Teaching as letting learn: What Martin Heidegger can tell us about one-to-ones

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Abstract

Human beings [for "man"] will know the incalculable—that is, safeguard it in its truth—only in creative questioning and construction empowered by genuine reflection (Heidegger, 2002c, p. 72, translation amended).

The teaching and learning that happens in the individual tutorials, or one-to-ones, of Learning Advisors is unpredictable and hard to measure—incalculable even. Here I reflect on my experience of one-to-one teaching through the lens of Heidegger's thinking about teaching and learning to reconstruct the idea of co-construction.²

Co-construction as letting learn

Why Heidegger? Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is an at times mystical and often mystifying philosopher, best known for his reflections on what he called "being" (*Sein*) and "human being" (*Dasein*, literally "being there"), his influence on and through the Existentialists and Post-Structuralists, and his problematic engagement with National Socialism in the early thirties. He wrote and lectured in a seemingly magisterial—masterful and masterly—style, and he wrote at great length. His collected works run to more than sixty volumes. I always thought of him as a writer rather than a teacher (because that's how I encountered him, needless to say).

But then I came upon a passage that made me think again, from a late essay called "Traditional Language and Technical Language" (1960):

The true teacher is ahead of the students only in that he has more to learn than they: namely, the letting learn. (To learn [means]: to bring what we do and allow into a co-respondence with that which in each case grants itself to us as the essential.) (Heidegger, 1998b, p. 261)

This is typical, somewhat mysterious Heideggerese, but the idea intrigued me. As against "instructing" (*belehren*), "teaching" (*lehren*) is ultimately a "letting learn"

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² I write *teaching and learning* where perhaps *teaching & learning* or *teaching/learning* might be more appropriate to recognise the co-constructed nature of this activity.

(*lernen lassen*). I googled "letting learn" and found another passage, less mysterious, from a lecture series called "What is Called Thinking" (1951-1952):

Teaching is more difficult than learning. We know that; but we rarely think about it. And why is teaching more difficult than learning? Not because the teacher must have a larger store of information, and have it always ready. Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than—learning. (Heidegger, 1968, p. 15; see Heidegger, 1967, p. 73)

For Heidegger, then, what is difficult as a teacher is learning to 'let students learn'. To do so is to allow them to respond freely—appropriately, truthfully—to whatever it is they need to learn. He calls this process "co-respondence" (*Ent-sprechung*). It is the equivalent of the "letting-be" (*Gelassenheit*) that he sees as the appropriate attitude to beings, both animate and inanimate. It enables learning to 'happen'. (Heidegger's word for truth is *Ereignis*: "happening," or less literally, "en-owning".) To slightly misread Heidegger, 'letting learning happen' would entail or embody a genuine co-respondence, a dialogue, between teacher and student.

This is certainly how I feel when I sit down for a one-to-one with a student to talk through some obstruction in their writing process: I have to work with them to find out where the issue lies that is obstructing their work. Often what the student says or thinks is the issue, is not—which we only find out through talking. But, more often than not, they know how to work out (or around) the issue—though they don't know it. For this reason, I take students to know at least as much as I do. This is a useful corrective (as a teacher, I don't know as much as I think); an injunction to take students' experience and expertise seriously (as a person, a student knows as much as I do); and a reminder that teachers can learn from the teaching situation. The teaching and learning situation, then, is—or ought to be—genuinely "co-constructed" (Atherton, 2010).

This made me think: How can I square this implicit focus on "co-respondence" with Heidegger's magisterial style? I looked for evidence of his teaching practice. Most of his numerous lecture series have been reproduced as monologues. The later seminars, however, which have been reproduced as dialogues, give us a clue as to his approach (although these were seminars, rather than lectures). As Walter Biemel (1976) puts it:

Those who [knew] Martin Heidegger only through his published writings [could] hardly form an idea of the unique style of his teaching. Even with beginners, he was able in no time to coax them into thinking, not just learning various views or reproducing what they had read, but entering into the movement of thinking. It seemed as if by some miracle the Socratic practice of address and rejoinder had come to life again. (p. 7)³

³ See also Hans-Georg Gadamer's testimony (1985, p. 48). On the influence of Heidegger's teaching on his students, see Beistegui (2005, pp. 186-187).

