

Notes Toward a Theory of Dialogue

Grace Deniston-Trochta, Jane Vanderbosch, & Ed Check

Multiple dimensions of dialogue as pedagogical practice are examined in the following three essays. In the first piece, “When Life Imitates Art: Notes on the Nature of Dialogue,” poet and essayist Jane Vanderbosch reflects about the politics of silence and voice in graduate school. She analyzes how power and politics charge the atmosphere of the classroom. In “The Pedagogy of Dialogue: A Relation Between Means and End,” Grace Deniston-Trochta focuses on self-examining the possibility of dialogue in a large “pit” classroom. She proposes teacher as listener/learner, a teacher who is self-reflective and respectful. In the final essay, “Managing the Silence of Children,” Ed Check considers how power and control are mediated in the lives of students and teachers. He implicates himself in his discussion as he reflects on a conversation with his nephew. Throughout, the writers dissect pedagogy as dialogue through the personal as political. Each reveals how telling one’s truths is a site to rethink institutionalized strategies and self-imposed silences.

Dedication

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Grace and I dedicate this article to Jane Vanderbosch who died on April 29, 1999. Grace emailed me the following: “I realize that one of Jane’s greatest influences on me was how supportive she was, specifically, how she encouraged my insights. I’m realizing how vital it is, to be surrounded by people who can do this for each other.”

I met Jane in 1991 at The United, a social service umbrella agency in Madison, WI for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people. I was a graduate student, angry at myself—at odds with a misogynist and homophobic culture. Jane was recovering from violence, incest, addiction and co-dependency. We clicked. We discussed many times, how we had accepted, rejected, denied, struggled with, and learned from or replayed our childhoods. We talked about our working-class backgrounds, how we then passed for middle-class, the betrayal and angst of not having a class to identify with, and the impostor syndrome—that we were the kinds of people who weren’t supposed to get Ph.Ds.

As a lesbian feminist, Jane heard and counseled gay men coming out at The United. She saw how patriarchy and misogyny hurt both men and women. She always knew how to respond in a crisis—her words wise and challenging—her wit sharp. She managed much of her pain by helping others. She, like me, was vulnerable and searching. After Jane was fired without explanation, her cancer came back. Unable to work, she went on disability. She later noted that it took getting fired and having cancer to push her toward the love of her life—being a full-time writer.

Jane’s writing includes published essays (1997, 1994, and others), published and unpublished poems and unpublished novels. Jane witnessed and legitimated my journey as a gay male artist, educator and academic. Her wisdom, empathy and kindness are tools I use to mentor students today. We will miss you dear friend.

Ed and Grace

Introduction: Notes on Dialogue

To teach is to do (at least) two things: share knowledge of the object of inquiry with others and initiate a search for wisdom. The first, given the explosion of both real and “faux” information, is a relatively simple matter. The art education teacher speaks of color, form or materials and

the matter is done.

The second, however, is much more difficult, for it requires not the traditional monologue of knowledge—for example, lines and light are the basic structures of art—but a dialogue, a dialogue wherein teachers and learners enter into a relationship in which the process of learning in and of itself is the singular method to achieve wisdom, the final goal. This relationship, in order to succeed in its mission of promoting the awareness, acceptance and acquisition of wisdom, must be egalitarian. That is, the teacher must not simply be the subject in the inquiry, leading the younger or the less informed to the “Promised Land of Knowledge.” No—like both the students and the discipline itself—the teacher must be both subject and object in a process of inquiry that is essentially a spiral.

In this spiral of inquiry, the subjects analyze the objects of inquiry—in this case, five objects: themselves, art, themselves in relationship to art, themselves in relation to each other, and themselves in relationship to the entire process of experiential learning. As they investigate themselves-in-art, they also investigate what others have said about them, the art they are studying, and about how those two subject-objects are connected.

This relationship requires that learners learn how others—adults, teachers, parents and all those operating in “*loco parentis*”—view them as children, adolescents, young adults and returning students. It requires that they fit the views that others hold of them into the great puzzle that is their lives. It will mean that they study educational texts as well as art books and decide for themselves the limits of disciplinarity. For example, Chicano students in an Anglo classroom might decide that Spanish and Mexican art must be included in any discussions of their own art. First graders might decide that books not written by children under twelve do not mirror their subjective experience of childhood. As the examples imply, dialogue would necessitate a new appreciation of subjectivity—and a less universal definition of it.

