

**Invitational Insurrection: The Pedagogy and Politics of Richard Brosio's  
*Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education***  
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**Abstract**

*As its title suggests, the pedagogical design of this book offers teachers a “philosophical scaffolding” for constructing their own philosophy of education. This invitation to do philosophy also functions as the foundation of the book’s political design. Brosio avoids presenting philosophy as a rarefied field of academic specialization, opting instead to describe it as part of an enduring human endeavor to understand ourselves and our place in the world. Through his invitational tone, most clearly expressed in those spaces of the text where he addresses the reader as he would a student in an authentic face-to-face encounter, Brosio helps the reader feel comfortable in realizing how the history of that endeavor, (i.e., the history of ideas) is his “house.” It’s where he “lives.” In writing this book, he has invited teachers into his home, and he is giving them a guided tour of what he believes to be the most helpful ideas for constructing a critical democratic theory of education to inform their practice.*

*“Follow your own course, and let people talk.”*

Dante, quoted by Karl Marx in the final line of his introduction to *Capital*

I must confess to have lost interest in the philosophy of education soon after completing my doctoral program, even though philosophy had been one of my areas of concentration at the University of Cincinnati. Too much of the contemporary work that I encountered in the field just struck me as irrelevant to what I saw as the real issues confronting education and the daily lives of teachers and students in schools

and the larger society. As the neoconservative political movement accelerated the formation of neoliberal social policies, precipitating the rightward swing of the Democratic party in the United States, philosophers of education ignored the writing on the wall, busying themselves with efforts to stay in step with the most recent fashions in continental philosophy without mindfully addressing the assault on public schools and the public mind. (To illustrate just how far removed some philosophers of education had become from the material world, I still recall how one effete, though highly respected, philosopher of education responded to a statement I'd made about the role of the World Bank as a agency of empire, suggesting that I should infiltrate the World Bank and seek to transform its discourse-practices. Ironically, he made this assertion on the basis what he claimed to have learned from studying various postmodern/poststructuralist philosophers' writings on the nature of power.) The philosophy of education has paid a heavy price for its neglect of real world exigencies. Few undergraduate and graduate programs in teacher education still require, or even offer, courses in the philosophy of education. Consequently, few employment opportunities now exist for those graduating with doctorates in the field. Perhaps philosophers of education could have done nothing to prevent the conditions that now threaten the demise of their field, but in their conscience they should always wonder if they could have done more.

Richard Brosio has always been an anomaly to this pattern. As a Marxist scholar and dedicated educational foundationalist, he has always kept his philosophical studies in education closely wedded to his historical and sociological understandings of schools and the larger social, political, and cultural dynamics they reflect. Though widely recognized as having made important contributions to the philosophy of education and educational studies for many years, Brosio did not publish a book of his own writing until *A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education* in 1994. He published *Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education* in 2000. Though he remains an active and vital agent in the field, we could view these two books as capstone events in Brosio's thirty-year career.

My own biases, having been mentored by the incredibly prolific Joel Spring, lead me to ask "What took Brosio so long to write these books? Why didn't he write more of them?" The answer, I believe, is two-pronged. First, as we know, Brosio dedicated

himself to many professional organizations and published numerous articles in their journals and conference proceedings. He also worked as the editor of the *Journal of Thought* for many years. Second, and this is highly instructive, I believe, for our understanding of *Philosophical Scaffolding*, Richard Brosio took time to teach, and to teach well. Ball State University, where he spent nearly the entirety of his career, is hardly a high-status research institution. Given his record of scholarly productivity, Brosio could have found an academic appointment at a far more prestigious university that would have required a much lighter teaching load, leaving him more time to write and publish. (Let's face it, the reward structure in higher education socializes and seduces us all to seek such a position.) But he stayed in Muncie, Indiana and, I suspect, worked diligently with students in the classroom. I suspect this because I witnessed first-hand how eager he is to dialogue with graduate students at professional conferences, when other academics view such dialogue as unproductive for their career trajectories.

Apart from its impressive academic content, *Philosophical Scaffolding* is a book that has obviously been written by a teacher. It is also a book that has been written *for* teachers – those who teach the philosophy of education – to help them make philosophy and the philosophy of education “come alive” for those who teach, or those who *will* teach in preK-12 schools. Though not written as a conventional textbook, *Philosophical Scaffolding* reflects a very clear pedagogical design that mirrors and complements its equally clear political design. One reinforces the other. Because I suspect that other reviewers will concentrate on the book’s academic content, my review focuses on the holistic union that Brosio achieves between the pedagogical and the political. I also do this because I think teacher educators ought to seriously consider adopting this book for their “Introduction to Education” courses, and because I believe such a popularization of this book could meaningfully contribute toward a renaissance in the philosophy of education.

