

What's the "Discipline" in Education?: A Personal Perspective

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If we take "A Discipline" in an academic field to mean "a branch of knowledge" (so defined as one of several meanings in most reputable dictionaries), I am puzzled as to why the field of Education is not considered "A Discipline." Since entering academic life as a tenure-track Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University in the Autumn Quarter, 1986, I've struggled with this, both because of my own perceptions of this field as well as that of many colleagues who are in what are unarguably defined as "Disciplines."

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (11th Edition) defines the primary meaning of "discipline" as a noun meaning "the practice of training people to obey rules, or a code of behavior; controlled behavior resulting from such training; an activity providing mental or physical training" (noting kung fu as a discipline in that sense). Its secondary meaning is defined as "a branch of knowledge, especially in higher education." In terms of its origins, the word in these senses is most immediately derived from Middle English meaning "mortification by scourging oneself" via Old French from the Latin derivative "disciplina" meaning "instruction, and/or knowledge" (from Latin "disciplinus").

My Disciplinary Journey

Perhaps I already have the answer to my puzzlement. When I chose to pursue a Ph.D. in Education, it was because I wanted to be "useful" in some tangible way to developing human beings, in this case, middle and high school students. I had been a high school English and History teacher in Australia for just under 15 years prior to pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Illinois. I had a B.A. in English and History and an M.A. in English Literature and Language. I loved the field of literary and stylistic studies and did well in it. I was encouraged to consider pursuing a Ph.D. in English at the University of Sydney. A dissertation topic had already been identified – an analysis of the marginalization of women in Patrick White's novels – it was the 1970s after all. I was tempted. Vi-

sions of a life of immersion in some of my favorite activities, reading and stylistic analysis, beckoned. I was good at this and already experienced “belonging” in this way of life, carrying out this kind of activity.

And yet... my already extensive experience as a secondary English teacher had raised significant questions about the lack of adequate training in language studies, especially for English Language Arts teachers. As many do, I struggled with knowing how to help develop secondary students’ language skills, going beyond the basics of grammar and “mechanics.” My training in stylistics and semiotics (the study of signs) worked for my independent analysis of literary text, but gave me no foundation whatsoever for understanding what was going on in the minds of my students and how they were processing the labels I used so readily (subject, predicate, object, complement, retrieved clauses and so on). It also gave me no foundation for understanding how their home language experiences impacted their ability to transition from spoken language forms to context-reduced standard written English favored in informational and academic writing.

I needed to extend my knowledge of both students and of applied language studies (primarily sociolinguistics in educational settings). The human-based dilemmas I struggled with as a teacher of adolescents won. I chose to pursue a Ph.D., housed in Education at the University of Illinois, with a specialization in applied linguistics. The University of Illinois offered cross-disciplinary and cross-field specializations and seemed a good fit for my goals. Not that I didn’t suffer some regret or chagrin, and at times gazed longingly at what I perceived to be the intriguing and enjoyable life as a scholar who could focus on scholarly things. And yes, I was aware of status differences – my ego is not without its weaknesses.

It seems to me that one of the key differences between pure scholarly pursuits and what we might term applied fields of inquiry is that the latter tends to attract those of us who feel a mission to improve some aspect of human endeavor. In my case, I wanted to improve English teachers’ ability to help students develop as readers and writers through a sound foundation of scholarly knowledge about language, about language development in the later years, and about how to “translate” such knowledge into practice. Given that mission, Education as a field of inquiry and practice (and as a discipline), seemed a good fit, since it draws, for its own knowledge base, from many other fields of knowledge – in particular, philosophy, sociology, psychology and branches within it that could

loosely be collapsed under the general concept of human development. Indeed, Dewey (1964, *On Education*) concludes his comprehensive analysis of Education asserting that “the educational process has two sides – one psychological and one sociological” (p. 428) and further asserts that “neither can be subordinated to the other, or neglected, without evil results following” (p. 428). I am not, in this paper, able to pursue Dewey’s rationale for such “evil” results, tantalizing as that may be.

In contrast, in the Humanities, having an understanding of how to think within an academic discipline has long been held to be one of the basic tenets of an educated mind. Therefore, it’s not just the content of the discipline that is the primary focus, but also how one thinks about that content, how one communicates what one knows about that content, and how one presumably contributes to the growth of knowledge related to that content.

This focus on knowledge for knowledge’s sake simply does not work for K-12 teachers. Educators in that domain must know at least as much (and arguably more) about the student, the human subject, as they know about academic content. They must also know as much, if not more, about how K-12 students learn and what inhibits as well as what facilitates learning in this essentially captive population; how to motivate these captive students since it’s not a given that a captive population has an intrinsic motivation to learn what we want them to learn; and how to manage a captive population of students whose developing bodies and minds significantly impact their capacity to endure long hours of “seated” learning.

