

# Past, Present, and Future Possibilities for Philosophy and History of Education

Stefan Ramaekers • Naomi Hodgson  
Editors

# Past, Present, and Future Possibilities for Philosophy and History of Education

Finding Space and Time for Research

 Springer

*Editors*

Stefan Ramaekers   
Laboratory for Education & Society  
KU Leuven  
Leuven, Belgium

Naomi Hodgson   
Centre for Education and Policy Analysis,  
Department of Education Studies  
Liverpool Hope University  
Liverpool, UK

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# Preface: Paul Smeyers and the Dutch Connection

## Connections and Friendships

When I first met Paul Smeyers, in Leuven in the early 1980s, he had been working on his dissertation at the London Institute of Education. His supervisor, Prof. Cyriel de Keyser, had sent him to the UK to sort out what analytic philosophy of education was all about, just as he had sent Jan Masschelein to Germany to do the same concerning German *Allgemeine Pädagogik* and critical theory. At that time, PhD projects at the Catholic University of Leuven had a stronger international orientation than at my own alma mater, Utrecht University in the Netherlands. I was asked to teach two of De Keyser's undergraduate courses in fundamental pedagogic from 1981 to 1982. It was my first opportunity to teach in another country, and it was an invaluable experience. To foreign ears, it may sound like we speak the same language, but for the rest, Flanders and the Netherlands are significantly different. My experience in Leuven was not only professionally rewarding, however; it was also the start of a unique friendship and a very productive professional partnership.

In those early years of his academic career, Paul was quite isolated as an analytic philosopher of education in the Dutch-speaking context. Luckily it was quite easy for me to create a Dutch connection. In order to introduce him to Dutch colleagues in theoretical pedagogy who shared his interest in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of education, I started to organise regular meetings in Utrecht in which we would present and discuss our work. Among the participants in the meetings we held over the next few years were Ben Spiecker, Jan Steutel, Wouter van Haaften, Ger Snik, and Wilna Meijer. We would go on to collaborate further when, in 1988, Paul invited me to join the editorial board of *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift*, a Dutch-Flemish general pedagogical journal. The reader should keep in mind that, in the Continental tradition, pedagogy has a much broader sense than in the Anglo-Saxon part of the world, where it tends to be restricted to what is going on in schools or, even more narrowly, to teaching methods. During his editorship, the journal flourished as a lively forum for discussions on important pedagogical issues. Through his experience at the London Institute, Paul had become a member of the Philosophy of Education Society of

Great Britain. In 1994 Paul introduced me to the society and its annual conference. Previously held in London, it had moved to a new venue at New College, Oxford, and since then has developed into one of the main international conferences in philosophy of education. New College became the place to meet colleagues from all over the world. It was no mean feat to get there at that time. I will never forget the 5-hour boat-trip from Zeebrugge to Folkestone. On one particular occasion, at the dinner table on the ferry of the Belgian company Sally, Paul advised me strongly to savour the food. Over the next few days, I should not expect to be served one single decent meal, he warned. Staying alive in England proved much less of an ordeal for me than for him; the standard of Dutch cuisine was still pretty low in those days too. And when we returned after the conference and I tried to pay the bill in a restaurant in Zeebrugge, he grabbed it out of my hands exclaiming: “But Bas, on Belgian soil!” Paul is world-famous for his hospitality and generosity.

## Collaborations

Until then, the majority of our publications had, naturally, been in Dutch. In the 1980s, however, things had begun to change. Paul and I started to discuss the publication policies at our universities. Paul had always said that Belgium was always about 10 years behind the Netherlands and that when the changes came they were always less extreme. In the late 1990s, the shift of emphasis toward publications in English and in English only had reached the policy statements of the Flemish universities too. We wrote an article defending scientific writings about education in the Dutch language, for obvious reasons. Many of the publications in pedagogy are related to what is going on in specific national institutions. Educational systems differ profoundly from nation to nation in many respects. It makes no sense to write about the Dutch or Flemish context in English. Many core concepts simply cannot be translated without losing essential elements of the meaning. Furthermore, counting publications creates a perverse stimulus to divide publication into smaller parts and publish them in different journals. What a waste. (I still regret that I did not succeed in convincing Paul to include in our article the recommendation to implement a points system in which there would be a limit on how many publications one could have in a year, with points deducted if that is exceeded.) The irony of our plea for scientific publications in the Dutch language was that we published that article in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*. (Paul’s Dutch-Flemish journal *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift* had to stop in 2005 because of a shortage of submissions; unsurprisingly, given that Dutch and Flemish pedagogues had to publish in English and in English only).

Our collaboration concerned not only pedagogy but also research, a sustained concern throughout Paul’s writing. In the late 1990s, we published an introduction to interpretive research methods, *Opvoeding en Onderwijs Leren Zien* (1999) (*Learning How to See Upbringing and Education*), comprised of contributions from Dutch and Flemish authors. The volume was unique at that time as every chapter

contained an elaborated example of a research project with the use of the method at stake. Paul has used this format again recently as the basis of an international collection, the *International Handbook of Interpretation in Education Research*. Paul managed our project with extreme accuracy. One of the problems with those big projects is that while the first invited contributor has delivered his or her chapter months ago, the last one has yet to start writing. It is – for most of us, arguably – impossible to complete such an editing job on your own. Collaborating on such a project is really a pleasure, however; at least when Paul Smeyers is your coeditor.

