



Between Pretense and Aspiration: The Virtue of 'Ironic Existence' in Teaching

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Chair: Dr Margaret Lo

Abstract:

Over and above instrumental ends, teaching demands moral integrity from teachers who must operate within the confines of a public profession that at once aspires to and yet often fails to work in the interests of children and youth. In increasingly intensified contexts of accountability and managerialism, teaching induces moral anxiety in teachers – the fear of failing to meet one's educational responsibility, the dread of doing harm to a child, and the shame induced by judgemental reprimands from parents and colleagues. In this research study exploring the link between the anxiety of obligation and disengagement from the teaching profession, I have been struck by the effort made by long serving and deeply committed teachers to teach with integrity while continuously considering the question of whether they should leave or stay in the profession. This is not "any question we are dealing with but rather how should one live? (Socrates in Republic I: 232d). At its core is the challenge of leading a good and faithful life – of meeting our obligations by responding to the needs and suffering of others, a given in a human life. Drawing on Jonathan Lear's (The Case for Irony, 2011) concept of 'ironic existence' as a virtue necessary for leading a genuinely human life and as the condition for singularity – the achievement of a unique singular voice that is fundamental to the human condition – I argue that if teachers are to remain deeply committed to the educational project while remaining sufficiently detached to pose challenging questions of themselves and the profession, they may need to live ironically.

About the speaker:

Anne M. Phelan is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Her research focuses on teachers intellectual and political freedom and on the creation of teacher education programs and policies that support that end. She has written about the dynamic of judgment and responsibility, the paradoxes of autonomy (creativity and resistance) and the anxiety of obligation in professional life. Recent publications include *Teacher Education and the Political: The Power of Negative Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2017; with Matthew Clarke); and *Curriculum Theorizing and Teacher Education: Complicating Conjunctions* (London: Routledge, 2015).



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