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Timely teaching in higher education: A note on being present in existential matters

Helene Torsteinson

Department of Pedagogy, Religion and Social Studies, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway
Correspondence: Helene.Torsteinson@hvl.no

ABSTRACT: This is a note on being present in existential matters. The article poses and responds to questions of teaching in relation to time and draws on classic and contemporary thoughts from the Continental pedagogical tradition and existential philosophy. In a time of haste and efficiency, being present in existential matters and life as it unfolds may be a challenge in higher education, but it is still of significance for the student. Two main questions are highlighted. First, why should we in higher education make students aware of human vulnerability and responsibility as a personal call? Second, how do we arrange teaching in classrooms and auditoriums if topics of human vulnerability and interdependence should be relevant and involve the students? To engage in existential matters in higher education through aesthetic sources like films, paintings, poems, and novels is suggested as a way to decelerate time and to help students see, feel and be touched by concrete moments in life that might demand a response.

KEYWORDS: Continental pedagogy, exemplarity, first-person encounters

Introduction

The question of why we educate is at the core of this article, and consequently the curriculum and how we teach are paramount. In recent years, the political orientation towards the "usefulness" of education and the connection between higher education and the work life has been increasing. This is recognisable in the streamlining of education (Biggs & Collins, 1982; Biggs & Tang, 2011), the focus on learning goals, input and output, measurement and calculation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Dekker & Meeter, 2022) and in the orientation towards evidence-based teaching and evidence-based practice in higher education and professional practice (Berg et al., 2014; Coe & Kime, 2019). Such thinking and practices, which to a large extent influence higher education today, have their origin in an instrumental and technocratic way of thinking of and relating to the world. However, the increasing stream of information and new technology puts claims on human ethos, judgment and creativity, although the concepts and thinking of market liberalism have little, if any, language for these human dimensions of life. How do we ask the basic existential questions about care for others, sensitivity and empathy in a climate of individuality and individual achievement?

My purpose is not to totally reject the current influences on higher education today. The problem, however, appears when one way of thinking, speaking of and doing education becomes *the way* to educate the next generation. My purpose in this article is rather to question what penalties a one-sided orientation towards "usefulness", efficiency and calculation might lead to. When doing this, I turn to Biesta's "perspectivism" and Masschelein and Simons' (2002) article "An adequate education in a globalized world? A note on immunization against being-together". Here, they present a description of how tradition is being neglected in higher education by the Europe of Knowledge document from Bologna in 1999. Interestingly, their description, and also critique, is surprisingly accurate and still of relevance for the current educational reality. It shows how a European higher education area is constructed with a focus on international competitiveness, mobility and employability and how this requires a specific type of education to reach its goals (e.g. streamlining, measurable learning goals and evidence-based teaching), what Simons and Masschelein (2013, p. 395) refer to as "the governmentalization of education".

In addition, I draw attention towards that which risks being overlooked if we focus on cause-effect relationships and "what works" in higher education, such as questions of human concern with no clear answers, and events and understandings that cannot be measured and controlled. Two existential questions are raised and responded to. First, why should we in higher education not only make students aware of human vulnerability, but also appeal to them to understand their responsibility as a personal call? Second, how can we arrange our teaching in classrooms and auditoria if topics of human vulnerability and interdependence should be relevant and touch the students? My concern here is to explore whether alternatives to mainstream instructions are time-sensitive for human existence in the classroom, for instance through aesthetic sources like film, paintings, narratives, or poetry. The questions come from the assumption that there are pedagogical forms, ways of *doing* education, or connections from the past that are relevant to students' lives and education *here and now*, and that certain values and ways of living of human concern are being more or less neglected in higher education today.

Connections from the past

In the editors' preface to the English translation of Klaus Mollenhauer's booklet *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*, Biesta and colleagues (2014) note that Mollenhauer presents emancipatory education in terms of concrete, historical and personal practices, contexts and communications across time and cultures. His concern is to regain attention on certain forgotten connections that remain important in today's educational settings, and as Biesta et al. (2014, p. xi) assert, "particularly in the light of the increasing trend to assume that all there is to say about education can be captured in the language and theory of the social and behavioural sciences". Mollenhauer's concern is the things, events, people, principles and understandings, even shortcomings and misunderstandings, that continue to have value for us; aspects of life that are also still worthwhile in the lives of the next generation of young people. The Continental pedagogical traditions rest on the conviction that genuine quality of human life must show its duration over time (Gadamer, 1986), and as Derrida shows us, misunderstanding is equally significant as understanding (Derrida & Caputo, 2013). Understanding, here, is not first and foremost related to cognition. It is also timely, relational, bodily and sensuous, and shows itself in our ways of being.

