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Existentialism, Phenomenology, and Education

James M. Magrini

Existentialism, and specifically phenomenology, in qualitative educational research, tends to be misunderstood. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is that scholars/researchers writing in the field often emulate and imitate the dense writing styles of philosophical forerunners in phenomenology such as Hegel, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Thus the writing is beyond the comprehension of many education professionals and practitioners. Existentialism and phenomenology need not be highly complex. Here I provide a summary of existentialism and phenomenology in accessible terms so that educators might see the potential this type of philosophy holds for enhancing our educational endeavors.

1. Existentialism is a modern philosophy emerging (*existence-philosophy*) from the 19th century, inspired by such thinkers as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Unlike traditional philosophy, which focuses on “objective” instances of truth, existentialism is concerned with the subjective, or personal, aspects of existence. The themes in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were developed in Europe and a modern philosophical movement was born. Existentialism is linked prominently with such atheist thinkers as Sartre, Merleau-ponty, and Camus, and religious thinkers like Marcel, Buber, Tillich, and Jaspers. Existentialism is not a systematic philosophy, with a hard and fast method of analysis, such as the “scientific method.” Rather, existentialism is a *way of existing wherein we inquire into our existence* – our Being is at issue and so we inquire into the things that have a deep and personal meaning for us! In the pursuit to understand our lives in connection with others, we begin to recognize common themes emerging, such as the meaning and import of freedom, responsibility, death, suffering, guilt, and the place of authentic values in human life. In education, “existentialism” loosely denotes a way of philosophizing linked with *reconceptualist* curriculum thought (e.g., Greene, Pinar, Grumet, Huebner, Jardine, van Manen, Willis, and Troutner). However, in contemporary educational research it is more common to run across the terms **phenomenology** and **hermeneutics** to describe research as opposed to “existentialism,” so a brief description of each is in order. There is a mistaken tendency to separate these two “practices,” or methods, however I avoid this because in educational research, for the most part, phenomenology *is* hermeneutics, that is, our descriptions of “lived experience” *must strive to be* interpretive (van Manen, 1990).

1.1 Phenomenology is a philosophical “practice/method” of observing, recording, and interpreting “lived experience” through vivid and detailed descriptions. The practice of phenomenology seeks to expose, uncover, or reveal “universal” elements of human existence that structure our practical, “particular” empirical situations. While differing on the way it is applied, existentialists all employ the practice of phenomenology as a way of gathering and interpreting the lived experiences they seek to understand.

1.2 Philosophical Hermeneutics is a philosophical “practice” of interpreting “texts” of all types, e.g., works of art, literary texts, human beings, social institutions, etc. Its goal is not to arrive at categorical solutions to its inquiries, but rather to clarify and deepen our understanding of the things that we engage. In one manner or another all phenomenological philosophy is hermeneutic, that is, *interpretive*. As related to education, in the hermeneutics of Gadamer there already exists a pronounced “educative” element bound up with interpretation, namely, the notion that interpretation is a co-creative act that involves personal growth and self-formation.

2. Common Themes of Existentialism and Phenomenology

Rather than summarize the thoughts of each existentialist and phenomenologist in education and philosophy proper, I will tease out the common themes, or “common structures,” present to all existential philosophy.

- There is a suspicion and distrust of grand (narratives) explanations for phenomena that are grounded in the primacy of human “reason,” as we might find in positivist science or traditional metaphysical philosophy.
- The belief in a multi-perspective model for knowledge (epistemology) – *there are in fact many legitimate ways of knowing the world.*
- The understanding that we do not have an “essence” given over in advance of our life – we enter the world and then proceed to create our “essence” through free, autonomous choice. It must be noted that there is a monumental sense of responsibility that accompanies all instance of human freedom.
- All perception and intentional conscious acts transpire within a “horizon,” or context, which indicates, against Descartes, that the human is already a *being-in-the-world*, and not separated off from it, as in dualist philosophy.
- The belief that we experience, and philosophize out of, moods such as *anxiety, dread, despair, and forlornness*, which indicates, to a greater or lesser degree, our estrangement from the world, others, and ourselves.

