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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

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LIT

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Chapter 9: Exploring our Cultural-Historical Embeddedness

Guro Hansen Helskog[1] and Vaibhav Jadhav[2]

Abstract

Using a reflective practice research approach, this essay takes its departure in four small episodes where the European one of the authors experienced that she did not fully understand what happened to her. The experiences included two inaugural ceremonies, a comment from a participant at a Dialogos workshop, and the experience of someone bending down to touch her feet. The episodes made her wonder, and in her efforts to better understand, she invited her Indian colleague to reflect upon the episodes together with her. Through the collaborative cultural-historical reflections that followed, what can be understood as glimpses into leftover aspects of the ancient Indian Gurukul tradition opened up not only for her but also for him. This again is used as an opportunity to reflect upon attitudes needed for the reciprocal widening of one's horizons of understanding in international collaboration.

Key words

Cultural-historical embeddedness – the Gurukul tradition – Dialogos – Philosophical practice – Intercultural Dialogue – Reflective Practice Research

Introduction

"Because the United States is so powerful, you can walk all over the world and not learn anything. You know, you can just speak English all the time and think, "Oh well, I can always find a McDonald's", and you don't have to learn anything about the traditions of the country that you're going to. But that's terrible. It is the recipe for a too-scornful policy. So, what you need is a history of the world – global history".

These are the words of world-renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum in our ResponsAbility podcast episode (Weiss and Helskog, 2025) about, amongst other things, her book "Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities" (2010/2024). The problem she poses, that people can travel the world without learning anything about the culture and traditions of the country they are in, is not only a problem for laypeople. It is a problem worth considering also in international collaboration and internationalization efforts as such. The purposes of Norway's internationalization efforts are, amongst others, to increase people's ability to meet the challenges and opportunities that arise from globalization and international interaction in working life and in society, to improve language skills and understanding of and insight into other cultures, and to also broaden the geographical perspective, "for example in the direction of new economies", as stated by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2008–2009: 4). However, even with such purposes, taking part in internationalization projects does not guarantee deep learning about the culture one is in. It all depends on the degree to which one reflects upon all the different experiences of discrepancies that most likely will appear in longitudinal collaboration.

Therefore, I, Guro Hansen Helskog, who am the European one of us, narrate four small episodes where I experienced that I did not fully understand what I was experiencing[3]. Two of the episodes left me in some kind of awkward surprise and light embarrassment, then in wonder. I understood that the feelings and the practices that caused them probably had cultural roots. As such, the episodes were examples of small intercultural and maybe even interreligious experiences that most likely are common in international collaboration between people from different cultural contexts. Because such experiences are common, they are not necessarily reflected upon more deeply. Therefore, in order to shed light on them, and in order to understand, I asked my colleague Vaibhav Jadhav from Savatribai Phule Pune University to reflect together with me on the episodes, trying to understand them from an Indian perspective. In addition to being embedded in Indian cultural and academic life, Vaibhav is considered an expert in Indian philosophy of education in general and in the Indian Gurukul tradition in particular. Moreover, since 2018, the two of us have collaborated extensively in two internationalization projects between Savitribai Phule Pune University and the University of South-Eastern Norway[4]. The friendship between us has made it easy for me to talk about my embarrassment, surprise, and wonder, show my vulnerability and not-knowingness, and ask those challenging questions you might not ask a complete stranger in their

own cultural home context. However, humility and willingness to stand in the open, to admit that you do not know, to ask questions, and to learn are pivotal if international collaboration is to become truly transformative. This goes both ways, yet in this essay, it is mostly me, Guro, who is on the questioning and learning side of the relationship. Yet the joint reflection with Vaibhav contributes to extended intersubjectivity, multi-perspectivity, and thus trustworthiness in the essay.

The research approach used is inspired by the broad field of reflective practice (see, i.e. Bradbury, et al., 2009) as well as action research (see, i.e. Reason and Bradbury, 2008). It might also be seen as a culturally-historical oriented variant of reflective practice research as conceptualized by Anders Lindseth (2015). He is grounding the approach in phenomenology (see e.g. Husserl, 1950; Heidegger, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984) and hermeneutics (see i.e. Gadamer, 1993). The reflective research- and essay structure suggested by Lindseth (2015) is to begin with first-person narration in the form of concrete reflection, followed by critical reflection drawing out one or a few themes that are then finally reflected theoretically. In this concrete essay, however, we have chosen to let the narrated stories of Guro's experiences be followed by what we have chosen to call *cultural-historical reflection*. Then follow some more general theoretical and philosophical reflections, drawing on perspectives from Gadamer's (1960) hermeneutics.

