

# *Feminist Care or Being Tough Enough: An Interview with Michelle Forrest*

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*This article takes the form of an interview with Dr. Michelle Forrest. A philosopher of education, a teacher, a feminist, and a mentor to many, Michelle has been a longtime member of the Canadian philosophy of education community. This interview, conducted by her colleague, Adrian Downey, and her PhD student, Renée McKinstry, looks back over Michelle's work in philosophy of education, offering her the chance to reflect on her contributions considering the changes in educational thinking and social circumstance throughout her career. Specifically, Michelle discusses her dissertation on pedagogical openness and the openness of the text, the feminist ethics of care and feminist irony, the dangers of comparative thinking, coloniality, and the significance of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society (CPES) to her career and life as a philosopher of education. The interview concludes with Michelle's advice to future scholars working the foundations of education and especially philosophy of education.*

## **Introduction**

The following article consists of an interview with Dr. Michelle Forrest, a feminist, a philosopher of education, a teacher, a mentor, and a colleague. In July of 2025, Michelle retired from her position as a Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). The interview was conducted by her colleague, Adrian Downey, and her PhD student, Renée McKinstry. Renée and Adrian spent several months reading through a selection of Michelle's work before formulating questions, then asked Michelle to respond in writing. Michelle did so, and the results, edited for cohesion and space, form the basis of this article.

The purpose of this interview was twofold. First, we (Adrian and Renée) aimed to offer Michelle a close and attentive reading of her work and, through our reading, the opportunity to revisit that work considering the time since its publication and the ever-evolving landscape of philosophy of education. Michelle has written about pedagogical openness, arts-based research, feminist ethics in teaching, coloniality, and a host of other topics. She has also been a prominent member of the Canadian Philosophy

of Education Society (CPES) for many years. In retracing her efforts, then, we are in some ways tracing one line of thought in the history of philosophy of education in Canada—a history that Michelle often extends backward through her doctoral supervisor, William Hare. Remembering such a history is, indeed, part of what motivated this interview.

Our second goal was more personal. Through close attention to text and ideas, we wanted to communicate what Michelle has taught us through her presence in our lives as a teacher and a mentor. MSVU, where the three of us study and work, is a unique university in Canada insofar as it carries the education of women and girls as an explicit part of its mission. This comes from its origin as a women's college run by the Sisters of Charity of Halifax, and, indeed, when Michelle attended MSVU, many of her professors and the university's administrators were members of that religious order. Today, that legacy shows up in the notion that MSVU is a 'feminist institution'—a statement that means something different to everyone within the university and with which we all wrestle daily. For us, Michelle represents the best of what it means to be a philosopher of education at a feminist institution. Specifically, it is a relentless willingness to engage and to be critical when needed but only of ideas, never of people. Crucially, Michelle's critical engagement is never without care, and that is the lesson we have both taken from her presence in our lives. Our second goal, then, was to engage critically with Michelle's work just as she taught us to do: with care at the centre of our workings—care for the work, care for the person, care for the details, and care for the ethical implications of ideas. We don't think this care is exclusive to MSVU; we think it is at the core of philosophy of education—at least insofar as it was taught to us, through Michelle's example.

## Interview

**Adrian:** Thanks for agreeing to this interview, Michelle. I want to start at the beginning. In your dissertation (Forrest, 1997), you made a strong case for the openness of text, both as a teacher and as a scholar. Indeed, reading your dissertation it seemed as though you were playing with a structured antagonism endemic to education between openness and the closure brought about by authority, whether it be manifest in the classroom as a teacher's imposition on students or by a particular artistic or pedagogic form. Is this tension between openness and foreclosing possibility a perennial tension in education?

**Michelle:** I do think a tension between openness and institutional impositions of authority is endemic to education, as it is in society broadly. We want to be free to do as we see fit but are beholden to societal necessities and our personal desires tied to them, making the tendency toward freedom always left wanting. The plight of the one among the many without whom the one could not exist is a recurrent theme in literature and philosophy. Having been influenced in my first philosophy of education course by William Hare's conceptualization of open-mindedness in education, I wondered what this meant for the formal arrangements of schools, classroom set-ups and routines, curricular materials and designs, asking to what extent teachers are or must be bound by the forms and conventional practices handed down to them.

Preceding my studies in Education, I was interested in finding freedom within beautiful, traditional forms such as those of the classical song repertoire. In the Royal College of Music's Opera School, I was trained in extremes: strict, traditional attention to styles of song and interpretation, on the one hand, and developmental drama (Way, 1967) methods that had a lasting impact on how I thought about the improvisational aspects of the life of the stage (Spolin, 1963), which dies if you don't give yourself over to it, a concept I brought to teacher education through the notion of curriculum as enacted.<sup>1</sup> My time in

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<sup>1</sup> This was theorized as *currere* in the reconceptualization of curriculum studies by Pinar (1975) and Pinar and Grumet (1976/2015).

Russian Studies—the effect of having fallen for the sumptuous sounds of the Russian song repertoire<sup>2</sup>—led me to study Russian language in the former Soviet Union where institutional imposition was total and brutal. This left me grateful for the freedoms I enjoy as a Canadian and feeling shame for how much I took this for granted. The ethical core of my sympathies likely derives from school days in a parochial (Catholic) school around the time of the Second Vatican Council, which had me learning by rote simplified tenets of faith in elementary school and discussing theological issues of faith and doubt in high school.