It was while celebrating the publication of that book, over dinner at *Comme Chez Soi* in Brussels, that the plan for an even more ambitious project was made. Paul and I considered the core introductory text on different schools of thought used in undergraduate courses at Dutch universities to be outdated. The collection, edited by Siebren Miedema (Leiden University), was updated edition after edition but had been in use for 15 years by that point. The postmodern revolution had shown that the resemblances between the modern schools of thought were more relevant than their differences. So, in 2001, we published *Grondslagen van de Wetenschappelijke Pedagogiek: Modern en Postmodern* (2001) (*Foundations of Scientific Pedagogy: Modern and Postmodern*). Miedema was one of the contributors. Our text went on to be used for at least the next 15 years, gradually replacing Miedema's.

Taking the critique of postmodernism seriously, I had pleaded in the late 1980s for an essayistic approach to writing about pedagogy. It is quite silly to think that pedagogical truth is something that can be falsified by one counterargument. Pedagogical truths should be underpinned by arguments-pro without too much consideration of possible arguments-contra. Pedagogical truths should be *essayed* (tried out). Good practice is unthinkable as mere application of theory. Practitioners have to be convinced instead of to be told what to do. Hence, Paul came up with the creative plan to publish a collection of pedagogical essays. Indicative of how he paved the way for his PhD students, Paul proposed that we include two younger colleagues in our essay project. But we agreed that four names on the cover of a collection of ten essays were too many. So, as a subtle comment on the endless lists of authors we find on many research articles, we decided to use a pseudonym. E.A. Godot published his first collection of essays on societal problems that are not pedagogical at first sight in 2003, entitled *Hoezo Pedagogisch? (Why pedagogical?)*. The second collection, published in 2006, reflected on the actual meaning of the seven deadly sins and was entitled *Zonde van de Tijd*. (The phrase is not directly translatable. It carries the double meaning “sin of the time” and “waste of time.”)

## Research Community

The themes of pedagogy and the practice and conditions of research have recurred not only throughout Paul's work but also in the themes and discussions of the research community over the last 20 years. Arguably it has had little impact in turning the tide of changes in academia and the status of philosophical and historical

research. In 2009, for example, I was invited by Paul to teach in Ghent to keep a chair in fundamental pedagogy warm for a younger colleague. In 2011 it transpired that this had been in vain; the chair was reallocated to a field with better research metrics. The research community did, however, provide initiation and opportunity for younger colleagues and established an international community of scholars whose work and appreciation of those events are reflected in the chapters that form this book.

The international conferences Paul Smeyers hosted in Leuven were always extremely well organised. The importance of good facilities is often underestimated, but never by Paul. The meetings of the International Research Community “Philosophy and History of the Discipline of Education,” for which he and Marc Depaepe obtained funding from the Research Foundation Flanders, have been held in Leuven since 2000 to form a separate chapter. In this volume, other colleagues report about the success of that extraordinary enterprise.

Utrecht University  
Utrecht, The Netherlands

Bas Levering

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: Reminders Assembling a Picture of Paul Smeyers</b> .....	<b>1</b>
	Stefan Ramaekers and Naomi Hodgson	
<b>2</b>	<b>At the Intersection of Anecdotal Stories and Great Narratives: Reflections on the Cooperation Between Educational Historians and Educational Philosophers</b> .....	<b>15</b>
	Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon	
<b>3</b>	<b>Seeing the Points of Connection</b> .....	<b>33</b>
	Richard Smith and Paul Standish	
<b>4</b>	<b>The University as Pedagogical Form: Public Study, Responsibility, Mondialisation</b> .....	<b>47</b>
	Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons	
<b>5</b>	<b>Philosophies of Hospitality: Toward Perpetual Peace and Freedom</b> .....	<b>63</b>
	Lynn Fendler	
<b>6</b>	<b>Why, Perhaps, Philosophers of Education (and Other Educational Researchers) “Leave Everything as It Is”</b> .....	<b>77</b>
	David Bridges	
<b>7</b>	<b>Truth “After Postmodernism”: Wittgenstein and Postfoundationalism in Philosophy of Education</b> .....	<b>89</b>
	Michael A. Peters	
<b>8</b>	<b>“Plowden” at 50—R.S. Peters’ Response to Educational Progressivism</b> .....	<b>101</b>
	Stefaan E. Cuypers	
<b>9</b>	<b>Upon the Academic Philosopher Caught in the Fly-Bottle</b> .....	<b>117</b>
	Jean Paul Van Bendegem	

**10 Postscript**  
**Humanistic Study, Collaboration, and Interdisciplinarity:**  
**A Dialogue on the Leuven Research Community ..... 131**  
Nicholas C. Burbules and Lynda Stone

**Appendix: List of Selected Publications..... 141**

# Contributors

**David Bridges** University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK  
St Edmund's College, Cambridge, UK  
Homerton College, Cambridge, UK

**Nicholas C. Burbules** University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA

**Stefaan E. Cuypers** Centre for Logic and Philosophy of Science, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

**Marc Depaep** Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Kulak Kortrijk Campus, Kortrijk, Belgium

**Lynn Fendler** Department of Teacher Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

**Naomi Hodgson** Centre for Education and Policy Analysis, Department of Education Studies, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

**Bas Levering** Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

**Jan Masschelein** Laboratory for Education & Society, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

**Michael A. Peters** University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

**Stefan Ramaekers** Laboratory for Education & Society, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

**Frank Simon** Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

**Maarten Simons** Laboratory for Education & Society, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

**Richard Smith** School of Education, University of Durham, Durham, UK

**Paul Standish** University College London, Institute of Education, London, UK

**Lynda Stone** School of Education, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

**Jean Paul Van Bendegem** Centre for Logic and Science-Philosophy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels, Belgium