

Discontinuity in Learning

In this groundbreaking book, Andrea R. English challenges common assumptions by arguing that discontinuous experiences, such as uncertainty and struggle, are essential to the learning process. To make this argument, Dr. English draws from the works of two seminal thinkers in philosophy of education – nineteenth-century German philosopher J. F. Herbart and American pragmatist John Dewey. Dr. English's analysis considers Herbart's influence on Dewey, inverting the accepted interpretation of Dewey's thought as a dramatic break from modern European understandings of education. Three key concepts – transformational learning, tact in teaching, and perfectibility – emerge from this analysis to revitalize our understanding of education as a transformational process. Dr. English's comparative approach interweaves European and Anglo-American traditions of educational thought with a contemporary scholarly perspective, contributing to a work that is both intellectually rewarding and applicable to a classroom setting. The result is a book that is essential reading for philosophers and scholars of education, as well as for educators.

Andrea R. English is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada. Dr. English, an American scholar, previously taught at Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, from which she received her doctorate in 2005. Her work on theories of teaching and learning has appeared internationally in scholarly journals and essay collections.

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Discontinuity in Learning

Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation

ANDREA R. ENGLISH

Mount Saint Vincent University





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Sections of Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 8: "Negativity, Experience and Transformation: Educational Possibilities at the Margins of Experience – Insights from the German Tradition of Philosophy of Education." In Education and the Kyoto School of Philosophy: Pedagogy for Human Transformation, edited by Paul Standish and Naoko Saito, 203–20. Dordrecht: Springer Publishers, 2012 © Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2012.

Sections of Chapters 1 and 2: "Critical Listening and the Dialogic Aspect of Moral Education: J. F. Herbart's Concept of the Teacher as Moral



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- Guide." *Educational Theory*, 61, no. 2 (Special Issue "Philosophies of Listening," edited by Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and Megan Laverty), 2011: 171–89.
- Sections of the Epilogue: "Should Teachers Think? Autonomy, Accountability and Philosophy of Education." *Teacher: Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation*, 23, no. 5, March 2011: 5.
- Sections of Chapter 7: "Listening as a Teacher: Educative Listening, Interruptions and Reflective Practice." *Paideusis: International Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Special Issue "Open-Mindedness and the Virtues in Education" honoring William Hare, edited by Michelle E. Forrest), 18, no. 1, 2009b: 69–79.
- Sections of Chapters 1 and 6: "Transformation and Education: The Voice of the Learner in Peters' Concept of Teaching." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43, Issue Supplement s1 (Special Issue "Reading R. S. Peters Today: Analysis, Ethics and the Aims of Education, edited by Stefaan Cuypers and Christopher Martin), 2009a: 75–95.
- Sections of Chapters 3 and 4: "Wo doing aufhört und learning anfängt: John Dewey über Lernen und die Negativität in Erfahrung und Denken." In Dem Lernen auf der Spur, edited by Konstantin Mitgutsch, Elizabeth Sattler, Kristin Westphal, and Ines M. Breinbauer, 145–58. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008.
- Sections of Chapters 2, 3, and 4: "Die Experimentelle Struktur menschliches Lehrens und Lernens: Versuche über die Rolle negativer Erfahrung in den Lehr-Lerntheorien von Herbart und Dewey." In *Johann Friedrich Herbart: 200 Jahre Allgemeine Pädagogik. Wirkungsgeschichtliche Impulse*, edited by Rainer Bolle and Gabriele Weigand, 97–112. Berlin: Waxmann, 2007a.
- Sections of Chapter 4: "Nietzsche, Deception and Education: A Response to Katz's Nietzschean Puzzle." In *Philosophy of Education 2006*, edited by Daniel Vokey, 401–03. Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007b.
- Sections of Chapter 4: "Interrupted Experiences: Reflection, Listening and *Negativity* in the Practice of Teaching." *Learning Inquiry*, 1 (Special Issue "Listening and Reflecting," edited by Leonard J. Waks), no. 2, 2007c: 133–42.
- Sections of Part One and Chapter 8: Bildung Negativität Moralität: Systematisch-vergleichende Analysen zu Herbarts und Deweys Konzepten der Erziehung. Dissertation, Berlin: Humboldt University Berlin Library Archives, 2005c.



