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Karl Hostetler
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, khostetler1@unl.edu

Margaret A. Macintyre Latta
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Margaret.Macintyre.Latta@ubc.ca

Loukia K. Sarroub
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, lsarroub2@unl.edu

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Retrieving Meaning In Teacher Education

The Question Of Being

Karl Hostetler
Margaret A. Macintyre Latta
Loukia K. Sarroub
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Abstract: In this article we examine "meaning" and "action" within the "good" work of teaching and learning. One premise of our argument is that teachers and students deserve to experience this good. The second premise is that meaning is part and parcel of Being; the debate about meaning must include attention to meaning as a question/project of Being. We offer our experiences as an educational anthropologist, educational philosopher, and teacher educator who strive to retrieve and pursue meaning and Being as common resources and aspirations.

Keywords: Being, meaning, social foundations of education, teacher education

> Good consists in the meaning that is experienced to belong to an activity when conflict and entanglement of various incompatible impulses and habits terminate in a unified orderly release in action.
>
> —John Dewey (1922/1988, p. 146)

In our article we examine *meaning* and *action* within the "good" work of teaching and learning. As educators, we all have a sense of what "good" teaching may look like; however, John Dewey's quote suggests how complicated and complex teaching and learning actually are and prompts our renewed attention to the matter of what *good* is. Two premises serve as the bases of our inquiry. One premise is that teachers and students deserve to experience this good, the meaning attained when they can make real sense out of "conflict and entanglement" and act in a unified way. The alternative, in Dewey's words, is a "superficial compromise," where one merely postpones meaningful confrontation with conflicts or is a victim to the pushes and pulls of forces seemingly beyond one's sense making. The good of genuine meaning includes the power to act freely, knowledgeably, and with purpose to experience personal awareness as a self-responsible agent in the world. The teaching–learning consequences of abandoning active meaning making must not be underestimated. Dewey (1964) argued, "Actively to participate in the making of knowledge is the highest prerogative of man [sic] and the only warrant of his [sic] freedom" (p. 192). We find Dewey's words compelling, calling us to actively participate in meaning making as the only warrant of our freedom.

A second premise of the article is that meaning is part and parcel of Being. Constituting the rela-

tional experience of self and other in time, assuming a self within the conflicted and entangled physical and social world into which we are all "thrown," Being evokes meaning making, and meaning making evokes Being. Meaning may take a number of forms; however, Being is an essential core around which thinking and action can and should be unified: What do the meanings formed and actions taken reveal about the being who is thinking and acting? What does the being of this being portend for further possibilities for thought and action? "The question of being" (Heidegger, 1977) presents the opportunities and challenges for teachers and students to experience the good of meaningful life and self-responsible action.

The entanglements to which Dewey referred demand a communion between Being and meaning, and it is to this relationship that we turn as we examine the good in teaching. From the professional literature and the students we teach we know that teachers and teachers-to-be yearn for such meaning (e.g., Day, 2004; Liston, 2004; Macintyre Latta, 2005; Noddings, 2003a). Our concern in this article regards questions that must be confronted if the good of meaning is to be acknowledged, pursued, and realized in teaching and teacher education.

Four principal questions guide our inquiry and arguments in the article:

What is the challenge of meaning in education?
How should we understand Being?
How is concern for Being in accord with the act of teaching?
What can teacher education faculty do to orient teachers and teachers-to-be toward meaning and Being?

The Necessity and Challenge of Meaning

What Charles Taylor (1991) said about authenticity describes our attitude about meaning. Meaning is

> an ideal that has been degraded but that is very worthwhile in itself, and indeed, . . . unrepudiable by moderns. So what we need is neither root-and-branch condemnation nor uncritical praise; and not a carefully balanced trade-off. What we need is a work of retrieval, through which this ideal can help us restore our practice. (p. 23)

Human beings necessarily are meaning makers/finders/perceivers. Dewey (1926) said, "[W]hat is perceived are meanings and not just events or existence" (p. 317); that is, human beings do not confront their world as a series of brute happenings but as a realm of meanings. However, they are empowered or shackled by the resources available for their sense making. For example, recent "reforms" such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act seek teacher accountability largely in terms of measurable, generalizable, predetermined learning outcomes. Explicitly and implicitly these policies ask teachers to unify their actions around these sorts of outcomes. For instance, teachers may be torn between their impulse to do what is good for students and their impulse to comply with school policies regarding testing and curriculum. NCLB asks teachers to resolve the tension by accepting that the testing is good for students. INTASC asks preservice teachers to serve students by focusing on content knowledge and teaching strategies (Hostetler, 2002). The result may be meaning of a sort; however, introducing a concept to which we will return, these reforms have a common orientation to "fabrication" (Arendt, 1958) that education will be improved if teachers become better producers, producers of high test scores, or producers of demonstrated skill at use of particular teaching strategies. This severely restricts possibilities for meaning.

