Seeking Ancient Paths

Why Philosophy Should Guide Teacher Education Programs

Ruth Givens
Azusa Pacific University
Ryan Cowden
Sandburg Middle School

Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.
—Jeremiah 6:16

Introduction

In the 21st century, expansive changes have been instituted in the world of education, most notably concentrating on critical thinking skills in preparation for an increasingly competitive global economy. After the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001, teacher credential programs shifted their emphasis in the preparation of educators from locally-driven curricula to a national emphasis on conformity and standardization. In an effort to ameliorate the rigidity forced on a vulnerable population of teachers and students, the subsequent introduction of *Common Core State Standards* in 2010 attempted to address the shock wave of NCLB. Additionally, a new wave of reforms, such as the *Framework for 21st Century Learning*, released in 2007; the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework*, released in 2013; and the *Next Generation*

Ruth Givens is a professor in the School of Education at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California. Ryan Cowden is a teacher at Sandburg Middle School in the Glendora Unified School District, Glendora, California. Their e-mail addresses are jrgivens@apu.edu & rycow1@gmail.com
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Science Standards, also released in 2013, has profoundly changed K-12 education in the United States. Prominent among all of these educational reforms was an emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills, leaving teacher education programs with the responsibility of training teacher candidates to prepare lively and engaged lessons that would inspire students to think the deep thoughts that would come naturally after embracing such a rigorous curriculum.

Although there is no doubt that the benefits of these new standards reflect an enormous leap forward from NCLB, the new demands placed on the teachers themselves seem to be overlooked and underappreciated in the current conversation. How are teacher candidates prepared to develop and evaluate these skills among the students they teach? Subsequently, in what ways are teacher education programs adjusting to prepare teachers for a new educational paradigm?

The field of teacher education is currently in a period of profound change, with great experimentation taking place regarding what new teacher curricula should include (McMahon, Forde, & Dickson, 2013). In this new climate, theoretical training is often neglected for the sake of more "relevant" coursework (Winch, 2012). The irony is self-evident: in the new educational climate, critical thinking is no longer an abstract pursuit, a luxury for those in higher education. The teaching of rigorous, critical thinking skills is now a functional expectation for all teachers, regardless of the age or subject they teach. In order to maintain a level of academic rigor necessary to prepare teachers for the daily demands of teaching in the 21st century, the courses training them need to be addressed as well. Rather than training pre-service teachers by "beefing up" the requirements for more standards and anticipated outcomes, teacher training should provide teachers with the competence we expect from our students: the ability to process information reflectively rather than reiterate material to meet a requirement. We suggest that philosophy courses could play a key role in teacher education courses as a means of developing the critical thinking skills teachers need in the 21st-century classroom.

Shifts in Education Standards

To understand the new imperative placed on teachers to develop critical thinking skills in their students, we must recognize the shifts that have occurred across several new education reforms that were released after NCLB, paying specific attention to the role that critical thinking skills play in this new educational climate.

When the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) for English/Lan-

guage Arts (ELA) and Math were released for adoption in 2010, the shifts initiated by this reform created quite a stir. In addition to placing a greater emphasis on reading and writing across the curriculum, these new standards required that all students demonstrate critical thinking skills, such as comprehending arguments, generating and defending their own analyses of information, and evaluating and formulating valid arguments in reading and writing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). For example, students in a seventh-grade ELA class were expected to form a claim, organize their evidence to create a logical defense of that claim, consider alternative arguments, and understand the connections between claims, reasons, and evidence (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, ELA). Similarly, students in a seventh-grade mathematics class were expected to understand how statistical data can generate useful information about a given population while keeping in mind that such information is valid only if it adequately represents the population and is formed using valid inferences (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, Math).

