



Moving Out of the Cellar: A New (?) Existentialism for a Future Without Teachers

Kip Kline, Lewis University

Kathleen Knight Abowitz, Miami University

Introduction

Twelve years ago, Bill Joy—computer scientist and co-founder of Sun Microsystems—declared that “the future” doesn’t need human beings.¹ If he is right, the future certainly doesn’t need teachers. Or at the very least, if we are not completely given to Joy’s provocative assertion, we still must confront the possibility of a future in which the human element in teaching is on the wane. In fact, many teachers experience this not as a possible future, but as part of the felt experience of their current situation.

The “new breed of accountability-driven schools is more interested in reaching some number at the end of the school year” than in actually constructing places where teachers can create meaningful learning experiences for students.² Educational systems increasingly reward the most machine-like teachers; those who focus fully on achieving the highest test scores and the most efficient use of instructional time toward that end. Curricula are increasingly evaluated and adopted based on their technical relevance alone and the delivery of this technical curriculum itself has become highly routinized and technicized through a process that twenty-five years ago critical scholars called the “deskilling of teachers” and which appears to only have intensified.³

These trends seem to point to a future of machine-like schooling, perhaps without as many physical school buildings in it, and in which the relational, embodied work of education further fades into the background. This is a future lacking humanizing educational experiences for teachers and for students, an educative process increasingly treated as thoroughly technical, its success exclusively evaluated by hyper-standardized, quantitative measures.

This dehumanization has particular forms and effects, including anxiety and angst. As one measure of the affect this has on teachers, teacher attrition rates have risen 50% in the United State in the last fifteen years.⁴ A 2009 survey of teachers revealed 40% to be “disheartened” by contemporary classroom working conditions.⁵ These statistics indicate a growing sense of angst among the U.S. teaching corps. Teachers of course are not alone in their angst; all of us in the

1. Bill Joy, “The Future Doesn’t Need Us,” *Wired* 8, no. 4 (April, 2000). http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html?pg=1&topic=&topic_set.

2. Alan C. Jones, “Mr. Obama: Most Schools Aren’t Like your Daughters’ School,” *Education Week*, January 22, 2013. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/01/23/18jones_ep.h32.html?tkn=SPUFjU7p6XYMUm0YENIhObsHjsesHK7I%2BJ9&cmp=ENL-EU-VIEWS1.

3. e.g., Dennis Carlson, “Teachers as Political Actors: From Reproductive Theory to the Crisis of Schooling,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, no. 3 (1987): 283-308.

4. Erik Kain, “High Teacher Turnover Rates are a Big Problem for America’s Public Schools,” *Forbes*, March 8, 2011. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2011/03/08/high-teacher-turnover-rates-are-a-big-problem-for-americas-public-schools/>.

5. Andrew L. Yarrow, “State of Mind,” *Education Week*, October 21, 2009. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/21/08publicagenda_ep.h29.html.

United States currently live in anxiety-producing times.⁶ Educators, however, feel a form of professional anxiety that is unique and, these days, perhaps a more acute form than other professionals may suffer. Many educators currently live with the threat and fear of a future in which being human—in relation, fallible, capable of creative inspiration, joy, and purpose—is less important and valued in the educative or schooling process. Our contemporary historical moment is constituted by this fear, for educators. The dehumanization of teaching and the corresponding fears accompanying this are all around us, compelling an existentialist response from educational foundationalists and specifically here, philosophers of education.

Foundations of Education: Beyond Instrumentality and Intrinsic Value

The dehumanization of educators and education, and the associated anxiety resulting from these processes, can be addressed in fruitful ways with preservice and practicing educators. Courses of study in the foundations of education, specifically philosophy of education, provide educators sites for productively investigating the humanizing features and potential of schooling. The recently published UNESCO document, *Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America*, argues with us that a rather dangerous approach to education has emerged and proliferated in which effectiveness and efficiency are the primary considerations of educational value. Effectiveness here is strictly defined by what is easily and quantitatively measured and efficiency means cutting out all that is extraneous to what is deemed effective.⁷

For some fifteen years this approach has typified education, beginning in the United States and spreading through many other countries. So an accountability strategy is spoken of, resulting in pressure on educational research to become ‘scientifically founded,’ i.e. empirical, in order that forms of education may be compared and measured in relation to fixed standards.⁸

