



Cultivating Wisdom: A Review of *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education: Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy*, by Howard Woodhouse. (2023).

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Abstract

This article constitutes a review of Howard Woodhouse's latest book, *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education: Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy* (Routledge, 2023). It outlines Woodhouse's assessment of the causes of the marginalization that the discipline of Philosophy of Education has undergone over the last 25 years, which has led to a decline in its stature. According to Woodhouse, this marginalization of Philosophy of Education has largely been the result of the increasing dominance of the money-oriented value program of the global economy and its influence on Education and Education programs. The value program of the global economy sees Education as a commodity to be bought and sold, rather than as a vehicle for the emancipation of human lives. This review anticipates several potential counterclaims that might be waged against Woodhouse's call for a restitution of the discipline of Philosophy of Education and argues against them. It also entertains an alternative conclusion that can be drawn from Woodhouse's premises, namely, that given the confluence of global crises in which we find ourselves, which to some extent comes as a result of a focus on the dissemination of knowledge as the goal of education to the neglect of wisdom in the application of that knowledge, going forward into the future, formal education should be inclusive of the cultivation of wisdom.

Keywords Philosophy of education · The value program of the global economy · John McMurtry · Bertrand Russell · The civil commons · Environmental education · The cultivation of wisdom

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According to Howard Woodhouse in his latest book, *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education*, Philosophy of Education, which was once considered a “foundational” discipline of university Education programs, has undergone a process of marginalization that has led to a substantive “decline in [its] stature” (p. 2) over the last 25 years. Woodhouse describes that in many institutions of learning today it has become “sidelined” (p. 11) and widely treated with “indifference” (p. 8). To be sure, with some exceptions, in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, new hires in the discipline have dwindled, basically removing the discipline from many universities over the years by way of gradual attrition. Woodhouse characterizes that under the value-program of the global economy, the knowledge that education disseminates is increasingly being understood as a commodity that is to be bought and sold, namely, it is deemed to be a function of the marketplace and subordinate to the interests of corporations and of industry. It is, for them, an article of commerce and/or a tool ensuring a pool of skilled workers who may be hired. Furthermore, the value program of the global economy commands that education must attain measurable “benchmarks” and results whose criteria are purely market-based. Education programs are being made ever-more subordinate to the demands of the global economy, either set up or removed based on factors such as perceived workforce need, the success of graduates in the jobs market and/or in the business world, whether money is being made through them, and whether they contribute to making the nation more economically competitive.

Today, we see the rise of market-oriented “performance-based funding” schemes for university programs¹ as well as differentiated tuition costs, which involve charging students more in the way of tuition money if they enrol in programs that are deemed by government not to be as conducive to the values of money-making as compared with others. By emphasizing such schemes and by conceiving education as a commodity, it would seem that supposedly “pro-free-market” governments want to have a (not-so-invisible) hand in determining what lines of work youths should eventually take up, doing so in a manner that does not to respect their intrinsic worth as selective agents in their own learning and lives, as well as shaping what the future of their market should be.

In Woodhouse’s account, the value program of the global economy has increasingly threatened the discipline of Philosophy of Education with critical endangerment. This is because the discipline of Philosophy of Education, with its emphasis on cultivating the kind of critical reflection that asks deep and penetrating questions about the nature and purposes of education, can reveal the undue influences of values running contrary to its own values, such as those of the global economy, on it. For Woodhouse, it is not that Philosophy of Education is the only discipline that can foster growth in terms of the critical thinking capacities of teachers and resulting, in their students. However, he warns that other courses and programs that enable such growth, especially those that cover philosophical topics and which are not

¹ For example, see the *Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations’ “Brief on Performance-Based Funding”* (October 14th, 2022), which presents an exhaustive critique of the Conservative Government of Manitoba’s plans to move ahead with a “performance-based” system in relation to university and programmatic funding.

deemed by administrators, governments, and industry leaders to be relevant to the purpose of increasing money profits, may eventually find themselves being marginalized in a similar fashion.

With reference especially to the Life-Value Onto-Axiology of the late John McMurtry (who taught at the University of Guelph),² Woodhouse argues that the life-oriented values of education and the money-oriented values of the global marketplace are inherently contradictory to one another. As such, it is no wonder that market forces have targeted and chiseled away at the discipline of Philosophy of Education. For Philosophy of Education is a domain of intellectual study that can help teachers to cultivate the kind of mindful reflective space, beyond the frenzied activity of dealing with their everyday demands, out of which they can both develop resistances to the external pressures that they may face in their professional careers and formulate pedagogical paths forward that have the authentic life-interests of students centrally in mind. Woodhouse writes that “without [the] logical and emotional life space,” that the discipline of Philosophy of Education helps teachers to secure, “the ability of teachers to reflect upon the complex world with which they are faced, and their capacity to implement pedagogical approaches that address the felt needs and longing of students for reliable meaning is undermined” (p. 2). But teaching that is directed by such conscious reflection will undoubtedly help to cultivate similar logical spaces for critical questioning and “inner impulse[s]” (p. 3) toward inquiry in youths.

