



“Me and Socrates, we are tight friends”: Co-constructing a polis of teachers and philosophers of education

Cara E. Furman^a  with Christine Sparkes (Public School Teacher)

^aUniversity of Maine at Farmington, ME, USA

(Giammarco, 2017)

ABSTRACT

It is an educational truism that reflection helps teachers to be more effective and ethical. Building on John Dewey's assertion that we learn by doing and reflecting, and Hannah Arendt's that reflection is strengthened through discourse among peers, I argue that a valuable role for teacher educators is to be interlocutors with whom teachers can reflect.¹ Adding to previous scholarship that positions philosophers of education as ideal interlocutors, I focus on the nature of the relationship between teachers and philosophers of education. Mirroring the format of the Socratic dialogues, I include three dialogues to explore how teachers and philosophers of education might reflect together. The first dialogue is the transcription of an interview about reflection and teaching between a former elementary school teacher colleague and me (then a doctoral student in philosophy of education). The second is a written dialogue that brings the interview into communication with Plato and Arendt to further elucidate what it means to reflect as a teacher and with teachers. The third dialogue occurred many years later as a group of philosophers of education reflected upon dialogues 1 and 2 to consider how they might better engage with teachers.

KEYWORDS

Arendt; philosophy of education; reflection; teacher education; situated philosophy

I begin with three commonly asserted inter-related truisms about teaching. First, to teach well requires that a teacher is effective and ethical (Furman & Traugh, 2021; Hansen, 1995; Higgins, 2011). In other words, teachers must have practices that will help them act justly. Second, ethical and effective teaching requires teachers to reflect upon their teaching and make changes indirectly and directly based on this reflection (Furman & Larsen, 2019, 2020; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Korthagen, 2001; Schön, 1983, 1988). Third, teacher educators, and philosophers of education in particular, can play an important role in helping teachers reflect upon their practice in order to teach well. In fact, when philosophers of education inquire about their role in teacher education, as they frequently do, they often conclude that philosophy and philosophers are particular well suited to help teachers reflect upon their teaching more systematically and deeply (Abowitz, 2012; Arcilla, 2002; Burbules &

Abowitz, 2008; Furman & Larsen, 2020; Golding, 2015; Hansen, 2017a, 2017b; Higgins, 2001, 2011; Laverty, 2006; McClintock, 2005; Santoro, 2015).

Building on John Dewey's (1916/1944) concept that we learn by doing or undergoing and then reflecting, in this paper, I am interested in the ways in which philosophers of education and teachers can grow by engaging in thinking and reflecting upon the thinking collaboratively. I call upon philosophers of education to be "situated," in the words of Nicholas Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz (2008), in schools and among teachers and, in joining as peers, work with teachers to reflect together. As the value of a partnership between teachers and philosophers of education has been widely addressed (Abowitz, 2012; Arcilla, 2002; Burbules & Abowitz, 2008; Furman & Larsen, 2020; Golding, 2015; Hansen, 2017a, 2017b; Higgins, 2001, 2011; Laverty, 2006; McClintock, 2005; Santoro, 2015), I turn to the nature of the relationship between teachers and philosophers of education.

As any host knows, simply inviting teachers and philosophers to gather around a shared table does not guarantee meaningful reflection. Aptly and poignantly illustrated, Kip Kline (2012) describes his attempts to situate himself as a philosopher of education in his child's preschool classroom. He likens the feeling of being physically unwelcome at the child sized table around which he and the teacher crammed for a conference to his sense that his ideas as a philosopher of education were also unwelcome, perhaps oversized, in the early childhood arena.

Acknowledging such difficulty Burbules and Abowitz (2008) write:

When we aspire to include school personnel, policy makers, researchers in other fields, and so on into our philosophical conversations, where and how we engage in philosophical discourse (our methods of inquiry, questioning, critical reflection, and dialogue, which we take so much for granted) have material effects on the nature and possibility of such engagements. It is not just a matter of having others at the table – we must also, so to speak, ask who built the table, where it is located, how it is tilted, and so on. (pp. 272-273)

How then might a table be repurposed and rebuilt to include both the philosopher of education like Kline and the teacher? Put differently, how might we recognize and engage both their aptitudes and discourses in shared inquiry?

I respond to the thorny challenge of cultivating this partnership by offering a methodology for engagement: a form of dialogic interaction among peers, namely the creation of what Hannah Arendt (1998) refers to as the *polis*. Adapted largely from her reading of Aristotle and Plato, the polis, according to Arendt, was a space in which:

1. citizens gathered as equals
2. around a shared topic or concern that vexed all parties and
3. the gathering and shared topic provided a meeting place in which they came to know each other and themselves better through discussion and debate.

In coupling Arendt's schema with a dialogue conducted between myself and a teacher, I put forth a model for engagements between teachers and philosophers that can be fruitful and mutually beneficial.

Methods

As a phenomenological study, I draw on the particular to look for insights in how to act (van Manen, 2016). I offer a scene: a polis consisting of a philosopher of education, me, and a teacher, Christine Sparks² and in doing so, put forth what David Hansen (2017a) refers to as an "orientation" towards being a philosopher with teachers. With an emphasis on the form and function of writing, to put forth a vision of a gathering among equals I avoid a traditional paper format in which I, as philosopher of education, would analyze the data [separated into small chunks]. I draw on Martha Nussbaum's (1992, 2001) discussion of philosophy and form and Martin Heidegger (2010), Plato (1997) and Jacques Derrida (2000) for models of philosophical dialogic experiments. Following their

lead, I put forth Christine and my dialogue, audio-recorded and edited for clarity and length, as an example of what a polis might sound like. I conclude by analyzing this dialogue and potential implications for both teachers and philosophers of education. As such, this paper tells my story as an interlocutor: first with Christine. Then with Plato and Arendt as informed by Christine. Finally, with philosophers of education. In doing so, I dually propose a mode of engaging with teachers and, through featuring the dialogue, contribute to an on-going discussion on reflection in philosophy and teacher education.