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2015) endeavored to make the development of real-world skills a central feature of their *Framework for 21st Century Learning: K-12 Education*. The four main skills for success identified in this framework are critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. The critical thinking domain is divided into four parts. In the first section, "Reason Effectively," students are expected to apply inductive, deductive, and other relevant types of reasoning in their studies. The second section, "Use Systems Thinking," calls for students to understand how individual parts are related to complex systems and the end products these systems create. The third section, "Make Judgments and Decisions," contains several requirements. These include analyzing evidence and arguments, assessing different points of view, synthesizing information, drawing valid conclusions based on information gathered, and engaging in self-reflection on learning. The fourth section, "Solve Problems," requires that students ask significant questions and solve problems by posing traditional and inventive solutions (p. 4).

The *Next Generation Science Standards* (NGSS, 2013) reflect the culmination of a nation-wide effort to update science education at the K-12 level. Critical thinking skills are embedded throughout these standards. For example, noteworthy among the eight science and engineering standards, students are expected to master higher level reasoning in order to progress in scientific content knowledge. Included in this list of real-world practices are skills such as forming good questions, offering clear descriptions of a problem, evaluating information, constructing

arguments based on evidence, generating explanations, and dissecting and explaining data. The writers of the NGSS standards worked closely with the authors of the CCSS to ensure the presence of critical thinking skills, including forming and evaluating arguments, understanding evidence, and presenting and defending key claims.

Similar to the *Framework for 21st Century Skills*, the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards* (NCSS, 2013) places the development of real-world skills at the center of public education, this time with an eye toward civic engagement as a way to frame social studies instruction. This framework is centered on the practice of having students plan and execute their own inquiry arc, challenging students to become autonomous in their learning. Students begin by generating their own questions and formulating a plan of thorough investigation to support their line of questioning (p. 17). Students are then required to use the tools of their discipline to gather information relevant to their investigation. Additionally, students are expected to determine the value of each source used and research gained from such places. Students are further required to form evidence-based arguments and counter-arguments from their research. Students will be exposed to a variety of perspectives as a result of this process and will need the skills to respond with cogent rebuttals to accomplish this work (p. 18). At the end of the inquiry arc, students share their findings and take action (p.19).

One example of such an inquiry arc that has been made available involves a fifth-grade social studies class studying voting (NCSS, 2014). The arc began with a compelling question: "Does voting matter?" Students analyzed documents and interviewed people to gather information about the compelling question. Culminating the arc, students made pamphlets and a class video to motivate citizens to exercise their right to vote.

Without a strong foundation in logic and critical thinking offered through an understanding of philosophy, teachers will lack the essential skills that guide students through analysis of alternative belief systems and application of logical arguments, imperatives of our current educational environment. As the pendulum swings away from teaching to the test and toward teaching critical thinking, teacher preparation programs should reintroduce the deep historical and philosophical roots of education to teacher candidates in preparation for their fieldwork in the schools.

The Value of Philosophy

It has been argued in this article that a misalignment exists between the way teachers are trained and the way they are expected to teach. Despite the fact that new standards from diverse subject matters now

require greater levels of critical thinking, new teacher training often de-emphasizes philosophical instruction and presents teaching as a craft, requiring hands-on, practical training. We suggest that philosophy courses should form an important part of introductory teacher curriculum because they develop the critical thinking skills teachers will be expected to advance in the students they teach.

Why should philosophy be used as the means of developing critical thinking skills in potential teachers? Some theorists have connected philosophy to the development of critical thinking skills in children and students. In an interview with *The Atlantic* (Rees, 2014), Rebecca Newberger Goldstein argued that philosophy teaches children to critically reflect on the strength of their own views and to build appropriate defenses of their opinion. Philosophy, she contended, has the added benefit of making students better listeners and more tolerant of others' viewpoints. In a *New York Times* report on the growing interest in philosophy on college campuses, David E. Shrader, then the executive director of the American Philosophical Association, contended that philosophy helps students become quick learners while developing their reading, writing, and critical thinking proficiencies (cited in Hu, 2008). *The Huffington Post* (Gregoire, 2014) reported that prominent leaders at Google, LinkedIn, and Flickr credit philosophy with developing the critical thinking skills necessary in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

The *New York Times* report (Hu, 2008) suggests that this appreciation of the value of philosophy is shared by many college students. The demand for philosophy courses at the City University of New York increased 51% between 2002 and 2008 (p. A31). The University of Delaware couldn't keep up with the increased demand for philosophy courses and directed students to online philosophy classes. The article quoted one student who became a philosophy major in order to develop the critical thinking skills she said she would need at a top law school.

