedded in philosophy as a discipline: the contemplation of eternal and beautiful truths, the precision and care involved in carefully analyzing the meaning of words and phrases, the engrossing exercise of examining first-person experience, the sense of perspective that comes from the history of ideas, the immediate relevance of applied philosophy, the poetry and play of Continental approaches, and so on. A one-sided diet in philosophy, unless one is blessed with a gifted teacher, is often not the best way to learn to appreciate the discipline as a newcomer. We also discussed certain concepts such as freedom and authority repeatedly, from a variety of angles and traditions, which allowed a greater degree of depth and sophistication. Of course, this was but an introduction; one cannot expect fully fledged philosophers to emerge from such a course of study, nor was this my purpose. Nevertheless, the student-teachers were exposed to high-quality and diverse philosophical writings, and began to learn how to think philosophically, giving them a sense of the value of the discipline to their professional work.

I have nothing beyond anecdotal evidence that my approach was successful, but I certainly was able to avoid some of the main problems Peters (1977) had pointed out with the historical survey approach. I did not have to worry about short-changing key philosophical thinkers, since I never suggested we were comprehensively assessing their

work. The approach felt highly relevant to the teachers since we had focused on practical problems and associated conceptual issues that were on their minds. There was no extra work needed to make the philosophy or theory “relevant.” Based at least on the group discussions we held, and the written work of students, the course content seems to have gone well beyond “inert ideas.”

However, there is still much room for improvement. In considering further refinements to my syllabus, I have decided to add readings on the nature of teaching itself, as a practice, as well as on the virtues and attitudes it demands of its practitioners. I had touched on these themes before, but I now think teachers would benefit from a more explicit consideration of them on their own terms. As such, I am refining the overall structure of my course, which will continue to place emphasis on the idea of understanding, but without making this its only organizing principle. I mention these more recent reflections in part to demonstrate the kind of ongoing learning process needed when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of various approaches to (re)introducing philosophy into ITE.

Conclusion

I have drawn attention to Peters’s critiques of prevalent ways of introducing philosophy to teachers and his practical suggestions for how to go about doing so, not in order to argue for the revival of a strictly “Peters-based” program for integrating philosophy into ITE, but in order to shed light on some of the desirable features of a path forward for those who believe philosophy is relevant for student-teachers. The path, at least as I see it, is (or should be) wide. There are no doubt several valid ways of integrating philosophy into ITE beyond the one I have presented here through the example of my own course, such as, perhaps, the “case study” approach suggested by Portelli and Konecny (2013), Gereluk’s (2020) problems-based approach, or what has been called the “Philosophy for Teachers” (P4T) approach (Orchard et al., 2016). Even an approach that maintained a chronological structure, if carefully amended and connected to the practice of teachers, could certainly prove effective (I have colleagues who certainly seem able to do this well). Some ways, however, are less useful than others, particularly in the early stages of ITE. More needs to be learned about a variety of approaches to integrating philosophy effectively, but Peters’s suggestions are a good place to start. There are of course other relevant considerations, such as how a course such as the one I have described can help

prepare teachers for their placements in schools or reflect upon the experience they gain therein. Indeed, Waks (2020) has suggested that the P4T approach, for example, could be incorporated into ITE as a weekly seminar during periods of supervised practice. Empirical research will also be necessary to explore various approaches. If we manage to develop rich and highly effective philosophical content for ITE, we will no doubt obtain a more sympathetic hearing when it comes to reinstating philosophy in teacher education.

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