As Dewey proposed, human beings connect with their world via meanings; they do not just undergo "events." Perception, the act of discerning meaning, also leads to awareness, the act of seeking to understand meaning. People strive to find meaning in tragedies such as 9/11 and the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia. Culture is full of stories, such as Richard Cory's and Ebeneezer Scrooge's, where people come to realize, sometimes too late, that their lives lack meaning or are full of meaning that they

have forgotten or failed to perceive. The experience of and desire for meaning is natural. That does not mean, though, that people do not have to be reminded about the good of meaning and educated to experience meaning fully. In his exploration of experience John McDowell (1996) described experiencing as a "second nature." Riding a bicycle may not come "naturally"; however, human beings have the requisite abilities, and with practice people can become skilled bike riders; riding becomes second nature for them. This is akin to the experience of meaning. To fully experience meaning people do not have to be forced to do something "unnatural," even if they need to be encouraged and educated about it. The aim is to retrieve an aspiration perhaps forgotten or submerged in contemporary educational trends, yet not an aim alien or novel in human and educational experience and memory. The aim is not to find a balance between meaningful actions and meaningless ones but to restore meaning as an aim that can guide educational practice.

Of course, it is possible to imagine someone saying that teachers are not in school to find meaning but to teach students how to read, write, balance a checkbook, understand the Bill of Rights, and so on. However, this is less of a challenge than it might first appear. If we were to reply with something like, "So, you're saying it's OK for school to be meaningless for teachers and students?" we would quickly have our antagonist backpedaling. The fact is appeals to meaning are ubiquitous. For example, INTASC connects its conception of teaching to meanings such as making the nation economically competitive. Proponents of NCLB assert that the aim is to provide a quality education for all children. The claims are that there is purpose, point, sense—that is, meaning—in the schooling proposed.

The importance of a meaningful education is not in dispute. The vital issue is what meaningful teaching and learning entail. As Taylor (1991) suggested, the debate should not be over meaning but about it, about the work entailed in perceiving and negotiating meaning, making sense out of conflict and entanglement.

There will be disagreements regarding meaning. Yet we propose that in the complexity we can find "common meanings"—common aspirations, common questions that are the sources and aims of the search—people can share despite their disagreements (Taylor, 1971). Being is one such common meaning.

Understanding the Question of Being: Heidegger and Arendt

Teachers, like all human beings, ask, "Who am I?" "Why am I doing this?" or "What's the sense of that?" We contend that the debate about meaning must include attention to meaning as a question/project of Being: What do one's activities as a teacher mean for one's Being? This is not a selfish interest, although teachers have a legitimate self-interest in experiencing their work as good and understanding its meaning for their Being. It is essential to responsible practice that teachers accept and understand the connection between their actions and beliefs and their Being. If a teacher were to say, "I will prepare students for high-stakes achievement tests, but I do not believe in those tests," this might be one way to resolve conflicts and entanglements while preserving Being in the sense of being faithful to some beliefs. However, it also implies a person who is willing to act contrary to some of her or his beliefs. We do not condemn teachers for making such a choice; however, we do insist that teachers must confront the implications for Being and accept responsibility for being the persons they are rather than say, "I did that, but it wasn't really me."

We draw three principles from our discussion of Heidegger. The first is the temporality of Being and the need for human beings to be active inquirers and perceivers of meaning. Meanings are neither fictions nor brute facts. There may be a number of legitimate meanings to be discerned in the conflicts and entanglements of teaching. The second related principle regards the multiplicity of Being, acknowledging the plurality of meanings and the implications of that for the multiplicity of Being, a multiplicity with-

in the individual and the natural and social world around her. Finally, to begin to reveal the Being of individuals within the multiplicity, conflicts, and entanglements, teachers (and others) must eschew attempts to take control of Being and to force meaning from or onto students and themselves. These are essential basic principles that guide our inquiry into meaning, even though later in our article we turn to Hannah Arendt's (1958) work to provide the vital link that connects Being to teaching.

"The question of being" (Heidegger, 1977) characterizes the revealing we encounter in the voices and experiences of our students who come to the university to find meaning in teaching and in being a teacher. For our talk of Being, existential questions, and meaning might seem quaint at best or, at worst, downright dangerous, given the often-difficult economic, social, and political realities teachers and young people face. It might be wonderful to ponder the meaning of life; however, teachers and students still have to be able to sustain themselves as workers and citizens. We argue that revealing Being is not inconsistent with typical educational activities and aims; indeed, it depends on them.

