

2006

Performing Life Stories: Getting By in Teaching for Social Justice

Sarah M. Stitzlein

University of New Hampshire

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/educ_facpub



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stitzlein, Sarah M. Performing Life Stories: Getting by in Teaching for Social Justice. *Philosophy of Education*. 2006. pp 450-452.

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

Performing Life Stories: Getting By in Teaching for Social Justice

Sarah McGough
Miami University

As many of us struggle to figure out just what social justice means, including what our responsibility is both for theorizing and enacting it, Kathy Hytten offers a well-timed discussion of these matters. She issues a call to philosophers of education who have long been enamored with the lofty goals of democratic education stemming from America's founding fathers, as well as our local cult hero, John Dewey.¹ Hytten urges us to begin not only engaging more deeply but also acting upon what she deems to be a correlate to democratic education, social justice. While the link between the two is largely assumed by Hytten to be evident, further discussion of how the educational sphere should be held responsible to the larger social sphere which it both mimics and feeds would be fruitful background material for her claims. Nonetheless, one senses that her link between the two is forging a pathway for future work in philosophy of education.

As she paves one direction for the field, Hytten clearly values the role of traditional philosophical approaches, including critical thinking, argumentation, and constructing insightful questions. Hytten encourages us to employ these approaches as tools in pursuit of social justice, but rightly recognizes that these intellectual tools are not enough for fully enacting social justice. Indeed, her discussion of the time that is lost by lingering in theoretical debates render me hesitant to offer a traditional conference response.

The new approaches to teaching for social justice that Hytten depicts are prefaced by an important reminder. Reminiscent of the *Educational Theory* symposium prompted by René Arcilla's question, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" Hytten varies the issue slightly.² She reminds us that we have not communicated well our intellectual goals of critical thought to our colleagues in teacher education, where teacher candidates are seldom required to engage in the level of critical analysis that we promote. Moreover, much of Hytten's argument presumes that we philosophers of education should be theorizing and enacting social justice education in the service of teacher education programs. If this is rightfully the case, perhaps it is necessary to include their perspectives and expertise from the outset of this endeavor. Additionally, it seems that we should couch our discussion within terms that, while they may not be familiar to our teacher education colleagues, are at least comprehensible and persuasive. Hytten does an excellent job of using her language in this way and her suggestions are well suited for being put into teacher education practice.

Hytten ushers in her suggested approaches to teaching for social justice through an interesting maneuver. She shows that, while philosophers of education have been offering "well-developed theories of justice" for several decades now, these theories and the critical thinking they demand are no more than habits of thought. Rather than

merely flexing our hackneyed habits with more gusto, she moves us toward using our bodily habits, as well as our mental ones, through the use of experiential accounts and performative activities. Hytten encourages us to use narrative and performance to help students see not only how their actions connect them to others, but also how their beliefs and behaviors can establish unjust social dynamics. I fear that Hytten overestimates the effects of self-reflection amongst dominant or privileged students when she says that self-reflection can lead to genuine concern for and collaboration with marginalized others. Certainly we have seen that reflection alone is not enough to lead to deep listening and partnership. Engaging in performance can help students become more self-aware of their actions and social positionings, and reading narratives can reveal previously unknown information about the lives of others. But, there must also be a collaborative link that extends outward from privileged schools or student populations in order for genuine interaction and improvement to occur. Perhaps this is one area where philosophers of education might team with colleagues in teacher education to construct these possibilities.

While self-reflection does have a valuable place within social justice education, when we link it with Hytten's discussion of imagination, we begin to see the potential for more fruitful embodied endeavors. Just as Maxine Greene tied philosophically reflective thinking and hopeful visions of schooling to imagination, so should performative approaches to teaching be tied to imagination.³ Imagination is not simply mental, but plays out upon the body and alternative, hopeful visions can be tested out and experimented with through role-playing in the classroom.

I would add to Hytten's suggestions that when students enact performances like "Transnational Capital Auction," they can be productively moved into a space of discomfort. While playing roles within the game, students may feel bodily tension which indicates that they need to make a change to improve their own lives and those of others. Of course, being led to such conclusions is likely not an automatic response given that schools have not been successful at establishing democratic habits, including openness, humility, moral commitment, and concern for the common good. In order to ensure that students responses will not fall pray to the contemporary pressures of militarism and economic gain regardless of human toll, students must be delicately guided through this process by caring teachers and supported in their use of the more traditional philosophical ways of thinking that Hytten cautiously celebrates. While she notes that some feminist poststructuralists have argued that liberal philosophical approaches to critical thinking have impeded social justice efforts, these intellectual approaches can be put to the service of changing students' habits of privilege and in cultivating proclivities of openness toward others and communication. The issue then is not abandoning these traditional philosophical tools, but learning to use them differently.

It is at this point in her directives that Hytten's work might well be linked to that of Megan Boler, Cris Mayo, and others on the pedagogy of discomfort.⁴ For if students are made intellectually cognizant or corporeally uncomfortable through the approaches described, they will no longer be ignorant of injustice in the ways that Hytten initially laments. But, teachers must guide them so that they know how to use

this knowledge and how to make sense of their bodily conflict. Otherwise, such experiences can be meaningless or paralyzing.

Pedagogies of discomfort complement Hytten's interesting suggestion that we need to learn how to "get by" without being certain about what is the best thing to do to achieve social justice. This getting by is somewhat contradictory to the polished arguments and rationally justified conclusions of traditional philosophical analysis that appear certain. Because of this, Hytten rightfully says we need to trouble these tools even as we use them. But getting by takes courage — courage to fail, though to do so while actively working toward alleviating suffering. Getting by also stands outside of (or perhaps against) the culture of accountability because it lacks a standard for comparison and acknowledges that "at-risk" situations require the cooperative response of a socially concerned democratic body, rather than a competitive business model. Finally, getting by is an admirable strategy because it acknowledges that the social complexities of a situation and the best way to handle them are not known at the outset and one must live in that uncomfortable space devoid of certainties as one carries out an endeavor.

I do want to end by voicing a concern with a recurrent theme in Hytten's essay: the necessity of social justice education to be inspiring. While I suspect that she is using a sense of "inspiration" that relates to the use of the phrase the "art of teaching for social justice" in her title, it operates in some unsettling ways in her piece. Too often in the corporate, pop culture world in which our students live, inspiration has been reduced to a sense of appealing to our emotions or fulfilling our desires, without a genuine activist result. Inspiration has been reduced to positive stimulation. Students may not need inspiration in this sense (in fact, many students tend to be over stimulated by a commercial culture which continually ups the ante of titillation). Instead, privileged or dominant students may need to experience discomfort with their position in the world. Rather than being propelled directly forward through some grand inspiration, we may first have to work with teacher educators to deepen the experience of being uncomfortable in ways that will lead to a more genuine sense of activism. This is an art that I hope many of us will continue to refine.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

2. René Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002).

3. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (New York: Wiley, John & Sons, Inc., 1995).

4. Megan Boler, "Teaching for Hope," in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving*, eds. Daniel Liston and Jim Garrison (New York: Routledge, 2004); Cris Mayo, "Certain Privilege: Rethinking White Agency," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004).