From these influences to the antagonism between the utilitarian formalism of the traditional university versus the creative intuitionism required to invent and innovate, I discovered in my master's thesis<sup>3</sup> (Forrest, 1991) how buttoned down the university was in terms of being open to alternate forms of expression for a thesis or dissertation. I had to appeal to the Dean of Graduate Studies to be allowed to include in my thesis single-spaced transcriptions of radio news broadcasts and a tape recording of the broadcasts I was analysing.<sup>4</sup> I succeeded in talking my home university into it, but Library and Archives Canada would not concede that innovation must be open to formal differences in the ways in which research is presented. This performative contradiction in the academy's claim to nurture original work while accepting only conventional forms of research presentation led me to post-structuralists, conceptual art, and arguing for curriculum as “open” work in my doctoral dissertation. That argument for formal openness is still hard won in many realms of human activity. Becoming calcified in usual ways of doing things tends to entail invisible imperatives that, as you say, foreclose possibilities. Shattering categories is worth doing if for good reason.

**Renée:** Thanks for sharing a bit of your biography through that answer, Michelle. The use of the personal is foundational to feminist ethics—a departure from the supposedly “objective” voice often found within the philosophical canon—and your work demonstrates how one might put this into practice. I'd like to move to one of your more recent examples of this approach: in *Scripting Feminist Ethics in Teacher Education*, co-authored with friend and colleague, Linda Wheeldon, you speak of the use of feminist irony and write that “we see the practice of feminist ethics as coextensive with the practice of philosophy” (Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019, p. 23). Your opening story, “On Uneven Ground,” recounts how after being startled by a snake in the wild, you were reminded of D. H. Lawrence's poem “Snake” in which the narrator has the same experience yet proceeds to throw a log at the unsuspecting animal. I read this as a brilliant ironic nod to how people are conditioned to fear and revile feminists in the same way as they do snakes.

**Michelle:** I'm so pleased to see how you interpreted that opening allegory, a reading that honestly never occurred to me because I rarely go back over anything I have published to see if I still agree with myself. I loved writing the story of the snake. The two incidents of meeting snakes on a path happened to me while collaborating on the book. One of the areas I was keenly interested in before going into Education was the Romantic movement, William Wordsworth in particular, and his concept of the one life, which relates to the feminist dictum that the personal is political. “Spots of time” (Wordsworth, 1982, p. 2) in one's personal life are moments that resonate and offer one a border state of mind (p. 51), that can inform one's understanding of society and its workings. Part of the draw of philosophy of education for me—analysing philosophical concepts in terms of human relations—is its grounding in critical ethical incidents

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle was so inspired upon hearing Romanian soprano Ileana Cotrubas perform Rachmaninoff in a Sunday evening concert at Covent Garden in the mid 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> Forrest's *Bias and Media Literacy* (1991), on the implications of analysing bias in radio news broadcasting for the media literacy curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to acknowledge William Hare, my thesis supervisor, who suggested and encouraged this approach, knowing my background in drama and vocal performance. This not only set me on the course I followed from the 1990s to retirement but also modelled the best of thesis supervision by beginning from where the student is and drawing on their strengths and interests in thesis development.

of the day-to-day. The examples I use to illustrate concepts have always been fictionalized from my own life as a teacher or from those of my collaborators.

What makes the political personal is how the author positions herself through personal story, be it biographically factual or fictionalized from their own life. Recounting part of my story puts my life on the line and is political because, as Arendt tells us (1959/2018, p. 198), the personal is political by definition (fr. Gk. *polis* city state), the *polis* being people speaking and acting together. Arendt (1971/1977, p. 153) traces how the history of philosophy in the Euro-Western tradition disunites the thinker from the world by discounting everything specific and distinguishing. Dwelling in one's own story, as feminists do by positioning themselves, shows the particular to be more than a local combination of ingredients. It is a political process that, before I had feminist language for it, interested me when studying the Romantic movement, including Dorothy Wordsworth, whose daily journal descriptions of the specifics of life in the Lake District are thought to have inspired some of her brother's poetry. For example, her journal description of coming upon a field of daffodils in the fells around Grasmere has a different quality from her brother's poem "Daffodils" based on the same experience. Even though both depict details of seeing the magnificent sight, her take on it has the spontaneity of someone thrilled by the experience. Not discounting the beauty of William's lyric poem, it has a worked-upon quality that takes the moment out of time. Genericizing the specificity of Dorothy's journal entry helps me understand the feminist critique of patriarchal language that reduces difference by universalizing it. This distancing process is useful, and at times necessary, but it can risk excluding or reducing significant differences. The question is: why and how is a moment being taken out of time? At what cost is a disjunction being used?

For most of my career, I have not been part of a community of feminists. Educating myself in feminist philosophy and theory immersed me in influential texts from various eras, many of which I missed when they were first published. Being a feminist teacher today without a feminist community, with countless versions of feminism proliferating, some antithetical to historical feminist commitments, can make me feel like an anachronism. In a study of contemporary artistic approaches to feminism's histories, Grant (2022, p. 15) cites video artist Sharon Hayes on the value of disrupted temporalities for creating a sense of community across time and space by using an 'active error' or 'wilful mistake' to learn collectively from feminist histories.