Heidegger (1977) argued that to understand Being one must first understand the human situation of being, *Dasein* (Being-there). In other words, all understanding is specifically situated and historically conditioned. Temporality is a given and so is context. Heidegger called this the ontological priority of the question of Being (p. 52). In a world that has become "disenchanted," (and we would argue disillusioned) where meaning can no longer be deemed simply embodied in the world, the exploration of Being evokes movement in search of meaning; it is the kind of Being that inquires and learns from inquiry (p. 88).

If Heidegger is right, a first step for teachers in pursuit of meaning is to acknowledge their "thrownness," which recognizes the need to understand meaning as a search, an inquiry. However, this need may not be obvious to teachers. At least, we hear our students say things that seem like an acknowledgement of their "thrownness" but which they take to obviate their need or ability to inquire; for example, "If you've signed a contract you have to do what it says" or "That's just the way things are; there's nothing you can do about it." The meaning they perceive seems to be, when you're "thrown" you're stuck. Heidegger suggested that "throw-ness" offers an opportunity for inquiry, to "throw" one's Being into meaning making.

Part of Heidegger's response to this sort of problem lies in his appeal to the multiplicity of Being. As David Krell (1977) explained in his introduction to Heidegger's *Basic Writings, "*as we surrender the diverse senses of Being to a sterile uniformity, to one that can no longer entertain variation and multiplicity, we become immeasurably poorer—and that such poverty makes a difference" (p. 35). It is not surprising that teachers construe "thrownness" as "stuckness" when they are not encouraged to see the variation and multiplicity of Being. The example we introduced above is a problem of production; however, production per se need not be a problem. The problem lies in any sort of "conformity." The dominance of production is one example, one that threatens the multiplicity of Being, that obscures the fact that being stuck is not the only mode of Being open to people.

As teacher educators, our attention must turn to the possibilities for multiplicity in teachers' work. Educators' voices and experiences show that they seek variation and multiplicity fundamental to human beings (e.g., Hansen, 2001; Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003; Noddings, 2004; Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Throughout our course offerings we encourage students to experience the relational interplay of ideas as Heidegger's (1977) "mode of being of a being" (p. 48). These concerns characterize the ensuing conversations we have as faculty grappling with the functions, intentions, and motives delineating our coursework. A broader, richer conception of *meaning* focuses on fundamental existential questions about "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What is the significance of this natural and social world I find myself in?" Simply foregrounding and talking about these questions are not enough, howev-

er. The critical issue is how educators strive to help their students and themselves answer them. Here, too, Heidegger had important insights.

One might argue that a standardized test can begin to reveal who a child is: she is good with language but not so good with math and logical operations. We need not deny that this tells us something about the being of the child. However, it is an approach that "has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth" that is characteristic of modern technology (Heidegger, 1977, p. 297). For Heidegger this "challenging-forth" involves two problems. One is that though this may yield something "correct"—the child does indeed have language ability while lacking other abilities—it yields only something partial. We may reveal something correct about the child; however, that is not the same as having the truth about her. The danger is that "in the midst of all that is correct the true will withdraw" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 308). The second, related problem is that all revealing will be construed as forcing, something within our control. However, Heidegger (1977) argued that "man does not have control over unconcealment itself, in which at any time the real shows itself or withdraws" (p. 299); what we can do is start the revealing on its way to arrival (p. 292). However, the premise of fabrication is that people do have such control over the products they aim to manufacture.

As we mentioned earlier, Heidegger provided three basic principles for our inquiry; however, he is also instructive because of the limitations in his philosophy, and so we seek additional refinements in our conception of *meaning* and *Being*. First, what is this Being we are striving for? Thomas McCarthy (1991) noted two senses of *Dasein:* a unitary sense and a sense that accepts plurality resulting from concrete historical and social circumstances. The crux of the issue is found in the questions: Does plurality manifest itself only toward the "truth" of Being? Or is plurality ontologically fundamental and ineliminable? For McCarthy, at stake is our attitude toward other human beings, and he saw Heidegger failing on that score. For Heidegger, it is the "isolated *Dasein*" that must determine authentic Being. This turns attention away from Being as a public project, a form of public action. Furthermore, this leaves no place "for a response and responsibility for the mundane pain and suffering of other human beings" (Bernstein, 1991, p. 134). If we devalue what is incidental and so "merely correct" in comparison with the "truth" of Being, it can be too easy to dismiss human suffering as "mundane" vis-à-vis the supposedly "true" task of saving "man's essential nature" (Bernstein, 1991, pp. 132-133).

Heidegger's claim that people do not have control over the revealing of Being presents another limitation. Being cannot be forced; however, that does not exempt human beings from responsibility while searching for Being. Starting revealing on its way to arrival is not always enough; responsible action in the world is necessary also. As Dewey proposed in the quotation that began this article, meaning is not just a mental task but involves a "release in action."

