

Maps for Learning: How Dorothy Heathcote's Use of Maps Facilitates Reflecting upon Arts Praxis as Thinking Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Arts praxis as thinking praxis connects to Paolo Freire's transformational social pedagogy and Heathcote's drama for learning. Against this background, this practice-based piece explores different examples of how maps can be used for reflecting and communicating knowledge in learning and educational contexts. It argues that maps can visualise processes of meta-learning and thereby empower learners to understand in which way their thought processes unfold. Featuring my own experience of using map making for reflection in a higher education literature course, the essay follows the guiding argument that the form a map takes on, its aesthetic quality, marks a relevant contribution to the learning experience. The emerging concept of knowledge empowers the learner through giving them awareness and thereby agency of their own learning journey. To contextualise this 'thinking of maps' further, the essay references a material map from

the archive of Dorothy Heathcote, which was presented during the Heathcote Now Conference in 2025, and a mental metaphor from her Fight for Drama speech (1989). The essay elucidates how maps can help to reflect upon and support the plurality of thinking praxis possible in our schools and societies today. As a practice-based piece, it emphasises the core argument with its playful, interactive form.

HOW TO READ THIS ESSAY (GUIDELINES)

Following Heathcote's idea of the interconnected, simultaneous and non-hierarchical presence of different pieces of learning at any time, you can read the parts of this essay in any order you prefer. To be able to represent this free form in the linear structure of a published essay, the three parts (experience—concept—practice) are presented in mixed-up order. All parts are linked by the shared conceptual core that map-making can be used to make visible a *dense* and emergent quality of thinking, resulting in a processual aesthetic of knowledge. Thus, the 'animated pedagogies' presented in this text (as interactive essay structure, map-making practice, pedagogy and metaphor) anchor in an understanding of *learning-as-transformation* as, for example, championed by revolutionary educator Paolo Freire. Heathcote likewise grasps the concept of knowledge production and communication as *(a)live process* with her metaphor of an octopus. My practice of *map-making for reflection* recognises the learning journey, i.e. knowledge, as a dynamic, ultimately unfinishable process as a result of observing the sometimes 'messy' path the creation of a map takes. These various forms of meta-cognition can empower a learner to take agency over knowledge production and the shape of learning environments.

Your reading journey can take on six different routes altogether:

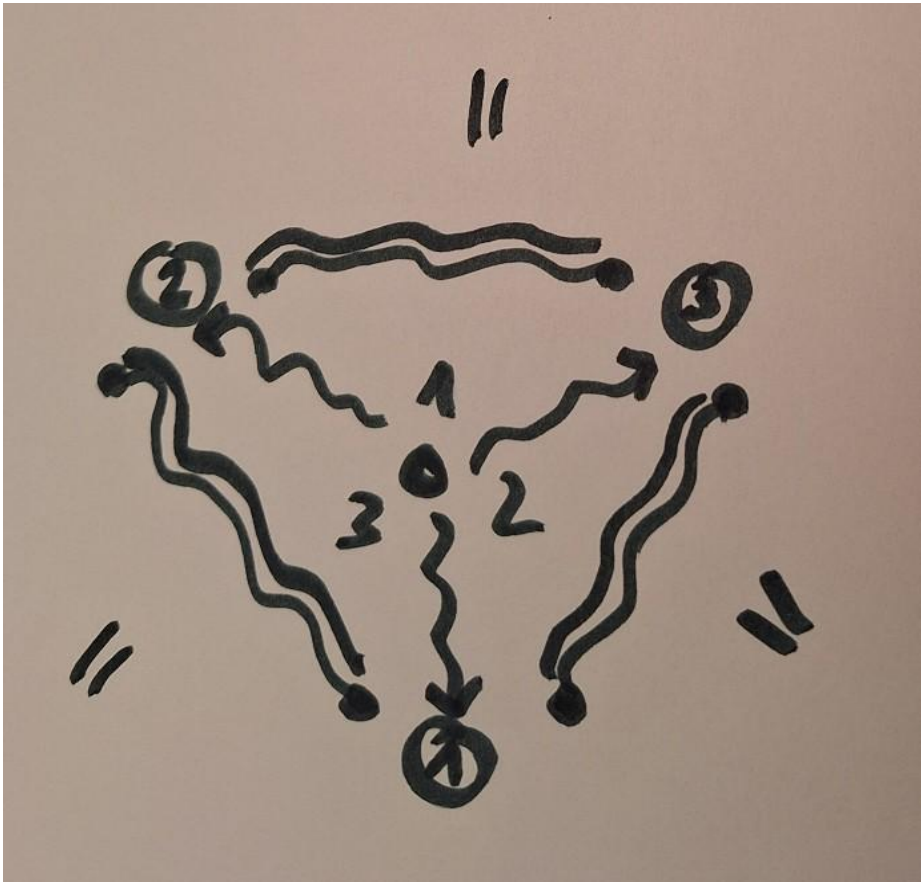


Figure 1. The structure of this essay as interactive map.

ALTERNATIVE: You can cut out the different parts of this essay and glue them together in tripod-shape. See what happens!

PRACTICE (3)

A sense-ible thing! Map-making in higher education

The practice section supports the empowering pedagogy of map-making as a translation of *dense*, emergent thinking into a visual-material analogue with a concrete teaching example. During summer term 2025, I was using *map-making for reflection* in a literary history class at university level in Germany. I thought this way of visualising

would help the students to grasp the episodic, at times meandering structure of an early German novel from the 18th century, *The History of Agathon* by Christoph Martin Wieland (1773). The sprawling text of significant length, with its alien tone to the modern ear and complex philosophical argument could benefit from an exercise for which the students would have to break down the text's essential stages into a drawn map of the protagonist's outer journey. However, my aim behind using map-making for text reflection in higher education was also to introduce the cohort of students, all of whom wanting to become teachers, to creative thinking and learning methods in literature teaching.¹ For the map exercise, I invited the students to bring in old magazines, newspapers, and other arts and crafts materials to fashion their maps. They could use an example from a teacher's training book for inspiration or come up with their own ideas. The practice exercise emphasises that map-making can be especially beneficial when the content of a work seems dense and initially remote from areas of creative learning techniques (e.g. because of the erudite aloofness still often associated with 'older literature').

What I found particularly striking was how the resulting map of the analogue group expressed in its multi-sensory aesthetic the argumentative dualism of the 18th century novel. As an early example of a *bildungsroman*, *Agathon* traces the growing-up experience of its protagonist. The eponymous hero discovers that a strictly idealised, morally-clean approach to acting in life, whether in his understanding of love or political leadership, needed to be counter-balanced with the realism of human emotions, how crowds act, and the physical make-up of various environments.

Throughout, the narrative voice showed a protagonist torn between following pure ideals and accepting that pleasures of all kinds are also a force in life. Taciturnly, through the multi-sensory aesthetic of their creative thinking, the students had chosen to 'draw their map' with three-dimensional, sensory materials: a piece of red string was used to connect the different stages of the journey, which led to a relief-like final stage adorned with artificial rose petals. Within the parameters of the exercise, it seemed, the 'thinking of the map'

¹ I deployed the map-drawing as an analogue counter-part to a digital 'bookTok' exercise, for which the students had to create a short trailer about the novel, to highlight alternative ways of using visual arts and performance strategies to communicate the content of an older medium.

developed a life of its own (comparable to the animated pedagogy grasped with the octopus metaphor in section 2 or my poem about the map from the Heathcote archive described in section 1). In visualising the story as an abstract conceptual blueprint and a concrete material piece of thinking that could be 'felt', the map, in content and particularly in its form, brought together the two argumentative strands of the novel.

In discussing the map with the class after the creative session, I exemplified with this aspect of the map that its aesthetics (the way how the map was designed and with which materials) could help to find a way into an interpretation or reveal profound insights into a text (or given field of study). The thinking encapsulated in the shape the creative expression took on helped to clarify the content of the novel. In a process of endless semiosis, therefore, the potentially three-dimensional qualities of *map-making for reflection* ushered in another process of meaning-making: that of reading the style of creative action symbolically; or, to paraphrase Heathcote, in the particular of creative expression universals patterns. *Map-making for reflection* illustrates an argumentative point about arts praxis as humanising thinking praxis. It is about finding out about a subject through the form the creative process takes on during the making, thus recognising that knowledge processes are transformational processes or in terminology from *Mantle of the Expert*: to learn through the shape of an *emergent inquiry* (Aitken, 2013). Comparable to the mantle of confidence that playfully grows while a person is learning *in role*, the students grew more confident in their understanding of the novel while creating their map and reflected this in their statements about the text afterwards. From my point of view, the map-making had made visible what they had understood about the novel. Reading back the path their map of learning had taken encouraged them to recognise, and ultimately, evolve their knowledge.