As the value program of the global marketplace continues to undermine the life-oriented values that help to preserve and extend the civil commons (including public education, public health care, and biospheric well-being, etc....), which is the ultimate life-ground, Woodhouse highlights that teachers are under increasing pressure to understand their work as “technicians in an assembly-line system that rewards compliance [with the money-oriented values of the global economy] rather than [rewarding] relevantly qualified judgment” (p. 2, my additions). Under this rubric, much like in a centrally-planned or command economy, the values of the supposedly “free” market are employed by government officials, university administrators, and industry leaders to select, in pre-determined fashion, what or who students should be or become, what they should strive for, what roles in society they should perform, what they should think and what they should believe, what they should enjoy, as well as the existential meaning of their lives. In this way, the values of the global economy continue to divert students away from entertaining certain life-possibilities in favor of others, such decisions based usually in highly questionable conceptions about the future trajectory of the economy and of shape of the workforce.³ At any

² See Woodhouse’s earlier analysis of John McMurtry’s *Unequal freedoms: The global market as an ethical system* in his critical notice, “Ultimately, life is not for sale” (2001). This volume has obviously inspired Woodhouse’s consideration of the causes of the marginalization of the discipline of Philosophy of Education.

³ To boot, when some provincial governments in Canada have been required to train, recruit, and retain certain types of professionals, in several cases (e.g., the long history of a shortage of nurses in Manitoba) they have been greatly reactive rather than proactive in doing so and/or they have purposefully not hired them. These examples point to the inability, in many cases, on the part of government to predict the future trajectory of the jobs market.

rate, this ideological and money-based agenda is emphasized as the meaning of education to the neglect of the pursuit of the kind of intellectual emancipation of students that sees to the expansion of their life-ranges in terms of their capacities for thought, feeling, and action and which enables them to determine for themselves what or who they will be, what they should strive for, what roles in society they should perform, what they will think and what they will believe, what they enjoy, as well as the existential meaning of their lives.

According to Woodhouse, as a discipline, Philosophy of Education chiefly promotes a critical engagement of teachers and prospective teachers with conceptual frameworks and philosophical theories of education that deal with the natures of experience, of reality, of right and wrong, and of the mind. In turn, this engagement typically increases their capacities to discover and to “implement pedagogical approaches that address the felt needs and longing of students for reliable meaning” (p. 2). Presumably, by helping to enable students to think beyond the demands of the global marketplace and instead to take their own needs, life-meanings, and life-goals seriously, Philosophy of Education and other humanistic disciplines can be said to assist students to be much more well-equipped to deal with issues pertaining to stress, anxiety, burnout, and mental health that they may face in their eventual occupational and professional roles. In this way, such disciplines contribute to the sustaining of persons in the context of their societal and workplace roles. For instance, through some exposure to the Philosophy of Education, prospective educators may discover for themselves the evolutionary purpose of their role as a teacher, namely, to foster humanity’s psycho-social inheritance system. Armed with such a realization, educators will be better able to situate themselves as regard to the meaning of their overall role as teacher and they will more deeply understand the importance of trust in the teacher-student relationship.⁴

In the book, Woodhouse presents his overall argument for why the philosophy of education should be reinstated as an important discipline in Education programs in three distinct parts. First, he outlines the case for the notion that that the money-oriented values of the global economy have undermined the life-oriented values that belong authentically to education. Second, as an example of the kind of engagement with theory that prospective educators in Philosophy of Education courses may be confronted with, Woodhouse takes up the humanistic educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell to suggest that, although Russell did tarry with behaviorism for a time, what is central in his overall theory is an emphasis on teachers cultivating “a spirit of reverence” for the process of organic growth that education ought to promote. It is this respectful, appreciative, and nurturing orientation in relation to life, which is found not only in Russell’s philosophy of education but also in the thought of Russell’s colleague, Alfred North Whitehead, which helps to cultivate the trust that students require if they are to learn from teachers. In contrast, ideological and instrumental concerns that are deemed to be closed to questioning, such as those

⁴ See Scarfe, “Education as an Evolutionary Phenomenon: Huxley, Waddington, and the Foundational Importance of Ethics” (2021), which analyzes the general points of agreement and contention between Julian Huxley and Conrad Hal Waddington as regard to the ramifications of the realization that formal education is a function of humanity’s psychosocial inheritance system.

stemming from the value-program of the global marketplace (e.g., fostering economic competitiveness regardless of the consequences for the civil commons upon which living organisms, including students, depend for their very lives), and that force themselves into the interactions of teachers and students, diminish this trust.