Hannah Arendt (1958) offered a response to these dangers that makes the connection between action as a public project and revealing Being. For Arendt, action is the peculiarly human way people show they are the unique individuals they are. In action, people reveal who they are, what they intend and value, the meanings they attach to events. Actions are not "acts," merely things people do, but things undertaken with some meaning in mind, and so things that can reveal actors' purposes, values, and understandings of their situation, revealing something of who they are. However, what is revealed cannot simply be read from the overt acts. Hence, Arendt argued for the vital role of speech; actions cannot speak for themselves. For instance, a classroom art project for which different students produce different sculptures might reveal their otherness and distinctness; however, revealing the uniqueness of each child requires speech, the story that accompanies each child's activity. These stories are not just about people. Arendt argued that the relevant speech typically is concerned for "matters of the world of things":

> Action and speech go on between [people], as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively "objective," concerned with the matters of the world of things in which [people] move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. . . . Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. (p. 182)

The upshot is that action and speech in education and elsewhere are not about escaping the "mundane" realities around and "in-between" teachers, students, and others. Fabrication is a fundamental human activity, one that produces artifacts without which human affairs would be floating, futile, and vain (Arendt, 1958, p. 204). Teachers and students need to produce things: subject matter lessons, classroom policies, compositions, science experiments. The point is to provide a space for people to voice something of themselves (which is not the same as mere "talk") (Arendt, 1958, p. 180) with and through those products. Nel Noddings (1993), for example, argued for addressing existential questions in schools and offered suggestions for how to do that. (Noddings's concern is teenagers; however, even younger children are capable of dealing with such questions; see Matthews, 1984). However, human beings as fabricators (*homo faber*), if they think only in those terms, are incapable of understanding meaning (Arendt, 1958, p. 155). Within *homo faber*'s restricted world, everything must be of use, including meaning. Meaning becomes just "another object among objects," another tool or aim to be chosen insofar as it is "useful" (Arendt, 1958, pp. 154155), an orientation that precludes full understanding of meaning. A narrowly utilitarian conception of teaching grants meaning a proper place only if it is "useful" for subject matter instruction, raising test scores, and so on. However, this brings us to our fourth question: What can teacher education faculty do to break or avoid such narrowing of meaning? In the next two sections we consider the possibilities for retrieving a fuller conception of *meaning* and *Being* within professional communities.

Meaning/Teaching/Being within Professional Communities

Meaning is not a new concern for education scholars (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Phenix, 1964), and professional communities have long been recognized as places within which learning becomes a communal enterprise where meaning prospers (Schwab, 1976). In these contexts, individuals are presented with a multiplicity of opportunities to expand their intellectual, professional, and pragmatic ideas and concerns. Nel Noddings (2003b) stated that "teaching is thoroughly relational, and many of the goods are relational," constituting teaching as necessarily a deliberative and interactive practice (p. 249). The space for meaning making thus demands the goods of meaning making: relational complexities, plurality, natality. As "learning is primarily about human beings who meet, meeting and learning are inseparable," and, thus, inherently relational (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 5).

Within the teaching profession, researchers have noted that professional development within these communities is crucial to sound professional judgment and practice (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Little, 1982, 1993; Lord, 1994). The success of such professional communities, where teachers have opportunities to consult each other and access professional resources and materials, is largely dependent on the local or situational contexts rather than on external mandates or policies. In other words, irrespective of external pressures one way or another, sound professional judgment is mediated by teachers' immediate concerns and implicit understandings of their own practice and their students' learning, especially as teachers make innovative changes to their curricula and classroom assessments. The local character of professional development and the "critical colleagueship" (see Lord, 1994) that develops in the community are key factors in the evolution of sound judgments and good teaching. However, if such meaning making remains unretrieved by educators, they close and limit these spaces. Gallego, Hollingsworth, and Whitenack (2001) emphasized this danger: "Without the opportunities to develop

the capacities for relational knowing, teachers and teacher educators will never be able to teach their students to develop such capacities" (p. 261).