New definitions would not only widen the knowledge base but also allow those currently silenced by both art and education to have their voices heard. And they would have their voices heard in the ensuing dialogue: a loud and exciting collage of colors, classes, ethnicities, genders, ages, nationalities and races.

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Sometimes peaceful, sometimes discordant, this dialogue would be initiated not to know, for it would be recognized that knowledge is a poor peg on which to hang our endangered future, but the many skills that lead to acceptance of wisdom: skills like joy, fearlessness and kindness.¹ Skills like self-love and a delight in ambiguity. Skills like art.

These skills, which together will revolutionize not only education but both life and art, will enhance the world and the place of humans in it. They will lead us to accept both the achievements and limitations of each species, including our oh-so-human one. They will enable us to not only recognize the limits of knowledge but also allow us to turn each act of knowledge into an act of being itself.

The following three essays are linked by one commonality: the examination of the politics of silence in relation to dialogue. Jane Vanderbosch examines how speech and silence are contained within texts of legitimized knowledge. She reflects upon her own experience as a graduate student and the ways in which silence and “noise” of a given curriculum can constrict or expand the mind and experience. Grace Deniston-Trochta submits that it is possible for dialogue to exist in the disposition and silence of the mind, as we try to reach out to each other. Required to teach a “pit” class, she tries to make sense of teaching in anonymity, an experience foreign to her personality and teaching philosophy. Ed Check asks Brandon, his nephew, about art class. Brandon talks about the difference between being listened to and not being listened to by his teachers. Check reflects on the importance of dialogue and truth-telling over silence and control in student’s lives.

Upon first glance, it may appear as though these are three stories united only by their common interest in the potential of dialogue in learning. However, the search for dialogue that is catalogued within these stories constitutes a larger dialogue in-as-much as the stories appear together in an appeal to the reader for its fulfillment. This triptych directs a spotlight on three divergent experiences of the concept of learning through dialogue, and it is this very divergence that stimulates responsive dialogue.

When Life Imitates Art:

Notes On The Nature Of Dialogue

Jane Vanderbosch

Dialogue: a speech act between two active speakers. Monologue: a speech act between an active speaker and a listener.

Such were the definitions, general enough and vague, that I knew as a young graduate student in English. Someone talked; someone else listened—whether it was during a play, where there were two listeners (i.e., the character spoken to and the audience), or within a novel or poem, read silently by a solitary reader.

I did not question the function of either of these definitions until the late 1970s, when feminism exploded like a supernova in my mind. Suddenly, it wasn't such a simple matter of isolated or even interconnected speech acts. Now, other variables—authority, intent, and context, for example—became part of this literary equation about dialogue.

As these variables intruded into the analyses of the poetry I was studying, entirely new sets of questions came following on their heels. Who is given the power to speak in any given speech act and who is silenced? What are the dynamics of the speech act itself? Where does the locus of control in a speech act reside—e.g., is there evidence that a speech or conversation is merely rhetorical, functioning more to provide the appearance of dialogue than an actual exchange of thoughts or feelings? How can we weigh the relative importance of each speech act within a dialogue? Why should dialogue matter to the reader, thinker or seeker at all?²

At first these questions nearly paralyzed me as a reader. Literature that I had read solely for “content” now seemed fraught with extra-readerly consequences. One pertinent example is: I had become immersed in the poetry of women, especially that of modern British and American women, and my whole notion of what a poem was “about” was evaporating before my eyes. Anne Sexton’s (1960) “crazy poems,” for instance, in which she directly addressed her psychiatrist (especially those in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), turned my poetic

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world upside-down. These were not the restrained, disinterested works I had been taught to admire by the New Critics, who clearly favored the order of thought over the anarchy of emotion. No, these were the poems of a gifted, sensitive, and enraged woman in the middle of a nervous breakdown.

And reading these poems marked the beginning of the end for me. I could no longer trust my teachers—hawkers of the New Criticism line—because they had left not only women poets like Anne Sexton out of their discussions of what was the proper or appropriate subject of poetry. They had left me out as well.