Lost between philosophy and education

A requisite condition of the polis is that dialogue must center around an authentic and shared question or theme of mutual interest. At the time of this dialogue with Christine, I was in what Socrates refers to as a state of *aporia* – a discomforting but potentially revealing befuddlement. I was studying philosophy and education and teaching a seminar on methods for student teachers. I had been a first and second grade teacher at which time Christine was my grade level colleague, collaborator, and friend from across the hall. Soon after this event, I returned to the elementary school classroom as a support teacher.

Every Thursday, I traversed the school of education from the third floor in one building, through an awkward cascade of hallways, down some stairs, to another third floor in another, separate, but interconnected building. This physical movement was accompanied by internally shifting my orientation from being a student in philosophy of education to teaching a year-long seminar for student teachers focused on methods. A year later, I found myself with an even more dramatic passage, traveling from the tumult of the elementary school where I had returned part time up and across town to the relative peace of the philosophy classroom.

As quoted earlier, Burbules and Abowitz (2008) speak of the different kinds of engagements that a particular discourse affords. My own physical traversing spoke to my crossing across intellectual worlds. In the calm and text-based world of philosophy, we had hours to discuss passages. We used precise vocabulary to discuss abstract concepts. In contrast, working with student teachers and later teaching in a K-5 setting myself, I delved into the emotion-laden, noisy, busy, child-filled world of elementary school classrooms where everything demanded a fast pace. Switching between these tempos, content, and discourses was both extremely difficult and powerful intellectually and pedagogically.

My *aporia* came to a head around a particular point. Where I had always valued writing as a means of thinking through ideas, I increasingly felt that written work was an inadequate medium for the thinking of teachers. Reading my pre-service students' papers, I saw that for some writing was hindering analysis and self-reflection. Students who were incredibly reflective in class discussion, office hours, and most importantly when teaching, sometimes struggled when asked to put pen to paper. Likewise, though my studies in philosophy informed my teaching practice (both with pre-service teachers and children), to my horror I was unable to translate all I was learning from teachers back to my doctoral seminar. I simply couldn't discuss or write about my teaching in ways that connected meaningfully to the academic texts.

Lost and frustrated, I set out to talk with Christine about the relationship between writing and reflecting. Why Christine? First, as I will discuss more later, Christine is an unusually reflective teacher who resists writing. Christine and I also had a history of dialogue. Our friendship solidified over many years of joining each other after school, crouched over child sized desks for hours, to discuss teaching. Though I was teaching teachers at the time of the interview and Christine second graders, we still met regularly to discuss our work. The presence of the audio-recorder was unique.

Dialogue 1: Reflection and teaching

Cara [C]: So, what does reflection mean to you?

Christine [CH]: My first [laughter] thought is, well I think about Descriptive Inquiry³ and I think “reflection! on a word” when you list out all these words. That’s just a little bit esoteric. But really, what it means to me is to stop and think. Or perhaps in the sense of how you are asking, it means to look at yourself, like you look at a reflection. But it doesn’t have to be. That’s self-reflection. Now that I’m thinking about it, reflection really just means to look. It’s interesting because when you think about looking, it’s not looking directly, like if you are looking at a reflection or you’re reflecting then you are seeing something through something else. Like you’re seeing something through a mirror. It’s not just directly looking. It’s not the same as seeing. It’s bouncing off, it’s going somewhere and bouncing off and then coming to you.

C: So if you take that definition what does reflecting mean to you as a teacher?

CH: Well, I want students to reflect on a book. I want students to reflect on their work. I want to reflect on my practice. I want us also to reflect on each other’s work. So, what does it mean to self-reflect as a teacher? It means to think about what I did and think about things that I have questions about. Often times my reflection is thinking about if I were to do this again, how would I do it differently. That’s probably the number one question, whether that be a lesson or an interaction with a student. My first thing was to think about times when I stop and think after the fact but often I’m really reflecting as I’m in the process of teaching, as I’m in the process of interacting with a student. I’m trying to gather information and look at that information through the filter of myself, obviously, and trying to modify. It’s a lot and it’s really, for the purpose of change. Either change what I’m currently doing or if it’s after the fact to change what I’m going to do next time or if I were to do the same thing again how would I do it differently? I’m reflecting back to what my students were able to accomplish or what they understood or what was challenging for them in this last lesson so that’s gonna help me think about what I’m going to do tomorrow.

C: Do you think it’s a different process when you are doing it in the moment, kind of quickly versus the reflection you do after the fact?

CH: . . . Well, one is more immediate right? One you have more time for. You know, you are in the middle of having a conversation with a student and you say something and they look at you and they’re shocked, or they look at you and they smile, and so you are taking in that information and then you just have a matter of seconds to respond and to either change your approach or get the okay that your approach is going somewhere. Whereas other kinds of reflection, I mean I might sit and stare [laughter] as you’ve seen me do, sit and stare at a wall for 10-15 minutes thinking about my day and you know what went well and what didn’t go well or thinking about what I need to do next. I can go off in a lot more tangents, not surprisingly, when it’s not in the moment. If it’s in the moment I need to stay focused and it needs to bounce back faster. I need to respond immediately to whatever reflection I’m doing.

C: You mentioned tangents? Do you think the opportunity to go through tangents is helpful for you?

CH: I think it’s necessary for me because of the way my brain works. Is the way your brain works helpful for you? In some ways. Is the way my brain works a hindrance for me? Most certainly. But do I personally get something out of my tangents? Yes. Would somebody else? Maybe not. But it’s kind of necessary for me sometimes to go to the end of the maze. Like if you are going through a maze you might know at the certain point that if you go down this path that it’s going to a dead end because you can look ahead. But sometimes it’s still necessary for me to mentally walk down that path, to go all the way to the dead

end so I can look at it and go “Yeah, I see the dead end. Dead end. Dead end. Okay. Moving on.” I need that closure in my mind even if I know that it’s not directly getting me to the other end of the maze. Sometimes it’s not even exciting to me but those thoughts are necessary for me.

