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## **Paper 33**

### **Dialogue in schools: Towards a pragmatic approach**

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## Dialogue in schools – toward a pragmatic approach<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In this paper I question the relevance and appropriateness of prevailing ideals of dialogue for educational practice within schools. First, I examine five core aspects common to most theories: dialogue as a communicative pattern, dialogue as a means of learning, dialogue as an epistemological stance, dialogue as an orientation toward content and dialogue as a relation. This discussion highlights central tensions inherent to any approach to dialogue. Second, I show how structural features of schooling render the dialogical ideal close to impossible. I propose a pragmatic theory of dialogue for schooling, which is appropriate to teacher and pupil institutional roles, sensitive to the large number of participants in a whole class setting and involves the negotiation of tensions inherent to the conduct of dialogue.

Dialogue, as an ideal, has become rather fashionable. It is proposed as remedy to a broad variety of issues, including irrationality, false consciousness, multi-cultural strife, ineffective learning, textual understanding, the creation of civil society, post-modern ethics and what it means to be human. It is enthusiastically embraced by educators working in philosophical enquiry, sociolinguistic research, teacher preparation and policy. Having crossed every other threshold, one is tempted to conclude, its entrance into our classrooms is merely a matter of time.

Yet, ethnographic and linguistic studies repeatedly show that the overwhelming majority of classroom interactions adhere to the infamous Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) framework (Cazden, 2001).<sup>2</sup> In this deeply ingrained pattern, teachers *initiate* discourse by lecturing or asking predominately predictable, closed questions, usually designed to test pupils' recall of previously transmitted knowledge and/or to discipline inattention. Pupils *respond* with one- or two-word answers. Teachers *evaluate* student responses, praising correct answers ("well done!") and censuring error ("you haven't been paying attention!"). Teachers dominate talk by controlling the topic and allocation of turns, by speaking more often than pupils and for longer periods of time and, indirectly, by privileging pupil contributions that are essentially a re-voicing of previous teacher utterances.

The persistence of non-dialogical teaching in the face of so much enthusiasm should give us pause: Why hasn't dialogue become a common form of classroom discourse? True believers round up the usual suspects: "inept" teachers, an over-crowded curriculum, managerialism, the audit society, "youth today". While each of these explanations may account for part of the failure to make schools more dialogical, I am troubled by this general line of reasoning, in which theories of dialogue themselves remain largely unquestioned. In this essay<sup>3</sup>, I seek to shift the focus: rather than positing a dialogical ideal and decrying schools for not living up to that standard, I question prevailing common sense about educational dialogue against the background of current structures and cultures of schooling. I

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<sup>1</sup> The first two sections of this paper were presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, April 3, 2004. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the participants' comments.

<sup>2</sup> Recent UK studies of primary school discourse include: Burns & Myhill (2004); Galton (1999), Moyles (2003), and Smith et. al. (2004). But see Rampton (2006) for different findings in secondary school.

<sup>3</sup> To clarify: I am not suggesting that problems with the dialogical model is the only or even the primary factor in the failure to make schools more dialogical. Perhaps the most significant factor is the resilience of interactional genres, an issue I discuss at length elsewhere (Lefstein, 2005).

argue that *idealistic* models of dialogue are ultimately inimical to formal educational practice, and propose in their stead a *pragmatic*<sup>4</sup> approach better suited to the school context.

This paper is organized in three sections: the first is an exploration of the dialogical ideal, including connotations, constitutive image, core aspects and inherent tensions. In the second section I discuss initial contours of a pragmatic model of dialogue, which is adapted to schooling's institutional roles, the curriculum, and the large number of participants in the whole class setting. In the final section, I examine the very promising model of "dialogical teaching" currently being developed by Robin Alexander.<sup>5</sup>

### **The dialogical ideal**

A plurality of theories of dialogue reflects the lengthy genealogy of the concept and the plurality of issues and contexts to which it has been and is applied (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Nevertheless, most theories share some core qualities, images, patterns and concerns. In the following discussion I explicate those common characteristics, and highlight the tensions between and within central approaches.

*On the occasion of invoking "dialogue"*. Before discussing the content of the concept "dialogue", it is useful to look at the contexts and manners in which it is commonly employed. I follow Bauman (2001: 1), who notes that "words have meanings: some words, however, also have a 'feel'." Like "community", which is the focus of Bauman's study, "dialogue" feels good. Even prior to agreeing about what it means – or perhaps *because* agreement has not yet been attempted – there is general consensus that "dialogue" is beneficial, an ideal worth striving toward, and that it doesn't happen as often as it ought.

What goods are implied by "dialogue"? What are the "bads" that occasion its invocation? "Dialogue" suggests plurality and equality in opposition to authoritarian voices that try to dominate all others; it suggests openness and thoughtfulness as antidotes for the combativeness and dogmatism that commonly characterize argument and debate; and it offers a path toward understanding in instances in which interlocutors have become deaf to one another's concerns.

These oppositions construct an *idealized* dialogue, which excludes the aforementioned "bads" by ascribing them to "monologism". Gurevitch (2000: 246) criticizes this approach, which he finds prevalent in Bakhtinian theory:

By insisting on dialogue as a remedy, it tends to oversimplify the instability and threat inherent in dialogue... Even in the more competent, good willing and compatible encounter, the 'other side of dialogue' does not disappear. Illuminating only the blessed plurality and semioticity, [dialogue] leaves out of the picture of sociality the Other side, that of strain, tension and silence.

Having been purified of threats and tensions, idealized dialogue appears as a solution, equal to problems posed by any and all contexts. As such, it can serve as a powerful image with which to critique current practice. It is less useful, I shall argue in the second half of this paper, as a guide for how that practice should be changed.

