



# Philosophy and Poetic Thinking in Teacher Education

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## Abstract

Teacher education has sought to combine the practice of teaching with the practice of thinking and most popularly through reflective practice. This refers to reflection on and in action that leads to thoughtful practical doing; praxis. In spite of its intention to develop teachers' practical wisdom, reflective practice has become instrumentalised for the efficient achievement of educational ends without questioning whether the means of achieving them are conducive to living a good, meaningful life. Standardised modes of thinking have all the more estranged teachers from thinking Being and from exploring meanings of who they are as teachers. To address this issue, this paper explores possibilities offered by poetic thinking and metaphorical thinking with reference to the thoughts of Heidegger and Arendt. The analysis of the problem of the abandonment of thinking Being by philosophical traditions as well as Aristotle's notion of praxis and poesis have been originally addressed by Heidegger. Poesis, the act of making and bringing something forth has also been discussed by Arendt in her thoughts about metaphorical thinking and its potential for becoming something new. I argue that poetic forms of thinking enrich the debate about the relation between philosophy and teaching and are insightful for doing philosophy for teachers. They encourage teachers to make use of language in an original way to bring themselves forth as unique Beings. To practically explore the poetic possibilities in teachers' quests for meaning, I refer to a student teacher's writing as an example of how Being teacher can be poetically revealed.

**Keywords** Philosophical thinking · Poetic thinking · Metaphor, Being teacher · Reflective Practice · Teacher education

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## Introduction

Philosophical thoughts underlie many of the concepts and practices of teaching. One example is how philosophy has informed reflective practice which has been widely applied in teacher education as one of the best approaches for becoming a ‘good teacher’. It draws on the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom; the ability to deliberate on what conduces towards the good life (Aristotle 1140a; 25). It is a “reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad or bad for man” (Aristotle 1140b; 5). One of its main aims is to develop teachers’ thinking about their practice and in discerning what is morally good to teach.

As Higgins et al. contend in this volume, practical wisdom is essential for teachers to question the educational processes that lead to lives worth living. I concur that the thinking and questioning processes in doing reflective practice involve the virtues of good understanding, good judgment and rational deliberation about teaching in developing practical wisdom. Teachers are able to act freely and responsibly, when they use their capacity of reason to avoid acting compulsively. The philosophical practice of questioning what appears to be true and the inquiry into the limits of knowledge is a practice of wisdom. Developing practical wisdom through reflection is intended for teachers to consider good educational pathways by asking questions that are grounded in particular situated contexts. The problem, as Higgins et al. (2024 p. 3: this issue) point out, is that teachers face challenges to think and act freely in an educational climate that instrumentalises their thinking for the efficient predictable learning outcomes. Furthermore, discourses of teacher competences, despite their good intentions to guide teachers’ trajectories in becoming good teachers, have concentrated their motivation to seek legitimacy by acquiring them. This does not leave them much time to question the notion of competence and the criteria which identifies them as competent. It is indeed challenging for teachers to question competence without the risk of seeming against competence.

The practice of reflection in teaching has become so much part of a “learnification” (Biesta 2010) trend in education that teachers are rarely free to express their own meanings of Being teachers in original ways. Such a scenario compels us to ask questions; what kind of thinking can possibly open our relation with our Being<sup>1</sup>? Is there some other form of thinking that can lift us out of systematised constraints to enlarge our thoughts about the meaning of *who* rather what we are as teachers? In exploring these questions, I address the philosophical underpinnings of poetic thinking to explore the possibilities of the use of metaphorical thinking in teacher education. To do so, one cannot do away with philosophical thoughts of Heidegger and Arendt<sup>2</sup> as they ask important questions about thinking Being through an original use of language. I argue that their philosophical thoughts can be taken up in teacher education to encourage teachers’ thinking and expression of their meanings of Being. Heidegger’s question “what calls for thinking?” (Heidegger 1968) and his turn

