

## Significance and Dialogue in Learning and Teaching

### Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game

School of Social Sciences and International Studies  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney NSW 2052  
Australia

[a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au](mailto:a.metcalfe@unsw.edu.au)

[a.game@unsw.edu.au](mailto:a.game@unsw.edu.au)

### Biographical Details

The authors are Associate Professors who teach together in the School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052. They have written four books collaboratively: *Passionate sociology*; *The mystery of everyday life*; *The first year experience*; and *Teachers who change lives*. Additionally, Andrew is author of *For freedom and dignity*, and Ann is co-author of *Gender at work* and author of *Undoing the social*. Their current research is a reappraisal of the logic of the gift.

## **Abstract**

Although dialogue is a common word in educational theory, its full significance is diluted if it is seen as a matter of exchange or negotiation of prior positions and identities. As a meeting, dialogue suspends the senses of time, space and ontology on which identities are based. It is therefore not simply metaphorical to say that dialogue changes lives and opens minds. Using empirical material from interviews with Australian students and teachers, this article will draw out the relational qualities of genuine dialogue, and the significance they have for how we understand everyday classroom life.

## **Significance and Dialogue in Learning and Teaching**

### **Dialogue as juxtaposition**

Although dialogue is a word frequently used in relation to educational issues, it slides inconsistently over a range of different classroom situations.<sup>1</sup> This point emerges clearly from Burbules and Bruce's extensive review of the literature,<sup>2</sup> leading them to insist that we need to think carefully before using the concept. It is in this spirit we want to draw attention to a conceptual blind spot in Burbules and Bruce's account.

In classifying types of dialogue, Burbules and Bruce base all their alternatives on an unspoken assumption that dialogue involves the actions, resistances and negotiations of subjects, who are continually having their subjectivities reconstructed through this struggle. The classroom, accordingly, is a social contest between parties identified by individual or collective attributes (ethnicity, class, race, sexuality ...). It could only be genuinely dialogic if all the subjects involved were able to exchange contributions freely and on their own changing terms.

Because of their sensitivity to the ubiquity of power, however, Burbules and Bruce are generally skeptical of claims that these situations arise. They warn against the simple "idealism" and "prescriptivism" of many advocates of dialogic pedagogy, who, they say, too readily assume that if you have multiple speakers you have dialogue.

While Burbules and Bruce seek to avoid naïve claims about democracy through dialogue, they remain interested in dialogue's political possibilities. In particular, they are attracted to Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson's poststructuralist account of the classroom's "third space."<sup>3</sup>

The third space is “a place where the two scripts [of the teacher and the students] intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction”. This is spelled out by Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson in the following passage, which usefully characterises the model of struggling subjectivities upon which Burbules and Bruce also rely:

A responsive-collaborative script is dialogic not because it is dyadic, but because it is continually structured by tension, by the conflict necessary between the conversants, and between self and other as one voice “refracts” another. It is precisely this tension – this relationship between script and counterscript or this juxtaposition of relative perspectives involving struggle among competing voices – that creates and maintains the third space.

Poststructuralist accounts like this rely on Hegelian assumptions about the desire for identity and negation of otherness, that is, about the struggle for mastery between self and other.<sup>4</sup> Social life is seen as the outcome of subjects struggling to know the world objectively while avoiding objectification by others. The political possibility of the third space is that it provides a level playing field for this struggle. This is what “intersubjectivity” means within this framework.

The assumption of struggling subjects is so deep in this tradition that an alternative is unthinkable. This is why Burbules and Bruce misunderstand Martin Buber’s account of dialogue,<sup>5</sup> which will be discussed at greater length later in this article. They say that Buber is prescriptive about dialogue as an approach to pedagogy, but, in fact, Buber argues that dialogue is a condition that no *one*, no *subject*, can produce. Dialogue happens, Buber thinks, but not through the desires or actions of subjects. While Burbules and Bruce are right to say

that Buber emphasizes the mutual respect of dialogue, this is not the egalitarianism they presume, for whereas egalitarianism is based on the sameness of a level playing field, Buber's respect rests on the difference of uniqueness. Buber doesn't make sense when reduced to the language of subjects and objects, self and other.