The story of the snakes insinuated itself into our writing before the book took shape. Its purpose only became clear once all the chapters came together. The story is a *parergon* [L. *para* beside, *ergon* work] or accessory to a text, a literary form Derrida (1987) describes as having a logic "more powerful than that of the analytic" (p. 73). He was attracted to it because it signals "the lack in the interior of the *ergon*" (p. 59). Linda and I felt the story ought to open the book, even though we had no clear sense of why or how it might connect to the points we make about feminist ethics in teaching. Derrida says that "[p]hilosophy wants to arraign... [the *parergon*] but can't manage" (p. 73). The *parergon* is quixotic, elusive, and difficult for reason to call to account, which makes it work for ironic intentions, a purpose common with feminist writers. The story only refers to the typical recoil many people feel when seeing a snake. Our narrator does not act on that instinct. She ponders how snakes shed their skin and evoke opposite associations in the public imaginary.

**Renée:** As a follow up, I'd like to ask how you came to feminist irony, ethics, and teaching within philosophy of education.

**Michelle:** Your questions help me see how irony may be an effect in my writing even when I wasn't purposely using it. The very idea of theorizing openness in Education is ironic, as were the artistic experiments I used in my dissertation. In The (1+1+1) Collective<sup>5</sup> we continually used non-didactic

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<sup>5</sup> Miram Cooley, Michelle Forrest, and Linda Wheeldon formed The (1+1+1) Collective in 1999 for the International Human Science Research Conference in Sheffield, U.K., where they presented "Ockham's Razor: (1)(1+1)(1+1+1)," three videos of real-time footage depicting natural scenes outside the space where they shared

inventions that left viewers mildly frustrated, as they tried in vain to categorize them. Linda and I worked intuitively, following a shared sense that, when something felt intriguing, it was worth tracing for the sake of the adventure. If one of our lines of flight unfolded somewhere interesting, we kept going. Rarely did this method fail us, not that we weren't continually distracted. Working at my dining-room table, often with my wife Esther reading nearby, she would set us back on task when we strayed too far afield. We were no match for her school-teacher's uncanny sense of when work chat veers into self-indulgence. Our aleatory or chance operations were inherently ironic; planning to impose chance is paradoxical.

Your reading of the story of the snakes suggests there was soundness in our chance operations and in starting from our unique inter-personal dynamic when writing on feminist ethics and teaching. Towards the end of writing the book, we meant to bring in the image of the oroboros [Gk. *ὄροβόρος*; *ὄρα* (*oura*, tail) + *-βόρος* (*boms*, devouring)], or tail-devourer, the ancient symbol of a snake eating its tail. It was the first thing that came to mind when you asked about "On Uneven Ground." I went to the book to find where we used it, but I could only find it in one of the penultimate drafts. Considering your comparison between people's common revulsion to snakes and their distaste for feminism, the symbolism of the oroboros is exactly what we needed to mark the way the book circles back on itself, miming the movement of feminist self-critique. The fact it was cast aside exemplifies how irony cuts in many directions, some of which can be humbling reminders. Even though we were inventing our own ironic method—influenced by Cavarero's writing with 'bad intentions'<sup>6</sup>—we arrived at a place we were satisfied with but which lacked the apt metaphor we lost sight of in our enthusiasm over our own process.

I take feminist irony, teaching, and care ethics to be inextricable when, as a feminist teacher, I support and speak up for without speaking for the other and when I do so from a position of personal vulnerability. Practicing feminist ethics in teaching is ironic because it is paradoxical: an impossible possibility. Freud (1925) claimed that intersubjective difficulties make education, governance, and medicine impossible professions. Britzman (2015) picked up on this, saying that the teacher is "divided and affected" by the "ambiguity of external reality" and by internal conflicts arising from forgotten events (p. 75). As she sees it, a teacher's doubts over which knowledge is true, added to the difficulty of needing to know the other and solve problems to support them, are "woven from our own frayed threads of primary helplessness and dependency" (p. 75). On top of personal challenges, the teacher must weigh learning theories against the "responsibility to protect and encourage the freedom to think beyond prescriptions" (p. 75). Feminist teaching entails an ethics that takes this complex set of responsibilities seriously, which is why it has no prescriptions or straightforward definitions. It's a practice and a set of commitments that affect and are affected by everything one is living.

Writing the book on feminist teaching took place during an intense time of intersubjective difficulties. Part way through my co-author was diagnosed with a terminal illness.<sup>7</sup> Known for her inventive and caring approaches in counselling and teaching, Linda's ethics of care were her way of life, as I think they must be if one lives what the word "care" implies. The intensity these personal circumstances brought to our project made us live our ethics of care in ways we could never have imagined when we began. The revulsion so many register on hearing the word 'feminist' or 'feminism'—and the irony of so many adopting 'feminism lite' as their brand these days—is frequently based in a

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a meal and chatted about their work. They chose a group name to challenge the assumption in scholarly publishing that collaborators necessarily have a principal researcher. Their name was inspired by Dan Flavin's "the nominal three (to William of Ockham)," the minimum number of white, fluorescent tubes needed to create a series, which exemplifies Ockham's Razor: when explanations compete, the simplest one with the fewest assumptions is likely to be correct. This heuristic suited The (1+1+1) Collective's experiments using chance operations to demonstrate the movement of invention in their collaborative process.