In her article discussing the Columbia Secondary School's philosophy program, Diana Senechal (2015) reported several benefits from teachers' efforts to teach philosophy to high school students. The philosophy program she helped design and in which she taught trained students to form questions, engage in debates, and interpret the meaning of complex texts. Former students reported that the intellectual skills they developed in the philosophy courses were beneficial in all areas of their collegiate coursework. Senechal noted that the philosophy courses also foster helpful dialogue within the school's diverse population.

In their synthesis of teacher professional development and curricula, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) argued that student learn-

ing and adult learning are fundamentally similar processes. It could therefore be argued that philosophy instruction could develop critical thinking skills in teacher candidates as well as in students.

Christopher Winch (2012) noted that philosophy instruction has many benefits specifically for educators. He wrote that a healthy philosophy curriculum could provide a rich, intellectual framework for teachers. According to Winch, teaching requires reflection and problem solving, and simply providing teachers with a set of stock answers is inadequate (p. 7).

Paths to Implementation

As shown above, it is particularly important for teacher candidates to develop their own grasp of critical thinking skills so they will be able to foster them in their students. Education programs should be concerned with the development of intellectual expertise in their teacher candidates in order to prepare them for the daily demands of teaching. But how should teacher preparation schools help teacher candidates develop these skills? Rigorous engagement with philosophy is the best way for students to learn and develop mastery of critical thinking. Here we offer just a few examples of how studying certain philosophers in particular can foster an aptitude for critical thinking that will have practical application in teaching the modern standards and frameworks.

Socrates and Classroom Discussion

Socrates is rightly called the "father of philosophy." His approach to practicing philosophy, the dialectic, is a form of spoken inquiry. The Socratic dialectic is a social, conversational process of learning that begins when someone presents a question or problem to a person or group. The issue is then defined and discussed. Possible solutions are given and challenged through a dialogue that can include both questioning and direct critique. The reflection germane to Socratic dialogue often reveals biases, assumptions, faulty logic steps, or truncated conclusions.

Teacher candidates can learn these skills by practicing them in classroom discussions or debates. After reading a Socratic dialogue, students could discuss the questions and answers offered and assess the progress made in the written account. Students could also take on a more active role by engaging in Socratic discussions on topics of their own choosing, proposing their own questions, and debating the arguments put forth by their peers. These debates teach critical thinking skills by training students to see the flaws in the arguments of others and experience what it is like to have others point out weaknesses in their own positions.

Socrates demonstrates that the critical thinking skills of the new K-12 standards can be learned and practiced communally, through dialogue and debate. Teachers trained in the Socratic dialectic would be more prepared to guide students through Socratic dialogues in their own classrooms, perhaps using popular discussion templates such as Philosophical Chair and Socratic Seminar. As seen above, students in ELA classes are expected to form and defend valid claims in writing, and students in math classes are expected to make valid inferences based on collected data. Socratic Seminars and Philosophical Chairs could provide K-12 students arenas in which to test their ideas and hear useful feedback on the validity of their arguments. When paired with the reading of a complex text and a writing assignment, these classroom discussions could provide essential feedback as students learn how to shape valid arguments in the midst of the writing process. Purposeful exposure to the Socratic dialectic would prepare teachers to moderate these discussions and to offer useful feedback on the quality of student arguments and reasoning that arise in classroom discussions. Teachers trained in the dialectic would also be more able to initiate robust discussions like Philosophical Chair and Socratic Seminars.