However, Mollenhauer does not go for a wholesale critique of the past, but carefully considers what we have inherited from the past in order to select what is worthwhile presenting to the young. A conclusive question for Mollenhauer (2014, p. 8) is: "Why do we want children at all?", a question I freely reformulate as "What do we want for the next generation?" with regard to higher education. Likewise, Biesta highlights the need for attention to what we want for the students, *why we educate* and why it matters that we allow the next generation to be different from ourselves and able to think and act in brand new ways (see Biesta, 2017; 2020; 2023). Education in this sense is not, nor should it be, a perfect endeavour where students adapt to a simple one-dimensional and contextless human world and encounter teachers who in the same way "manage" life unproblematically. Mollenhauer (2014, p. 8) ventures a provisional answer to the question of why we want children: "I want to perpetuate the (perhaps very little) goodness in my life". His response connects past and future and also ties the singular human life with humankind and our common human history. A pertinent question related to the continuation between past and future in current higher education is whether there is something valuable in the past that should be continued in some form in the encounter with students studying professional human practices. How are, for example, existential questions of human care and responsibility for the other considered in teaching and educational practices in classrooms or auditoria and in professional practices relevant for higher education (like kindergartens, schools, hospitals and nursing homes)?

Mollenhauer (2014, p. 9) reminds us that upbringing is "first and foremost a matter of passing on a valued heritage, of conveying to children [and young people] what is important to us". A relevant and ongoing pedagogical concern thus should be to question whether we, in today's education, pass on a heritage that we value and consider important (to the next generation) – so important that we will reserve the present moment for the future. In education at all levels, from kindergarten to higher education, the question of educational purpose is essential. This means that every educational situation incarnates the question of why we educate and through its practice carries out qualification, socialisation and subjectification of the children, pupils or students involved (Biesta, 2022). In higher education, like nursing, social work and teacher education, students are (to be) qualified and socialised into their profession (e.g. through campus-based teaching, academic literature studies, colloquium work and periods of practical training). While qualification, socialisation and subjectification always happen in education to some degree, the balance between the three could be lopsided. A tendency today, Biesta (2022, p. 16) says, is that qualification comes first, socialisation second and "if there is time left" comes subjectification.[1] Subjectification is "about the ways in which students can be(come) subjects in their own right and not just remain objects of the desires and directions of others" (Biesta, 2017, p. 28). In this article, the question of balance concerns how we in higher education should teach to help bring forth a morally connected and responsible attitude towards the self and the other in the students.

Questioning a third-person perspective

Being aware of something means that we are unaware of something else. This is trivial but nevertheless of significance to my concern. If we as teachers try to make an educational difference by pointing to the world as a place where we live, love and suffer (Levinas, 1998; Lingis, 2004) rather than as a world that we construct and control with our knowledge and technology, then existential concerns should be given space and time in teaching. Teaching, in this sense, is about making representative and morally loaded choices, and the decision of reading, ways of teaching and what to choose as vantage points for educational practice are serious educational concerns. Mollenhauer (2014, p. 34–35) reminds us that education is "a huge montage of images and representations which are not the 'thing themselves' but that instead 'point out' things and phenomena [...]. This massive arsenal of educational contents, methods and aims [is] a matter of reproducing the world", which "is a massively aesthetic, symbolic undertaking". Students should be guided into their discipline and profession in what he calls a "reliable" way and they can only be so when our lifeforms "are presented [...] in this [meaningful] cycle" (Mollenhauer, 2014, p. 36). According to him, education is thus about selecting what to convey to the next generation.