According to Hannah Arendt (1971) in her essay "Martin Heidegger at Eighty", Heidegger's lecture courses and seminars were different in nature from those of his contemporaries. His teaching differentiated between "an object of scholarship and a matter [of] thought" and was indifferent to the former (p. 1, quoting Heidegger, 2003, p. 19).⁴ That is to say, the texts under consideration were thought through as sources of "problems of immediate and urgent relevance" (p. 1). And that thought was "passionate thinking" (p. 2): It was "unceasingly active"—but without "a goal sighted beforehand and guided thereto" (p. 1)—and always "rethinking," that is, "destructive" (p. 2), which for Heidegger means "critical . . . towards its own results" (p. 1). To think through a problem, then, is to 'make it present' in passionate, active reflection.⁵ "Today this sounds quite familiar," writes Arendt, "because nowadays so many proceed in this way; but no one did so before Heidegger" (p. 1). Yet his lesson is easily forgotten in the rush of higher learning today, with its 'end-stopped' (at once anticipatory and retrospective) language of aims, objectives and outcomes, summative evaluation, etc., that seems to leave no time to let learning happen.

However, Biemel, Arendt and others have mainly reflected on how Heidegger taught in lectures and seminars.⁶ How he might have taught in a one-on-one situation we cannot know, but what he said about teaching and learning can help us to understand and evaluate how teaching and learning happens in one-to-ones.

Learning in one-to-ones 1: Dialogue

First of all, I take one-to-ones to be potential sites of radical transformation—or "development", to put it more circumspectly (Crookston, 1994, p. 5). Why? Because one-to-ones are non-content-based, not-for-credit, ex-faculty interventions in learning. Since one-to-ones sit outside the "content for credit" régime of degree courses in faculties and allow learners to voice their thoughts *and* feelings about their academic life and work, they offer learners a place of safety, a relatively secure vantage point from which to reflect on and validate their experience in and of their institution.

To use the jargon of higher learning, not only are one-to-ones transmissional, but also transactional *and* transformative (Miller & Seller, 1985, pp. 5-9). They focus not only on teaching and learning as content-driven (about strategies and skills), but also as interactive (about dialogue) *and* critical (about personal development; Ukpokodu, 2008, pp. 230-231). As such, they enable students to develop critical consciousness (Paolo Friere uses the more suggestive term "conscientization" [1970]) to question their own learning, thinking and way of being.⁷

⁴ In my citations, I follow the pagination of the online version of Arendt's essay.

⁵ For Heidegger on phenomenology as "making-present", see Heidegger (2002a, pp. 210-225).

⁶ For Heidegger's thinking on university education, see Heidegger (2000a and 2000b) and Thomson (2003). For an excellent exposition of his thinking, see Thomson's "Heidegger's Mature Vision of Ontological Education, or How We Become What We Are" (2005, pp. 141-181).

⁷ For Arlene Goldbard (2006, pp. 21-22) in *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, community development works by conscientization and empowerment.

For Heidegger, education (*Bildung*) is—even as we learn or think or exist together—in some sense individual or individualised, the "unfolding of that which is one's own," namely, "personal development" not "outside involvements" (*Eigenentwicklung*, not *Fremdverwicklung*, literally "estranging entanglement"), in the language of Heidegger's "Toward a Philosophical Orientation for Academics" (1911/2007). Heidegger adds: "One only possesses truth in a genuine sense when one has made it one's own" (2007, p. 15). Leaving aside for now what it is to "make truth one's own"—and even what "that which is one's own" is—such an injunction implies that teacher and learner are both individuals on their own paths of learning, paths that intersect in the teaching and learning situation.