*The Socratic legacy.* The roots of the dialogical ideal can be traced back to the image of Socrates. Although there is little consensus about his method (and whether "method" is an apt characterization), Socrates stands out as the archetypical dialogical instigator, participant and guide (see Burbules, 1990; Haroutinian-Gordon, 1989; Reich, 1998; and Sichel, 1998 for

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<sup>4</sup> "Pragmatic" here is intended to invoke James' philosophical Pragmatism, not "pragmatics" in the linguistic sense.

<sup>5</sup> The first two sections were written for a Philosophy of Education audience, and draw primarily upon and enter into debates in that field. The final section was written two years later, and bears the marks of my more recent interest in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

interpretations of the Socratic legacy). And what does Socrates do? He seeks out conversational partners and inquires into their ideas. He questions them at length, subjecting their ideas and other commonly held doctrines to intense critical scrutiny. He is driven to dialogue by awareness of his own ignorance and passion for knowledge. He does not always infect his interlocutors with that passion, but he invariably provokes thinking. He appears, as Plato (1952: 458a) portrays him explaining in the *Gorgias*, to be

one of those who are happy to be refuted if they make a false statement, happy also to refute anyone else who may do the same, yet no less happy to be refuted than to refute. For I think the former a greater benefit, in proportion as it is of greater benefit to be oneself delivered from the greatest harm than to deliver another. No worse harm, it is true, can befall a man than to hold wrong opinions on the matters now under discussion between us.

From Socrates' character and actions we can reconstruct some of the core aspects of dialogue: (1) It is a form of verbal interaction, between at least two participants, who exchange ideas by means of question-and-answer and debate. (2) It is a means of learning about the world, clarifying ideas and developing understanding. (3) It is a state of mind or epistemological stance. (4) It is a critical orientation toward knowledge and ideas. (5) It is a dynamic relationship. I elaborate on these five themes below.

(1) *Dialogue as a communicative pattern.* At first glance the question of whether an activity should be considered “dialogue” appears to be a question of discourse patterns. In this “structures” orientation, a few people discussing an idea through questions, answers and the exchange of ideas would be considered “dialogue”. On the other hand, two people shouting insults at one another, or a teacher lecturing a group of docile pupils, or a candidate in a job interview being grilled by a panel, or a group of people meditating in silence would not be deemed “dialogue”.

The characterization of dialogue as a communicative pattern naturally leads to identification, prescription and enforcement of communicative procedures or rules. For example, a recent Department of Education and Skills (2003: 22) *Handbook* directs teachers' behaviour by a list of *Do's* (e.g. “expect children to speak for all to hear” and “vary your responses to what children say... in order to extend the dialogue”) and *Don'ts* (“routinely repeat or reformulate what children have said” and “just ask questions”). Burbules (1993: 80-82), in a philosophical treatment of dialogical norms, posits three rules: participation (“engagement... must be voluntary and open to active involvement by any of its participants”), commitment (“engagement... must allow the flow of conversation to be persistent and extensive across a range of shared concerns...”) and reciprocity (“engagement... must be undertaken in a spirit of mutual respect and concern... what we expect of others we must expect of ourselves”).

However, the focus on the external forms, procedures or rules governing interaction ignores those elements of the dialogical *spirit* that the discourse patterns are assumed to reflect: the substance of the talk, the conversational context, and, most importantly, participants' motivations and dispositions. Thus, in a recent review of theory and research on teaching as dialogue Burbules and Bruce (2001) call for going

beyond the idea that dialogue can be simply characterized as a particular pattern of question and answer among two or more people. Many instances of pedagogical communicative relations that might have this external form are not dialogical in spirit or involvement, while interactions that may not have this particular form can be. (p. 1110)

Burbules and Bruce's emphasis on dialogue's internal spirit is consistent with their categorization of dialogue as primarily a *relation* (see also Burbules, 1993). While I agree that the tendency to reduce dialogue to patterns or procedures is too simplistic, it is problematic to view discourse patterns only as an external manifestation of relations. Indeed,

there is an implicit tension in interaction between an emphasis on patterns and rules on the one hand, and attention to relationships on the other. This tension becomes apparent, for example, when one tries to invoke a rule in an intimate relation, or to develop a friendship in a highly bureaucratic environment. A corollary: the more fragile the relationships between partners in dialogue, the more important rules and procedures become.

(2) *Dialogue as a means of learning.* Educationalists have been attracted to dialogue as a means of improving cognition, developing understanding and learning (e.g. Hicks, 1996; Mercer, 1995, 2000; Nystrand et. al. 1997; Wells, 1999). There are many ways to interpret this process. In the *Theaetetus* Plato uses the metaphor of midwifery: Socrates recognizes when his interlocutor is pregnant with thought; instigates, intensifies and allays the pains of labour; and thereby delivers ideas. The “highest point of [Socrates’] art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man’s thought is a false phantom, or instinct with life and truth” (Plato, 1957). In this final sense, dialogue is a method for testing hypotheses – a thinking laboratory for conjectures and refutations.

The significance of dialogue as a means of learning lies not only in the quality of its offspring, but also in the very participation in the process. If, as Vygotsky (1978) claims, “all the higher [cognitive] functions originate as actual relations between human individuals”, then taking part in high quality interpersonal dialogue should lead to the development of high quality cognitive abilities. In this view, higher order critical thinking is *internalized* dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

In this sociocultural approach, as I have (simplistically) outlined it above, dialogue is primarily an exercise for developing and sharpening cognitive abilities (reflecting Vygotsky’s psychological interest). But there is a deeper way in which dialogue underlies learning: not only appropriation of the tools of thought, but also the formation of the product, knowledge. Inasmuch as understanding happens – including self-understanding – it occurs in a process of dialogue with Others (including texts). Gadamer (1998) employs the metaphor of *fusion of horizons* to illuminate this process. According to Gadamer, each interlocutor brings to dialogue their own unique perspective, or *horizon* of assumptions, prejudices, expectations and ideas. Participants can only “see” what is on their horizon – i.e. participants’ prejudices limit their thinking and understanding. But the horizon is also enabling; without it, thinking and understanding would be impossible. Another person’s unique horizon has the potential to reflect back to me my own prejudices, and thereby to help me become more conscious of the boundedness of my own understanding.