In a climate where only the measurable and efficient are valued, it is unsurprising that the fields informing the interdisciplinary praxis of social foundations of education have weakened in their influence of teacher education programs. Tozer and Miretzky define social foundations as an interdisciplinary field using “the lenses of the social sciences and humanities to help teacher candidates develop ‘interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on education,’ and that such perspectives are important to interpreting educational practice in cultural context.”⁹ Teachers today, to put it mildly, are not rewarded for interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on their work. Neumann, in his survey of 302 universities, found that nearly half of university-based teacher preparation programs do not require a Social Foundations course or combination Foundations/Multicultural Education course of 3 units or more in the 50% to 100% content range.¹⁰ Findings such as this confirm that today’s “reform” efforts in education push an agenda

6. Daniel Smith, “It’s still the ‘Age of Anxiety.’ Or is it?” *The New York Times*, January 14, 2012. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/its-still-the-age-of-anxiety-or-is-it/>.

7. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America* (Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011).

8. *Ibid.*, 70.

9. Steve Tozer & Debra Miretzky, “Social Foundations, Teaching Standards, and the Future of Teacher Preparation,” in *Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Context, Theories, and Issues*, ed. Dan Butin (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 8.

10. Richard Neumann, “Social Foundations and Multicultural Education Course Requirements in Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States,” *Educational Foundations* 24, no. 3-4 (2010): 3-17.

of alignment with curricular objectives, conformity with externally-mandated curriculum and assessment processes, and a narrow form of professionalization.

What's at stake here is the position of the teacher as an ethical subject, a human being of intellectual and moral agency in relation to students, parents, and community. Ball argues that today's reform efforts have subjected educators to the "terrors of performativity" where performativity "is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)."¹¹ These terrors of performativity act as a form of displacement of the educator's values as they are effectively an assault on the teacher as an ethical subject. Ball provides commentary from teachers in the UK that supports this claim:

What happened to my creativity? What happened to my professional integrity? What happened to the fun in teaching and learning? What Happened? (G. E. Johnson).

I find myself thinking that the only way I can save my sanity, my health and my relationship with my future husband is to leave the profession. I don't know what else I could do, having wanted to teach all my life, but I feel I am being forced out, forced to choose between a life and teaching (Name not supplied).

I was a primary school teacher for 22 years but left in 1996 because I was not prepared to sacrifice the children for the glory of politicians and their business plans for education (Christopher Draper).

It's as though children are mere nuts and bolts on some distant production line, and it angers me to see them treated so clinically in their most sensitive and formative years (Roma Oxford).¹²

Here we can see the kind of anxiety and frustration that stems from reform efforts and policies that technicize and mechanize the educative process. Teachers like these end up feeling a need to try to "save (their) sanity" and that they may be contributing to the "sacrifice (of) children." These articulations make clear that such anxieties have left educators "ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent. And yet it is not always very clear what is expected."¹³ What has foundations of education, specifically philosophy of education, to offer this troubling scenario?

Philosophers of education use philosophical methods and texts in inquiry related to educational problems, issues, policies and trends. A field which (arguably) had its beginnings in a few privileged ancient Grecians' search for wisdom and truth, and which held real power in early 20th century teacher education programs, like the social foundations in general, it too has lost much of its stature. Yet philosophy of education has lost none of its worth as a vehicle for reflection, normative inquiry, and a space for discovering meanings of and for education. For the particular problem of educator angst, there is a kind of instrumental value that philosophy of educa-

11. Stephen J. Ball, "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity," *Journal of Education Policy*, 18, no. 2 (2003): 216.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 220.

tion can provide, in contrast to the commonly asserted charge that philosophical study is esoteric and impractical. The study of philosophy of education or thinking about foundational questions in education and schooling can do the practical work of helping educators such as the ones quoted above to make meaning of their anxiety and frustration, thus giving them ways to address the questions of aim and meaning which have become so technicized and vocationalized in today's education discourses. Audrey Thompson asserts the value of philosophy of education in helping teachers productively engage such questions: "Neither empirical research nor personal experience can give education the leverage she needs to rethink social and pedagogical practices that, however valuable they appear, may be rooted in problematic assumptions and commitments. Only philosophy can fulfill that function."¹⁴ No standard methods course can do the kind of work that helps teachers address their feelings of value displacement and the frustration that their jobs have come to include the sacrifice of children on the altar of business and political interests. This kind of instrumentality is surely of value to the profession of teaching as it may be the means by which dedicated and successful educators cope with difficult realities in a way that allows them to remain and even thrive in the profession.