Four small episodes

The first little episode happened at the opening of a conference during my (Guro's) first visit to India in 2017, while the second, third and fourth episodes happened at the beginning of, during, and at the end of two Dialogos workshops which I conducted with teacher educators working at 12 colleges affiliated with Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) in 2022. The incidents passed in a matter of seconds, and they might as well have been left unnoticed, as they, on the surface, may seem unimportant and without any significance. Yet digging into them, deep cultural-historical roots were conveyed, shedding light also on my own Norwegian culture of origin.

Episodes 1 and 2. The inaugural ceremonies

I had been invited to be the keynote speaker of the conference "Education today – Society tomorrow" hosted by the organization Initiatives of Change

in Panchgani. When arriving, I was asked if I would care to "light the lamp" at the opening ceremony. Without really understanding what I was asked, I (of course) accepted the invitation, finding my place at the first row together with the organizer – the auditorium now filling up with more than 100 educational leaders from all over India. "When given the sign, you just go up there, putting light to the lamp at the stage", the person next to me answered when I asked what I was supposed to do. After a speech in Hindi, the sign was given, and I lit the lamp, yet I felt awkward: Did I do it the way they expected me to do it? Was I supposed to stand up there longer than I did? And not the least: What was really the purpose of putting light to a lamp that would make no difference to the lighting of the big auditorium?

At the time, so much else called for my attention (see Helskog, Weiss, and Stokke, 2025, in this anthology) that I did not ask any further. Yet a similar feeling of awkwardness a few years later reminded me of the situation. Now, 17 teacher educators were sitting around the big U-table in the School of Education (SoE) conference room at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Up front, four chairs were lined up. We were waiting for the formal inauguration ceremony to begin. The ceremony would mark the start of the first of two three-day Dialogos workshops.

Coming from an informal Norwegian culture where academic ceremonies were rare, the PhD defence ritual being one of the few that I have ever attended, I found it rather difficult to sit alone up front with everybody's eyes on me. My background as the daughter of a farmer and a housewife and having grown up as a shy child and teenager, did not help. So, I found a plastic chair and sat down in a corner beneath the lectern. "Professor, you should sit there!" one of the participants exclaimed, pointing to the row of chairs. The others nodded. "Yes, Ma'am, you should sit up front!" Smiling, hopefully signalling that I appreciated their care, I answered that "I prefer to sit here for now", adding that "you know, as the facilitator of this workshop, I am the lowest in this room". The second, after having said this, I regretted my attempt to play around with roles. Hierarchies are strong in India, and I was a guest. The teacher educators were caringly guiding me into a part of their academic culture, and I answered with something like a joke. Maybe I should have just accepted the invitation to sit up front while waiting? This feeling of indecisiveness and ambiguity ran through me. If I had known I would just sit there for a few minutes, it would have been easier. But after several visits to India, I knew that things hardly ever started on time. For all I knew, I would be sitting there for the next couple of hours, with the kind and curious eyes of the arriving participants on me.

About an hour after the scheduled time, all who were supposed to be part of the inauguration ceremony had arrived, and the ceremony could start, with short, formal speeches from the leaders of the School of Education. My feelings of slight embarrassment now changed to an awkwardness of being at the centre of the formalities, sitting up front with the others, again not really understanding what was going on.

Reflecting critically upon this episode, the theme of *cultural-historical embeddedness and meaning* emerges. For me, being at the centre of the ritual of the inauguration ceremony was an experience that, in some respects, collided with my own personal and cultural habituation. I did not know how to behave and could thus not really relax in the situation. For the Indian teacher educators, the ceremony was something normal and familiar, a part of academic life that they took for granted, and never questioned. Thus, when I asked Vaibhav Jadhav, from now on Vaibhav, about my experiences, he was forced to reflect too. Answers to my questions did not come easily for Vaibhav either, maybe because he was embedded in the tradition himself and thus blind to it. It was just something he, like the teacher educators, had taken for granted and thus never thought about. let alone reflected critically upon. Concerning Episodes 1 and 2, it is therefore relevant to ask the question *What is the cultural meaning of the Indian inauguration ceremonies?* We have reflected together upon this, yet Vaibhav is the one bringing in the knowledge.

