

Maternal Thinking

Philosophy, Politics, Practice

Edited by
Andrea O'Reilly



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twentieth anniversary of the publication of Sara Ruddick's *Maternal
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MATERNAL THINKING

PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS, PRACTICE

The year 2009 marks twenty years since the publication of Sara Ruddick's monumental text *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, a book that is regarded, along with Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, as the most significant work in maternal scholarship and the new field of Motherhood Studies. What made *Maternal Thinking* so life-changing and ground-breaking was that it foregrounded what all mothers know: motherwork is inherently and profoundly an intellectual activity and theorized the obvious—Mothers think. This volume, published to commemorate and celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Maternal Thinking*, explores the impact and influence this book has had on maternal scholarship and revisits what motherhood scholars regard as the pivotal insights of Ruddick's text: motherwork is a practice that gives rise to and is informed by "maternal thinking"; mothering, as a practice, is composed of and characterized by particular characteristics; this work is not defined by or reducible to gender; and maternal thinking makes possible a politics a peace. The volume includes 17 contributors from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, literature, philosophy, education, women's studies and psychology and features a conversation with and an epilogue by Sara Ruddick.



Andrea O'Reilly is associate professor in the School of Women's Studies at York University and is founder and director of The Association for Research on Mothering and Demeter Press. She is author of *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* and editor of fourteen collections, including with Liz Podnieks *Textual Mothers: Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literatures* (2009). She is editor of the first ever encyclopedia on motherhood (2010).

"I was transformed by Sara Ruddick's Maternal Thinking when it was first published. Now we have a stunning collection of essays by writers, social scientists, philosophers and activists illustrating how profound an effect the very idea of 'maternal thinking,' in all its implications, has had on them. I was educated and moved, reminded and expanded, by the writers whose work fills this crucial collection."

—JANE LAZARRE, author of *The Mother Knot* and *Beyond The Whiteness of Whiteness*

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The Mother in Mr. Chips¹

Educating Artists and Maternal Thinking

DENISE FERRIS

In her earliest essay on maternal thinking, Sara Ruddick writes with great economy, distinguishing *thought* in the practice of mothering—"This is a paper about the head of the mother (1983: 213)."² Revealing the self-sacrificing ubiquitous mother depicted in a Victorian poem, Ruddick makes a more telling point—detecting the anxiety provoked by an estimation of the mother's truly powerful component, her head, which represents the potency of maternal thought.

In this chapter I consider the first two parts of Ruddick's later book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. There the thought growing out of doing mothering work in "Thinking About Mothers Thinking," and the work of care in "Protection, Nurturance, and Training," is foregrounded. Since Ruddick's conception of maternal thought offers me a way of articulating the teaching practices of certain women and men in creative arts academia, I write about the head of a teacher.³ Furthermore it presents an opportunity to value modes of thinking in these practices—not as charismatic trimmings but as approaches essential to quality pedagogical standards.

Applying the attributes of maternal practice, summarised by Ruddick from her extensive philosophical considerations, I argue that the imperatives of an art school education, its necessities, create comparable reactive thought patterns, like those so meticulously described by Ruddick in her book. I make a case that aesthetic education's "community of practice" models environments where a kind of thinking similar to maternal thinking is potentially used. I contend that the ways in which teaching is undertaken in these situations allows the attentiveness and scrutiny manifest in the thought behind maternal care.

By drawing similarities between maternal thinking and an educator's thinking, I have no desire to dilute the singularity of maternal thought but rather to affirm its indisputable existence. It is my intention to foreground and give due value to traits in maternal thought that I suggest are also inherent to excellent teaching practice—traits too readily and too often associated with the instinctive "emotional" heart not the purposeful "thinking" head.

Almost twenty years after it was published, I read Ruddick's book and was

astounded by the cogent argument, with its subtle distinctions and its firm philosophical grasp on the essence of maternal practice. Its case for specificity of thought in maternal practice was recounted with such clarity, it left me gasping, nodding and grinning in agreement. Ruddick's tone never veered to any high moral (waste) ground and intellectual precision defined its considerable parameters. It is a truly clever text, densely crammed with meticulous logic and sound estimations. Nevertheless for my extrapolations of Ruddick's thoughtful rationale, the way I use it as a model, and for any unsound conclusions, I take full responsibility.

