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Prologue 1

Preparing for the incalculable: Rehearsing the art of teaching

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Abstract: The assumption which underlies this prologue is that teaching is not a technique that involves intervening upon students in order to produce measurable learning outcomes, but that it is an art which involves tactful and thoughtful engagement with always unique educational situations, always aimed at equipping and encouraging students to become subjects of their own life. In this prologue I ask how teachers can best be prepared for the everyday reality of classrooms, and argue that the only way to enter the practice is through practising the practice. I explore what teaching is, highlighting that at the heart of teaching we find the work of capturing and redirecting the attention of our students and encouraging them to meet what is brought to their attention. I discuss ways in which such work can be practised, showing the multi-layered nature of attention-(re)direction. In addition I discuss the ways in which teaching is a performative art – teaching needs to be enacted in always concrete situations – and what kind of practising preparation for teaching-as-performance requires. I propose a form of teacher reflection that gets students closer to the practice rather than further away from it, and highlight the importance of the art of ending teaching. Through all this I contribute to the emerging literature on rehearsal in teacher education.

Keywords: teaching, teacher education, rehearsal, attention, performativity, reflection

Sammendrag: Antakelsen som ligger til grunn for denne prologen, er at undervisning ikke er en teknikk som innebærer å gripe inn i elevens læring for å produsere målbare læringsutbytter. I stedet er det en kunst som involverer taktfullt og gjennomtenkt engasjement med alltid unike utdanningssituasjoner, med mål om å utruste og oppmuntre studenter til å bli subjekter i sitt eget liv. I denne prologen spør jeg hvordan lærere best kan forberedes på klasserommets hverdagsrealitet, og argumenterer for at den eneste måten å tre inn i praksisen på er gjennom å praktisere praksisen. Jeg utforsker hva undervisning er, og fremhever at i kjernen av undervisning finner vi arbeidet med å fange og omdirigere studentenes oppmerksomhet, samt oppmuntre dem til å møte det som bringes til deres oppmerksomhet. Jeg diskuterer måter dette arbeidet kan praktiseres på, og viser den flerlags naturen av oppmerksomhets-(re) dirigering. I tillegg diskuterer jeg hvordan undervisning er en performativ kunst – undervisning må utføres i alltid konkrete situasjoner – og hva slags praktisk forberedelse undervisning-som-*performance* krever. Jeg foreslår en form for lærerrefleksjon som bringer studentene nærmere praksisen i stedet for lenger bort fra den, og fremhever viktigheten av kunsten å avslutte undervisning. Gjennom alt dette bidrar jeg til den fremvoksende litteraturen om øving i lærerutdanning.

Nøkkelord: undervisning, lærerutdanning, øving, oppmerksomhet, performativitet, refleksjon

Introduction

In a text from 1984, republished as a journal article in 1988, the British curriculum scholar Lawrence Stenhouse wrote a sentence which, in hindsight, can only be characterised as visionary. It reads: 'Improving education is not about improving teaching as a delivery system… crucial is the desire of the artist to improve his or her art' (Stenhouse 1988, p. 50). The reason for calling it visionary is because, if one thing has come to dominate educational policy and research over the past decades, it is precisely the idea that the improvement of education is a matter of 'driving' the system, rather than supporting teachers' professional action. Moreover, to the extent to which the teacher is 'in focus' in these developments, it is increasingly as an evidence-based technician, rather than as a thoughtful professional.

Interestingly, Stenhouse presents the teacher as an *artist*, not just in the artistic sense – although there is definitely an aesthetic dimension to teaching (see Biesta in press) – but also in the Greek sense of art, which might best be translated into contemporary English as craft (see also Biesta 2023a).

Whereas teaching as technique assumes that with the 'right' interventions teachers can produce the 'right' outcomes – and the language of intervention, production, and outcomes already shows the technicist thinking involved – teaching as art acknowledges that the work of teachers encompasses tactful and thoughtful engagement with the here-and-now. It acknowledges that teaching involves engagement with concrete situations that, in some respect, are always new and unpredictable. Moreover, these are situations in which teachers do not intervene 'upon' students-as-objects but are in communication – or, with a phrase from William Pinar: a 'complex conversation' (see Pinar 2012) – with their students-as-subjects.

