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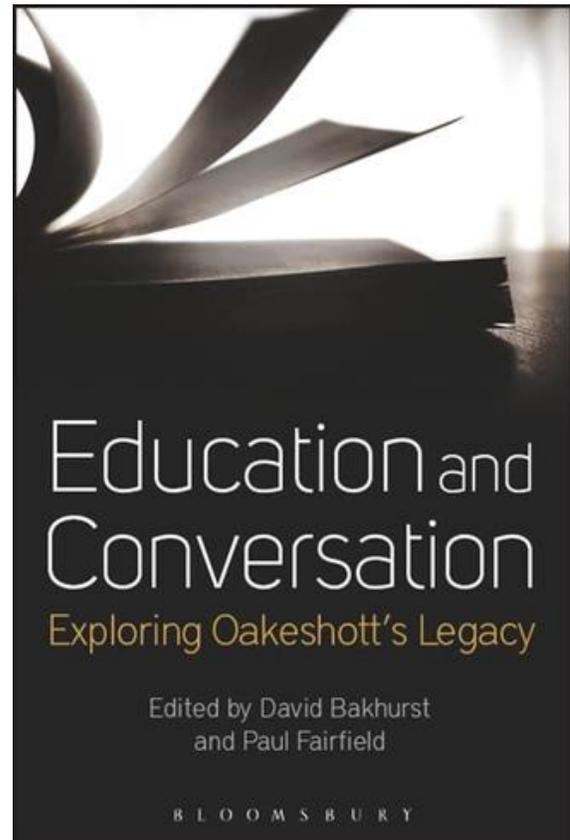
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Known as a political conservative, Michael Oakeshott might seem an odd figure for the left and right to rally around today. Yet the collection of essays within *Education and Conversation: Exploring Oakeshott's Legacy* could indirectly make a case for just that, particularly regarding the current state of education policy and practice in the United States.

The title *Education and Conversation* is drawn from one of Oakeshott's better-known metaphors: education as the "conversation of mankind." Several of the authors in *Education and Conversation* use it in some form. As Oakeshott (1962) writes,

In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no 'truth' to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another... (p. 489).



Such an approach to schooling could not be more different from the approach schools increasingly follow today, which is to set students on very particular, economically practical paths: college or career. Editors David Bakhurst and Paul Fairfield set up this volume well, addressing a pressing – maybe the most pressing – question facing American schooling today: what is it for? States and school systems, while sometimes mentioning some form of “character education” or the importance of ill-defined “lifelong learning,” have focused almost exclusively on students’ eventual economic outcomes. Bakhurst and Fairfield see this focus on the materialistic goals of schooling as a mistake, arguing as Michael Oakeshott would, that “While it is true that education must equip students for life, and equally true that, for the vast majority of people, the means of life are secured by work, it is a mistake to infer that education should serve such instrumental ends alone...” (p. 1). “College and career readiness” is a target that Oakeshott would certainly have found lacking.

Michael Oakeshott was much more interested in education as an introduction into a society, or a cultural inheritance, than as a means to practical economic ends. His value in the current moment is in his ability to see value in tradition and the good of the past, without succumbing to the materialistic or technocratic authoritarianism that so many education policymakers of the “establishment” (and, frankly, education “reformers”) promote today. More than the value Oakeshott might place on tradition, this attempt to stand athwart the movement of modern schooling to focus on practical and economic concerns is a major theme – though not the only theme – that runs through *Education and Conversation*. The chapters in this volume come in two types: those that introduce and explore Oakeshott’s thinking specifically, and those that use Oakeshott’s ideas as an introduction or

springboard into other topics, and that discuss him less directly.

Oakeshott as Introduction

The majority of the chapters in the book use Oakeshott’s ideas as a jumping-off or landing point and discuss a specific topic in between. Derrida, child development, autonomy and born rationality, and others all serve as major themes. Two examples by Nancy Salay and Paul Fairfield, elaborated on below, illustrate the sort of territory this volume covers well.

As American schools push for more technology in the classroom, students are becoming ever more distracted and ever less able to engage in conversations – indeed, even to listen long enough to pay attention to each other. Nancy Salay uses Oakeshott’s concept of conversation as a way to critique the growth of technology in the classroom. “It is trivially true,” Salay writes, “that injecting technology into a classroom will increase the activity level: people will be punching keys, looking at screens, getting up to plug in cords, and so on. But this is not the kind of activity we want to be increasing in the classroom...Cognitive distraction, an epidemic of our age, is fostered by the endless stream of sound and image bites with which technology users are inundated throughout the day” (p. 161). Salay goes on to discuss the importance of unfettered conversations in classrooms – in all subject areas – in order to build students’ neural pathways and help them create connections among various types of information that they may be able to apply to future problems. As she makes her arguments, Salay defends lecture-based teaching on the grounds that teachers providing students with new information, and combining that with class discussion, is a much more effective pedagogy than handing students various electronic devices. And she argues against specialization, calling for broad-based liberal arts education.

As another example, Paul Fairfield's chapter on listening may be an especially appropriate and timely topic. Fairfield quotes Oakeshott on "listening" from "Education: The engagement and its frustration":

[L]earning to read or to listen is a slow and active engagement, having little or nothing to do with acquiring information. It is learning to follow, to understand, and to rethink deliberate expressions of rational consciousness; it is learning to recognize fine shades of meaning without overbalancing into the lunacy of 'decoding;' it is allowing another's thoughts to reenact themselves in one's own mind; it is learning in acts of constantly surprised attention to submit to, to understand, and to respond to what (in this response) becomes a part of our understanding of ourselves" (p. 69-70).