3. Existentialism and Phenomenology in Philosophy of Education: *Aims, Curriculum, Teaching, and Critique*

3.1 Aims and Curriculum

- Existentialism in education offers a corrective and alternative to behaviorism, social efficiency, ideas of conservative scholar academics, and vocationalism and the “banking-model of education” (Freire, 1970). The “existential” aims of education are grounded in the notion that the students and their unique possibilities are paramount to the task of teaching. We are more than merely “rational animals with speech,” we are also feeling, emoting, intuiting beings – who create and re-create our world through free choices. Importantly, for education and its various institutional manifestations (most particularly for “reform”), our world and ideas are not given, they are not indelibly etched-in-stone, and change to both the world and our ideas is possible through united, ecumenical activity.
- “Existential” aims of education are inspired by curriculum “content.” For Greene (1984), we get this content in its purest most visceral form from literature and the arts. Such ideas that the world is unstable, absurd, without intrinsic meaning, and that life is an anxious stretching out between our birth and inevitable death may be disturbing notions, but they should be incorporated into the curriculum. Existential education wants to inquiry into life’s difficulties, tensions, and ambiguities.
- Existential philosophy offers the possibility to overcome the “polarity” that exists between the subjective/objective, internal/external, either/or rationale for programmatic curriculum making (Detmer, 2005). For example, it calls us to recognize and seek to overcome the injustice of a curriculum that embraces and privileges certain modes of knowing about others, such as an epistemological model favoring *analytic-logical-empirical* clusters of knowledge over more intangible forms of knowledge, those associated with the arts, which include the *intuitive-perceptual* model of knowledge.
- The “existential” aims of education would be inspired by questions of a unique and specifically “existential” nature (Heidegger, 1935). Instead of asking tradition questions such as “What is the ideal democratic student?” Or “What is an authentic education?” Educators should be inspired to ask more original questions such as “How is it that an authentic education unfolds in its essence?” Or “How is it that an authentic teacher enacts her potential-for-being in the classroom with her students?”
- Curriculum making conceived existentially, as opposed to following a *product-process* model (Tyler, 1949), which in great part determines the trajectory of the education in advance of actual student learning, would attempt to adopt a *process-product* line of curriculum development (“curriculum-envisioning”). This would allow for the curriculum to develop and evolve autonomously as the

learning unfolds. In this “existentially” conceived curriculum, benchmarks are merely temporary, transitory, and malleable, they develop along with the learning process.

3.2 Pedagogy and Role of the Teacher

- The method of pedagogy must allow for the student’s development of her own unique possibilities, which is why the existentialists would reject a standardized curriculum and an authoritarian model for teaching. An “existential” curriculum would include a diverse content as well as an array of varied pedagogical methods, which would, importantly, include ample opportunities for peer-initiated and peer-directed learning.
- Educators should plan lessons that embrace and incorporate aspects of the student’s emotional and intellectual autobiography (Grumet, 1992). However, it is not only the aspects of one’s unique life-story that matter, it is also important that students understand the major role that “history” and “heritage” play in shaping who we become - history’s authentic role not only forges our past but as well contributes to the future enactment of our possibilities that we gather from our “heritage”.
- The instructional methods employed should not be resemble the out-dated authoritarian model, where the teacher is the “superior” possessor of knowledge and the student the “inferior,” empty vessel waiting to be filled (Freire, 1970). This is model for pedagogy views knowledge at an objective remove from the student, and demonstrates no concern for the place of the existential “lived world” in the curriculum as shared by both teacher and student. Knowledge, according to the existentialists does not reside at a remove from our “lived world” and in addition is constructive. Thus pedagogical techniques should stress the co-creative, co-responsive, and co-participatory aspects of education. This is not to indicate that the teacher allows the student to dictate each and every aspect of her education, for teachers need to be in command of the subject matter in order to first tailor it to fit the students needs. In relation to this issue, Heidegger (1952) famously stated that the most difficult task for educators was to *learn how to let students learn*.
- There are crucial normative and ethical issues bound up with the role of educator for existentialists. Importantly, the teacher needs to be aware of her deep and substantial existential responsibility she bears as a “creator” of values, for when she chooses, be it an activity, textbook, a method for giving directions, or simply a way of holding herself to address the class, she is simultaneously “choosing for the students,” for she is endorsing values and stating: “I value X, you too *should* value X.”

3.3 Critique of Existentialism in education

- A common critique of existentialism in education, from the perspective of quantitative “analytic-empirical” researcher, is that it is not applicable because it defies the typical empirical model of theory-practice, wherein research results function to explain, describe, and predict the outcome of events.
- A second critique, lodged by philosophers of mind (Dennett, 2000), is that phenomenological research is not legitimate research, rather it is an endeavor that is bound up with subjectivism, which amounts to little more than literary and poetic introspection with no clear-cut “real world” applications.
- Finally, to reiterate what was stated at the outset, the dense and impenetrable technical philosophical language employed by philosophers of education embracing existential-phenomenology render it impossible to translate into the actual practice and the experience of education, this due to the fact that most existentialists (with the exception of Nietzsche and Heidegger) wrote little to nothing about formal education (Troutner, 1979).