



## Action Foundations! A Comic (Book) Tale of Defending Educational Studies

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### Introduction: A Vignette

*It was the summer of 2009. The Faculty Senate meeting room was surprisingly full, considering that so many of our colleagues had already left campus for their vacation destinations, and unsurprisingly stuffy, considering the time of year. At least our glistening faces and occasional handkerchief swipes didn't look too conspicuous.*

*The Senate was voting on our proposal that day, which had been a full year in development. What began as an idealistic notion discussed among friends in different parts of the College was now a meticulously thought-out plan, with support from administration and the involvement of many more faculty than we'd originally envisioned. We'd laid it out carefully in a memo, and our spokesperson that day was so eloquent and persuasive that we found it hard to believe when she later said she'd been nervous. All we needed now were the votes.*

*Finally the Chair called the question. If we had been watching the scene on television rather than as guests in the meeting, we probably would have grasped hands—maybe even shut our eyes. The proposal was moved and seconded, and it was clear to even our worried ears that the ayes were louder than the nays. The Department of Foundations, Social Policy and Research was born!*

When defending educational foundations, we sometimes find ourselves responding to the question of “why?”—often phrased, “But WHYYYYY do we have to take a class on this stuff???” (We want to take more methods!).” As distressing as this can be for teacher educators whose own work reveals rather a marked fondness for both the social and philosophical foundations, it is nevertheless necessary for us to convince our students that the philosophy, history, and sociology of education are relevant and meaningful to their work in the classroom. This is a struggle with which we've been engaged since 2006 when both of us started work at our institution (the same week, in offices just across the hall from each other's). We are usually successful with our students, or they know well which sides of their grades are buttered. (Which side of the bread their grades are on? Who butters their grades? You get the idea.)

If only it was our students alone we needed to convince. The past seven years we've also needed to defend the necessity and utility of the range of foundations of education to many of our colleagues among the college faculty and administration. Their “why” questions are similar: “how can we make room in the curriculum for these ‘luxury’ courses when we have to meet the standards?” (whatever standards those might be). This task can be more challenging (no grades to butter), but we did persuade enough of our *University* colleagues to make that Senate vote in the summer of 2009 possible. It has been an interesting journey, with both hills and valleys, and one we are glad to be traveling together.

It is the story of these travels that we would like to share in this article, and, in the spirit of hope and optimism, we decided to begin with the most inspiring moment of that tale: the birth of the new foundations department at a time when this area was under fire throughout the field of education. (Not that the assault has let up at all, as evidenced by the need for this special issue.) Reflecting on our particular institutional experience of defending the foundations, it strikes us that there are a couple of related ideas that have guided and influenced us along the way: one around putting our principles into action, and the other about the immense practical value of the foundations for day-to-day life—whether as a teacher or otherwise.

We also continue to be confronted by the question of “why,” and very often in the way illustrated by the example above: a stance, whether prosodic, dispositional or both, that can only be described as “whiny.” While this is not our favorite type of interaction with our students, or worse, our colleagues, it did lead us to an idea about this article—as well as a new way to think about our work in the foundations. The childishness of the “whiny why” reminded us of another effort to engage a younger generation with the foundations—in this case the foundations of *life*, or philosophy. Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey write a series of comic books called *Action Philosophers!* in which “the lives and thoughts of history’s A-list brain trust [are] told in a hip and humorous fashion.”<sup>1</sup> We’re not really sure how many adolescents are foregoing *Batman* or *The Avengers* in favor of Nietzsche or the Pre-Socratics, but the Action Philosophers *are* popular with many of our doctoral students. We’re still not quite sure whether that is a “good” thing or not...