As its title suggests, the pedagogical design of this book functions to offer teachers a “philosophical scaffolding” for constructing their own philosophy of education. This invitation to *do* philosophy also functions as the foundation of the book’s political design. In a beautiful acknowledgement of G. Max Wingo, his doctoral studies mentor at the University of Michigan, Brosio maintains that

Philosophy and philosophy of education are *too important* (emphasis added) to be thought about and “done” by only the few, especially during these times which feature the inability or refusal of many people to agree with the orthodoxies of others. In the absence of agreed upon orthodoxies and grand narratives – and in societies that claim to be democratic – *doing* philosophy with regard to society and school becomes the responsibility of all citizens and educators, not just those who make a living in this field of study (p. 2).

Quoting from Wingo’s citation of Max Black in *Philosophies of Education: An Introduction* (1974), Brosio encourages teachers to embrace philosophical work by recognizing how

All serious discussion of educational problems, no matter how specific, soon lead to consideration of educational *aims* (emphasis original), and becomes a conversation about the good life, the nature of man [woman], the varieties of experience. But these are the perennial themes of philosophical investigation. It might be a hard thing to expect educators to be philosophers, but can they be anything else? (p.15)

In extending this invitation to teachers to *do* philosophy, Brosio demonstrates no naiveté. As he articulates so masterfully in his analysis of Herbert Marcuse’s work and that of other members of the Frankfurt School in Chapter Three, Brosio understands that the vast majority of learners arrive ill-disposed to the study of philosophy and the philosophy of education. American students, in particular, have grown up in a society whose institutions, including its schools – despite all pretenses to the contrary, ascribe little value to “the life of the mind.” Even in the most elite private boarding schools (whose tuition and fees run upward of \$30,000 per year) attended by the children of the nations most privileged and powerful, philosophy almost never enters into preK-12 curricula. In the minds of today’s students, then, if philosophy was not required in school, what possible importance could it hold for their lives?

I remember an incident from my experiences as a member of our university’s faculty senate when one of our most distinguished professors of philosophy openly berated our students for their lack of interest in philosophy and their more general anti-intellectualism. In response, I challenged him to identify anything our society’s dominant culture that would even remotely dispose a young person toward developing an interest in the study of philosophy. Of course, he couldn’t. I reminded him that it is *our* duty, as teachers/professors, to inspire students to develop such interests, but that

we will forever fail in task until we lead them to recognize the relevance of our fields of study for some aspect of their daily lives.

Brosio answers this call convincingly on behalf of the philosophy of education through the pedagogical design of his book. While he provides a clear and powerful narrative for students to follow in learning *about* the history of philosophy and the philosophy of education, each strand of that narrative leads to what Brosio refers to as a “Suggested Task for the Reader.” These “Suggested Tasks” allow readers, first, to synthesize the central arguments and main ideas of specific sections of the book and, second, to come to their own conclusions regarding those arguments and ideas. In other words, Brosio helps teachers recognize the importance *of* philosophy by having them *do* philosophy, by having them engage in philosophical reflection on various issues of easily discernible relevance to their lives as teachers and citizens in a democratic society.

The invitational tone that characterizes his narrative also facilitates this critical engagement. Brosio avoids presenting philosophy as a rarefied field of academic specialization, opting instead to describe it as part of an enduring human endeavor to understand ourselves and our place in the world. Through his invitational tone, most clearly expressed in those spaces of the text where he addresses the reader as he would a student in an authentic face-to-face encounter, Brosio helps the reader feel comfortable in realizing how the history of that endeavor, (i.e., the history of ideas) is his “house.” It’s where he “lives.” In writing this book, he has invited teachers into his home, and he is giving them a guided tour of what he believes to be the most helpful ideas for constructing a critical democratic theory of education to inform their practice. Because he believes, with Harold Entwistle, that “the job of theory is to evoke judgment rather than rote obedience,” Brosio neither demands nor expects his readers to agree with any of philosophers represented in the book. “Standing on the shoulders of those who came before us,” he explains, is beneficial; however, it is still necessary for each of us to construct our own operative understanding of ourselves as well as the world in which we live...You are invited to reflect upon your own foundational or ultimate beliefs and value system. You are encouraged to think about their sources, development, and the potential and actual action consequences. The accent is on your educational philosophy, because this book is mainly intended for

those who seek to deepen and broaden their understanding of teaching and learning, as well as those who are interested in the broader idea of education. (p. 3)