Educational philosophy has value beyond the instrumental, however. Simon Blackburn, arguing for the value of teaching and learning philosophy, says that philosophy or the practice of reflection on the "scaffolding of our thought" is inherently valuable, like the appreciation of art and music.¹⁵ However, he goes on to argue that philosophical thinking is also continuous with our behavior or action. Translated into philosophy of education, this means that thinking philosophically about education will necessarily inform the practice of an educator. Philosophy of education, then, goes beyond both typical instrumentalism and inherent value. That is to say, it does the unique work of giving practicing and preservice educators the practical means to make meaning of and cope with deep ontological uncertainties and their resultant anxieties, a rather indispensable process that is not easily categorized as either instrumentally or inherently valuable. The UNESCO authors of "Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America," certainly understand this: "Philosophy is not a niche culture, but an integral part of free, open and critical citizenship."¹⁶ Again, translated into the domain of philosophy of education, philosophical inquiry is not a throwaway or even an auxiliary component to the preparation of teachers and other school professionals, rather, it is at the very center of learning what it means to be an educator. In particular, today, it can be an irreplaceable component of remembering the idea of education as a humanistic and humanizing endeavor.

In the remainder of this article, we interpret certain strands of existential thought to offer a compelling framing device for the fear and its resultant anxiety that educators are experiencing in our contemporary moment, an anxiety that is fully rooted in the struggle for selfhood. In so doing, we explore Sartrean and Kierkegaardian ideas about anxiety and the self, ultimately joining educational philosopher Maxine Greene in asserting existentialism's fundamental value for teachers. We assert that many educators are experiencing life "in the cellar," or living with fear and dread in a house not of their own making. We argue that these existential threats experienced by educators today can be met with existential inquiry, specifically the kind often provided through educational philosophy.

14. Audrey Thompson, "Maybe we can just be Friends: The Unhappy Marriage of Education and Philosophy," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 3 (2002): 235.

15. Simon Blackburn, *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

16. UNESCO, *Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America*, 7.

“Life in the cellar,” the metaphor that grounds our argument, is taken from Kierkegaard, who in 1849 wrote

In case one were to think of a house, consisting of cellar, ground-floor and *premier étage*, so tenanted, or rather so arranged, that it was planned for a distinction of rank between the dwellers on the several floors; and in case one were to make a comparison between such a house and what it is to be a man—then unfortunately this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of men, that in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar.¹⁷

We employ some of the most recognizable ideas from the existentialism of Sartre and Kierkegaard as a way to understand the current “teacher (human) condition.” In so doing we examine key existentialist concepts—fear and anxiety, freedom and subjectivity, being-in-situation—and use them to analyze the contemporary conditions of education in the U.S.¹⁸ At the end of the essay, we point toward how teachers might begin to cope with the *existential threats* to their profession and to their selves with *existential responses* that involve creativity and living artistically. In short, we suggest a means by which educators might move out of the cellar.

Existence Before Essence and the Contingency of the Teacher

Jean-Paul Sartre’s thoroughly philosophical novel, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), established one of the more central themes of existentialism (if not the *most* central), that existence precedes essence. Sartre published the novel in 1938, when he was 33 years old, relatively early in his career; its themes would resound throughout the rest of his writing life. “Written in the form of a personal diary, the novel gives us an intimate picture of events in the life of an individual whose thoughts and feelings are transformed as their objects start presenting themselves to his senses.”¹⁹

Roquentin, the novel’s protagonist, struggles with a kind of nausea that he periodically experiences in navigating his everyday life as a writer of biographical history. He cannot quite locate the source of this nausea that comes over him as he looks at a glass of beer or himself in the mirror, as he does historical/biographical research, or has a sexual encounter. Toward the end of the book, in one of the most frequently cited passages in Sartre’s corpus, Roquentin identifies the nausea’s cause in an epiphinal scene in which he contemplates the root of a chestnut tree as he sits on a park bench.