We take inspiration and insight from Van Lente and Dunlavey, and from the Action Philosophers themselves. In this rendition, philosophers throughout the ages are portrayed not just as thinkers and ponderers, but rather as movers and shakers: individuals who “do something” with the mindwork they’ve wrought rather than leave the acting upon to others. In this version, even the headiest of philosophical endeavor is more akin to a contact sport than intellectualizing. Certainly, the easy answer to this is genre-related, but perhaps it’s something more—something better. When we, as did Wittgenstein below, think of philosophy as action, it can quite literally be a game changer. It is in this spirit that we take an action-oriented approach to the very practical applications of our work as scholars of educational foundations, as well as the significant consequences that work has for both the field and society at large. This essay will borrow from the comic book to signpost our journey, contextualizing and explicating the triumphant scene in the opening vignette. Not only can the Action Philosophers help us understand the meaning of life, they can also help us make sense of our story here at Unnamed Midwestern University (check our affiliations if you’re curious). Maybe they really are superheroes!

### “It’s All Greek to You”<sup>2</sup>

“Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.”<sup>3</sup>

This notion of “action” has been a staple of our practice since we began teaching social and philosophical foundations courses a decade ago. We sought to live out our principles and teach our students to do the same, according to the example set by the heroes of the first section

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1. Fred Van Lente & Ryan Dunlavey, *Action Philosophers!* (New York: Evil Twin Comics, 2009), i.

2. *Ibid.*, iii.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), 77.

of *Action Philosophers!*: The Pre-Socratics, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes, Epicurus and Epictetus (*nearly* all Greek). Partially in response to our own concerns regarding the perceived irrelevance of the social and philosophical foundations to the very practical world that teachers live in every day, we explicitly framed all of our coursework to continuously bridge the theory-practice divide. The last assignment in the Master's level course we teach here called "Foundations of American Education" provides a good illustration of what this looks like, and, truth be told, there is a similarly framed essay required of students at the end of every foundations class.

The assignment is a paper entitled "A Challenge to Act," and in it students are instructed: "For this essay, articulate your challenge toward action as an educator. Given the materials we've explored in class, the group discussions we have generated, your emerging educational philosophy and your reflections, outside readings and activities, articulate how this new perspective challenges you to act in terms of your educational practice and philosophy." In most cases, if not for every student, the results are inspiring. Our degree candidates, all practicing teachers, find myriad creative ways to live the principles they've renewed or discovered through studying the foundations of education. Requiring this kind of practical interpretation and application of the highly theoretical texts we ask our students to grapple with is a no-brainer, right? Or not?

In 2003, George Noblit and Beth Hatt-Echeverria edited a book entitled *The Future of Educational Studies*.<sup>4</sup> In this volume, Noblit and Hatt-Echeverria sought to respond to what was perceived at the time as a "generational and intellectual transformation" in the field of educational studies (nee social foundations), and to provide a space in which to both reflect on the discipline's past as well as imagine its future. To some, the disciplinary shifts represented a threat to the identity and scholarship of a generation of thinkers while, to others, the changes represented the potential for a broader landscape and more open frontier for generating new knowledge. Despite (or because of) these differences—these conflicts—the editors sought to illustrate the "vibrancy" of the field. Ten years later, we seem to find ourselves in a different sort of position. Although the senior scholars at the time of publication likely felt they were "defending" the foundations in very real ways, the threat was different. Today, we aren't defending the foundations from a transformation within the discipline, but rather from what feel like much more sinister, much more pervasive, much more threatening, *external* forces.

In thinking about this article, one chapter in Noblit and Hatt-Echeverria's volume particularly resonates. Steve Tozer's "Making the Philosophical Practical"<sup>5</sup> challenged philosophers of education, and the field of educational philosophy as a whole, to move beyond the rather insular boundaries of "guild work" (or, philosophy and philosophizing for philosophers' sake) and commit to working toward greater positive impacts on educational *practices*: more specifically, the practices of schooling. Tozer argued, albeit with some sense of the "disquietude familiar to philosophers of education," that the future of philosophy of education may very well depend on the ability of the field, and those within it, to act and engage in ways that are just plain more relevant to education and to educating at large in the everyday sense of the word/work. Tozer suggested broadening the definition of what "counts" as philosophy of education and, as such, increasing the ways in which the philosophical endeavor can practically benefit education and schooling. In many ways, this parallels the notion of "action philosophy" that we are using to frame our thinking for this article. Why work in the foundations of education if those efforts do

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4. George Noblit & Beth Hatt-Echeverria, eds., *The Future of Educational Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

5. Steve Tozer, "Making the Philosophical Practical," in *The Future of Educational Studies*, ed. George Noblit and Beth Hatt-Echeverria (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

not have a tangible and traceable impact on the experience of real teachers and students in real P-12 educational environments? To what end work in the social foundations if it does not have a tangible and traceable impact on society at large?