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger in *Being and Time* distinguishes between being and Being; being refers to an entity and what it is while Being refers to the meaning of Being. The ontological difference between being and Being rises out of the ability of human beings to inquire what it means to be.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt was highly critical of Heidegger’s individualistic philosophy as well as his association with the Nazi Regime. However, she could not dismiss his philosophical contribution to Western post-metaphysical thought. What is specifically relevant to this paper is that Arendt continued to refer to Heidegger’s writing on thinking to develop her own philosophy about thinking in *The Life of the Mind*. For an extensive reading on the relation between Arendt’s philosophical thought and that of Heidegger see Sharpe (2024).

towards poetic thinking is discussed to explain the value of poesis in exploring the question of Being. However, Arendt's developments of his thought and her specific philosophical discussions on metaphorical thinking (Arendt 1978) are more practically oriented to inform examples about how poetic thinking can be used in educating teachers to bring forth their meanings of Being teachers in unique ways.

## Reflecting Philosophy with Teachers in Context

Before I delve in the more philosophical discussion about what is thinking and the value of metaphorical thinking for becoming a teacher, I start with outlining the challenges of thinking about teaching referring to teacher education discourses in Europe and specifically in Malta.

Teacher education at the University of Malta is one of the higher education in Europe who has retained philosophy of education as one of the core disciplines aimed to theoretically enlarge student teachers' thinking about their teaching's practices. Philosophy of education for student teachers however has lost some of its prominence mainly due to the relatively popular underlying thought that the pedagogical component of the course specifically concentrating on how and what to teach is more useful to the efficient acquisition of established teacher skills and competences. This latter approach that draws on notions of competence is mainly influenced by the discourses of teacher education in Europe seeking to provide standard universal points of reference for higher education institutions which define the good and effective teacher. (EU Commission 2005, 2013)<sup>3</sup>. The prevailing thought envisages teacher "education" as a constructive exercise whose end is to develop competent teachers.

Reflective practice is considered important for teachers to critically think about practices of teaching and to develop practical wisdom which is a commendable philosophically informed practice, based on Aristotelian notion of praxis (Wain 1992, 1995). One prominent philosophical outlook that expanded the relevance of philosophy of education to student teachers, teachers and notably teacher educators is that of praxis; thoughtful practice that necessitates "becoming critical" (Carr and Kemmis 1986). These concepts were crucial in attempting to confront the problematic relation between theory and practice in teaching. In fact, praxis became the overarching philosophy for teacher education in Malta, oriented towards teachers' engagement in research and their critical inquiry to claim their political active role in public debate and educational decision making. Their knowledge of sociology, philosophy and psychology is intended not only to inform their experience and fuel a deeper reflection on their practices of teaching in schools but also in making sense of how wider socio-political milieus impact their conditions of teachings. However, the practices of critical and reflective thinking have become more concentrated on pedagogical aspects of the teacher education course and during teaching practice in schools, making it more challenging for students to think about Being teachers.

The problem with relying on this form of reflective practice is that it mostly focuses on thinking *how* to teach and how to teach inclusively, equitably and justly in ever-increasing intercultural schools and classes. Deeper questions such as, why educate? what does being just mean? how do we think of difference and why can it be an educational source? are rarely addressed. Philosophy and philosophy of education are deemed crucial to introduce

<sup>3</sup> see also Tuning Educational Structures in Europe project 2000, <http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>.

student teachers and teachers to such concepts to enlarge their thinking. The aim is not to test their philosophical knowledge but to use it in thinking about experiences without ending up following prevailing ideas and practices of teaching without questioning them. This is not to minimise the value of experience in teaching and the wisdom derived from it. But as Heidegger points out, our desire to be recognised by other educators and the public, tends to immerse us into the conformity of what “they say” so that we lose our free capacity of authentic free thinking to “the they”.<sup>4</sup>