This personal stake in teaching and learning is, nonetheless, predicated on dialogue. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time* (1927): "Knowing oneself [*Sichkennen*] is grounded in being-with [*Mitsein*]"—or "Being with one another understandingly" (1962, p. 161).⁸ Martin Buber (2002) extrapolates from Heidegger that the fundamental fact of human existence is a dialogue that takes place in what he calls the "sphere of 'between'" ("*das Zwischenmenschliche*"; p. 241). As against "technical dialogue" or "monologue disguised as dialogue," "genuine dialogue" is *thou-ing*, to use the language of *I and Thou* (Buber, 2004, p. 22). On the one hand, there are objectifying or 'instrumental' "I–it" relationships, for example, as in teaching and learning as transmissional, where the content or the 'other' (the student) is seen as an "it". On the other, there are non-objectifying or 'existential' "I–thou" ones, for example, as in teaching and learning as transmostional or transformative, where the other is seen as a "thou", a person, and the content as person-like and thus worthy of the curiosity or respect a "thou" deserves (Buber, 2004, p. 4). For Buber, the latter is more authentic (read: better)—and the prerequisite of genuine dialogue; I would agree.

Learning in one-to-ones 2: Letting-learn and letting-be

But it is not simply the fact or the manner of dialogue that makes it authentic. In fact, Heidegger (1962) scorns empathy as a "bridge" between individuals; for him, "only on the basis of Being-with does 'empathy' become possible" (p. 162). To slightly misread Heidegger once again, it's the content, or better, the nature of the dialogue that is important: Genuine dialogue brings the institutional context into the dialogue (as content), or better, it keeps the institutional context in mind—not so much by assuming the aims, etc., of the university as an endpoint, but by seeing them as a condition of the dialogue (in its nature). To wit, it is in the nature of dialogue in the university that the aims, etc., of the university—as it is today in this place, let's say—are part of the conversation. For example, when we talk about essay writing, a condition of the dialogue is to understand that essays are the main tool by which students are examined in the modern university, more so as students progress and as they are required to account for their learning in calculable ways (as articles are the main tool by which academics are 'examined'). The teacher makes a judgement about

⁸ For Heidegger on *Mitsein* and teaching, see Donnelly (1999).

how explicitly and in what detail this 'fact' about the university should be part of the conversation.

Nonetheless, to go back a step, the simple fact or manner of dialogue was my 'in' to one-to-ones. Before I knew the language of higher education, I conceived of what happened in one-to-ones on the model of Rogerian argument, which comes out of Carl Rogers' (1951) "person-centered therapy" (PCT), a non-judgmental, non-directive talk therapy that aims to enable patients to solve their own problems.⁹ For Rogers, we must understand the other's position (find common ground with them) before we can critique it (mark out our own territory; Babin & Harrison, 1999, pp. 235-237). I always assumed—and still do—that a student has rich experience and expertise of their own, that they already know-if not consciously-what they need to do. For example, most students have learnt, through teaching or mimicry, the intro-bodyconclusion point-first model of expository writing, though they might not know its aim or why it is privileged in the university, and will have their own metaphor or narrative to understand it-though they're unlikely to have "thematised" (clarified and explained), "grounded" (justified and critiqued), let alone reflected on that metaphor or narrative (the terms are Heidegger's). In other words, students know how to learn, but they just don't know that they do.

My job as an advisor is to help students bring to light that knowledge and transform it into a heuristic, which thematises and grounds that knowledge, based on my own experience and expertise. A heuristic (from the Greek *heuriskein*, "to find") enables someone to learn something for themselves—and to reflect on that learning. So now we can begin to unpack the idea of letting-learn as co-respondence (*Ent-sprechung*) with which we began: letting students learn as letting learning happen . . . or letting-learn (*lernen lassen*) as letting-be (*Gelassenheit*). The first step in letting-learn is letting students learn how to learn (*lernen lassen*).