<sup>6</sup> For Cavarero's description of her method, writing with 'bad intentions' (*cattivi intenzione*), see Cavarero (2008), and for examples of its application to a case study in education, see Forrest and Wheeldon (2019).

<sup>7</sup> The book was published just before the start of the pandemic and Linda was hospitalized during the second wave and died November 11, 2022.

misconception about what is non-negotiable when it comes to feminism. To cite bell hooks (hooks & Cox, 2014), a woman's reproductive right to decide what happens to her body and, by extension, to be free from others dictating what they ought to do with their body is non-negotiable. Through our writing process, I came to a new understanding about what it means to embody what one stands for, to live it in the flesh. Our meetings often began with Linda sharing her experiences of the palliative care she was receiving; and days after the final draft was submitted I was told I needed open-heart surgery. So much for planning to use chance operations?

I learned how to live a feminist life slowly, not having had to face sexism brutally growing up, the way my mother did. As a young woman, I didn't recognize the micro-manifestations of heterosexism I was exposed to. Only after reading feminist theory and working with self-professed feminists did I begin to experience the 'clicks' of consciousness-raising that woke me up to the sexist indignities I had tolerated, which had been making me complicit in patriarchal ways of working, being, and thinking. I continue to get that click of awareness each time I recall something sexist that I accepted unthinkingly in the past or that gets past me in a new form today. Each of these clicks drips with irony as I see what was hidden in plain sight. My own philosophical practice is a work in progress, replete with new ironies I have to welcome, because they force me to question my preconceptions.

Jonathan Lear (2011, p. 9) describes this "deeper" kind of irony: "a form of not being perfectly sure—an insecurity about being human that is... constitutive of becoming human." Being perfectly sure of things may be the greatest ill of our times. It is certainly dangerous in teaching. Lear comments that, "when a culture is in the grip of a vibrant illusion, philosophical discourse about our ability to step back in reflection can function as ideology, reinforcing our confinement in the name of liberating us from it" (p. 8). I take as crucial the iterative process of getting outside or beyond my usual methods. To only reflect on usual terms, assumptions, and patterns of debate leaves me vulnerable to ideological tendencies. As Lear points out, it is "when reflective consciousness unwittingly participates in the illusion that is the occasion for 'the most intense irony'" (p. 9). How illusory and self-deceptive has my practice been? This is the question that brings me to the place where I began, as ironies accumulate, and I find myself taking life writing more seriously.

**Renée:** One might suggest that your work has followed less of a 'narrative arc' than a 'narrative spiral'—in that you don't always know where you're going or why, but follow your curiosity and often call upon past teachings and experiences. Would you say, then, that you have invented your own philosophical practice?

**Michelle:** It seems I *have* invented my own philosophical practice, which every author must do so to call themselves 'writer.' The process is ongoing for me. Many women writers, feminists typically, choose to invent practices to resist and replace traditional ways in which they and their writing have been misrepresented. Living as 'woman' means that a person simultaneously is and is not what she is presumed to be. As Irigaray (1977/1985) pointed out, a woman belongs to a sex which is not one because the category 'woman' is premised on a lack. Women begin in irony, perform it, as Butler would say, and we survive societal interpellations of 'woman' by recognizing this disjunction and mobilizing new forms of expression to create rhetorical space (Code, 1995) lacking in conventional practices. Practising irony as a method disrupts conventional philosophical practice. What is it to write as a woman? Irigaray (2008) says that such a language is "still to be discovered" and it starts when we liberate our consciousness from how we have been framed historically (p. 162). As she put it, writing "can be a way of discovering a language that better suits one's own identity" (p. 162). Being a cisgendered queer woman, feminist teacher, philosopher, and artist are ironic facets of an ethical project to discover my language and through it the identity with which I write myself into philosophy of education.

**Renée:** Further to the topic of method, several of your pieces involve the use of stories and/or case studies (Forrest, 2009; Forrest et al., 2010; Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019; Forrest, 2020; Harkins et al., 2009). Can you tell us about the value of these approaches within philosophy of education and feminist ethics?

**Michelle:** As I mentioned, the cases I write are fictionalized from my own experience or from that of my collaborator(s). This has led me to read feminist philosophers who theorized critical feminist standpoint epistemology which, as I understand it, means that what we know and how we know it and represent it is always being influenced by the experience of knowing something in the moment of knowing it. Each time I claim to know X, I know it in relation to others present, the context of that moment, and memories in relation to these and other contingent factors. With each iteration, I am a different knower and that which is known by me will have been influenced by different qualities and shifting relations than the last time I claimed to know it. This makes knowing provisional, not in the way that a simplistic understanding of constructivism would construe it (i.e., bits of information adding up to knowledge, as in building a house), but in the ways that those who know X and whatever participants there may be in knowing it, such as a teacher and students considering X together, have personal circumstances bearing on the moment they claim X to be true. Dewey's (1938/1963) principle of continuity acknowledges this and, as Sandra Harding (1993) has explained, taking one's lead from this standpoint understanding of epistemology offers the strongest form of objectivity because it is reflexively reflective.