The dynamics of teaching are therefore fundamentally 'incalculable.' There is no way in which we can calculate what is going to happen, how students might respond to what we present to them, and how, in return, we, as teachers, in turn respond to our students.

This then raises an important question for teacher education, namely how we can prepare new teachers for the incalculable. (The phrase 'preparing for the incalculable' stems from the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who had a real 'nose' for the complexities of human interaction; see Biesta 2001.) In the following pages, I offer some reflections on this predicament,

that is, of how to prepare teachers for what, in a fundamental sense, cannot be foreseen.

I begin by asking how one can actually 'enter' the art of teaching. The simple, but nonetheless important, answer to this question is that the only entry that is possible is by joining the practice of teaching, which one does by practising or rehearsing the practice. There is a practical – or, if one wishes, praxeological – dimension to this, but there is also the question of what kind of practice teaching itself is.

Here I will suggest that the basic gesture of teaching is that of pointing or, in more descriptive terms, that of redirecting the attention of students. This then raises the question of what it might mean to practise such 'acts' of redirecting. Next to this, I will argue that teaching always has a performative quality – the 'doing' of teaching communicates as much as the intentions 'behind' the doing. This also raises the question of how the performance – or better, performativity – of teaching might be practised or rehearsed.

I conclude with a brief 'coda' on reflection and the practising of it, and an observation about the importance of bringing teaching to an end.

Entering the art of teaching

The question of how teachers can bring their students 'inside' a field, or practice, or body of knowledge, is one of the enduring, age-old questions of education.

In Plato's dialogue 'Meno' the predicament is put as a 'learning paradox'. From the perspective of the student, the question here is how we can ever search for something new, because if we do not yet know what it is, we are unable to search for it, which also means that as long as we do not know what it is, we cannot know whether we have already found it. There is a similar predicament from the side of the teacher, because if we want to teach our students something new, then how can we tell them about it, or instruct them about it, if they do not yet know what this 'it' is? It seems, then, that learning something new, or teaching something new, is actually impossible (on this see also Roth 2011).

One interesting and helpful answer to this problem has been given by Ludwig Wittgenstein in what has become known as his 'language-game' theory (see Wittgenstein 1958). Wittgenstein uses the example of teaching someone a new game. Quite often, when we begin to explain a game that we know to somebody who does not know it, we explain the rules, or explain the moves of the game, or what the different game pieces mean, but much of that information does not really mean anything to someone who does not know the game.

So, we often reach a point in our explanations when we say 'OK, let's just start playing, and then things will become clear!' And that is exactly what we often do in teaching: we invite our students to just 'come along', join the practice, so that things slowly begin to become meaningful to them.

That, in short, is how we 'enter' a practice and, over time, begin to get a sense of what 'matters' in the practice, what the point of the practice is, what the rules and assumptions are, even what the values and concerns of the practice are, and how, through all this, the practice 'makes sense' for those who practise it. Over time, and of course in conversation with those who have already been practising the practice longer, we then also begin to get a sense of what it means to practise the practice well and eventually become able to come to our own judgements about this.

But all this only becomes possible once one is on the 'inside' of the practice, and one could say that the only way to enter up there – and to enter a practice more generally – is by practising it, by joining in.

What is teaching?

I considered it important to start at the practical 'end', so to speak, so as not to make the mistake of starting with a definition or an explanation of the practice, precisely because those definitions and explanations do not make sense as long as one is on the 'outside' of the practice.

But where it concerns the practice of teaching, entering the practice also at some point raises the question what this practice *is*, that is, how we can describe what we do when we teach, why it matters, also what teaching is not, and so on.

While there is a substantial amount of literature on teaching, on what it is, and how it can be defined – for an overview see Gittomer & Bell 2016; Biesta & Stengel 2016; see also Biesta 2023b – the account of teaching I have found tremendously helpful, and which is also very appropriate for this prologue, can be found in the work of the German educational scholar Klaus Prange.