Small but very revealing, another example of the blind spot in the work of Burbules and Bruce is found in the etymology they ascribe to dialogue. Monologue is one voice, they say, while dialogue is two.<sup>6</sup> This misconception is so common because the presumption of subjectivity is so common. From this starting point, social life can *only* be the exchanges, interactions, oppositions, negotiations, refractions, competitions, accountings and reconciliations of one subject and another subject.

### **Dialogue as meeting**

In fact, the *dia-* of dialogue primarily indicates *through*. The word is not drawn from the finite realm of one voice or two voices or a third space. It points instead to a non-finite ontology of meeting and relation that cannot be built up from a base of individual identities. To put it in David Bohm's phrase, dialogue implies "a new kind of mind" that carries and is carried by the participants.<sup>7</sup> The dialogue moves through them and they through it. Dialogue is not located in any or even in all of the individual participants, but rather in a whole that is incommensurable with the sum of the finite parts.

We will argue in this article that social life generally, and classroom relations in particular, are constantly shifting between identity-based exchanges and dialogic meetings. There *are*

situations which are ordered by the actions and resistances of struggling subjects, but there are also situations where participants are not subjects. While these different states imply each other, each arising in relation to the other, they involve fundamentally different senses of time, space and ontology. They change who and where and when we are.

Bohm made this point in a description of a weekend dialogue in which he participated:<sup>8</sup>

The weekend began with the expectation that there would be a series of lectures and informative discussions with emphasis on content. It gradually emerged that something more important was actually involved – the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants. In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to hold any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on a close personal relationship between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of dialogue.... In this development the group has no pre-established purpose, though at each moment a purpose that is free to change may reveal itself. The group thus begins to engage in a new dynamic relationship in which no speaker is excluded, and in which no particular content is excluded.

Dialogue arose on this weekend when there was a shift from the negativity of identity logic to the openness of dialogue. At first, people were defending positions and identities. But there was a change, Bohm says, when people realized that what they were doing together was more important than the protection of the self.

The significance of this dialogic shift for educational theory is that participants change their cognitive capacities when no longer subjects. People who identify with knowledge take it personally, seeing the world and others only for what these say about themselves, as a mirror of themselves. People in dialogue, however, are able to *hear* the differences offered by others, because they are not personally affronted. Through the play of differences, they are making something that they share with others but which is no one's personal property. Same and different are no longer qualities attributed to discrete individuals: each participant makes a unique contribution but, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, no-one can say who contributes what:<sup>9</sup>

Speaking to others (or to myself), I do not speak of my thoughts; I speak them.... Not [as] a mind to a mind, but [as] a being who has body and language to a being who has body and language, each drawing the other by means of invisible threads like those who hold the marionettes – making the other speak, think, and become what he is but never would have been by himself. Thus things are said and thought by a Speech and a Thought which we do not have but which has us.

Not limited to encounters between people, dialogue refers to any encounter that respects the world's difference. Making a sculpture, reading a book or playing golf can be dialogic experiences if they avoid Hegelian self-consciousness and involve direct encounter with difference. It follows that dialogue is always a learning experience, and that there is no learning without this dialogic meeting with difference. Moreover, if there is no learning, no sense that one experience significantly differs from another, there is no sense of aliveness. Without dialogue, we are alienated from the flow of difference.

It is not simply metaphorical to say that dialogue transforms us, opens new worlds, and expands minds. It is our difference as beings that allows us to see the world differently: no longer confined to subjectivity, we discover unexpected potential through being in relation. These ontological shifts are everyday aspects of classroom life. To learn more about the world, we must learn how to live in it differently, and we do this *through* our teachers, as Michel Serres pointed out:<sup>10</sup>

I love that bird who put wings on my feet. I didn't become a flying creature by my own efforts - far from it – it was thanks to him that I was able to pass ... into this vast new world.

So we feel a special gratitude to these extraordinary pedagogues who make it possible for us to enter new worlds.

If educational theory loses its ability to recognise dialogue, it loses its ability to understand education as a transformative rather than a simply accumulative process. Without dialogue, there can be no education, no aliveness, no meaning. Because there is dialogue, teaching and learning are creative processes, and not just refractions of competing voices.

