

Thinking-in-concert

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In this essay, I examine the concept of thinking in Hannah Arendt's writings. Arendt's interest in the experience of thinking allowed her to develop a concept of thinking that is distinct from other forms of mental activity such as cognition and problem solving. For her, thinking is an unending, unpredictable and destructive activity without fixed outcomes. Her understanding of thinking is distinguished from other approaches to thinking that equate it with, for example, problem solving or knowledge. Examples of a 'problem-solving', skills-based approach to thinking that place a premium on behavioural change are drawn from the context of the prison. I offer an alternative example of thinking with others from my philosophy classes in the prison. I draw upon Arendt's insights to develop a concept of 'thinking-in-concert'. Whilst Arendt believes that thinking must be a solitary activity, I argue that the concept of 'thinking-in-concert' helps to capture experiences of thinking with others in a manner that is more hesitant and provisional than some descriptions of communities of enquiry or democratic education. The embodied presence of others matters when 'thinking-in-concert'. I describe this approach as educational as well as conversational. This helps to communicate the way in which we turn towards others and may be pulled up short by them as we strive to think together or experience moments of conversion or insight whilst enjoying the ordinary activity of talking with others. This concept may help us to understand the difference between the experience of thinking, teaching and learning when we are physically present to one another and the experience of virtual learning or teaching.

Keywords: conversation; subjectification; thinking with others; thinking skills; Hannah Arendt; prison education; experience

Introduction: thinking-together

Thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think. (Arendt 1978, 99)

No thinker has ever entered into another thinker's solitude. (Heidegger 1968, 169)

Educational policy, research and practice continue to place considerable emphasis on the importance of critical thinking and thinking skills. Whilst such terms have a good deal of purchase in contemporary educational discourses, they do not capture what Arendt understands to be of value in the activity of thinking, an activity that, in her view, abjures results, conclusions and outcomes. Thinking is not to be equated with problem solving.

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This is not to say that activities such as problem solving, ratiocination, learning, knowing and reflection are not valuable but rather that they are conceptually distinct from thinking as she understands it. In *Life of the Mind* (1978), she observes that although philosophers have written and spoken a good deal about thinking, often drawing delicate epistemological distinctions, they have seldom commented on the *experience* of thinking. This is an interesting proposition for educators who are often asked to provide 'learning outcomes' but who seldom have the opportunity to communicate the experienced quality of the educational encounter, an encounter that tends to be undertaken in a collective setting. This essay seeks to examine what it means to think together. The example of prison education is mobilised to draw into relief the way in which 'thinking' has been presented as a skill set that can be taught, that offers predictable outcomes, that seeks to 'problem-solve' and is closely tied to the formation of prescribed identities but pays more attention to the 'how' than the experience of thinking. Such approaches to thinking are problematised in the first half of the essay. Thereafter, I am interested both in pursuing Arendt's conjecture that thinking is an unpredictable and destructive activity without results and her interest in the experience of thinking. I consider this in the context of philosophy seminars within the prison, describing what we do as 'thinking-in-concert'. This concept of 'thinking-in-concert' constitutes a creative and speculative extension of her writing, allowing us to reflect upon a relationship that puzzled her, the relation between speaking and thinking. To communicate the importance of the embodied presence of others when thinking-together in educational settings, I argue that we ought to understand 'thinking-in-concert' in the context of education as 'conversational', in the sense that we turn to one another as we come to think together.

Context

In response to a climate that claims to cherish 'thinking' but equates it oftentimes with a methodological and generic approach to problem solving, sometimes with an explicit goal of behaviour modification, I am interested in thinking with Hannah Arendt about two key questions: what is thinking? Is thinking-together possible? The discursive approach of the philosophy seminar brings with it an experience of thinking-together which is puzzling. Our classes in the prison seldom constitute virtuosic displays of knowledge. Rather, we stumble in our efforts to understand the ideas that we encounter in the texts and in our conversations with one another. This experience of thinking-together is not the same as the thinking I experience when I withdraw into my study, and my solitude, to think. In contradistinction to the sometimes hesitant, sometimes energised play of voices in my classes as we strive to think together, I have watched with curiosity and concern the growing emphasis upon 'thinking skills', the purported link between such skills and morality, the implicit normalisation and psychologisation at play in techniques of subjectification, including citizenship education, and, like many other educators and philosophers, the rise in rather empty 'order-words' such as efficiency, effectiveness, excellence, alongside an increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes, the proliferation of generic methodologies and the substitution of online and blended models of learning for face-to-face contact as though the former were equivalent to the latter. I teach philosophy within the context of a prison environment and a teacher education college, neither of which is immune from these trends; however, the primary focus of this essay is prison education.