To explain how so, we need to know something of Heidegger's complex narrative about modernity. For him, modernity is marked by just such a preoccupation with method, foundations and theory, a framing-up of problems, situations, the world, even, in a scientific manner (*Ge-Stell*, "enframing"). In "Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics" (1962), he unpacks this preoccupation through the Greek word *mathesis*, which means "calculation" (from *mathema*, "science, knowledge"), but more importantly, "learning" (from the root of *mathema: manthanein*, "to learn"; Heidegger, 1982). (I'm reminded of Plato's narrative in the *Meno* of the slave-boy who learns that he already knows how to do maths [Plato, 2005, pp. 115-124; 82b-86b]. For Plato, this exemplifies learning as remembering, or literally, "un-forgetting": *anamnesis*.¹⁰) We can read this etymology straightforwardly: Learning leads to knowledge. Or less so: Learning works with what we know. To put it another way, learning is about framing up what we already know. (The same goes for teaching; for example, when

⁹ For Rogers on learning, see his "Significant Learning in Therapy and in Education" (1961, pp. 279-296) and "Student-Centered Teaching as Experienced by a Participant" (1961, pp. 297-313).

¹⁰ On Heidegger's debt to Plato's *Meno*, see Glazebrook (2000, pp. 51-52), and Dallmayr (2007, p. 160).

we reflect on our own experience in order to teach something, our first question is "What do I or would I do in this situation?")

This is how I teach the essay: To frame up the writing tasks students face, I relate them to the institutional history and drives of the university to thematise and ground aims that teachers at faculty usually leave unstated. Two models of academic writing are predominant in higher education, namely, writing as

- a. examination, whereby essays, reports, theses, etc. are increasingly the main mode of assessment, whatever the discipline (see Hoskin, 1982 and 1993);
- b. forensics, whereby writing is seen as making a case supported by evidence (see Russell, 2002).

The model of writing as examination reinforces the importance of writing for students—albeit writing that answers to the demand for end-stopped teaching and learning: point-first expository writing. Such writing is easier to read and grade, and fits well with the model of writing as forensics. Writing as forensics emphasises

- a. positionality: that academic arguments are exercises in positioning vis-à-vis other arguments, in other words, they are 'distributive' (see Maher & Tetreault, 2001, pp. 164, 203); and
- b. citationality: that academic authority is borrowed from other academics, in other words, it is 'distributed' (see Butler, 1993, p. 225).

On this model, academic writing is a matter of staking out our territory and mapping it relative to other academics'—but defending our own. Students enjoy to discover that they can have an 'opinion' and that they can use others' authority to defend it.

To disclose this frame is eye-opening for students. But learning is more than just an exercise in framing-up; it is about discovering something new for ourselves. Recall Heidegger (2007) on "personal development" (*Eigenentwicklung*): "One only possesses truth in a genuine sense when one has made it one's own" (p. 15). Enabling students to "make their truth their own" constitutes the second step in letting-learn— and the one that would no doubt have been more important for Heidegger, namely, letting learning happen, which is letting students learn how to be (*Gelassenheit*).¹¹ What this might mean, Heidegger (1982) gives us a clue in "Modern Science", albeit couched in Heideggerese:

Genuine learning is therefore a most remarkable "taking", a taking where the taker takes only what they basically already have. Teaching corresponds to *this* learning. Teaching is a giving, an offering; but what is offered in teaching is not the learnable, for the student is only instructed to take for themselves what they already have. If the student just takes up what is offered, they do not learn. They

¹¹ For connection between teaching and *Gelassenheit* (translated as "releasement"), see Gibbs (2004, pp. 161-162).

come to learn only when they experience what they take as something they themselves genuinely already have. True learning occurs only where the taking of what one already has is a *self-giving* [*Sichselbstgeben*] and is experienced as such. (p. 251; translation amended)¹²

The last two sentences are key. The first: "They come to learn only when they experience what they take [from the teacher] as something they themselves genuinely already have": this much we know already. Students learn on the basis of what they know but don't know that they know: the 'unknown knowns' of their learning situation, as it were.¹³ In "Heidegger Teaching: An Analysis and Interpretation of Pedagogy", Dawn Riley fleshes out this idea. She thinks of the teaching and learning situation as the inhabiting of—or "dwelling in", to use Heidegger's terminology—a world of shared concern or *Mitwelt* ("with-world"). It is on the basis of meaning "established" between teacher and learner that new meaning is "discovered" by the learner (Riley, 2009, p. 13).