It had occurred to me there were correlations between the considerations I made in my teaching practice and certain deliberations of my mothering life. Then a colleague's remark, that as a teacher I was the "nurturing type," threw into relief the low value others knowingly or unknowingly gave to the activity of nurture, projecting it as a manifestation of personality and instinct, a tendency that just can't be helped.

That backhanded compliment, which construed nurture as "natural," a "type," rather than an intellectual choice of action, slyly designated such conduct to a realm of insignificance beside the cultivation of apparently higher intentions. This collegiate slight and the idea of 'natural' nurture, motivated further reflection since I agree with Ruddick, that nurture can be an act of will. And further, a resolve that I fully appreciate is no mean feat in any practice of care.

I considered how a nurturing consciousness and the high value I gave to its implementation, informed my intellectual process of teaching. How it influenced, in fact led, my teaching ethos and that of others. Whenever I mention these deliberations, which associate maternal thinking and teaching in applied arts, colleagues nod sagely. They know that women shoulder much of the required pastoral care, certainly on our campus and I presume elsewhere. However this paper is not about pastoral care, although along with attentive thought, pastoral care does belong at the crucially effective, 'pointy' end of educational methods, with an intrinsic function in arts pedagogy.

A kind of thought, modelled on the maternal form, does matter in tertiary education. In a university we teach with a potent opportunity to guide the evolving maturity of emergent individuals who will imminently have an impact socially and culturally. For them, at the very least, we may influence how inevitable challenges are administered and therefore absorbed. Even at tertiary level, lecturers as teachers, occupy an interface that is fundamental to the transmission of understandings that are vitally important for the futures of students and their social networks.

We can readily imagine how the teaching discipline is associated with mothering's qualities, which Ruddick reveals here, clarifying that mothers engage in a discipline:

...the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms...

mother caring for children engages in a discipline. She asks certain questions... rather than others; she accepts certain criteria for the truth, adequacy, and relevance of proposed answers; and she cares about the findings she makes and can act on. The discipline of maternal thought, like other disciplines, establishes criteria for determining failure and success, sets priorities, and identifies virtues that the discipline requires. (24)

Thought arises out of social practice, because practice responds to a reality, which presents certain demands, Ruddick explains (15). Interests in preserving and understanding individual and group life shape our response to these demands. It is the intensity in teaching and my comprehension of the importance of that intensity, which allows me to speculate on the similar qualities of the disciplines of particular teaching and the maternal. My understanding of the intellectual activities, feelings, judgements and self-reflection occurring in learning, also inform my views.

I teach in a Visual Arts Degree Program for hands-on practitioners, its basis is the fine art tradition of studio practice and theory. Evidently there are technologies to be mastered and skills to be acquired. Ideas develop from the individual's imagination and life, as well as the history, theories and contemporary issues of the discipline. To enable the process of making innovative work, the context of practice and intellectual development is essential. This necessitates building a methodology, one that is repeatable, which ingrains a working practice independent of institutional support. Establishing the capability for critical thinking and decision making in each individual leads to this practice being independent and sustainable.

In the program there are lectures, classes and tutorials, where the groups of ten to twenty are small, relative to other kinds of educational deliveries. Within a specialised discipline there are frequent critique and group sessions, where peers discuss each other's work. There are individual tutorials, for it is expected that each student is working on an individual production. This learning mode relies on careful attention by the academic coordinator, who oversees all studio work, with an intensity that may seem surprising (and luxurious). Each teaching department could be described as familial—with many of the same tensions.

Ruddick states that as mothers we are presented with the child who must be cared for and whose growth must be fostered (82-102). Change is required and often shaped to the companion generation but also forms a "next" generation. Ruddick notes how we must "welcome change" in maternal practice (89). As teachers we also lead students who need to realise their capabilities for future art making. These students are also trained to develop professional characteristics that suit the current generation, audience and market as well as establishing the change demanded by the next generation of artists, encouraged to innovate, pushing the boundaries of acceptability.

