

# An Engineer Well Lost

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Volume 19, Number 2, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071926ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071926ar>

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## Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

## ISSN

0838-4517 (print)

1916-0348 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this document

O'Leary, P. (2010). An Engineer Well Lost. *Paideusis*, 19(2), 98–103.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071926ar>

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## *An Engineer Well Lost*

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Since I was born and raised in a predominantly Catholic area of Boston and sent to a Catholic elementary school, it would be natural to infer that my interest in philosophy was stirred by questions about religion. Such was not the case. As evidenced by having to repeat the third grade, I was a very mediocre student with a mind to match. In fact, the only questions that seriously occupied me concerned the fate of the Boston Red Sox and, occasionally, the Boston Bruins. My less-than-stellar school performance continued in a secondary school devoted to science and engineering and came to an unwelcome end at Northeastern University's School of Engineering when, after two years of desultory study, I was authoritatively told that the world would be much safer if I did not become an engineer.

Realizing that I was lost to engineering, I stopped my mindless drifting. My predicament forced me to ask serious questions about what I was going to do with my life. Little did I know at that time how such a personal question can easily morph into the sort of philosophical inquiries found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*! Fortunately, a friend of mine, who was well informed about matters philosophical, helped guide my incoherent inquiries. Because of him, I became an omnivorous reader though, perhaps, a somewhat indiscriminate one. Unfortunately, I still had to earn a living and, thus, spent the next two years attached to an engineering firm where I worked as a road surveyor. It was then, too, that the judgment about the safety of the world was confirmed when one of the half completed bridges I had worked on, began slowly to sink into a riverbed.

Before I could return to university to pursue my interest in philosophy, I was drafted into the United States Navy for two years. While I disliked my time in the navy, it proved to be beneficial since it not only fostered my maturing, but also helped me develop my interests. For one thing, I was the only sailor aboard our ship who was reading Plato, Aristotle, as well as George Santayana! Moreover, six months in the Mediterranean allowed me visits to Greece, Turkey, Italy, Spain, and France. Since our home-port was on the French Riviera, I frequently escaped the gastronomically disastrous food served on our ship and tasted the remarkable cuisine of southern France.

After my discharge from the Navy, I was lucky to be admitted to Boston College—a Jesuit-run university. The Jesuits required all students, Catholic or not, to take two courses per year in philosophy as well as two in theology. The philosophy courses followed a prescribed sequence starting with logic and epistemology in the first year and ending with ethics in the final year. It was in the ethics course that I encountered my first Jesuit teacher of philosophy. We respectfully addressed him as “Father Toolin” but he was known to us as “No Foolin’ Toolin”. These required courses tended to be formulaic as well as too dependent on a single textbook. Surprisingly, although he was acknowledged, Aquinas’s work never made an appearance. Nevertheless, these courses gave rise to argument and debate about important issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A perspective on the instructional atmosphere of Jesuit colleges can be gleaned by reading Anthony Kenny. *A Path from Rome: An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

During my third and fourth years at Boston College, I was able to enroll in various electives in philosophy. Most of the ones I took were in the history of philosophy, the only exception being a course on metaphysics where we dutifully cursed Carnap while hailing Heidegger. Now, however, I am more inclined to reverse these judgments. As philosophy was not my only preoccupation during these years, I also registered for a number of history courses. Two of these, taken in my final year, were in the history of medieval political thought. Although these might have appeared to be straight history of philosophy, they were not. Some philosophers were considered (for example, William of Ockham), but the main emphasis was on extracting medieval conceptions of politics through the legal and doctrinal disputes of the period. The professor, William Daly, was perhaps the best teacher and scholar I ever met. It was at this time, too, that I published my first article, the subject of which was the medieval Islamic philosopher Averroes. The Medieval period was beginning to exercise an influence over me, but it was not to last.

My years at Boston College helped disperse the storm clouds left by my failed attempt to become an engineer. Not only was the world safe from sinking bridges, but I was well removed from nagging doubts about whether I possessed any worthwhile talents. My undergraduate success fostered in me the hope that I would be able to go to graduate school after my bachelor's degree. Being prudent, I thought I should have a fall-back position in case graduate school proved a mirage. The idea of a career in education occurred to me. When I consulted a Jesuit friend of mine about the idea of taking some education courses, he just looked at me and said: "Don't waste your time!" While offered, education courses were not highly esteemed. Although this was the first time I had thought about the study of education, it was not the last.