¹² See Heidegger (2005, pp. 159-164) and Heidegger (2010, pp. 25-26).

¹³ For the permutations of Donald Rumsfeld's 'philosophizing' on knowns and unknowns, see Žižek (2004, p. 95).

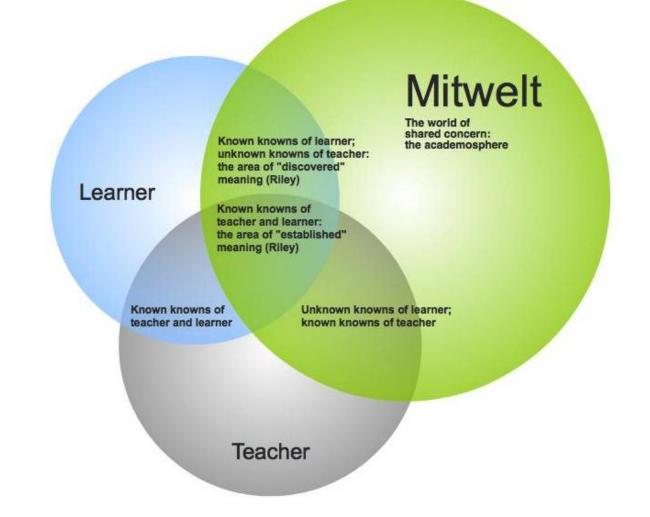


Figure 2. The unknown knowns of teaching and learning. (N.B. The segments that don't intersect represent the respective 'unknown unknowns' of the 'sets'—teacher, learner, *Mitwelt*; for example, the non-academic segment of the teacher's personal life remains an unknown unknown to the learner, and vice versa.)

To understand what it is to "establish" and "discover" meaning, we can think of the teaching and learning situation in one-to-ones in terms of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which conceives of the individual's environment as made up of nested systems: a microsystem (immediate environment), a mesosystem (connections with other immediate environments), the exosystem (environments that less immediately affect the individual), and the macrosystem (cultural context) and chronosystem (historical context).

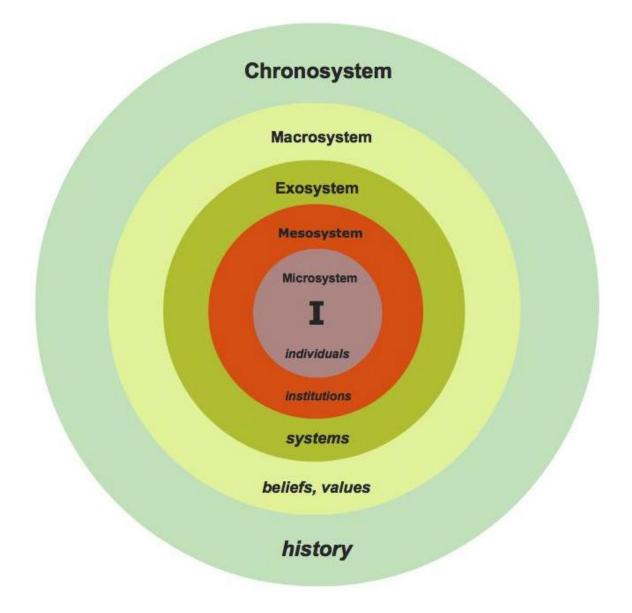


Figure 3. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

The teacher and learner work together to reflect on the learner's situation, in terms of individual and institutional drives or demands, affects or effects:

- 1. as individuals and as students (the microsystem),
- 2. in a cohort, discipline, faculty or institution (the mesosystem), but also
- 3. as citizens, as people (the exosystem), and
- 4. as human beings (the macrosystem and chronosystem).