The cultural-historical meaning of the Indian inaugural ceremonies

When visiting higher education institutions in India, coming as university staff from Europe, one is met with ceremonies everywhere, as now at the beginnings of the "Education today, society tomorrow" conference and of the Dialogos workshops. More than once, I have been confused as to what my role is in the ceremonies, as here, when asked to "light the lamp", and when the teacher educators wanted me to sit up front. Most likely, this was not only a personal feeling of shyness. The feeling most likely had cultural-historical roots as well. How?

The word "inauguration" generally means the beginning or introduction of a new programme, a new policy, or new work. In the Indian education tradition, the ritual of the inaugural ceremony marks the start of all educational programmes; in our context, the conference and the philosophical dialogue workshop. The term is also commonly used to describe the formal entry of a new person into the workplace, in our context, Guro. The idea behind this practice has always been to inculcate a spiritual dimension to

academic life. In this respect, the inaugural ceremony is meant to help create a mindful and spiritual environment at the beginning of an educational programme.

This spiritual dimension is uncommon in a Norwegian context nowadays. Here, the cultural values of equality and democratic participation are combined with a rather despiritualised and secular public sphere. The Church and State were separated as late as in 2012. From 1814, the Evangelical Lutheran Christian Church had been the state religion. Despite the tight connection between Church and state, the public sphere has become increasingly secular. One aspect of this culture is the demand that all public education, including teacher education, shall be "neutral" when it comes to life views and religion. The idea is partly that all students shall feel included regardless of their culture and religious, and/or spiritual or secular world views. Hence, while I myself experienced morning prayers every day during my first three years of primary school, this is now a forbidden practice since it is not neutral and inclusive. Could it be that this secularized cultural background of mine also contributed to my feeling of unease, not understanding the deeper dimensions of the rather spiritual inauguration ceremony?

The inaugural ceremony contains certain rituals. One of the major rituals is the lighting of the lamp, like I was invited to do in episode 1. The intention of this action is to create positivity amongst the learners, with the spreading of divine grace as a hidden aim. Fire is one of the five elements that form our body according to the Indian tradition. It removes darkness and enlightens the lives of humans. The lighting of the lamp symbolizes the awakening of our five senses and is meant to show everyone who is present how to rise upwards and how to dispel darkness. In the educational programme, lighting a lamp is very auspicious, as it kills the impurities of darkness and shows light to a student/devotee, etc. (Sharma, 2009).

Hence, for the second episode, to begin the workshop before the formal inauguration ceremony had been conducted with the Director of the School of Education, Professor Sanjeev Sonawane, present, was thus out of the question. But while all the teacher educators in the room knew *what* we were waiting for and *why*, I did not. Instead, my own personal and cultural-historical background came to the surface in my reactions. While the practices involved in the inauguration ceremony have roots in the gurukul tradition, where the authority of the Guru is central, I come from a culture that at least on the surface level holds social equality regardless of background, gender, and position as one of its main values. For instance, public edu-

cation, where all students attend the same school with the political intent to create socio-economic and cultural equality regardless of economic and social background in the population, has been an ideal for policies of education since the late 1800s. The other side of this cultural value of human equality is a scepticism of authority. Both treating others as authorities and being treated as an authority oneself are therefore awkward for many with a Norwegian cultural background. Might these be parts of the background of my feeling of awkwardness with sitting as an authority figure up front waiting for the inauguration ceremony to start even though I held the title of full full professor? Maybe.

