

What is a teacher? Well, that depends!

By

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Goal of presentation: Reflect on how key concepts in education are extremely context-dependent and often changing.

This has several implications for what a teacher can be said to be in a given context (there is no universal definition of the teacher shared by all) and how we can understand (analyse) the teacher in context.

Key concept: Teacher imaginary

Examples used: Norwegian, English, and French contexts – and the Norwegian, English, and French languages, with some minor references to Spain. These are contexts I have studied extensively over the past 12 years and languages I am more or less fluent in.

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- Teacher, master, professor, docent
 - English: **Teacher**
 - One certificate, the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
 - French: « **professeur** » (professor) today
 - Primary teacher: Historically called a **maître** (master), but lately this has changed to professeur des écoles (professor of primary). This is argued to be a change of conception and not just of name (see e.g., Prost, 2014).
 - Secondary teacher: professeur du second degré (or informally: secondaire, collège, lycée) or **agrégée**
 - Separate certificates, different concours, different recruitment processes.
 - Similar to e.g., Spain, but there they also have the word « docent » that includes everyone from primary teacher to university professor.
 - Norway: **Lærer**
 - But also: adjunkt, lektor, grunnskolelærer, barnehagelærer (are they teachers?)
 - Multiple certifications as to level, but overlapping (1-7, 5-10, 7-13)

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Pedagogy dictionary

- OED definition: “The art, occupation, or practice of teaching. Also: the theory or principles of education; **a method of teaching based on such a theory.**”
- Le Robert definition: “Science de l'éducation des enfants (et, par extension, des adultes) ; méthode d'enseignement.” [Science of education of children (and, by extension, of adults); **method of teaching**].
- Ordboka definition: “lære eller vitenskap om oppdragelse og undervisning” [Knowledge or science of **upbringing and teaching**].

Didactics dictionary

- OED definition: “**The science, art, or practice of teaching.**”
- Le Robert definition: “Théorie de l'enseignement.” [**Theory of teaching**]
- Ordboka definition: “del av pedagogikken som gjelder selve undervisningen; lære om undervisningsmetoder” [**The part of pedagogy** that concerns the teaching itself; knowledge of teaching methods]

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Thus, there is a need to conceptualize the teacher differently in different contexts.

Teacher as an imaginary (Helgetun & Coppe, 2026; Helgetun et al. 2026)

- A common understanding of what a concept is in a given society
 - i.e., what a given society imagines a teacher to be
 - Subject to change
 - An agreement on what to include and remove. What to remember and forget
 - Rooted in an imagined community by Benedict Anderson
- For more see: Helgetun, J. B., & Coppe, T. (2026). What is teacher education in policy terms? Different imaginaries of the teacher and teacher education in England and France. *European Educational Research Journal*

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Teacher imaginaries today

- France: Agent of the Republic
 - Civil servant
 - Makes citizens out of the rabble
 - Master of their subject
 - Performance of the nation
 - Top-down
 - Didactics – pedagogy split
- Norway: Pedagogue of the nation
 - Educate the spirit of the people
 - Upbringing and knowledge
 - Bottom up
 - Pedagogy above all
- England: Craftsperson
 - Knowledge
 - Individual
 - Transmitters of skills
 - Holistic

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- Teacher imaginaries of the future
 - Digital teachers
 - AI-as teacher
 - AI replaces teachers. Humans as guides. Alpha school
 - Technology driven teacher
 - Technology before the human. Techno pedagogy. The human must use technology to teach well
 - Cyborg
 - Human and machine in symbiosis. Teacher enact technology. Together they enact learning
 - Teacher as master of technology
 - The teacher codes. OECD promotes this but unrealistically today
 - How does a teacher master technology?
 - How does this connect to the purpose of teaching. The teacher imaginary.

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Upshot:

- There are multiple ways to imagine the teacher, that are locally anchored and dynamic
- How different actors envision the teacher of today, or of the future, differs even if the words used may be the same
- There is no universal view on what the teacher is or ought to be
- Promotion of singular visions of the teacher are doomed to fail and are misleading
- We cannot simply say teachers need to know more pedagogy and/or didactics for example, without clarifying what is meant by pedagogy and didactics