Descartes and Skepticism

As learners develop reasoning skills through analyzing and critiquing various perspectives, they must also remove their natural proclivity to believe what they are told and develop the ability to test their assumptions. Skepticism undergirds the nature of philosophy; thus Descartes' famously skeptical approach to the beliefs of his times serves as an exceptional model for today's students. In his famous *Meditations*, Descartes' pursuit of truth led him to doubt everything gained rationally or experientially until he could arrive at a fundamental revelation that could not be doubted. In the *Meditations*, Descartes wrote:

> Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions. The eventual result of this doubt is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently [ascertain] to be true. (cited in Baird & Kaufmann, 2008, p. 381)

The fundamental truth upon which Descartes eventually arrived is none other than the famous "*Cogito ergo sum*"—"I think therefore I am." Doubt, therefore, can become a stance one takes to guide the path to the rigorous pursuit of truth.

If Socrates demonstrated that critical thinking can take place in community through dialogue, Descartes demonstrated that it can also

take place in solitude through writing and reflection. Exposing teacher candidates to Descartes' *Meditations* and similar writings will show them what the process of skepticism looks like. Students who closely analyze the structure of Descartes' *Meditations* will discover that skepticism can be used to deconstruct beliefs assumed to be true and construct new arguments, testing their conclusions each step of the way. Requiring teacher candidates to engage in the same processes of deconstruction and construction through rigorous research and writing projects will allow them to practice these skills firsthand before they are expected to teach them to others.

Doubt could become a practical tool for K-12 students engaged in critical thinking activities at school. Science teachers can use Descartes' methods to teach students to doubt their own hypotheses during experiments, withholding a conclusion until their theory has been tested in the lab. Students conducting research for a project ought to be trained to doubt the validity of their information until they can verify the merits of their sources. All teachers can use the process of deconstruction and construction as they guide students through the various stages of the writing process. Skepticism could also support Socratic dialogue and enrich the quality of classroom discussions. Rather than accepting the initial offerings of fellow classmates, students could learn how to politely doubt such claims until they are properly defended by evidence and sound reasoning. Students must learn to test even their own assumptions and predictions with doubt until they are proven true. Given the current paradigm, teachers who are expected to guide such activities will need proper training to understand how and when to properly apply doubt as a strategic tool in the learning process.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Inquiry

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that rose to prominence in the 20th century, taking shape in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and others. Existentialists concern themselves with how life is experienced through the perspective of the individual. One of the major features of existential thought is the radical freedom of each person. Only the individual can define his or her essence, according to these thinkers, knowing that others are also free to define their essence. Sartre went so far as to say that "man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (cited in Baird & Kaufmann, 2008, p. 1142). It is therefore through our free choices and actions that we as humans determine the meaning and shape of our lives.

Just as freedom and choice are central to the thought of existentialism, they are also central to the inquiry arc found in the C3 framework. Rather than introducing a set of objectives or content standards, the arc begins by posing a question. Students then take the lead as they gather evidence they will later analyze and defend or refute. Teachers will be better prepared to guide the processes of inquiry and questioning if they have embarked on some existential quests of their own.

John Dewey and Experiential Learning

John Dewey (1975) is credited with having constructed a philosophy of education comparable in scope and depth to that of Plato. However, unlike Plato, who supported education for the elite based on reason's capabilities, Dewey had an educational philosophy that was democratic and relied on the capacity of the scientific method. Dewey believed so strongly in the democratic process that he envisioned that schools could become facilitators of socialization and positive growth rather than acting as merely repositories of information. Through active engagement with their own learning, students would practice supporting their claims by applying logical reasoning, relevant evidence, and the scientific method of experimentation, skills required by the C3 framework. Dewey insisted that students' beliefs about education would need to be altered from a passive way of learning to an active engagement with the world at hand.

Dewey claimed the most significant way to create necessary connections for this kind of engagement is to utilize the surroundings, both physical and social, in a way that contributes to worthwhile experiences. In fact, he was convinced that the only way educators can influence their students is through the environment. By influencing the child's environment, the teacher creates the needed space for children to discover their natural interests, and because everything else (motivation, aptitude, attitude) is ultimately outside the teacher's domain, the environment provides the only real opportunity within the teacher's control.

As teachers shape experiences by environing conditions, they help to build on knowledge that is worthwhile, resulting in meaningful education. In other words, as individuals are transformed, society can be reinvented, and education becomes the means for socially reconstructing society.