PERFORMING THE ESSENTIALS: PROTECTION, NURTURE AND TRAINING

Key philosophies in maternal thinking may be observed in the teaching methods I describe and these are central to the learning needs of art students. This model of pedagogy does not 'mother' students but acts out values essential to teaching in art education, promoting excellence in pedagogical standards by instigating policies of nurture. In both mothering and teaching, the will to implement recognised standards must be asserted.

Maternal thought's essential activities as defined by Ruddick are performing protection, nurture and training. These attributes are perhaps self-evident in any pedagogical model. But the learning paradigm in arts based tertiary teaching is particular, as I explain later in greater length. In short the expectation of originality within the applied, creative arts studio context necessitates problem-based learning strategies, the very currency of learning. This creates a paradigm where special teaching approaches are also necessary.

In this context, protection may be understood as using hierarchical power wisely. Transmitting awareness of 'big picture' parameters integral to strategic development and providing the security of support for experimental practice are educational goals. Suitable nurturance promotes confidence and self-esteem, qualities fundamental to the practice of art, where decision-making relies on the confidence to initiate and innovate for speculative outcomes. Experiments in learning and failures in practice are generally supported since originality and continual innovation is customary.

Training promotes understanding of methodology and ability, in other words the comprehension and insight to repeat outcomes by fostering critical thinking that relishes ongoing questions and problems. The art producer is a social group where goals are widely agreed, and pedagogical power assigns and measures achievement, with expectations of standards. However the concept of achievement could remain just that, a model belonging to the institution, the successes judged only within the limits of institutional frameworks. Ruddick is careful to make the point—training within the dominant culture is prescribed by its values (109). Teachers, like mothers, are presented with an opportunity, at times limited, to demand and ensure institutional values are examined in a broader context.

RESPONDING TO DEMAND: PRESERVATION, GROWTH AND ACCEPTABILITY

Preservation, growth and social acceptability are the interests Ruddick explains are a response to children's demands (17). I extrapolate these interests to examine those responding to the requirements of visual art students at university, where there are corresponding demands. In tertiary teaching preservation could be seen as sustainability of training, success in practice perhaps, development as

intellectual growth, and acceptability as the acknowledgement of fitting into the current culture and contributing to a future one, communicating and having resonance in the culture.

PRESERVATION

Ruddick draws out the issues in preserving the life of the child, without restrictive or excessive control, acknowledging fearfulness as an issue in mothering. Likewise, teachers afraid to allow individuality to readily emerge are caught in a similar bind. Those overly conscious of unimportant regulations, whose ego is predominant in dealings with students and who wish to triumph over the less powerful student, are unable to enact the necessary "letting go" articulated by Ruddick (91). Too much control risks student's individuality and independent development.

Ruddick argues for the virtues of humility and resilient cheerfulness in maternal thinking and against the cheery denials of maternal practice. The denial described, veiling difficult matters and ignoring thorny ones, is reminiscent of the possible reluctance by teachers to address student issues as they arise. As teaching terms are short and intense, dealing with awkward situations and addressing these in good time is part of active pedagogical best practice. Glossing over issues, ignoring what adjustments could, and should occur, is particularly detrimental to students working to a prescribed institutional timeframe in speculative, experimental practices.

Quoting the philosopher Iris Murdoch, Ruddick expands on the ability to maintain the appropriate degree of direction over those being cared for and doing so with good grace. Murdoch discusses chance and our inability to dominate all natural things of the world including the mind itself.

One might say that chance is a subdivision of death.... Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of virtues. (95)

As teachers, this reminds us of the pedagogical benefits of viewing the unavoidable effects of chance realistically. This respect for reality and the actuality of events is a mode of thinking that communicates significant lessons to our students.