Rather than trying to define what teaching is or, as often is the case, what teaching is *for*, Prange has suggested focusing on the unique and distinctive *form* of teaching, that is, on what we do when we teach. Here, Prange has made the simple but crucial suggestion that all teaching is fundamentally a matter of pointing (see Prange 2012; see also Biesta 2022). In German, Prange uses the word 'Zeigen', which translates both as pointing and showing; I prefer to translate it as pointing in order to highlight the actual 'gesture' of teaching.

Another German scholar, Dietrich Benner, has provided a slightly more precise description of the gesture of teaching, when he refers to it as the art of redirecting someone's gaze (in German die Kunst der Umlenkung des Blicks; see Benner 2020, p. 21), or, in a slightly 'broader' formulation: the art of redirecting someone's *attention* (see also Rytzler 2017).

Key in this description is the 're' of 'redirecting', because we can assume that human beings can direct their own attention, but what no one can do by themselves is to *redirect* their own attention. For this we need someone else, which also shows that in Benner's description of the gesture of teaching we find an argument for the important distinction between 'learning' – which anyone can do on their own – and 'teaching' (and 'being taught'), which always requires someone *else*, so to speak.

Prange holds that pointing is essential for education by arguing that without pointing, that is, without directing the student's attention, there is no education. In German: 'Wenn es das Zeigen nicht gibt, dann auch keine Erziehung' (Prange 2012, p. 25). Prange also highlights that pointing has a double orientation. It is always directed *at something* and in one and the same 'move' at *someone*.

Pointing is never an abstract 'Look *there*!', but always a concrete '*You*, look there!' (see Prange 2012, p. 68). Pointing thus calls someone to their attention or, more precisely, it calls someone to their *own* attention. In that regard, pointing is basically an evocative gesture.

While Prange highlights that pointing raises the student's attention and even demands their attention – pointing 'macht aufmerksam und fordert

Aufmerksamkeit' (Prange 2012, p. 70) – pointing can never enforce the student's attention, nor can it control what students will do with their attention. Pointing thus also points at the student's freedom, we might say, in that it raises a question for them about what they will do with their attention.

Nowadays, we may have become conditioned by Facebook and similar technologies into thinking that when something is brought to our attention, the only thing it would require from us is to push the 'like' or the 'dislike' button. That, of course, would be a travesty.

Trying to capture – we also say 'catch' – the attention of our students and redirect it onto something else is best understood as the first step of teaching, though we should not forget that it is the most crucial and essential step.

But after this first step, a 'pedagogy of attention' needs to provide students with opportunities for thoughtful, intellectual engagement with what has come to their attention; engagement which, taking inspiration from Simone Weil (see Weil 1965, p. 72), should always be conducted with a degree of humility. Such work is not an end in itself but should ultimately lead to a moment of judgement. It should lead to the question what all this that has come to my attention and understanding is asking of me, or, in 'bigger' terms: Now that I have arrived here in my life, how do I carry on from here?

Practising teaching is practising pointing

On this account of teaching, then, it follows that the very first thing that needs to be practised is pointing or, in the broader formulation I have utilised in the previous section, practising how to 'capture' one's students' attention. This is, of course, no mean feat. It starts with catching one's students' attention, which can be done in all kinds of more and less direct ways. A simple, but not automatically 'effective', way is to say to students that they should pay attention, but if students do not pay attention to the invitation to pay attention, then the invitation, or demand, to pay attention will not do anything at all.

Catching one's students' attention thus has to start somewhere else, which can be by bringing something to the students' attention – a sound, an image, a text, and so on – although, of course, the presence of the teacher can itself

also be a potential object of attention. There is, therefore, much to practise in catching one's students' attention, and also in studying how others do this.

Catching one's students' attention is one thing, but then (re)directing it onto something is still quite another, particularly if one understands that from an educational point of view the gesture is never just 'outwards' – redirecting one's students' attention onto something – but also 'inwards' – redirecting one's students' attention also to themselves. Attending to their own attention would be a first step for this.

And then there is also the work that needs doing in 'holding' one's students' attention onto something – slowing down and focusing the attention so that something can be attended to, and the attention does not simply drift away to something else. Along the lines of the pedagogy of attention hinted at in the previous section, there is then the work to do to begin to 'intellectualise' the attention, that is, to make the attention thoughtful, to put it briefly. And there is the work to lead the students' attention to the point of discernment, that is, to bring the question of 'where to go from here' to their attention.