Image-association appeared as another aspect of the learning processes in *map-making for reflection*. The aesthetic and visual content of the images chosen carried meaning and potential insight into a subject area as it connected the visual footprint of the novel to the life worlds of the learners. This highlighted their potential of being capable of making sense of what they had read in their own right, translating the original text into a different medium in the creative dialogue. In their feedback after the map-making exercise, various

students commented that they had felt the content of the novel had become clearer through the map-making process and associations with images they could relate to more directly from their own sociocultural frame of references (such as using an image of Freddie Mercury to describe the popular, yet internally torn appeal of the protagonist at the height of his 'fame'). This learning by analogy helped to intellectually grasp various argumentative facets of the novel. Of course, some of the students who were already trained in the self-reflective awareness of the humanities highlighted that this presentist approach (e.g. applying contemporary images to a text from roughly 300 years ago) can also distance from the actual text; yet, discussing telling images and materials which were seemingly haphazardly assembled in the making process, we also constructed knowledge from reading the map and its design. The material reality of the map evidenced this learning as much as the content presented with it and transformed the educational environment through its presence in the classroom (as described in more detail in section 1).

In this practice example, *map-making for reflection* emerged as a way of externalising *dense*, simultaneous thinking in arts praxis. The technique provided a window into a subject through depicting it once removed and through this very aesthetic distance allowed for productive interpretation. Seen in another way, the map in front of us helped us to cross the historical distance to a text from various centuries ago by finding haptic, three-dimensional paths into it. As we associated our current images and sensory realities, we produced insights into the text and generated knowledge. This had a mutually transformative effect. By leading us into the epistemological game of meaning-making, *map-making for reflection* made us aware of the ongoing journey of learning as dialogue between people, between media, between stages of knowledge. Heathcote's humanising pedagogy of revealing thinking as a live, organic process (as an octopus, cf. section 2) expresses the possibility of the constant evolvment of knowledge in our societies. Map learning as *actionreflection*, as a concrete creative intervention into the often static topography of our educational realities contains, in a nod to Paolo Freire (cf. my poem in section 1), the empowering possibility of change.

EXPERIENCE (1)

The look of a thought

The map shivered when David rolled it up. A small cut-out of a church, or a town, or a well, dislodged, revealing a spot of the raisin-coloured residue of glue on a ground of faded yellow, and fell, gently, like an autumn leave twirling, too early in the year, like a single flake of snow dancing in a winter gust, to the institutional ground. Grey carpets.

For a second, they were quiet.
For a second, everybody in the room saw it peel off and fall.
For a second, the story of the map had unfolded unto the educational floor, easy to clean; nevertheless, messy.

Casually, then, while being stored away, the map, back into the archive, the cut-out was picked-up, shoved under the turning cloth, the fabric of the map, re-lodged thereby, differently, at an angle, changed, closed off again; yet a living archive.

This was, we were told, a map from the archive of Dorothy Heathcote, a device to be used, a *treasure-burden*: a map to a whole continent of creative learning.

This made me understand so much about Heathcote's applied work, her use of creative methods for thinking and learning, and material tools; arts praxis *as thinking*. I love to use maps in my practice, in teaching, and in personal reflection. They help to immediately grasp the narrative of an argument, the look of a thought, the essence of a thinking process. I'd say maps lead into structures of

thinking themselves, the structure the communication of learning takes on. They are an act of meta-cognition. And understanding these structures, rendering them conscious through creative methods, is learning itself. Learning can be messy, as Heathcote often describes in her writing and talks. Creative thinking can be messy, too. Maps can embrace this messiness by tracing it intuitively and thereby perhaps reveal patterns, show the human, sprawling, imperfect, changeable, lively nature of ideas themselves. Maps are useful, maps are to be used.