Third, Woodhouse discusses several developments that suggest some degree of “hope” in relation to the prospective restitution for the Philosophy of Education. One of these is the general success of the *Philosophy for Children* (P4C) movement of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp. As outlined by Woodhouse, P4C employs storytelling that appeals to the imagination of children and promotes critical discussions in relation to value systems and fosters the cultivation of wisdom. Another area is the urgent contemporary need for sustainability-, climate-, and/or environmental-education in light of the onset of the global ecological crisis, which largely has to do with the continued entropification of our environmental “life-host” by human beings, whose habits of action have become informed, in an entrenched manner, by the money-code of value that belongs to the global marketplace. That is to say, the money-code of value alienates persons away from that which ultimately sustains their very lives, namely, the planetary environment, whereas environmental education can help to rebuild one’s sense of interconnection with it. A third related avenue wherein hope may be found is recent emphases on the importance of land-based Indigenous knowledge. For Woodhouse, the “hope” that is presented by such avenues is not a naïve one, especially given the sheer dominance of the money-oriented values that rules hegemonically over life today.⁵ Rather, Woodhouse’s “hope” is one that is internally aware of its own fragility, namely, that it may very well fail.

Pointing to the lived-life authenticity of the arguments that Woodhouse wages in this volume, interspersed with them, he relates and reflects on some of his own experiences. In his long professional career in Philosophy of Education, he endeavored to challenge and to resist the encroachment of the values of the global economy onto education. These anecdotes point to the profound struggle that has represented a great deal of the substance of his professional life—as being caught up with critical questioning in relation to the influence of the money-code of value on education.

⁵ The money-oriented value program of the global economy is dominant despite the fact that, for example, money, mostly digital, is in-itself valueless in that most of the money supply is created *ex nihilo* by private banks on the basis of a client’s agreement to pay off a loan. That is to say, private banks do not necessarily “loan” what they own. To be sure, Richard Werner asserts in his article “How do banks create money, and why can other firms not do the same?” (2014), that

banks can individually create credit and money out of nothing, and they do this when they extend credit. When a loan is granted by a bank, it purchases the loan contract (legally considered a promissory note issued by the borrower), which is reflected by an increase in its assets by the amount of the loan. The borrower “receives” the “money” when the bank credits the borrower’s account at the bank with the amount of the loan (pp. 71–72).

And as former Canadian and UK Central Banker, Mark Carney states, in his book *Values: Building a better world for all* (2019),

in the modern financial system, the private financial sector creates most of the money in circulation The principal way banks create money is by making a loan. When the bank decides a borrower is creditworthy (that they are likely to pay the loan back) it credits their deposit account for the amount of the loan and new money enters circulation (pp. 69–70, electronic version of the book).

And in contemporary money currency systems, money is not backed by anything that is of direct value to the purposes of life, e.g., education.

Woodhouse's personal anecdotes humanize the formal arguments that he presents in the book, concretizing them for the reader by way of his relating of his own life experience. They portray the situations and events described in a fair, objective, humble, and thoughtfully-considered manner in that they not only point out where his questioning was relevant and prescient but was dismissed by administrators in *Semmelweis Reflex* fashion, but in some cases, he also displays some of his own partial misconceptions at the times of the events described.

In order to counteract the imminent charge that the view of the nature of life that Woodhouse (being inspired by Russell, Whitehead, and McMurtry) conveys in the volume is that of an unscientific "vitalism," in that he seems to appeal to the "inner creative impulses" of living organisms, including those of teachers and learners, he might strengthen his arguments by way of a reference to the *autopoietic* (Gr. "self-creation," "self-maintenance," and/or "self-production") definition of life. The notion of *autopoiesis* was coined by Maturana and Varela, but has its roots in the philosophical thinking of Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. While the term *autopoiesis* was initially construed by Maturana and Varela in the 1970s under a mechanistic rubric, according to the autopoietic definition of life, living organisms are entities that organize the production of their own members in intrinsically purposive fashion. That is to say, cells, organs, tissues work with other cells, organs, and tissues in the manner of reciprocally causality for the sake of producing, replenishing, and maintaining both each other and the living organism as a whole, enabling it to persist (for a time) in the face of entropy. The objective fact that living organisms are self-creative, intrinsically purposive entities distinguishes them from inanimate objects and machines, whose purposiveness, if any, is allopoietic, i.e., it issues from agents extrinsic to them. Analogously, in relation to education, which involves the dissemination of knowledge (and ideally the cultivation of wisdom), living organisms can be said to undergo what might be called an adventure of "intellectual autopoiesis." Living organisms are learners who selectively take in the data of their experience so as to build their own conceptions of things, their mentalities, their habits, as well as their innermost hopes, dreams, and life-purposes, in self-creative fashion.

