

# Exuberance and Despair

*Jackie Blount*

When I first walked into the enormous new graduate library at the beginning of my doctoral studies, I experienced a powerful and conflicted rush of feelings that must be common to fledgling scholars, a mix of exuberance and—despair. My excitement was from sensing that everything in that library was available to me and that as a grad student, I had the time and permission to study what I wanted. In these slightly dank stacks, I felt certain I could find everything I might ever need to piece together the stories I wanted to tell about schools. I despaired, however, in knowing that the most I might ever accomplish as a scholar would be so small—literally—in terms of shelf space in libraries like this, that is, if I even managed to craft my stories at all.

No matter. I quickly found my own way into the collection, a way of making the vastness of the stacks seem more manageable. I simply started by finding a book from my first history of education course. Then I sat in the stacks for days, pulling one book off the shelf right after the next, thumbing through each, and delving into the scattered gems that somehow called out to me. This was a decidedly low-tech, intimate, and richly expansive process for me. Over the years, as my scholarship took shape, this work paid off as I felt the deep satisfaction of carving out an inch or two on those shelves as library-bound versions of books with my name on the spine magically appeared in the collection.

I am not finished, though. I plan to contribute more books, but as each year passes, I understand that ultimately, I still confront the same powerful tension that I felt at the beginning of my scholarly endeavors. Certainly I know a bit more now. I have developed a few strategies beyond pulling books down one at a time. I am more confident that I can thread a number of historical bits together into stories I want to tell. I have an ever-growing list of historical projects I would like to tackle, especially those that seem to me to occur at leverage points with the potential to help shift the field. And yet at the same time, I know even better now how much I do not know, how much I will never know—and to make matters worse, the digitization of so much information over the past two decades makes the totality of the ideas

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encompassed in the volumes in that graduate library those decades ago seem utterly infinitesimal by comparison. Finally, I understand that as an older person, I must choose my projects carefully. The library will not be open to me forever. The thought of what I might tackle, then, becomes deeply poignant.

And so it is with great interest that I read the essays commissioned by Bob Hampel for this issue of *History of Education Quarterly*, essays by Barbara Finkelstein, John Thelin, Jim Albigetti, and Wayne Urban. I first encountered these amazing scholars as I methodically pulled *their* books down during my early library forays. The four of these thinkers have filled not just inches, but feet of shelf space. More importantly, their ideas are inspiring and enduring. Whether they knew it or not, they helped introduce me to the history of education and the ideas of the field. Fittingly, their ideas walked through the pages of *History of Education Quarterly* too, which I learned early on was something of a common area for the field, a cozy place where we share our ideas and our exuberance for the work. Often it is where we help each other find our way among possible stories and sources, as blazes in the wilderness. The individuals I had the good fortune to meet early on welcomed me as a colleague, something for which I will always be grateful.

In curating this set of essays, Bob Hampel had the foresight and grace to ask these scholars questions that essentially required them to confront the very same tension that I felt in my work from the very start. Paraphrasing, what is it that excites you and compels you to keep doing the work? And, if mortality were not an issue (a question that obliquely asks us to remember our own ephemerality), how might you find your continued place in the field among ideas and sources that are dauntingly and increasingly vast?

As I consider how these scholars have addressed these questions, I am compelled to describe how I would respond. What is the work I most want to do? First of all, I want to finish my project of writing a biography of Ella Flagg Young. Why? Simply put, Young fascinates me. She led the Chicago Schools a hundred years ago; served as the first woman president of the NEA; published a series of significant books with John Dewey (he regarded her as the wisest educator he had ever encountered); devised and implemented a broad range of creative, effective, and highly ennobling reforms that are quite relevant even to this day; inspired important social changes around the country and world; provoked David Tyack to tell me that he regarded her as one of the three greatest educators in U.S. history; and, surprisingly, and of great interest to me, she had a female life companion. That is a pretty long sentence that I had to resist making a whole lot longer—mainly because I am engrossed in Young's story and cannot wait to finish writing it. We each have our obscure reasons for wanting to be historians of education. Young's life epitomizes some of mine.