It took my breath away. Never before these last few days, had I understood what “to exist” meant... There we were, the whole lot of us, awkward, embarrassed by our own existence, having no reason to be here rather than there; confused, vaguely restless, feeling superfluous to one another. Superfluity was the only relationship I could establish be-

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death* (Radford, VA: A & D Publishing, 1849/2008), 35.

18. We acknowledge that existentialism has fallen out of favor in some philosophical circles and this is sometimes the result of the challenge from poststructuralism (often in the form of Foucault). Here we align ourselves with the work of Robert C. Solomon and Thomas Flynn, both of whom have argued in multiple places for the continuing relevance of existentialism into the late 20th Century and beyond. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to rehearse the argument, Flynn makes the case there is a largely under recognized continuity between Sartre and Foucault. He makes a brief version of this argument in *Existentialism: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2006) while the full version is found in the two volume *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 & 2005).

19. Anthony Hatzimoyisis, *The Philosophy of Sartre* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University, 2011), 1.

tween these trees, these hedges, these paths. Vainly I strove to compute the number of the chestnut trees, or their distance from the Velleda, or their height as compared with that of the plane trees; each of them escaped from the pattern I made for it, overflowed from it or withdrew. And I too among them, vile, languorous, obscene, chewing the cud of my thoughts, I too was superfluous. Luckily I did not feel it, I only understood it, but I felt uncomfortable because I was afraid of feeling it...I thought vaguely of doing away with myself, to do away with at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death—my corpse, my blood poured out on this gravel, among these plants, in this smiling garden — would have been superfluous as well. I was superfluous to all eternity.

This passage vividly depicts the existence before essence theme for which Sartre is famous. Throughout the novel, Roquentin engages questions of existence, and in the chestnut tree passage he locates the fact of his “bare existence” as the source of his nausea. Sartre’s novel as well as his subsequent work emphasized this theme. The idea is that essences are created “after” existence. That is to say, things and beings do not arrive onto the scene with essences, they simply exist and essences are created by conscious beings after the fact. We can see how this works in various passages from *Nausea*.

We first begin to see Roquentin’s struggle with the existence/essence notion when our protagonist sits in a bar with the glass of beer. In this scene, he “avoids looking at” the glass of beer, and claims that he cannot “see it.” He imagines that the bachelors in the pub would be of no help in seeing the beer. He says that they would simply tell him that the glass is like all others and list the physical properties of it, to which Roquentin replies, “I know all of that, but I know there is something else.” This beginning confrontation with what will later be called “bare existence” is followed by an even more detailed episode with the purple suspenders of Adolphe in the same bar.²⁰ Here we see Roquentin beginning to understand that “purple” does not exist. It is an idea created in order to talk about something that exists, but no one has ever really seen or experienced “purple.” Again, within the chestnut tree passage, the existence (“nude” or “bare”) happens first and then an essence like “black” is attributed to it. He says about the root, “Black? The root was not black, there was no black on this piece of wood...black...did not exist.” He then relates this experience to his time looking at Adolphe’s suspenders about which he now says, “They were not purple.”²¹

So this is the notion of existence before essence related to nonconscious things, which are examples of “beings-in-themselves.” The nausea that Roquentin experiences comes from the realization that human beings have created these “essences” and attributed them to the beings-in-themselves. He says that “things are divorced from their names.”²² Conscious beings exist in this “bare” sense as well. Roquentin is coming to understand that he—as a conscious being or being-for-itself—also exists “in excess” (*de trop*). He says existence “penetrates me everywhere” and “it was the very paste of things.”²³ In the end, as existentialist philosopher Thomas Flynn claims, being-in-itself and being-for-itself have some mutually exclusive properties, but humans put them together in ways that result in “the ontological root of our ambiguity.”²⁴

What of the ontological dilemmas experienced by the contemporary teacher? Much like Roquentin, the contemporary teacher “is in the middle of a crisis” in which much of what is per-

20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1938/2007), 19.

21. *Ibid.*, 130.

22. *Ibid.*, 125.

23. *Ibid.*, 126 & 7.

24. Thomas Flynn, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012, 11.

ceived or thought about “teaching” as a vocation turns out not to be as originally conceived. Sartre’s idea—existence precedes essence—is summarized by Flynn: “What you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence) rather than the reverse. Essence is not destiny. You are what you make yourself to be.”²⁵ This has profound implications for the struggle of educators in our contemporary moment.