Arendt's methodological approach acknowledges Walter Benjamin's image of the pearl diver who retrieves thought fragments to illuminate our present. As a consequence, the multiplicity of ways in which she approaches the question of thinking are not intended to offer a systematic or singular response to the question 'what is thinking'? Arendt would like us to draw more careful distinctions between the concepts of knowing, inquiring, understanding, cognising, ratiocinating, problem solving and thinking. She wrote a good deal about 'thinking', yet her understanding of thinking as a solitary activity appears to preclude the idea that we might 'think together'. Much of what she writes is inspired by her astonishment at Eichmann's 'thoughtlessness', so in certain respects, thinking for her is bound to the exercise of the ethical imagination and creates the conditions for judgement. However, she remains suspicious of the tendency to seek control and to eliminate unpredictability in the contemporary world, so her understanding of the relationship between thinking and ethical imagination is always mediated by the conviction that the 'who' that each of us is precludes categorisation. Nonetheless, strains of her work indicate a more fundamental relationship between others and thinking. With this in mind, I begin by examining one approach to 'thinking' in the prison context and then examine some of the ways through which we might begin to understand the practice and experience of thinking-together. The first example offered conflates, in my view, thinking with problem solving. Although 'thinking skills' courses in prisons claim to empower the individual to make decisions, these are often curtailed by forms of assessment that evaluate whether or not the person has indeed made the correct choices. Even more importantly for Arendt, the focus is on 'how' to think rather than the experience of thinking, or what provokes us to think. Creating educational opportunities that value thinking in its own right is particularly difficult in a total institution when the primary concern tends to be reoffending statistics; however, Ecclestone and Hayes and others argue that this approach is being adopted in contexts other than the prison. In the second case, I draw from Biesta's and Vansieleghem's writings on democratic education and philosophy with children in order to consider some of the ways in which thinking together might be understood.

What is thinking?

They don't want you to think, they want to think for you
Who is "they"?

All of them, the system

(The words of a man from my philosophy class in prison)

Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) claim that during the last decade, we have witnessed a dangerous rise in therapeutic education. The shift towards teaching life skills, communication, personal development and social and emotional skills stretches from prisons to primary schools to the workplace. Interventions, often benevolent in their origins, draw into relief the fraught relationship between education, thinking, subjectification and socialisation, alerting us to the intensification of practices in education that seek neither to impart knowledge nor to provoke thinking but rather to transmit skills for living. Two aspects of those 'thinking skills' courses that are oriented towards behavioural outcomes are of particular concern in this regard: they make thinking a formalised outcome-driven procedure and they pre-define the self that one should become, albeit at times implicitly through modes of evaluation.

Courses devised by psychologists called 'Enhanced Thinking Skills' (ETS) and 'Reasoning and Rehabilitation' (R&R) with acronyms such as STOP (Straight Thinking on Probation) or courses mobilising order words such as 'Think First' are offered to prisoners to address their 'socio-cognitive deficits' and 'offending behaviour'. These programmes that were often initiated with a progressive and liberal ethos to counter the post-Martinson despair that 'nothing works' (Martinson 1974) have increasingly come to replace education in the humanities in countries such as Canada despite evidence that a liberal arts education can be more effective in preventing recidivism (Duguid 1998, 2000). 'Thinking skills' or 'cognitive-behavioural skills' courses are perceived by many prisoners as implicitly coercive, in part because of their focus on what are labelled as individual deficits with apparent indifference to life story, wider milieu, environment or context. The identification of deficits in thinking is presented as a matter of individual failure, and thinking is presented as an activity that one could do correctly if taught. Here, we find an implicit appeal to Socrates' conviction that one could not do wrong knowingly – one would not do wrong if one could 'think straight', ergo all prisoners have cognitive deficits. Nonetheless, we see little of Socrates' humility in such matters, nor his caution that we must understand the difference between divine wisdom and human wisdom, human wisdom being necessarily limited and partial. The use of medical terminology such as 'treatment manager' rather than tutor seeks to convey the impartiality and neutrality of interventions that are prescriptive in motivation. Out of curiosity, I asked the men why they come to my philosophy class in prison when we often find ourselves in discussion about issues of moral and ethical significance whilst they resist the 'invitation' to attend classes on anger management. One man said 'You don't tell us what to think'. He articulated his belief, which was supported by others in the group, that not only should the teacher not dictate how someone ought to think, but that being told how and what to think also meant being told how to be and what one should be like.

Arguably, in 'thinking skills' courses, one discovers that there is not only the correct solution to the life problem with which one is presented, but also that the kind of person that one ought to become is prescribed in advance. In the prison, thinking skills interventions are aimed at behavioural outcomes. In light of this, we might do well to listen to Buber who notes that 'As soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuinely independent character; they will not let themselves be educated, or rather, they do not like the idea that somebody wants to educate them' (1947, 133). Falshaw et al. who were somewhat critical of the effectiveness of thinking skills programmes in the UK, speculated 'that the motivation of prisoners may have become more 'instrumental' after 1996, as they were made aware that attending a cognitive treatment programme could help to reduce their time in prison' (2003, 3).