Dialogue entails a back-and-forth movement, between my own and the Other’s horizons. I am distanced in dialogue from my own prejudices, suspending them in order to engage with the Other. But if prejudices remain forever suspended, then one might be described as “politely listening”, but not truly *engaged*. Engagement implies returning to my prejudices, using the Other’s perspective as leverage for self-understanding and, ultimately, a revision of my own horizon. Thus, dialogue necessitates maintaining the tension between two forms of openness, to the Other and to oneself. This tension can be characterized as a tension between speaking (i.e. asserting one’s own horizon) and listening (suspending own’s one prejudice in order to be addressed by the Other’s horizon).

At the end of a key paragraph describing the fusion of horizons Gadamer emphasizes that horizons only “*supposedly [exist] by themselves*” (1998: 306, emphasis in original). In a sense, they are actually tips of a collective iceberg called tradition. Because our horizons have been nurtured by a shared culture, each meeting with the Other might be better described as a “deepening” (in the sense of getting to the roots of tradition or base of the iceberg) than as a “broadening”. Either way, what’s important for my purpose is to note that dialogical activity also by definition implies understanding of and participation in cultural tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Hicks (1996: 106-7; citing also Wertsch & Stone, 1985) argues that this common interpretation does not reflect the central place of learner agency in Vygotsky’s theory. In her interpretation, the child does not passively internalize cultural tools, but also actively transforms them. In this sense, Vygotsky’s approach to the individual’s encounter with her or his society and culture is closer to Gadamer’s.

(3) *Dialogue as an epistemological stance.* While it is commonplace to talk about the “Socratic” or dialogical *methods*, from the preceding discussion an interpretation emerges in which dialogue is fundamentally an epistemological position. Freire repeatedly emphasizes this theme in clarifications of his pedagogy (e.g. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Shor & Freire, 1987). According to Freire, dialogue is not a better technique for the effective transmission of positive knowledge determined prior to and outside of the learning encounter; rather, knowledge – at least knowledge of society, culture and self – is itself formed in the dialogical process.

Being conscious of and accepting this epistemology leads to *humility* – recognizing one’s own ignorance, the inherent limitations of one’s own knowledge – and *openness* to the Other. Consider two extremes, both of which reflect an essential closedness of mind: (1) I assume that relative to me the Other is an all-knowing authority on the matter under consideration, and do not speak, only listen; and (2) I assume a position of authority, believing that relative to me the Other is utterly ignorant, and only speak, do not listen. Dialogical openness happens between these two extremes: I assume that both my partner’s and my own horizons are necessary for greater understanding. (Complete understanding is impossible, so openness always seeks more partners and more varieties of difference.)

(4) *Dialogue as critical orientation toward content – questionability.* The epistemological stance underlying dialogue guides participants’ general orientation toward the content of the conversation – a subversive, questioning orientation. Indeed, perhaps one of the reasons the IRE cycle is so repugnant to educational sensibilities is that teachers’ initiations – although often linguistically adhering to the form of questions – are antithetical to questioning as a cognitive activity. A genuine question is one that *problematizes*, i.e. that transforms commonly accepted facts or answers into problems to be explored, thereby opening knowledge up to thinking. Since “the significance of questioning consists in revealing the questionability of what is questioned” (Gadamer, 1998, pg. 363), an emphatic yet controversial statement or subversive narrative can have a more powerful questioning effect than a series of predictable utterances capped with question marks.

Interlocutors oriented toward the questionability of the subject matter tend to gravitate toward controversy and difference, to problematize seemingly straightforward topics and to be sceptically disposed toward their own and others’ ideas. Their nemesis is unthinking conformity to the majority opinion.

Plato shows in an unforgettable way where the difficulty lies in knowing what one does not know. It is the power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance. *It is opinion that suppresses questions.* Opinion has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be the general opinion, just as the word that the Greeks have for opinion, *doxa*, also means the decision made by the majority in the council assembly. (Gadamer, 1998: 366, my emphasis)

This critical, subversive attitude to dominant ideologies, which contributed to Socrates’ demise in Athens, accounts for part of the appeal of dialogue to Freire and fellow critical pedagogues.

Questioning is being open, not only to the possibility that my own or the general opinions are wrong, but also to the possibility that they may be right. For this reason, Gadamer calls questioning an “art of strengthening” (1966: 367). There is a basic tension inherent in this orientation, between sceptical questioning that strives to refute an idea, and faithful questioning that strives to understand and strengthen an idea, or to use Ricoeur’s (1970) terms, between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion. A related tension is between convergent and divergent forces in dialogue: on the one hand, dialogue is forever aimed at creating agreement between interlocutors; on the other hand its continuation is dependent on the persistence of difference.

(5) *Dialogue as a relation*. My discussion until this point has tended to treat dialogue as a meeting of *minds*, without body, emotion or extra-intellectual interests. But ignoring these non-cognitive aspects of human interaction leads to an incomplete and even distorted view of dialogue. Burbules points out that the “cognitive interest is not all that attracts us to the dialogical encounter, or keeps us in it when it becomes difficult or contentious”. This is one of the reasons that, for Burbules, dialogue is chiefly a relation, which thrives on emotions such as “concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection, and hope – [which] are crucial to the bond that sustains a dialogical relation over time” (Burbules, 1993: 41). These emotions are of course closely related to the cognitive openness described above: one is more inclined to respect and appreciate someone from whom one learns and with whom one engages in productive dialogue.