Teachers are existing, conscious beings, yet a culturally constructed (or determined) essence as “teacher” often powerfully shapes their professional actions and choices. One’s identity as “teacher” is achieved through a long process of formal as well as informal schooling, acquiring licenses and degrees, and through paid employment at a school or some educational setting. There are many preconceived essences that accompany the identity of “teacher” that every living, breathing teacher exists within, and against. Today those essences are more machinelike and externally-mandated than perhaps they have ever been, as teachers now exist within the orchestrated rituals of test-driven curriculum and assessment. Just as Sartre’s protagonist, Roquentin, tries to measure and count trees, in his moment of contemplating the existence of the tree, so do teachers now try to measure and count. Yet existence overflows our categories and measures, as Roquentin realizes. As Adolphe’s suspenders are not “really” purple, most teachers, parents and students would confess that true education is not “really” about counting and measuring, or the habits we’ve developed in test-driven teaching—yet most of the English-speaking world might call the suspenders purple, and call what passes for education in today’s schools “21st century learning.” The essence of the teacher identity is planted when a child sits in classrooms for years upon formative years; the identity is nurtured and fertilized in teacher education (or perhaps more often, teacher training) programs; the identity is culminated and matured in the formal employment requirements and habits of fulfilling the job dictated by the School Board, State, or governing body.

Teachers live in the basement of a house built largely by many others, in a time when their work is neither widely appreciated nor very well understood by those in charge of making policy. Of course, the teacher identity is no stranger to this condition; any history of teaching documents varying degrees of professional freedom and control, characterized largely by much paternalistic supervision and implied or even outright derision of the teacher as intellectual agent. Regardless of whether we can state today’s conditions for teachers are qualitatively worse than some imagined yesteryear, the essence of teaching in this age is a highly reductive one, and the immediate future of formal schooling in this country only promises more of the same, if one can judge by policy debates of the moment.

Many conscious teachers are able to sensitize and sharpen their critical faculties and habits. They are able, as Roquentin was, to wake themselves up. Some discover ways to live within the experience of their own teaching lives rather than in the pre-ordained essences of teaching that are perhaps most highly rewarded today. Central to this experience of teaching is ambiguity and contingency.

Ambiguity, while bringing its own forms of nausea and anxiety, paradoxically helps a teacher resist the seductive certainty of teacher essence. The idea of ambiguity, for existentialists, has grounding in Sartrean ontology, in the combination of transcendence and facticity. The latter refers to the “givens” of our situation that give limit or possibility to our lives while the former refers to something like the “takens” of the situation, or perhaps how we face up to the facticity. This is what leads Sartre to one of his mantras, that we can always make something out of what

25. Flynn, 2006, 11.

we've been made into.²⁶ We find ourselves always in-situation (facticity), but with the ability to, in some sense, to transcend our situation. Again, for Sartre, this means that humans are beings "in-situation." Yet, we can never know in the moment of a particular situation just how much facticity and how much transcendence is informing it. It is for this reason that we are always "more" than the situation and this becomes the ontological foundation of our freedom.²⁷

Any person defining her or himself as a "professional" in a work context is much more than the professional identity she or he is inhabiting, of course. The bus driver has a passion for detective novels; the doctor blogs about libertarian politics; the teacher transcends the teacher identity as that identity becomes more boxed in, closed, circumscribed, and increasingly stripped of creative possibility.

Yet that narrowing and facticity of the essence of "teacher" co-exists with possibilities of transcendence. Even as the teacher identity becomes less open, more closed to individual critical and creative work/play, the living, breathing teacher inhabits and exists in real schools with real students. This existence offers transcendence and possibility insofar as teacher-student bodies, relationships and the intellectual work of education cannot be (fully) prescribed or determined by essences of teaching or schooling that our culture creates.

