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The Wonder of Communicative Encounter: The Shifting landscape of Dialogic Education

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THE WONDER OF COMMUNICATIVE ENCOUNTER: THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF DIALOGIC EDUCATION

Dialogic education tries to offer a sense of realism and caution about a relational teaching style. We offer a student a realistic understanding of a teacher/student relationship not based just on good cheer, but grounded in long-term accountability. We need to assume that a relationship based on hard work will in the long run offer more assistance to a student than short-term efforts at personality and charm.¹

The task of this essay is to suggest a conception of dialogic education that hinges, fundamentally, upon content. This perspective is largely indebted to the educational insights of Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, with the latter guiding my initial work on dialogic education and the former assisting with the vitality of responsibility in an age of narrative and virtue contention. My goal is to offer an impressionistic picture of such an educational orientation. I use the term “communicative encounter” as a way to suggest that as we exchange content, something *more* than information acquisition occurs; we are invited into a revelatory moment of the wonder of the unexpected. The first section, *dialogic coordinates*, differentiates this perspective of dialogic education from mere conversation. The second section, *the limits of undue assurance*, continues this theme, stressing the pragmatic recognition of multiple perceptions. The third section, *ongoing responsibility and existential trust*, establishes dwellings or places that evoke narrative trust. The final section, *the revelatory: dialogic ground*, stresses our responsibility in the invitation of the revelatory and in the invitation of dialogue that begins with clarity of what we, as educators, bring to the table of conversation.

Dialogic Coordinates

This essay seeks to outline coordinates of dialogic education emphasizing content and ground that make conversation about ideas possible. The term “dialogue” is perhaps one of the more misused terms in education. There are multiple schools and approaches to dialogue. This essay does not permit such delineation, but I have provided such an analysis in a previous work.² There are, however, two caricature understandings of dialogue. The first confuses dialogue with conversation and process, driven by phrases such as “what is needed is more

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dialogue.” This approach has been largely associated with the American school of dialogue and is tied much too intimately to naïve optimism. The continental understanding of dialogue, within which this essay is situated, presupposes that conversation begins long before an immediate communicative encounter. Each communicator brings to the conversation narrative ground that houses values and positions that matter. Dialogue from such a perspective does not begin from conversation. It begins with the acknowledgement of content that is of significance to each communicator. Indeed, dialogic education is not about more talk, but fundamentally about more content. I will outline this perspective, largely relying upon a previous work.

The Limits of Undue Assurance

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, I wrote *Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons* during demanding and, at times, anguishing moments as a college dean/academic vice president. Unlike the time when I was a student and enrollment was robust, student numbers had declined. In fact, the enrollment was nearly half of what it was during my student experience. The temptation of every college, and perhaps every business, when it is in trouble, is to stress customer satisfaction to the point of bracketing and putting at risk research and development and considerations for a long-term future. The book’s title, *Dialogic Education*, and particularly its subtitle, *Conversation about Ideas and between Persons*, was an effort to respond to such marketing temptations that risk the future for immediate relational customer satisfaction. In the book, I refer to this misguided relational effort to salvage a campus as emotional prostitution. Dialogic education privileges content as research and development and resists relational technique marketing that shifts our responsibility from a community of saints—those who have sacrificed long before this moment, those currently present, and those not yet part of the horizon of this place—merely to those who are part of a given place now. Such efforts jettison tradition and the not yet for the vocal demands of the proximate and the immediate. Fundamental values are like axioms seldom discussed, yet enacted in practice.