To prepare a ground for my discussion, I start with what Biesta (2023) refers to as "perspectivism" and with two of the three perspectives he develops. This might help us distinguish between different ways of relating to and being in the world that are of significance for education and professional human practice. In perspectivism, a distinction is made between a third-person perspective, where we are looking at the world and the things in it from the outside to generate explanations to phenomena, and what he calls a first-person perspective. The latter opens opportunities where students can experience encountering the world (and themselves as a part of it). A second-person perspective is "the perspective of the teacher who stands in a triadic relationship between student and the world, and who

1 A tendency today is that qualification comes first in the educational hierarchy, then comes socialisation and "if there is time left" (Biesta, 2022, p. 16), subjectification comes third. He argues for the need to place the hierarchy "on its head and work from the assumption that subjectification is the core of all education" (ibid.). This, however, does not mean that we should put the students at the centre of education, but rather that we, as teachers, should orient the students towards the world as a shared concern and the question of what the world is asking of me (Biesta, 2020).

ultimately must leave the scene" (Biesta, 2023, p. 2). Biesta's seminal concern is whether a third-person perspective, which largely influences education today, gets in the way of what I prefer to call first-person experiences and a direct contact with the realities of the world. However, both perspectives or positions are experiences, but they are different on a fundamental level. The word "perspective" is itself a third-person matter, as we *take* a perspective. In that act, we have already positioned ourselves outside of the world (Biesta, 2023), as watchers or spectators (of the world). We are *looking at* something in order to explain and try to make sense of it. Thus, the world becomes an object for our sense-making and cognitive understanding. This perspective is recognisable in education as constructivism, or even behaviourism, where students are supposed to gain knowledge about the world, e.g. knowledge of children's development, health, pathology and disabilities, to better understand the world through explanations and cause-effect relationships.

When we explain something, we position ourselves outside and above the world, making the other an object to our observing gaze. We analyse the child to explain its behaviour or examine the patient to find the cause of illness. Knowledge of children's development, diseases, pathology and health is undoubtedly important in teaching and professional human practice education. My concern is not whether such knowledge should be available to the students or not, but whether teaching, education and professional practice also open possibilities for students to encounter the world as *an I*, as a participant and not a spectator or an audience. Gaining understanding from first-person experiences is to partake in the life of the other, to include oneself in that which one witnesses, and to become involved with and in the world directly and concretely. Existential teaching, which is at the centre of this article, is to attend to and prepare for first-person encounters with questions and dilemmas in education, and for teachers to appeal to students to read, engage in and attend to questions of concern to themselves and others, e.g. directing their attention to subjects and concerns outside of themselves that have the quality to disturb and reorient our naturally ego-logical orientations.

Be(coming) touchable

Good education in the so-called "knowledge society" (OECD, 2000; UNESCO, 2005) is characterised by the cohesion between learnings goals, assessment criteria, evaluation forms and teaching methods (Biggs & Tang, 2011), where the SOLO (structure of observed learning outcomes) taxonomy (Biggs & Collins, 1982) offers a rational apparatus of approaches, methods and ways to simplify the complex educational reality through streamlined education, learning goals and measurement of outcomes. In this view, education is seen as techniques to foster "effective", "streamlined" and "harmonised" learning. To a large extent, the language of education has become the language of economists, bureaucrats and entrepreneurs. Words like "learning techniques", "effective instructions", "powerful feedback" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), or "pedagogical innovation" (Walder, 2017) are common terms. Andersen (2010) claims that the language, mindset and practices of this "learning apparatus" draw on constructive alignment, which is a constructivist, even a behaviouristic, way of thinking. We might ask whether higher education today and the way education is practised, thought and spoken of leads to inattentiveness toward experienced reality and the event of being touched.

We might also ask whether the great focus on rational explanations and cause-effect theories in higher education today (through learning goals and learning output, measurement and calculation) leads to a mindset and a language that immunise us to others and the world (Masschelein & Simons, 2002), and thus hinder involvement and understanding on a deeper human level, both non-cognitively and cognitively. The word "immune" is associated with the medical field (and of being protected from disease). Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin *immunis* (*im + munis*), meaning freed or excepted from service or liability (Onions, 1966). With regard to education, immunisation might mean that one is no longer affected (as before), but has developed immunity to the existential questions, the situations and that which one has experienced before. Immunity might lead us to think that we know what we encounter and we might already have built up a defence so that we no longer (re)act. In a sense, to draw on the case of perspectives, through a third-person perspective, we risk becoming immune to aspects of the outside world, impressions, questions, sights, or sounds, like Lize Stilma indicates in her poem "Mary" (1984). In the poem, the protagonist Mary despairingly calls out for her daughter Salina every night. Salina was taken away from Mary by the authorities several years before without anyone telling her where her daughter was taken. "For the better, people had said" (Stilma, 1984, p. 295). With time, the neighbours become "used to the evening wind bringing Mary's voice into their houses" (ibid.) and her voice becomes "as insignificant as the whimpering of a yard-dog" (ibid.). In time, the neighbours become immunised to the pain of Mary's experience and no longer hear the despair in her voice.