The one thing about my undergraduate career that I regret is failing to take more courses in mathematics. In my first year, I took two courses in calculus. Not being engineering, calculus revealed that I had a certain flair for mathematics. Unfortunately, my engineering debacle had kept this talent well hidden. For various reasons, I did not pursue further studies in mathematics even though it does behoove a philosopher to know something more than philosophy. In graduate school, I toyed with the idea of taking one graduate course in mathematics, but I soon dropped this toy lest its content proved to be too heavy for a mathematical 'lightweight'.

I was admitted to the graduate school at the University of Toronto in 1961. There were two reasons for choosing Toronto. First, many of my undergraduate professors of philosophy had earned their doctorates at Toronto and displayed an enthusiasm for the university that was impossible to resist. Second, the breadth and variety of courses offered by its Department of Philosophy far exceeded any of those available at other universities. So I spent the next four happy years in Toronto concentrating on modern European philosophy rather than on the mediaeval period. I also took side trips with a course in logic as well as a seminar in analytic philosophy. The logic course, as well as the seminar, suppressed any lingering appetite I may have had for Heidegger. At that time, however, the philosophy of education was not even within sight. It was not offered by the department and, even if it had been, I would not have been interested.

While living in Toronto, I spent three of my four years in a residence for graduate students on the Saint Michael's College side of the campus. I spent the fourth year off campus because I had met a francophone student with the lovely Italian name of Pia. In the summer of 1964, we were married in Montreal and returned to an apartment in Toronto. During the years of our courtship, both of us earned Master of Arts degrees which were granted in November, 1963. The occasion was memorable since it was on the very day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. My father, who had generously supported me over many years and who had traveled from Boston to attend the convocation, could hardly speak. It was a grim day for all of us.

Although supported by a scholarship for the last two years of my graduate studies, money was running out and a baby was on the way. I needed to find work, preferably teaching philosophy. I applied to various colleges and universities but with little success since no department was willing to take on someone who did not have a doctorate in hand. Indeed, it took me until 1973 and three

children later to obtain my doctorate; I am nothing if not slow. In the meantime, I attended the 1964 meetings of the American Philosophical Association. While there, I was interviewed by Thomas Knight who was scheduled to become head of the Department of Philosophy at what was then called the Ontario College of Education in London, Ontario. Knowing my likely prejudice towards the philosophy of education, which was deeply engrained though based upon a profound ignorance of the field, Knight assured me that we would not be teaching the philosophy of education but regular mainstream philosophy courses. The only difference in the whole arrangement was that the student population would consist entirely of prospective teachers. Otherwise, it was philosophy as usual.

Later, some time in February 1965, I received an offer to teach philosophy at what was now called Althouse College of Education. Later still, I received a letter from Thomas Knight declaring that he was dismayed by the situation at Althouse, was resigning, and urged me to do likewise. In a state of panic, I telephoned the Dean of Education at Althouse who assured me that everything was fine except for a certain misunderstanding and that I was still welcome to become a member of the faculty. Thus soothed, I began teaching philosophy in September, 1965. Little did I know at the time that I was beginning a long and circuitous route towards the philosophy of education.

Althouse College was the second institution to be established in Ontario for the education of those who hoped to teach at the secondary school level. Prior to 1965, all initial training of secondary school teachers was done in Toronto. Although a part of the University of Western Ontario, Althouse did not receive the status of a Faculty of Education until 1973 when its student body was enlarged to include those who wished to teach at the elementary level. The mix of students was further expanded when, after much debate, a graduate programme was added.

The programme at Althouse required every student to take one course in philosophy, one in history, and one in psychology. While those teaching history and psychology were more than willing to teach the history and psychology of education, the four of us teaching philosophy had no inclination to engage in the philosophy of education. In my first year, I taught logic, epistemology and, incredibly enough, the history of modern philosophy. The students were incredulous. During a lecture on Descartes, I remember one indignant student asking what this course had to do with teacher education. This student was not alone, since all the students were seriously displeased. Something better had to be done. We needed help.

Such help came in the form of R.S. Peters. The first bit of assistance was his *Ethics and Education* (1966) followed quickly by the man himself. As chair of a lecture series committee in 1967–1968, I invited Peters to come to Althouse College to give a public lecture. He spent several days with us and with our students as well as giving us some advice on how we might improve our courses. Later, he generously sent us various course outlines they were using at the University of London Institute of Education. Gradually, it dawned on us that philosophical work on educational issues was not only deeply interesting, but also afforded students the opportunity to gain critical insights into their work as teachers.