The importance of emotional relations in dialogue lies in the latter’s unpleasant or dangerous “other side” noted by Gurevitch (2000). Openness to the other implies a threat to one’s own identity. Our ideas are invested with emotional energies: extending the midwife metaphor, we become attached to the ideas we have conceived as parents love their children. Few are as Socrates happy to have them refuted. Most, contrary to the view espoused by Socrates above, prefer winning to losing an argument. Partly for this reason, discourse is rarely the cooperative, orderly and attentive affair commonly evoked by the word “dialogue”. Indeed, attention to emotional and relational factors is important specifically because dialogue is also implicated with competition, argument, struggle to be heard, persuasion, “ego” and – like other social arenas – power relations.

The concern with power relations is central to criticisms of dialogue. Habermas, for instance, criticizes Gadamer’s hermeneutic model of understanding as lacking the vantage point from which one can come to terms with power and ideology, which systematically distort communication. He quotes Wellmer (1971) in this regard: “The Enlightenment knew what a philosophical hermeneutic forgets – that the ‘dialogue’ which we, according to Gadamer, ‘are,’ is also a context of domination and as such precisely no dialogue...” (Habermas, 1990: 266).

Paradoxically, a similar concern motivates Freire’s use of dialogue. He decries so-called “revolutionaries” who would use “banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans – deposits) in the name of liberation” (1986: 66). For Freire the only way to truly enable the oppressed to liberate themselves from domination is to engage with them in dialogue. Because dialogue is fundamentally respectful of the Other’s humanity – including experience, intellect and freedom – it is potentially empowering.

However, critical pedagogy’s recourse to dialogue can also be experienced as repressive. “Why doesn’t this feel empowering?” asks Ellsworth (1989) in the title of an oft-cited essay. Ellsworth draws attention to the way in which the call to dialogue is also an exercise of power, with its accompanying assumptions and expectations regarding teacher authority, communication norms, legitimate forms of participation, and privileged differences and identities. Discussion of uneven power relations leads to fundamental questions about the very possibility of dialogue at this particular historical moment.

At one point in her essay Ellsworth suggests that “the only acceptable motivation for following Others into their worlds is friendship” (Ellsworth, 1989: 317, in reference to Lugones & Spelman, 1983). This principle coincides with Noddings’ (1994) concerns in advancing what she calls “ordinary conversation” as an important yet neglected form of educational discourse:

Perhaps most significantly of all, in ordinary conversation, we are aware that our partners in conversation are more important than the topic. Participants are not trying to win a debate; they are not in a contest with an opponent. They are conversing because they like each other and want to be together. The moment is precious in itself’ (p. 115).

This tension, between care for the participants and concern for the topic, is especially acute in situations in which consensus seems beyond reach. At some point in such conversations, if

participants are committed to one another in a dialogical relation, they “almost say to each other: ‘Let us change the topic. We all know what we all know. We have our disagreements, but let us have a small talk as a token of our mutual understanding beyond the subjects that divide us.’” (Sidorkin, 1999: 76) The tension between care for participants and topic is paralleled by a tension between gravity and levity in conversational tone. Sidorkin, drawing on Bakhtin, juxtaposes the light and “nurturing atmosphere of a carnival, where all things seem to be possible and all becomes laughable” to the gravity, discipline and high stakes of formal discussion or debate.

However, there is no escaping the issue of power: while carnival levity may alleviate the oppressiveness of argumentative, truth-seeking discourse for some, it can become repressive for others. Similarly, it is impossible to regard conversational partners as more important than the topic in cases in which the topic is inseparable from participants’ identities (see Callan, 1995). The back and forth movement of this discussion, between the various approaches to power in dialogue, suggests its conclusion: power relations are implicated in all human intercourse, and attempts to dismiss them from dialogue serve some interests while harming others, and are therefore ultimately self-defeating. Burbules and Bruce (2001) therefore include reflexivity as an integral part of their definition of dialogue.

[T]he element of reflexivity puts within the concept of dialogue the possibility of renegotiating, as part of an ongoing dialogical engagement, questions of inclusiveness, linguistic difference, bias, domination, and so forth. None of this guarantees the success of such attempts to identify, critique, and renegotiate those limits; but one need not necessarily step outside of the dialogical relation in order to challenge them.

In this section I have discussed central aspects and concerns – i.e. dialogue as discourse pattern, as learning mechanism, as epistemological position, as orientation to subject matter, and as relation to Other – shared by dialogical ideals. In the next section I examine the commensurability of these ideals with the circumstances of schooling.

### **Schooling dialogue – beyond idealism and IRE**

At the beginning of this paper I noted that classroom discourse is dominated by the non-dialogical IRE pattern, and questioned why the many attempts to “dialogicize” pedagogy have been so inconsequential in practice. Burbules (1993) concludes his thorough and penetrating *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* with consideration of this question. After touching on problematic aspects of communication in the larger society, Burbules focuses attention on “the antialogical school”, including structural conditions that make “dialogue on any general scale... simply impracticable” (pp. 161-2). Among the impediments he lists are pressures to cover curriculum, time constraints, standardized testing, overcrowded classrooms, the valuation of control and discipline, and teacher authority and privileges. Burbules concludes,

Indeed, it appears that if we were designing institutions from scratch with a primary goal of *guaranteeing* that there would be few incentives to pursue dialogue and even fewer opportunities to do so, we could not do much better than the typical public school. (p. 162)

While I do not want to ignore those problematic aspects of school structure that could and should be changed (and not only because they inhibit dialogue), the net effect of Burbules’ analysis – and idealistic approaches in general<sup>7</sup> – could be termed the *anti-school*