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Sections of Chapter 3: "Negativität der Erfahrung, Pragmatismus und die Grundstruktur des Lernens – Erziehungswissenschaftliche Reflexion zur Bedeutung des Pragmatismus von Peirce, James und Mead für Deweys Theorie der reflective experience." *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 49 (Special Issue "Erziehung, Bildung, Negativität" edited by Dietrich Benner), 2005b: 49–61.

Sections of Chapters 3 and 4: "Negativity and the New in John Dewey's Theory of Learning and Democracy: Toward a Renewed Look at Learning Cultures." Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, 8, no. 1, 2005a: 28–37.



### **Abbreviations**

#### THE WORKS OF HERBART

AP Allgemeine Pädagogik
APP Allgemeine Praktische Philosophie
ARW The Aesthetic Revelation of the World
SE The Science of Education

#### THE WORKS OF DEWEY

AE Art as Experience
DE Democracy and Education
HWT How We Think

LTI Logic: The Theory of Inquiry

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### Note on the Translation

I have modified the standard translation of Herbart's texts in various ways. It is important to note that I am making a significant change to the standard translation of Herbart's term *Zucht*, which in the standard translation is translated as "discipline," but which I translate as "moral guidance." Also, Herbart's term *Vielseitigkeit*, which relates to his theory of instruction, is translated in the standard translation as "manysidedness"; however, I have determined that a better-suited translation is "multifacetedness." In cases where I have modified the standard translation of a text passage, I note this with the words "translation modified." As for all of the untranslated German texts of Herbart and other authors, I have translated these texts myself, and note this as "translation mine."

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### Note on Usage

Throughout this book, with reference to the use of generic singular nouns and pronouns, my usage should be understood as inclusive of all human beings. When it does not hinder reading, I use "or" (e.g., "he or she"). In all other cases (e.g., when referring in the singular to teachers, learners, individuals, etc.), I vary between using generic male and female nouns and pronouns.

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### Prologue: Why Herbart and Dewey?

Questions concerning the structure of learning date back at least as far as Western Antiquity. From Plato through to the modern era, philosophers have recognized and investigated the aporetic and paradoxical aspects of human experience and learning. Certain authors in this tradition have highlighted the fact that learning necessarily involves discontinuous moments. This runs contrary to the more common understanding of learning as a smooth, continuous transition from ignorance to knowledge. Discontinuous moments in learning can be described as points at which the learner is confused, perplexed, filled with doubt, or engaged in a struggle with new and unfamiliar objects or ideas.

Two modern philosophers have placed particular significance on the discontinuous moments in learning processes, namely, the well-known American pragmatist John Dewey, and one of his predecessors, the lesser-known nineteenth-century German philosopher, Johann F. Herbart.¹ It is generally widely recognized in Dewey scholarship that – by his own account – learning is a process that begins with the learner's experience of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> J. F. Herbart (1776–1841) was a philosophy student of German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte at the University of Jena, and later worked as professor of philosophy at Göttingen University and the University of Königsberg, where he took the former post of Immanuel Kant. Herbart made it his central aim to investigate educational questions; he can be considered one of the foundational thinkers in modern pedagogy. Herbart's followers created the educational movement known as Herbartianism, a movement that was influential in the United States and Europe. In the United States, the Herbartians formed the National Herbart Society around 1895, a society in which John Dewey was an active member (but he was not considered a Herbartian); see Harold B. Dunkel, Herbart and Education (New York: Random House, 1969). Although Dewey (1859–1952) is better known than Herbart, it is worth mentioning that he studied at Johns Hopkins University with George S. Morris and gained prominence during his time on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he initiated the Laboratory School. He later moved to the philosophy department at Columbia University, New York, where he remained until his retirement. On these and other aspects of Dewey's biography and intellectual life, see Robert B. Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).