These questions are not new; as Noblit, Hatt-Echeverria and Sherick Hughes<sup>6</sup> remind us, the earliest of social foundations scholars (and by this we mean the Teachers College crew of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) were “pushed to be practical” by their teacher educator colleagues. Although the substance of those tensions might have been different than today, the historical parallel is a valuable one to consider. Again looking back to Wittgenstein, philosophy (or, in our case, the social and philosophical foundations) as an active and activist pursuit can be a catalyst for practical, real-world change.

Making the philosophical practical was our rallying call when we were given the opportunity to redevelop the Curriculum and Instruction Master of Arts program soon—very soon—after our arrival here. Considering that we were both hired without our completed doctorates in hand, it was downright shockingly soon—within the first few months of our first academic year in 2006-2007—that we were selected to lead an undertaking of this magnitude. (In fact, it would be years before we finished our dissertations and could proudly point to the fancy letters following our names. Thinking about it, this may well be related to the size of the projects we were allowed [willing?] to take on, as well as to the wisdom of our eagerness for these first gigs as real[?] academics. But that’s a whole other story of theories, actions and consequences . . .)

Nevertheless, we approached the task with enthusiasm and an unshakeable faith in the value of the educational foundations. With a firm grounding in foundational studies, the program provided a balance between what teachers thought they needed (the methods) and what they came to realize they needed (the foundations) after having been introduced to educational studies. We made sure that no teaching method was taught in isolation; along with the classroom practices, students also learned the underlying theoretical assumptions about teaching and learning in which they were grounded. To make sure *every* class called for both thinking *and* doing, we embedded a program-long capstone experience involving a “Challenge to Act”-style reflection at the end of each course.

The majority of students responded quite positively to the redesigned program, appreciating both the intellectual stimulation of engaging deeply with issues in the foundations and the enriched understanding of their work in the classroom that the process provided. Still, we weren’t exactly free of the “whiny why,” from candidates or colleagues, and many a hand-wringing, head-shaking conversation about this transpired between us. Little did we realize how good we had it, back when the naysayers might whine, but the foundations still had a prominent and protected place in the curricula of all of our education degree programs.

### “That Old Time Religion”<sup>7</sup>

Most of the stars of the second section in our comic guidebook looked above for direction and guidance on how to live the good life. Whether it was St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas in prayer to the Christian God, Bodhidharma following the path of Buddha, Rumi in mystical communion with Allah, or Isaac Luria teaching the Kabbalah, the medieval philosophers indeed

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6. George Noblit, Beth Hatt-Echeverria, & Sherick Hughes, “Where Identity Meets Knowledge: The Future of Educational Studies,” in *The Future of Educational Studies*, ed. George Noblit and Beth Hatt-Echeverria (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 313-27.

7. Van Lente & Dunlavey, *Action Philosophers!*, iii.

got religion. Compared to their Greek predecessors, they did a lot less pondering and a lot more parsing of scriptures and other holy texts.

Interestingly, in the second chapter of our story we also began to see greater reliance on external authority for validation and purpose—a situation that strongly intensified our hand-wringing. Even as we were happily teaching the newly designed Curriculum and Instruction Master's program in the 2007-2008 academic year, we began to hear rumblings as our NCATE<sup>8</sup> report deadlines and upcoming site visit loomed nearer. There were some among our colleagues who began to appear extremely pious, earnestly discussing what we might do to please this higher power. The answers nearly always had to do with “quality control through standardization,” a direct quote that we won't be so catty as to attribute.