### **A phenomenological project on teaching**

To draw out the relational logic of dialogue, we will call upon a research project called *Teachers who change lives*, for which we interviewed 13 well-known Australians and 22 Australian teachers. The latter came from all sectors and levels of education, and from a diversity of disciplines, and while some worked in small group settings, others worked in very large groups. In semi-structured interviews, we encouraged all participants to re-enter and recount specific experiences, inviting all interviewees to talk about their experiences of life-



changing teachers, and inviting teachers to talk about their own teaching practices and experiences. Our aim was to develop a relational understanding of education, addressing the questions: What happens *between* teachers and students in effective, engaged learning and teaching? What are the implications for teaching practice?

Given our interest in relations, we took the relational tradition of phenomenology as the basis of our conceptual framework and methodology. In phenomenology, participation is the principle of knowledge: we know, not as subjects observing objects, but through our being in the world. In other words, the site of knowledge is the relation. We know and learn “with” rather than “about” others. Avoiding abstractions, phenomenology is concerned with direct and specific descriptions of experiences, of the space and time of our relations with others.<sup>11</sup>

By allowing us to accurately explore the relational conditions underlying everyday life, phenomenology raises valuable new conceptual issues. In the present case, for example, we will be showing that the lived experiences of classroom dialogue do not match the exchange-based understandings of identity, time, space, agency, subjectivity and objectivity that dominate educational theory, and that common terms like “dialogue”, “feedback”, “facilitation” and “independent learning” are often used in misleading ways. To understand the classroom, we must be more careful and precise in our understanding of the social experience.

Grounded phenomenology is to be distinguished from conventional social science methodologies. Our interviews, for example, were not designed to be representative or to provide data from which generalizations could be drawn. Rather, the aim of our empirical

research was to provide details of particular experiences and situations, through which we might gain an understanding of the universality of good teaching. An appreciation of the particular is gained through participation, which, for us, as interviewers, involved attentive listening to students and teachers. Through this encounter, both we and they learned more than we had previously known about learning and teaching.

Phenomenological writing is guided by the same participatory principle, aiming to evoke the quality of experiences so that they might resonate with those of the readers. By inviting readers to reflect on the similarities and differences with their own experiences, this evocative form of writing allows for a creative dialogue with the text. Focusing on two case studies, the article aims to provide the particularities that readers need in order literally to get a feel for the conceptual issues involved.<sup>12</sup>

## **Potential**

Education is the drawing out of potential, but whereas pedagogy based on identity logic sees potential as finite, dialogic pedagogy sees it as infinite. Identity logic locates potential inside a bounded individual, but participants in dialogue find it in a meeting that brings inside and outside together. This is the primal encounter referred to by such pedagogic terms as interest, inspiration, engagement, wonder, fascination, curiosity and relevance. Through meeting the differences of others, we meet the difference in ourselves. We change by becoming who we are: what we know of the world reveals unexpected potential when recontextualised through dialogue.

Martin Buber spoke of the difference between finite and infinite logics in terms of the difference between I-It and I-Thou.<sup>13</sup> By helping us understand the different ontological situations that arise in teaching, Buber's terms will allow us to appreciate the difference between exchange and dialogue.

The hyphenated form of I-It and I-Thou indicates that the I is not a fixed identity. In different situations, we are different beings, with different capacities. The I of I-It is the Hegelian subject who, in aspiring to stand alone, surveys the world in terms of his or her own position and desires. The world becomes an array of objects, a set of means to the subject's ends, "a world of mirrors and mirrorings".<sup>14</sup> Whenever the world challenges the subject's knowledge, the surprise is taken as a threat to this position. The acquisition of knowledge is designed to maximize control and minimize this surprise.

Rather than standing alone, the I of the I-Thou relation is connected with others. In this relation, the world is not a set of external things but a whole that is always emerging through meetings, through dialogue. This sense of infinite emergence is present here and now, proof of the incalculable difference made by each participant as they find their potential through their connection with others. This is a situation where changes occur relationally without arising from a subject's volition. As Buber put it, "The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object".<sup>15</sup>

Buber's first point is that many of the most important relationships are unbounded, involving neither subjects nor objects:

*It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds.*

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation....