GROWTH

In the visual arts, students move forward with their work by proposing ongoing change, which culminates in an array of resolutions, there is not inevitable certitude. Ruddick could be describing teaching in the visual arts when describing maternal thinking's response to changing realities. "The work of fostering

growth," Ruddick says, "provokes or requires a welcoming response to change. This welcoming attitude ... is the most exigent intellectual demand on those who foster growth" (89).

ACCEPTABILITY

Maternal efforts to raise children who are acceptable members of the group is analogous to the aim for reproducing graduates to fit into expected social and professional networks. Art school graduates are encouraged to visually transmit ideas, reporting on their time, feeding work to the cultural memory bank. Both disciplines of mothering and teaching are conducted within the parameters of social situations. In defining the ethos of the larger social site neither have substantial influence or power with respect to certain determinations of ultimate standards.

Of course, there are clear differences between maternal fundamentals and those of the tertiary teacher. The maternal appreciates their own child, and transferring ideals, instills life values and morals. The teacher is charged with greater detachment from an intimate understanding, even though each student is valued as an individual. There is the possibility of a more objective position relative to a mothering role, but nonetheless through mentoring there is a transmission of ethics also conveying implicit standards.

Ruddick in a section of the book titled, "Maternal Thinking from a Feminist Standpoint" envisages a future where maternal thinkers are "respected and self-respecting" (127-139). Moreover the teacher finding many dominant values in the institution unacceptable will insist on its critical appraisal, often from the basis of feminist belief. These struggles in academia undoubtedly mirror negotiations of power and equity in the world outside education.

THE SPECIFICITY OF ART TRAINING

As I mentioned earlier, teaching students to cultivate a practice within arts based culture happens in specific conditions that encourage particular teaching modes. The art school is distinctive from two points of view — the particular circumstances of teaching and the special kinds of resourceful learning needing to take place.

The teaching delivery in small classes promotes intense relationships with a strong understanding of individual motivations, an expectation that individuals will evolve, each in their own way. Ruddick, referring to the potential in exploratory even loose discussion between mother and child notes, "Developing habits of conversational reflection depends on ongoing mutual trust (118)." In art training trust is developed in a range of situations that are personally exposing, for example, the critique session where the visual work students produce is constantly appraised with others in groups. Trust is built from recognition that a vigilant teacher conducts these sessions in positive ways and knows about

an individual's progress and process, a consequence of what Ruddick names "careful attention" (123).

In this distinct environment the student's learning and what is necessary to learn is comparable in some respects to the child's growth. An art school in a university has expanded possibilities and strong expectancy for broad learning, including learning through peers, learning outside the curriculum, across discipline and gaining indefinable understandings. What really constitutes the content of learning in the visual arts is important to clarify here.

While they establish an underlying framework, neither skills nor theory form the entirety of learning. Questioning values, resistance to the dominant ethos and ethics transmitted in teaching, not just professional skills, are part of that learning. A number of studies have found non-cognitive skills, certain attitudes promoting developmental risk taking—"soft skills" rather than "hard skills" are significant in visual arts education. A study of the particularities of aesthetics education notes, "Perhaps it is not skills at all that art courses develop, perhaps it is the promotion of certain attitudes that promote risk taking and hard work" (Eisner 24).

Other disciplines, training firemen perhaps or coaching sport, may exhibit maternal thinking's attributes. However, in visual arts unique features stand out, making this pedagogy (and for all I know similar disciplines) strongly connected with maternal thinking's characteristics. I argue that creativity is not some magic light bulb but the formation within social systems of the ability to empathise, understand and communicate examined ideas. These qualities can be, and are developed, through high quality art training. Teaching environments in the art school are connected to "the community of practice," a term coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (Wenger).

This principle of communal practice is based on the recognition that human knowledge is a social act and there are three main elements forming such a community. The domain of interest, where there are considerable, shared concerns is one. The second is a community where interaction around a practice, activities of learning and sharing knowledge of that practice takes place. The last marker of Wenger and Lave's concept is the practitioner, where through time and sustained interaction the common practice affords participants, its practitioners, many insights, much learning and shared knowledge.