Heathcote's and by extension all forms of empowering education and learning are about providing a space for this messiness in thinking: the exchange of ideas, the changing of ideas, of a status quo, of a something-that-has-always-been-like-that-but-now-looks-different, of life transformation. Learning creatively and perhaps seeing things differently after an encounter with the creative action, like a cut-out piece of a paper map falling to the ground of a high-tech educational building, bridges the gap between a mundane environment and the potential of a different world behind it; the creative past infecting the sterile carpets of the present to animate the future. In my semantisation of the material reality, the falling piece from a map becomes *creative practice-as-symbol*, a concrete 'critical intervention into reality', to use the words of transformational pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970/2017, p. 26). Learning empowered by creative practice can change the make-up of our learning environments and the maps for our institutions as well; if by happy accident.

We learn something about what we think by looking at the aesthetic structures our thoughts take on, this could be one through-line when reflecting upon arts praxis as thinking practice in maps. So, maps are not 'just' tools to reflect but they contain evolving thought processes.² Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin describes processes of literary reflection as *Denkbilder*, 'thought-images' (1974/2022). The form becomes content in literary *image*-ation as thinking. Maps are a particular version of these *thought-images* too, either as a material device in applied drama work, to spark a story or start a creative exploration, or as a reflective tool in other contexts. But maps are not just the visual footprint or initiator of a complex cognitive journey. They

² My practice in section 1 elaborates on this idea as well as the analysis of Heathcote's 'octopus thinking' in section 2.

are this very journey as much as they illustrate it. They trace our story of learning about a subject, empower us by seeing that our learning journey has a clear path, they shape a messy progression, a structure, a direction (whichever way it may take us). Though the map of Dorothy which David Allen showed us at the International Conference in Manchester in November 2025 may have been originally used to initiate a *Mantle of the Expert* classroom drama, it allowed for many learning journeys to be taken at the same time.

CONCEPT (2)

Eight arms? Reading Heathcote's metaphorical map of (dis-) organised thinking

Now, the other thing I just want to say is I wish I could do tidy, neat talks. But I can't. So I've got this dreadful sort of octopus-thing here because to me teaching is not linear; teaching is dense. So all these octopus-arms [Heathcote moves her hands and performs a gesture of locating her ideas in the space in front of her, *inserted by the author*] I sort of hurl at you to me are all there every time I open my mouth or my ears when I'm working with children. So they are all together. But you can't speak with nine [sic!] arms as you might say so you got to talk about one at a time. But they are all there as far as I'm concerned. (1989)

In her seminal speech at the teacher's conference 1989, Heathcote introduces a mental image early on, a cognitive metaphor, to describe the organisation of her thoughts visually. The octopus with its eight (or counting the head with its nine) limbs spatialises the structure Heathcote's thinking takes on comparable to a drawn map. Its sprawling layout of eight seemingly disorganised arms reaches out in space and therefore could be seen as a version of an animated map. Seeing the octopus arms as different paths or thought-excursions creates the image of a network of ideas in motion which helps to understand art praxis as thinking praxis: as interconnected, simultaneous, non-hierarchical reflections in action with the potential to mutually transform each other. 'Octopus thinking', thus, makes *learning-as-transformation* and the act of presenting changing stages

of knowledge visible in its animated map-structure.

In our conventions of thinking, maps are often associated with a clear path, or a linear journey from A to B, a GoogleMaps that shows where to start (your 'home') and where to finish (your 'destination'). That a journey may change along the way is rarely acknowledged in the initial understanding of how a map works and what it looks like (unless GoogleMaps tracks a construction site on the way). Heathcote's understanding of thinking and her communication of the shape that thinking takes on aims for 'messiness' (accepts learning as as a continuous construction site, one might say). It is not tidy, not neat. And this messiness requires a different look, an image allowing for the possibility that an emergent journey may change along the way. The position of the arms of the octopus, to stay within the image, can twist while we are tracing one limb to the end, which may influence our next step. In the dynamic cognitive processes insinuated in Heathcote's octopus map of *actionreflection*, conceptualising knowledge as unfinished thinking process, the parts can transform the appearance of the whole and vice versa (also compare my symbolic reading of a paper cut-out falling to the ground of a modern building, briefly transforming the educational environment, section 1).