C: You mentioned sitting and staring into space. People use different strategies like some people walk and that helps them to reflect or people write and that helps them to reflect. Are there things that help you? Is there a ritual that you go through so that you can take the time to think?

CH: There’s definitely not a ritual. I don’t have many rituals. It’s not like I say to myself like now I’m going to reflect. Like I do have to say to myself unfortunately, “Christine, now you are going to brush your teeth.” But reflecting on my practice is just so intrinsic to what I do that I don’t have to set aside a time. I don’t have to set up a ritual. It’s going to happen. There’s sometimes where its more purposeful than other times. There’s a lot of times where I’m reflecting where I’m doing other things at the same time. Maybe I’m walking home or I’m walking to the bathroom. Or I’m engaged in one-on-one with a student and then I’m immediately reflecting. I talk to myself a lot. I walk down the hall and I’m having a conversation with myself and people must think I’m crazy. That’s okay [laughter].

C: What about other people? Do you use other people to talk about things?

CH: I looove to talk to other people to reflect but unfortunately these days I don’t really have that opportunity very often. When I do get that opportunity I jump on it but mostly it’s by myself.

C: How do you think that influences your teaching or does it?

CH: Luckily, I’ve been teaching enough years that I have enough in my mental piggy bank to sort of bounce things off of. But a huge fear I have is that it’s easier to become stagnant and become stale.

C: You mean if you don’t have somebody to talk to?

CH: Yeah, if you’re not getting ideas from others. I think that the situation that I’m in now, it’s not so much a problem because I am in a new situation. I’m also having to adapt to this particular curriculum, like I’m teaching these social studies concepts, so it’s enough newness naturally that I’m not getting stale but would I benefit from having a conversation with someone else? Most definitely. Of course, any time I get a chance to talk with you about my practice I do.

C: I’m gonna switch gears a little bit to a different kind of question. This is a huge question but what are some ways that you’ve grown as a teacher over the years?

CH: I think I’ve gotten better at taking my ego out of my teaching.

C: How? Is that just ‘cause of time? Are there processes you’ve gone through mentally to allow you to do that?

CH: I think that a lot of it comes from being in the placement that I’m at and that I feel like I don’t have anything to prove. I’m not as inhibited as I used to be. I feel like I don’t take failure as personally as I used to. I think that more has to do with me evolving as a person and I think that some of the ways I’ve been able to evolve as a person is because of my experience teaching. I consider myself very much a teacher. Like if I had to come up with three words to describe who I am, teacher would be one of those three words. It’s not just a job. It’s very much who I am. So how else has my teaching changed. Okay. I think I have a bigger tool bag so to speak. One recent big shift is I have pretty successfully moved away from the model of I’m going to teach you how to do X, now you are going to do something that shows me that you know how to X. I still do that every once and awhile. Sometimes

you need to do that but I would say 90% of my teaching is not that. It's more like I'm gonna present this idea or I'm gonna present this text and it might even be like I'm gonna present this format or procedure. I've really been able to move pretty successfully away from the role of teacher and more towards facilitator. Like I always wanted to work on how to lead a class discussion 'cause I felt like I wasn't so good at that and I realized that it's not about me talking. If it becomes more about my talking then theirs and I have to talk that much to explain something to them then they're not ready for it. And so it's more like I am in classroom discussion doing, "So what do you think about that?" "Okay, did you hear what so and so said?" "Who can repeat what so and so said?" "Do you agree? Do you disagree?" "Oh, so and so disagrees with you. Do you want to respond to that?" "Wow, how do you know?" Those are more the kinds of talking that I'm doing and leading than let me show you a, b, and c and that's been a really big shift for me.

- C: So when you say teacher as opposed to facilitator, do you think of the teacher as the person who shows you a, b, and c versus the facilitator? How are you using those terms?
- CH: I'm using those terms as the teacher being somebody who's more like up above and imparting knowledge and the facilitator is somebody who's more in the mix and helping. I'm helping to bounce things off of and clarify things. But that sort of muddies the definition. In some ways that's a very limiting view of the word teacher and I don't want to sully that word because I like that word. I'm sentimentally attached to the word teacher and so I don't want to think of it as something that's bad whereas facilitating is something that's good. I also do think there is a time and a place for teaching in the way that I'm using it. Teaching is imparting, facilitating is more negotiating. But I think that the word teacher should encompass the word facilitator.
- C: Before you said you were a teacher in your sense of yourself as a person. It sounds like teacher is sort of a broader term. Facilitator is one of the aspects of teaching.
- CH: Yes, teaching should encompass facilitating but I think a lot of really good teaching incorporates a lot of facilitating.
- C: Right. Right. You said that you have switched in terms of not expecting students to "get it," you are not giving them a piece of information that then they hold on to to take away. How would you like your students and yourself to be measured in terms of growth? How would you want someone to evaluate that in an ideal world?
- CH: That is the 64,000 dollar question. Okay, in an ideal world there would be somebody who was more wise and more experienced than myself like Marta⁴ who would come to my room for three days, have many discussions with me, and then reflect back to me what she notices. That would be how I would like to be evaluated.
- C: So it's less of an evaluation really. It sounds like, like you are not looking for her to say this is good, this is bad but looking for her to tell you what she sees and give you a sense of where to go from there?
- CH: In some ways, I do want her to tell me what is good and what is bad.
- C: But not that you are good or bad?
- CH: But not that /am good or bad. The same with my students. If this person who is wiser than myself and I were having this conversation and she could say this is good and this is bad but it wouldn't mean that I would get this grade or that grade then I could say okay let me think about the fact that you think this is good and you think this is bad and let me think if I agree or disagree and I would like the freedom to say oh you know what, you're right, that is bad, I never really thought about it that way, yeah, I got to stop that or for me to say, you think that's bad, hmmm, well you know what, I think that's good and these are my reasons for thinking that's good and I'm okay with that and I'm gonna stick to that. I want to be

able to have that dialogue. It's the same with my students too. If they can defend what it is they're doing then I'm gonna say, "you know what. Go for it." Like sometimes I'm like, "I'm just gonna tell you this so you can take it or leave it . . ." and I want them to really feel like they can take it or leave it.