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<sup>7</sup> I’m wary of lumping Burbules together with “idealistic approaches in general”. First, my criticism is directed at the final chapter of the book, and not at the book in its entirety (which is frequently sensitive to school contexts). Second, it is noteworthy that Burbules’s own position has developed, and he now emphasizes the importance of a

*theory of dialogue*.<sup>8</sup> Instead of adapting their ideas to existing structures of schooling, idealists theorize about dialogue in such a way that its application in school becomes an impossibility, something to dream about doing after the abolition of schooling as we know it.<sup>9</sup>

The pragmatic approach I advocate here suggests “pedagogicizing” dialogue, that is, constructing a model of dialogue that is appropriate to school contexts<sup>10</sup>. Such a move entails at least four modifications of the idealistic model described above: (1) viewing dialogue as a problem rather than a solution, (2) acknowledging and adjusting institutional roles, (3) considering the presence of audience, and (4) integrating curricular content and objectives.

(1) *Dialogue is primarily a problem, not a solution.* Throughout the preceding discussion I highlighted principal points of contention between different approaches to dialogue, and argued that these differences reflect fundamental tensions inherent in any robust conception of dialogue for education. A central fault line, more or less underlying all of these tensions, divides between divergent (difference and competition) and convergent (agreement and cooperation) forces<sup>11</sup> in interaction – both forces are necessary conditions of any dialogue:

	<b>Forces of convergence</b>	<b>Forces of divergence</b>
<i>Communicative activities</i>	Listening	Speaking
<i>Orientation of openness</i>	Openness to Other	Openness to Self
<i>Orientation toward subject matter</i>	Hermeneutics of faith	Hermeneutics of suspicion
<i>Primary concern</i>	Care for participants	Truth-seeking
<i>Tone</i>	Levity	Gravity
<i>Regulating principle</i>	Relations	Procedures

These tensions pose alternative orientations and courses of action for participants in dialogue, individually and as a group, and in particular for those who attempt to design, facilitate or direct dialogue (e.g. as teaching activity). Acknowledging these tensions marks a significant shift in thinking about dialogue. Rather than looking at dialogue as an ideal that we should aim to achieve – as a predetermined solution – the pragmatic approach sees dialogue as a problem – riddled with tensions – with which we are constantly confronted. Resolving these tensions is usually not a matter of choosing between dialogue or monologue, but between competing dialogical concerns and participant interests. Moreover, while a (dialogical) move may encourage, empower and foster growth for some participants, it may

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situated approach to dialogue (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). The discussion in this paper is to a large extent an elaboration on and development of themes first raised by Burbules.

<sup>8</sup> Ehlich (1985) warns that such a theory (or postulate, in his terms) places teachers in an untenable situation: “The dialogue concept for school can, for that reason, often only be applied to school reality as a sort of *postulate*... But I think that extreme caution is called for here, since such postulates often lead to considerable strains on the participants, who perceive their own *institution-adequate* actions as subjective *failures*” (p. 408).

<sup>9</sup> Another approach, with similar effects, is to see dialogue in school as an infrequent and fleeting phenomenon, which emerges between the cracks of teacher and pupil roles, when both sides temporarily abandon their disparate “scripts” (see Gutierrez et. al., 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Schools differ, especially between national contexts, sectors and year levels. As I write this section I am thinking specifically about state Primary schools in England, especially in Key Stage 2 (where I have recently conducted ethnographic research). I am convinced that my comments are also relevant to other contexts and year levels. Also, I have chosen to focus on whole-class discussions of curricular content. This focus is not intended to imply that meaningful dialogue cannot and does not occur in less formal situations, small group settings (e.g. cooperative learning teams) or with regard to non-curricular topics (e.g. social events, resolving conflict). On the contrary, the whole class situation is most challenging, but it also the context of current educational policies regarding “whole class interactive teaching” (see, e.g., Moyles, 2003, on the emergence of this term and on teachers’ interpretations of it).

<sup>11</sup> Burbules (1993) uses the terms “convergence” and “divergence” to refer to dialogue aimed at achieving consensus and opening up multiple interpretations respectively. Out of that dichotomy and the dichotomy between an inclusive-critical orientation (hermeneutics of faith vs. suspicion) he constructs a matrix of four types of dialogue: conversation (inclusive-divergent), inquiry (inclusive-convergent), debate (critical-divergent) and instruction (critical-convergent). The convergent and divergent forces in dialogue discussed here reflect fundamental centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in language (see Bakhtin, 1981). This “fault line” reflects general tendencies, not necessary relationships.

also silence and alienate others. Approaching dialogue pragmatically means being cognizant of and sensitive to these tradeoffs.

(2) *Teacher and pupil roles.* In idealistic dialogue participants freely define their own roles. In school, participants meet one another from within roles the institution has already constructed for them. Inherent in these roles are imbalances in the distribution of resources for the exercise of power: teachers are mandated to limit pupils' movement and speech, assign pupils tasks and determine the quality of pupils' activity (thereby classifying the pupil as "successful" or "failing"). Teachers are also vested with epistemological authority -- the teacher's curricular knowledge has been officially authorized; school is ostensibly designed to cure pupils of their ignorance. In this setting, complete reciprocity, in which "what we expect of others we must expect of ourselves", is an impossibility, and the epistemological stance of openness is threatened.

One idealistic approach to this power imbalance is for the teacher to attempt to dissolve or transcend his or her traditional role. While I agree with Burbules and Bruce (2001: 1111) that "the roles of teacher and student... must be viewed as historical artifacts, discursively constructed and institutionalized, not as inherent concepts that define the educational endeavour", the roles are still very real and durable. Even though they do not define all educational endeavours, pupil and teacher roles are inherent to schooling as a compulsory institution, in which the former's attendance is coerced, and the latter are bound by contractual and legal obligations.