Episode 3. Teaching from the podium

Episode 3 happened towards the end of this first three-day workshop. During the workshop, I had led the participants through a variety of philosophical dialogues and exercises based on the Dialogos approach to wisdom-oriented pedagogy, which I had developed over almost three decades (see Helskog, 2019). I had facilitated dialogical work with the full group sitting and standing, in smaller groups, through individual thinking and sharing in pairs and small groups. In the process, I had let the teacher educators work with topics related both to their professional practice of teaching in teacher education and to their own personal lives, two dimensions which cannot really be separated when working closely with students (see Helskog (Ed.)) forthcoming 2026, especially Helskog et al. 2026 forthcoming). The purpose of this work is the development of deep self-knowledge, intersubjectivity, and wisdom. It involves all six dimensions in my Dialogos model for wisdom-oriented pedagogy: the existential-emotional, the relational-communicative, the critical-analytical, the practical-ethical, the spiritual-ideal, and the cultural-historical dimensions (see Helskog, 2019). Different dimensions are brought to the forefront in different exercises and also in research articles. For instance, while this essay has the cultural-historical wisdom dimension in the forefront, the essay "On Compassionate Teacher-Student Relationships" (Helskog et al., 2025, Chapter 10 in this anthology) has the existential-emotional and practical-ethical wisdom dimensions in focus.

Now I approached a group of the teacher educators who were philosophising together on one of the many exercises they had been given during the workshop. They welcomed me, saying they had talked about the workshop and about the work they had been doing together during

the three days. "The way you have questioned us and made us reflect and think together, and not least the way you organized us in groups and moved amongst us on the floor level, surprised us", they said, claiming that "We only teach from the podium". Their comment puzzled me as well. *What did they mean by teaching from the podium?*

Unfortunately, I did not ask the Indian teacher educators to elaborate there and then, but their question kept itching me. On a surface level, they seemed to be pointing to a difference between modes of teaching that I have often met in Norway as well. Teaching from the podium or from the front desk, in my context often labelled "blackboard teaching" or sometimes also "teacher-led teaching", has a long tradition in my culture as well, with roots, amongst others, in Christian preaching and the teaching in the medieval Cathedral Schools, educating students to become priests. Moreover, the educational philosophy of Herbart, where the teacher's main task is seen as transmitting the cultural and historical knowledge of former generations through what might be labelled teaching from the podium, still influences teaching in Norway. Nowadays, an educational theorist like Gert Biesta is advocating traditional forms of teaching, arguing that the practice of so-called student-centred teaching, and thus the focus on learning, has become too dominant (listen to Biesta, et al., 2024).

Teaching from the podium in the Indian context might have British colonial and thus European roots similar to the Christian and Herbartian roots of Norwegian education. My intuition, however, was that the notion and practice of "teaching from the podium" might also have cultural-historical roots in the many thousands of years-old Indian educational tradition. Reflecting upon the experience together with Vaibhav, we have both come to agree that the notion of "teaching from the podium" most likely has roots that are specific to the Indian context.

Possible aspects of the cultural-historical meaning of "teaching from the podium"

In the Vedic period, the place of the Guru's seating would always be high in the teaching-learning situation, as would the priest in a Christian sermon and the teacher in a traditional school. The guru would sit up front at a podium, and all the students would sit in rows on the ground before him. The most popular teaching-learning practice in the Vedic education system is known as *preaching and discourse*. After fixing a topic, a learned speaker speaks on that topic for a fixed time. This practice is called *Upadesh* (Sharma, 2009). Preaching is like lecturing, but the language of preaching

is spiritual. The Guru is considered to have deep and special knowledge. Therefore, *listening* was the main task of the student in the system of Vedic philosophy. After listening, the Guru would open up for question-answer, dialogue, debate, discussion, sightseeing, etc.

However, it is important to note that this was not all there is to the teaching of the Guru. On the contrary, a variety of activities were included in the teaching and learning relationship between the Guru and his students. First of all, he was a spiritual teacher, working in the tradition of the Vedas. The name Veda stands for the 'Mantras' and the 'Brahmanas'. 'Mantra' means a 'hymn' or 'religious song' addressed to a god or goddess (Hiriyanna, 2000). Hence, the role of the Guru has been that of a spiritual teacher, as indicated in the name itself, 'Gu' meaning *darkness,* and 'ru' meaning *remover*. A Guru is thus a "remover of darkness". The Guru traditionally worked within the *Gurukul system*, implying the educational institute where the spiritual insights were taught. The importance of the Guru and the Gurukul system is shown in this song from the Samaveda (Sharon, 2009):

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णु र्गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः
गुरु साक्षात परब्रह्मा तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः
Gurur Brahmā Gurur Viṣṇur Gurur devo Maheśvaraḥ
Guruḥ sākṣāt paraṁ Brahma tasmai śrī gurave namaḥ[1]

Gurur Brahmā Gurur Viṣṇur Gurur devo Maheśvara?
Guruḥ sākṣāt paraṁ Brahma tasmai śrī̄ gurave nama?[5]

The Guru was thus the spiritual father of his students. He was an exemplar and an inspirer, a confidant and friend, a philosopher and moral educator, a character and personality builder, a facilitator of learning, and an imparter of knowledge and wisdom. During the Vedic period, learning was transmitted orally from one generation to another. Great importance was attached to the proper accent and pronunciation in the Vedic recitation, and these could be correctly learnt only from the lips of a properly qualified teacher.