As regards to Woodhouse's neo-McMurtryan characterization that the life-code of value and the money-code of value are inherently contradictory in relation to one another, one might try to argue that they are not. While Woodhouse admits that money can be used in manners that are in service to life, the rampancy of market speculation today, in which money is used to make ever more money, places an ever-increasing demand on life and tends to take concerns for the well-being of one's fellow living organisms almost entirely out of the circuit. Market speculation typically has the goal of hoarding of the medium of exchange,⁶ rather than the securing of tangible goods that are useful to the purposes of life, and it diverts most of the national money supply that could be used to support and promote life and/or enhance the civil commons away from this task. One might here ask: in the context

⁶ In the *Politics* (Book I, Chapter 9, 1257b1-1258b8), Aristotle makes the case that living the good or virtuous life is inconsistent with the unlimited pursuit of wealth-getting of the "artificial" sort that is possible with the use of money, in contrast to the pursuit of wealth of the "natural" sort—involving the acquisition of tangible and useful goods, services, items, and resources that are useful to the household.

of the ongoing global ecological crisis, once the biosphere has been completely liquidated for the sake of making money, will those in possession of all of the money, providing that they are still alive, suddenly think that they can simply buy it all back again?

All in all, while not mentioned in an explicit manner by Woodhouse, the premises of his argument for the restitution of Philosophy of Education as a foundational discipline in Education programs at the university that he presents in this volume can also be said to be supportive of the alternative thesis that the purpose of formal education, going forward, should not only entail the *dissemination of knowledge*, the transmission of information, and/or the transference of skills from one generation to the next, as is typically described in the foundational documents of Western post-secondary institutions. It is the highly problematic “banking” model of education (which is critiqued by Paulo Freire⁷) that conceives of education solely as the project of “fill[ing] the minds” of youths “with information that is poured in” (p. 36) by teachers, without any room for critical questioning, no less in a manner that is grounded in the value program of the global economy. Rather, treating pupils as selective agents in their own learning and respecting their intrinsic worth, characterizations of the ultimate purposes of formal education should be inclusive of the *cultivation of wisdom*, namely, bodily-, biological-, and/or ecological- wisdom, in relation to the application of that (aforementioned) knowledge. Arguably, it is the dissemination of knowledge without an adequate attention to the manners in which that knowledge is applied in the context of the global economy (as can be seen, for example, in the recent emphasis on STEM and Business disciplines to the exclusion of the Arts, including Philosophy) that has contributed greatly to the contemporary situation of global ecological crisis. The cultivation of wisdom is also important in our choosing of the correct, most sustainable, means of generating “solutions” to the global ecological crisis (and other crises). For example, one might ask: is it truly the best way of addressing the climate change crisis to invest in the development, building, and marketing of electric cars or any other type of motor vehicle? Or will simply adding more cars of a certain type to the road just contribute to its exacerbation? Philosophy of Education is a key discipline that provides for the potential of evolving the aim of formal education beyond the exclusive goal of knowledge-transference from one generation to the next under the rubric of the values of the global economy, in order to be able to better arrive at sustainable solutions to the expanding nexus of global crises that humanity faces currently. In this regard, a first positive step toward acknowledging that the current fatal trajectory of overemphasis on transferable knowledge and skills, as well as on STEM to the elimination of the A as in STEAM, would be to include, within the foundational documents of post-secondary educational institutions, the statement that one of the chief purposes of higher education is “the cultivation of wisdom.”⁸

⁷ See Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 72.

⁸ See a more detailed argument for this claim in Scarfe, *Humanity’s Rise to Superdominance, The Global Ecological Crisis, and the Way Forward for Education* (2023), pp. 65–67.

In conclusion, how on earth could existing or prospective teachers assist their students to cultivate wisdom without having had some substantive exposure to the discipline of Philosophy of Education or to some parallel or related domain of inquiry? Woodhouse argues that without a robust exposure to Philosophy of Education (or to other fields like it) the probability of teachers being able to do so is greatly diminished. Given the urgent life and death stakes that Woodhouse demonstrates to be involved in relation to decision-making concerning the shape that formal education will take going forward into the near-, medium-, and long-term futures, this book is essential reading for all existing and prospective teacher educators, school and university administrators, and Education policy makers.

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