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*.<sup>16</sup>

Buber's further claim is that the potential of life is only found in the undefended dialogic relation of I-Thou: "This fragile life between birth and death can nevertheless be a fulfilment – if it is a dialogue."<sup>17</sup>

When Buber says "the speaker has no *thing*", he is referring to a direct encounter with the infinitude of wholeness and potential. Far from being exceptional, we found from our interviews that such encounters are the basis of all good teaching. Kindergarten teacher Vicky Yannakouros was referring to such a state when describing the boundless no-thingness she experiences with her students:

The little children, they just look at you with this look of wonder about the world. They have these innocent faces, very open, and this incredible thirst for and love of learning. They want to hear what you've got to say. They think it's really exciting. And then they want to tell you what they know about what you're talking about. It's beautiful. It's like they're hearing about something for the first time ever. It's when I

realise this that I am blown away yet again by this incredible job that we have. It's quite goosebumpy stuff.

The way in which these children and this teacher are present to each other exemplifies the directness of the I-Thou relation. They know each other's names, each other's faces; the teacher keeps meticulous files on the progress of each student. These are all necessary I-It forms of knowledge. But on this occasion, teacher and students see beyond these things to the undefended essence of each person.<sup>18</sup> Without denying the objective truth of I-It claims, the I-Thou reveals that the whole person is more than this collection of attributes. Wholeness is a non-identifiable potential that emerges through relations.

This revelation of the universal in a particular person is what Vicky means when she speaks of the beauty of open encounter. Beauty is not cuteness or attractiveness, or some *thing* you see; it is a way of seeing, of being and of knowing. She does not look *at* the children; instead, it is their bright eyes that allow her to see the potential they share. Vicky's goosebumps arise from the wonder of this potential. These children and this teacher place their lives in the hands of others, who amaze them by allowing them to find new capacities. Such a meeting, says Buber, is where life happens; it is the opening to new worlds here, now.

Clearly an instance of an I-Thou relation, the encounter in Vicky's classroom is based on a mutual respect for the vulnerability, openness and innocence of all participants. Clearly too this respect is not simply a matter of affirming each other's identity. The respect of the I-Thou

relation is, instead, awareness of Thou's unidentifiable essence, Thou's difference even to the way they identify themselves. Respect is always respect for this mystery. This is why it is not earned or forfeited. To carry out her teaching duties, Vicky must occasionally identify and rank children, in I-It mode, but it is the I-Thou that guides her, regularly reminding her of what teaching is really about. In this mode, Vicky could not treat children who have misbehaved with less respect than well-behaved ones, nor clever children with more respect than less gifted ones. She said:

I want my children to be validated as human beings and as individuals. I want my care and love of them to show to them that they have an important part in this huge crazy world. Love is about respect and validation: that you matter enough for me to listen to you and accept what you've got to say and that you've got a contribution to make. It doesn't matter who you are.

It is through a respectful I-Thou relation that each finds their unique part.

### **Wonder and humility**

The look shared by Vicky and her students involves a form of witnessing: Vicky sees their wonder and therein witnesses her own; the students see hers and therein witness their own. But this is not the mirroring of the I-It relation, for it leads to a sense of wondrous unfolding and implication rather than a self-certain independence. Moreover, rather than a proof that "I" matter as an autonomous individual, the goosebumps are a sign that *this* matters, this coming together, this meeting with difference, this sense of belonging together in a "huge crazy world". What matters are the unique parts we play together in an unfolding educational dialogue that no one controls. Humility and awe are present together.

The I of I-Thou is grateful for the world that encounter opens, for this is the world that draws out our potential. But it is a world that only opens to us if we are open. As Buber says “Only he who himself turns to the other human being and opens himself to him receives the world in him.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the respect of the I-Thou relation is the entry to respect for the larger world of learning; it is not only respect for other participants in the classroom, it is a respect for the surprising differences that must exist if there is to be learning. The I-Thou relation allows Vicky and her students to appreciate what amazing things they can learn from each other, and what amazing things they are still to learn about the world.

For Durkheim, awe is the essential characteristic of the sacred which, through its relation with the profane, provides the sense that there is meaning. He says that in the presence of the sacred, a person feels more alive, amazed by capacities they did not know they had.<sup>20</sup> This is the experience of dialogic encounter. It is the awe manifest in Vicky’s goosebumps and in the sense of overriding importance that came to Bohm’s weekend workshop. This awe for the difference of others is respect for the sacredness of learning.<sup>21</sup>

Dialogic meeting always relies on a sense of humility in the face of something bigger than the desirous self. What makes this an experience of wonder is that the “bigger than me” is not external or transcendent, but is a whole in which each participant has a vital role. Rather than transcendence of the profane, the sacred is an awakening to the larger reality of everyday life. This is the true meaning of relevance: participants are respected as part of this living whole. The

humility, then, involves a recognition that participants are bigger than they thought they were, that they have a larger responsibility than they realized when they were acting as subjects. Their contribution to the world of learning matters. This recognition is what is meant by vocation or calling.

