

# Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education

Volume 12

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The audience for the series includes academics, professionals and students in the fields of educational thought and theory, philosophy and social theory, and critical scholarship.

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# Making Education Educational

A Reflexive Approach to Teaching

 Springer

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ISSN 2214-9759

ISSN 2214-9767 (electronic)

Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education

ISBN 978-3-030-27075-9

ISBN 978-3-030-27076-6 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27076-6>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To our present and future grandchildren*

# Foreword

A book about teaching seems almost anachronistic in light of the current climate of performativity in which ‘learning’ has become the mantra of global educational reform. Reflecting upon the beginnings of my own teaching career, which occurred not so long ago in geological time but was nonetheless part of a different era, I can sometimes feel a sense of loss, but mostly a sense of disappointment bordering on despair at what the language of education has become, so divorced is it from the act of teaching – and all the rich complexities that this entails.

My sense of having lost something is not caught up in some middle-age nostalgia for a time that was ‘better’. I am not so naïve as to think that schools, and the teachers within them, have not participated in practices of colonisation and exclusion or that they have not perpetuated violences through their micro regulations and seemingly minor gestures that ended up having profound and lasting effects – and continue to do so. Rather, my sense of having lost something has to do with a feeling that there has been a rupture with a long tradition of teaching to which I belong, for better and worse. Indeed, it was through acknowledging that the power of teaching could be used for maleficent ends that prompted many of us in my own teacher education programme to try to use this power responsibly, to become educators that could engage with that part of the teaching tradition concerned with human enrichment, democracy and social justice. This part of the tradition, reflected in educational thinkers from antiquity right through to Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori, Greene and Freire, was not about converting students to a specific world view, or to insist that they were deficient and thereby in need of the school’s civilising mission; instead, the tradition of teaching that mattered to us was inspirational, showing us as beginning teachers that not only could the world be a different place but that our role in helping to shape that world *actually* mattered.

It mattered not only because of *what* we were – teachers – but because of *who* it enabled us to become through *how* we approached students. It led us to interact with them in a way that followed the students’ rhythms and moves while also allowing those moves to shape the subject matter on offer. It was a way of dancing with students that sought to encourage them to think for themselves and to engage with the world in informed and caring ways. Teaching was seen to be central to educa-

tion, and our actions as teachers were necessary for setting the conditions, as it were, for something to happen, something more than ‘learning’ information and facts (however important these might be); indeed, it was about *creating experiences* that optimally could enhance what we were studying on a particular day; but equally, they could also lead us astray, propelling us off into uncharted territory that compelled us as teachers to exercise judgement in knowing when to follow this serendipitous flight and when to loop it back to what we had been doing together. Teaching therefore is not a perfect science but an artful venture involving continual balance and reflection.

But you would not necessarily recognise this in current discourses about education – even if you will find it in many teachers’ classrooms who are struggling against the commodification of learning and the rigid examination structures upon which their teaching is judged. Recently, I attended a meeting with policymakers in the Irish government who unabashedly declared that education is ‘in the business of learning’. Put in this way, teaching becomes the handmaid of ‘learning’; it is no longer an *invitation* to students to reflect, think or articulate but is instead being turned into *mechanism* by which students can acquire skills and facts. I am not suggesting by any measure that skills and facts are totally unimportant, but they do not lie at the heart of education, or what makes education educational to put in Hoveid and Hoveid’s words, which involves far more complex and essential qualities of insight, informed judgement, meaning-making, creativity and imagination, qualities which cannot entirely be measured on a test but are crucial to living a sound and meaningful life in both the private and public domain.

What Hoveid and Hoveid show in this very welcomed volume is that teaching is the ‘driver’ of formal education – not the other way around. That is, insofar as schooling continues to be thought of as a *mechanism*, it ceases to be an *invitation* to the world: to construct meaning, understand how it functions, challenge existing orthodoxies and find a way of living with it on one’s own terms and as part of a collective. Moreover, through its appeals to ‘efficient’ forms of teaching that lead to immediately discernible learning outcomes, it risks at the very least, deprofessionalising and, at the worst, dehumanising the work of teachers and their actions in the classroom. Even the example they give of students who spent time working on constructing a functional wooden box for holding 80 litres of firewood (that involved complex negotiations with other group members, mathematical skill, understanding of physical properties of the material, creativity and imagination) is telling insofar as students themselves could not see they had learned anything in doing this task since it was not about factual knowledge to be examined. The success of the mechanistic model is borne out, therefore, by the ways in which perceptions of teaching and learning are reduced to a cause-effect relationship that can then be measured.

Instead, the emphasis that Hoveid and Hoveid place on reflection (read through Ricoeur’s work on memory) challenges these received ‘truths’ about education as involving simplistic input-output dynamics. Here, memory and memorisation are two different elements of living: the latter involving mimetic recall of content from books and other sources of information and the former involving processes of experiencing lived life and making connections to other experiences in ways that are

history-making. What the authors make clear is that the current discourses guiding educational reform only privilege memorisation as a technique, forgetting that memory is also involved in formations of human identity and relationality. Thus, reflecting on teaching becomes not merely an exercise of ‘what’ teachers have done, or what techniques ‘work’ in a classroom, but ‘who’ teachers become in the context of the relationships they have with their students and with the content being taught.