Cohen (1988) remarked that good teaching is inherently difficult because it is the practice of "human improvement." Making matters especially difficult is the fact that teachers have direct control over neither the improvement of outcomes (teachers must depend on their students to achieve the results for which the teachers are responsible) nor the improvement of resources (teachers must live and work with the resources and within the structures provided by society). Dewey (1938), Jackson (1968), and Lortie (1975) have all noticed (and recommended) that teachers internalize the "technical" language of their profession to enable themselves to make their judgments coherent to students, colleagues, and administrators. However, Lortie also noted that through "shared discussion and analysis, reflexive conservatism (and conformism) will be less readily sustained" (p. 232). The conflicts and entanglements teachers face between the "technical" and their own sense of being calls for retrieving and constructing new meaning in their teaching, what Cohen (1988) alluded to as "adventurous teaching." Cohen contended that "adventurous teaching" includes teachers becoming advocates of uncertainty, abandoning rigid conventions, taking more risks, and depending on students more explicitly. For a host of reasons known all too well to practicing teachers, teaching requires incredible flexibility and dynamic responsiveness. No matter how much a teacher plans, she or he is likely to encounter the unexpected, and Being is at stake in the potential meaning residing outside those plans. A good teacher will not only expect "the unexpected" but also find a way to learn from the challenge of surprise. Knowing when and where that learning will occur is neither predictable nor obvious. Judgments made along the way, from hour to hour during a school day, are, for the most part, quick and reflexive rather than reflective. Teachers have little time for individual reflection, let alone the sort of professional speech with colleagues that can more readily stimulate reflection. Yet, as Dewey (1938) commented, it is common experiences (especially those "unexpected" moments) across classrooms and teachers that can draw communities together with the shared purpose of learning from all types of classroom events and participants. Thus, teacher learning is not likely to emerge as the sole result of reactions to the impulses of everyday practice. In light of Cohen's observations and the realities of teachers' schedules, retrieving meaning in teaching seems to be a productive and useful heuristic; it may provide a way to explain how teachers continue to be and become teachers to achieve professional growth and understanding of one's practice.

From this discussion we can recognize the potential power of professional communities; however, we would like to press the issue further. Above we argued that appeals to meaning are ubiquitous. However, we cannot and should not propose that there is one meaning to be found in the complexity of human life; there will be debate about meaning. Meaningfulness, as we are conceiving it, is fully compatible with multiplicity, plurality, complexity, disagreement, and uncertainty. Indeed, it thrives on these things. Meaning can be found in a number of things, in a number of ways, to a number of degrees. Far from narrowing the aims of education, concern for meaning enables teachers and teacher educators to show the complexity of human aspirations, the many influences on and distortions of meaning resulting from historical, cultural, political, economic, and other forces. Meaning provides a ground to teach preservice and in-service teachers the value of treating students as individuals, of looking beyond impoverished conceptions of meaning in education to make their lives and the lives of their students more complex, complicated, and connected. This does not imply that their lives will be happier. Seeing that the meaning of standardized testing may not lie only or primarily in its benefits for students but rather in its connections to some political or ideological agenda may well lead to disillusionment, anger, and other unpleasant consequences. However, there is value in that awareness. It provides a ground for agency, for teachers and students to resist imposition of meaning on

them, at least to search for meaning within the context that confronts them.

In these ways, we believe teacher educators can share "common meanings." Deep divides still can exist concerning what is and becomes meaningful. Nonetheless, there can be fruitful conversation across such divides. To suggest how this is so, in the next section we offer our experiences and reflections as faculty who have tried to engage with teacher education students in the search for meaning in their work.

Common Meanings: Three Colleagues' Experiences

As an educational anthropologist (Loukia K. Sarroub), educational philosopher (Karl Hostetler), and teacher educator (Margaret Macintyre Latta), positioning students to take up the question of Being through conversations between self and other(s) is at the core of our role as social foundations faculty in a college of education. Such participatory thinking, speaking, and acting are integral to our understandings of knowledge as understandings gained always in relation to other(s) and to the world. Thus, there is much we have in common. However, we also differ in our orientations toward Being and the meanings we hope to incite. We hope to show that faculty with varied scholarly backgrounds, research interests, teaching assignments, and so on still can come together in the common project of helping teachers and teachers-to-be experience the good of meaning.

We describe ourselves as social foundations of education faculty. Social foundations of education faculty have historically played a unique role in expanding the spaces in which new educational meanings can be perceived and constructed. By the very nature of their work, social foundations faculty are in a unique position to help students make such connections. By nature, social foundations confront within teaching the multiple relations between culture, gender, ethnicity, history, politics, the personal, and other elements of Being. For example, the historian looks for connections between current educational policies and their historical roots. The anthropologist looks for relationships among differing human cultures and how individuals and collectives make sense of those. The sociologist looks for connections between current attitudes about children and the social forces that shape them. The philosopher looks for connections between educational aims and conceptions of human flourishing and knowledge. The teacher educator looks for connections between such perspectives and the developing lives and practices of teachers in relation to their students. Foundations scholars, through their various disciplines, tend to have a keen sense for the complexity of education and human life, the tenuousness of "the best laid plans," "the fragility of goodness" (Nussbaum, 1986). Part of our task as social foundations of education faculty is to reenvision teaching and learning as an ongoing, developing relation between self, other(s), and subject matter, assuming growth, transformation, and complexity in meanings as primary within teaching and learning.