We know that our experience with NCATE's reign of terror was not unique. Peter Taubman's award-winning book of 2009, *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*,<sup>9</sup> recounts his own very similar trauma—the result of an NCATE visit to his institution in New York City. That text would have been a help to us in 07-08, as it not only critiques the slavishness of his college's response to NCATE's every anticipated desire, it also empathizes with it. In a chapter entitled “The Seduction of a Profession,” Taubman explains the fear, shame, fantasy and mourning that are the detritus of a decades-long attack on the work and personhood of our nation's educators, and that have primed us for the supplicant's role. Since these have only intensified in the few short years since Taubman's book was published, it should come as no surprise that standardization and submission to external control is even more deeply ingrained today. Common Core, anyone?

As passionate advocates of teachers' creative control over the curriculum, and firm believers that critical thinking cannot be taught where there is no opportunity for it to be modeled, we resisted this shift to a more top-down approach to program administration. And, as anyone who was marginally more savvy than us could have foreseen, we were no longer the higher-ups' favored children. We were not shy about expressing our feelings toward NCATE, so we weren't trusted to lead the report writing; we were no longer the “go-to” team. Again, a less naïve pair would have seen the benefits right away (We did, eventually, finish those dissertations, for one.), but we were a bit put out. And somewhere in an idle fantasy we thought about how nice it would be if we were in a department of our own...

A new department! A haven where we'd be free of interminable meetings at which little lines of data are traced along the graphs that never end. A home in the university where we'd have like-minded colleagues and a shared vision for our programs—as well as for the educational endeavor writ large. A place to ensure that the foundations courses taught in *all* the programs (Master's and doctorate) engaged the students (all 3500+ of them) in the highest-level theory *and* made certain it came to life in their on-the-ground practice. A space in which we could actualize the purpose of the Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies to “promote quality instruction and learning in foundational studies to guarantee to the extent possible that those individuals in pre-service and in-service educator preparation programs have opportunities to acquire interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on education through rigorous study and field experienc-

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8. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or, then, The Bane of Our Existence.

9. Peter Taubman, *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

es.”<sup>10</sup> This was our dream and, we were happy to discover, one that was shared by several of our workmates. We convinced the dean of the efficiency and effectiveness of centralized expertise in the areas of foundations, social policy, and research, and we spent the better part of a year in brainstorming sessions, researching what foundations-oriented academic spaces at other institutions were comprised of, and drafting and redrafting our proposal.

**Readers: Insert inspirational opening vignette from the start of this article here.**

It was a triumph: an accomplishment to be proud of and from which others might take inspiration. We’d always liked coming to work (we’d been close friends since grad school and, as we mentioned, our offices were right across the hall from each other’s), but now the job was even better! For one thing, department meetings were a qualitatively different experience. Sure, we laid out program plans and approved new course prospectuses, but it was more than just business; the process involved stimulating discussion of the *ideas* in the documents—in fact, participating in such heady endeavor was part of the mandate that came along with the department. It seemed there was recognition in our college of the importance of the foundations; the proof was right there in our department chair’s presence on the leadership team and in our dean’s insistence that we engage, and endeavor to engage our colleagues, in scholarship and “thinking big thoughts.” We were asked to develop—and delivered—a bevy of new courses that took seriously the history, sociology, politics, and philosophy of education. We designed a doctoral seminar for educational leadership folks that explored deeply what it means to teach and lead in ways that are socially just. We developed two new graduate programs and began work on a third.

We were also excited about the number of our students, and our students’ students, who would be touched by this work. We had never in our capacities as higher education faculty felt so much ability to make a real impact on real kids in real schools. It was amazing. And it was wonderful to share the news of what had transpired with our friends at the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) annual meeting. It was clear on their faces that what we had managed to create, in the climate in which we created it, was indeed inspirational to others in the discipline.