Case studies can be written clinically, using only basic facts and giving no indication of the point of view of the protagonist nor other details implying their attitude toward the circumstances of the situation. The closer to literary verisimilitude a story gets, however, the more it tends to carry the thoughts and feelings of its protagonist(s) and, depending on the point of view (first, second, or third person omniscient), the teller of the tale may even describe how they feel about the situation. It is this fleshed-out type of case study that I try to write. I have found that the most generative cases for discussion and analysis are those in which the protagonist faces an ethical dilemma: something must be done but no good options for action exist. Thinking the dilemma through as if one were the protagonist, brings out personal vulnerabilities and helps one extrapolate implications for future, similar dilemmas. Making the personal political from the inside out in this way, identifying with a protagonist and examining nuances in human relations, connects philosophical analysis to feminist ethics because the standpoints of the characters and the reader are brought to light. Common criticisms against the use of personal story in research—a characteristically feminist approach—is that it is self-indulgent, confessional, biased, and trades on emotion.<sup>8</sup> And yet, when women writers describe human vulnerability without any hint of emotion, they are criticized for not being more sympathetic. Čufar (2023) points out the irony: “[w]hile binary oppositions like reason-emotion are often considered neutral descriptive devices, dualisms are hierarchical and constitutive of the reality they purport to describe” (p. 328).

In *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, and Weil*, Deborah Nelson (2017) considers five women thinkers known for facing painful reality in their work in an unsentimental way, looking at human suffering “with directness and clarity and without consolation or compensation” (p. 2). The way they handle pain in their work has drawn charges of heartlessness, a critique Nelson says would unlikely be made against males. A result of this “gendering of emotional style” is that these women have made unsentimentality their conscious lifelong project (p. 3). This “dilemma of pain” (Nelson, 2017, p. 8)—that is, trying to confront suffering neither heartlessly nor in a maudlin, sentimental fashion—is one faced by critical feminists and other theorists concerned to acknowledge the lives of marginalized persons and theorize from a position of constitutive vulnerability. The unusual focus of the work of Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, and Weil, that which Nelson calls their “toughness,” “neither sacralized pain nor remained indifferent to it” (p. 7). This makes them exemplary examples of how personal anguish can be

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that those from other marginalized groups (e.g., racialized persons, 2SLGBTQIA+ folks, the colonized, the poor) are also commonly identified with emotionality.

shown to be political without resorting in one's writing to gratuitous displays of feeling. By writing and analysing stories of vulnerability, I discover new ways of beginning from the human frailty I feel and try to bear witness to. I believe this approach is valuable to philosophy of education that is interested in the challenges of teaching across difference in pluralistic societies.

**Adrian:** I want to pick up on your evocation of feminist standpoint epistemology. Recently (Forrest et al., 2024), you wrote about making big epistemological shifts 'late' in your career toward recognizing your own complicity in coloniality. In that piece, you wrote that early on you saw Indigenous ways of knowing as similar to feminist standpoint epistemology, and that gradually you recognized that as a false equivalency. Can you talk through that transition? More broadly, why do you think it is important for philosophers of education to engage with coloniality?

**Michelle:** The dilemma of comparison is one I struggle with in trying to position myself as queer settler feminist philosopher of education. Derrida got me started thinking about the pitfalls of comparing one idea or set of ideas against another, a tendency trained into me by a Eurocentric colonial education, comparing literary works, artists' styles and poetics, and philosophical arguments and theories. His concept of *différance*, despite its slipperiness and the complex ways in which Derrida demonstrates (rather than argues or proves) any point, was a first step in my realization that the correspondence theory of truth might not adequately account for phenomena because every statement or belief runs up against the question of representation: Is there a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified? As he put it, "an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces" (Derrida, 1981, p. 29). Christina Howells (1999) describes his key term well: "*différance* is a gerundive formation implying not only difference but also differentiation, differing, and deferring" (p. 50). If meaning anything using language is tied up in such a multivalent, unfixable system of implications, interpretations, and values, how complex must it be to compare representations against one another?

When I began to think about Indigenous ways of knowing—insofar as I can broaden my thinking from settler position to a non-colonializing mode of thought—I tended to compare, seeing what I took to be similarities between feminist standpoint epistemology, its valuing of personal story, and the relationality of sharing and listening I understood to be part of Indigenous worldviews. But when Linda Wheeldon and I shared our personal stories of Eurocentric reflexiveness—she compared Wolastoqiyik composer Dutcher's (2018) songs based on archival Wolastoqiyik melodies to Gregorian chant, and I compared the un-tempered, pentatonic scale of the Native style flute to the tempered diatonic scale of Western European music—we realized that our instinctive response toward comparison was part of a colonizing process. We had subsumed other ways of knowing the world into our predetermined Eurocentric categories. Comparing Indigenous epistemologies, of which I know little, to feminist standpoint epistemology is another example of settler colonial subsumption and reduction of a non-Euro-Western worldview. Although this may seem benign in the larger picture of abuses and atrocities done to Indigenous peoples in the name of Education, it is a key function in the internalized systemic problem I confront whenever I ask myself what I can do to decolonialize my own ways of understanding, teaching, writing, and acting in the world.