As a reader, a writer, and a woman, I was nowhere to be seen in these dialogues on the appropriate. And I did not know what I was missing until I read Anne Sexton.

So what does this one example of silence in the classroom about women's lives, of being silenced as a woman, have to do with an understanding of dialogue?

It is a clue. A clue that dialogue is not only a linguistic act, but a political act as well; a political act that is as much about power and control as it is about speech. It is a clue that, as seekers, we have a responsibility to gauge how we can facilitate dialogue in the politically charged atmosphere of a classroom—where sexism and racism and classism abound, not simply as ideologies from “out there,” but as the speech acts of all the individual speakers who enter the room. Speakers—who sometimes can be teachers rather than seekers—who do not listen to the voices of women or little girls. Or speakers—who may be students rather than seekers—who bully and intimidate less powerful speakers than themselves. Or speakers who have—to paraphrase the poet Audre Lorde (1984)—“learned” the speech patterns of the dominant, visual culture, and who refuse to “hear” the speech acts of the auditory or the kinesthetic.

This one example, then, taken from one life, speaks of the many variables, the many differences, within dialogue that arise as much from enforced silence as imposed speech. In this final sense, then, dialogue cannot itself be understood without reference to either silence or noise. The one denoting the inability or unwillingness to speak; the other the

cacophony that results when speech itself is divorced from the real purpose for speaking: to share our individual understandings of our world. To fuse those understandings into a collective undertaking, where words and speech acts combine, separate and re-combine to form a language, a common language, that attempts—much like this essay itself—to articulate what has historically been called “the getting of wisdom.”³

The Pedagogy Of Dialogue: A Relation Between Means And End

Grace Deniston-Trochta

In September I began teaching a “pit” course, so nicknamed because of the large amphitheater setting, holding the 164 students who had signed up for the class. Reluctantly, due to the size and the setting of the class, I was forced to choose the lecture format. Yet, all semester, John Dewey’s words rang out: “These means form the content of the specific end-in-view, not some abstract standard or ideal” (Archambault, 1964, p. 104). As I tried to justify the means, my anxiety spilled onto pages of a teaching journal, and in the process I began to examine the concept of dialogue as pedagogy.

The notion of dialogue as pedagogy has great appeal to me in that it is based on two informed assumptions: that it enhances lasting learning and produces more satisfying social interaction (Palmer, 1998). It also mirrors the complexity and “copious” nature of the world (Grudin, 1996). And, according to the late Paulo Freire (1997) who championed dialogue, it also contains the seeds of political empowerment. These claims have a healthy history, dating back to the Greeks. However, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) has demonstrated that dialogue as pedagogy is not without problems.

The Characteristics of Dialogue

The image of Socratic dialogue at work in the classroom is one of students engaged in learning by animatedly interacting with each other and the teacher as points are argued. Deborah Tannen (1998) points out in her book, *The Argument Culture*, that this popularized version reflects

our devotion to the Adversary Paradigm and is not true Socratic dialogue. Socratic dialogue is characterized by convincing others and leading them to new insights as habitual thought is abandoned. "Our version of the Socratic method—an adversarial public debate—is unlikely to result in opponents changing their minds" (Tannen, p. 274).

Dialogue in Multiple Forms

My recent experience in the "pit" raised several questions for me: Are there no other models of dialogue besides an image of vigorous student interaction in an intimate classroom? Does the large lecture format exclude dialogue? If our attempts at dialogue fizzle, do we conclude that no dialogue has taken place? In other words, is dialogue only "good" when particular standards are met? Dictionary definitions of dialogue do not help answer these questions because they neglect the subtleties of dialogue as they play out in the classroom. Robert Grudin (1996), a contemporary scholar, has made a prescient statement, which helps to flush out a fuller notion of dialogue:

What happens in dialogue? The key ingredients are reciprocity and strangeness. By reciprocity I mean a give-and-take between two or more minds or two or more aspects of the same mind. This give-and-take is open-ended and is not controlled or limited by any single participant. (p. 12)

Vivian Gussin Paley

Vivian Gussin Paley teaches very young children at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Having taught at the Lab School, I have been in Paley's classroom and observed her "laboratory of learning." I have also read several of her books in which she has reflected deeply on her behavior as it relates to interactions with her students. As Paley examines her own behavior as a teacher, her self-reflection becomes both the means and the ends. Similarly, she looks to the student to learn about herself, inverting the traditional role of teacher and learner. In her books, Paley has allowed us numerous intimate glimpses of this learning process as she recounts a range of teaching dilemmas, including her own ethnicity and race as they impact her students (Paley, 1979). It is this emphasis upon Paley's role as learner that allows change to

occur (for herself and for her students).