To become immunised, to remain distanced and untouched by that which earlier touched one is a common human response when we encounter situations and practices frequently or on a daily basis. Such situations and practices are easily "automated" and made into routines. Onions (1966) describes a routine as a regular, unvarying procedure, something we do in a more or less mechanical way. Susan Sontag (2003/2019, p. 4) relates conventions and routine to human suffering when she writes "no we should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain". Like the neighbours in Stilma's poem or all human beings in general, no one knows the details of another person's life or how life is sensed from their standpoint and from moment to moment. Just to assume it is a violation of the other's otherness (Levinas, 1987; Derrida & Caputo, 2013). We run the risk of reducing someone's experience to a category if we identify it in relation to what we already know and think we have a proper name for, like a general 'we', or when we observe from the outside, analyse and construct realities from a third-person perspective. A core question of this article is how teaching might prevent the immunisation of students in higher education and whether there are ways of teaching and being-together with students that somehow repair inattentiveness and immunisation and open minds and hearts to others' conditions of life.

Timely teaching in higher education

Etymologically, the word "teach" derives from the Old English *tæcan*, meaning "to show, point out, declare, demonstrate".[2] Learning, on the other hand, means study and acquiring knowledge (Onions, 1966), but also to "be cultivated; study, read, think about". The word "learn"

2 https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=teach

derives from the German word *lernen*, with a base sense of "to follow or find the track".[3] However, teaching and learning today tend to be seen as two sides of the same coin (Biesta, 2017), and the attention in education has gradually shifted "away from teaching and the teacher towards students and their learning" (Biesta, 2017, p. 1). Biesta (2017, p. 1) calls for a "re(dis)covery of teaching" and argues for the need to separate learning from teaching. This is important, he says,

> for opening up other existential possibilities for students, particularly possibilities that do not put them and their sense-making at the centre of the educational process, but rather allow them to encounter what comes to them from "beyond" their sense-making, that is [...] without reason (Biesta, 2017, p. 38).

To avoid education being simply cognitive sense-making and preparation to the future requires that we think and speak differently about education (Todd, 2016; Howard et al., 2021). The solution might not be to provide students with knowledge about the world so that they are as well prepared and equipped as possible for professional encounters in the future, but that we teach in ways that make students aware of the world as something in itself and in need of their concern. "Whereas a pedagogy of empowerment seeks to prepare students for their encounter with others, a pedagogy of disarmament seeks to open students for the encounter itself" (Biesta, 2023, p. 2). To allow students to encounter that which comes to them from "beyond", as *an I*, involves opening space for students so that they can experience, receive and encounter that which does not have its origin in themselves, that which exists beyond their rationality, will and interests. This is, of course, not something we as teachers can guarantee. We can only hope for it to happen.

Teaching as disarmament and de-immunisation implies that we do not understand teaching in technical terms and as preparation alone. Pedagogical actions as they are directed toward children or students in higher education are "not served by 'skills' or 'competency' training", van Manen says (2016, p. 41). Rather, they are based on

> sensitivities such as affects, feelings, ethical values and tactfulness [which] cannot be trained in an instrumental manner, but, if approached with openness, willingness and commitment, they can be developed through phenomenological reflections and evocations, but only in those who are receptive to it (van Manen, 2016, p. 41–42).

A pedagogy of disarmament is thus not oriented towards knowledge in the form of explanatory models and problem-solving, or seen as a pure cognitive act. Rather, pedagogy is an existential matter that turns teaching toward life and life-oriented questions. This does not mean that techniques, problem-solving methods, programmes and regulations are not important in higher education. To a certain degree it is both necessary and needed, sometimes even life-saving. The problem appears when the rational is prioritised over other forms of knowledge and ways of being.

What I have called timely teaching is an attempt to imagine how teaching itself can be existential, but also how it can be turned towards existential matters and questions of relevance for students studying professional human practices. Timely teaching might have several connotations. It can refer to teaching *on*, but also *in* and *at*, time. In addition, timely teaching might refer to teaching that offers opportunities for the students to be "touched by the moment" (Todd, 2023, p. 9), moments where they can experience forgetting time and place because they are captured by something, like a discussion, an artwork, a common subject matter. Thus, it also highlights "the time of studying" as a valuable period in human life, a time with dignity in itself. There are also existential matters that cannot be fully captured in words and language, such as sensuous and bodily aspects of human understandings and phenomena like human vulnerability and interdependence, uncertainty and moral disquiet. Such phenomena are sensed rather than verbally uttered in human encounters.

