

Extrait de ***Aplied Philosophy for Health
Professions Education***
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Editors)

Philosophy of Education: Towards a Practical Philosophy of Educational Practice

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Philosophy of Education as a Theory of Practice: Meirieu's View

In Herbart's first lecture in 1802, he makes a remarkable statement: "First, let's distinguish pedagogy as science from the art of upbringing' (Herbart [1802–1832] 1986, 55). Science as theory is general, practice is individual. That is why theory is always "too much and at the same time too little" (ibidem). There is a gap between the more general theory and the more individual practice. According to Herbart, practice needs 'tact'; this can only be achieved by doing and reflecting on what one does in practice. That's not saying theory is not important. It is important, in preparation for practice and reflection on practice. In the introduction of his *Allgemeine Pädagogik* [General Pedagogy] from 1806, Herbart speaks about theory as a map. The map allows the educator to determine their direction, but also helps them find the way they want to go and to reflect on the results of it.

Meirieu's Pedagogy as a Map

The French educationalist Philippe Meirieu (1949) affirms Herbart's stance of pedagogy as a map. For him, pedagogy is an 'educational doctrine' that consists of loose, heterogeneous elements, "a number of reflections and ideas" that enable the educator "to take on a pedagogical challenge" (Meirieu 2004, 136). Pedagogy is a practical theory, an 'in-between theory', between sciences and philosophy on the one hand, and

on the other hand practice, and the experiences gained there. It is, indeed, a map to orient on educational practice, and to reflect on the gained experiences. At the most basic level, educators should make the map by themselves. The starting point of the map is not science, nor philosophy; it is practice, more precisely: the resistance of the child or adolescent that the educator experiences. Meirieu speaks about 'a pedagogical moment'. According to him, the heart of such a moment is resistance; it's the moment that the educator experiences that a child or adolescent escapes their power (Meirieu 1995). The child or young person has their own will. During such a moment, the educator experiences that children and young people aren't objects; they are subjects; they have, as Langeveld said, the desire to be someone themselves. That is an experience-based, pedagogical fact. But that fact does not absolve the educator of the responsibility to introduce children and young people into the world and help and support them as self-active young humans to grow up, and achieve grown-up-ness. In his *Le choix d'éduquer* [The Choice to Educate] (1991), Meirieu states that the act of education is based on a choice. It is a choice for the child as subject. In education, the crucial question is always: "Do I allow the other, the one in front of me, to be a subject, even if it goes against me?" (12). For Meirieu, the educator is able to say 'yes' to this question because they believe in a child's educability. They do so, because they are convinced of the child's inherent capability to form themselves, convinced of what the Germans call *Bildsamkeit*. Based on this conviction, Meirieu argues that the fundamental task the educator stands for is twofold: to call the child as subject into presence, and to provide them with the cultural tools, and help to use them, to be able to inhabit the world in which they live. A teacher, who is always an educator as well, can only accomplish this task within an educational safe space. A school should be a safe place where children and young people can communicate and gain experiences with the cultural tools they are offered. Safety requires a law to which all participants measure their actions. This law functions as a 'third party' and positions one against the other. Within such a safe space children and young people can appear as subjects and learn to work with the cultural tools offered them. At the same time, it is a place where they learn to live together. School is a form of community life, as Dewey said, a mini society where citizenship is learned (Meirieu 2004). The other fundamental task of an educator or teacher, respectively, is to install such a safe place, a safe mini society. Here we can learn lessons for the education of health professionals. Here too, selfactivity and confidence in the student's *Bildsamkeit* is crucial. Only if the health care student is addressed as a subject, is challenged as a subject to pick up medical tools and challenged to work with them, can they become a responsible health professional. That is only possible if the place in which

health professions education takes place is a safe place in which students can make mistakes and can learn from their mistakes. The place where health care education takes place should be a place of professional togetherness, a place where the professional attitude of healthcare workers is put into practice daily, by professional health professions educators firstly, and, following their educators, by students.

A Situated Philosophy

Back to Meirieu's pedagogy. The pedagogy he puts into practice can be called a "situated philosophy" (Burbules 2018, 1424). It is a practical philosophy. Like philosophy of education, it generates meanings and indicates purposes. Above all, however, it is a practical philosophy through the concepts it proposes; these concepts make practice appear as an educational practice that challenges the educator to act. Meirieu's practical, philosophy does not give clues and hints, it points, from the concepts presented, in a direction, ways to go, to special points to notice, to obstacles to overcome. It is indeed a map, a map to orient oneself, to determine one's direction, to find one's way, to help to make decisions. You may have noticed that Meirieu's practical philosophy is part of a long-standing philosophical and pedagogical tradition. Concepts of many philosophers and pedagogues can be found in it. They form a loose network together; they are the conceptual crossroads on a pedagogical map. For example, self-activity, *Bildsamkeit*, and the law as 'third party'. All kinds of other forms of knowledge, practical and theoretical, can be connected to it. Meirieu does so, but he also challenges the user to do it themselves. And that is indeed also an educational task: to elaborate the maps educators are working with based on the experience they are gaining in the educational field.