I began reading about Indigenous knowledge in the edited collection *The Circle Unfolds* (Battiste & Barman, 1995) and used two of these chapters in my introductory philosophy of education course: Willie Ermine (1995) on Indigenous epistemology and Shirley Sterling's (1995) descriptions of two grandmother models for education. At that time, in what may be a common story among white settler academics, I thought that infusing my curriculum with Indigenous content was enough to satisfy the calls of my own conscience. I continued this approach until 2015 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action. As a settler academic implicated in perpetuating colonial systems of education, I was shaken by the Commission's report and Calls to Action, which helped me realize that, as a product of

colonialism and teacher responsible for sustaining and renewing PSE on stolen Mi'kmaw territory, I had to do more than include Indigenous content in my Euro-Western curriculum.

In the spring of 2015, when Justice Murray Sinclair tabled the TRC's report and I read their calls to action for education, the reality of the situation for me as a settler academic hit home with force. Shortly after, a colleague at another university took the TRC's report as a sign to retire, his reasoning being, as I understood it, that he did not feel qualified to rejig a career's worth of curricula and program design to adequately respond to the challenge. I sympathized with his reaction but felt conflicted. How could a Eurocentrically trained teacher help the situation? Becoming aware of it was one thing, but doing something productive without a fundamental shift in my own worldview was a dilemma of impossibility, a logical paradox in which the rules available to solve the problem are the very ones making it impossible to solve. As I read more and pondered different approaches to addressing the dilemma, such as how feminist standpoint epistemology, with its prioritizing of personal experience, differed from Indigenous relational worldviews, I added more challenging Indigenous content to my curriculum, incorporated Indigenous sources in my writing, and began to let go of my assumption that the tools I possessed were adequate to the task. I asked myself if how I set up logical hierarchies of priority is circumscribed by Eurocentricity and my settler experience. Once I began to place the questions of those from other worldviews and ways of knowing ahead of my own, my tendency to assume that logic would suffice began to dissolve, to be replaced by a new set of aporias or unanswerable (at least to me) questions. For example: What if dream time is more real than awake time? What does it mean to let nature be my guide? Can Indigenous people's ceremonial practices be adequately respected and represented in a secular system with no concept of the sacred?

Once I began to avoid judging Indigenous philosophy by Eurocentric standards, questions began to merge and make more sense wholistically. The so-called 'branches of philosophy' began to dissolve into one another. For example, since every theory of knowledge has and stems from ethical implications, and every theory of ethical action operates from a way of knowing the world, there is no clear distinction between epistemology and ethics, only a conventional separation imposed in Eurocentric philosophical practice. As categories dissolved or merged, I found myself talking to colleagues like yourself who work across traditions and who also theorize from lived experience. Where I think I am now is accepting that there are no shortcuts to wisdom. The best insights of the sages are only words until lived in such a way that I can understand them through my own life experience, which admits no tricks or logical slights of hand, contrary to what the self-help industry might have us believe.

**Adrian:** Thanks Michelle. As you know, the intersection of western philosophy and Indigenous thinking continues to be one of my defining foci, so it's helpful to hear your thoughts. At the end of our interview, we wanted to focus a bit more on the communities of which you've been a part. So, what role has your involvement with the CPES throughout your career played in shaping your thinking? How do you situate yourself as a philosopher of education within the field?

**Michelle:** Without CPES I suspect my career may have taken a different path, likely more in literacy and the arts. My teacher and former colleague, Bill Hare, nominated me to join CPES when I was his PhD student in the early 1990s when you had to be nominated by an existing member to join the society. My induction was into a group of philosophers of education still populated by some of those who founded the society in 1976 and who had direct links in their scholarship with the first society in Great Britain. Some of these founding members had been taught by R. H. Peters. So, I feel fortunate to have experienced the society when it was still cohesive in terms of members who, to a large degree, had been steeped in philosophy first, with all that it entails. I found it somewhat daunting at first, but those from whom the trenchant critiques issued were full of generosity and humour. I recall at my first conference receiving a very warm welcome, especially from the three women at the meetings that year. That welcoming attitude stuck with me, and I did my best to carry it through my years as a member, especially

when I was on the executive. CPES has been home for me at Congress, along with the Canadian Association of Foundations of Education under which CPES is a special interest group.

How CPES has shaped my thinking is something I can never fully understand, various influences not all having been overt. I can group the influences I'm aware of into three categories: content of key debates; style of writing and delivering philosophy; and, operations of a scholarly society, its annual conference, and journal. My teacher and supervisor focussed many of his publications on the concept of open-mindedness and its role in teaching. I was first drawn to that concept when I took William Hare's introduction to philosophy of education course in my B.Ed. degree. Open-mindedness was a natural fit for me, plus he taught open-mindedly, which appealed to my sense of the importance of maintaining consistency between what one espouses about good teaching and how one practices, and he impressed me with his understated, humble tone, which he wrote about in his work on the virtues or excellences of the good teacher (Hare, 1993). I have experienced strongly contrasting types of pedagogy in different disciplines and countries; from authoritarian musical training and choir conducting to the developmental drama approach at the Royal College opera school in London; highly didactic delivery methods of Russian teachers in a Soviet-era Moscow language institute to total immersion language methods at Université de Ste. Anne in Nova Scotia. Those contrasts in pedagogy extended past individual differences in teachers' styles, which left me curious about open-mindedness as a virtue in teaching and the *laissez-faire* attitudes masked as openness that were beginning to manifest in Nova Scotia classrooms in the 1980s, attitudes I noticed in my practice teaching that seemed inconsistent with my understanding of progressive education. Open-mindedness is more than a *leitmotif* in my thinking and writing; I try to practice it.