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"doubt," "difficulty," or "frustration," and leads to reflective thinking. Far less considered is how this central tenet of Dewey's thought connects his work to the Continental tradition of *philosophy of education* (in German, *Allgemeine Pädagogik*), in particular to the work of Herbart. For the most part, the American reception of Dewey has focused on understanding him as a dramatic break from modern European understandings of education that had taken hold in late nineteenth-century America, including, and perhaps especially, that of Herbart.<sup>2</sup> At least part of the reason for this reception may be owing to the fact that Dewey himself – although acknowledging Herbart as an influence – criticized the Herbartian movement in his 1916 canonical work *Democracy and Education*. To this day, those aspects of Deweyan philosophy that demonstrate significant continuity with the Continental tradition of education philosophy have gone almost entirely unrecognized. This marks a significant gap in the research.

Discontinuity in Learning: Dewey, Herbart, and Education as Transformation addresses this gap. In this book, I argue that both Herbart and Dewey provide answers to the question concerning the structure of learning. Their works on education demonstrate the central educational meaning of discontinuity in learning and, in turn, in teaching processes. Through detailed analysis of these authors' works, this book seeks to enrich our understanding of discontinuity in education with the aim of productively reorienting how we approach education.

This book is situated in an international discourse on education currently taking place in both the English- and German-speaking worlds. In these contexts, philosophers have examined and established the importance of understanding learning as a complex process – one that entails what I have termed "discontinuous moments." In the English-speaking world, these moments are discussed in a variety of ways, without necessarily using the concept "discontinuity." For example, philosophers have discussed aspects of learning such as doubt, fear, discomfort, difficulty, disorientation, and

Recently, scholars have taken an increased interest in the well-known nineteenth-century German philosopher (and contemporary of Herbart) G. W. F. Hegel's influence on Dewey's thought in a way that begins to contribute to understanding Dewey in the context of Continental philosophy. See, for example, James A. Good, A Search for Unity in Diversity: The 'Permanent Hegelian Deposit' in the Philosophy of John Dewey (New York: Lexington Books, 2005). For an examination of the emerging scholarship on Hegel and Dewey, see James Garrison, "The 'Permanent Deposit' of Hegelian Thought in Dewey's Theory of Inquiry," Educational Theory, 56, no. 1, 2006: 1–37). See also David I. Waddington, "Uncovering Hegelian Connections: A New Look at Dewey's Early Educational Ideas," Education and Culture, 26, no. 1, 2010: 67–81. Despite this important scholarship, extended study into J. F. Herbart as a foundational influence on Dewey's educational thought remains largely unexamined.



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ignorance as central aspects of educational processes.<sup>3</sup> Although each of these ideas demarcates different phenomena, they all describe aspects of learning that are conceptually connected to the idea of discontinuity, as I will demonstrate.

Within the present-day German-speaking philosophical discourse on education, the idea of discontinuity is more prevalently discussed than it is in English. German educational philosophers have drawn on the tradition of philosophy of experience, as developed in particular by Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty, to analyze processes of learning and teaching. Within this discourse, concepts have been developed that provide a way of talking about discontinuities in learning and teaching using the idea of the "negativity of experience" (Negativität der Erfahrung) and also "negative experience" (negative Erfahrung). In this context, the term "negative" has a different sense from what it does in colloquial English, in that it is not meant pejoratively. The negativity of experience arises in our encounters with difference and otherness, that is, in encounters that are the basis for learning, since learning necessarily involves confronting something that is as yet unfamiliar and new.

Why do we need the term "negativity" in English-speaking discourse?

To use the terms "negative" and "negativity" to describe experience likely brings a bad taste to the English-speaker's palate. In everyday language, these terms commonly describe something bad, such as an undesirable experience. Although these and related terms have to some extent been incorporated into English-language philosophical discourse, the terms were given meaning primarily with reference to the German philosophical tradition, such as Hegel's "the negation of negation" (Negation der Negation) or Heidegger's "the nothing noths" (das Nichts nichtet). These usages in English-language contexts have maintained a distinctly foreign quality to their tone.