Dialogic Education was penned in a period of vocational questioning in a time in which I was intensely attuned to the limits of undue assurance. In the course of writing the book, I also functioned as a conflict consultant for churches. There are two particular instances of irony that I would like to reflect upon. The first involves sacred terms. While working with a variety of churches that were fueled by self-righteous gossip and seeking to remove a pastor, I discovered that each church had a

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similar invitation for worship: “Come and worship with us. This community cares.” Clearly, the churches did not enact such a motto. If, indeed, community is so important, perhaps it should be seldom discussed while being central to life lived together. One of the most Christocentric theologians of the twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), was enamored with the importance of not naming or reifying God. Bonhoeffer constantly asked, “Who is Christ for us today?” never permitting one to assume that the answer can be solidified. Bonhoeffer admired the Old Testament’s refusal to possess the face of God; the face of the Other remains sacred when the ambiguity and the uniqueness of an Other trumps the precision of our speculation.³ Martin Buber adhered to this perspective, considering psychologism, the assumption that we can know the motives of another, the everyday communicative refuge of the demonic.

My second reflection is on conflict resolution experts. I was invited to a Protestant denomination’s headquarters to meet with eight different conflict resolution specialists. The reason for my presence was that the conflict resolution experts were unable to get along with one another. Yet, these same people were sent to churches across the country and around the world when churches were in distress. I was asked by the leaders of this denomination, “What can we do to rectify this situation?” I suggested that the church search for people who could find insights temporally grounded on local soil and would not offer abstract solutions rendered from on high. Emmanuel Levinas, considered the primary ethics scholar of the twentieth century and who continues to speak to the twenty-first, provides a vision of communication ethics that is jarred into responsibility by a spiritual awakening engendered by the face of the Other. However, this spiritual awakening offers no answers. All ethical discernment must attend to local soil—the particular of a given person and a given people.

For Levinas,⁴ the face of the Other functions as an ethics of optics. Literally, the face of the Other reminds us of an ethical awakening. The face is akin to a signpost that generates an ethical awakening in me and then moves me from an ethics of optics to an audio ethics, an immemorial message, an ethical echo beyond the beyond—“I am my brother’s keeper.”⁵ Upon hearing that archaic dispatch, an ethical awakening charges *moi* (me) with a unique and singular sense of responsibility.

Levinas contended with a number of dialogic assumptions explicated by Martin Buber, particularly Buber’s attraction to the mystical. For Levinas, ethics is not mystical, or what he

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understood as governed principally by sense experience. The enactment of ethics requires reason propelled by hard work and ongoing education. After an ethical awakening, only a small percentage of the ethical charge is activated. The vast majority of ethical work happens after the ethical awakening, after attending to the immemorial ethical echo, after being called to universal responsibility. This ancient voice speaks in everyday life; it simply is not heard at every moment. After this audio charge to responsibility, one returns to the same face, knowing “I am my brother’s keeper.” Responsibility is in place, but the how of responsibility is not yet known. At such a moment, one wants to cry, “How am I going to help?” One understands when one is called into such responsibility with the phrase “If not me, then whom?” In such a moment, one assumes the charge of responsibility without the assurance of a codified morality, a solidified formula, or a programmatic set of rules for action. The ethical responsibility is particular and can be enacted by no one but *moi*. This responsibility cannot be delegated, ignored, located in a manual, or discovered in a procedural answer.

Emmanuel Levinas’s understanding of ethics moves from the face of the Other to an audio ethic that culminates in a spiritual awakening, only to have the “ah ha” moment driven by one realization: *I do not know how to assist*. This recognition has dawned on each parent, friend, sibling, and teacher who has sought to be responsible for another when the charge for ethical care is clear but the answers sparse. Perhaps at such a moment, we find ourselves in the heart of dialogic education in which one feels responsible without clarity of answer, just a demand to be responsible and to figure out a temporally flawed solution.