Doing philosophy with teachers in the Maltese teacher education context as in others has long grappled with the issue of whether one should start from philosophical thought to inform one’s teaching practice or addressing the experiences and challenges of teaching first so that philosophical inquiry is based on practice. To my mind, it does not really make a difference which way to approach “philosophical practice” (Higgins et al. this edition page 4) in thinking about teaching. The major problem of the practice of reflection is when it is disjointed from the very philosophical underpinnings of practical wisdom, which delineates the *freedom* to think to make good educational judgments. It is not nourished by a philosophy of education which Masschelein and Todd (2011) describe, an “exercise in thought.” Standardised practices of thinking, teachers’ preoccupation with being evaluated as competent and with achieving established learning outcomes, encourage conformity when the means by which these are achieved are not questioned (Zeichner and Liu 2009; Platt 2014). As I argue elsewhere, it increases student teachers’ anxiety in meeting the appropriate standards of reflection and enhances their demands on being instructed how to properly reflect on teaching to be able to reach expected standards (Galea 2012, 2019). This has inevitably, although not entirely intentionally, regulated teachers into accepted ways of thinking about being a teacher (Cochran Smith 2005, Carr and Skinner 2009), rather than the open debates about things that are in “our power and that can be done by our own efforts” (Aristotle 2009:6, 21112a36). More relevantly, teachers’ ability to think, speak and act freely has become more limited whilst their thinking of Being is relatively non-existent in teacher education.

## Thinking Being

In the “Letter on Humanism”, Heidegger (1997b) takes up this issue of human beings’ instrumental frame of mind that regulates their agency. He explains that “We measure deeds by the impressive and successful achievements of praxis. But the deed of thinking is neither theoretical nor practical, nor is it the conjuncture of these two forms of behaviour”. (Heidegger 1997b, p. 240). His philosophy, which he acknowledges as indebted to Aristotle, inspires hermeneutical inquiries about teachers’ practical immersion in their craft, pointing towards the missing questioning of Being. Concentrating on the end effects of our actions and interactions and the dynamics of cause and effect, distracts us from openly contemplating our becoming, ontologically so that “the thinking of Being makes itself unrecognisable to us” (Heidegger 1997b, p. 107). As Thomson argues, teachers have become “enframed”

<sup>4</sup>Heidegger argues that human beings have the tendency to conform their selves to “the they”; what other people say, do or think, in order to be accepted by others. Being resolute to be different is harder than it sounds for teachers, due to their need to be recognised by regulative professional bodies that accredit and evaluate them as professional teachers.

by the ‘instrumentalization of teaching’, transmuting into “mere resources” in the service of learning (Thomson 2001, 245). The technology of reflective practice that masters the teachers’ world “in terms of effecting” (Heidegger 1997a, p. 9) is far removed from a positive use of ‘*techne*’ by which teachers’ Being can be uniquely expressed and revealed. The aim of reflection is not so much to define what thinking is or what students should do to reflect well to be recognised as teachers. It is to attend to what calls for thinking (also about Being teachers) and openly respond to it. It is to recognise that one’s Being can never be definitively revealed as if it were a fixed entity that has already been designed by professional teaching communities.

There is another explanation as to why the question of Being has been cast into the shadows and how we have lost an awareness of the relation of Being to human essence (Heidegger 1998, p. 281). It is the inability of philosophical thought to ask what it means to be, which has caused it to be forgotten. The metaphysical tradition of philosophy has articulated the question of being in terms of what; what is man? what is thinking? what is a teacher? and so on. It limits our inquiries into being as if it were an inert object that one can have complete and universal knowledge of. Being cannot be inquired as if it were a thing to be discovered and defined as separated from one’s experience and existence.<sup>5</sup> A definition of a teacher gives the impression that being a teacher is an entity that passively “stands in front of” whoever is thinking about it. It is through living teaching that the meaning of Being teacher can be ontologically revealed; that is, through the very practical being in the world, acting, producing and relating to others. A human being “is called the being who can think and rightly so” (Heidegger 1968, 3), however his thinking should be also called by the continuous inclination to question his own Being. It is the very faculty of human beings to interrogate their own existence that differentiates them from non-human beings. What is essential to human beings is their capability of thinking ‘What it is to be *as* a human being?’ (Magrini, 2012, 501). Thinking ‘as’ human beings in this way is no straightforward matter; it is a play between an awareness of what is revealed through one’s own actions in the world and that which is yet concealed.