In creating our own institutional home, we rejected “that old time religion”—or any religion at all. Our new department was populated by colleagues who were like-minded, and also simply *like* us: young(ish), relatively new to the professoriate. We had refused the tyranny of NCATE, but we had also closed off the possibility of eldership by separating ourselves from the associate and full professors who had the longest history here. Again, we were not unique in this. In fact, Bernard Bailyn’s classic treatise *Education in the Forming of American Society* explains that this is practically a part of our national character, forged by generation after generation leaving the protection and authority of their family homes to sail to America and settle the ever-farther frontiers.<sup>11</sup>

Our own westward push is understandable then, if perhaps ungrateful to the elders who had given us such wonderful opportunities for leadership early on (or a wise escape from a workload that would have kept us ABD forever, depending on your perspective). Still, it may have been wiser still to take at least *something* from the medieval philosophers’ search for divine

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10. The American Educational Studies Association’s Committee on Academic Standards and Accreditation, “Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies. Third Edition.” 2012.

11. Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972).

guidance. It was our lack of direct connection to the powers above that may have been the biggest precipitating factor in the challenge to come.

### “Blinded Me with Science”<sup>12</sup>

Many in the third set of action philosophers do an about face, turning away from heaven and planting their flags (and knowledge claims) firmly in the ground. The Enlightened minds of modern philosophy (Francis Bacon, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and the like) looked to their senses and trusted what could be scientifically verified—much in the same way that the programs offered by our College, driven by the data requirements of accreditation bodies and the desires of students, became more empirically grounded. Without a presence in the departments that housed these programs, without a connection to the sites of programmatic power, we were left without a voice when foundations courses began to disappear in an intensifying focus on practice.

When we were initially asked to redevelop the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) Master’s program soon after our arrival, our task was to reframe the program as something more meaningful than a bunch of professional development seminars masquerading as graduate-level courses. A few short years later, our own newly designed Master’s degree, Critical Perspectives in Education, and the C&I program itself struggle to enroll students, while the M.A. in Differentiated Instruction (more professional development workshop-esque than the original C&I program, if that is even possible) fills cohorts beyond capacity each eight-week term.

In addition, there’s been a frightening shift in student responses to the foundations classes we still teach. Just a few short years ago, teachers seemed much more willing to engage with abstract ideas (despite the “whiney why” about courses that asked more questions than provided answers). Now, many of our students are themselves products of schooling under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), socialized to merely check in and check off the boxes. If I can’t use it tomorrow in my classroom, it isn’t worth it. As can be seen with the decline of the liberal arts more generally, somehow we as a society have been persuaded that education equals training, nothing more. There can be no question without answers, and those answers need to conform to what’s both conventionally acceptable and directly aligned with making “progress.”

This new negotiation with students is a tricky one. In many ways, the Critical Perspectives Program was developed in direct response to what students say they want and need (at the end of a foundations course), but the problem for us (and the company that markets our programs) is that they don’t know they want/need it until after they have experienced it. It’s a challenge that all foundations educators face: We might know the value and practical application of our discipline to P-12 classroom practice, but it is difficult to communicate in such a way that others—our students, our colleagues, the powers-that-be—can understand it *before* beginning the work. How do we sell the foundations in the face of so much desperation for a quick fix, an easy answer, a cure-all for what ails us broadly and our schools individually? Our students are teachers and administrators who tangibly feel the pressures we talk of every day—feel them in ways that, even with the specter of NCATE looming over us, we can really only theorize about.

Perhaps our plan had backfired. Yes, we had protected the ideas, but we encountered as much if not more anti-foundations sentiment—and we were no longer “in the mix” to resist or provide counter-proposals. In many ways, we can attribute this to the increased pressure on teacher and administrator preparation programs to behave in ways very similar to the teachers

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12. Van Lente & Dunlavey, *Action Philosophers!*, iii.

and administrators in them: Identify the standards, align all content and curriculum with them, and ensure that our work in our graduate classrooms mimics that of each other as closely as possible. We recall the New Teacher in James Clavell's *The Children's Story*:

The teacher waited for them to finish their candy. This was what she had been trained for, and she knew that she would teach her children well and that they would grow up to be good citizens. She looked out of the window, at the sun over the land. It was a good land, and vast. A land to breathe in. But she was warmed not only by the sun, but by the thought that throughout the school and throughout the land all children, all men and all women were being taught with the same faith, with variations of the same procedures. Each according to his age group. Each according to his need.<sup>13</sup>

We hear echoed in Clavell the equally chilling words of our colleague: "Quality control through standardization."