Then, there are the other stellar Canadian philosophers of education and the important claims they initiated and defended, such as Don Cochrane with his early social justice focus in advocating for gay rights before the abbreviation 'LGBTQ+' became well known; Doug Stewart with graceful, contained stillness in the face of any trenchant, or even boisterous, critique of his presentation and his subtle analysis of the concept of forgiveness; Paul O'Leary whose knowledge of ancient philosophy taught me to never think any key idea was not prefigured by one of the ancients; Sharon Bailin's work with LeRoy Daniels on creativity as inextricable from critical thinking; Sheryle Bergmann Drewe who applied values from dance and drama to issues in leisure studies; Sandra Bruneau whose paper on courage is a wonderful example of a philosopher at work, thinking on paper and aloud in presentations; Heesoon Bai whose work in philosophy is inextricable from her work as a counsellor, like the life and work of my late friend, Linda Wheeldon; Walter Okshevsky whose knowledge of Kant's *Critiques* would always set my head spinning; and, John Portelli, another of my teachers whose social consciousness had him spanning the foundations at a time when, to my knowledge, few in philosophy of education were seeing the connections between epistemology and the sociological conditions that supported one theory of knowledge over another.

As regards the way CPES operated, one phrase of John Portelli's has stuck with me: "seriousness not precluding humour," which speaks well to his capacities as scholar, teacher, and person. One year at Congress, John arrived having written nothing but haikus during his sabbatical leave, which he wove mischievously into the text of his presentation. I have had the great fortune of interacting annually with a wide range of talented philosophers at CPES, from the most traditional, classically trained, to those pushing formal conventions. Nothing was ever not taken seriously, and humour was always a *modus operandi*. Judging by the talented new generation of philosophers presenting and organizing CPES and its journal, I am hopeful that the society will long continue in this well balanced, critical spirit.

What kind of a philosopher of education have those influences made me? That is for others to say, but the way I have moved from concept to concept in my writing, based more on the application of concepts to my own ethical dilemmas than on following one main thing through the literature, makes me more of a fox than a hedgehog, to use Isaiah Berlin's distinction between types of thinkers. The fox goes from one small thing to another, rather than being stuck on one big thing, as the hedgehog tends to be. So, in that sense, the most influential philosopher or thinker on me is the one I'm focussed on in the moment. Right now, I could say that means the two of you, whose questions are pushing this vixen to

meet her inner hedgehog, as I consider how I have followed similar lines of thought over the years. Eclecticism has a history of being opposed to scepticism because its practitioners do not belong to a particular school of thought. To my mind, considering scepticism a school of thought seems antithetical. So, I don't accept a clear distinction here, although I have felt like something of an outsider by not being a hedgehog as many of my predecessors were. Berlin (2013) also claimed that every thinker has both tendencies. This interview has helped me see how the hedgehog in me resists limitations, even while my vulpine tendencies let me rest content in whatever momentary clarity I do achieve.

**Adrian:** In addition to your work with CPES, you've been involved with philosophy of education in Nova Scotia for the last 30 years or so, and some might say that the only reason we still have a Foundations of Education program at MSVU is because of your tireless and selfless efforts to keep it going. Philosophy and Foundations more generally are seen as occupying a necessary counter-cultural space in educational thought. Yet, at every turn, we see the pressures to erode this kind of thinking in education. Indeed, expediency seems to be the order of the day in Nova Scotia, where the government is pressuring faculties of education to move B.Ed. programs to one year rather than two, and to reduce the academic requirements from three or four years of undergraduate study to two for admission into the B.Ed. program. Such shifts not only erode our capacity to do serious foundational / philosophical work with pre-service teachers, but also tacitly dismiss the value of such work. As two newer scholars in this field, and two of only a few who take up the work of Philosophy of Education in the Atlantic region, we're wondering what advice you have for us in carrying on this work.

**Michelle:** Thank you for your kind words. My take on the usefulness of studying philosophy of education in teacher education is not simply that it helps develop one's logical skills and critical capacities, as is often considered its primary value. Other disciplines also contribute to these skills (e.g., mathematics, history, science). Where I see its characteristic and essential role is in the ethics of teaching. I followed in Hare and Portelli's tradition of composing case studies based on real teachers' critical incidents in classrooms, using key terms and concepts to analyse ethical problems and encourage students to do so before facing them in their own classroom. No provincial government can deny that teachers need some introduction to the ethics of teaching, codes of conduct, and their intersections with the laws of the land. How best to argue for the value of philosophy of education in teacher education is the question. Although we have not needed to think quite so seriously about this until recent political governmental interference in universities' institutional autonomy began to directly threaten our role as protectors of academic integrity and freedom—through cut-backs to public funding, imposition of externally developed accreditation standards and governmental representation on university boards of governors—sustaining a Foundations focus in teacher education offers the best hope against concerted pressures to satisfy neoliberal consumerist agendas that turn post-secondary education to purely utilitarian ends.