And I also think that you have to look at where a person is. You can't ignore the person and then arbitrarily place this rubric or this grade over them and measure them by the grid. You can't just go, "tada" and "oh you fall here." You have to look at where the person is and where they've come from and everyone's not gonna grow in the same way or at the same pace, or in the same direction. For a lot of years I felt really stagnant in my teaching but probably in retrospect even though it maybe wasn't even visible to myself or to an outward person that I was growing, I was. I felt like maybe I was chasing my tail but I needed to chase my tail. So that part of my growth was to chase my tail. Like chase your tail 10 times and then you can now walk forward.

C: Does that fit with what you were saying before about the maze? Having to find the dead end and know it's there before you're ready to go to a different direction?

CH: Yeah, I feel like that. Yeah it does kind of go with that.

C: This a totally different direction in some ways [laughter]. How do you see writing and documentation in terms of both your own practice and reflection? Your own reflection but also how other people are reflecting on your practice or responding to you? Does that make sense?

CH: YES. It's always more impressive if you put something down on paper. Things automatically, metaphorically, and literally have more weight. You say a word, it goes into the air. You put a word down on paper, now it has heft. Now you can touch it. You can lift it. I know if a student comes up to me and says, "Ms. Sparks I really want to do X after lunch!" and I'll say, "oh, okay okay, we'll see if you can do X." But if they are like, "Ms. Sparkes, I have a really important note to give you" and they give me a note and it says, "Dear Ms. Sparkes, I would really like to do X after lunch. Do you think I could do X today?" I'm gonna be like "Awww, okay, you can do X." It automatically has more weight.

C: Why do you think that? Do you think it's the time and effort of writing? Do you think it's official that way?

CH: I think it has to do with effort and I also think it has to do with concreteness of it and the evidence of it, like you can say something, it comes and goes. The word comes and then it disappears and then there's no sort of evidence afterwards that you even said that and so it disappears into the air, right? And the only sort of documentation of that is in your own brain whereas if it's written down there's like a physical piece of paper that's like, this kid wants to do X. It is also about effort. It's about the actual proof of it and about the effort. So going back to my teaching, whenever you put something down on paper, it automatically carries more weight.

C: Drawing from some prior knowledge I know that you had trouble writing your reports even though your facility as a writer is fine, strong actually. Do you think it was writing reports on students or just writing itself that you're resistant to? Do you think it's connected to the weight of it?

CH: It is connected to the weight of it. I mean when I was in high school and even in the first part of college, if I ever had to write a paper, I had to hand write everything first and then only type it after I had gotten it how I wanted it. I felt like somehow when I typed it, it was too much pressure but I was more okay with writing something down on paper and scratching it out and moving it around. So there is something about the permanency of it that is intimidating when I'm putting this down and I'm not going to be able to take it back.

I have to be really confident about what I'm saying 'cause I'm not gonna be able to change it. And also, unfortunately, it's about sitting and being in one place and doing one thing for long periods of time and having that thing that I'm doing being really solitary.

C: One last question, do you think that there's something about the permanence that supports the work of teaching and facilitating? Do you think it gets in the way of it? Do you think it's unrelated? Is there some interconnection between this permanence and teaching?

CH: When I first started teaching, I kept a lesson plan book, I was completely obsessed with my lesson plan book. If I lost my lesson plan book, it was horrible. Once my car got broken into and they stole my bag and my lesson plan book was in there.

C: I remember that.

CH: It was just heartbreaking. Oh my god my lesson plan book! All of this documentation of my work!!!

C: You were upset about what had already been done?

CH: Yes!! About what had already been done and how was I gonna know what I was gonna do next time and oh my gosh! Every Sunday I would spend all day really working on my lesson plan and making sure that it made sense and everything was really well planned and then the more that I started teaching and the more that I started getting my next steps from the students those plans became less and less relevant. I realized that, okay, I could keep this lesson plan book and think that I was gonna look at it next year but I never did. I would look at it for the first week or two of school and then after that it was irrelevant. It didn't matter because what I was gonna do next wasn't gonna be the same this year as it was the year before because the kids are different, I'm different, and no matter how well it's documented, I'm gonna do things slightly different. It's gonna lead the kids in a slightly different direction. The kids are gonna go in a slightly different direction. There's so many variables that there's no way you can just place this grid down and go, "I'm gonna do this math." There's so many things! Maybe there was a fire drill one year, maybe there wasn't a fire drill, maybe one year it snowed! Those are superficial examples but...

C: But even if it's your own grid it's still just as problematic?

CH: It's still not gonna match. So, what I tend to hold on from year to year is some of the bigger ideas. Honestly, I don't keep a lesson plan book anymore and I know that that's a big no no but I plan what I'm going to do the next day at the end of the day. I have a bigger picture of what the project is and what the unit is and what I want them to get out of it.

C: Do you keep any notes for pacing to keep in mind the larger scope? [Laughter]

CH: [Laughter] That is a problem. That is probably one of my biggest problems as a teacher, pacing.

C: Yeah, but that's not 'cause of writing. You used to keep notes and you still had trouble with pacing.

CH: Yeah, yeah. It's true. It didn't really matter.

C: Cool, well we should go pick up Asher [son]?

CH: Yeah.