Consider, for instance, replacing the "teacher" role with that of "facilitator". The facilitator retains teacherly authority to allocate turns, but abrogates epistemological authority by not participating in the dialogue as a contributor of content (cf. Ranciere, 1991). While this solution may be appropriate to certain settings (e.g. dispute settlement), in schooling it becomes problematic. In the school context, a teacher's ignorance or refusal to contribute to the discussion ("in order to give everyone else a chance") seems contrived. Facilitation thus suggests to pupils that "now we are engaged in a frivolous exercise" – otherwise, the teacher would say what she or he thought.<sup>12</sup>

So, instead of trying to eliminate the teacher's role, the question is how it and pupil roles can be structured in order to allow dialogue to unfold. The various functions teachers and/or other participants may be called upon to fulfil include:

1. Establishing (and preserving) conditions for dialogue, including introducing and asserting appropriate communicative norms and rules;
2. Opening up content (see discussion of curricular content and objectives below);
3. Maintaining the flow, direction and cohesion of the conversation;
4. Encouraging broad participation, and insuring fairness in access to the floor;
5. Probing others' thinking;
6. Protecting "weak" -- either socially and/or academically – pupils;
7. Undermining own content authority by bringing dissenting voices into the classroom (see Burbules, 1993: 33-4);
8. Exemplifying in own actions dialogic dispositions, such as sensitivity, humility, respect, reasonableness and openness;
9. Inviting pupil criticism of and participation in the way the dialogue is directed.

Note that these tasks often conflict with one another, and teachers are called upon to navigate between inherent role conflicts and dialogical tensions. For example, opening up curricular content may involve denying pupils the floor and interrupting lengthy speech. Protecting pupils' social needs may involve not probing their thinking (in public). Moreover, tasks involving teacher direction of dialogue may be antithetical to maintaining its flow.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See also Freire's criticism of the facilitator role as "laissez-faire pedagogy", which "ends up... reproducing the values of the [existing] power structure" (Freire & Macedo, 1987: 378)

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer (1998) argues that "genuine" dialogue cannot be directed:

Furthermore, since the primary function is one of shaping classroom culture, roles can reasonably be expected to shift over time, as evolving cultural norms make some functions less necessary (and other functions more central).

(3) *Dialogue before an audience.* An obvious difference between idealistic accounts of dialogue and actual classroom encounters is that the former are much less populated than the latter. This disparity is especially striking in scholarly articles that report on "classroom" dialogues between the teacher and 2-3 participants (Erickson, 1996: 31) and in instructional demonstration videos. Where are the other 30+ pupils? What's happening out of frame? Granted, it is possible to organize classroom situations in which pupils converse in pairs or small groups; for example, in the National Literacy Strategy "Literacy Hour" teachers engage in "guided reading" or writing with small groups of pupils (6-7) while the rest of the class is assigned independent work. And, indeed, these situations do afford dialogical possibilities and should be exploited. However, current policy<sup>14</sup> emphasises "whole class interactive teaching", which poses a greater challenge to dialogue, and elements that are central to it are also relevant (though less obviously so) in smaller group conditions.

What are the ramifications of the whole class situation, with 30-40 "participants", for engagement in dialogue? First, not everyone can contribute actively and meaningfully to a particular discussion. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that only a minority of the group (5-6) will be intensely involved as speakers at once, while the majority "participate" as audience. Contrary to the common expectation that teachers involve as many pupils as possible in every discussion, it may make more sense to focus a dialogue on three or four pupils (as long as it is not always the same three or four pupils).

Second, this division of participants into interlocutors and audience entails a rethinking of dialogical purposes and mechanisms. Interlocutors are no longer directed only toward one another's concerns, interests and horizons, they also must take account of the audience. When thinking about dialogue in the classroom, we must replace the image of 2-3 conversants, leaning toward one another in intimate conversation, with that of a performance. For this performance to "work", it must not only be satisfying and edifying for the interlocutors, it must also be aesthetically pleasing and intellectually meaningful for the audience. For pupils to successfully participate in this performance, they must vie for the floor, be attentive to their audience as well as interlocutors and direct their speech in such a way that it will be appropriate for both groups. Moves that work well in an intimate, relatively audience-free situation become problematic in a performance dialogue – for example, posing a question can lead to losing the floor.<sup>15</sup>

This performance view complicates the idea of dialogue as a fusion of horizons. Not only does it raise the question of whose horizons are involved, it also draws attention to the fact that dialogues occur in rhetorical situations, in which interlocutors adapt their speech to their audience(s). Thus, the distinction between speaking and listening is made more complex -- as I speak I also listen, in order to represent my own horizon in a way which will be comprehensible and/or palatable to my direct and indirect interlocutors.

Third, thinking about classroom dialogue as a performance before an audience further

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We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. (p. 383)

<sup>14</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>15</sup> Perelman (1982) sees the difference in audience size as constitutive of the difference between dialogue and (monological) speech-making: "the Socratic technique of question and answer will appear... as suited to argumentation before one person or a small number of people, while long speeches are necessarily given before large audiences." Further, he argues that ultimately both are rhetorical forms, aimed at persuasion. He continues: "But, it is not necessary to transform into a difference of nature a difference of argumentative technique imposed, essentially, by circumstances, and which concerns only the adherence, more or less assured an explicit, to the arguments developed" (p. 16).

complicates the teacher's role. Function #3 discussed above, “maintaining the flow, direction and cohesion of the conversation”, can be elaborated in light of the current discussion to include the following continuation: "... thereby ensuring its educational and aesthetic value." In a sense, the teacher acts as choreographer or stage director, coaching pupil performances and orchestrating the timing and course of their interaction.