The questions we may need to ask ourselves and the public who fund public education is this: Should teacher education follow an apprenticeship model as in the trades, with no general liberal arts and sciences education beyond a candidate's undergraduate degree preceding a practical induction process? The argument for this approach claims that once a teacher has qualified, they will take upgrading professional development sessions regularly throughout their careers. My rejoinder: How would this account for the ongoing developments in Educational Studies globally? How does a learn-as-you-go approach, with only practical, curricular professional development, open new ideas and interconnections between world problems and the premises on which we ground our education systems? Experience shows that teacher professional development as provided and managed by the departments/centres for education in this province tends to focus on immediate needs as determined by those running these departments and centres. A prime example is the continuing focus on professional development in digital technology, meaning learning to use the software that departments and centres have purchased, and a waning of focus on critical literacy around this digital technology, its assumptions and exclusions. I fail

to see the potential for an apprenticeship induction process for teachers in terms of broadening thinking about teaching, curricula, and administration in schools.

Perhaps I am overly defensive of a system that has worked well and taken generations of development to effectively resist the authoritarian models that preceded it to see what might be possible with some sort of apprenticeship model. Were it small and tailored enough to the needs and capacities of each teacher candidate, perhaps it could work; but, churning out more teachers more quickly is where we are now, and once teachers lacking critical consciousness and an education in social justice issues get into their public school workplaces, the contingencies of immediate needs and pressures to perform according to administrative and parental expectations is a large burden to shoulder without a robust teacher education in the foundations of education, as teacher retention rates seem to suggest.

As for the Atlantic region and the foundations of education still being 'alive' here, I inherited the Foundations of Education graduate program at MSVU from my predecessors, William Hare and Robert Bérard in philosophy and history of education respectively. They were colleagues at Dalhousie's Department of Education, no longer extant following government rationalization of teacher education programs in Nova Scotia in the mid-nineteen-nineties, an example of the critical mass equals efficiency argument over the unique traditions of practice working well in Nova Scotia universities. An aspect of life in Nova Scotia that also may have played into the fact that foundations of education at Mount Saint Vincent has outlived its iterations at other teacher education sites here and in other provinces is an old rule of thumb. Do not jump to adopt the new thing from elsewhere; wait and see how it fares there and if it was a flash in the pan, what has worked for years has not been disrupted. Life in Nova Scotia seems to prove this true. In the recent Graduate Foundations Program external review at MSVU, reviewers recognized that the uniqueness of this program was a strength, claiming that it ought to survive as a stand-alone program. In many jurisdictions in English-speaking countries, Foundations of Education faculty, courses, and themes have been subsumed into other programs and departments in Education, such as curriculum studies or leadership and administration. Here at MSVU, where we clung to the same basic principles and were not tempted to rename the foundations courses with trendier titles to attractive prospective students, the Foundations curriculum still appeals to a wide range of students from diverse backgrounds and countries. Although ours is a small case with statistically insignificant numbers, sticking to the principles on which the program was founded has worked out, at least among reviewers who recognized the value of educational foundations.

Are there lessons here for others who may try to sustain foundations courses and programs? Yes and no. Keep in mind that, when I say 'foundations of education' I am not referring to an assumption that there are unassailable truths or eternal verities that must be preserved. I use the term to refer to the scholarly disciplines from which educational studies developed: history, philosophy, and sociology of education in respect to their grounding and progressive philosophies and social and political theories. Sticking to these principles of scholarly practice has been successful insofar as the Foundations of Education offer a good background for going on to a Ph.D. in one of these disciplines of study. That said, our 'success' has never attracted large numbers, which tends to be the way administrators and university budget committees determine value, by its profitability. Is trying to sustain the Foundations a route I would recommend to new scholars? Only if they are committed to the same academic principles of caring criticality on which our program depends. Of course, we all know that anything worth doing is not easy; so, all I can offer is my own story, more as a cautionary tale than a roadmap for anyone to follow.

The Foundations of Education in the academy are, as I understand them, the same as solid foundations for life; they involve integrity, critical and caring human relations, and self care, not to be confused with selfishness. This is needed to sustain everything sooner or later and makes it worth the

effort in the long run. Or, as my dear mother was fond of saying, “The longest way round is the shortest way home.”<sup>9</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

**Michelle:** If I might add a last word to new philosophers of education—ours is a discipline that takes being ‘tough enough,’ like the women whose idiosyncratic work Nelson (2017) writes about. They did not wager their judgements against an outcome (p. 13), but allowed them to stand on their own, which resulted in criticism of them as writers. Neither applying moral codes or virtue templates from traditional ethics to critical incidents nor applying weak versions of feminist care ethics are up to the task for philosophers of education today. Practising ‘rigour’ is not a bad thing; being thorough, exhaustive, and accurate is appropriate so long as it is not kept at arm’s length from one’s scholarly responsibility to acknowledge personal positionality and its biases, positive and negative. Nelson’s tough enough thinkers were able to mark “a border territory of affect studies” (p. 11) by clearing space between indifference to emotion and being saturated with sentiment (p. 7). For those inclined to believe practising in this way is valuable, despite its arduousness, I would encourage you to keep faith with the process of making your biography a departure point. I believe the eventual homecoming will make it worth the effort for you personally and for the future of philosophy of education.

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<sup>9</sup> Quite recently I discovered that the expression was used by James Joyce in *Ulysses*. Whether Joyce and my mother knew the saying from their Celtic background, possibly through Gaelic, or Joyce invented it and it made its way into the popular imaginary, I cannot say.

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