Phronesis and the Student Teacher

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the preparation of teachers, through the lens of various authors who have interrogated the role of the particular circumstance. The current acknowledgment of the need for differentiation and individual needs, increasingly apparent in changing times, is explored through a hermeneutic approach, taking the case as an example, which has ramifications for the profession in general. The argument contends that, while knowing what to do is important, knowing why, how, when, and with whom are often even more important and becomes essential when considering the classroom as a place where the teacher lives daily with students. Tracing the idea of *phronesis* from its Aristotelian roots through contemporary writing and into a narrative of a particular student teacher, this essay seeks to claim a significant place for this ancient, but enduring and currently relevant idea, which embodies the idea of living well with others.

RESUME: travers la lunette de différents auteurs qui se sont posé des questions sur le rôle de la circonstance particulière, ce papier analyse la préparation des enseignants. Par le biais d'une approche herméneutique, on étudie la reconnaissance actuelle du besoin de différentiation et d'exigences individuelles, en apparence grandissant dans les périodes en changement. A l'appui et comme exemple, nous présentons le cas qui a des ramifications dans la profession en général. L'argument affirme que si le fait de savoir agir est important, le fait de savoir pourquoi, comment, quand et avec qui, est encore plus important la majorité du temps et devient essentiel quand il s'agit de la salle de classe, lieu où l'enseignant vit chaque jour avec les élèves. Après avoir fouillé dans les écrits contemporains pour calquer l'idée du p*hronèsis* à partir de ses racines aristotéliciennes et après qu'un enseignant étudiant particulier l'a relaté par écrit, cet essai cherche à attribuer une place importante à cette idée ancienne qui, au demeurant, est pertinente et durable. Cette idée revêt le concept de vivre en harmonie avec les autres.

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Recently, I stepped out of an early childhood classroom into one populated with adults. To what extent did this change in role mean? To what extent would the role be the same? How might I be able to mediate the gulf for these adults between being student and becoming teacher while encouraging the mind frame that we are always both? What kinds of structures, programs, and forms of learning will allow new teachers to "live well" in the changing and challenging world of education? To which aspects of being an early childhood educator did I need to cleave, and from which should I cleave myself?

I also ruminate upon questions that students might ask me about myself. One stuck. Has there ever been a particular child you did not like? If what Noddings (1994) writes has truth, the relationship – the exchange between myself and the self of the child – is the foundation of any pedagogical exchange. How do I see the child? I answer this question by saying I try to find something I admire in every child. In some encounters that is more challenging than in others. I could say that every child is to some extent a diamond in the rough. Sometimes helping the child liberate the sparkle that is inside can be a challenge.

This, though, could be an unfortunate metaphor, suggesting a certain violent edge in education. But then, Aoki (2000) writes that learning can never be safe, it is always dangerous, risky, and violent. The teacher educator raises this danger to the second power. Not only would I now be teaching, but I would also be teaching teachers. How could I mediate this necessity of educational violence? One challenging part in such mediation in *living well* is keeping the person of the student safe while doing violence to their thoughts, so that other thoughts become possible. My new role would require me not only to do this for my students, but also to model the practices and structures in such a way that they could recognize the possibility for their own practice. Like many other considerations in education that I would present to my students, this seems to be an impossible paradox (Palmer, 1998). Risk and safety seem polar opposites. As Palmer explains, though, they are a necessary paradox. They could be described as extremes on a continuum, but in thinking of them as a paradox, one can feel their tensions pulling as they circle around each other until there is not just a *circle* between them, but a sphere as their continual orbits change.

The sphere of their necessary tensions is like a balloon, for if one part becomes too weak, the entire thing collapses. If there is too much safety and no risk, there can be no learning. If there is all risk, learning stops. There is not only one such balloon. Education is full of juggling

such paradoxical balloons, with a temptation, in the changing winds of policy and demographics, to focus on a few, allowing others to drop. There is, however, a comfort, since if a balloon is dropped it will almost certainly bounce back into the play of things without too much damage.

In my estimation, echoing a sentiment from Caputo (1987) within this juggling act, "it is always a question of wading into the flux and doing the best one can not to drown" (p. 262). Unless one is a Jedi Knight (Kershener, 2004) there is no *do* or *not do*, there is only *try* as long as it is one's best in the face of the *flux*. As Arendt (1958) purports, communities are built upon action based on promises and forgiveness. The promise of the teacher is to live well, to act with the best interests of the child at heart, and the weight of such a promise can only be borne because of the existence of forgiveness and, thankfully, as van Manen (1986) asserts, "children are naturally forgivers" (p. 54). Such a promise for action is described by van Manen (1990) in the context of the obligation to act within a pedagogical situation: "Pedagogy itself is a mode of life that always and by definition deals with practical action" (p. 154).