Yet, the terminology of the *negative*, especially the concept of *negativity of experience*, has proven to be significant for discussions of teaching and learning. The concept of negativity provides the philosophical basis to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Each of these concepts and the authors dealing with these phenomena will be referenced in various ways throughout the book, for example, Nicholas Burbules's work on doubt, Gert Biesta's work on difficulty, Deborah Kerdeman's work on disorientation, and relevant work by others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This German discourse will be taken up throughout the book, referring to the works of authors such as Günther Buck, Fritz Oser, Käte Meyer-Drawe, Dietrich Benner, and others who have discussed notions of negativity of experience in relation to teaching and learning.



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examine and describe phenomena at the margins of experience in ways that can get lost or be easily overlooked without this terminology. Using this terminology, we can discuss the connection between different kinds of learning experiences (such as doubt or fear) in ways that are not possible within the limits of the current English-speaking discourse in philosophy of education.

Thus, the term "negative" is used here as a way of philosophically demarcating the moment when a person experiences a limit to his or her present ability or knowledge. These are moments in experience when our ideas or ways of acting become untenable, and thus are often coupled with doubt, discomfort, or frustration. They make us aware that experience and learning are not merely positive and continuous, but also negative and discontinuous. By examining connections between negativity and learning, we can open up the possibility of grasping meaningful differences between learning as mere correction of error and learning as transformation of self and world.

The aforementioned English- and German-language discourses in educational philosophy (although operating largely without reference to one another) serve to resist the overwhelmingly common conception of learning as merely a series of positive steps toward the acquisition of knowledge. Unfortunately, current trends in educational *policy* tend to frame learning as merely the continuous step-by-step achievement of predefined outcomes. On such models, the student's difficulties, frustrations, or doubts are considered signs of a *halt* in the learning process and are associated with the learner's failure. Accordingly, the student's difficulties with a particular subject matter in school are viewed by teachers and administrators as undesirable and problematic. In this way, the concept of learning has become dramatically simplified and reified.

These current trends have serious implications for teaching. Teaching is increasingly construed as transmitting predetermined outcomes to students and then using standardized testing to verify that students have achieved these outcomes. In practice, teachers are pressured to eliminate any signs of student failure from the classroom, at the risk of losing employment or resources. The result is that students' difficulties are not perceived as meaningful for their learning processes. The danger is that teachers may entirely overlook the educative value of difficulty and doubt, that is, of forms of discontinuity and negativity in experience and learning.

On this basis, a pressing need exists for a sustained examination of the educative value of discontinuities in learning. Indeed, it is a significant point of this book to argue that experiences such as difficulty, perplexity, doubt,

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suffering, and struggle are constitutive of learning processes. These experiences should not be avoided by teachers; rather, they should be cultivated in educational ways. To make this perhaps counterintuitive argument, this book brings together a rich line of educational thought across philosophical traditions represented in the works of Dewey and Herbart, two seminal thinkers in philosophy of education. The book also connects these traditions of thought to the contemporary discourses on teaching and learning mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, the book brings the important educational concept of the negative aspect of experience into an English-speaking context. It demonstrates that this concept is necessary for philosophical inquiry into the limits of human experience, knowledge, and understanding in a way that harkens back to those paradoxical aspects of experience and learning discussed since the Socratic tradition. More specifically, this book addresses questions concerning where learning begins and how the learner experiences the world and learns to interact with other human beings. A basic premise of this book is that, without answering these questions, we cannot begin to educate another person.

In addressing these central questions of learning, this book develops connections to other important educational concepts including critical thinking, moral judgment, teaching as a reflective practice, and recognition of the other. In this book, I also illustrate implications for teaching practice by demonstrating how a learner's experiences of frustration, confusion, and resistance can *support*, rather than *hinder*, the learner's ability to learn. Furthermore, I show how a teacher's experience of teaching is also discontinuous – the teacher's experience can be interrupted such that he or she falls into difficulty and doubt. Yet, as I underscore throughout this book, such experiences of interruption in both learners' and teachers' experiences are vital for cultivating educative learning environments. Ultimately, this book aims to demonstrate how understanding the role of discontinuity – and the related concept of *negativity of experience* – in education can deepen our understanding of education as a transformational process.