A Guru lived with his family and his students in a *Gurukula*. The primary duty of the student in this institution was to serve the teacher and his

family. The Gurukul education system thus included a variety of activities in a natural environment with the aim of having no harmful impact on society. It included a focus on activities like walks, sports, and yoga, aimed at the development of the physical health of students. Also, skills like craft, dancing, and singing were emphasized, encouraging an individual to find their passion. In addition to these activities, the students were required to do daily chores on their own, with the aim of developing students' independent temperament and helping them gain skills needed for everyday life. They also worked on personality development and towards increasing their self-confidence, esteem, and intellect. Thus, listening to lectures was only one part of the learning for the students.

Based on the description of the role of the Guru and of the Gurukul system, the notion "teaching from the podium" seems only to refer to one small part of the teaching and learning that went on in traditional Indian education. Yet, while the traditional system is not widely practiced today, except maybe in some yoga ashrams, it did have some dimensions that seem to align well with the philosophical dialogue activities. First of all, it represented a holistic form of education, encompassing not only academic knowledge but also character building and overall moral and personality development of the students. Moreover, it was a personalized form of learning. Both dimensions are at the core of the Dialogos approach to pedagogical-philosophical practice (see Helskog, 2019). This individualized yet collective approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the subject matter and tailored teaching methods to suit the learning style of each student. However, the Gurukul education was not confined to theoretical learning. Students participated actively in various activities, including agricultural work, arts and crafts, and other practical skills. This hands-on approach contributed to a more practical understanding of the world, allowing for learning through the day-to-day interactions and examples set by their Gurus. This helped in the transmission of ethical and cultural values from one generation to the next, and the disciplined lifestyle in a Gurukul, with fixed daily routines and adherence to rules, also helped in instilling a sense of discipline and self-control. Finally, living together in a Gurukul fostered a sense of community and brotherhood among students. This environment promoted collaboration, shared responsibilities, and a strong sense of belonging.

Aspects of this ancient educational practice seem to have similarities with the idea of "learning by doing", which was popularized by John Dewey but which has roots, amongst others, in Plato (Dewey, 1959; Reese, 2011).

The idea has been a central notion in so-called progressive education, both in the USA and in Europe throughout the 20th century. I, Guro, have been inspired by both when working as a teacher in secondary education and as a teacher educator, and the practice of "teaching by walking around" and engaging with the group on a floor level is, in my world, nothing uncommon and thus nothing revolutionary. The practice of making students philosophise through dialogue, however, is not as common, even though Leonard Nelson introduced this form of practice in university education already in mid-war Germany (see Nelson, 1922/2004), and Matthew Lipman developed his Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach from the late 1960s on (see i.e. Lipman et al. 1980; Lipman, 1988). This practice also surprises many students and colleagues in my own Norwegian context. Teaching "from the podium", or at least in front of students who sit in rows behind each other, is not uncommon in my context either.

Here, it is interesting to draw Raphael's painting "The School of Athens" (1511) into the picture, as it depicts a variety of ways of being in the world and ways of teaching and learning. There are several interpretations of Raphael's painting, as discussed by Gutman (1941). Throughout this big wall painting in the Vatican, classical figures from the history of philosophy and science are seen, some in eager teaching of their students. Amongst them we find Hypatia, Epicurus, Ibn Rushd, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Diogenes, Heraclitus, Archimedes, Zoroaster, and Ptolemy. In the centre of the painting, Raphael has depicted himself as Plato, a giant persona pointing upwards to the spiritual world of ideas. To his side, the equally giant Aristotle points outwards to the world of human life and empirical, earthly reality. To the left, Socrates is painted in eager dialogue with a group of fellows, and it is not wrong to say that I understood my way of living and teaching dominantly in the educative tradition of Socrates in dialogue, even though I, of course, was deeply inspired both by the Plato who wrote the Socratic dialogues (see Plato u.a.) and by his student, Aristotle, not the least with regards to his conception of practical wisdom (phronesis) (Aristotle, 2004).