In light of this, self-reflexivity develops, in the hands of the Hoveids, ‘by way of reading teaching as a text’. For teachers to reflect in ways that are meaningful to them requires delving into the complexity of the classroom and a refusal to encapsulate their observations into simplistic structures of outcome-based learning. Indeed, the first time I attended a secondary classroom in a town just outside Dublin to observe a student teacher, I remember being struck by the list of ‘learning outcomes’ she wrote on the board; the students were to copy these down as if to internalise what they were supposed to get out of this 40-min lesson before it even began. It is not as if teaching needs to be shrouded in mystery, but the ‘outcomes’ end up becoming fixed standards against which students are to measure their own progress. The language of ‘learning outcomes’ has little then to do with what students are *actually* learning, studying and experiencing and more to do with an ideal construct of attainment. It is not that teachers do not need goals or aims or purposes but that the extent to which this is the only way to think about students’ engagement with subject matter blinds us to what might really matter for students in that engagement. Thus, reflecting on one’s teaching practice as a text needs to move beyond the (largely imagined) link between technique and outcome and into the territory of the quality of teaching practice as conditioning environments of inquiry, insight, imagination and compassion.

What is so curious about the dominant mechanistic discourses of education is that they seek to diminish teaching as a specifically human and artful act based on trying to minimise teachers’ judgement, self-reflection, attention and intuition. In other words, it removes the very human element of teaching as an action that in turn can affect the world and replaces it with industries based on better systems of delivery. It begs the question, however, given we live in a digital age, why would we need schools to focus even more on information delivery and consumption? Or is ‘teaching’ as the handmaid to ‘learning’ simply being made to imitate structures of digital interface? Presenting a smooth, user-friendly screen for students to learn better, more, faster? What this volume compels us to confront is that while these may be the misguided ideals of some policymakers, publishers and other educational industries, something else is going on in our classrooms. The real question is: Do we have the courage to face teaching for what it is, or will we simply seek to erase it in the name of mechanical efficiency?

# Preface

In education, teaching is part of the equation, teaching and learning. The one cannot be subsumed into the other. We must keep them apart – at least analytically – to grasp some of the complexities entailed in them as processes. Teaching and learning, as intertwined actions, happen daily around the world, both in and out of formal education. What we wanted to do in this project was to try to grasp some of the complexities of these processes into words. We decided to focus on teaching, mainly because teaching in today’s educational climate seems almost forgotten. Teaching we contend, when it happens, holds the potential for new beginnings, for learning, in the true sense of that word – something life-altering.

Both of us authors grew up in rural districts outside of mid-sized towns in Norway. We both went to smaller rural schools where we attended classes governed by one teacher and have experienced both sides of such regimes, the caring and the authoritarian. As students in the 1970s and 1980s, we experienced and were part of the opposition against those in power, the hierarchies of (mostly) men ruling across the universities and in societies in general. Today, we witness how education develops as a culture of competition subsumed into a system of algorithms of technical-mathematical reasoning that is hard to grasp. Our lifetime has shown us a series of developments in and out of education where oppositions against what holds power needs constant deliberation and discussion. Truth be told, the current situation in education has some scary traits.

But we did not want to write a book about what scares us. We wanted to write about education in a way that can make one see what possibilities there are, without forgetting both what has been and what is at stake. We wanted to write about education educationally. Our intention was to address teaching, the complexity of teaching, as the driver of this process. This is therefore a book about teaching where we hope to disturb the dominant understanding of teaching as a delivery to those (so-called) not-knowledgeable. Teaching in our undertaking is understood as action, because we think teaching holds a potential in *the course of recognition*, to use Paul Ricoeur’s words. Our understanding of teaching through action builds on the philosophy of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). He has provided a work through all the texts he has written, an enormous and manifold source for

developing thought and practice. His texts are a legacy, we argue, an invaluable gift to humanity.

We address teaching as action in this book. This builds directly on Ricoeur's theories of action. We once adopted the idea that Ricoeur's philosophy could be used as a rich source for deliberations about education. In this, we specifically wanted to try to work out what is entailed in thinking education and teaching in reflexive terms, hence the title of the book. Understanding teaching reflexively means to try to flesh out what is entailed in what one does when one does what one does – to put it in colloquial terms. To understand and think of teaching in the act of teaching means to be attentive to what teaching does. The reflexivity of teaching is attention paid to how teaching and learning processes unfold.

To write a book takes time and help from others. In this work, there are some special people who have given of their time and commitment which has been invaluable. First, thank you Ronda Schlumbohm. Discussing education with a dedicated and experienced teacher like you makes us understand what teaching can be. We do hope some of this show in our writing about teaching. To write in a foreign language is demanding, and without you Peter (Gray), we would have been lost. You have managed to make some of our Norwenglish become readable, for that we are forever in your debt: Tusen Takk. We would also like to thank one of the first reviewers of our book proposal. His (we think it was a man) comments were encouraging and given in a way that made us believe that this project was feasible. Such reviews are extremely helpful and not that common in academia – you set an example. Then to Annemarie Keur, from Springer, your encouragement and steadiness have given us confidence when working on the project. Springer is lucky to have you.

It took almost 2 years, but that is probably how it is and had to be for us to become clear about what we wanted to address in this book. We have presented at conferences and discussed with colleagues as part of that process. Such events whether they are at ECER (European Educational Research Conference) or at INPE (International Network of Philosophers of Education) or at some other venue are invaluable for scholarly work. We strongly believe such venues are more important than ever – to keep thoughts alive. To paraphrase Ricoeur, once a book is written, the words are dead, until some picks up that book and starts reading and then can bring the thoughts back into life.

We hope that someone will pick up this book and will engage you in your thinking about teaching, and if you are teaching, we hope that it will inspire you in your actions. Teaching is and will always be a work in progress – that is the hope.

Trondheim, Norway

Halvor Hoveid  
Marit Honerød Hoveid

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