We feel at the mercy of the empiricists, who serve an even more jealous god than those of the medieval philosophers. Although the recent redrafting of the Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies provides a vehicle of hope in terms of answering one set of powerful standards with another, as a field we're not quite there yet. So we must ask ourselves, did we, by pursuing our own academic department, unintentionally serve to further marginalize the foundational disciplines in our college? Have our actions (either heroic or flight-of-fancy, depending on your perspective) served to pave the way for our coursework to be excised from the numerous programs that our college offers? It certainly seemed so as the long arm of the standards and accrediting bodies continued to reach out and pick away at the structures we were building for our students.

In one of the fabled "counter-top" meetings that occur in our college (a meeting in which broad, sweeping changes are made in minutes while standing at the counter that separates the administrative assistants from the walkway), the "Foundations and Philosophy" section of the doctoral core went from requiring a choice of three (of six!) newly developed courses in the traditional foundational subjects, to requiring coursework in subjects like organizational change and theories of leadership. Why? Because in this day and age, the university can't afford to burden students with "luxury" courses in the historical, cultural, political and social contexts of education, or the philosophical and theoretical foundations of education. And especially not that Social Justice Theory and Practice course; that one is downright antithetical—dangerous even—to the work that teachers and administrators are compelled to do in their classrooms and schools.

Not only are we not invited to the conversation (no longer surprising), but there are regular attempts made to wrest curricular and staffing control of the foundations courses that remain from our purview. (For example, one such effort involved the claim that our Contemporary Issues in Educational Policy course was a methods class and therefore out of our curricular control.) Of small consolation is the fact that we have been able to teach the leadership theory class as a pretty hard-core social and philosophical foundations course. The department housing the program this class is a part of hasn't figured out what we're doing yet (fingers crossed that they never do—or read this article!), but they are aware that students regularly cite it as their "favorite" class in the program, the one in which they "learned more about education and [themselves] than all the other courses combined." Go figure. I guess that's what they mean by "luxurious."

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13. James Clavell, *The Children's Story* (New York: Dell, 1963/1981), 18.

### “Our Stupid Age of Isms”<sup>14</sup>

The final section of *Action Philosophers!* paints the landscape of contemporary thought in all of its brilliant variance. From Karl Marx to Ayn Rand, Joseph Campbell to Michel Foucault, there are so many diverse directions to intellectually travel that it’s hard to choose a single road. Taking in the view from *several* of these, letting each perspective raise questions about the others, seems like a good way to avoid the potential for stupidity in any single “ism.” In the last stage of our story (thus far) we are inspired by contemporary philosophy to examine the narrative and its implications from a variety of angles and to ensure that the latest incarnation of our fledgling department—now a university Center—takes the same broad view.

This summer, our department was transformed into the Center for Policy Studies and Social Justice. Our mission is to explore policy as a catalyst for a more socially just world through wide-ranging research, dissemination, education and advocacy. This work, which we have been doing for years as part of the scholarship and service components of our vocations, has been granted the institutional status of a Center. We were given significantly reduced teaching loads and a free-standing, 1920s-era house in which to make our Center home. (Our previous offices were carpet cubicles located behind the bathrooms, easily accessible by a swift kick and half-hearted push to the flimsily constructed wall.) Of course, now that our offices are in this house we are out of sight (and out of mind?) for many of the colleagues and supervisors who’ve questioned the worth and validity of our work over the years. And, although the Center is charged with some programmatic responsibilities, we are no longer considered an academic department, lessening our already tenuous connection to the college degree programs.

To say we were surprised by this development would be an understatement, and our feelings about the change were—and are—complex. In the face of the foundations fire-sale in our college’s course offerings, the upper university administration has made an even more strenuous and focused effort to ensure that a place for this kind of work, our kind of work, grows in terms of scope and frequency through our establishment as a Center. This is an interesting, and troubling, tension: the perceived “luxury” status of our work within our own college juxtaposed to the apparent value of it to the university as a whole. Our college and university colleagues view the new Center very differently: to many in our college, we’ve been isolated and punished; to the faculty in Arts and Sciences (and our friends at other institutions) the Center confers status and prestige. On the one hand, our geographic and intellectual distance in the Center may allow the foundations to be further marginalized by our colleagues. Or, just the opposite, the Center may make it possible for us to be in a space where our work can have an even farther-reaching impact, where we can “defend the foundations” on a larger scale.