Therefore, in this book, I aim to:

Provide a sustained study of the educative meaning of discontinuity in teaching and learning processes.

Provide a conceptual apparatus for philosophers and educators to further analyze and critique educational theories and practices that ignore the educative meaning of discontinuity. The concepts developed in this book



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are essential for reinvigorating the meaning of learning as a transformational process.

Bring together Continental and Anglo-American approaches to philosophical questions about the nature of education. By investigating this topic across philosophical traditions, this book goes against common conceptions of Dewey as a dramatic break in the tradition of philosophy of education. Instead, it demonstrates that Dewey's thinking was influenced by and aligned with thinkers in the Continental tradition of philosophy of education, particularly Herbart. In doing so, I offer a new reading of Dewey.

*Provide an in-depth treatment of Herbart's educational works.* It is the only such treatment available in the English language in more than forty years.<sup>5</sup>

By highlighting discontinuity as a central aspect of educational thought, this book tells an untold story of the connections between Herbart and Dewey in a way that does not conflate the myriad distinctions between these thinkers, but rather illustrates how they each have something important to say about education as a transformational process. An underlying concern here is thus to highlight the meaning of the negativity of experience as a constitutive aspect of teaching and learning that has been under-investigated and risks being eliminated from educational discourse. By providing philosophers and educators within the international community a way of discussing this aspect of learning and teaching, this book seeks to further cross-cultural dialogue about education in the twenty-first century.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part One, I offer a historical and philosophical examination of the idea of discontinuity in education by examining the central educational works of Herbart and Dewey. In Chapter 1, I provide some philosophical background to Herbart's thinking about the human being as a learner, which forms the basis of my analysis of his theory of education (in Chapter 2). I highlight how Herbart's concept of education and its connection to morality was influenced by his more widely known contemporary, Immanuel Kant. Furthermore, I examine his concept of "perfectibility" (*Bildsamkeit*) as the underlying anthropological notion framing his thinking about education. This idea connects his work to well-known

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Prior to this book, Harold Dunkel's work provides the most recent sustained look at Herbart's educational works in English: Harold B. Dunkel, *Herbart and Education* (New York: Random House, 1969) and Harold B. Dunkel, *Herbart and Herbartianism: An Educational Ghost Story* (University of Chicago Press, 1970).



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educational philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

In Chapter 2, I address Herbart's two-part theory of education by examining his notions of the teacher's task as both supporting the learner's expansion of horizons through "educative instruction" and providing "moral guidance," respectively. By examining each of these interrelated ideas of teaching, I discuss the significance Herbart placed on discontinuity in the learner's process of learning. I reveal that, whereas Herbart viewed cognitive learning as primarily a continuous process, he viewed moral learning as a discontinuous process. I provide a criticism of his conception of continuity in cognitive learning, in order to locate and define the significance of discontinuity. The central concept I develop in connection with Herbart's view of moral learning is that of "inner struggle" (innerer Kampf). With this concept, I highlight a form of discontinuity constitutive of learning processes and begin to illuminate the educative meaning of negativity of experience. I emphasize how Herbart's account helps us understand the teacher's task as one of cultivating the learner's inner struggle in order to support the learner's path toward becoming a moral person who recognizes the other. In closing, I turn to examine Herbart's concept of "pedagogical tact" (pädagogischer Takt) in teaching to illustrate how experiences of discontinuity are educative not only for the learner, but also for the teacher.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I analyze the role of discontinuity in Dewey's theories of learning and teaching. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of discontinuity as a learning-theoretical concept by addressing how it relates to key ideas in the tradition of pragmatism. I demonstrate that the idea of discontinuity in experience can be found in key works of Dewey's fellow American pragmatists, namely, Charles S. Peirce, William James, and George Herbert Mead. I examine Dewey's concept of learning and develop what I call "learning in-between." I argue that we can understand learning as a process in which spaces and gaps are opened up in experience through *interruptions*. These spaces can be viewed as openings for experimentation with new ideas and new modes of action. My examination of the discontinuity of experience and learning highlights the central role of negative experiences such as doubt, difficulty, and frustration in Dewey's concept of reflective learning processes.