Dialogue 2: To be situated and doing philosophy among teachers

In the act of conversing, we take elements from one interlocutor and bring them to our dealings with the next. At the time of my interview with Christine, I was taking a course on Plato and another on Arendt. In this way, Christine's insights and our dialogue carried forward into my understandings of Plato and Arendt, leaving the three permanently enmeshed in my on-going understandings and captured in an eternal conversation on the page and in my mind. In this section, I depict that dialogue with Christine, Plato, and Arendt as it pertains to being situated among teachers in the interest of reflecting upon teaching.

Philosophers of education argue that philosophy can provide a retreat from the busyness of classroom life in which a teacher can ponder, and then, return better readied to teach (Higgins, 2001, 2011; McClintock, 2005). Within this framework, the philosophy classroom where I pondered ideas slowly apart from my daily teaching would be conceived as the ideal space for such reflection. I agree that such a place can be valuable and meaningful but I disagree that these spaces separated from the field are superior for reflection (Furman & Larsen, 2020; Korthagen, 2001).

In fact, a key element of Socrates' polis was that it was a vibrant, busy, and active space. This element has been somewhat obscured with romantic imagery such as Raphael's School of Athens (hanging prominently in the lounge that served as the meeting place for my doctoral program in philosophy of education) in which Plato peacefully strolls along with Aristotle among columns surrounded by men [other famous philosophers] writing, deep in contemplation, and conversation.

Yet, Plato's writing suggests the real polis was a more tumultuous place. Plato (1997) begins the *Republic*, quoting Socrates, "I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon" (p. 972, line 327). This beginning plants Socrates in place and time: the Piraeus yesterday. In going down to Piraeus, Plato is going into a particular and specific place. Though the location is the stuff of myth for me, it likely recalled for the initial readers the specific qualities of a chaotic port city bursting with noise, smells, and action near Athens. Similarly, Plato also grounds us in real people. Socrates, for example, takes the trip to Piraeus with Glaucon. As such, he, as philosopher, is situated in place, in time, with an interlocutor, and amidst a bustling center of practical action. Just as Socrates dialogued in the midst of the bustling port, he is also depicted as thinking in the midst of battle or paused in contemplation outside a banquet (Furman & Larsen, 2020; Plato, 1997).

Between finishing teaching and picking up her son from preschool, Christine and I were strapped for time, carving space for discourse amidst the bustle of life. Given the spatial constraints of our port city, Brooklyn, we chose a local bar as the best location to speak without interruption. It was late spring and we took advantage of the spacious outdoor seating. In other words, we found a space for dialogue amongst the public. Our time was also bracketed by Christine's practical and consuming obligations – the end of her teaching day and picking up her child.

No stranger to thinking amidst distractions, Christine also emphasizes in the dialogues that she needs no "ritual" to think; it simply happens in the midst of action – while working with a student or in as pedestrian a moment as walking down the hall to the bathroom. In other words, Christine is constantly thinking in the midst of action.

Thinking without ends

Arendt (1971) compares thinking to Penelope's web. In doing so, she emphasizes the need to weave and unravel. While transcribing my dialogue with Christine, I was struck by how fluid conversation gained permanence. Later, reading the transcribed and edited version, I found some of the movement of our conversation lost. For example, as Christine and I spoke, I could see her eyes move, I could hear the pauses, the adjustments, the stammering. Worried at one point that she had damned the word "teacher" by contrasting it with her now preferred word "facilitator," in the original transcript [edited for readability] Christine repeats "I" six times consecutively. Her

nervousness about this claim appears as she works her way through to a satisfactory definition of teaching.

As Penelope weaves and unravels, Christine describes her own thinking as following a maze. Throughout the dialogue we follow, drop, and pick up threads. For example, the idea that reflection must bounce off someone else comes up throughout. Christine asserts that it is necessary to follow the maze even when she knows it is a dead end because seeing how the road ends is at times necessary. Later she offers the metaphor of chasing one's tail and again insists that she must chase her own tail at times to grow. Demonstrating how she doggedly pursues an idea – Christine first declares that a teacher is different from a facilitator and follows that route to its end. Yet, then she says this “muddies” for her the word teacher and revises her claim to protect a word she feels “sentimentally attached to.” Pushing her on terms as philosophers tend to do (Golding, 2015; Laverty, 2006), I encouraged this journey to consider the logical ends and travelled with her on it. Later, again using the tools of philosophy, I assisted with a generalization – drawing on her previous use of the word teacher as her defining characteristic, I suggest that perhaps a teacher is the “broader term” that “encompasses” the word facilitator – a definition that she concurs with.

Speaking to the movement that Arendt makes a central characteristic of thinking and speech, Christine contrasts speaking with writing saying that, “You say a word, it goes into the air. You put a word down on paper, now it has heft. Now you can touch it. You can lift it.” As she reflected about teaching in our dialogue, Christine could and did amend ideas. Further, she was not expounding theories but working through her thoughts as she spoke. She similarly described the flexibility she achieved after she stopped writing down her lessons. After getting over the initial shock, she found that losing the plan book gave her more freedom to follow the children. In other words, she could better weave and unravel as she went.

Finally, an important distinction. As noted in the previous section, Arendt (1998) puts forth thinking as a kind of reified mental activity – apart from action in both place and time. She contrasts thinking as having no ends with judgment – a deliberative process in which one determines how to act. Arendt's conception corresponds with the notion that a philosophy of education courses might offer a quiet space to reflect apart from worrying about practice (Higgins, 2001; McClintock, 2005). Christine's schema troubles these distinctions. Asked what reflection is, she begins with a more contemplative activity in which one identifies the nuances of a particular word, but she then moves quickly to a more deliberative mental activity in which one considers a day's teaching in order to plan. What links these mental acts is neither the duration nor the subject matter nor the purpose, but instead, reflection is a kind of thinking in which, according to Christine, one idea bounces off of another. This description is akin to the dialogic interaction that Arendt (1998) describes as thinking. Finally, mirroring Arendt's movement from thinking without ends to deliberation, my dialogue with Christine moved from the more esoteric – what does it mean to reflect? how does Christine define herself as a person? what is a teacher? – to the more practical - what kind of feedback is beneficial? how should one be evaluated? how does one plan?