Human beings are thrown in the world as active beings and they make sense of their being in the midst of situations and activities. Being there (*Dasein*) is revealed in those moments when they open themselves to the world and project themselves through their capacities of acting in the world, opening up to a myriad of possibilities of becoming. Heidegger (2001a) uses the Greek notion of ‘*alētheia*’ to present the elusiveness of the emergence of Being between concealment and unconcealment. We know that Being exists when we think about it and question it. Our thinking throws a ray of light on our Being, yet what lies beyond that light remains concealed until it further calls for our attention.

<sup>5</sup> What distinguishes a human being, is ‘being there’, in the world, (*Dasein*), an “entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue” (Heidegger 1962, p.68). It is essential that the question of Being is asked and analysed as human being are the only living entities that are capable of asking the question ‘what it means to be?’, an inquiry that philosophy, historically since the Greeks, has failed to address.

## Poetic Thinking in Teacher Education

The relevance of Heidegger's thought in education, including his critique of the function of higher education, has been well explored during the last decades (Peters 2002; Thompson 2001, Irwin 2015; Magrini and Schwieler 2018; Gordon 2000). What Heidegger says about philosophy, teaching and the pedagogical relation between teachers and students is crucial to rethink educational practices, yet his thoughts have been less explored in debates about doing philosophy with teachers; why and how thinking is significant to Being and becoming a teacher. Heidegger's understanding of thinking and his reconsideration of philosophy in terms of 'being' human raises the question of Being teacher in a different language that goes beyond to a means to an end approach. Being shows itself what it is, by its thrownness in the flux of life, in what we do and what we produce, before we reflect and theorize about it. This does not mean that Heidegger was against thinking about what we do but for him it should not be only confined to solving issues when something goes wrong. In reviving the question of Being in teacher education, Heidegger's poetic and aesthetic turn in his later writing presents a post- philosophical form of thinking that enables a teacher "to release herself and become open for the creative use of language and allow for the redefinition of customary terms in order to potentially invoke a transformation to her thinking on education." (Magrini 2018, 193).

The poetic generates and is generated by variable thinking that enables the projection of one's self, other than which is immediately present. Heidegger (2001a, 214) describes it as "responding, in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language." Language is an abode of Being because of its possibilities of revealing its presence. The use of language, is also 'techne', a means of production, but its significance lies in its vital force to reveal Being without the restrictions of instrumentalism; "this form of techne does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that techne is a bringing-forth" (Heidegger 1997a,13). The indefinite language of poetry allows for an expansion of the literal meaning of words in which Being finds its dwelling ahead of itself towards something new. Thinking poetically is not necessarily didactically useful in doing things the right way but it is educationally more enabling to the process of becoming teachers as they unfold their Being while contemplating their existence.

## The Functions of Metaphor and Metaphorical Thinking in Teacher Education

The question that begs a practical answer is how can poetic thinking be practically encouraged in teacher education? I have argued that formal teacher education institutions have the responsibility to open the ontological possibilities of teachers' authentic being and that an alternative thinking about teaching is required. It is a kind of thinking that is different from philosophical thinking but one that runs parallel to it.