Proponents of ETS and R&R will argue that they simply offer participants techniques of thinking to empower them to make choices. Some will even point to the long Stoic heritage of such an approach to thinking. The formalism, problem-solving orientation, proceduralism and quantitative evaluation of the programmes, as well as the deficit model underpinning them, reveal the normalising focus of these programmes, one which is readily perceived by prisoners who will be presenting before parole boards and the courts. In an article comparing R&R and ETS, Blud and Travers draw upon the writings of Porporino and Fabiano to explain how the programmes are based on

... the same model of change. Anti-social behaviour is explained in terms of a range of socio-cognitive deficits which can significantly impair how someone reasons, how he/she views the world and him/herself, how well he/she understands people, what he/she values, and how he/she reacts to problems. (Porporino and Fabiano 2000, 13)

It is suggested that offenders fall into and continue to maintain a disorganised, antisocial lifestyle because they are 'unaware of how their thinking is propelling them into difficulties, and... are unable to extricate themselves since they lack the skills to do so' (Porporino and Fabiano 2000, 13). Blud and Travers add that 'offending behaviour should be seen as "underpinned by an anti-social self-narrative that the individual has developed over the life-course"' (2001, 253) and the problems that the individual faces stem from the nature of their thinking, their distorted cognition, the need to transform their thinking, their perception and hence their reactions. A quotation from Ross, Fabiano and Ross sums up this failure to reason critically on the part of prisoners:

Their thinking is often exceptionally shallow and narrow; they construe their world in absolute terms, failing to appreciate the subtleties and complexities of social interactions. Their thinking is concrete, rigid, uncreative and maladaptive. Many fail to consider that their thinking, their behavior, and their attitudes contribute to the problems they experience ... They simply have not acquired an adequate repertoire of reasoning or problem-solving skills which would enable them to respond in alternative ways to interpersonal and economic problems. (1988, 45)

The model proposed in response to these 'deficits' unwittingly feeds into the kind of image of sovereign self-mastery that is anathema to Arendt. It emphasises, in quasi-Cartesian form, thinking processes that are premised upon distorted perception of the world without reflection upon what it may mean for someone, a prisoner, to be an embodied being within a stressed and intensely structured environment. Techniques and strategies are offered as though one can bracket the lived environment of the prison, and as if the mind has no relation to body, history, others or context. A curious dissonance exemplifies the oddity of the marriage of conflicting aims such as seeking to promote autonomy and sociality in a total institution. These dissonances underpin the often absurd logic of the operational structure of the prison.

The above is a rather stark example of an image of thinking equated with problem solving (in this case resolving the problem of the individual) in which thinking becomes a tool to reduce reoffending statistics. The singular humanity of each individual is occluded, as are the opportunities for dynamic and relational responsiveness to others and one's milieu. Delivering cognitive skills courses, whilst ignoring the impoverished relational and material environments that institutions like prisons are, seems a rather artificial exercise that conceives of prisoners as Cartesian minds rather than embodied thinking beings. Clark et al. acknowledge the problem with the deficit model when they write 'Many prisoners undoubtedly feel that their lives are out of control and have given up on constructive ways of reflecting on their past and planning their futures. However, it is unhelpful if tutors give the impression that prisoners are incapable of rational and productive thought' (2006, 13). In such cases, it seems as though 'thinking does not arise out of reason's need but has an existential root in unhappiness' (Arendt 1978, 153).

However, this tendency to mobilise education and thinking in order to support normalising modes of subjectification that are bound to acceptable practices of identity formation is also evidenced in more benign forms in other educational settings. For instance, behavioural management in schools, if it focuses predominantly on the

'behaviour' rather than the 'child', can come to lose sight of the child and the relational nature of education in its efforts to correct behaviour. Rather than arguing over whether or not education ought to involve character, moral formation and socialisation or the extent to which education will be resisted once it is seen to be instrumentalised in the service of alternative ends, I want to continue to think about the experience of thinking, including thinking together.

Socialisation, subjectification and thinking

Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. (Emerson 1946, 52)

If we turn to Vansieleghem (2005, 2011) and Biesta (2009, 2011), we find a different emphasis, but their concern is similar to mine as I have outlined above. Thinking is instrumentalised in the service of, for example, a restrictive understanding of moral education or democratic education rather than an experience to be valued, a condition for humanity and a 'need' of human beings. Biesta, in particular, emphasises the *humanitas* that for Arendt is only possible when humans come together in what Biesta calls 'being-together-in-plurality' (2010, 558). This runs counter to other socialising approaches to education that focus on competences, dispositions and capacities rather than the experience of 'acting-in-concert', creating through one another's presence a fragile web of relationships that, just as thinking disappears once someone turns to another activity, vanishes as soon as people disperse. This may even be the case in approaches to education that emphasise collaboration and community. Commenting on the appeal of philosophy with children, Biesta says:

[it] seems to lie in the claim that it can help children and young people to develop skills for thinking critically, reflectively and reasonably. By locating the acquisition of such skills within communities of enquiry, the further claim is that an engagement with philosophy can foster the development of moral reflection and sensitivity and of social and democratic skills more generally. (2011, 306)