This is how I teach academic citationality, as I have suggested: as an authority game, in which to cite is a move by which we borrow the authority of a fellow academic to establish our right to speak on a given subject—and position ourselves as players of the game relative to those who have already spoken on that subject. Of course, we have to cite 'correctly', typographically and ethically speaking, but this practice only makes sense in the context of the distributed authority that is at work in the institution

as mesosystem. (We know, of course, that it varies by discipline, faculty and institution, even if the over-arching 'rules' broadly conform). Citation, then, is an 'authority effect'—by analogy with what Roland Barthes (1986) calls a "reality effect", by which something counts as "real" (p. 148). It is a mechanism by which writing, for example, counts as authorititative. This is one authority game among the many students must play—but one that is always anxious and often underexplained. We can establish common ground with students because we also play this game: for us, it is a known known; for them, an unknown known—until they understand the position they play in it.

Moreover, it is on such a basis of meaning "established" between teacher and learner, as Riley (2009) puts it, that new meaning is "discovered" by the learner (p. 13). Hence the second key sentence from Heidegger (1982) on genuine learning: "True learning occurs only where the taking of what one already has is a *self-giving* [*Sichselbstgeben*] and is experienced as such" (p. 251). "Self-giving"? Heidegger here alludes to the Delphic "know thyself" (Greek: *gnōthi sauton*) that Socrates made the maxim of philosophical reflection (Plato, 2005, p. 18; 164d-165b). The teacher knows some of the unknowns that populate the mesosytem of the institution and the systems beyond (these are his or her knowns, unknown to the student), but doesn't know others (these are the student's own unknowns). It is for the student to discover those and thereby find—or make—their own place in the academosphere. To do so, to use the language of higher education, is to become an independent learner, to shift their "locus of control" to become more independent (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott, & Mianzo, 2006), that is, intrinsically motivated or "self-directed" learners (Miller, Cassie, & Drake, 1990, p. 67).

This is why I teach argumentation as a matter of positionality, whereby arguments are exercises in positioning vis-à-vis other arguments. One strategy is the three '-ise' ('eyes') method of positioning an argument: personalise (why you?); historicise (why now?); localise (why here?). This is one way I challenge students to take a stake in their own learning—and thereby to find a place in the academosphere.

With such a move, we come full circle to what I called 'making present': the idea that to think through a problem is to make it present in passionate, active reflection, which implies that we are not learning 'nowhere' but learning 'now-here', as it were. According to Arendt (1971), this is what happened in Heidegger's lectures and seminars—and what I believe is possible in one-to-ones:

It was technically decisive that, for instance, Plato was not talked about and his theory of Ideas expounded; rather for an entire semester a single dialogue was pursued and subjected to question step by step, until the time-honoured doctrine had disappeared to make room for a set of *problems of immediate and urgent relevance* [emphasis added]. Today this sounds quite familiar, because nowadays so many proceed in this way; but no one did so before Heidegger. (p. 1)

Making present implies thinking—and learning—that takes its own path (a *Denkweg*, or *Lernweg* even), that remains 'in the moment' ('present'). This sounds mystical, but it need not be: it is learning that is not end-stopped, that allows the time and space for learning to happen. Arendt (1971) again:

Heidegger never thinks "about" something; he thinks something. ... This thinking may set tasks for itself; it may deal with "problems"; it naturally, indeed always, has something specific with which it is particularly occupied or, more precisely, by which it is specifically aroused; but one cannot say that it has a goal. It is unceasingly active, and even the laying down of paths itself is conducive to opening up a new dimension of thought, rather than to reaching a goal sighted beforehand and guided thereto. (p. 1)

It is being present, 'presencing' even, which Claus Scharmer (2009) defines as "sens[ing] and connect[ing] with a future possibility that is seeking to emerge" (p. 8). This is what it is truly to let learning happen—and to let the learner own it (remembering that Heidegger's word for truth is *Ereignis*: "happening" or less literally, "en-owning").