Arendt's reflections on the importance of thinking and particularly how she relates it to the use of metaphor allows us to better addresses the question of poetic thinking. In *The 'Denktagebuch'* which is a collection of Arendt's 'thought fragments' (Cornelissen 2017), she presents the parallelism between philosophical concepts and metaphors in this

manner; “In philosophy one calls concept what in poetry [Dichtkunst] is called metaphor. Thinking creates its ‘concepts’ out of the visible, in order to designate the invisible”. (D XXVI.30.728)<sup>6</sup>

She explains how the experiential and the sensuous, which are visible, can be transferred to the abstract and invisible<sup>7</sup> (Arendt 1978). Analogies typical of metaphorical thinking draw on appearances to remind us of things that cannot be seen and she puts it, “thinking and sense experience, the invisible and the visible belong together, are ‘made’ for each other, as it were.” (Arendt 1978,109). This is very much in line with Heidegger’s understanding of poesis explained above; a play between what is concealed and what is revealed and the bringing forth of something from non-being to being. It is also very similar to Virginia Woolf’s description of moments of being that let us see beyond the “cotton wool” of everyday life. These moments of being happen when one lets thoughts roam freely in a desire to capture a thinking being. As she states, “it is token of a real thing behind appearances and I make it real by putting it into words and I make it whole by putting it into words” (Woolf 1976, 85).

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt unmistakably demonstrates her preoccupation with the “absence of thinking” in a fast pacing busy life of doing, “where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think” (Arendt 1978, p. 4). This might seem to run contrary to her idea of the ‘*Vita Activa*’. Yet she argues that the life of action that brings something new into the world is not possible if we do not pause to think rather than compulsively or blindly move into action. Praxis, she explains, cannot be understood in opposition between what one does and what one thinks (Arendt 1978, p. 7).

Metaphorical thinking, which for Arendt is characteristic of “all philosophic and most poetic language” (Arendt 1978,102) is significant in other ways. Metaphor is exceptional in that it uses words that correspond to each other as there is “no language has already made vocabulary for the needs of mental activity ; they all borrow their vocabulary from words originally meant not to correspond together” (Arendt 1978,102). This points to her political and ethical reasons for the need of original language that surpasses our reliance to standardised language which inhibits people to think by themselves. Arendt was very much concerned with the inability of people to speak their own mind, reflecting their failure to think beyond the grasp of the ‘they say’. A case in point are her comments about Eichmann’s use of repetitive phrases during his trial in Jerusalem, reflecting his persistent obeying orders without questioning them (Evron 2021). For her, this is a problematic source of evil that prevents human beings from being free to distinguish right from wrong. This is why metaphors and analogies are the mark of an ‘extraordinary quality of thinking, of its being always out of order’ (Arendt 1978, p. 109).

## How can Teachers Think Metaphorically?

The philosophical thoughts of Arendt and Heidegger give us ample reasons why poetic and metaphorical thinking can be another way of thinking that not only focuses on practice as if it were separate from one’s being. Creative forms of thinking about teachers are frequently addressed by narrative research and through phenomenological inquiries into the lives of

<sup>6</sup>As quoted and translated from German to English by Cornelissen (2017).

<sup>7</sup>‘Metaphorien’ in Greek translates to transfer and alludes to the transmission of what is not seen to what is seen and sensed and vice versa.

teachers. Yet these as well as poetic thinking can be activities done by student teachers to express their meaningful becomings and reflect their pedagogical wisdom. Since Being teacher is revealed through intimate intra-actions with others, metaphorical thinking and writing offers teachers authentic possibilities to publicly reveal who they are, without being restricted by the technological ‘enframing’ of reflective practice. It gives them an opportunity to freely find their own analogies to understand themselves as teachers and related actions that for them are essential to be good teachers.

By way of giving an example of metaphorical teaching, I draw on one student teacher’s poetic thinking in her quest for meanings in being a teacher. The poetic language in the excerpt from the following student teacher’s metaphoric writing demonstrates non-calculative thinking, whose expression brings forth her very Being and that informs her teaching actions. In her writing “Fiona The Chameleon” (unpublished writing, Caruana 2018) she makes an analogy between her Being a teacher to being chameleon.