However, he suggests that much of what is called a community of inquiry follows a model of scientific rather than philosophical inquiry. Moreover, approaches to democratic education tend to be centred upon developing competencies, dispositions and skills in individuals in what Biesta calls elsewhere the 'psychologisation' of education, rather than characterising the space of education in terms of its individuating, relational and collective dimensions. In a lecture entitled 'Good Education', Biesta takes issue with the shift towards this kind of socialisation, saying 'it puts too much emphasis on "moulding" individuals according to particular templates and provides too little opportunity for ways of being that question and challenge such templates' (2009, 9). It is not the socialisation function of education that is resisted so much as a socialisation function that prescribes acceptable forms of identity and relationality, or which portrays the value of education in terms of its serviceability in meeting other ends.

Vansieleghem argues that 'thinking cannot be acquired in conventional ways; it is not a capacity for reflexive problem-solving or a skill or a strategy; rather it is a search for meaning' (2005, 21). Her reading of Arendt depicts thinking as an activity that involves the experience of perplexity, paralysis and responsiveness to novelty arising out of an encounter. This is not the same as cognition that operates within pre-established patterns,

responding to what exists. Arendt's primary metaphor for thinking is the wind. The wind touches us whilst withstanding our appropriative grasping, remaining invisible, its presence sensed only as long as it continues to blow. The wind, like thought, does not exist outside its own exercise. This activity, at once creative and destructive, has no goal or destination, not even that of knowledge. In this respect, Arendt follows Kant's conceptualisation of reason as the speculative need that seeks to transcend the limits of knowledge. It is the transgressive power of reason or thought that is of most importance when the greatest risk lies in simply confirming what *is*.

Referring to John Dewey and Matthew Lipman, Vansieleghem writes, 'Governing the self refers on this account to a process of seeking increasing control over one's own thinking and action, and over the environment one lives in' (2005, 22). Focusing on higher order thinking skills can buy into a model of the self that equates autonomy with control; even where it is undertaken with others in a community of inquiry, the social skills and dispositions are ego-centred with little of the hesitancy, perplexity, discomfort and provisionality that accompanies the experience of thinking, in particular if the motive for dialogue is to arrive at agreement. Although Biesta and Vansieleghem do not read Arendt as I do in terms of 'thinking-in-concert', they are equally critical of approaches to a socialising approach to education that promotes only certain norms alongside an individuating approach to education that has a particular kind of subject formation in mind. When they speak of Arendt's concept of action, they do so to reframe education in terms of action and the idea of beginning and initiative; others take up our initiatives in a manner that are unpredictable and exceed our control. Whilst I think that Biesta and Vansieleghem and others are correct to describe the importance of being-together-in-plurality and to reimagine the question of beginnings in education, they do not examine sufficiently the experience of 'thinking-together' or 'thinking-in-concert'.

We can begin by refiguring our understanding of thinking-with-others-in-plurality as a modality of existence – it is an exercise in thinking but it is also a way of being. For Arendt, if called upon to justify thinking when confronted with the demand to account for it or explain it, could well have responded, as she does in *The Life of the Mind* when she appeals to Wittgenstein:

He asks, 'What does man think for? Does man think because he has found that it works? – Because he thinks it advantageous to think?' That would be like asking 'Does he bring his children up because he has found it works'. Still it must be admitted that 'we do sometimes think because it has been found to work', implying by his italics that this is only 'sometimes' the case. Hence: 'How can we find out why man thinks?' Whereupon he answers: 'It often happens that we only become aware of the important facts, if we suppress the question 'why'; and then in the course of our investigation these facts lead us to an answer.' It is in a deliberate effort to suppress the question, Why do we think? that I shall deal with the question, What makes us think? (1978, 125)

To ask 'What is thinking for?' is absurd as asking 'What is life for?'. To ask someone to justify engaging in the activity of thinking is as ridiculous as asking them why they bother living. For Arendt, such questions are the wrong questions. As Spinoza states, man thinks.

By working with descriptions and accounts of the experience of practices, we can begin to frame both our understanding of what 'thinking-together' involves and what arouses us to think. This does not displace the experience of solitary thinking but persists alongside it in an interstitial space that hovers between the public domain of appearance and the private domain of thought. 'Thinking-together' is distinguished from ordinary

modalities of conversation about, say, football or fashion or technical problem-solving activities because the nature of the engagement demands of those present an openness to re-examining fundamental beliefs, values, interpretations and ideas and a mediating object that retains sufficient ambiguity and arouses sufficient perplexity to sustain an open discussion or engagement. As we engage in this practice, we do not do so in our capacity as private (thinking) individuals, consumers, citizens, wards of the State but as 'beings-together-in-plurality' in a world that long precedes our arrival and that will long outlast our departure. This is where the work of Arendt is particularly helpful as she describes the human condition and the conditions for humanity without entering the fraught terrain of claims and counterclaims about identity and human nature.