It is perhaps obvious that listening would be a skill necessary for a productive "conversation of mankind," but as Fairfield points out in his chapter, listening is a skill that can be, and needs to be, developed in classroom practice. In fact, Fairfield points out, not only do many students simply "listen" to prepare for exams, rather than to really engage material, but many teachers really only "listen" in order to respond. Michael Oakeshott suggests that conversations should be "inconclusive," (Oakeshott 1975, p. 30) and this is only really possible if the conversants are willing to listen to others with more or different information than they themselves have, and be willing to engage that new information. Otherwise, two people or two groups may be speaking, but speaking past each other, not in something that anyone would recognize as a "conversation."

Introduction to Oakeshott

But an introduction to Michael Oakeshott's work – a conservative who believed in tradition but also valued education for its own sake, rather than for materialistic or practical or political outcomes – may also be valuable for educators today. The "conversation of mankind" Oakeshott valued so much as the real end purpose of education often seems more like an incoherent, unproductive shouting match lately. Therefore, educators might do well to engage Oakeshott's thinking on the purposes of education – What is it for? Which traditions are worth preserving and which amending or ending? How might we hear and understand one another better? Several chapters of this type in *Education and Conversation* include those by Barry Allen, Cheryl Misak, Christine Synowich, and Babette Babich. These chapters would be particularly helpful to new (or relatively new) readers interested in Oakeshott in general, and his ideas on education in particular.

Synowich's and Misak's chapters develop the idea of Oakeshott as out-of-step with the current *zeitgeist*, though she argues that he is very much in step with other current strains of thought. Oakeshott, Synowich notes, was an "avowed conservative," who might not seem like a natural opponent of the current, economically-focused system. "However," she writes, "there is much that divides the two political perspectives, but there are also some strong points of affinity. In particular, they share a critique of the market and an interest in perfectionist approaches to social institutions" (p. 77).

What are some possible "points of affinity" that Oakeshott might bridge? Though known as a conservative, Oakeshott resists simple categorization (Misak in fact calls him a "classical liberal," p. 50). Many state and local policy projects continue to be

based on their return on investment, and often seek current industry leaders to define what students should be taught. Oakeshott would reject the premise that education should draw from current employment opportunities as exactly backward.

A reading of Oakeshott could help readers on the right and left together explore questions such as: What might be done about the problem of increasing student loan debt – how are graduates with large debts and few job prospects to join the conversation? Many conservative and neoliberal policymakers clearly want to retool colleges as economic drivers, while institutions themselves often have different ideas in mind – How might both sides rethink the missions of institutions of higher education? What might be done about retraining for older workers – is this retraining a responsibility of employers, of educational institutions, or of the workers themselves? Oakeshott did not explicitly deal with the practical. But points of potential agreement among left- and right-leaning readers of Oakeshott could be found in the discussion, and at the very least a shared agreement that culture matters, and that individuals are meant to be more than economic data points.

Conclusion

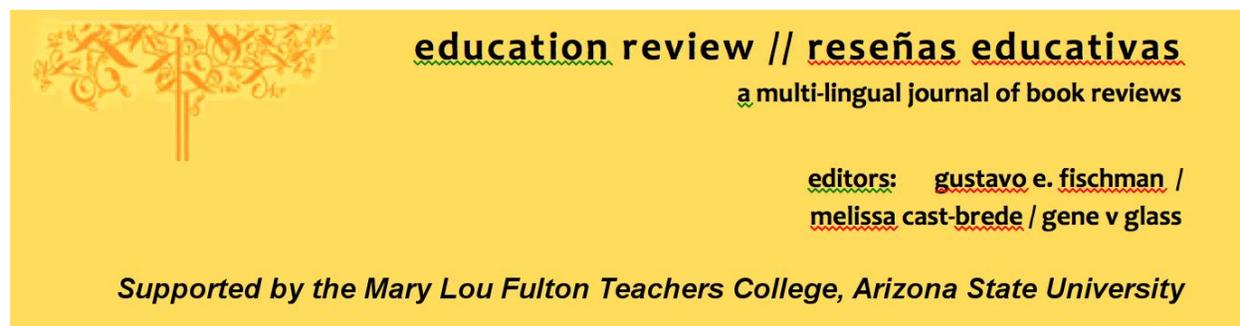
Readers new to Oakeshott will likely find the chapters directly about him more informative about his thinking than the chapters inspired by him, but all of the chapters in this book are pertinent to current conversations in American education about the purposes of schooling, the pedagogies we use, and the fads of technocratic policymaking and “college and career readiness.” The editors write, “For Oakeshott, it is a disastrous mistake to attempt to replace liberal learning by modes of education preoccupied with relevance, training, and instrumental means to outcomes.” (Bakhurst and Fairfield, p. 3). A conversation on the purpose of education and of our practical and ethical obligations in life between the “conservative” political scientist Michael Oakeshott and someone like the “liberal” environmentalist and *Small is Beautiful* author E. F. Schumacher, who argued for “human-scale” interactions and stressed education’s role in the transmission of values would probably be, if not totally in accord, at least an amiable one. At least regarding education policy, Oakeshott’s work and the ideas explored in this collection could be a starting place for the left and right to find some sort of common ground.

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