The Socratic tradition originated in the idea that it is beyond human capacity to become wise, as wisdom is an unreachable divine ideal for humans. As depicted in the *Apology* (Plato a), the defence speech of Socrates written by Plato around 480 before Christ, the closest one could come to the ideal of wisdom was to realize that existentially speaking, when it comes to virtues and the "highest things", we can know nothing, and with regards to these, we need to be humble.

In our own time, the Socratic tradition has inspired different ways of philosophising ranging from critical-logical thinking (see Brenifier, 2009) to spiritual contemplation (see Lahav, 2016; Weiss, 2022) and different forms of so-called Socratic dialogue developed with inspiration from Leonard Nelson (1922/2004) and Gustav Heckman (1981/2004), for instance, in the approach of Finn Thorbjørn Hansen (2008), being an existential version. Also, the practice of Philosophy for Children (P4C) developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margareth Sharp should be mentioned as an important tradition in this landscape. In the Dialogos approach, I draw upon inspiration from different ways of philosophising, arguing that wisdom-oriented pedagogies need to be multi-perspectival and multi-faceted (Helskog, 2009), in line with a kaleidoscopic epistemology (Helskog and Weiss, 2023), yet existentially relational and mystery-oriented.

To sum up: In Episode 3, where the teacher educators expressed fascination and surprise about the Dialogos workshop they were part of, it seemed that Socratic-dialogic-inspired teaching practice met leftover aspects of the Indian Gurukul tradition, probably combined with British colonial educational influence.

Episode 4. Touching the teacher's feet

Episode 4 happened after the closing ceremony at the end of the second three-day Dialogos workshop in October. As both workshops had started with an inaugural ceremony, they also closed with a certificate ceremony in which Dean Sanjeev Sonawane, who at this time had become pro vice chancellor at Savitribai Phule Pune University, played a main role. Each time he was asked to enlighten the participants – ("*Sir – please enlighten us!*") – before being invited to the podium to give his speech.

When the closing ceremony was over, the group pictures had been taken, and mutual gratitude was exchanged, I noticed two of the male teacher educators and workshop participants approaching me. To me, unexpectedly, they bent down to touch my feet, one at a time. I had seen this done to Professor Sanjeev Sonawane and to the director of a yoga institute, but I was totally unprepared that it was now done to me. I was taken aback for a moment, feeling a bit awkward and embarrassed by this act of respect that was so different from what I am used to in my own cultural context. What was expected of me? What should I have done? The act made me wonder, and again I asked Vaibhav, who was surprised that I did not know.

The cultural-historical meaning of touching the teachers' feet

While the first three episodes could have happened in similar surface forms in a Norwegian cultural context as well, the forth episode could not. The practice of bending down to touch the feet of a teacher is a traditional gesture of respect and reverence in many cultures, especially in South Asia. As per the Vedic tradition and in Hinduism, touching someone's feet is a mark of respect and humility towards knowledge, experience, wisdom, and age. It is an act of acknowledging the teacher's knowledge and wisdom. This practice stems from the belief that knowledge is sacred and that teachers are important in spreading and imparting it. There is an Indian story where a person asks, "If teacher and God are both in front of me, who will I greet first?" The answer of the other is then that "it is only because of the teacher's teaching that I am able to see God". Thus, touching the teacher's feet is a way to express gratitude and honour for their guidance. What I did not know was that I also should have put my hands on the head of the ones touching my feet, giving them my blessing. The act of touching someone's feet is also a way of seeking blessings and good wishes from another person's aura. Positive words like long life', 'may you always be happy', 'may you succeed' or 'be successful' are often expressed the moment one touches someone's feet. This emits positive vibes from the teacher (or the elder if in the family), which are then passed on to those who touch their feet. It symbolizes values of respect, gratitude, a sense of duty, and humility.