THE CREATIVE TEACHER AND THEIR STUDENT

Maintaining a dual practice, teachers at art schools demonstrate that they are active practitioners, makers in the art discipline that they also teach. They are immersed in the discipline with students as peers and as active members of an art community. Communicating with those who have related interests also facilitates strong recognition of the necessity of emotional management in building and retaining such creative communities, with commonality of practice.

The process of socialisation where visual art students work with peers, relying on feedback from them to progress their work in an atmosphere of trust and support (and rigorous critique), creates environments that are also observed in maternal practice. The development of student self-esteem imparted in studio teaching through positive support is a critical to learning. This understanding is supported by a student's production of artwork—material proof of their development. That self-reflection is fundamental, that the process of critical appraisal is ongoing and that shifting refinements resolve work in progress is inherent to building sustainable working methods. This is at the core of what, and how, we teach in the visual arts.

The pedagogical model I have discussed does not 'mother' students, certainly not in the ways that envisage a mother figure as a purely emotional centre, the heart, without the intentional point, the head. The model recognizes the essentials of art education, promotes the necessities of nurture in pedagogy and acknowledges the breadth of teaching strategies that impart necessary competencies. These demonstrate Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave's community of practice, confirming similarities of purpose between maternal and teaching practice.

PAYING ATTENTION: ORDERING AND VALUING

To consider maternal thinking's demands, interests and capacities and align these specifically with creative arts teaching could be just a simple explanation of an apparent synchronicity in maternal and pedagogical environments. However the idea of "attention," an insistent mode of practice in both disciplines, compels recognition of genuine similarities in these disciplines, when practised to "capacity." This "attentive" love centres on attaching significance to observations leading to purposeful understanding and "clear-sighted attachment" as Ruddick says (123). This committed focus leads to a fuller knowledge and an ability to negotiate accordingly what action needs to take place.

Thinking of another in the first instance occurs as an aspect of this strategy, not as an act of martyrdom. (We must not forget that teachers are paid workers but it is the order of achievement I'm concerned with here.) I have stressed, attention requires effort and self-training. Ruddick again quotes Murdoch who suggests that full and useful comprehension accrues from attending. This is what Murdoch says:

The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking,' making those little peering efforts of imagination which have important cumulative results. (Murdoch 43)

As I have suggested, the potential for attentive teaching is determined by the circumstances of how teaching is routinely practised in the visual arts. Further,

careful teaching is characterised by connective attention, which bothers with defining optimum receptivity.

Ruddick acknowledges that some who are not mothers may show this consideration and yet they are enacting maternal ways (42). The performance of teaching is not one of the unchangeable circumstances of care such as gestation, infant development and dependency, so enactment by those other than women or mothers is feasible. These acts are in a potential mode and need to be acted out as acts of will, as Ruddick continues to argue, "Attentive love is a discipline (122)." Further Ruddick interweaving words states, "Maternal thinking is a discipline in attentive love (123)."

That mothers actually think differently, ordering and valuing, in maternal activity, not because they are perfect people but because this is required, qualifies Ruddick's claim for maternal thought. This is the crux, the apparently minor but crucial point that I return to again and again when I observe teaching practice, especially practice with outstanding qualities. The will to prescribe importance, putting others first in pedagogy, mirrors the model of maternal thinking and a capacity for attentive consideration.

I am not referring to self-sacrifice but altruistic teaching with a high order of engagement. The potential for rigorous evaluation, with a comprehension of the importance of sound judgements, the quality of thought as part of a teaching role, allows teachers to move between being supervisors and teachers to acting as examiners to those we have taught. As Ruddick makes clear, thinking arises from and is tested against practices, which are collective human activities distinguished by aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims (13).