Thus, Heathcote's conceptual metaphor, the *octopus map*, which proposes knowledge as unfinished process grasps a key aspect of a humanising learning experience in the tradition of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire: "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation." (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 56) The animated octopus visualises a cognitive reality in motion within its aesthetic: It embodies *actionreflection*. Ideas may gravitate around a centre (a *problem posed*, an emergent inquiry) but then can change in an animated dialogue, an inter-play between heads and arms in a shared space, rather than following top-down, neatly one from another, as academic writing courses regularly teach. In this sense, knowledge production appears as a map evolving. The octopus-learning rests on a humanised, time-based order of constant transformation. It produces insights because it is a multiverse, in which different elements co-exist and therefore can infect each other to create something new, a different order. Note that Heathcote does not introduce a conceptual binary here: she doesn't describe her thinking

as ‚non-linear‘ in opposition to the linear progression of conventional academic thinking, she describes it as *dense* (i.e. 'not linear'). Learning as a process and the knowledge resulting from this learning is changing in the very moment it is uttered; therefore the direction in a map may change its course, which renders this form of thinking closer to life; for life contains a flurry of possibilities.

Heathcote deploys the image of the octopus at the beginning of her speech to creatively express what she considers the unusual shape the communication of her thoughts takes on as a result of the *dense* approach to learning described in the previous paragraph. She uses the *octopus map* as a device to guide a listener through her talk. In analogy to the extremely agile and sometimes sudden movement of the limbs of the octopus, she claims to *hurl* pieces of information at us, unprepared. Of course, Heathcote's *en passant* image is much cleverer than her self-deprecating understatement initially suggests. With her underwater animal, she already acknowledges her teaching and learning practice as located in a different medium to the conventional air of institutions of learning. Ironically, the lack of the very same air provides her approach with more oxygen than comparable practice above water level. One might read a certain level of 'underground' movement into the deep-sea creature's location. In the fluid medium of drama education, the octopus-agent can wiggle, finds itself *in a reality in liquid process* with all its empowering implications for notions of education in the sense of Freire. Further, by no means are the arms of an octopus really unruly at all times. When some biologists talk about the octopus, they often describe how every arm contains a kind of brain and that the big brain in the middle (the inquiry, the exercise, the problem posed) cognitively controls or is in constant dialogue with the parts. It knows where they are going and, responding to its environment, is open to change at the same time. To communicate the seemingly messy structure of her thought process, thus, Heathcote uses a clever underwater animal which is very well capable of handling complex intellectual movement processes; perhaps sometimes much more apt for these than more streamlined organisational structures. In the languages of political and educational aesthetics: learning becomes transformational.

The function of the map as device to express this order of a different learning environment, therefore, solves a key problem in teaching and thinking in our schools and societies: it helps to

communicate how humans think in an accessible form of meta-learning. It takes pride in the productivity of 'messy' cognitive structures. It is one thing to embrace that there needs to be spaces of messiness in education. But it is another, while acknowledging that 'we can't speak with nine arms', to find potent ways of doing so nevertheless. Maps fill this gap, whether as literary images, intellectual concepts, or material pieces, they conveniently remind us that thinking is more than one piece of a thought and perhaps sometimes requires more than one medium, one person present at a time. In this context, the practice section emphasises how useful evolving *maps as reflective tools* can be in higher education. Maps are a material analogue to a creative-cognitive reflection that helps us to see how we think as humans and what we learn through becoming aware of the shape this thinking takes on. In Heathcote's pedagogy, thinking emerges as complex, alive and constantly in flux; sometimes unpredictable. Connected to Freire's impulse to transform life realities by seeing them as an extension of such a malleable world-view, and vice versa, this unfolds empowering potential. The octopus with its eight arms and one head is both, a non-hierarchical approach to hurling ideas at us and a productive organising principle. The pieces of learning presented in this *messay* ('messy essay') about art praxis as thinking praxis come as much from the content of the maps as from semantising the aesthetic of their form.

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