An interlocutor

At the beginning of this paper, I argued alongside Arendt that our capacity to reflect is informed by our ability to think together. Making this point, Christine opens our dialogue by explaining that reflection is not the same as seeing. Where she depicts seeing as a direct and seemingly unidirectional view, she points out the interactive nature of reflection in which one passes an idea or topic from self to other and then back to the self. Similarly, in the *Alcibiades*, Socrates positions to know thyself as analogous with to “see thyself.” Socrates explains,

if the inscription [at the Oracle of Delphi] took our eyes to be men and then advised them, “See thyself,” how would we understand such advice? Shouldn't the eye be looking at something in which it could see itself? (Plato, 1997, p. 591, line 132d)

He then proceeds, “if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs, and this, I presume, is seeing” (p. 592, line 133b). Therefore, looking into another’s eye “allows us to see both it and ourselves when we look at it” (p. 591, line 132e). In sum, in the Socratic tradition, to see oneself, one must look through the eye of another – work that Socrates believes happens in dialogue. Thus, for both Christine and Socrates, to reflect and, in doing so, know one’s own mind, requires that ideas leave the self and, as Christine says multiple times, “bounce off” someone else.

Such bouncing of one’s own ideas off of another occurs even when alone. As Arendt (1998) writes, to think requires having spent time in the polis – the space where ideas are debated and discussed. Thinking does not require one is in the polis. In fact, when alone, we think by replaying voices from the polis in our head and so, even when physically alone, when thinking we are still in conversation. Similarly, Christine describes how as an experienced teacher, she brings years of conversation into her internal dialogue. In other words, drawing on her experience in conversation with other teachers, she brings her thoughts into conversation with other voices.

That said, where Christine does acknowledge her capacity to reflect apart from others by recalling their previous statements, she repeatedly notes that this reflection is less fruitful and she links reflecting alone to going through a maze in which she keeps hitting “dead ends.” She argues that going through a maze clears her mind for new ideas but rarely yields new ideas. When she wants to grow, she comments, she engages with another. She, in Arendt’s terms, seeks a polis.

Co-constructing meaning

A recurring element in the dialogue with Christine is the value of co-constructing meaning. Socrates usually begins a line of discussion from an interlocutor’s questions. Socrates then proceeds to speak at length with his interlocutors interjecting to ask questions that further his point or offer affirmatives. For example, within one short segment in the *Republic*, Glaucon asks “which one’s?” (Plato, 1997, p. 1100, line 472e), “what is it?” (line 473c). He also offers encouragement: “I agree,” (line 473a), “so would I” (line 473b), “that’s absolutely right” (line 473c), and “say on” (line 473c). In my first readings of the dialogues, I reduced these comments to filler. After participating in my own dialogue, aware that my minimal comments expressed active participation and a desire to support Christine’s ideas, I came to see Socrates’ interlocutors as behaving similarly.

Christine and I co-constructed throughout the dialogue – coming to shared understandings as we made sense of each other’s questions and comments. For example, as she answered my questions, Christine worked through to a definition of reflection that resonated with me as well. As we inquired into what it means to be a teacher with her comments and my questions, we also came to a working definition.

The Socratic dialogues are also famous for the ways in which Socrates and his interlocutors use challenging questions and disagreement to uncover a truth. Arendt (2006) similarly places disagreement at the heart of fruitful discourse in the polis. Christine also describes at length how questions operate at the center of her instruction. She comments that if she is doing most of the talking, the topic is probably too hard for the children. Describing what she wants in an interlocutor herself, she acknowledges the role of disagreement, “In some ways, I do want her [a supervisor] to tell me what is good and what is bad” and adds “But not that I am good or bad. The same with my students. I feel like if this person who is wiser than myself and I were having this conversation” such a person could help her think an idea.

When Socrates resists speaking about a controversial topic, Glaucon promises:

I won’t betray you, but rather defend you in any way I can—by goodwill, by urging you on, and perhaps by being able to give you more appropriate answers than someone else. So, with the promise of assistance, try to show the unbelievers that things are as you say they are. (p. 1101, line 474a)

Christine too emphasizes that while an interlocutor might disagree, two features are key. 1) They may name an idea as bad but not name the person as such. 2) Ultimately, while a different perspective and even disagreement are welcome, a person must ultimately be left to assess the value of a particular idea. Finally, it is important to note that our dialogue replicated this kind of engagement as my participation involved, “urging” her on, giving “appropriate answers” in the form of comments that built on listening to her carefully and having observed her teaching, and “goodwill” in order to “assist” her in getting ideas across. For example, when I comment that she struggled with pacing even when she used a plan book, I was not critiquing her but offering information that might challenge the suggestion that she might be better at pacing if she wrote more down.

As shared understanding is pursued, it is done so with student interest at the center. Most of Christine’s teaching is about following students’ interests. Socrates also bases teaching around his interlocutors. He opens his conversation with Alcibiades, “I’ve been observing you all this time” and proceeds to describe Alcibiades. He then uses his observations to guide the instruction.

In the *Republic*, after an outburst from the challenging interlocutor, Thrasymachus, Socrates feels “frightened,” “flustered,” “startled,” and “afraid” but musters a response saying:

If I hadn’t seen him before he stared at me, I’d have been dumbstruck. But as it was, I happened to look at him just as our discussion began to exasperate him, so I was able to answer. (p. 981, line 336d-e)

From observation, Socrates determines what bothered Thrasymachus and again, is able to formulate a response that keeps Thrasymachus’ in the conversation.