Finding a Name

The call for practical action thus is also a call for practical judgment, deliberation about action within the moment of the action. I began to understand how all my questions revolved around this core, a core of practical wisdom. In his translation of Aristotle (350BCE/1925), W.D. Ross uses this term to interpret the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. Identifying such a concept, though, is only part of the inquiry, added to this is the dimension of understanding its nuances. Dunne (1993) writes of it, stating "there is a complexity and multi-layeredness in the concept of phronesis which would make it an extremely uncomfortable fit in any ... schematization" (p. 245). Aristotle (350 BCE/1925), though, is clear on some points – his call for action as an integral part, for example. In Aristotle's framing, phronesis becomes *above all* deliberation that translates into action, which will be of practical benefit to those concerned. In fact, phronesis hinges on this criterion: "Further, a man has practical wisdom not by knowing only but being able to act" (Book VII (10), 1152a). Not only would I need to reflect on my questions, I would have to *act* in way that would encourage my students to live well with their students. Aristotle further explains:

> For we say this is above all the work of the man of practical wisdom, to deliberate well, but no one deliberates about things invariable, nor about things which have not an end, and [to enact] a good that can be brought about by action. (Book VI (7), 1141b)

Aristotle's writing, though, does not connect the teaching with phronesis; yet in his words something resonates with the way in which I view the reflective and active paradox of teaching, a paradox that is a constantly moving target. The rule of the rule somehow does not apply to the way in which I have observed teaching to work. Dunne (1993) describes phronesis as "the grasp which Dasein has of its own affairs but which cannot be reduced to formalized knowledge and rendered explicit in terms of rules" (p. 109). To Dunne, phronesis is:

> Not without rules (for it goes with rules as far as they can take it), nor below rules (for it is not necessarily the case that it can or will be superseded by rules yet to be discovered) but rather *beyond* rules. (p. 71)

The Dreyfus and Dreyfus model of learning, described by Flyvbjerg (2001) also suggests that the highest level of expertise is not rule-bound, nor consciously rational, but instead relies heavily on pertinent experience. The basic levels are founded on rule-based precepts, but Flyvbjerg explains that proficient and expert levels of learning include many tacit deliberations about which a novice cannot be taught. In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer (2000) portrays Aristotle as purporting that phronesis is not a skill transmitted through teaching:

> In fact this means that the end towards which our life as a whole tends and the elaboration of it into the moral principles of action, as described by Aristotle in his ETHICS cannot be the object of a knowledge that can be taught. (p. 321)

Aristotle confirms this aspect: "such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience" (350BCE/1925, Book VI (8), 1142a). He explains that things that are constant, rule-governed, and unchanging do not require decision-making. He declares, "practical wisdom on the other hand is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say this is above all the work of the man of practical wisdom, to deliberate well" (Book VI (7), 1141a). In a changing world, where situations and events arise for which a teacher has no precedent, this form of deliberation becomes increasingly necessary.

Not only is deliberation about and within action necessary to the concept, but also it is through the action of the *phronimos* – the one who

exhibits phronesis – that it will be recognized: "Regarding *practical wisdom* we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it" (Aristotle, 350BCE/1925, Book VI (5), 1140a). In Aristotle's view, though, phronesis is not just about what people do, but also who they are – in other words, a part of the character of the individuals who are seen to have it:

> Practical wisdom, too, is linked to virtue of character, and this to practical wisdom, since the principles of practical wisdom are in accordance with the moral virtues and rightness in morals is in accordance with practical wisdom. Being connected with the passions also, the moral virtues must belong to our composite nature; and the virtues of our composite nature are human; so, therefore, are the life and happiness which correspond to these. (Book VI (5), 1140a)

This explanation of virtue of character and phronesis being bound together causes Dunne to comment on "a remarkable circularity" (1993, p. 278) in Aristotle's analysis of the relationship between virtue and knowledge. He states, "if one starts from the side of knowledge, one analyzes the need for virtue. If one starts from the side of virtue, one analyzes the need for knowledge" (pp. 278-279). He refers to the outcome of such analysis where Aristotle declares, "it is clear, then, from what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue" (350BCE/1925, Book VI (13), 1144b). To make clear the relationship between teaching with phronesis and being true to one's values and principles will be an essential component in inquiring into the foundations of praxis, and one that encompasses the very selfhood of the teacher, which will, in turn, be revealed through praxis..