Fourth, recognizing the large number of participants populating the classroom raises questions about the manner and intensity of emotional relations that can be expected there. It is perhaps more accurate to think about the emotional climate and interactive norms developed by participants than the interpersonal relations existing between the individuals.

(4) *Curricular content.* Dialogue in school is driven and bounded by predetermined curricular content and objectives. This aspect of school dialogue poses a number of problems and opportunities. First, the curriculum typically appears as a set of answers to be grasped or skills to be mastered. As such, it appears inimical to dialogue, which thrives on epistemological openness and uncertainty. Moreover, by demarcating the topics of conversation, and directing them toward clear objectives, the curriculum further constrains the breadth of discussion and participants' freedom to draw in other concerns. Thus, it is tempting to see dialogue as primarily appropriate for discussions of current events, civic education, or PSHE. Such a move, however, relegates dialogue to the margins of the school day, which is dominated by the core curricular subjects. The challenge is how to actively reveal the questionability of those subjects' content, including directing the conversation to areas of particular contention for the specific participants. Moreover, some areas of the curriculum are less open than others – that is, for either necessary or contingent reasons they do not as readily lend themselves to open questions; “dialogue” about such issues tends to deteriorate into an exercise in guessing what the teacher has in mind.

Second, the curriculum can be thought about as an additional voice (or set of voices) entering into the classroom dialogue. Participants enter into dialogue with authors and characters alongside their discussions with one another. Making this aspect of curricular engagement explicit, e.g. by having pupils role play literary characters or adopt certain points of view for the sake of the discussion, is one way of cultivating it. (Such a move, of course, also implies a trade-off, between playing a role and being able to speak freely in one's own voice.)

### **Robin Alexander's “Dialogic Teaching”**

The preceding sections were composed two years' ago, prior to my becoming acquainted with Robin Alexander's (2005a, 2005b) exciting work on “dialogic teaching”. In this final section I briefly review his model, highlighting in particular points of divergence from my above analysis.

Alexander approaches dialogue from a different angle than this paper's primarily philosophical perspective. His inspirations for dialogic teaching come from his (2000) comparative study of five nations' pedagogic cultures – and in particular the very different way teachers and pupils interact in French and Russian Primary classrooms in contrast to England and the U.S. – from sociocultural psychology, and from observations and interventions in English primary schools (e.g. Alexander, 1995, 2005a). Currently he is engaged in large-scale interventions in North Yorkshire and Barking and Dagenham Local Education Authorities. His ideas about dialogue are being continually refined through their enactment by teachers and pupils in these interventions, thereby pragmatically grounding them in the realities of contemporary classrooms.

Dialogic teaching, according to Alexander, is –

- *collective*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class;
- *reciprocal*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;

- *supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
- *cumulative*: teachers and children build on their own and each others’ ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- *purposeful*: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view. (Alexander, 2005a, p. 34)

In addition to these criteria, he develops a list of “repertoires” of teaching talk, learning talk and organisational contexts (e.g. whole class, small group), and indicators of the contexts and contents of dialogical teaching.

As I previously noted, Alexander’s system is largely pragmatic in the sense that I’ve been using the term here. It is being developed in conjunction with teachers and pupils in classrooms. The notion of a plurality of teaching and learning repertoires dispels the idea that there is one best method – dialogic or otherwise – for all teaching and learning contexts. And, in his summary of the first two years of implementation in North Yorkshire, Alexander emphasises that problems in enacting dialogic teaching should be thought of as “dilemmas, not deficits”. His model is elegant in both its simplicity and comprehensiveness, and appears to be positively impacting the quality of discourse in the participating schools.

Alexander divides his criteria for dialogic teaching into two groups: “collective”, “reciprocal” and “supportive” relate to the *form* of discourse, while “cumulative” and “purposeful” describe its *content*. He notes that teachers and pupils have been more successful in achieving dialogical forms than content. This problem features centrally in his list of dilemmas, which culminates with the following “toughest” points:

- *Is extended talk dialogic teaching?* In project schools there’s undoubtedly more thinking time, and children’s answers and other contributions are becoming longer, but do these necessarily add up to dialogue? What is the essential difference between extended talk and dialogic talk?
- *Improving the content as well as the form of talk.* In terms of the five principles or criteria of dialogic teaching, how can we best ensure that classroom talk is cumulative and purposeful as well as collective, reciprocal and supportive? What does the teacher need (a) to know, (b) to plan and (c) to do and say in order to make dialogue genuinely cumulative and purposeful?

I interpret these two dilemmas as closely related if not overlapping. Indicators such as pace and length of utterances can only give a superficial measure of the quality of discourse. The essential differences between extended talk and dialogical talk are rooted in the content of the conversation and, I would add, the relations between the participants. In what follows I examine Alexander’s treatment of these issues and, on the basis of the first two sections of this paper, suggest potential directions for the development of his model.

*Dialogical content.* In Alexander’s model the content of classroom discourse should be *purposeful*, meaning guided by educational goals (e.g. curricular objectives), and *cumulative* in the sense that participants respond to and build upon one another’s ideas. These criteria are important but insufficient. I propose to add to them at least two further criteria:

- *critical*: participants identify and investigate open questions and points of contention within the group; and
- *meaningful*: participants relate the topic of discussion to their own horizons of meaning, and bring those horizons to bear upon one another (and upon textual perspectives) in developing new understandings;

Readers might object that I have merely replaced “cumulative” with a less friendly (and thereby less helpful) formulation. While the terms may be less accessible (but see above the

sections on dialogue as learning and epistemological stance, upon which these points are based), they are not synonymous with cumulative, rather they bring to the fore aspects of discourse absent in Alexander's model.