This said, in India, the practice of touching the feet is also common within the family. Touching someone's feet can also be an expression of gratitude towards one's parents, grandparents, and other respectable people for their contribution to one's upbringing and well-being, implying the fostering of strong social and family bonds, also signifying cultural identity. It is an age-old tradition from the Vedic period, holding spiritual meaning and considered to be a mark of respect towards the older generations. The thought is that an elder's feet are the source of spiritual energy, and by touching them, one receives blessings that can help in one's personal and spiritual growth. It's a gesture of acknowledging the authority and wisdom of the person, symbolizing the submission of ego, pride, or the complex of the superiority of the one who touches the feet.

The gesture is seen in almost all Hindu families in India as well as those residing in other countries (Arulsamy, 2011). The gesture is called 'Dandvat' in Marathi, 'Charan Sparsh' and 'Sadar Pranam' in Hindi, and 'Pouri Pouna' in Punjabi. These are all commonly used phrases for touching the

feet of a person one respects deeply. It simply means *bowing the forehead down and touching the feet of another person.*

Philosophical meta-reflection

These four small episodes have been sticking with me as those kinds of experiences that I cannot really forget. For the Indians, Episodes 1, 2 and 4 were normal everyday actions that nobody thought about as special, while Episode 3 showed that the teacher educators experienced the Dialogos workshops as something different and unexpected to them. Through the four episodes, we both got what for us seem to be small glimpses into left-over aspects of the Indian Gurukul tradition: the inaugural ceremonies, the teaching from the podium, and the touching of the feet. All four episodes were examples of encounters between practices that have deep cultural-historical roots. The acts and practices convey, as we have seen, spiritual as well as cultural-historical *meaning*, and our original horizons of understanding were challenged when reflecting culturally-historically upon the episodes. Initially, it created a form of *aporia* in me (Guro). Aporia is the situation of 'not knowing', where Socrates famously ends up with his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues (2004, u.a.), which is also the point where true philosophising begins. From here, an urge to understand the events initiated a hermeneutical process that was also educative (see Gallagher, 1992) for both of us two authors of the essay. In the words of Gadamer (2010: 305–306): Those who want to understand a text or another human being (or, in our context, culturally embedded practices) cannot trust his or her own initial and accidental (mis)understanding but need to be open to let it speak to them. And in the research process, the hermeneutical task is to unfold the "miracle of understanding", which again implies participation in shared meaning (p. 330). If we are to understand such meaning, it is not possible to be neutral spectators observing from the outside. Rather, we need to take the attitude of a *participant* that takes the life world of the other seriously, entering into a dialogue with him or her, like I did when engaging in dialogue with Vaibhav in order to understand the practices I became part of.

Through the reflective practice research approach, I (Guro) took both the workshop participants and Vaibhav seriously as dialogue partners in the attempt to understand the cultural-historical meaning of the episodes. Our attempt to understand can be seen as a philosophical form of research, which can be connected to the etymological meaning of the word "philos-

ophy" – *philo sophia* in Greek. While *philo* means "love/friend", *sophia* can be translated as "insight/wisdom", signifying a natural and necessary drive and desire in human beings to know themselves and the world in which they live (Sharma, 2009). This connects reflective practice and reflective research to traditions with roots in classical philosophies of life, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle among the underlying inspirational sources, as argued also in the essay *Reflective practice research and kaleidoscopic epistemology* (Helskog and Weiss, 2023). Truth in these traditions is, again drawing on Gadamer (2010), what is *revealed*, for instance, what comes forth when we have AHA experiences. As Gadamer puts it: Truth is an experience – an event of understanding (2010, p. 348). The Greek notion for this kind of truth is *aletheia,* which is the form of truth that we seek to uncover through certain forms of reflective practice research and that has come forth in our dialogical process of co-writing this essay. For instance, Vaibhav has repeatedly laughed and claimed that he never thought about how practices in India, such as the lighting of the lamp, teaching from the podium, and touching the feet of authorities, whether older family members or teachers, possibly represent leftover practices with roots in the Indian Gurukul tradition. Guro's open questions and their joint reflection brought this "to the light" for him and caused us both to have repeated AHA experiences. Truth, so to speak, happened to us in the process. This is not a final truth or a complete truth. Rather, it is a truth – a new understanding – a glimpse – that happened based on the horizons of understanding that we had at the time, and it is not possible to draw any bold conclusions from what we have done. However, now the same episodes will not have the same confusing effect if or when they happen again next time I conduct a workshop or give a lecture in India. Rather, I will be able to participate with more confidence. Because my repertoire of insight and experiences, my prejudices (Gadamer, 2010), – will have expanded and deepened, it will be possible to make other truth experiences happen which could not have happened to me if I did not have this new insight. In humanistic research (like philosophical reflective practice research), such "truth events" have more in common with the intuition of the artist than with the methodological spirit of the natural, Gadamer (1953) argues.