Moreover, *Philosophical Scaffolding* signifies Brosio's invitation to teachers to join him in a struggle that is individual, collective, and historical. Individually and collectively, humanity's search for self-understanding is never-ending. Certainty remains elusive once we begin the task of questioning ourselves and the world around us. For Brosio, as for many others, the struggle for understanding does not occur in isolation from the concomitant struggle to improve ourselves and, through our critically-informed actions, to improve the world. In this regard, those who have occupied privileged spaces within asymmetrical power relations, have always recognized and sought to repress philosophy's subversive potential. It is at this point that Brosio's pedagogical design intersects with its political design. As he explains,

The leitmotif of *Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education* is the need for broad participation in deciding which kinds of epistemologies, meanings, and interpretations are more justifiable than others, especially with reference to the construction of schools and societies that are more democratic and equitable (p. xiii).

Brosio openly acknowledges that he wrote this book for to be "meaningful to those who are interested in education for democratic empowerment, social justice, respect for diversity, and the possibilities for a more 'caring' school and society" (p. xi). Through his invitation to enter into the philosophical conversation, he seeks not to enlist readers into a new orthodoxy, but to have them willing join what he characterizes as a great historical and open-ended *struggle* to make sense of the world. He provides them with a scaffolding – a model or systematic inventory of elements. As part of their struggle to develop their own philosophy of education, it is up to them to decide how adequate or useful this scaffolding is for constructing pedagogical practices that contribute to students' abilities to better understand the world in hopes of acting effectively toward the improvement of the world.

In addition to understanding that students will not likely approach this book with a strong disposition to eagerly engage in philosophical reflection and inquiry, Brosio also understands that our schools do not prepare students for the serious study of philosophy. As previously noted, he informs readers from the outset that the book

may “appear daunting to some.” He adds, however, that “*if* (emphasis added) it is read and studied carefully you will find it understandable” (p. xi).

Adding to the book’s daunting qualities, Brosio makes “copious use of direct quotes and endnotes” in order that readers “can benefit from experiencing some representative arguments that have developed around certain key, historical, philosophical issues about schools, education, and society” (p. xii). This copious use note direct quotes also benefits readers by allowing them to “deal with the various contributors’ arguments in their own words” (p. xii). To aid students in their careful reading, Brosio, as any good teacher would, advises them to “consult a good dictionary while studying this work” (p. xii). Such a recommendation should not be necessary. How many of us, however, have not had to contend with student complaints that they didn’t like a particular book because it contained so many words they had never encountered before? These complaints are particularly deplorable coming from the mouths of those to profess a desire to become teachers. Imagine the response of a third grade teacher whose students did not want or did not expect to learn any new words. It is a sad commentary on any nation’s dominant culture, infected as it is with consumerist values imposed by the market, when students expect that their vocabularies will have reached full maturity by the time they have completed high school, if not earlier. Again, Brosio is not naïve to this, but he demonstrates a genuine concern for learners in their efforts to wrestle with new ideas and concepts by providing them with a five-page glossary at the end of the book. None of this, of course, should cause us to question his faith in the ability of students to *read* as well as to *do* philosophy. Brosio is a true Gramscian that regard, holding that not only does everyone have the ability to engage in critically reflective, intellectual work; they have a responsibility to do so.

In conclusion, as a capstone event in a continuingly illustrious career, *Philosophical Scaffolding for the Construction of Critical Democratic Education* should hold enduring value for the philosophy of education as one of the premier pedagogical texts in the field. Unlike so many conventional texts that offer little more than an annotated taxonomy of the subject area, *Philosophical Scaffolding* offers readers/students/teacher as pedagogical approach to help them not only learn the material but also to help them come to appreciate why *doing* philosophy is so

important to teachers and citizens in democratic societies. True to his word, Brosio uses “the power of invitation in order to welcome those who have been discriminated against and suffer from injustice” – (namely, teachers) – into the philosophical conversation. In borrowing the words of Mike Rose, Brosio clearly believes that “‘the more I . . . understand . . . education, the more I’ve come to believe in the power of invitation’ ” (p. 38). Through his invitation for readers to join in philosophical conversation, he hopes their experiences *in* that conservation can help them come to understand that “through good talk we can share our imaginations concerning where we can and must go. The democratic imaginary must be ‘made real’ in the same way that a blueprint is translated into a building” (p. 105).

### **Author's Details**

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