Van Manen (1990) writes about tact as ruling praxis. He makes the point that the presence of what he names "pedagogical tact" appears under a myriad of labels that obscure the normative and subtle nature of its underlying aspect:

> This text aims to explore and offer a more experience-based interpretation of pedagogical reflection on the one hand, and of the practical pedagogical moment of teaching (and parenting) on the other hand. Indeed, it is the reality of these pedagogical moments that much literature has been trying to grasp and clarify under the labels of *reflective teaching, teacher thinking, the teacher as reflective practitioner, teacher as problem solver, teacher as decision maker, teacher as researcher.* Using the motions of pedagogical thoughtfulness and pedagogical tact, this book attempts to show

> that the interactive practice of pedagogy has a subtle and highly normative character. (p. 11)

I would argue further that all these labels, including "pedagogical tact," describe teacher judgement that is founded upon phronesis. Van Manen's point that "by definition pedagogy is always concerned with the ability to distinguish what is good and what is not good for children" (p. 10) parallels Aristotle's reference to phronesis as "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" (350BCE/1925, Book VI (6), 1140b). Aristotle's assertion is that phronesis both forms and is formed by the character and experience of the *phronimos*, the one whose practice is based upon phronesis.

Understanding

If this way of acting with phronesis is not eminently teachable, and appears to involve personhood, where might I find others who could frame the work involved in this "impossible" profession (Felman, 1987) in a way that might help me connect students with the praxis of teaching?

Several authors, without mentioning phronesis directly, have shared a certain *kinship* (Wittgenstein, 1958) when writing about educational issues connected with praxis, which on examination involves the phronetic domain. This kinship involves deliberation about what is desirable in a particular educational context and about the role of the individual within practical action. Examples of this include reflection-in-action, (Schön, 1983, 1987), pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1990), "being as opposed to doing" (p. 129), and "the self that teaches" (Palmer, 1998, p. 7). These topics illustrate the presence of personally located characteristics, which the authors purport should be exhibited within good teaching. Such characteristics also reflect phronesis within practice.

Dunne, commencing his work, wrote about the practice of "good teachers" who, faced with objectives, outcomes, and technically prescribed methods, "did not seem to work in this way, but I fancied that if they had their teaching might have been a great deal less successful" (1993, p. 3). He chose Aristotle's concept of phronesis for "the authority of these intuitions when set against the imposing rationality of the objectives model" (p. 3). He writes that Aristotle:

> Explicitly repudiates any merely calculative efficiency with respect to means, any ability that could serve indifferently all ends whether

> good or bad and to which goodness, then would accrue only incidentally. The cleverness required here is, in Aristotle's words, "an eye of the soul" which is fixed on the good; and what makes it so fixed – thereby transforming it into phronesis – is *ethical goodness*. (p. 277)

This statement, I believe, is not necessarily to imply that a teacher who is not allowing for particularity is acting unethically. The emphasis here is that "cleverness" that is equally well employed to any ends whatever the nature of their consequence cannot be confused with phronesis; that phronesis can only arise when means and ends ultimately contribute to "the good." In other words, an efficient techne (rule-based, practical knowledge) could have the possibility to be ethical *or* unethical, but a techne influenced by phronesis could only be ethical, since the impulse of phronesis *must* be towards "the good."

Action

As I wrestled in the "swampy lowland" (Schön, 1987, p. 102) with the impossible necessity of introducing my students to the possibilities of recognizing the difference between "doing" teaching and "being" a teacher in the ways described by Palmer (1998), van Manen (1986), and Noddings (1984, 1992), among others, the signs that they were getting the idea began to blossom. A case in the Curriculum Inquiry Tutorial became a sticking place, through which the shoots of the idea of phronesis began to sprout. The question, "As a member of a privileged mainstream culture, who am I to represent diversity to these children?" burst forth to disrupt much more than the Social Studies curriculum. Suddenly the entire landscape of this case grew thick with question. Who speaks for whom? Who is silenced? Who am I in the middle of all this and what do I do?

The class stayed in this place for a few weeks. Various members researched the process of curriculum design, and the policies that drove and shaped the Program of Studies. The questions drove the work as we wandered over the terrain, finding out more about it, but with each discovery of the voices included came more questions of those about those on the margins. Some of our class who were not of the mainstream culture began to question the authenticity of the process of curriculum design and of the experience of being "talked about" by a specific unit and yet somehow not being able to be addressed within it. The students began to wonder how they could live ethically and well with their students in this changing place and to help those students also to

develop their abilities not just to cope with change but also to live well within it. How could we find a glimmer of hope so that we could find our way through this thickening undergrowth?

In the process of inquiry, no answers uncovered seemed to be generally applicable. For each possible solution to our troubles, there arose a cry of, "Yes, but in my class that would not work." Through this difficulty emerged possibilities that emphasized the role of phronesis. Schön (1983) writes, "because each practitioner treats his case as unique, he cannot deal with it by applying standard theories or techniques ... he must construct an understanding of the situation as he finds it" (p. 129). Though the situation is unique, with the teacher faced with "overload and corresponding vulnerability to packaged solutions" (Fullan, 1998), an attitude towards phronetic deliberation that is dialectic in character can include a regard for techne as a background from which to act in the particular circumstance. Schön (1983) posits, "the teacher's isolation in her classroom works against reflection-in-action. She needs to communicate her private puzzles and insights, to test them against the views of her peers" (p. 333). A second dialectic, then, that takes place in the community of educators can also help inform practically wise action within a particular pedagogical situation. Within this conversation, the class began to find, perhaps not answers, so much as ways of being.