When they hear the call of learning, participants in a dialogue immediately know what is called for: their responsibility is to keep the dialogue alive and open, unobstructed by self-centred biases and desires.<sup>22</sup> Just as respect for another person is based on acknowledging their unfathomable difference, participants know that they are disrespecting knowledge if they reduce it to their own concerns. Like all the teachers to whom we spoke, Vicky stressed the importance of not imposing herself or her agendas, however well-meaning, on her students: “You want to expose them to everything, but you hope you’re not preaching. That would be dreadful. But to share experiences with them, that’s just so exciting.” Vicky’s sense of dread here is her respect for difference, for learning and for the vocation in which she finds herself.

If dialogue is to unfold, then, teachers as well as students must experience the awe of learning. They must be learners too. The deep form of knowing they need is characterized by a simultaneous unknowing. The teacher’s mastery is an undefended humility, not the fearful independence of the Hegelian master. To allow new connections to emerge from classroom dialogue, teachers must hold lightly those that they have previously made, allowing their knowledge to re-form around new starting points that arise in the class. They must trust that the whole of their experience will be evident in their response to whatever particular points



arise. As Daniel Liston says, this humility gives teachers access to transformative powers not available to the self-centred teacher:<sup>23</sup>

An enlarged love in teaching is, in part, an effort to diminish the unnecessary noise of the teacher's self....As a result [teachers] could construe their teaching not only as *their* loving gift but also as a gift of the human inheritance of which they are a part. In giving such a gift our preoccupation with self-worth, our vulnerability, is lessened. A larger teaching love also attends to the situation, to the students in classes, in an attempt to see the class more clearly, to find ways to connect students to the grace of great things. Less encumbered by the vicissitudes and noise of the teaching self, the teacher searches for ways to knit student and subject. Finally, an enlarged love looks for the good in students and these teaching settings, it attempts to see students in ways that assume and build up the good.

Vicky said she was “blown away yet again by the incredible job” she has. Teachers with this sense of calling have cognitive capacities free of the biases brought by the self.

### **The time and space of attention**

Liston speaks of a “larger teaching love [that] attends to the situation, to the students in classes”. While good teachers know the importance of this alert attunement, it is often misunderstood as the action of a subject rather than a quality of a relation. This raises the question: If the respectful teacher does not control the classroom dialogue, what do they do? What are the teacher's responsibilities? The answer lies in the non-judgmental state of awareness that only arises when desire is suspended. This state allows teachers to stay in

relation and stay responsive – to the students, to the course subject-matter, but also to their own fears and desires, which may otherwise distract them from whatever is before them.

Responsibility, in other words, is not a form of control but a responsiveness to calling.<sup>24</sup> It allows the emergence of the new world upon which the dialogue of education relies.

Discussing the teacher's responsibility, Noddings says, the 'special gift of the teacher... is to receive the student'.<sup>25</sup> This highlights the importance of silence and attentive listening, for, contrary to Sidorkin, dialogue is not occurring where subjects talk over one another.<sup>26</sup> Dialogue is not an excess of giving or even a sequence of giving and then receiving, but is a receiving that gives and a giving that receives. It is the ability to listen that allows teachers to know what is called for at any stage of the class. When the class calls for a more formal presentation of information from the teacher, this presentation becomes itself a moment in the unfolding dialogue.

This world of learning cannot be understood in the temporal and spatial terms that underpin identity-based theories of education. The time of desire is chronological: life is never still, or in the present, but is a constant movement towards a future end that leaves the past behind. The space of desire is Euclidean: subjects desire to stand alone, their independence protected by the vacant space around them. To understand learning, however, we need concepts like Winnicott's potential or holding space, concepts developed to describe the time and space of dialogue and presence. In this space, people experience a wholeness that cannot be described in terms of a dichotomy between inside and outside; in this time, they experience a sense of potential that holds within it past, present and future:

What for instance, are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed, or playing tennis? What is a child doing when sitting on the floor playing with toys under the aegis of the mother? ... The question also needs to be posed: where are we (if anywhere at all)?<sup>27</sup>

Based on the paradoxical logic of both-and rather than either/or, potential space is the space that is between and also includes mother and baby, therapist and patient, teacher and student. In all of these dialogic I-Thou situations, the holding or potential space allows possibilities to be held open; it provides a sense of safety that does not rely on the Hegelian identification of and with certainties.