A couple of funny things have happened along the way in writing this book about Young, though. First, I have taken on some full-bore administrative assignments. This work, though of a dramatically different nature than Young's, allows me to understand much more fully the challenges she must have confronted. Of course, it also means that I have significantly less time to write. Second, over the early years of gathering source material for Young's bio, I was determined to find everything written by or about her. Consequently, I painstakingly went through *every* page of *every* issue of the *Chicago Tribune* published over the years of her service as Chicago superintendent. I did the same thing with the *Chicago Defender* and scores of journals—and generally with every single archival bit that I could locate in about a dozen facilities, sources that I found after a great deal of intensive sleuthing and hard work. Two years later after completing this research, however, I was dumbfounded to discover that most of these sources had just been completely digitized and made broadly available. So too had some of the very rare books that I had traveled across the country to access. If only I had waited two years longer, my eyesight would be considerably better and I would still have all the quarters that I put into those microfilm photocopyers (machinery that reveals the antiquity of this project), not to mention years added back to my life. Nonetheless, I still immensely enjoyed all of that time quietly pursuing Young's story. I sat in stacks and found beautiful, obscure sources, some of which are unlikely to be digitized anytime soon. I read adjacent stories and ads that helped me develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of Young's circumstances. And I had the time and quiet to allow thousands of scattered pieces to coalesce in my mind in totally unexpected ways, a process that, when it happened, sometimes made me bounce with excitement, alone, thank goodness, so others did not have to witness it. The digitization of these sources, then, was bittersweet. On one hand, I regretted all the time and manual effort I had put into the project even though I had enjoyed it. On the other hand, I went ahead and collected, then cataloged these digital sources in their full-text and more searchable, usable forms—to supplement my blurry photocopies and exhaustive notes. And I noticed that more digital sources kept popping up, and then more still. I am left to wonder when all of the pertinent sources will have appeared. Will my life be long enough to sort through this growing body of potential source material? One way to work through these sources is to run queries, though this is in some ways akin to taking a two-dimensional photo of a three-dimensional and moving subject. It is helpful, but the shape and trajectory can only be guessed.

If I am finding that there is a new vastness of available sources about Ella Flagg Young, a person who lived a century ago, what will historians of education do as they try to come to grips with persons of interest who have lived more recently? For this, I consider

Barbara Finkelstein's essay in which she profiles Sonia and Omékongo, two remarkable individuals who are transnational, transcultural, border crossers. They are "globally conscious, mobile, empowered young people," as she describes them, who are "highly evolved cultural shape-shifters in possession of habits of mind and association that transcend boundaries of nation state and the social and cultural determinacies within single geographic localities . . . . They are endowed with a borderland consciousness." Here are two people who have constructed vibrant identities for themselves, resisting the neat categories that scholars of times past might have imposed. I am struck by how amazing it is that their stories have come to light now, that Omékongo, for example, is so digitally and compellingly alive to people around the world. Finkelstein describes how "their stories proceed in multiple spaces—across increasingly porous boundaries of nation state, the interconnecting worlds of Skype, Facebook, and Twitter . . . ." They are authoring their own stories, though not necessarily in the form of conventional autobiography. They are constructing their identities in conjunction with and in relation to others who also are making sense of their own complex social discontinuities, a sort of ever-changing community of understanding. I wonder what Sonia and Omékongo's lives will look like to historians of education in another generation as the digital bits are sorted and analyzed. Will those historians be overwhelmed by a seemingly unlimited collection of interconnected stories and digital imprints describing these remarkable educators? Will historians find their way into telling the stories of such educators by starting with their self-created digital personae? And eventually as these empowered border crossers in effect render borders much less meaningful, who will they be? Of course, we also must ask: Who will we be? Is there any special reason that one set of stories may be more credible than another, that is, stories of self-creation rather than as framed from a distant point in time by a historian?

Wayne Urban touches on these issues to some degree in his essay. He already has written one biography and currently is working on another, a major effort that he believes may be his final large project while employed in academe. For his biographies, he has chosen to examine the lives of persons with unusually great influence on the field of education, much as I have by studying Ella Flagg Young. However, he also plays with the idea of writing his own story, largely because, like Finkelstein's border crossers, Urban sees value in describing "what can happen to a descendent of the southern and eastern European immigrant generation that came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century," or put another way, making sense of multiple identities by telling one's own story. The idea of autobiography is so compelling to Urban that he has edited a forthcoming collection of autobiographies by historians

of education. This provokes a fantasy on my part of what future historians of education might make of this volume. For so long, historians of education on the whole have avoided entangling their own narratives in accounts they construct. However, their own stories obviously play significant roles in how they shape their historical analyses, but instead this has been neatly trimmed away from published versions that are so much in surplus. Will future historians of education read these autobiographical essays and come to understand the animating forces that drove the work of earlier historians of education? Will they search the newly growing digital reserves to corroborate details or will they take these autobiographical accounts at face value? And does a volume such as Urban's edited collection of autobiographies signal an ongoing shift away from a laser-like focus on telling the stories of a small number of seeming social/cultural/intellectual giants and toward telling the stories of far greater numbers of persons, including ourselves? This is a lot of storytelling to do. How will we come to make sense of storytelling/life-accounting on this scale?