In all of that, students may have a tendency to throw their attention back to the teacher (for a detailed phenomenology of this see Biesta 2024), because most students understand that the 'game' of education is not an entirely open game, but one with constraints, and rewards. The simple question whether something needs to be known for the exam is an example of throwing the responsibility students should have for their own attention back to the teacher, on the assumption that the teacher has the authority – and is the authority figure – who ultimately can decide over the students' attention.

Up to a point, this may be true, but teachers should understand, of course, that at the end of the day students need to take responsibility for their own attention – which means that throwing the students' attention back to them is also part of what needs practising. (I use 'throwing' here metaphorically, although from my own experience as a teacher I find it quite an appropriate metaphor; see also Biesta 2014.)

In addition to all the 'interactive' dimensions of teaching, it is also important not to forget that teaching always 'takes place' somewhere, and that the staging of where teaching takes place matters as well. More concretely: teachers also have important work to do in safeguarding space and time so that attention becomes possible. That is why it is virtually impossible to teach 'on the street' – literally and metaphorically – because there are simply too many

distractions. And it is also why many educational technologies, as well as the architecture of school buildings, and the 'choreography' of the classroom, are all intended to make attention possible.

Part of practising teaching is therefore also about practising different staging, but the more important notion here is the idea of the 'choreography' of teaching, as the way in which teachers move in and through classrooms, as an important 'tool' for all the attention-seeking work teachers perform.

Practising the performance of teaching

The idea of choreography brings me to the other point I wish to highlight about the practice of teaching, which is the fact that all teaching is *performative*. By this I do not just mean that teaching needs to be 'performed' ('enacted' is another way of putting it) and that the performance of teaching always takes place in front of an audience – which are two of the ways in which teaching is of a similar quality as performing arts such as song, dance, and music. I also mean that the way in which teaching has significance for students – the word I would not like to use here is 'impact' – is not just about what teachers say but also about how teaching is done, which also includes the 'how' of saying, as one can say the same thing in very different ways, with very different 'effect.'

This already suggests a few important things about practising teaching and the need for practising teaching, because just as a musician can practise for a long time at home, or a dancer can practise for a long time in the studio, and even do so to a degree of perfection, the question whether they manage to perform in the same successful way in front of an audience remains entirely open until they actually are in front of an audience and 'do' their performance. There is, therefore, practising as *rehearsing* – which is important for teachers as well – but there is also the practising in front of an audience, which is an entirely different practising for a range of reasons. The most important reason is that any performance in front of an audience is 'real,' which means that what one does matters and, most importantly, cannot be undone. (Even if one were to stop and apologise to the audience and then do it again, what happens the second time will be tainted by the interruption.) There is therefore quite a lot

at stake in the actual performance of teaching, which explains the additional stress such a real performance may cause in the students rehearsing it 'in practice.'

That the 'how' of teaching matters means that teachers also need to be(come) aware of one's 'way of teaching' and of the way in which one's 'way' communicates to students. This requires that, as teachers, we need to work with a special attention ourselves as well, not just attention to the ways in which students respond – or not – to what we say, what we ask them to do, how we instruct them, how we support them, how we provide them with feedback, and so on, but also attention to the ways in which students respond to our 'ways', so that we can also adjust our 'ways', if possible.

This begins to show that the performative character of teaching requires quite complex modes of attention from teachers, so that it is not just the performance itself that needs to be rehearsed, but also the accompanying attentiveness.

Whereas dancers, musicians, or theatre players want their performance to have some kind of 'impact' on their audience – at least they hope that their performances will not leave their audiences indifferent – in teaching this 'hope' is more explicit, more precise, and more intentional. The reason for this is that all teaching, unlike indoctrination, is always interested in, concerned about, and in a fundamental sense 'after' the freedom of the student. In all good teachers, therefore, there should always be an 'appeal' to the freedom of the student. Dietrich Benner has characterised the fundamental appeal that should occur in all teaching as 'Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit', which literally translates as summoning to self-action (see Benner 2015).