It is incumbent upon us to ask both sides of the same question: What did we do “wrong” with respect to “losing” the department (or rather, our explicit involvement with academic programming across the college), and what did we do “right” in terms of earning the prestige and impressive physical space that came with the elevation of our work to the level of university Center? To be honest, it has been hard—*really* hard—to “let go” of our involvement, both teaching and administrative, with programs we were at one time so instrumental in building. But perhaps what’s needed here is another reality check—similar to rethinking our response to being “snubbed” on NCATE report-writing: Should we really object to being freed of the shackles that many academics feel constrain their best work? Are we really complaining about a reduced teaching load? Are we crazy?

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14. Van Lente & Dunlavey, *Action Philosophers!*, iii.

It reminds us of how hard it was to leave our P-12 classrooms for roles in higher education, and of some of the reasons we did so. Like many of us in these hallowed halls, the notion of “making a difference” took on new meaning when we began to imagine the potential and possibility of having an impact on the field, an impact that extended beyond the 30 or 160 kids in our elementary and secondary classrooms to the teachers of those kids. Do the math, it’s huge! It’s a bit arrogant, yes (and discordant, given the current educational climate and the perceived worth of teacher educators by textbook companies, test publishers, venture philanthropists, and society in general), but, if we’re all being honest, not untrue. And yet, while folks from around the university (and beyond) seem to recognize the significance of What Just Happened, our college colleagues offer false condolences at our “punishment.” Punishment, indeed! Or...wait...

### With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Fabulous as the *Action Philosophers!* may be, sometimes you need to be inspired by a good old-fashioned superhero. Thus, our concluding subheading is a quote from Uncle Ben to a young Peter Parker, otherwise known as the amazing Spiderman. (Of course, this sentiment was previously expressed by Jesus Christ<sup>15</sup> and Voltaire,<sup>16</sup> among others, but only Spiderman is *best* known as a comic book superhero.<sup>17</sup>) Now that we have the Center, our responsibility has increased exponentially in a variety of ways. We have more power, more support, more of everything than ever before (except, of course, courses to teach and students to impact, but...). So what do/should we do? How do/should we leverage this? Returning to our old friend Wittgenstein, if philosophy really is more than just theory, if it really does compel us toward action, then it’s time to put the pedal to the metal and, in the words of Pink (ugh, *this* is our popular music reference?), “get this party started.” We have a responsibility to act, and our challenge is to act in a manner that continues to push, prod, and cajole in ways that extend the “good” of the work that we do into as many areas as we can reach, in ways that prompt others to think, consider, and act themselves.

Peter Parker/Spiderman, in keeping the secret of his dual identity, might also be a model for our creative use of deception. If we are being truly honest, the fact that the majority of our college colleagues think that we’ve been banished to the hinterlands for acting in an untoward fashion is actually beneficial to us and the work that we seek to do in numerous ways. It’s amazing how much can be accomplished when folks with enough power to be inconvenient (if not downright dangerous) truly believe that we’ve been made irrelevant; if they don’t remember that we do still exist (yes, we have gotten a few “You still work here?” queries); or if we leave uncorrected their misconceptions about what it is we do and how it is we do it. To that end, it seems we do much of our best work under the cover of something—anything—else.

Now, we’d like to think this is akin to teaching as a subversive activity,<sup>18</sup> but there are a couple of problems with this. First, just where are we sitting morally with this one? Is it possible to “do good work” in any sense if such work is done under the guise of something it is not? The irony is not lost on us, as two of the courses that come out of the academic branch of our Center are grounded in “ethics.” Second, what’s the value of specifically located mild subterfuge when what is really needed is a large-scale revolution? That said, we know that throwing

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15. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 1885.