Jim Albigetti examines a different set of questions and issues in his essay. He has, for decades, been one of relatively few historians of education with the language skills, historical preparation, and inclination to undertake transnational studies of schools and those associated with them. Albigetti describes in his piece a series of important meta-analyses within nations as well as across them, projects that are utterly daunting in scope and complexity, accounts both written and as-yet-to-be written. He shares with Finkelstein the deep conviction in the need for understandings that transcend borders. They differ, however, in that Albigetti contends that such comparative work has been going on for some time whereas Finkelstein argues that there has not been enough transnational, transcultural work in the history of education. Both, no doubt, are right, but each is discussing different levels of analysis—nations versus individuals, for example, and systems versus microcultural constructions. It seems to me that in both cases, borders are key to the stories that Albigetti and Finkelstein are telling here. I have my own stubborn issues with borders as I do not like to be kept only on one side of them, a trait I share with my cats. On the other hand, I clearly remember the moment during an introductory biology course long ago when the professor explained that it was only when cell walls first formed that cellular creatures came to exist. That moment profoundly changed my view of borders. They could be generative rather than just exclusive and imposing. No longer was it a question of whether they were good or bad, but rather whose needs are served by those borders, to what degree those borders are permeable in each direction, as well as to what materials those borders are permeable. In the case of Albigetti's essay, he invites readers to cross borders by undertaking transnational historical

studies because “Years of experience working with sources such as these have convinced me that educators and political leaders were looking at, admiring, and critiquing the practices in other countries all the time. All one needs to do is start looking—and learn the needed language.” Indeed, lack of language skill has been a sort of de facto impermeable cell wall in conducting such work. I wonder now, though, if there may be some trends afoot that ultimately help penetrate that barrier. For example, the European Union countries that Albisetti primarily describes rely increasingly on a few widely used languages for conducting their affairs. And now a growing number of digital services exist that provide mechanical, but increasingly serviceable translations both of print as well as spoken language. I wonder if in the near future, these translational services might reach a level of accuracy and dependability that more scholars might venture into the realm of transnational, translanguagel historical studies of education. Without question, if this were to be the case, such practices would inspire a whole new set of analyses about the degree to which such interpretations are valid and culturally embedded.

Finally, John Thelin describes his desire, were cost and time to be without constraint, to create and analyze quantitative datasets describing higher education, sets that are comprehensive, consistent, and span hundreds of years, rather than a mere couple of decades. Analysis based on *this* kind of data is the stuff that can blow wide open the prevailing myths of an era, the kinds of myths that university presidents like to tell. I personally relish these data-based and counterintuitive histories, so much so that for my dissertation, I compiled a 50,000+ person database of superintendents over the twentieth century so I could demonstrate that our prevailing beliefs about the history of gender and the superintendency were wrong. That is a lot of work to do to prove others wrong, but it is gratifying. I am relieved to know that Thelin has this bent, too. Over the past few years, I have become aware of some new tools that can help make sense of disparate quantitative datasets such as Wolfram’s powerful analytical tools where the system makes the best possible guess as to what data to compare and cross-reference before returning what sometimes are surprisingly complex and relevant results. Other meta-analytical tools allow researchers to bridge discontinuous datasets to find meaningful and reasonable responses to queries. Though I doubt that these tools are anywhere nearly ready to tackle the specific discontinuous datasets that Thelin describes in his essay, the day may soon come when such analytical tools might help historians of education develop a “cliometrics” that yields rigorous statistical analyses of comparable, though not necessarily exactly matching data types over time. Much room will still exist, though, to determine the degree to which disparate datasets can be bridged through such methodologies and tools.

Over the course of my brief thoughts above about the provocative essays by Finkelstein, Urban, Albisetti, and Thelin—as well as about my own work—I have considered some of the ways that our current era of digital transformation might affect our work as historians of education. It is not just a backdrop for how we undertake our scholarship, but increasingly, it is fundamentally shifting how we think about who we are, how we describe ourselves, how we impart something of value from one generation to the next, from an earlier era to a later one. More importantly, though, this digital transformation is *the* story of our time that affects us in practically every conceivable way, most especially in education, broadly understood. It is for this reason that the story I am by far the most compelled to write is a contemporaneous/historical account of this transformation in education. The thought of doing this above all things fills me with exuberance—and, of course, despair.