This indeterminable and ambiguous mix of transcendence and facticity is related to the contingency of existence that the protagonist of *Nausea* discovers. The novel itself represents a fictive struggle to cope with contingency; Roquentin's diary is his attempt to narrate sense and order out of inescapably contingent existence. Simply put, that mix of limits and possibilities represents the source of the protagonist's nausea. Roquentin states,

I understood the Nausea, I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think it would be easy for me to put them in words now. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is to simply *be there*; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them. I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift.²⁸

In this "age of anxiety"—a term coined by W.H. Auden in 1948 but constantly evoked 65 years later—it is difficult to see contingency as a gift. But the (burdened) gift of insight into ambiguity and contingency is the first step out of the basement.

The basement is a cozy existence for many teachers. It is a safe place. Comfortable in narrow, circumscribed roles, able to quell the nausea with all the various forms of consumption and dulling that keep most of us sedated, fat and happy, teachers are no different than any other public vocation in an age of privatization. Many teachers seek to return the gift of contingency, and perhaps exchange it for something more comforting and facile. The experience of reading philosophy of education in graduate classrooms with practicing teachers, in fact, often is one in which students refuse this gift, as determinedly as we professors might try to wrap it up in enchanting curriculum and humanizing pedagogy. Yet, others use the philosophical texts to arrive

26. Flynn, 2006, p. 81

27. Thomas Flynn, "Jean-Paul Sartre," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/sartre/>.

28. Sartre, *Nausea*, 131.

at a wakefulness, not terribly unlike Roquentin's, that allows them to begin to move out of the basement by acknowledging and making meaning of education/educator-related ambiguity and contingency. It is in these instances that philosophers of education are reminded of the value of their work.

Teachers as Strangers, and the Future of Teaching

Maxine Greene (1973) writes of teacher-as-stranger, providing an existentialist response to the existentialist threat posed to teachers. Drawn from a text written forty years ago, this persona resists the culturally-constructed essence of teacher and to this day, can enable a process of seeing the same-old-same-old standardization and privatization with the new eyes and fresh perceptions of a newcomer. The teacher-as-stranger approaches the classroom as someone coming to a strange land, wide-awake to the rituals, mythologies, and deadening routines of that new land as only a stranger in a new land could be.

We do not ask that a teacher perceive his existence as absurd; nor do we demand that he estrange himself from his community. We simply suggest that he struggle against unthinking submergence in the social reality that prevails. If he wishes to present himself as a person actively engaged in critical thinking and authentic choosing, he cannot accept any "ready-made standardized scheme" at face value.²⁹

Greene tells us that if teachers are "willing to take the view of the home-comer and create a new perspective on what he has habitually considered real, his teaching may become the project of a person vitally open to his students and the world."³⁰ Such a teacher will learn how to exist with her or his students, instead of inhabiting a flaccid essence of "teacher" in the easy ways set before classroom teachers today.

Art and aesthetics have been a common prescription for philosophers and many others diagnosing the existential dilemma. In *Nausea*, Roquentin's final decision is to become a writer of fiction, having dropped his historical project. Art and the possibilities of humanization therein represent the glimmer of hope at the novel's end. Certainly Maxine Greene's opus and lifework are testimonies to the possibilities in this prescription for teachers, and there is no space to recount these many lessons here.³¹ Yet Greene's work shows us one direction in which existentialist inquiry might guide educators towards the position of teacher-as-stranger, and towards a position of greater responsibility.

Art and aesthetic practice, for Greene, represents a way to exercise existentialist responsibility. The responsibility of the existentialist is to face painful truth absent the comfort of myth, facing the now of schooling absent the nostalgia for yesterday's schools, and facing the constrictions of standardized schools even as we seek for the spaces to construct them otherwise. It is a responsibility for our choices and making them, and for maintaining and building our active projects of meaning-making with students and colleagues. For Greene and other existential phi-

29. Maxine Greene, *Teacher As Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1973), 269.

30. *Ibid.*, 270.

31. See Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) & Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

losophers of education, art is a means to exercising that responsibility, a set of practices that enables us to exercise the existentialist responsibilities of courage and decision-making and action.

The pose of stranger also provides a break from the temporal continuum of self. That is, as teachers narrate their own lives as teachers, stepping out of that narration to be stranger to one's own work jars one's sense of past, present and future. Narratives tidy up contingency and assert progression onto temporal lines. But as Roquentin says, "time [is] laid bare."³² Kierkegaard tells us the struggle with the future is a noble one.