As I switch roles from daughter to parent to teacher I compare myself to a chameleon changing its hue according to its surrounding conditions, endeavoring to seek some inner truth behind this phenomenon. I discover that chameleons use colour to reflect their mood and to respond to varying temperatures. As I gained knowledge of this creature and its unique features, I realized the relevance of other features that I then metaphorically compare to my life.

## **Changing Colours**

The transition between hues is reminiscent of my childhood. As a descendant of Maltese/Australian migrants, many times, like a chameleon, I had to change colours in order to cope with two entirely different societies and educational systems. Being shuffled between Malta and Australia, country to country and school to school made it extremely difficult for me to contend with cultural differences. Just like a chameleon with its changing appearance I found I was able to change. As a teacher in today’s multicultural school communities. I draw on my developed ability to change colours to find the right hue to communicate with different students.

## **180-Degree View**

Chameleons have independently moveable eyes enabling them to look forward and backwards simultaneously. It is said that teachers must have eyes at the back of her head. How is that possible? During teaching practice, I was struck by the amount of information I had to take in at one go. The first few days were like a blur, absent notes, parents’ notes, no lunches, meetings with the head, lesson plan file, resources, fund raising... How could I focus? By the end of the 6-week period I had not mastered the art of multitasking. But I realized that besides multitasking, focusing on children to attract their interest in learning was more important.

## **The Extensile Tongue**

It is said that a chameleon has a tongue that extends one and a half times the length of its body, using it to capture its prey. My extensile tongue reaches out to my students, even if



they seem far out. I use it to capture their attention and draw them towards me and other students on class. This is the way I seek to seize my prey, which is learning.

### **Zygodactyl Feet and Prehensile Tail**

Like a chameleon using its feet and tail to strongly grip the branch of a tree, I too intend to keep a strong hold on my belief that my relations with parents and caregivers are essential ingredients to a child's success in education. I have a very high tree to climb but like a chameleon I will take it slow, steady steps to explore several branches to reach them without falling.

I find it ironic that what used to torment me as a child, is the food that energizes me as an adult and teacher. My continuous search for what nourishes me, will give me the strength to grip even harder to the branches of my journey as a teacher to strengthen my relation to children and others.

In seeking to bring herself forth resolutely as a teacher, Fiona dwells on her being a teacher, in connection freely to other entities and their experiences that call her to think. The metaphor here works along the limits of what can be articulated as an acceptable way of being a teacher at the same time as relating to the world not strictly associated with teaching. Her metaphor does not claim any definite knowledge of what it is to be a teacher, but alludes to her actions through a play of un-concealment and concealment of Being in teaching and is open to interpretation to what she might yet experience. It may invite other questions that critically reflect on instances when her change in colour makes it hard for students to locate her. For example, can I control my change in hue? As a human being am I resolute to avoid letting certain climates of teaching control my colours?

The function of the teacher educator here is to let the students roam, search, gather different experiences together at the same time as giving them the courage to leap into the unknown spaces for inquiring being. The pedagogical suggestion is that "teachers have to learn to let students learn" (Heidegger 1968,15) at the same time as accompanying them through their own pathways of learning. This 'method' Heidegger warns, "often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by 'learning' we now suddenly understand merely the procurement of useful information" (Heidegger 1968,15). Teaching in this manner is difficult for a number of reasons not only because the teacher herself has to learn, but also to find how to renounce her influence on students in making the leap out of conventional modes of thinking. This path is risky for the educator as it is full of uncertainty for the students but it is that which Babich (2017,10) says, "Free (s) the learner for his or her own most possibilities of and in being, including one's own projects, concerns, challenges, and limitations."

Finding meaning in Being teacher in this unique poetic manner is an intentional task that encourages teachers to respond to the call of thinking differently from the everydayness of reflective practice. The poetic play of language is generated through artful encounters within the world that instigate an ethical creation of being a unique person unfolding in action. Thinking teaching metaphorically entails a playful but serious engagement with what is present. It is an open movement towards the potentiality of the unknown and an exploration of the possibility of who we can become.

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