16. Voltaire. Jean, Adrien. Beuchot, Quentin and Miger, Pierre, Auguste. "Œuvres de Voltaire, Volume 48." Lefèvre, 1832.

17. Stan Lee, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, August 1962.

18. Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell, 1971).

rocks at a tank is not particularly effective (although it's an activity that we as educators and scholars seem to favor), and that one must learn, if not speak, the language of the oppressor in order to gain an audience, much less get a seat at the table (an activity that more often than not seems bile-inducing to that same population of educators and scholars). As Adrienne Rich writes, "This is the oppressor's language//yet I need it to talk to you."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, and going a good way toward explaining that bile, Audre Lorde warns us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>20</sup> For us, does (or should) the question become one of how much of our souls are we willing to sell in order to be able to do the work that we know "needs to be done"?

It is easy, if spiritually and mentally painful, to sit back and watch with horror as departments of educational foundations are systematically dismantled or absorbed, and courses in the foundational disciplines are excised from graduate programs in favor of experiences that are more "practical" and easily/explicitly aligned with "the standards." These actions are born out of frightened and reactionary visions of what it means to satisfy accrediting bodies and movements toward greater standardization of content, practice and outcomes. To know that this is occurring at institutions far and wide—including our own—is not enough. Diane Ravitch hosted a recent public scolding of academics on her blog as readers wondered when "a silent academia in the colleges of education" is going to "start taking control back." In many ways, philosophizing only gets us so far.

When Dewey's vision of a good society was contested (much like our vision of what comprises a good education), the best that he could do was to continue the conversation through process of dialogue with supporters and detractors alike. We're not sure if that is the kind of philosophy as activity that Wittgenstein imagined, but we feel we have an imperative to take it a step further. It is at this place of dialogue where the seeds of critical conversation are planted and an impetus toward action cultivated; we are working to inspire our colleagues throughout the discipline toward advocacy and activism. The "action" we must take is simple; we must embrace Maxine Greene's injunction to "imagine not what is necessarily probable or predictable, but what may be conceived as possible"<sup>21</sup> in the service of securing the future of our field and as a positive consequence, society. We must heed Uncle Ben's words of wisdom, and use our newly acquired power in both responsibly and with a sense of responsibility.

### Postscript

Just days after we received the editors' revised draft of this article, we were faced with the latest crisis of our work defending the educational foundations. Tucked into an upcoming meeting agenda was a proposal to completely scrap the Curriculum and Instruction Master of Arts Program, which we had designed as first-year assistant professors, in favor of an M.Ed. program with the same name that would have no foundations courses at all—a self-proclaimed practitioners' degree. If the proposal were to pass, no Master's-level graduate students would take any foundations courses at all, and our lessened "practical" value as faculty members in the college would make us even more vulnerable in the event of a possible reduction in force, something that has occurred at our university as recently as 15 years ago.

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19. Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*. (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1971).

20. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1978).

21. Maxine Greene, "Teaching as Possibility: A Light in Dark Times," *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*, no. 1 (1997): 2.

After a sleepless weekend and a frantic Monday brainstorming session, we strategized a response plan. It involved countering the research in the proposal (not so difficult, considering that the majority of it was from Pearson texts) with the foundations standards referenced earlier in this article and with yet-to-be-published work from the newest issue of *Educational Studies*, as well as written and personal communications with faculty and administration. At the start of the meeting, any outcome was still possible, but then two extraordinary things happened: Our colleagues in the department, who are not part of the Center but still enjoy and appreciate engaging the foundations, began voicing objections; and the dean of our college asked for the proposal to be revised based on input from all parts of the college—including the Center.

The fight is not over. The program that we created *will* be redesigned. We still need to work to convince our colleagues that the educational foundations have value—real-world, practical value—for students. But at least we have a seat at the table in this round of negotiations. Now if only this article was not about to go to press, and we didn't have to leave you with this cliffhanger ending. Oh well, we suppose it's an appropriate close for a comic book tale. Don't miss the next exciting episode of Action Foundations!

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