To enrich this dialogue, two voices (Dr. Ottman and Dr. Raqvi, Personal communication: University of Calgary, Curriculum A, 2006) that also brought in others from their experience, joined our conversation. One assuaged our fears about perpetuating stereotypes by extending the idea that stereotypes begin to soften and disperse when relationships are cultivated. The other suggested that respect for family literacies would provide a space in which traditions we studied were rooted in authentic experience and would steer us away from the trap of tourism and exoticism, both of which can serve to other the very children we are attempting to include. Within both these notions lay tenets of phronesis. In order to form relationships, a teacher needs to invest self. One can be in a relationship, but not *do* a relationship. The idea of deliberation with a view to "the good" is also nestled here. How one handles traditions, artifacts, and other representations of culture can affect the way in which members of that culture are seen and either promote or stifle possible relationships. In this deliberation both about and within the sensitive action concerning *what* and *how*, lies an impulse to the good in living with one's students.

Within the actions one chooses is laid bare one's being. Arendt (1958) purports:

> In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of their bodies and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself. (p. 179)

The character of the teacher is thus displayed through words and action whether conscious or not. The way one views the world in general and diversity in particular will be mirrored in the activities one creates for one's students and the resulting relationships that one fosters.

Having taken the discussions in Case Class to heart, several of the pre-service teachers took on the new Alberta Social Studies curriculum as both a unit to promote inquiry among their own students and a vehicle through which to examine their own issues. How could they explore another culture in a way that was authentic, respectful towards the culture, and meaningful to the children? How could they avoid "othering" the people about whom they were to inquire, while preserving the particular diversity that those within that culture might celebrate as part of their identity?

The topic revolved around a community in Canada with a Ukrainian culture. The curriculum called for certain questions to guide the inquiry, but the children seemed to be distant and not quite as engaged as the two student teachers would have liked. In class, we were discussing the power of learning about art and through the arts as a way to unify the curriculum. After discussing the alternatives of playing safe and not addressing culture and tradition, or attempting to familiarize children with various traditions, but doing it wrong by trivializing, the student teachers decided to attempt to draw in the children in a way that might encourage participation through valuing a tradition: the tradition of Ukrainian egg decoration. At first, the student teachers thought that this approach might be fraught with difficulties associated with modern religion. As they discovered the history of the tradition, though, they

found that the practice stretched much further and harkened from ancient ancestors and overlaid original symbols with those of Christianity.

They were able to draw the children in with the story of the tradition, and engage them in the authentic act of creating their own patterns with symbols that were meaningful to them. In this way they learned about the tradition in a deeper way, practicing something personally meaningful, involving their own separate identities while connecting them in a relationship with a vast history of others who had practiced the tradition. They became part of the communal web woven with separate strands: the evolution of sharing a communal practice, which rests on the sum of the parts and in a way that sparks the inquiry about self-hood through the exploration of other. The classroom community developed a caring attitude such as Noddings (1984, 1992) described. The students in their personal involvement cared about this tradition. They began, through deep exploration, to care about the people who had originated the tradition and those who carried on the practice. They explored, with care, the symbols that are respected by others, and through further inquiry, related to the people and the tradition in making their own places within the relationship.

One particular boy entered this relationship through creating a pattern involving the spider, a traditional symbol of patience in this culture. "*Sometimes*," he remarked, "*it's really hard to have patience when you feel all jiggly inside.*" The boy, a very active seven-year-old, remained engaged in his task of carefully and painstakingly creating a pattern that represented him on his egg, which would then become a part of the class collection, representing their journey discovering self and other and furthering the relationships between past and present and between cultures.

So perhaps the questions with which I began also come down to this. They do not revolve around the structures in which I need to teach or the role I must take, so much as they pertain to journeying with the pre-service teachers as they inquire into their selves and those of their students. How will they take up the challenge of valuing self and diversity, of recognizing and valuing the differences, seeing the diamonds and holding safe the children while encouraging them to think differently – to see, respect, value, and truly care about diversity of the other without "othering." Perhaps my role is, after all, to continue to ask the questions and to continue to hold myself open to the same possibilities of thinking differently. Perhaps "living well" in teaching is

only made possible in a changing world through the violence of interrogating our own thought, and having the courage to act in the face of answers which are tentative, based on the hope of phronesis and the promise of forgiveness.

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