To be able to occupy oneself with the future is a sign of a human being's nobility, to strive against the future is the most ennobling strife...[For] he who struggles with the future...struggles with himself, [since] the future does not exist, it borrows its strength from the self, and when it has taken this [strength] from him, it shows it to him as if it were an external enemy he is to encounter.³³

Teacher-as-stranger provides educators with a metaphor, a positionality that provokes a break with contemporary habit and routine. Such interruptions are important to wrestle us from the powerful narratives that solidify and sustain the current policies of accountability and standardization that help mechanize and dehumanize today's teachers. By breaking temporality and routine, by challenging the very assumptions at the heart of the teacher essence, the teacher can derive strength of perspective. By serving as an interruption to the what is, it can inspire think about what could be in educational settings.

Conclusion

Our arguments explicitly stand upon the work of others, particularly the noted philosopher of education Maxine Greene. We use Greene's considerable existential insights to assert our argument for the continuing relevance of existentialism to education in response to the considerable anxiety that plagues the spirit of the contemporary teacher. We use her notion of teacher-as-stranger to illustrate the insight that existential philosophy can generate for challenging the temporal, technical, and mechanistic essences that so palpably construct the teacher identity.

Greene serves as an exemplar in other ways for us, however. Greene's genius is not simply in her existentialist insight but in her philosophy of education, in her educational *praxis as philosophy*. Her philosophical work utilizes aesthetic inquiry, and has inspired any number of engaging learning experiences (courses, workshops, programs) for teachers. Quite simply, Greene has helped make educational philosophy meaningful to her students through arts-based inquiry.

By proclaiming the importance of addressing the educator's angst through educational philosophy, we should not be read as advocating a simplistic "exposure" approach to existentialist thinkers or to any other philosophical texts, for that matter. Greene's example shows how, in light of educational anxieties, educational philosophy can be revisited, relived, and reconstructed.

It can be said, then, that Greene's work is both an example of and a motivating factor for responding to the anxiety that educators face today. It was in this spirit that we were able to identify the connection between Sartre's Roquentin and contemporary educators' struggle with anx-

32. Sartre, *Nausea*, 31.

33. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 17-18.

iety, contingency, and ambiguity. Beyond this, Greene's work is an example of the kind of value of philosophical inquiry has in education. Philosophical examination surrounding the notion of teacher as stranger and considering *Nausea* in light of anxieties of educators are two specific ways in which educators can make meaning of their ontological uncertainties. These kinds of projects carry a unique value for educators in that it is likely to be inherently rewarding and also result in some kind of material difference for the educator and her or his students—a material difference, we argue, that cannot be gained through methods or assessment courses which now litter the teacher education curriculum. This is philosophy of education's unique contribution. It carves out space in which education is treated as a field of inquiry unto itself and not just as a kind of vocational training. There is no doubt that in most programs in colleges and schools of education, students' course schedules are pregnant with a variety of classes whose aims are largely about what to do and how to do it. This is how the field of education has come to birth or adopt language such as "best practice," "skill sets," "teaching strategies," and "rubrics." And, as noted above, it is increasingly the case that these courses and their resultant technical and mechanical notions of education have proliferated and pushed out foundations courses.

Therefore, it is in this time that philosophy of education is more necessary than ever. All the coursework in which education students spend examining strategies of what and how to do things must be complimented (or resisted, perhaps) with courses in which students examine what education *is* (and hopefully the host of other philosophical questions that result from pursuing this one). This is the kind of pursuit that allows students to (re)examine old and new texts and ideas, take them apart, and put them back together in light our contemporary moment in education. Without that spirit of creative reinvention that invites educators to be involved in processes such as negotiating the contingency and absurdity of their work lives and contexts, educational philosophy instruction and scholarship—like teachers themselves—will continue our relegation to the educational basement.

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Kip Kline has published and presented work in the area of philosophy of youth and adolescence, including youth culture and aesthetics and adolescent identity. In 2010 he gave invited lectures at the department of aesthetics at Aarhus University in Denmark. Also, he was the president of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society in 2010. He is currently working on projects that examine media representation and discourses of youth. Kip Kline received his PhD in philosophy of education from Indiana University, Bloomington in 2007.

Kathleen Knight Abowitz is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She teaches courses in philosophy of education, socio-cultural foundations of education, cultural studies and community-based leadership. Her most recent book is *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (Paradigm, 2013).