Thinking is a 'solitary business'

In solitude, for company. (Auden 'Lauds' 1971, 116)

As she reflects upon the experience of the thinker through a number of her writings, Arendt tends to describe thinking as a solitary experience that involves withdrawal from the world in order to enter into dialogue with ourselves – what she calls, following Socrates, the two-in-one. More importantly, she adds that it is an activity that constantly undoes itself; in short, it is destructive. Arendt remains relatively faithful to this image of thinking as destructive, critical, worldless and solitary, but a strain of ambivalence runs through her depiction of the solitary nature of thought, in particular when she thinks about Socrates, Kant, Jaspers and Lessing. 'Thinking, though a solitary business, depends on others to be possible at all' (1968, 40). It is because the mental activity of thought requires temporary withdrawal from the world of sensual things, that it is a solitary affair – I cannot know or experience what other thinks – yet her commitment to plurality and human togetherness unbinds thinking from its solitude. Again, writing of Socrates, she says:

These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you full awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with one another. (Arendt 1978, 175)

Arendt's separation of thinking and acting (speaking) in *The Human Condition* becomes less absolute in later work. In a letter to Heidegger, she asks, 'How are saying and speaking related? Out of thinking, it seems to me, comes saying but not speaking' (Arendt and Heidegger 2004, 174). She raises this question in *The Life of the Mind* again, responding this time by saying 'Thinking, however, in contrast to cognitive activities that may use thinking as one of their instruments, needs speech not only to sound out and become manifest; it needs it to be activated at all' (Arendt 1978, 121), although she soon returns to the image of thought as withdrawal and silent dialogue.

As I wonder whether or not thinking-together is an oxymoron, I find myself thinking of Cavell's turn to Wittgenstein to convey his sense that we do not know our way about. Still, 'in philosophising, perhaps only of a certain kind, there is the odd feature that two can enter unknown territories together' (Cavell 2010, 367). The timbre of another's voice, the way he or she shifts in a chair, sighs, leans forward to listen or sometimes backward in scepticism make the experience of speaking and thinking with others different from the kind of exercise of thinking that I engage in behind closed doors. Even the most solitary

and seemingly sovereign of thinkers, Descartes, invites the reader to accompany him in his meditations. There is a quality of experience to thinking-together afforded more readily within the climes of those institutional settings that allow us to temporarily suspend the cares of the world and to come together both to learn and to think. This is distinct from the experience of watching a film, looking at a painting or reading a book, activities that also allow us to move imaginatively into the world of another. Speaking from the perspective of the teacher, there are many moments at which I found myself speechless, sometimes from amazement, sometimes when I realise that there is nothing to say – ‘I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned’, to quote Wittgenstein (2009, 217). Sometimes this occurs when speaking would mark the re-appropriation of an insight or disclosure. At moments, I have simply lost my bearings. Moments of surprise, akin to Platonic wonder, have occurred most often in those least schooled of environments in which I work when participants are less concerned with pleasing me, the purported figure of authority, than with thinking. Such experiences are not the same as when, in solitude, I allow my imagination to go visiting, where the idea of an enlarged mentality appeals to a solely anticipated communication with others.

If we uncouple learning from knowledge, then Cavell (2010) makes the observation that ‘learning outruns teaching’ and that ‘the time of learning is unpredictable’ (122). Just as the time of learning is unpredictable, the time of its arising is unforeseeable. Gadamer calls such moments being ‘pulled up short’ (2004, 270). One of the men in my classes describes the phenomenon of somebody, lost in thought, falling behind the group walking in the prison yard, as ‘having a moment’. One cannot tell when such moments will arise and they befall the teacher as much as the student. The tendency to approach the teaching of skills, competencies and dispositions as discrete and generic rather than embedded in practices diminishes the vitality and passion of the exercise of thinking. Arendt invites us to attend to the phenomenological experience of thinking rather than to any increase in knowledge or understanding of a specific question or topic. It is at that point that it becomes easier to understand what Arendt means when she said Heidegger did not think about something, he thought something.

Looking to such points of ambivalence allows other pathways to open up through her thinking. Heidegger, like Socrates, showed us his thinking. As he taught, those present and those who read those lectures could witness his thought-trains as he spoke aloud with vigour and uncompromising commitment to thinking itself. Gadamer writes:

One need only recall the way Heidegger approached the lectern – the excited and almost angry seriousness with which his thought was ventured, the way he glanced askance at the window, his eyes only brushing over the audience, and the way his voice was pushed to its very limit in all of the excitement. (1994, 66)

In this way, the students draw close to the experience of his process of thinking by being with him as he thought, as opposed to being persuaded by the force of his argumentation. In *What is called thinking?*, Heidegger (1968) finds a shared philological origin between thinking and thanking, as remembrance keeps and gathers, moving from representational thought that thinks about something to what Arendt calls ‘thinking something’. The movement of thinking is a gathering and preservation from oblivion. But the experience of thinking requires at some point, Arendt keeps suggesting, withdrawal from the world and the vivacity and force of present perception. In the case of Heidegger, thinking in action is witnessed but the audience remain spectators, listening.