My experience of what it means to be an English scholar within that academic discipline was, interestingly, osmotically experienced. I experienced insight that I was being “trained” to think about knowledge in particular ways. In my studies of English Literature and stylistics, this “training,” was largely indirect, and achieved, I believe, in the following ways: through reading the texts (both primary and secondary sources); through listening to how my fellow students, instructors, and professors in small group tutorials and lectures spoke about literary and linguistic topics; through practice in writing and thinking as a literary analyst; and through feedback on my written work. In retrospect, I suspect that successful students were those who “got” what was to be “got” and those who did not, fell by the wayside. At the time of my earlier university education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we were not given lecture outlines, or bulleted notes which highlighted what was important. We

were not provided with PowerPoint handouts, and mass-produced or professor-initiated study guides were, as yet, not the industry they have since become. It was assumed that admission implied some level of intelligence, that it was then our responsibility to exercise that intelligence, and if we could not, then it was best that we leave and slink into obscurity. Whether we had, in school, received at least adequate preparation to enter the disciplines was not addressed. We either “had it” or didn’t.

At no time, whether in the K-12 setting or during pursuing my undergraduate and graduate degrees, however, was there ever explicit discussion or information presented that suggested we were being “trained” to think about the content of these disciplines in certain preferred ways. Perhaps this lack of explicitness implies what many have argued about in the contexts of “the politics” of education, that the test of one’s qualifiedness to succeed in these settings, was indeed about “getting it” on one’s own. The secrets of the “trade” were the key to success but those secrets were withheld as part of the test of suitability. Whether it would be useful or applicable to my subsequent choice of occupation was not relevant, and justly so. We were not being trained to teach, we were being trained to become English scholars.

Thus, after a one year of post-degree exposure to the rudiments of “instruction” in school settings, I met a wall that all this training could not breach. In essence, I had to put aside what I had absorbed as a student in the Humanities, and adapt what was adaptable for the 7th and 9th graders for whom I became responsible. I discovered the limits of all this knowledge about how to work with literary text and did what many of us have done - taught a mangled, highly reduced version of what I had learned, and struggled to make it work with students who forgot what a “verb” was as soon as it had been erased from the board. I discovered that there were other dynamics involved for which I had no “training” at the time that could adequately help me address the issues I was facing in my classrooms. The model I used in my teaching was based on what I had learned, but did not realize then: how largely unproductive it was for most students who did not, for whatever reason, “get it” themselves through exposure and various forms of practice.

In short, in the K-12 setting, it is simply not adequate to know content or even to know *about* content. Pre-service Teacher Education has made significant strides in helping us understand that content knowledge is just one domain of knowledge that teachers need to know. As I noted

earlier in this essay, we also need to know about the learners themselves, about how one can provide instructional support to enable all learners to learn, regardless of age, educational backgrounds, and variable home experiences that support or do not support learning in academic settings (including the K-12 setting). We also need to know where learners are in terms of their cognitive, intellectual and social development, and how these impact learning.

Granted, in the college setting, knowledge about learners in the ways identified above has not seemed as necessary as it is in the K-12 setting. Many teachers – professors, lecturers, tutors, teaching assistants in the traditional disciplines – are excellent, dedicated teachers who love to foster students’ learning in their discipline. Many have had little if any direct instruction about “how to teach” – rather, they are of the kind of teachers we think about when we think of “teachers who are born and not made.” Somehow, they are as tuned into the learning process, and into learners, as they are to their subject matter. Intuitively, or through modeling they received indirectly from their own teachers, they know how to “explain” and “present” information/content about their subject matter. They know what assignments will be challenging but not impossible to do. They will provide guidelines sufficiently well-articulated for these assignments that are meaningful and helpful to students. They will mentor and provide opportunities for discussion about papers so that students can brainstorm, air their thinking prior to final writing. They will provide adequate information about sources that novices may not find on their own. They know, somehow, how to synthesize information about the subject matter, how to bring in useful and interesting anecdotes, and how to think about the subject matter.

Teachers within the disciplines received their “training” through experiencing learning within the context of their chosen discipline. Those who love to teach within their discipline are, I believe, naturally gifted at and drawn to teaching. Over time, through feedback from students, and through their own well-developed and honest insights about what went well and what did not, they become increasingly seasoned and expert at their teaching, as well as in the practice of their discipline. Such teachers have an innate love for their disciplinary knowledge as well as for teaching itself, for passing on that knowledge and that passion for it to others. Those who say that such teachers are born and not made are, I believe, correct in that assertion.

How does the field of Education qualify as a “Discipline”?

If we return to the definitions I offered earlier in this essay, and if we accept that these definitions are workable and applicable for the “disciplines” as they currently exist, can we apply them to the field of Education, and if so, how? Is it a “branch of knowledge”?

Recall that the COD (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*) offers the following definitions: a noun meaning “the practice of training people to obey rules, or a code of behavior; controlled behavior resulting from such training; an activity providing mental or physical training; a noun meaning “a branch of knowledge, especially in higher education.” It is probably not productive to return to the original meaning of “discipline” as the practice of “scourging” or “mortifying” oneself. Granted, an additional original meaning from the Latin derivative, “discipline” may provide an argument for considering Education as a “discipline” in that it, too, is engaged with “instruction, and/or knowledge” (from Latin “disciplinus”). And yet, since the field of Education has emerged relatively recently as a field of inquiry, an applied “science” if you will, it may just be time for us to cease quibbling about whether or not it’s a “discipline” given that that term was applied for quite a different purpose, and within a different historical context, and instead, embrace the implicit extended intention embedded in the word “Education” itself – acquiring knowledge to improve oneself and/or others, to influence the development of oneself and/or others, to impact oneself and/or others, to transform.