In an art teacher's consideration of practice, there's opportunity to recognise the student's position, to acutely realise their situation. This conceptualisation of empathy and shared membership is another illustration of the ideas of "community of practice" referred to previously. "What are you going through (121)?" This question, and the empathy behind its enquiry, is central to practising mothers and teachers, for it is those who are disseminating the workings of their own discipline.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SERVICE

Art is also complicated by perceptions of its status as a discipline. It is often not perceived as a subject that can be taught. Being successful with art is something people assume is simply a gift or innate talent. I've been asked many times, how can art actually be taught? Like the discipline of mothering, struggling with the apparent invisibility of its existence, teaching art grapples with views that it is superfluous. While mothering may be devalued or sentimentalised, it is also regrettable that the nurture essential to the teaching discipline should be diminished and belittled rather than central to pedagogical methodology.

Ruddick recognises in the commitment to carrying out maternal thinking,

the necessity of genuine equity and authentic equality (109-116). Accordingly Ruddick sees problems of social adherence by the mother who may have to refuse dominant authority for adequate maternal thinking to function (109). Power relations in educational structures are also fraught with challenges. Teaching in a way that values and orders students above all else, fully attentive to their needs, sometimes in conflict with powerful authority can also damage the very influence needed to be strategically valuable to one's students. This requires maintaining a finely balanced commitment between the institution and students, which may diverge.

Elaborating on the dilemmas presented when women are unclear about the authenticity of their maternal position, Ruddick notes how the very role itself is questioned (112). The conflict arises from the desire to provide what is needed while acknowledging there is a fundamental inequity, a cost, in the provision of such care. This is highly pertinent to hierarchies within education. It states the need for power and affirmation for the often-undervalued aspects of teaching—recall the mildly derisive view of nurture. In arts academia, and elsewhere in teaching, there may not be the equivalent recognition for teaching practice, relative to other academic endeavours, such as research and its associated required self-promotion.

For academics who teach, the human desire for class and status is confronted by the reality of what is socially valuable on the one hand and what is socially rewarded, on the other. These are often quite different and valuing the importance of educational care, educators like maternal thinkers, Ruddick urges, should question the continuing support for a system that does not recognise the value of such thought or its crucial contribution (113).

On the other hand Ruddick notes characteristics in maternal thinking do not "presume maternal achievement" but rather "a *conception* of achievement, the end to which maternal efforts are directed" (24). I temper my earnest description of an ideal teaching practice by acknowledging that the exemplary teaching I describe, does and can, take place. However it's necessary to acknowledge that not everyone and not all the time are these expected standards achieved.

I acknowledge the disparity between ideal crit sessions and mediocre encounters that should and could be better. I recognise the distance between theory and practice, the gap between absorption and lecturing over repetitive and numerous contact hours. Concerned that I appear an unreal paragon; I wryly accept how life continues to wedge itself between the *idea* of accomplishment and the *actual* accomplishment. Nevertheless my teaching experiences continue to disclose the importance of remembering the significance of a curriculum of attentive care.

In summary, Ruddick defines the core contribution of maternal thought as distinctive, originating out of the work being done. Certainly I observe that colleagues working with optimum pedagogical direction appear to have assimilated a kind of *thought* conspicuously close to aspects of maternal thought Ruddick describes throughout the book. That this should be so, is a result of

the shared necessities of both its interests and the demands of its participants, as I hope I've explained, my thoughts inspired by the stirring well-argued wisdom of Sara Ruddick's extraordinary thinking.

¹*Good-bye Mr. Chips* was a novel by James Hilton, subsequently made into a number of films. The story essentially follows the evolution of Mr. Chipping, a school teacher, initially distant from his students, who eventually becomes an inspirational teacher, whose nickname is Mr. Chips. The aging teacher later upholds humanist values in response to the crisis of war impacting on the school, its alumni, and staff.

²The quote is from the 1983 essay, "Maternal Thinking," but all other numbered references are from the book cited.

³Though Ruddick believes that maternal thinking exists differently for men than women (and I agree), elsewhere as noted here, Ruddick is clear about more general gender possibilities in the care of children and in other kinds of practices. "Many women and some men express maternal thinking in various kinds of working and caring." (Ruddick 1983: 225.); "...mothers of both sexes" (Ruddick 1983: 227).

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