Thinking-together in a seminar situation occupies a peculiar terrain between the sheer experience of thinking, that most private of activities which involves, says Arendt, an experience of the dialogue with self as two-in-one, and the exposure of oneself in the public domain. Minds need to talk to think together. The metaphysical myths of a disembodied world of thought are dismantled. What is marked here is not the easy facility of collaborative forms of inquiry but the hesitant disclosure of the movement of thinking in the presence of others that remains responsive to the existence of those others. Witnessing the experience of thinking by a master of thinking, like Heidegger, who performs thinking itself, allows thinking to be made manifest in speech, but this has a different tenor from the experience of thinking-together, although the latter may be inspired by the 'path-marks' of such thinkers.

This is simply what we do

Arendt's famous remark 'Thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to be listened to' (1978, 99), which begins this essay, seems at odds with many of her comments about thinking. How can we come to understand the relation between thinking, speaking and listening which seems so integral to many practitioners' and students' experiences of education? One day I asked the men in one of my philosophy classes in prison why they come to philosophy. 'As opposed to sitting in the cell with a nice cup of tea and a cigarette', one said. 'Yes', I replied. I had been wondering what it was that we were doing together, co-negotiating our themes and thinkers for discussion, and arguing with each other each week without clear and prescribed outcomes. One of the men wrote a reflective piece for me in response. The following are excerpts from it:

Like the others who decided to attend the class I was curious enough to turn up, but I also suspected that like so many enterprises within the prison it might be just another way of introducing some sociological indoctrination via a simplified and childish moralistic reduction of genuine philosophy. Prisoners generally expect to be patronised. Because most prisoners are from a similar social background, there is a tendency to assume that they have uniform values, dispositions and interests. It is also very convenient for the evangelist or proselytiser to overlook individuality in order to accommodate the sweeping generalisations of their prejudicial assertions.

What those who attend a philosophy class have in common is a curiosity about the true nature of the world. Interests and discussions can range from phenomena with a direct personal impact to astronomical and eschatological theorising. The reason anyone attends philosophy classes or reads philosophical texts is as corny as it gets. It's about enlightenment, and we all want to be enlightened. I have been attending a weekly philosophy class for about five months. The class has become quite popular. The subject matter is as complex and demanding as it would be for any undergraduate. Those who attend interact with this subject matter in different ways. Some enjoy reading and discussing the literature on offer, we may read different pieces. Others prefer to listen and get more involved once the issues discussed become familiar to them. It is a contribution in itself to listen to the discussion with all its unexpected deviations. Though in time because of the informal setting and thought provoking issues, even the most taciturn become involved.

There is a palpable frisson when some ubiquitous assumption is dispelled; this is the most exciting aspect of philosophy and it generally will only manifest through the sort of inquiry that is consistently relevant to the issue under consideration . . . Those that are curious enough to attend philosophy have in common a desire to know more about the world around them, to understand it in a deeper and more meaningful way . . . It often makes me smile to think of a group of men turn up to a philosophy class and sit around a table and wait patiently for the

argument to commence. They might be exchanging small-talk or having an agreeable discussion, and by some tacit acknowledgement the philosophical argument begins in earnest. This Pythonesque event has become a weekly feature of prison life for those who attend. Nietzsche has never had a more varied and off the wall audience.

Whilst many of the current discourses around prison education focus on recidivism, those who share the ethos of the Council of Europe's 1990 document on prison education and the 1985 Whitaker Report on Irish prisons, such as Kevin Warner who was national coordinator of prison education in Ireland for over 30 years, emphasise that the sentence is itself the punishment and opportunities for education ought to be developed with the ethos of adult education. Dewey (2007) warned us against simply seeing education as a preparation for life; rather, education is a process of living and a form of community life. Again, the suspension of the word 'for' enables greater attentiveness to the educational experience itself. This man's writing draws our attention to the diversity of those participating in our classes. This is not so much in terms of personal characteristics as the different ways in which people relate to philosophy and to our world which bring them into this shared space. It would be straightforward to locate a series of learning outcomes from this process; however, it is unlikely that this would capture the experience of thinking in the company of others, present, absent or even dead for many centuries, speaking and listening, without expectation that we will finally resolve the question at hand. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt (1978) describes the aimlessness of thinking and the exhilaration of the exercise of thought. Like thought, speech, though born of the vibrations of flesh, is as intangible as the wind. We sense it but we cannot preserve it. It matters that the voice is heard as it tries to make its way through thought, not quite knowing what it will say and the tonalities and tenors of different voices, interspersed with sighs, shouts and laughter, makes of thinking a concert.