This appeal is not the injunction to be *yourself*, but rather to be *a* self, that is, to be a subject of one's own actions. In more everyday language, we could say that in teaching we (try to) knock on the 'door' of our students and ask if anyone is there. This is what above I have referred to as the double nature of pointing, where teacherly pointing never only points at something but also points at someone, that is, as an invitation to our students to involve themselves in what we try to bring to their attention.

How to appeal to students in such a way that we leave space for their freedom – which ultimately comes down to their judgement or discernment (see above) – is another important and not immediately 'easy' dimension of the performance of teaching that definitely needs practising.

A coda on reflection

In this prologue I have tried to focus on the practice of teaching and teaching as practice, because I do think that in order to become a teacher, one should not just 'enter' the practice but also practise the practice, first of all because practising the practice is the one and only way to arrive on the 'inside' of teaching.

But practising the practice of teaching, on all the dimensions outlined above, is also critical and crucial for becoming a teacher because teaching *is* a performative art, and as with all performative arts, one can only work on one's artistry by practising – in the studio or rehearsal room, but ultimately also in the real situation of the performance, as the latter practising is ultimately the only way in which one can work on preparing oneself for the incalculable character of the teaching situation.

At this point, many might say that preparing to become a good teacher is not just a matter of 'doing', but also a matter of reflecting on the doing. This is, after all, what the literature on reflective teaching says again and again.

It is true that practice without reflection – though I would prefer the word 'thoughtfulness' – is not enough, because one may acquire many routines but no understanding of what these routines 'mean', what their potential value and import may be. There is a danger that reflection becomes disconnected from the practice, and becomes something of its own, so to speak. This has been very much my experience as a teacher educator, where I found that students had become so good at writing 'reflective essays' that I began to wonder whether they had any significance for, or even connection with, their teaching practice and the practising of their teaching.

As I have discussed elsewhere in much detail (see Biesta 2019), it is first of all important to acknowledge that reflection can never be 'empty'. In order to reflect, one needs something to reflect *with*, which highlights the importance of theory and language for reflecting. Reflection, to put it differently, should always be mediated by theory, and what theory provides is language – language that helps to see, language that helps to name and identify, language that helps to see differently, language that helps to generate questions, and even language to become aware of what is absent.

But for reflection to be meaningful and keep the one reflecting close to the practice rather than running the risk of moving away from it, it also needs

a helpful question. One concern I have is that reflection is often framed in terms of the question as to what the student has learned from a particular experience or situation. But the question 'What have you learned?' very quickly moves the one reflecting away from (attention to) the situation towards what one has (literally) 'taken' from the situation or experience.

It is for this reason that I have introduced a different question for my students, which is not to reflect on what they have learned, but on *how they have been* in a particular situation. The question 'How have you been?' bends the attention in a very different direction, namely towards the situation itself. And to carefully try to describe (rather than to judge) how one has been in a situation is a way – and perhaps even the way – to focus one's attention onto one's own practising.

Conclusion: The end of teaching

In this prologue, I have shared some observations about how future teachers can be prepared for a practice that is fundamentally 'incalculable' – a practice, in other words, that cannot be predicted through calculated extrapolation from the past, because it always presents teachers with new, unpredictable, and often unexpected situations and experiences.

I have suggested that this requires artistry and have argued that the way to develop one's teacherly artistry is by engaging with the practice itself – a matter of practising the practice, as I have called it. Although there is, of course, much more to say about the artistry of teaching, and about the ways in which teacherly artistry can be practised, I hope that the foregoing observations provide a sense of direction for how this might be done, and also a justification for why the practising of the practice is essential.

I would like to conclude with a fitting quotation from Bertolt Brecht, taken from his book *Me-ti: Book of interventions in the flow of things* (Brecht 2016). The quotation is fitting, because teacherly artistry not only requires that teachers are able to *begin* teaching, start a lesson, capture the attention of students, and so on.

There is also art needed in order to stop teaching – that is, to find the right 'moment' when teaching needs to come to an end, and we 'allow' students the freedom of their own attention, with the full responsibility that comes with that, of course. As Brecht beautifully puts it: 'Every teacher must learn how to stop teaching, when the time comes. That is a difficult art. Only a few are able, when the time is right, to allow reality to take their place.' (Brecht 2019, p. 98)

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