The revision of our courses was two-fold. For those students whose focus was subject centered, we offered courses in the ‘philosophy-of’. So, for example, I taught philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history to students preparing to teach the corresponding subjects. I thought then, and still think, that this approach to teaching philosophy in a faculty of education is a valuable one. But it was not the only approach needed since there were also students whose teaching subjects could not easily be brought under the ‘philosophy-of’ umbrella, such as those preparing to teach technical subjects or a wide range of subjects at the elementary level. For elementary teachers in training, I taught a course based on Robert Dearden’s *The Philosophy of Primary Education*,<sup>2</sup> while also becoming involved in a course on moral education.

My new-found enthusiasm for the philosophy of education worked its way into publications. My interest in the ‘philosophy-of’ approach to teacher education is reflected in articles published in

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Dearden. *The Philosophy of Primary Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968.

*Educational Theory*<sup>3</sup> and *Teacher Education*<sup>4</sup> while a mounting interest in moral education saw its first manifestation in the *Journal of Educational Thought*.<sup>5</sup>

The years 1967–1977 were a halcyon period for philosophers in Western's Faculty of Education since our budgets were not severely restricted. Indeed, when two of the initial members of the department left, they were promptly replaced. Moreover, we were able to invite several prominent philosophers to give lectures at the Faculty. Among them were William Dray and Richard Rudner. This was not to last. On my return from a sabbatical in 1978, I discovered that the 'philosophy-of' approach to teaching the philosophy of education had been eliminated. From then on, students enrolled in the bachelor of education programme were to take one course entitled "Philosophy of Education". In addition, monetary pressures were becoming palpable. When philosophers in the Faculty of Education either did not receive tenure, went to other universities, or retired, it became increasingly difficult to replace them. When I retired in 1996, there were only two philosophers left to teach the philosophy of education to all the 600 students in our undergraduate programme. Such a teaching load was, of course, unsustainable. The upshot of this sad tale is that philosophy of education is no longer offered as a separate course at the B.Ed. level, although various courses are available in the graduate programme.

Before considering how we dealt with the post-1978 regime for teaching philosophy in our faculty, I want to consider two factors which contributed to my growing commitment to the philosophy of education: the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society (CPES) and *Paidensis*.

Around 1966, an embryonic form of what was to become the CPES held its meetings at Althouse College. Two of my colleagues had published a paper in the *British Journal for the Study of Education* in which they defended the view that the best way to teach philosophy to future teachers was not by way of philosophy of education, but through offerings in philosophy which did not differ from those given in the Faculty of Arts. Jerry Coombs, who was acting as commentator, began his remarks with this memorable line: "I thought I was to comment on a philosophy paper. But there is no philosophy in this paper." After that, all was mayhem. But the effect on me was something like a conversion. Here was a self-confessed philosopher of education displaying an acute mind about educational matters. In my ignorance, I thought that such a thing was not possible. But it was not just possible; it was actual. I changed my mind.

I do not recall when I first joined CPES, but among the various regrets in my life, being a member of CPES is not one of them. Indeed, I enjoyed being a member of CPES even more than being a member of the Philosophy of Education Society in the United States. I gave my first paper to CPES in 1973 and Sandra Bruneau acted as commentator. At least she did not accuse me of failing to do philosophy! From that point on, I believe I gave papers at two out of every three conferences. All of my published work, with the exception of the article on Averroes and one on Charles Peirce, has been in the philosophy of education. The conversion proved to be permanent.

In 1986, I was asked to serve as the first editor of a new Canadian journal in the philosophy of education. But what was it to be called? In proposing the name "*Paidensis*", I was met with puzzled looks. What did it mean? I did not tell anyone then, and I think I will continue to guard this secret. A hint? Its meaning is connected to the title of Werner Jaeger's *Paideia*.

The first issue of *Paidensis* came out in the fall of 1987. Creating the first issue was not that difficult a matter since initial enthusiasm gave rise to a willingness to contribute. As the first editor, I wrote to the famous and the not-so-famous to solicit contributions. Some never replied; others replied though they declined the invitation; yet others accepted the invitation, but did not send anything; fortunately, some not only accepted but contributed articles. As time went on, the last class of invitees became few in number. Some of the issues of *Paidensis* were so thin that I seriously considered changing

<sup>3</sup> Paul O'Leary. "Philosophy and the Curriculum." *Educational Theory* 21.3 (1971): 362-68.

<sup>4</sup> Paul O'Leary. "Philosophy and Curriculum Decisions." *Teacher Education* 8 (April, 1975): 44-54.