Cornel West and Civic Engagement

Contemporary philosopher Cornel West bridges the gap between the classroom and the public sphere in both thought and practice. As an activist, he campaigned for the election of Barack Obama and was arrested for protesting apartheid in South Africa. This activism is the practical application of the thought laid out in West's writings. After

acknowledging the need for "new frameworks and languages to understand our multilayered crisis," West (1994) argued that "we must focus our attention on the common square—the common good that underlies our national and global destinies" (p. 11). The solution to our deepest problems, according to West, begins by engaging with the civic institutions in one's local community (p. 30).

Teachers might appreciate reading West's no-nonsense philosophy in order to generate ideas for students who engage in concrete applications in a content-area classroom. West's view of school as a training ground for the real world fits appropriately with the stated goals of the C3 framework, which conclude with students' sharing their findings, proposing solutions, and taking action to "influence institutions both large and small" (NCSS, 2013, p. 19). Teachers who have grappled with practical philosophical questions like the ones posed by Cornel West will be better able to guide student inquiry to deeper and more meaningful application, including: What do the research and data illuminate about life and equality in the United States? What structures might the text illuminate about the world? What do we want to change in the world we have studied? What changes can we make?

Table 1 illustrates how the ideas of ancient through contemporary philosophers can be applied to the different standards that dominate the pedagogical challenges faced by today's classroom teacher

Conclusion

One could argue that philosophy informs us of past mistakes in our thinking, and by familiarizing teacher candidates with ideas that "correct the characteristics of our own period," courses in philosophy supply new recruits with the tools they need to teach a class full of diverse and interconnected learners (Lewis, 1970, p. 202). Without a strong foundation in logic and critical thinking offered through an understanding of philosophy, teachers will lack the essential skills that guide students through analysis of alternative belief systems and application of logical arguments, imperatives of our current educational standards and requirements. As the pendulum swings away from teaching to the test and toward teaching critical thinking, teacher preparation programs should introduce the deep philosophical roots of education to teacher candidates in preparation for their fieldwork in the schools. Teachers can be trained in how to develop lesson plans that will enable students to practice critical thinking. Without these, we may have classrooms in which the blind are leading the blind.

It is a stereotype that philosophy is the least practical of all the

Table 1

Thinker	*Idea*	*Activity*	*Standard(s)*
Socrates	Learn logic and critical thinking through debate and dialogue.	Read a selection of Socrates and engage in a Socratic dialogue. Assign debates requiring students to defend their claims, analyze their opponent's position, and prepare a rebuttal.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1.B Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.
René Descartes	Doubt claims until they can be proven true.	Research a topic and form a claim. Posit doubts to your claim, testing them with logical claims and further research. Using the editorial page of the newspaper (or other opinion pieces) have students write a paper opposing the editorial opinion posing doubts and defending other side.	Evaluate sources for validity (NCSS, 2014, p. 18).
Jean-Paul Sartre	Humans are free and are the result of their explorations.	Use a question to design and implement an inquiry arc.	Students demonstrate their freedom by posing a central question for their inquiry arc (NCSS, 2014, p. 17).
John Dewey	Learning is a result of interest and effort.	Engage students in problem-solving methods using the scientific method. Require students to verify their learning through experimentation and engagement with the problem-solving process.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1.B Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.
Cornel West	Education empowers students to have an impact on their communities.	Research a topic of interest in a local community. Use the C3 framework to identify a need in your community, research it, follow through, and have an impact in your community.	Students share findings, present solutions, and take action to create change (NCSS, 2014, p. 19).

majors on a college campus. Based on our survey of the new wave of education standards, this is no longer the case, at least as far as education is concerned. At the K-12 level there is now a pressing demand for teachers to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills in their students. This is no easy task; we cannot expect teachers to pick it up "on the job." In this article, we have argued that most teacher programs, ironically, are neglecting the "ancient paths" that lead to love of learning for learning's sake. These very requirements have never been more necessary and practical for classroom teachers; in fact, they offer the skills that will give life to the kind of thinking we are working toward in the first place.

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