Levinas’s work unites the East and West with a spiritual awakening from the East and a commitment to knowledge, learning, and rationality from the West. Indeed, both have currency. In an ethical life of communicative encounter, however, there is no easy answer. The solution does not rest in programs or in relational engagement but in giving students creative information that informs a background that they can visit in the midst of moments defined by admitted ignorance and recognized responsibility. Preparing students for encounters in the future requires educators to ask: “What books have you read? What ideas have you encountered? What theories have you explored?” Educators must build a creative background from and to which students can return and explore in hopes of finding a glimpse of something that might help in a given moment of communicative responsibility. Such a view suggests that education is an ongoing development of a background of insights that may never be

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needed, but in a moment when least expected, may be crucial in carrying forth responsibility in the assistance of another. Indeed, Levinas does not allow us to linger in spiritual awakenings; they are just the beginning of a communicative encounter. If we linger here too long, we find ourselves in self-righteousness or the claiming of sacred language for our own sake, ignoring the reality of hard work, discernment, and the accompanying fear and trembling in carrying out responsibility without predisposed assurance. As we attempt to figure out what to do in a given moment with a given person, the more prepared we are for such an instant, the more helpful we might be. If the information and insights remain flexible and frayed around the edges, a spiritual awakening may be the beginning of a long journey of responsibility to unexpected moments and unscripted responses.

Our focus remains on the Other rather than using the Other as a commercial tool. Our ongoing responsibility as educators is to provide dwellings of existential trust for external and internal constituencies. Existential trust does not suggest agreement. Rather, it implies narrative coherence and fidelity. In short, people need to know what the place stands for and what it does not support. Identity emerges in knowing who and what we are not in order to discern who we are.

Ongoing Responsibility and Existential Trust

As an educator, the student before me recalls an ethical obligation, but I am also reminded of justice for all those “not yet” here. As we recruit and meet with parents and students, I talk about the interplay of ethics and justice with the terms “sales” and “research and development,” stating that great companies cannot live on sales alone. Outstanding corporations discover, create, and innovate. Teachers at great universities like Duquesne are required to engage in research and development, assisting students who are “not yet” on this campus with insights that will assist them in the meeting of the unforeseen.

Communicative encounter, for Levinas, has no totality, no universal answer, just an ongoing demanding sense of responsibility. Totality is interrupted by justice, and infinity is interrupted by the particular Other. If one wants a template for ethics, one cannot turn to Levinas. However, one cannot forget that Levinas adheres to theories, ideas, research, rationality, and education, all necessary to answering an ethical call. Levinas recognizes the danger of idolatry, imposed sacredness, and totality. He calls forth attention to the revelatory nature of God’s world where we again discover a form of dialogic education resting on an ongoing demand: *learn more*. I now turn to my

earlier book on dialogic education, which continues to represent my scholarly and personal signature.

Dialogic Education begins with a discussion of the value of a college/university centered on ideas. Engagement of ideas permits us to bring something to our students, moving teaching from the realm of personality, or what Richard Sennett referred to as one of the “tyrannies of intimacy”⁶ to an engagement based on learning together. When I wrote *Dialogic Education*, many of my insights were tied to Martin Buber. Buber’s (*Between Man and Man*, 1947/2002) understanding of dialogue does not begin with relational closeness, but with distance. The focus on ideas permits that distance to be enacted. Buber cautioned us to beware of anyone overrunning reality with undue relational enthusiasm. In common vernacular, such a person begins to approach the framework of a communicative stalker. If you have ever been bullied by a smile or intensity of engagement, you will understand and recognize the importance of distance that permits one to navigate such experiences creatively.

The book stresses the importance of a communicative home, an academic dwelling characterized by existential trust,⁷ where trust is grounded not in people but in the environment. Such dwellings permit one to function from the vantage point of a specialist/generalist, knowing one’s topic with great precision while exploring the periphery of ideas that keep self-doubt as a principal communication education companion. To be only a specialist is to fall into the realm of reification with an effort to possess the sacred. To fail to strive to be a specialist is to live with a relational certainty that one’s personality is somehow sufficient for the educational task. Conversation about ideas engages the specialist with persons and students who do not have the same expertise or even the same interest in learning the ideas. Educators must find ways to invite students to explore ideas they have not yet considered. The dialogic educator invites the skeptic to look forever for an unexpected, unheralded pot of gold. For most of us, our task is not to seek a pot of gold, but to fill barren kettles with practices and actions that provide meaningful significance for others. For the educator, this service begins with what we know and with our commitment to what we continue to learn. The student benefits not only from our particular knowledge, but from the testimony of an intellectual journey that does not conclude.