Socrates also makes space for his interlocutors to guide the conversation (Plato, 1997). Most obviously, the subject of discussion comes from their interests. For example, the dialogic arc of the *Republic* responds to Thrasymachus’ claims about justice; after hearing about Hippothales’ crush in *Lysis*, Socrates leads a dialogue on erotic friendship; the focus of Socrates’ conversation with the great speaker, in the eponymous *Protagoras*, is rhetoric.

As she describes, Christine’s teaching increasingly focused on students’ ideas. Likewise, just as Christine observed her students, I knew Christine’s teaching well, having spent many years teaching alongside her and discussing practice. These observations influenced my decision to discuss reflection and writing with Christine. As an unusually reflective teacher who taught both effectively and ethically and who hated writing about her work, I believed that speaking with Christine about reflection would help me better think about what it means to reflect as a teacher. In fact, it was Christine who had previously identified the struggle I was having to merge the teaching I was doing with my philosophical studies. As she noted, “last year you spoke about your classes [in philosophy] but now I have no idea what you are even taking. Since you started teaching, everything else slips away, doesn’t it?”

Further, as Christine pushed her students to listen to each other during class discussions, Socrates says to Alcibiades, “you’ll probably be eager to give me your full attention, since, as you say, you’re keen to know what I have in mind. I take it that you’ll listen carefully” (Plato, 1997, p. 559, line 104d). Exhibiting close attention, in the *Republic*, Polemarchus

drew Adeimantus towards him, while he himself leaned forward and said something to him. We overheard nothing of what he said except the words “Shall we let it go or what?” We certainly won’t let it go, Adeimantus said, now speaking aloud. And I asked: What is it that you won’t let go? / You, he said. / For what reason in particular? / We think that you’re slacking off and that you’ve cheated us out of a whole important section of the discussion in order to avoid having to deal with it. (p. 1077, line 449b-c)

Though giving the impression of inattention, Socrates’ students are so keenly alert to him that instead of assenting to all his words, they confront Socrates on an inconsistency. In the *Gorgias*, Adeimantus finds that Socrates, who usually slows down an argument to flesh it out (p. 806, line

462c-d), has gone through one too quickly. As with Christine's ideal mentor-mentee relationship, not only did Socrates' listeners pay close enough attention to his argument to find a discrepancy, but they also adopted his values for inquiry – pushing him to go slowly through each segment of the argument.

Socrates responds to interruption by repeatedly asking questions, pushing his students to explain their response. In doing so, he makes them the primary speakers and he the interlocutor. Similarly, though Christine speaks more than I do, my topic choice and questions guide the discussion (Golding, 2015). Where my questions offer a framework, her words take my frame to unexpected places. Attention goes both ways as one moves between speaker and listener in the dialogue.

Finally, just as Socrates practices the attention he seeks in his students, I am struck with Christine's consistency of topics. Though our conversation meanders, Christine repeatedly returns us to a number of themes: reflection, growth, and her sense of identity. Similarly, just as she does in our dialogue, Christine describes how she follows her students' ideas. She explains that she seeks in a teacher what she aspires to in her own teaching: someone who will follow her ideas and give critical and supportive feedback. Someone who will challenge ideas but not her as a person. In coming to the dialogue with just a few prepared questions, I saw my role as largely following Christine – asking questions to get her to clarify, expand, or infuse a new topic when she seemed to lose steam. My observations were also brought into our conversation such as when I commented about Christine's resistance to writing despite her capacity and noted that even with a plan book Christine struggled with pacing. Thus, my approach as interlocutor mirrored how she described engaging with children.

We need dialogue for our soul

The ends of dialogue for the ancient Greeks was a somewhat intangible concept: *eudemonia*, translated as living well. This abstract lofty concept had daily implications as it was directed at how to conduct oneself in one's actions and work. Contemporary scholars in philosophy and education have similarly argued that professional life, teaching in particular, can provide a route to living well (Hansen, 1995; Higgins, 2011).

Perhaps the most surprising part of my dialogue with Christine was when she voiced this concept in what felt to me like a tangent initially. Asked to describe her own professional growth I anticipated a comment about self-reflection. Instead, she said,

I think that more has to do with me evolving as a person and I think that some of the ways I've been able to evolve as a person is because of my experience teaching. I consider myself very much a teacher. Like if I had to come up with three words to describe who I am, teacher would be one of those three words. It's not just a job. It's very much who I am.

Leaving the bar, and not captured in the transcript, I noted that Christine had bypassed my question about her growth in the classroom. "Funny," she said, "I guess it's because it's all about my growth isn't it. I mean, I do it, I do this for my soul."

In the famous pedagogical interaction between Socrates and Alcibiades, Socrates comments:

If the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else which is similar to it. (Plato, 1997, p. 592, line 133b)

The soul is the location for self-knowledge and wisdom. It is accessed through looking at another soul in dialogue. Having just read this passage as part of my graduate studies, I had exclaimed, "That's just like Socrates," to which Christine responded laughing, "Yeah, me and Socrates, we are tight friends."

In placing Socrates' understanding in dialogue with my interaction with Christine, I came to name Christine and my work as doing philosophy. Namely, drawing on Socrates' famous method, I found myself constructing a syllogism: If the kind of teaching Christine engages in is a dialogue (as I have argued it is), and if Christine and Socrates are both doing the work for their souls, then Christine, like Socrates, is engaged in philosophy in her daily work with children.

Dialogue 3: Working with teachers as a philosopher

After sharing a version of this paper in doctoral seminar, a draft sat on my computer for nearly 10 years. Though unpublished, it informed much of my writing and orientation towards research. Troubled by the unusual format of putting an interview alongside philosophical analysis, and the desire to do justice to the endeavor, I let the paper sit mostly undeveloped for many years. Then, because I wanted to bring forth some writing I was truly stuck with, I submitted it to be workshopped in the North East Philosophy of Education Society Virtual Polis: an on-line "forum" in which papers were workshopped in lieu of a traditional conference in response to Covid-19 restrictions. The format was this: three interrelated papers were shared ahead of time and responded to individually in the session mostly with questions posed by a more senior respondent. Then the conversation was opened up to others in the "room" to comment and ask questions. What developed in my session was a discussion about ways of engaging as a philosopher with teachers and the value of teacher education research that placed philosopher-researchers on equal terms with teachers.