Co-construction as letting-teach

What, then, can this teach us about the teacher's role in one-to-ones? Over and above to offer what they have learnt from their own experience in the form of skills, it is to draw out of learners the lessons of their experience, so that they can return to their coursework with a better understanding of their place in the institution and as more self-directed—or "self-giving"—learners, to use the Heideggerese (1982, p. 251). This existential practice Michael Bonnett (2002) calls "empathetic challenging" (p. 241). Heidegger would, I think, have preferred empathetic 'education'; or better, 'existential' education (bearing in mind that the Latin *educare* means "bring forth"); or simply, "letting-learn" (see Heidegger, 1977, p. 10).¹⁴

Presumably, if the teaching and learning is to be co-constructed, the teacher must learn something too. And if teaching is to be about "letting-learn", about letting learners learn how to learn (and how to be), the converse must also be true: Learning is about letting-teach, about letting teachers learn how to teach (and how to be). We teachers can certainly learn from teaching from our experience and from the experience of our students. But beyond that, we can learn about the content and nature of teaching, as Heidegger suggests in "The New Task of the University" (1934): It is not about the transmission of knowledge to students; it is about letting students learn and enabling them to be more than students. "*Teaching* [emphasis added] doesn't mean: the mere transmission of knowledge discovered when- and wherever. Teaching means: *letting*-

¹⁴ For an alternative 'ontological' reading of Heidegger on education, drawing on Plato's ideal of *paideia* from the "myth of the cave" in the *Republic* (1974, pp. 317-322; 514a-518b), see Thomson (2005), which draws on Heidegger's "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" (1998a, pp. 155-182).

learn [emphasis added]. ... Teaching means: bringing students to the point where they no longer remain students" (2000a, p. 306; my translation).

Furthermore, by way of a last word from Heidegger, the relation of teaching and research is reversed; teaching is "primordial" (*ursprünglich*):

Hitherto it was thought that teaching had to arise out of research—but the groundlessness of research has made teaching aimless. Not research—and thereby also teaching, but rather teaching—and *in* [emphasis added] teaching—researching. Teaching is the *primordial* [emphasis added] task. (2000a, pp. 305-306; my translation)

Heidegger on teaching: The key texts

- 1. "The Age of the World Picture". In Off the Beaten Track (2002c, pp. 57-85).
- 2. Being and Truth (2010).
- 3. "Heidegger on the Art of Teaching" (2002b).
- 4. Introduction to Phenomenological Research (2005).
- 5. "Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics". In *Basic Writings* (1982, pp. 247-282). An excerpt from *What Is a Thing*? (1967, pp. 66-108).
- 6. "Die Deutsche Universität" [The German University]. In *Gesamtausgabe: I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910-1976.* (2000a, pp. 285-307).
- 7. "Plato's Doctrine of Truth". In Pathmarks (1998a, pp. 155-182).
- 8. "Science and University Reform: On the Nature of the University and Academic Study". In *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* (2000b, pp. 3-5, 173-181).
- 9. "The Thinker as Poet". In *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971, pp. 1-14) and *Martin Heidegger: Philosophical and Political Writings* (2003, pp. 19-23).
- 10. "Toward a Philosophical Orientation for Academics". In *Becoming Heidegger:* On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927 (2007, pp. 14-16).
- 11. "Traditional Language and Technological Language" (1998b).
- 12. What Is a Thing? (1967).
- 13. What Is Called Thinking? (1968).
- 14. "What Is Called, What Calls for Thinking?" In *Martin Heidegger: Philosophical and Political Writings* (2003, pp. 80-96).

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