On time and being contemporary

Students studying professional human practices need teachers who are willing and able to open spaces where they can encounter existential matters and questions and can teach in ways that show the students how these matters and questions can be articulated, processed and dwelt upon. The word "dwell" is core here, as it means "to continue to be in a space for a significant amount of time".[4] Time, duration and deceleration of time are perhaps some of the greatest challenges in a period of efficiency and measurement; to stay with something over time – a question, a thought, and/or another being – without rushing to answers or solutions. In education and in professional practice, we are expected to solve today's (and future) problems, be efficient, innovative and flexible. Today, the term "quality" as such has the meaning that something must be delivered within a given framework, which is constantly changing, and evidence of "quality-work" is in the form of measurement and documentation (Zamojski, 2014). Likewise, it seems to be more important to find quick solutions to problems than to bear with the complexity, dilemmas and difficulties that rise out of time and being. In this sense, we risk losing the moment and the present time for the future.

Deumier et al. (2024) emphasise the significance of decelerating education and offer pedagogical exercises or movements to slow down education and life as such in order to see, feel and reflect on existential matters and concerns. By pointing towards concrete examples, they offer possibilities to dwell in the space and time where *how to delay time* is put on the table in the form of concrete exercises of educational relevance. They ask, what does decelerating education look like in particular teaching situations? How is it possible to teach in ways that open opportunities for students to be(come) present in the present, so that they might experience encountering and being touched by the world? How could teaching for the opportunity it is to be present in the moment, what I have called "timely teaching", in higher education look like?

The dignity of education

The Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim (1996) says that to meet the other as a subject, the teacher must orient the gaze of the student to shared educational matter. The teacher has to point towards something outside of the relation between the teacher and the student in itself and orient the gaze towards that "something". This does not mean that the relation between the

3 https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=learn

4 https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/dwell

student(s) and the teacher is not important, but that the gaze, the matter of teaching, has to be somewhere else, oriented towards the world and a shared matter. But how can we draw attention to something without taking a third-person perspective, without making ourselves and the students spectators of the world? Which pedagogical movements, forms and matters can bring students into contact with the world *here-and-now*, and thus also themselves as "earthlings" (Lingis, 1994, p. 117)?

Etymologically, "contact" stems from Latin *contactus*, meaning a mutual touch, to touch closely (Onions, 1966). Thus, to be in contact *with* (someone or something) is a first-person experience, an experience where we are present in person to encounter and be touched by the world. Among Biesta's critical concerns regarding education are, as mentioned, the great focus on constructivism and "learnification", where a risk is that students become oriented towards their own achievements and goals and become immune to the outside world. He also questions the emphasis on textuality and linguistics (partly as a consequence of constructivism and "learnification") (Bertelsen et al., 2023). Textuality, however, is an important aspect of and matter in education, but there are always several ways to encounter subject matters. There also exist alternatives to the mainstream academic textbooks, evidence-based articles and textual assignments that require predetermined answers.

An example is Alphonso Lingis' evocative texts that offer the reader opportunities to encounter existential matters of mutual human concern. His texts, which are accounts of his many travels around the world – almost like travel letters – take us to places and spaces we otherwise and without his guidance would not have gone to. Through personal, evocative and sometimes disruptive descriptions, he invites the reader to take part in human matters and concerns. Phenomena such as chance, awe, fascination, horror, love, and passion are highlighted. He writes that

> all the major events in life are due to chance – our birth; a teacher who captivated us and engaged us in mathematics and nursing, music, or football; the person we happen to meet and fall in love with; the job opportunity that abruptly opened; our child who was autistic or who died; the car crash that crippled us; the tumour that grew silently in our inner organs. There is [...] an element of chance and risk in every relation with another human being. We never really know what someone might think or might do. We can only trust him or her. Chance is the unpredictable, the incalculable, the incomprehensible – surprise, shock, good or bad luck (Lingis, 2018, p. 30).