If teachers cannot autonomously create this potential time and space, they can facilitate them by remaining open and aware of both their own desires and the needs of the dialogic community. Students learn how to hold conversations and hold their desires and anxieties when they experience their teacher's holding capacity. To illustrate this, here is sculptor Anna Eggert's account of her relation with her teacher, Deborah Singleton. Like all students, Anna often desired the safety of completion, but Deborah's attention allowed her find a more open sense of fulfilment in the creative process itself:

Deborah and I really connected. I thought she was understanding what I was trying to do rather than what I was doing. I think what she did was listen to me for long periods of time. She didn't try to set her agenda onto me, she let me go, and in the end we kind of communicated.

With art, there's an internal struggle. You're grappling with things that are not yet visible and when you grapple with them for a long time you think they *are* visible and you think *That's really good, I can see it*. And then Deborah would come in and wouldn't see it and I'd think *It's not there, is it?* I couldn't believe it: the whole thing collapsed. I had to get outside myself to see what was really there. And then I could do more with it.

For example, those works up there, when they were in their early stages they didn't float off the wall. When Deborah came to look at them, she didn't say *What's wrong with these?* She asked, *How are you hanging these?* And we looked at the back and I said, *They're a bit flat on the wall, aren't they?* I think she put her finger on the way the work related to the wall, and once I saw that, I thought *Yeah, that's the problem!* And then she helped me find the solution, went on the journey with me.

There were other teachers, though, who put their agendas onto us. They'd give you a lecture on Lacan or Baudrillard. It was useful because it pushed me on to do more reading, but at the time it withheld me from my work. I suddenly felt inadequate; I felt the big theory should be there; I felt I had to fulfill someone else's interests. But then the work couldn't come from the heart.

Feedback is commonly understood as an external form of evaluation, but Anna's account shows that it is organic if it emerges through a dialogic process. Feedback is a word from cybernetic or ecological theory. As Gregory Bateson insisted, it is a moment in the life of a system that doesn't demarcate boundaries between inside and outside or identify finite causes

and effects: “no part of such an internally interactive system can have unilateral control over the remainder or over any other part. The mental characteristics are inherent or immanent in the ensemble as a *whole*.”<sup>28</sup> The mind in a dialogue is ecological and not Euclidean; it is not what one subject gives to another, but is the sense of differences within a network characterized by feedback.

The commentary of the art theorists was not genuine feedback because, substituting their concerns for the concerns of the work, they could not see what the work itself required. Had Anna followed their advice, she may have received praise, but her work would have been alienated from the wellsprings of her creative potential. There would have been a dishonesty about it: “the work couldn’t come from the heart”.

Deborah’s feedback emerged from the respect and love that allowed her to attend without impatience. Liston could have been speaking of her when he talked of teachers “[s]eeing these moments and students for what they are, without enmeshing ourselves into the drama at hand . . . , [not acting] out of anguish, fear, or self-aggrandizement but for the good of the student and the situation at hand.”<sup>29</sup> Deborah’s questions arose from an unknowing, from a feeling that wasn’t forced into definition. They were not designed to lead Anna to an answer that Deborah already knew. When Anna saw the unease on her teacher’s face, she could recognize her own submerged feeling of unease, could face the problems she had been denying because of her impatient desire to finish the work. Whereas previously the sculpture had been a mirror of Anna’s identity, Deborah’s holding gently returned Anna to a respectful relation.

