

Phronesis and Techne: What is teaching?

**Dr. Lloyd Kornelsen, Opening Address, Manitoba Teacher Research Collective,
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I was a high school teacher for 25 years. During that time, I only ever ‘kicked out’ one student from class. It happened in the winter of 1998. Steve* had become increasingly verbally abusive to other students in class; and despite a number of interventions and out-of-class conferences, his bullying behaviour continued. Finally, one day in late January, I felt I had no choice, and I asked (told?) him to leave class and report to the principal’s office. Steve returned a week later, somewhat subdued. At the end of the school year, after he graduated (with a grade of C+ in the course), he asked for a letter of reference. None of his other teachers were willing to write one. He wanted to go to university. I agreed to write it; but it was one of the blandest letters of reference I have ever written, believing Steve was not ready for university, nor was university ready for him. Four years ago, in 2015, Steve emailed and asked to meet over coffee. He was flying through town to visit his mom and he wanted to meet up with me, his former World Issues teacher. As it turned out, Steve was now a medical doctor, working as a researcher at a world-renowned medical research facility in the United States where the previous year he had raised more money for research, than any of his colleagues. His project? HIV prevention education in rural southern Africa, where he was spending most of his time, meeting with community leaders and working on HIV prevention education projects.

The only student I have ever ‘kicked out’ class, removed from the learning community for which I was responsible, and for whom I had written a lukewarm letter of reference – one intended to raise red flags for university recruiters – was now working to save the world. As a school teacher

of 25 years and now working in a faculty of education today, I am haunted: What did I miss 21 years ago? Did I do the right thing by removing Steve from class, by not writing a supportive letter of reference? I think not; but I am not sure. Did the seven months Steve spent in my class, make any difference, for good or ill? What were my teaching responsibilities to Steve? What about the ethical and moral implications of my teaching choices vis a vis Steve?

In that same year of 1998, another student in another class, Adrienne*, most days came to high from smoking pot. I did not do anything about it; I did not call her out. She knew that I knew (as did most of the class, I think). In fact, I think she knew that I knew that she knew that I knew. I'm not sure why I didn't do anything. The school had a zero-tolerance drug-use policy and several students had already been disciplined that year. Maybe I was feeling tired (it was the last class of the day); maybe I was being lazy; maybe I thought more harm would be done by reporting her. Adrienne was not disruptive in class (other than laughing a lot). And yet, I worried about the ethical and pedagogical implications of excusing her drug use, and of other students witnessing my ignoring her actions.

I wrote Adrienne a supportive letter of reference at the end of the year. Adrienne went on to do an inter-disciplinary undergraduate degree, exploring relationships/connections between physics and political philosophy. She subsequently won a Rhodes scholarship, completing her master's degree in Oxford England. In 2010, Adrienne was invited to head up a sustainability program by senior administration at her alma mater. Since returning to the university, and through her leadership, all new buildings on the campus have been built to the highest LEEDS standards. Most of the older buildings have been refurbished, such that the university reduced greenhouse

gas (GHG) campus emissions by 32% between 1990 and 2015, despite a 39% increase in owned space. Today, Adrienne is sought after, nationally and internationally, for her advice, expertise, and insight on ways and means of reducing GHGs.

So then, a student whom I probably should have ‘kicked out’ of class, sent to the office, and treated according school policy dictate, but did not, is now working to save the world. It begs the questions: What is a teacher to do in these circumstances? What is their role, their task, their responsibility in helping guide students in engaging with the world and in helping shape the trajectory of their lives? How is a teacher to know what to do, when? In one circumstance, I actively interfered in a student’s engagement with his learning communities; in the other, I consciously looked the other way as she openly and publicly defied school rules; yet today, both students are engaging with the world in extraordinarily helpful ways. And, both have succeeded in academics and learning at the highest levels and in ‘making a difference’ in the world.

What do these two anecdotes, and the issues they raise about teachers and their teaching role, have to do with why we are here today, celebrating teacher inquiry and teacher-led research?

John Dunne, in *Back to the rough ground: ‘Phronesis’ and ‘Techne’ in modern philosophy and in Aristotle* (1993) renders two Aristotelian forms of knowledge or reason, *techne* and *phronesis*.