Lingis goes beyond the calculative and what we can predict, master and control, and moves from the self-oriented to an outer-oriented world view. Life itself is a risk, and we will meet disruptions, shortcomings and failures in our everyday life and in professional practice. To open up space and time for students to engage in topics of chance, unpredictability and unease, even failure, is imperative in education. Too often phenomena such as uncertainty, moral disquiet and failure are seen as something to be fixed, mastered and controlled (Torsteinson, 2024). To recognise the complexity and dilemmas of professional practice, to accept reality *as it is* – rather than controlling it – is a significant part of human life and practices. In the text "Risks and Failure in Education", Bollnow (1959/2022, p. 139) elevates phenomena like mishap and failure as common in pedagogical encounters and describes them as "the painful and dark side of the teacher profession, one that teachers don't like to dwell on". He continues, "[n]o one has yet considered the possibility that failure has a far deeper meaning, one that is actually founded in the essence, in *the dignity of education*" (Bollnow, 1959/2022, p. 139; emphasis added). Because we are dealing with free human beings, risk and thus also failure belong to the core of education and human practices. They are phenomena that might open up for something new to be seen or to happen.

Dwelling as first-person experience

The texts mentioned above, but also texts like "The pedagogical atmosphere" (Bollnow, 1989), "Care-as-Worry, or 'Don't Worry, be Happy'" (van Manen, 2002), "The Conversation" (van den Berg, 1953/2021), "The 'Secret Place' in the Life of the Child" (Langeveld, 1953/2021) and "Between Past and Future" (Arendt, 2006) are texts that raise existential questions of common human concern. They invite the reader to dwell in the space that the texts offer. Dwelling is always a first-person experience. As teachers, we can encourage students to open up and stay in the space of reading and dwelling, by offering them time to read, feel and possibly be present in the moment. We can allow for different ways of reading; slow reading, reading out loud, shared reading, or bilingual reading (Deumier et al., 2024), or show other entrances to dwelling than through textuality and linguistics.

"[T]here is no reason why philosophy of education should only be concerned with books and lectures, and not with films" (Masschelein, 2011, p. 358). Art,[5] like movies, paintings, poetry and novels, "offers us opportunities to experience pedagogical moments pre-reflectively and thus make them available for our reflective attention" (van Manen, 2016, p. 22). Art, Murdoch (1970/2001, p. 85; emphasis in original) asserts, "when it is not a diversion or a side-issue [...] is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*". Thus, art, like the poem "Mary" by Stilma (1984), might open possibilities for morality to be seen. It speaks to our senses and the cognitive, and as readers, we are invited to take part in the experience or event, not as spectators, but as participants. The structure and content of the poem draw us into the moment of the poem if we are willing to be open and take part in what Gadamer (1986) calls "the game" or "the play". In a sense, the poetic encounter becomes like a dialogue or a play between the poem and the reader that may open a space in time, a rupture if you like, where we can reside. Experiential qualities, as exemplified in the poem "Mary", might mean something to students' life and practice. What does it mean to "lose" a child (to someone else)? What does it mean to be a mother, a relative, or a neighbour? How is pain expressed and how do we sense another person's suffering?

Likewise, the movies of the Dardenne brothers (Masschelein, 2011), like "The Kid with a Bike", "The Son" and "The Child", draw us into the present and the moment of the story. By pointing towards everyday life, familiar but also complex and sometimes extreme situations and the possible consequences of our actions, the movies allow us to be present in other people's lives as they

5 Commonly, aesthetics is understood in relation to the philosophy of art, theories of art and art-based education and practices. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *aisthetikos* from *aisthetá*, meaning "things perceptible by the senses", to feel, sense; "one who perceives" (Onions, 1966, p. 16).

unfold, moment by moment – by seeing, listening, feeling and reflecting. Certain scenes are uncomfortable and we might be uneasy, feel pain on behalf of others, or even experience shock. At other times, we are delighted or amused on behalf of the actors and what unfolds in the moment. The movies do not only show us "the reality", but are also questioning us (without directly asking) by making us reflect; what would I have done in such a situation? Would I have recognised the other's suffering and pain? How far does my responsibility reach? Films might be "studies of essential educational situation and matters", Masschelein (2011, p. 358) says, that raise questions like; what does it mean to be a patient, a nurse, or a teacher, a parent, son, or a daughter, a colleague, or a random passer-by? These questions are not posed in general, but are connected to concrete situations of today (Masschelein, 2011).