Our search for common ground is a collaborative undertaking among an educational anthropologist, an educational philosopher, and a teacher educator. We all differ in our disciplinary background. Two of us have argued our disagreements in print (Macintyre Latta & Hostetler, 2003). Nonetheless, meaning is our common ground, and through relaying something of our meaning-making experiences, we take up meaning making as the object and means of our argument.

An Educational Anthropologist

As an educational anthropologist who is an ethnographer I am concerned with how individuals make sense of the mundane, everyday events of life. This can be as rudimentary as knowing that on Tuesdays one has department meetings or as difficult as knowing that one cannot predict what is likely to occur during seventh period English class. Making sense of these types of events involves the discovery of patterns of participation (Goffman, 1959). The patterns themselves emerge from routine and surprise, from how people choose to engage in their own lives in school and home settings (Sarroub,

2001, 2002b, 2004). The educational anthropologist looks for, discovers, and interprets how routine and surprise events make sense in light of the contextual evidence, and then she or he proceeds to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, all the while making arguments for the connections and distinctions among those relations. One does not ask why but how and under what circumstances people do what they do. The educational anthropologist looks for the "rich points" as Michael Agar (1994) called them, or for the "ah ha" moments (Willis & Trondman, 2000). These instances, no matter how mundane, illustrate how meaning is made among individuals and groups of individuals in cultural scenes such as a school lunchroom in southeastern Michigan, a village in Yemen, a retail store in a mall, a tutorial session, someone's home, a community center, or a running trail.

Meaning making is a dynamic enterprise because it is ongoing and recursive, and culture is a lens for lending significance to human experience because it refers broadly to the ways in which people make sense of their lives. Renato Rosaldo (1993) pointed out that "questions of culture seem to touch a nerve because they quite quickly become anguished questions of identity" (p. xxi). And like most tacit, shared knowledge, these assumptions become more explicit and even hardened when people find themselves in contact with others who see cultural identity as quite different from their own (see Sarroub, 2005). In turn, "ah ha" moments occur when individuals make meaning from the differences they encounter, when they reach a common understanding of the webs of significance (Geertz, 1973).

As an educational anthropologist I am committed to learning from others, how people understand what is significant in the events they live from moment to moment. This is a valuable idea in educational settings where oftentimes knowledge is thought of as transferred or conveyed rather than shared and owned by individuals. Closely examining the rich points teaches our students to learn to become aware of the multiple layers of meaning, *the onions of life*, so to speak. These onions, to carry the metaphor a bit further, offer a theoretical and methodological site for inquiry. The layers allow for the wedding of teaching and learning, for scholarship to be the object and subject of the people who do the studying and the people who are, in turn, studied. At the heart of the work of anthropology and education is to connect in a meaningful way to people in the most local (the core of the onion) and in the most global (the outermost layer) contexts (Sarroub, 2005). To do this one must be an observant participant actively and systematically discovering what is meaningful to key agents such as *parents, teachers, policy makers, students, community members, government officials*, and so on in the settings they occupy (Sarroub, 2002a; Sarroub, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007).

An Educational Philosopher

John Dewey (1916) described the philosophic attitude as an inclination to make connections among seemingly disparate entities: "Any person who is open-minded and sensitive to new perceptions, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them has, in so far, a philosophic disposition" (p. 325). Described this way, a philosophic attitude is essential to meaning making and is not restricted to philosophers. We see it in what Loukia described as seeking patterns, experiencing "ah ha" moments when what appears as different suddenly is not merely different, separate, and strange but somehow makes sense. However, it is an appropriate way to describe philosophers' work.

The fundamental question I pose to students is "How does this serve people's well-being?" Thus, the meanings I encourage have a strong normative and/or ethical dimension. In that way, my approach may differ from Loukia's. At least, I make a distinction between an anthropologist's interest in what people consider significant and an ethicist's concern with what they should consider significant. However, those concerns are complementary rather than competing. Much can be learned about what a good, meaningful life should be from what people actually yearn for (e.g., Nussbaum, 2000).

At the same time, I see a good deal of overlap between my approach to meaning and Loukia's. Her

aims of making sense out of "routine and surprise" and making the familiar strange and the strange familiar are philosophical aims. For example, the preservice students I teach tend to "know" what teaching is all about: Teaching is the "familiar" activity of making lesson plans, taking attendance, presenting subject matter, and so on. Part of my job is to make teaching strange.

It takes some work, and it doesn't happen for all students; however, confronting that question does lead to a sense of strangeness and so to questions of Being. When students think about lesson planning and what good it might accomplish, they can see a point in it; however, they also begin to see conflicts and entanglements regarding things such as creativity and spontaneity. What does lesson planning portend for the possibility of creativity and spontaneity that can make their and their students' work more meaningful and fulfilling? Lesson planning becomes less "natural" and stranger when students begin to wonder what the point of lesson planning is, why there is such an emphasis on it, and how they will make sense of the complexities.