Critical thinking, the world of others and conversational education

A philosophy of mankind is distinguished from a philosophy of man by its insistence on the fact that not Man talking to himself in the dialogue of solitude, but men talking and communicating with each other inhabit the earth. (Arendt 1968, 90)

Whilst thinking requires solitude, it also requires others, but need those others be present or does thinking simply need to anticipate prospective communication? Is thinking always a worldless activity? When I allow my imagination to go visiting, I imagine how I might experience the world from the standpoint of another, and begin to think from that standpoint. In 'Truth and Politics', Arendt writes 'The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion'. This preserves the solitude of the thinking activity whilst resisting the tendency to tyranny and sovereignty of such an experience, and it is one of the reasons why Greene (2000) finds Arendt's writings so helpful as she reflects on the relationship between democracy, imagination and education. As we move into the worlds of works of art, film and literature, we sense how the existence of others might be, not as they experience it, but as we ourselves in their place would, viewing the world from their vantage point. I think here of the day that a man handed me a sheet upon which he had written a reflection in impeccable academic prose that redescribed the 'I' of Descartes' *Meditations* as a fictitious seventeenth-century female philosopher. Because there was no evidence to indicate that

this was not the case, and in deference to Descartes' avowed scepticism, he pronounced, 'Henceforth, I shall refer to the 'I' of the narrator as "she"'. Scanning the piece at that table with him beside me, seeing the light smile on his lips as I looked up in disbelief, I collapsed in speechless laughter. Would my visiting imagination alone have been able to conjure up such a mischievous and brilliant reading of a canonical text? Solitary thinking, thinking as storytelling, understanding, critical thinking and thinking-in-concert are not equivalent activities, although they share certain characteristics, because conditions for their exercise differ. Encounters through the arts help to move us into the perspectives of others, but so too can the unpredictability of a conversation that one sometimes has with students and others. 'Thinking-in-concert' requires the presence of others. The difficulty with this concept from Arendt's perspective is that it seems inappropriate to call such an activity 'thinking' when it meets none of the conditions that she lays out – the de-sensing required for distance, the remembrance necessitated as part of that process, the withdrawal from the world and others. She writes 'No man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualise the dialogue with himself, that is, who lacks the solitude required for all forms of thinking' (Arendt 1978, 90). Must we turn from human affairs when we think? What does this mean for education? Perhaps, there are resources in her writings that help us to better understand 'thinking-in-concert':

To the question, Why are there men rather than Man? Kant would have answered: In order that they may talk to one another. (Arendt 1992, 40)

In a letter to Karl Jaspers, Arendt's husband Heinrich Bleucher says that Jaspers has taken pedagogy to a metaphysical level and that he should like to develop an approach to education called communicative education. Communication can seem too close to communion, with its overtones of agreement. Education might be better reframed as 'conversational'. The difference between ordinary forms of conversation, educational conversation and action as outlined by Arendt is that educational conversation negotiates the terrain between the world as 'objective in-between' and the world as 'subjective-in-between'. 'Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the "common nature" of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object' (1958, 57–58). The cultural artefacts and stories of the world constitute the enduring objective in-between preserved over time that also creates the conditions for the fragile web of relationships that Arendt calls the subjective in-between. She writes of Jaspers that, 'Thinking becomes practical, though not pragmatic. It is a kind of practice between men, not a performance of one individual in his self-chosen solitude' (Arendt 1968, 86). He asks what thoughts and experiences can signify for communication: 'Do they seduce to solitude or arouse to communication?' (1968, 86). Which does Arendt desire? To be seduced to solitude or aroused to communication? Again she returns to the idea that thinking is a matter of the 'two-in-one', that silent dialogue that I have with myself. This persistent refrain may be because of her experience of Eichmann – in times of crisis we have no banisters for our thinking, not even others. Arguably, it is this conviction that there is a relationship between thoughtlessness and evil that leads her ultimately to privilege thinking as withdrawal. Yet, even though Socrates returns home to be with 'the other fellow', he spends his days in the market place engaging people in conversation.

For many, 'conversation', in a philosophical context, is readily associated with Rorty and Oakeshott. If we look to a piece by Oakeshott like 'The voice of poetry in the

conversation of mankind' (1962), we perceive his sensitivity to the curious nature of conversation, specifically philosophical conversation, and the 'difficulty which both men of science and of business have in understanding what philosophy is about and their frequent attempts to transform it into something more familiar to themselves' (1962, 492). His description of conversation in 'The idea of a university' (2004) bears a conceptual affinity to Arendt's conception of thinking as an activity without predetermined conclusion, purpose or utility. We do not ask what it is 'for', and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion. 'Its integration is not superimposed but springs from the quality of the voices which speak, and its value lies in the relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate' (2004, 26). He says, 'In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no "truth" to be discovered, no proposition to be provided, no conclusion sought' (1962, 489). Conversation takes the form of dynamic activity as 'thoughts of different species take wing and play around one another, responding to one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions' (1962, 489). Moreover, he adds, there is no gatekeeper as 'every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation' (1962, 490). The relations between people are horizontal and recognise the diversity of humans and their utterances. In 'The study of "politics" in a university', Oakeshott writes of modes of thinking that are related conversationally, 'that is, not as assertion and denial, but as oblique recognition and accommodation' (1962, 195). Unfortunately, Oakeshott does not pursue the insights of the first part of his essay, leaving the reader wondering about the substance of such conversation when pried from the witty, playful seriousness of the great conversationalist.