Obstacles emerge from the time and space of desire,<sup>30</sup> but they change their meaning when impatience gives way to stillness. When Deborah held Anna's desires, each blockage became an organic way forward. The patience of dialogue is a temporal and spatial presence. Attentive students and teachers know that what they need will not be what they can anticipate. As Buber says, desired answers cannot be received. The answer comes

not from a distance but from the air round about me, noiselessly.... Really it did not come; it was there. It had been there – so I may explain it – even before my [question]: there it was, and now, when I laid myself open to it, it let itself be received by me.... If I were to report with what I heard it I should have to say “with every pore of my body.”<sup>31</sup>

Attentive students and teachers recognize that everything they need is already present. It is present as potential, as a wholeness that has not yet taken shape. The student's responsibility is to serve the work, to body it forth into the world of It.<sup>32</sup>

Let us imagine Anna's experience of this creative process. Through Deborah's attentiveness, Anna would have been able to attend patiently to the “not yet visible” of her work, without fantasizing a premature completion. In this state, she would have been able to stay with her intuition, *feeling* the inchoate of the “not yet” in her body, in her hands, stomach, chest. *Seeing* the work would have involved a transformation: the spaces between the wall and the work, and the various elements of the work, would now be both outside and inside. By trusting this feeling, Anna would have been able to allow the work to emerge in the right time.

The stillness of such creative experiences brings with it a sense of awe: something has become significant, an originary difference is emerging. The work is original, not simply new, as it emerges from the time of eternity which is here and now and also before all *things*.<sup>33</sup> This is the time and space that T.S Eliot referred to as “the still point of the turning world”, and Eliade spoke of as sacred time and space<sup>34</sup>. We live in this non-homogenous time and space, Eliade says, whenever we have the “primordial” experience of “reality”, a sense that there is meaning. This is the time and space of everyday dialogic encounters.

In identity-based terminology, Deborah *facilitated* Anna’s learning and her creative process. From this perspective, facilitation is seen as a non-confronting laissez-faire process of helping students express themselves. We can see from Deborah’s feedback, however, that a more complex and edgy process is involved in dialogue. Since students’ self-centred desires block their work, teachers facilitate by allowing their own patience and openness to help students get *outside themselves*. Dialogic facilitation relies on difference rather than confirmation of pre-existing identities.

Imagine being Deborah. Anna’s anxious expectations could have imposed a demand that Deborah accept the work as completed. To challenge this expectation was to risk facing Anna’s disappointment and resentment. It would have been easy to try to please Anna, but Deborah would have regarded such a response as insulting to their relationship and to the greater love of learning. Her priority as a teacher was to serve Anna’s potential rather than falsely protect her self-esteem. She had to not-confirm Anna’s comfortable assumptions in order to keep her real and to keep the working process open. So, because her attention brought

Anna into the present, allowing an attentive dialogic consciousness to emerge, Deborah *both* made a decisive difference to Anna's work *and* allowed Anna herself to develop her work.

### **Learning for life**

An understanding of the logic of dialogue challenges the common view that education is a preparation, that adulthood and real life begin when education has overcome ignorance and dependence. From a dialogic view, maturity is neither knowingness nor independence, but an ability to live well in time and space, so that life is graced by a capacity for wholeness and wonder. In particular this involves the ability to have a reflexive dialogic relation with yourself, a state that Winnicott called the capacity to be alone.<sup>35</sup> Students develop this "holding capacity" because they have experienced their teacher's love and patience.<sup>36</sup> It is this state of reflexive awareness that allows students to recognize and hold the personal issues that would otherwise diminish the moment of dialogue. Anna Eggert described this in terms of the continued presence of her teacher:

Deborah made me aware of what I was doing in my sculpture in a more formal sense. It's really been beneficial because I find now that I actually ask myself those questions that she would have asked. I feel like she's standing above my shoulder, helping me develop my work in a way that I want to develop it.

When Anna is working by herself, she is not in an isolated condition but, rather, is both teacher and student, having developed the mature capacity for reflexive dialogue. Just as ordinary dialogue allows students and teachers to find inspiration through each other, the



solitary worker finds inspiration through awareness of their own otherness, receiving and responding to their own feedback in a way that keeps them open to the world.

People who use the phrase “learning for life” may not notice all its meanings: learning as guidance on how to live well; learning as a life-long process; learning as an enlivening experience; and learning as responsibility, as the student’s particular contribution to life. In any one of these meanings, all are implied: learning is a mode of being, a way of life, and, as a meeting with difference, learning is awareness of being alive. Dialogic education teaches students how to live well, with others and with themselves. No education can stop, or negate, the fearful processes of the desirous subject, and the desire to do so is futile if it produces new desires. Dialogic awareness, however, allows these processes to lead back to the holiness of the whole.