Similarly, I try to take a strange idea—such as teachers are not just conveyors of subject matter but also should be political agents—and make it familiar. Again, the basic question concerns the good in it. I ask students to retrieve their familiar sense that politics affects their lives. I appeal to historical and philosophical conceptions of teachers as agents to show that maybe this is not such a weird idea after all. I appeal to the students' own familiar past and current experiences as students—in the lunchroom, in the classroom, on the athletic field—to prompt them to consider what good did or did not come to them within their political milieu—for example, a milieu hostile to teachers and students discussing controversial issues—and what they might have wanted their teachers to do regarding it. The initially strange idea becomes more familiar, more sensible given the experiences they have had and the philosophic reasons to warrant it.

The broad aim is for students to revisit the meanings they experienced in teaching and learning, entertain different possibilities for meaning, and ponder implications of multiple thoughts and actions for their teaching and Being. These meanings are not arbitrary or idiosyncratic. At the core of these processes is the attempt to retrieve common meanings, to make connection with meanings to which human beings do and should aspire, meanings such as *creativity, justice, well-being, identity*, and others.

However, one big hurdle I (and any philosopher) face is the connection between thought and action. Students' skepticism is voiced in statements such as "That (e.g., resisting a principal's demands) sounds great, but what does that have to do with reality (e.g., keeping my job)?" I do not force students to resolve such dilemmas any particular way, nor can I force students to reveal themselves; however, I can start unconcealment on its way by compelling them to face up to the complexities involved. Philosophy, at least as I think about it, does not offer answers to tough issues; however, it does offer a realm of meaning to be confronted as students ponder their Being.

One tool I use to bring thought and action together is *case studies* (Hostetler, 1997). The point is for students to make judgments in realistic, difficult situations, to recommend a "unified action" in the face of conflicts and entanglements among important ethical values and their own habits and impulses. Students might decide to comply with an administrator's demands; however, in the meantime they have to seriously consider the possibly "strange" idea that resistance is an option. They have to confront what their decision means for their Being as a person and educator. Few people would deny the value of resistance considered in the abstract. One reveals much more of oneself when having to go beyond abstractions and platitudes and make tough choices, a choice between being a "complier" and a "resister," for instance.

A Teacher Educator

I embrace the dynamism of the philosophic disposition as integral to meaning making. Thus, as a teacher educator I am mindful of positioning prospective and practicing teachers to experience first-

hand the significances of such a disposition, seeking out and making connections within learning (Macintyre Latta, 2004). Dewey (1916) argued that "such knowledge never can be learned by itself; it is not information, but a mode of intellectual practice, a habitual disposition of mind" (p. 188). And, he warned that it is within "affections" and "aversions" that meaning is made (p. 188). In other words, learning spaces must incite deliberation and interaction encountering conflicts and entanglements. However, as I work with educators I am struck by how unfamiliar and uncomfortable many teachers find such spaces (Macintyre Latta & Field, 2005). Meaning making as a "habitual disposition of mind" is a difficult practice to cultivate in classrooms. It demands openness to multiplicity of all kinds, in the face of complexity and uncertainty as lived consequences of deliberation and interaction. Indeed, educators too often see meaning making as a mammoth undertaking in a classroom setting. For example, 12 educators in a self-study research group relay how disconnected they feel from their teaching practices and how that they actively resist (to varying degrees) disconnecting daily in their classrooms (Macintyre Latta, 2005). The disconnection they refer to stems from imposed policies, predetermined activities, and established expectations that undermine and disrupt entry into meaning for teachers and learners. Teachers find themselves avoiding the processes integral within acts of meaning, ignoring the given relational complexities, and ensuing plurality and natality (Arendt, 1958; Bruner, 1990). Meaning making is diluted or eradicated within the ensuing consequences of such disregard. At the same time, teachers are keenly aware of embodied inner tensions and discomfort. They struggle to articulate the underlying reasons but fear they are dismissing some students, ideas, differences, and questions.

I do hear teachers voicing how isolated they increasingly feel from students, colleagues, and themselves (Macintyre Latta, 2005). They describe a separate self performing as teacher, disconnected from understandings of self, students, and context, mechanically carrying out the tasks of teacher. Arendt's (1958) distinction between action and fabrication seems fitting (p. 188). Action entails the presence of others, the constant contact with the world, the web of the acts and the words of other(ness). Fabrication manipulates materials toward a preconceived end. Fabrication can take place in isolation; however, action is never possible in isolation. The fabrication teachers experience in their practices disguises and sometimes obliterates meaningfulness within their teaching practices. Dominant conceptions of student learning value fabrication, resulting in regulated learning, generic learning products, and monolithic curricula. Fabrication curtails entry into meaning making; action prompts and furthers entry into meaning making. And action entails embracing the ethical ground that meaning making opens into as integral to meaning making.