Consider for example Mercer's (2000) gloss on what he calls "cumulative talk": "speakers build on each other's contributions, add information of their own and in a mutually supportive uncritical way construct shared knowledge and understanding" (p. 31, cf. the illustrative transcripts on pp. 31-32). This discourse is premised upon commonality of purpose and perspective, which yield "shared knowledge" in an uncritical, generally harmonious process. Such processes clearly have a place in educational dialogue, but we should not let them obscure the potential benefits of dialogue that starts from difference and proceeds through critical argument and inquiry to competing understandings and further inquiry. Moreover, I am troubled by the question: What happens to difference that has no place in the official model of dialogue?

*Beyond ideational dimensions.* Note that this discussion of dialogical content has focused only on discourse's ideational function: the way in which it represents academic content, cognitive understandings and other ideas. However, language also serves other functions, such as the interpersonal and aesthetic. Thus, participants in dialogue communicate their feelings, negotiate their social positions, exercise and resist power, and entertain themselves and others at the same time that they contribute ideas to the academic discussion (cf. Wortham, 2006). These aspects receive little attention in Alexander's model, though they are a critical part of teachers and pupils' experiences of classroom interaction, including dialogical teaching.

Alexander addresses the affective domain in his "supportive" criterion: "children articulate their ideas freely... and help each other to reach common understandings". While it is hard to disagree with wanting children to feel free to express themselves (though not necessarily to achieve "common understandings"), this criterion begs the question of what to do with the tension, conflict and inarticulateness (McDermott, 1988) that are invariably a part of classroom life. How does one create an environment in which all children feel equally free to articulate their ideas? (Can all be given confidence to speak without silencing any?) Who is empowered by the dialogical regime? And who is silenced by it? Does the fact that Alexander's dilemmas do not touch on these dimensions<sup>16</sup> mean that they have been easily resolved by the teachers and pupils involved? Or, perhaps, the model is not sufficiently sensitive to them?

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that I have chosen to focus on Alexander's dialogical teaching because I find it worthy of attention, as the most promising and exciting approach that I have encountered. My critical questions and suggestions are offered as a way of building upon Alexander's model, not of tearing it down. Finally, all of these comments are speculative, as Alexander has not yet published transcripts of actual classroom dialogues, upon which I could test these initial reactions.

### **Coda: Revisiting idealistic dialogue**

In this paper, I have outlined an idealistic approach to dialogue, and argued that it is inadequate – even counterproductive – as a guide to practice in schools. The argument has proceeded on the assumption that the dialogical ideal is appropriate for most contexts, and thus only its applicability to school has been questioned. However, consideration of dialogue in school raises questions about the adequacy of idealistic theories for other contexts also. The issues highlighted by the classroom context – institutional roles and audience – may have farther-reaching implications.

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<sup>16</sup> One dilemma, entitled "Conditions for whole class dialogue" does question what message is conveyed by the teacher being seated on a chair above the children during circle time. But this issue is mentioned in passing, in the context of a dilemma about physical arrangement of children during whole class discussions. The more general problems to which this example points – regarding the teacher's role and classroom power relations – are not elaborated.

By way of illustration, I return to the scene from the *Gorgias* quoted at the beginning of the paper. Socrates tells Gorgias that he has detected some inconsistencies in the latter's exposition, and wants to make sure that Gorgias, like Socrates himself, is committed to the truth instead of to winning the argument. Gorgias replies that "I do indeed nominate myself, Socrates, to be just such a person as you described. Perhaps, however, we ought to give some consideration to the others here with us... Whether we are not detaining some of the others who may wish to attend the some other business." Gorgias's comments remind the reader what Socrates pretends to ignore: a crowd is present, and they have assembled in order to hear Gorgias, the visiting teacher, speak. Gorgias appeals to the audience to give him an excuse for breaking off the dialogue without losing face.

This effort backfires, however, and we are informed by Chaerephon that the audience has signalled with applause that they would like the dialogue to continue. Callicles also voices his delight. Socrates agrees to continue, but again questions Gorgias's willingness. Gorgias responds:

After all this, Socrates, it would certainly be disgraceful for me alone not to be agreeable, especially since I've already declared that anyone may ask any question he desires. So, if that's what everyone here wants, continue the discourse and ask anything you like. (pp. 17-18)

Socrates has set a trap for Gorgias, compelling cooperation and raising the stakes before delivering his knock-out blow. After Socrates' trap, Gorgias's refusal to continue would be publicly humiliating. Moreover, consideration of Socrates' and Gorgias' institutional roles serves to complete the picture. Both Socrates and Gorgias are teachers who purport to contribute to their students' betterment. The contents of their teachings, however, are diametrically opposed. Gorgias is from out of town, and has succeeded in attracting a big crowd. Given the context, Socrates' questions seem geared more toward winning over the crowd than ascertaining the truth of the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Read the scene from Gorgias's perspective: He came to town to teach rhetoric. He was challenged to a verbal duel by Socrates, a disgruntled local teacher-competitor. Rather than exchanging speeches, Gorgias's area of expertise, Socrates changes the rules of engagement to those of Dialogue. Being unaccustomed to this interactional genre, Gorgias is literally dumbstruck by it.

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<sup>17</sup> Comparison of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* can be instructive here. Socrates' style is more "philosophical" – in the sense of self-critical and reflective – in the latter, i.e. in the intimacy of a one-on-one conversation beyond the city walls (and thus outside of the public eye). Moreover, away from the crowd Socrates' attitude toward rhetoric is much more conciliatory. See Kennedy (1980) for a comparison of the two dialogues. Haroutinian-Gordon (1989) suggests that Socrates' humanness, his fallibility, is what makes him so attractive as an educational model.

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