In Chapter 4, I analyze Dewey's concept of teaching and argue for an understanding of teaching as "teaching in-between." I argue that, for Dewey, reflective teaching provokes learners to dwell in the realm *between* right and wrong answers. Further, I discuss how this realm for learning can and should be created in classrooms. In the context of my discussion of teaching, I also



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take up the idea of teaching as a reflective practice, drawing on Donald Schön, who builds on Dewey's work, and who has become widely known in teacher education for his theory of reflective practice. I extend Schön's concept to demonstrate that teaching is a unique form of reflective practice, distinct from other professional practices, in order to develop the idea of teaching inbetween as *interrupting experiences* of learners. To close this chapter, I examine how discontinuous learning and teaching processes relate to Dewey's ideas of teaching as a moral task and to his notion of democratic education.

Chapter 5 forms the conclusion to Part One. Here, I examine Herbart and Dewey comparatively and discuss both Herbart's influence on Dewey, as well as the ways in which Dewey's concept of education surpassed that of Herbart. Additionally, I address broader implications of these philosophers' ideas for our present-day understanding of morality and democracy.

In Part Two, I take up three particular concepts, namely, *learning inbetween*, *pedagogical tact*, and *perfectibility*, which emerge from my discussion in Part One. Part Two is divided into three chapters (Chapters 6–8), with each of the concepts forming one chapter. I contend that these concepts are particularly important for understanding the educational relation between teacher and learner and its connection to the cultivation of transformational learning processes. I further develop these and examine them in ways that connect classical and contemporary thinkers from both the Continental and the Anglo-American traditions of philosophy of education. Thereby, I seek not only to draw out the concepts of teaching and learning developed in Part One with Herbart and Dewey, but also to show interrelations in the current discourse on education, in particular interrelations between notions of discontinuity in teaching and learning developed in the traditions of pragmatism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism.

Specifically, in Chapter 6, I further develop the concept of learning inbetween as a space of learning opened up by interruptions in experience, in which we explore new possibilities for thinking and acting in the world. Here, I tie the idea of learning in-between to the German notion of *Umlernen*, which describes learning as a complex transformative experience.

Chapter 7 further develops the concept of pedagogical tact. I inquire into the unexpected that pervades the practice of teaching and that arises from the discontinuity in both the teacher's and learner's experiences. In this context, I further develop the notion of teaching in-between and describe teaching as involving learning to productively turn toward the blinds spots of teaching practice. Ideas of risk, improvisation, and listening in teaching are the focus of this chapter. I conclude Chapter 7 with a model of "Reflective



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Teacher-Learner Engagement," which illustrates how the concepts developed throughout the book are interconnected in a teacher's reflective practice.

Chapter 8 discusses the need to highlight the concept of perfectibility in contemporary educational discourse. I demonstrate that this concept connects to educational concerns that reach beyond language barriers and cultural contexts to broader questions of education and humanity.

Part Two concludes by considering what it might mean to preserve the "inbetween" in education. There, I define the corporeal-existential, theoretical-experimental, and pragmatic-moral dimensions of negativity of experience in learning, with a look ahead as to how we can continue to articulate the meaning of these aspects of human experience in educational theory and practice.

In the epilogue, I consider the implications my argument has for beginning to rediscover the meaning of philosophy for the education of teachers.

A note to readers: This book is written for theorists and practitioners, philosophers as well as educators in all fields. Some readers may prefer to begin with Part Two, which is primarily concerned with contemporary educational theory and practice. Most of the concepts dealt with in Part Two have been developed throughout Part One, and relevant internal chapter references have been included to help guide readers.