So, I now close, considering as audience philosophers of education like those in my session who are eager to consider what it means to situate oneself as a philosopher with teachers. As noted at the beginning of this paper, Burbules and Abowitz (2008) call for an examination and reshaping of the table at which we encourage others to join us. Christine's interview provides a schema for such an interaction. As I've argued, in making space within the busyness of life for thinking without ends about a topic of mutual interest, joining each other as respectful interlocutors who listen carefully in addition to speaking, we were able to co-construct meaning together. This dialogue was not only helpful as we thought about teaching but, in Christine's phrasing, was good for our souls.

In closing, where philosophers of education often ask what they might do for teachers, I follow in Dewey's (1916) footsteps to also ask what teachers might do for our thinking. As I spoke to Christine, listened to the recording and then transcribed, all the time simultaneously reading Plato and Arendt, I was jolted, pulled into a state of aporia. Christine, Socrates, and Arendt's words intermeshed with each other, overlapping, dialoguing, and making meaning.

At the time I was struggling as a graduate student to write. A paper then came forth in an earlier version of this one. Put differently, as Christine and my words came into dialogue with Plato and Arendt, I found a way to talk about both philosophy and education and, in doing so, I re-found my capacity to write and began to find my own voice as a philosopher of education. In the more recent dialogue with those in my field, it became clear that this orientation towards teachers and philosophy matters, matters enough to finally try to put these ideas into the permanence of print.

Notes

1. In this paper, I use the word reflection to refer to a particular form of thinking. See Furman and Larsen (2020) for a discussion of this.
2. This work is shared with her permission and feedback.
3. An approach to studying teaching that Christine and I were both familiar with.
4. This is a pseudonym for a student teaching supervisor we both knew.

Acknowledgements

Much gratitude to my brilliantly reflective pre-service students who resisted writing; Dave Backer who discussed the seeds of this paper and introduced me to “situated philosophy,” also in a crowded Brooklyn bar, when I was experiencing writer’s block; David Hansen for supporting this project in doctoral seminar; Doris Santoro as respondent and my fellow panelists and attendees at the NEPES session, and foremost to my interlocutor here and often, Christine.

Notes on contributor

Cara E. Furman, PhD, is an assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Maine at Farmington. She is the co-author with Cecelia Traugh of *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools*. Her research integrates teacher development, philosophy, inclusive teaching, and progressive practices.

ORCID

Cara E. Furman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3482-0675>

References

- Abowitz, K. K. (2012). Responsibility, not relevance. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 43, 20–24.
- Arcilla, R. V. (2002). Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other? *Educational Theory*, 52(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2002.00001.x>
- Arendt, H. (1971). *The life of the mind* (One-volume ed, Vol. 1). Harcourt, Inc.
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed). University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226924571.001.0001>
- Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. Penguin Books.
- Burbules, N. C., & Abowitz, K. K. (2008). A situated philosophy of education. *Philosophy and Education*, 24(2), 268–276.
- Derrida, J. (2000). *Of hospitality* (A. Dufourmantelle, Ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Free Press.
- Furman, C. E., & Larsen, S. M. (2019). Interruptions: Reflecting-in-action in pre-service math methods courses. *The New Educator*, 15(2), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2018.1551588>
- Furman, C. E., & Larsen, S. M. (2020). Interruptions: Thinking-in-action in teacher education. *Teachers College Record*.
- Furman, C. E., & Traugh, C. (2021). *Descriptive inquiry in teacher practice: Cultivating practical wisdom to create democratic schools*. Teachers College Press.
- Golding, C. (2015). The community of inquiry: Blending philosophical and empirical research. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 34(2), 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-014-9420-9>
- Giammarco (2017). [Untitled photograph of statues and bookshelves]. Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/zeH-ljawHtg>
- Grimmett, P. P., & Erickson, G. L. (Eds.). (1988). *Reflection in teacher education*. Pacific Education Press; Teachers College Press.
- Hansen, D. T. (1995). *The call to teach*. Teachers College Press.
- Hansen, D. T. (2017a). Among school teachers: Bearing witness as an orientation in educational inquiry. *Educational Theory*, 67(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12222>
- Hansen, D. T. (2017b). Bearing witness to teaching and teachers. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1205137>
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Country path conversations* (English ed). Indiana University Press.
- Higgins, C. (2001). From reflective practice to practical wisdom: Three models of liberal teacher education. *Philosophy of Education*, 29(9), 92–99.
- Higgins, C. (2011). *The good life of teaching an ethics of professional practice*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444346534>
- Kline, K. (2012). Toward a post-institutional philosophy of education. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 43, 10–19.

- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. L. Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410600523>
- Laverty, M. (2006). Philosophy of education: Overcoming the theory-practice divide. *Paideusis*, 15(1), 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072692ar>
- McClintock, R. (2005). *Homeless in the house of intellect: Formative justice and education as an academic study*. Laboratory for Liberal Learning, Columbia University.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1992). *Love's knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Rev. ed). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817915>
- Plato (1997). *Complete works*. Hackett Pub, Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Santoro, D. A. (2015). Philosophizing about teacher dissatisfaction: A multidisciplinary hermeneutic approach. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 34(2), 171–180. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-014-9409-4>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Schön, D. (1988). Coaching as reflective teaching. In P. P. Grimmett & G. L. Erickson (Eds.), *Reflection in teacher education* (pp. 19–29). Pacific Education Press; Teachers College Press.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (Second Edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.