Techne is the concept that lays down the Western tradition of purposive rationality. It is a form of activity that

issues in a durable outcome, a product or state of affairs . . . which can be precisely specified by the maker before he engages in his [sic] activity . . . and provides it with its end. *Techné* is the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert maker. (p. 9)

I worked in construction for 10 years, becoming particularly adept at finishing outdoor concrete, concrete that would be exposed to all types of weather – wet, dry, freezing, and hot – and needing to keep its form for many years. To this day, when I look at concrete that I finished (or ‘made’), years ago, I can tell whether I got it right or wrong – and if wrong, the specific mistakes I made, and how those mistakes could be fixed today. Aristotle would call this type of knowledge *techné*.

But teachers do not finish students, or make them, or build them, or fix them. We do something else, and therefore must cultivate a different type of knowing and engaging, something closer to what Aristotle called *phronesis*. According to Dunne (1993), *phronesis* has to do with knowledge of persons, fellow subjects in relation to oneself,

It is a knowledge that is practiced in a public place with others in which a person, without ulterior purpose and with a view to no object detachable from themselves, acts in such a way as to realize excellences that they have come to appreciate in his community as constitutive of a worthwhile way of life . . . a knowledge that is more personal and more experiential, more supple and less formulable than knowledge conferred by *techné*. (p. 10)

“Aristotle believed that if one’s subject matter is the practical and communal life of persons, then one must renounce the methodological purism of *techne*” (p.18). Dunne argued that because teaching is open-ended and plays out in a communal history, and because a teacher’s power is realized in moments of interplay with others, teaching by its very nature falls into the category of *phronesis*. And if it does, then good teaching—teaching that encourages independent thought and reflection—calls for the teacher to bring qualities of mind, character, and practice that transcend the skillful application of technique (Kornelsen, 2006).

Echoes of *phronesis*, particularly as it informs teacher-student relationships, are heard in Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative: “so act that you treat humanity whether in your own person or any other person never merely as means but as an end in itself” (cited in Dower, 2003). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) suggested implications for teachers: Teachers must be considerers together with students, and remember that they are not so much preparing students to live in the world, but are living in the world with them, together, now, as interactive and autonomous Subjects. No one can unveil the world for another (i.e., teachers for learners), this can only be accomplished through dialogue. Perhaps this is why Aristotle said,

For do teachers profess that it is their thoughts which are perceived and grasped by the students . . . who is so stupidly curious as to send (their) son to school in order that he may learn what the teacher thinks? (Aristotle, *Politics* p. 54)

Where does this leave us teachers? We are called to teach facts, teach for truth and justice and about reality. To that end, we spend five years in faculties of education learning to be teachers.

Along with learning pedagogical theory and educational philosophy, a part of the five years is given to acquiring effective and requisite teaching methods, techniques, and skills. All of which hearken Aristotle's, *techne*.

Back to Dunne (1992). He says that Aristotle is not suggesting that technique is not important for effective teaching; it is. However *phronesis* is necessary so that the techniques “are deployed in relation to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way (p. 368)” And of course, this begs the question: How does a teacher know what and when the right thing is (e.g. when to kick out and when to look away); and how do teachers acquire this sensibility? For as Max Van Manen (1990) says, in a phenomenological sense, theory always arrives late, too late to inform praxis in an instrumental way, and so in the daily practice of living we are forever at a loss for theory (Kornelsen, 2019).

Some years ago, as a part of a research project, I asked master teachers about their teaching life and practice. I found that these folks seemed to have an instinctive sensibility for knowing when to do what, and how – it was cultivated through experience in caring for students and the course material, and in reflecting on that experience (Kornelsen, 2006). But, as with other teaching sensibilities, since this sensibility is necessarily uniquely experienced and expressed, understanding its practice is enhanced by inquiring of teachers their ways of cultivating dialogical relationships and navigating the transecting spaces of student autonomy and teacher responsibility (Kornelsen, 2014). And I think it is for this reason that we are here today: To think about, reflect upon, re-search our life and practice in the classroom so that we are better able to help students know, live, and act in the world – so that they can save the world; and to know that

much of the work we teachers do in classrooms transcends technique and will therefore always necessarily elude easy measure, valuation, and judgement. Hannah Arendt (1968) said:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable . . . (p. 196) Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look. (p. 192)

- * The two students' names are pseudonyms. The particularities of their stories have been altered slightly to protect their anonymity.

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