A dialogic education is attentive to communicative encounters and to the two-sided nature of life, hope and disappointment, which walk together as companions in everyday existence. It is the

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task of teachers to prepare students for the interplay of hope and disappointment, which keeps conversation from solidifying into totalized conclusions of assurance constructed from premature convictions. When Gandhi was asked “What is truth?” he offered a performative answer. He admitted that he did not know what truth was, but he knew how to discern it. One pursues truth via a conviction that includes the courage to shift pathways or to continue once again after one has fallen while recognizing the pragmatic importance of others who pursue other avenues that might illuminate life when one’s own efforts render merely shadows.⁸ *Dialogic Education* discusses Athenian virtues on a campus discerned between the boundaries of deficiency and excess and ever attentive to the distinctiveness of particular soil. One must learn what it means to be brave, generous, and truthful in a particular time and in a particular place. These answers are found in the performative call of responsibility in a human life.

Dialogic education seeks to market the ideal of a campus for no more than 80% of what it can actually accomplish, letting students be surprised by the fullness of implications.⁹

Dialogic education needs to give students the resources to counter stress and frustration.

The marketing of ... undue optimism is not caring; it is vulgar manipulation of the student. Dialogic education needs to give students the resources to counter stress and frustration. An educator does not have the right to eliminate a major part of maturation and take away the opportunity to learn coping skills for dealing with disappointment and pain. In short, caring is the offering of hope and conversation about inevitable disappointments. (Ibid., 112).

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Cynicism is fueled by unmet high expectations. Perhaps the definition of an adult is the recognition that all communities are “broken covenants.”¹⁰ Perchance the difference between an adolescent and an adult is that the latter rolls up his or her sleeves and tries to make a place better while the adolescent laments and asks why this dwelling is not perfect. Bellah’s call was for adults to engage broken covenants, putting hands to tasks and hearts to hope with recognition that no educational home is perfect. “Dialogic education is not just a task or a job; it is a... calling.”¹¹ This calling does not come with a clear set of answers, just an ongoing sense of responsibility and burden that has no conclusion.

I asked my favorite professor, who had fundamentally shaped my life, why he chose the profession of teaching. His response was the following:

I wanted my life to count as I helped others make a difference in service to the human community.

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I chose teaching out of a love of learning, study, and a desire to pass on information and values to the next generation. Aristotle considered politics the most noble profession, one motivated by a concern for the “common good.” I entered teaching with that kind of commitment. I wanted my life to count as I helped others make a difference in service to the human community. (Ibid., vii).

Indeed, I was fortunate. My entire undergraduate experience was rich with educators with such a commitment. Our responsibility is to meet existence on its own terms. Our meeting, however, does not commence in abstraction, but rather in content, ideas, and convictions that we bring to the meeting of existence. The revelatory in education requires us to bring narrative ground—a hermeneutic lens—for making sense out of existence, not in a manner that will solve all disputes, but in a fashion consistent with the position one takes into the conversation. We contribute to a multiplicity of perspectives only when we bring our standpoint into the educational mix. Our position must be situated in ideas and schools of thought that can be defended, not reified as a final answer, but articulated as a position that can move the conversation, at times, in unknown directions.

The Revelatory: Dialogic Ground

The logical question at this point in this reflective essay is what I might add to *Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons* today. This historical moment necessitates an uplifting of the importance of education. We are fortunate to be at a university that frequently reminds us to serve God by serving students, framing teaching as a vocation. Communicative encounter with an impulse toward teaching as a vocation reminds us that we are not the center of the communication, but we are ever so responsible. As Levinas suggests, we respond to a call with a love of conversation and ideas. The stress on exteriority that infuses interiority that then shapes our engagement with others points to the revelatory power of answering such a call.