<sup>5</sup> Paul O'Leary. "Moral Education, Moral Character, and the Virtues." *Journal of Educational Thought* 15.1 (1981): 41-46.

the journal's name from the noble, if mysterious, *Paidensis*, to the more accurate *Anorexia*. Happily, the journal did not succumb to its early lack of nourishment and is now flourishing. I hope that *Paidensis* continues to spread and deepen "*paideia*".

Let me return to the issue of how philosophers within Western's Faculty of Education dealt with the mandated change in the teaching of philosophy. I was certainly sorry to forgo the opportunity to teach, say, the philosophy of history to prospective history teachers, but I was not paralyzed. Neither were my colleagues. Most of us had done enough teaching in moral education or curriculum theory to have some idea about what could form the content of a general philosophy of education course. We eventually co-edited a book entitled *Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*,<sup>6</sup> which then became the basis of our teaching. It included papers by R.S. Peters, Paul Hirst, Lawrence Kohlberg, and many others. It went through a later revision in 1992. Both versions served us and our students very well. In its first edition, our textbook had a rich yellow cover which led us to refer to it, somewhat irreverently, as the "*Butterscotch Bible*". But, unlike the Bible, our butterscotch one was not regarded as divinely inspired. Our hope, however, was that it was inspired enough to prevent it from being judged insipid.

Let me close this self-portrait first by considering the evolution of my teaching, then by indicating the focus of my writing, and finally by making some comments about the present and future status of the philosophy of education within faculties of education.

I have little doubt that, as a novice teacher in 1965, I was seriously defective. After all, what else could you expect from someone who, willingly enough, taught the history of modern philosophy to prospective teachers and who, in doing so, droned on from a carefully prepared text? I was woefully ignorant of what to teach to education students as well as how to go about it. The subject matter of my teaching gradually improved when our courses actually dealt with educational material. Content dealing with moral education always elicited a lively response from students. The main question was how to get them to become effectively reflective about moral education. Opinions are fine, but well thought-out ones are better. As to the manner of my teaching, I discovered that using concrete examples to illustrate abstract ideas, especially if the examples are humorous, helped enormously to bridge the gap between a serious teacher and an anxious student. Sometimes on meeting former students, I have tried to find out how much they remembered. Often enough, they would recall the humorous example, but be quite vague about the point the example was supposed to serve! Happily for me, student ratings of my teaching began to climb and finally reached the high end of the scale.

The general focus of my writing has been an attempt to develop a connection between teaching and an ethics of belief. Teaching an ethics of belief involves the fostering of certain traits of mind and character. Traits such as truthfulness, open-mindedness, epistemic prudence, and good judgement are not only enabling conditions for acquiring knowledge, but are ethical virtues as well. Currently, I am working on how teaching history can encourage the development of open-mindedness by way of regarding historical inquiry as a fallible enterprise.

Finally, what do I consider to be the current and future status of the philosophy of education? The slow decline of philosophy within my own faculty as well as in others is a sign of the times. What is it about our culture that facilitates such a decline? In his *Truth and Truthfulness*,<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams considers modern culture's attitude towards truth. On the one hand, there is an antipathy towards those who are not truthful, while on the other, there is a growing scepticism about our ability to acquire truths about important matters. This scepticism about the ability of complex inquiries such as philosophy, history, and even physics to achieve some degree of truth about our world has gradually eroded our culture's confidence in them. If this scepticism is warranted, then there is little point in ensuring that those subjects which try to make sense of ourselves and our world are taught.

Allied with this growing scepticism is another feature of modern culture which contributes to the undermining of our discipline. This is the preference for utility over theory where the notion of utility is

<sup>6</sup> Paul O'Leary, ed. *Philosophy of Education: An Introduction*. Lexington, MA: Ginn and Co., 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

confined to the vocational and the economic. However, if we broaden our notion of what is useful to include whatever has practical consequences, then philosophy of education has educational utility. I might rephrase something Richard Feynman said about physics: philosophy is like sex; it has practical consequences, but that is not why it is done. Why is philosophy of education done? It is undertaken in order to make sense of the modern world of schooling, teaching, and learning. Whether future generations continue to support our long philosophical tradition of trying to make sense of things, I cannot say. But I hope so.

It must be clear by now that I have traveled a long and somewhat twisting road from a failed engineer to a hopeful philosopher of education. Looking back, I must confess that, in becoming a philosopher, I was an engineer well lost.

### **Works that have significantly influenced my thinking**

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