In her book, *For More than One Voice*, Cavarero (2005) considers the words of Rosenzweig, who contended that the philosophical tradition has subordinated speech to thought. '[Thinking] is always solitary, even when it takes place between several people "who are philosophising in common, even when the other only poses an objection that I would have been able to pose all alone (2005, 174)"'. Speaking, she says, on the contrary, 'is always bound to time. It does not know in advance where it is going, and it entrusts itself to the unpredictable nature of what the interlocutors say. In short, thought is as solitary as speech is relational' (2005, 174). Like Arendt, Cavarero does not fully explore the relation of speech to thought. A voice that makes its way in conversation may develop its character through its speech and engagement with others, but the trajectory of a conversation is undeterminable – it creates its own conditions of existence, just as thinking does. Thinking-in-concert is perhaps less close to the *dia-logos* – the speaking and thinking of two – than to the *con-vertere* and *con-versare* of conversation in which we turn towards one another to listen, to speak, to contest, embodying passionately our thinking. Such conversations are as reminiscent of the perplexity, wonder, aporias, paralysis and frustration embodied in Socrates' dialogues as of the vibrant, lively and witty interplay of Oakeshott's conversation.

Living-thinking-speaking involves hesitation and interruption as we try to accompany one another in 'thinking aloud'. I am here reminded of one man in my class. At a certain moment, often two-thirds of the way through the class, having listened intensely throughout, a furrowed expression would cross his face. He would breathe in sharply and then exhale as though sighing, stop, breathe in, out again, stop and then eventually say 'Are you telling me that ...?'. The 'are you telling me that ...?' included 'Descartes knew that all his beliefs were unfounded but he didn't get around to doing anything about it until years later' or 'this

man [the son caught in a double bind in Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*] seriously said "Oh, maybe I should stay home with me mammy". His sentences were both introduced and punctuated by the sighs of thinking. Thought is here embodied in voice, and whatever sense of sovereignty or mastery we found in the solitude of our thoughts is undone in the struggle to find a way through the questions that the mere presence of others can spark in us. Thinking's passion, passionate thinking, comes from its pathos, the undergoing of encounters that we might never have imagined alone, like the image of Descartes' female narrator. I abide with myself and those in my classes. *Con-versare* as living-with (its past sense), talking-with (its present sense) and its echoes of transfigurative moments of conversion – *convertere* – in which we are turned about ourselves, begin to give us some sense of the atmosphere of thinking-together as an unruly exchange of ideas. The passionate liveliness of thinking is not a consequence of achieving our goals or resolving those questions that led us to think. Like Socrates' image of the flute player, the mixture of breath and voice as we come together to think-in-concert is one of those '*energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit' (Arendt 1978, 129). The Latin etymology of 'conversation' offers images of dwelling, abiding, passing one's life and keeping-company-with that enrich our understanding of 'thinking-in-concert'. Despite the invisibility of thought, in a class the sounds of voices speaking-thinking, often dissonant, even off-beat and out of tune, respond in an immanent play to one another, bringing thinking back to earth.

Conclusion

It is no doubt easier to evaluate whether learning matches prescribed outcomes or to develop problem-solving exercises to see if a skill set has been accomplished, or even to assess the cognitive-behavioural outcomes of a thinking skills course, than to give value to something as intangible as the experience of thinking, in particular the loosely collective experience of thinking-together. Consequently, for some critics, much of what is written in this essay might appear to be anecdotal, or worse, descriptive. Nonetheless, reflecting upon thinking, in particular thinking-in-concert, helps to illuminate one dimension of what happens and what matters in educational settings. Arendt's insistence on making careful conceptual distinctions between different cognitive and mental activities takes on ever more urgency when spaces for thinking are increasingly colonised by other agendas. What reasons would we offer, as students and as teachers, for the importance of seminars and tutorials in education? Why do not we all study remotely and alone or through online communities? Does blended or virtual learning permit us to think together in the same way as our embodied presence to one another in an educational setting? What of those epiphanic moments of silence, transformation, hesitancy, break through or frustration? Can such forms of participation be captured in the collective life of a virtual community that demands consistent measurable input to demonstrate engagement, participation and learning? There is still a good deal to be said about the importance, nature and experience of thinking, particularly in our contemporary world, but as educators faced with technocratic and corporate prescriptions and proscriptions, we can also reflect upon the arguments that might be offered to communicate why it matters for us and for our students to think together in the presence of one another. Taking the prison as an intensified microcosm of broader societal trends may help us to better understand the existential importance of an education undertaken with others.

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