In their book, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, Brookfield and Preskill catalogue the practical value of discussion.<sup>37</sup> Like Burbules they see dialogue as means to valuable educational ends. While sympathetic to these claims, they misstate the place of dialogue. While dialogue brings about consequences that teachers and students welcome, it is less able to do so if applied instrumentally. Dialogue is educational precisely because it does not know its end in advance.<sup>38</sup>

Brookfield and Preskill chide themselves for the “semireverent” tone<sup>39</sup> they use when discussing dialogue, but perhaps this tone should be given more respect. If it is not put on as display, reverence is the respect for difference at the heart of dialogue. Dialogue is important because it reveals the cognitive power of openness and the life of learning. This sense of

significance gives meaning to the comings and goings of everyday life. Unless people have experienced dialogue, they have not learned to respect learning and truth. Dialogue is not just the way *to* some desirable educational outcome, although it may be that. It is just the way. We do not know where it leads. That is what we are learning.

WE WISH TO THANK the students and teachers whom we interviewed for this research. They all enhanced our understanding of the learning and teaching process, but they are not responsible for our interpretations of what they said.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Nicholas Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Bertram C. Bruce, “Theory and Research on Teaching as Dialogue”, in *Handbook of Research on Teaching, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ed. Virginia Richardson (Washington DC: American Educational Research Association, 2001), 1102ff.

<sup>3</sup> Kris Gutierrez, Betsy Rymes and Joanne Larson, “Script, Counterscript, and Underlife in the Classroom”, *Harvard Educational Review*, 1995, 65(3), 445-71.

<sup>4</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 104ff. Other classic accounts of this defensive logic are found in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square, 1966), 340ff; Georg Simmel *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. K Wolff, (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409ff.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York: Scribner’s, 1958). See also Alexander Sidorkin *An Ontological Understanding of Dialogue in Education*, PhD thesis, University of Washington, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> “Theory and Research on Teaching as Dialogue”, 1106. In *Dialogue in Teaching*, 15, Burbules offers a broader etymology, putting the stress on the spanning or connecting of two.

<sup>7</sup> David Bohm, *Unfolding Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1985); *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996); *On Creativity* (London, Routledge, 1996); *Thought as a System* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> *Unfolding Meaning*, 175

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology, Language and Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth* (Paris: Flamarion, 1995), 162

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> In our book, *Teachers Who Change Lives* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), we offer many more accounts given by our interviewees. The accounts given in this article are common.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner's); "Dialogue" in *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1-21. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85ff.

<sup>14</sup> Buber, "Dialogue", 34.

<sup>15</sup> *I and Thou*, 58. While we share Sidorkin's appreciation of the significance of Buber to an understanding of dialogue, we do not accept his reading of I-Thou as a subject-subject relation. On the question of subjectivity, Sidorkin is quite close to Burbules. See *An Ontological Understanding of Dialogue in Education*, 5, 15, 16.

<sup>16</sup> *I and Thou*, 4, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, *The Way of Response*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 19.

<sup>18</sup> By essence, we mean not identity but being-ness. The blanket usage of identity logic is apparent in the frequent equation of essence and identity.

<sup>19</sup> Buber, "Dialogue", 35.

<sup>20</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), 416-417.

<sup>21</sup> This sacred quality is not to be confused with either organised religion or, as Buber puts it, "exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy". Buber goes on to say "I possess nothing but the

---

everyday out of which I am never taken.... If that is religion then it is just everything, simply everything that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.” *The Way of Response*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> See Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2002). See also Daniel Liston, “Love and Despair in Teaching”, *Educational Theory*, Winter 2000 50 (1), 95-99.

<sup>23</sup> Liston, “Love and Despair in Teaching”, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*.

<sup>25</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press), 177.

<sup>26</sup> *An Ontological Understanding of Dialogue in Education*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), 105. See also Buber *I and Thou*, 12; Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game, *The Mystery of Everyday Life* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2002); Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1972), 315.

<sup>29</sup> Liston, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Phillips, “Looking at Obstacles,” in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 79ff.

<sup>31</sup> Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 10; Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xii-xxxv.

<sup>33</sup> Serres, *Angels*, 109, 130ff; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 33ff.

---

<sup>34</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 4; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987) 20-21; Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> “The Capacity to be Alone”, in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Karnac Books, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> See also Sidorkin, *An Ontological Understanding of Dialogue in Education*, who argues against an instrumental approach to dialogue.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 37.