The movies of the Dardenne brothers bring morality back to the moment and to the sphere of the personal and singular, to the irreplaceable – to what *I* can do, that nobody else can do for me (Levinas, 1987; Biesta, 2022). It does not offer a solution to the dilemmas and conflicts it highlights, but leaves the questions open for interpretation and reflection – open for the seer to take a stand (or not). In this sense, art might draw us into the present – the space between the past and the future (Arendt, 2006). The educational present, or what van Manen (2016) calls the pedagogical moment, are moments when we become present in the present (Todd, 2016). By encountering matters of human concern like responsibility and freedom through art, we can be(come) more aware of the moment. We see small gestures or glances, sense atmospheric qualities, understand underlying subtleties and aporias that might easily be overlooked and elude us in our everyday lives (van Manen, 2016). And we also sense nuances or shades of what is good (or not), beautiful or ugly (and everything in-between) in encounters with the world. These are qualities of great significance for everyone who works closely with people who are particularly vulnerable.

Delayed time in order to see, feel and be touched

Biesta (2020, p. 99, 100) invites us to engage with the questions that art raises, not only in a hermeneutical way in terms of our cognitive understanding, as in "What does this mean?" or "How can I make sense of this?", but also in an existential way, by questioning oneself: "What is this asking of me? [...] What is this trying to teach me?". In a time of efficiency and calculation, we as teachers should question ourselves whether what we emphasise in education is what we really value and consider worthwhile to pass on to the next generation. This concern has to do with how we understand education and its purpose. Understanding is, for Arendt (1994), seen in relation to dwelling. Understanding, also students' and teachers' understanding, is in fact without a final end, like movements or something that continues to happen which is hard to set limits to and identify in final results. Arendt (1994, p. 307–308) sees understanding as "an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world".

Understanding, as distinct from explanation, is fundamental to human existence and human sciences as such (Gadamer, 1975/2021). It is both a cognitive and a sensuous and bodily activity, but also a way of being. This also means that through our practice we show who we are. By building on something other than strict rationality and different from explanatory models, human science is oriented towards understanding as truth, or as Gadamer (1975/2021, p. 307; emphasis in original) says,

> [u]nderstanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*.

Understanding, in this sense, is not understanding as a proof (to be explained), but rather understanding as an event. It appears in the movement from the self to the unself (Murdoch, 1970/2001), in the encounter between the self and the world, like in a conversation where we suddenly experience seeing something differently or in a new light. Or, understanding might grow upon us when staying with a thought, an experience or a dilemma over time.

To engage in existential matters is not something we can or should do in a hurry. To stick with a thought, an experience, or a dilemma takes time if something is going to show itself in its complexity and ambiguity. To give students time, to decelerate time, to make moments last longer, and to encourage them to stay with a phenomenon and with that which calls upon them, are all possible ways of timely teaching. Understanding, though, is not merely subjective. The other – whether the other is another human being, a text, a film, or a painting – also bears meaning. It is *in the transference*, the movement from the self (same) towards the other (different), understandings and thus ways of being *with* might occur. According to Heidegger (1962/2008, p. 182), "understanding always has its mood". It signifies the being's *Befindlichkeit* – the mood, atmosphere, or the state where the being finds themself and thus *is* the being. Understanding requires that we encounter the world openly and on the same premises as we encounter ourselves. However, when the world is no longer understandable to us, we easily turn to explanations. To distinguish between explanation and understanding is thus a fundamental moral act in which the other, from my position, is seen either as a subject or an object (Buber, 1970).

Timely teaching is an attempt to give time (and teaching) back to education. To meet in time, a time that is neither mine, nor yours – but rather a shared time (Torsteinson & Saevi, 2023), or what Levinas (1987) calls genuine time, we need to pay attention to the moment. We need to delay time in order to see, feel and be touched by that which calls upon us. We need to listen and open up "not only to the dominant voices of the great masters, but also to other voices that speak more gently, more discreetly, more mildly" (Derrida & Caputo, 2013, p. 57). In this sense, timely teaching is also a democratic act that allows for other voices to be heard. The word "contemporary" means "existing at the same time", from Latin *com* (with, together) + *temporarus* (of time). Heidegger says (1962/2008, p. 155) that humans are being-with, "the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of *Daisen* is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with*". To be contemporary, as Being-with, is a first-person experience (Biesta, 2023). It is a call to engage in existential matters in classrooms and auditoria (as well as in life as such), to stay with the complexity and dilemmas and to open up to the world and what it calls upon us to think of and thus also *be*.

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