When attempting to understand ourselves and our experiences, we are moved to explore the relationships within which we are enmeshed. When encountering a different cultural web than the one we have embodied, we, so to speak, *meet ourselves*, or rather, we meet our *prejudices* and our *limited horizon of understanding* in our *not understanding* the life and practice

of the other(s). It is only by entering into dialogue with the world around us that we are able to understand. Thus, according to Gadamer (1980, p. 62), all understanding implies self-understanding. Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self and includes the unity and integrity of the other. Anyone trying to understand something is always influenced by his/her culture and time, which gives us certain prejudices. However, these prejudices do not stand in the way of understanding. Rather, it is through the help of our prejudices that we are capable of opening up, and opening ourselves to, what we wish to understand.

Lindseth (2023) argues that while instrumental practice research gives knowledge of facts, reflective practice research gives *orientational* knowledge. The orientational knowledge that might be summarized from this essay is the knowledge that even seemingly small episodes that happen in international collaboration carry not only personal but also cultural-historical meaning that is worthwhile trying to understand. Seeking to understand ourselves and others beyond the personal by looking more closely at the cultural-historical embeddedness of our actions and reactions is important because it might increase our epistemic, practical and relational humility and wisdom. Such humility tells us to seek understanding by entering into dialogue with what surrounds us. It tells us to question rather than take for granted and accept without understanding. It tells us to first listen rather than tell and to be attentive rather than to act thoughtlessly and too quickly. If one wants to understand something, one has to put one's horizon of understanding and prejudices at play and open up to the situation and to what others have to say.

As such, the hermeneutical work in the essay has implied a process of *making the implicit explicit*. This is a never-ending process, yet what have we gained? Not much, many might say, arguing that it is obvious that when you engage in international collaboration, you will find yourself in situations you do not fully understand. Yet if we return to the statement of philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum et al., 2025) in the beginning of this essay, it is perfectly possible to travel to other countries without learning anything about the culture and practices of those living there, and vice versa: Those living in a country might not learn anything from strangers visiting. As such, we have shown how deep mutual understanding and learning might emerge, as long as we are willing to put our original horizons of understanding at play through open questioning and dialogue, with humans as well as with literature. Our intention has thus simply been to encourage people engaged in international collaboration to go deeply

into even small incidents and experiences. The incidents may convey implicit cultural-historical roots that are well worth making explicit for all involved. By doing so, those engaging in such work (as well as the readers of the written outcomes of such work) may *improve their understanding* and develop *orientational knowledge* that can help them and others act with greater wisdom in practical situations later.

Notes

[1] Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge, 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast.*

[2] Vaibhav Jadhav is an Associate Professor at Savitribai Phule Pune University, holding a PhD in education. Jadhav is particularly interested in global citizenship education, the internationalization of teacher education, mixed methods and microlearning strategies.

[3] The research is reported to SIKT – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

[4] The visit and also the Dialogos project, within which the philosophical dialogue was reflected upon in this essay, were part of the projects *Quality in Teacher Education – Joining Forces through Internationalisation* (JOIN) and *Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway* (TeachIN). Associate Professor Åsmund Aamaas was the coordinator from the University of South-Eastern Norway, and Professor Sanjeev Sonawane was the coordinator from Savitribai Phule Pune University. Both projects were funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-Dir) through the NOTED programme (JOIN 2017–2024) and UTFORSK (TeachIN 2022–2025), respectively.

[5] Translated to English, it says that our creation is Guru *Brahma* – the force of creation. The duration of our lives is Guru *Vishnu* – the force of preservation. Our trials, tribulations, illnesses, calamities and the death of the body are Guru *devo Maheshwara* – the force of destruction or transformation. And finally, there is a guru nearby, *Guru Sakshat,* and a Guru that is beyond the beyond, *param Brahma*. Finally, it says that I make my offering – *tasmai* – to the beautiful – *shri* – remover of my darkness, my ignorance, and it is to you *Guru,* I bow and lay down my life – *namah.*

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