I suggest that in this historical moment, the temptations of modernity are numerous. The secular trinity of modernity consists of faith in and commitment to progress, individual autonomy, and efficiency. We have made these terms into secular sacred touchstones. Communicative encounter from a dialogic education perspective calls us to question each branch of this secular trinity. Progress can put at risk the wisdom of the past, confusing the new with the genuinely constructive and smart.

Efficiency can be paradigmatically bound, driven by the self-assured blindness of technique. In the words of Jacques Ellul (*The Technological Bluff*), the West often asks “Can it be done?” failing to ask the fundamental question, “Should it be done?” Efficiency does not pause to ask ethical questions about the “should.” Individual autonomy eclipses the fundamental importance of sociality, connection to family, friends, communities, the Church, and to those “not yet” among us. For me, a vocational commitment to dialogic education in the twenty-first century requires an unmasking of the dangers of this secular trinity that continues to gather currency in seemingly every realm of human life.

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This historical moment is identified by numerous designations, most commonly postmodernity. This term is linguistically misrepresentative, suggesting that it follows modernity; however, such a reading is a misnomer. Postmodernity is better understood as an existential confession that we live in a time in which all eras are co-present somewhere, at some time, and at some place throughout the globe. The practical consequence of postmodernity is the acknowledgement of differences in perspective that are now commonplace expectations in a world defined by narrative and virtue contention. Additionally, because our perspectives are driven by considerable differences, our agreement on the notion of the good and the ethical is now in dispute. Communicative encounter in such a historical moment understands that conflict arises most often from arguments over differing ethical foundations. We live in a moment in which the ethical leads to conflict and conflict to creative and demanding communicative encounters.

Educational institutions, teachers, and leaders, in such a moment must explicate the ethical foundations from which communicative action emerges. To do so does not presuppose universal truth but necessary temporal clarity. For without clarity of argumentative parameters situated within ethical practices and nourished within an ongoing narrative, we invite disputes reminiscent of Alasdair MacIntyre’s “emotivism,”¹² decision making propelled by personal preference alone. Communicative encounter in a time of ethical dispute necessitates the claiming of ground that propels one’s action. Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781/1965) was correct; imagination emerges from real soil, real ground, from which one pushes off. Fantasy, on the other hand, attempts to impose its will via abstraction. Emotivism is a personal fantasy that fuels individualism, the disregarding of social, familial, and institutional roots, and renders obligation to another, at best, a mere act of happenstance.

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Finally, the Spiritan commitment to the revelatory manifests itself at Duquesne University, a place where the spirit gives life. Communicative encounter, at times, requires standard bearers of tenacious hope who keep possibilities alive as we work to discern creative and constructive temporal insights. The revelatory requires steadfastness that does not seek to control outcomes, but embraces responsibility in the quest for temporal answers. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1998) suggests, we must engage practices that permit us to discern unexpected insights, continuing work that offers moments defined by thanks, awe, and prayer. Dialogic education tied to communicative encounter begins with ideas not because they are sacred, but because they connect us to our students, academic homes, and dwellings of education. We must learn to meet the Other in the revelatory and the unexpected outcome of a dedication to learning. If I were to retitile *Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons* in this historical moment, I would suggest the following title: *Dialogic Education: The Wonder of the Unexpected*. Conversation about ideas and between persons shapes an academic dwelling, moving it from a house to a home, from an intellectual factory to a devotional calling, to a place of wonder.

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Endnotes

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²Ronald C. Arnett, C. Grayson, and C. McDowell, "Dialogue as 'Enlarged Communicative Mentality': Review, assessment, and ongoing difference." *Communication Research Trends*, 27 (2008), 3–25.

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⁷M. Buber, "Hope for this hour." F. W. Matson & A. Montagu, eds. *The human Dialogue: Perspectives on Communication*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 1967), 306-312.

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⁹R. C. Arnett, *Dialogic Education: Conversation about Ideas and between Persons*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 26.

¹⁰Bellah, R. N. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

¹¹Arnett, *Dialogic Education*, 224.

¹²A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*. 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 165.