The act of meaning making is the capacity to enable and deepen learning connections between self, other(s), and subject matter. It seems meaning making demands a contextual responsiveness, valuing the relational complexities unique to learners and learning, seeking out the ensuing interactions as productive elements furthering learning. Instead, teachers report a binding of capacities to see and act on the integral role relational complexities hold within the development of meaning making. Without acknowledging plurality and its lived consequences, Dewey's (1916) "affections" and "aversions" are all too rarely encountered in teaching and learning. The work of teaching and learning as a meaning-making venture is desired by teachers; however, the terrain of such ventures is foreign and/or only an occasional encounter. This is indeed cause for alarm. The task for me as a teacher educator then becomes to create the necessary conditions and contexts for teachers to make meaning, gain confidence in meaning-making processes, experience firsthand the "good"(s) of meaning making, inciting teachers to take such meaning making "good"(s) to their students as "a habitual disposition of mind" bringing meaning into Being.

Conclusion

The question of Being forms the primary focus for the thinking and action involved in our pursuit of meaning as an educational anthropologist, an educational philosopher, and a teacher educator. Thought "entrusted" to us "first joins and appropriates us to thought" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 367). Entrusting meaning to teachers and their students demands attention to the relationships among people and ideas we each identified. These relationships assume participatory thinking within the given relational context. The "presencing in things" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 322) opens into thinking as the relational medium in which Being comes into presence. If such reciprocity is ontologically fundamental to human beings, entrusting meaning to teachers and their students positions participants to ask "What is it that calls on us to think? What makes a call upon us that we should think and, by thinking, be who we are?" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 367) Heidegger's questions seek what draws or calls us to think. Heidegger characterized this as not just simply giving us something to think about but as "gifts" integral to "entrusting" meaning to Being. Thought is essential to the meaningful work of teaching and learning. "To let learn" (p. 356) is to learn thinking and thus begin to retrieve meaning in Being a teacher.

However, as we argued, thought may "begin meaning and Being on their way to arrival"; however, thought must "terminate in a unified orderly release in action." We invite our students to think; however, we also invite— and sometimes compel—them to do, act, speak, produce. Teachers and teachers-to-be must confront the "mundane" as part of their obligations as teachers and to contribute through artifacts and speech to the "in-between" around and through which Being can be revealed.

We believe the experiences we three describe suggest how meaning can be a common ground for social foundations of education faculty and other faculty within a college of education who differ in the specifics of their work and disciplinary expertise. The three of us work actively to make connections—among ourselves, ourselves and our students, people and ideas, ideas—that take into account social movements, temporality, epistemologies, ontologies, values, and the mundane, everyday events of human lives in an ongoing, recursive search for meaning and Being.

Can that perennial human search be retrieved as an aim of education, an aim that makes manifest the vital relevance of meaning to human beings? At a time when national and international geopolitics appear to be at their most conservative and closed to rich conceptions of *meaning*, the outlook may seem bleak. Yet we believe there are reasons for optimism, if social foundations of education and other education faculty do their part in interpreting and revisioning meaning as it is situated in its current forms in schools of education and as practiced by teachers. Most important, we cannot dismiss the extent of yearning we hear in the voices and experiences of the teachers with whom we work alongside. Optimism continues to germinate from this yearning, gaining substance as a "critical spirit" (Krell, 1977), taking life in teachers' thoughts and actions and creating meaning in Being a teacher. The ensuing vitality demands our attention.

Serious revisioning likely will lead to conflict among people, including teacher education faculty. The meanings we aim to retrieve and reconstruct can themselves conflict. There may be times when one aspiration must be sacrificed for another, leading to interpersonal turmoil and existential discomfort. Yet, though there is the persistent question of how meaning should be understood and pursued, that is a very different matter than whether meaning should be an aim of teacher education. The question of Being is fundamental; it must be worked with, and toward, constituting meaning in/with/through Being.

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Karl Hostetler is a professor in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. His area of teaching and research is philosophy of education, with emphasis on ethical issues in education.

Margaret A. Macintyre Latta is an associate professor in the College of Education & Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her work foregrounds the integral role of aesthetic considerations such as attentiveness to participatory thinking, emotional commitment, felt freedom, dialogue and interaction, speculation, and greater consciousness within the acts of teaching and learning. She terms these neglected epistemological assumptions elemental to learners and learning. Her work emphasizes the primacy of teachers in the lives of their students and the long-term impact on the future, contributing to the scholarship regarding teacher education and professional development reform initiatives.

Loukia K. Sarroub is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Sciences, with expertise in the areas of anthropology and education, literacy and cross-cultural studies, immigration and education, youth cultures, and ethnographic research methods.