In her book, *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Paley (1990) describes how she uses children's stories as the curriculum. As she relates some of these children's stories to us, however, she reveals how they become sources of deep learning for her, about her students and about herself. The title is taken from the child in her class, Jason, who lives out the fantasy of being a helicopter. He is an outsider in the classroom, a loner who for quite some time resists all attempts—by students and teacher—to engage him in the learning community of the classroom. While the other children benefit from Paley's storytelling curriculum, Jason resists it. Or, rather, he lives his own story of isolation and loneliness through his fantasy of being a helicopter. Appearances would suggest that Jason seems to be out of dialogue with his classroom, but a dialogue exists nonetheless.

Through much struggle and introspection, Paley (1990) gained the following understanding:

Jason's most reliable tool has been the helicopter; mine had been drills and exercises. Both Jason and I, as newcomers to a classroom, hovered over children without landing on their runways, without entering their fantasies. I cannot avoid my own premises and experiences, and I can only pretend to know Jason's. But he is a child who causes me to analyze myself and everyone else. In his visible confusion, he often clarifies matters for me. (p.122)

Paley (1990) identifies teaching as a moral act when we acknowledge and respond to the fact that "every child enters the classroom in a vehicle propelled by that child alone, at a particular pace and for a particular purpose" (p. xii).

Although Paley may not call her practice a pedagogy of dialogue, her work constitutes an elaborate dialogue in which the teacher becomes a listener par excellence, a learner, a person who responds to and respects students, one who has earned the trust of his/her students. Her self-reflection (her learning) becomes the means and the end, as it changes the behavior and perceptions of both teacher and student.

Teaching in the “Pit”

As I anticipate the beginning of a new semester and lecturing to a new group of students in the “pit,” I have few illusions about my role. I am still convinced that a richer learning environment exists when you can recognize your students and “land on their runways.”

However, my hope rests in the complexity of dialogue as revealed in the self-reflective aspects of Paley’s work. Her experiences suggest that dialogue as pedagogy may begin in solitude, in the mind and will of the teacher. Not only does this suggest that dialogue as pedagogy wears as many disguises as there are teachers and student communities, it also suggests that something vital happens in solitude (in the process of self-reflection). We know that it is passed along to students: The means and the ends become indistinguishable.

Specific to my “pit” class, I know that the time, energy, and attention I devote to preparing my lectures will show up in kind, giving me a measure of control over the material substance of my lectures. I can also state with confidence that every struggle and effort I make to reach my students will also be in the sphere of my learning. Less predictably (and certainly with less control), there will be moments of grace when I will accidentally “land on the runways” of some of my students as their learning continues.

It is clear, finally, that internal dialogue can overcome the barrier of anonymity in “pit” classes, or other environments not conducive to mutual learning. In the context of student teaching, John Dewey once suggested that a student teacher should “observe with reference to seeing the interaction of mind, to see how teacher and pupils react upon each other—how mind answers to mind” (Archambault, 1964, p. 324). This is a useful phrase when thinking about dialogue, as well. While mind seeking mind may give birth to a dialogue of pedagogy, mind answering mind sustains and nurtures it.

Managing The Silence Of Children

Ed Check

[S]ilence sends a strong message to children: This may be your reality but it is not [a] truth that we honor in this institution. (Lyman, 1998, p. 14)

I was taught that “kids should be seen and not heard.” From elementary school on, I was on the receiving end of multiple monologues telling me what to do: from my parents, relatives, priests, nuns, neighbors and teachers. As a result, both my formal and informal educations failed me miserably as an adult. I was not at all prepared to discuss or deal with the realities of life—not sex, or sickness, or diversity, or death.

A recent conversation I had with my ten-year old nephew, Brandon, suggests to me that unfortunately, little has changed. It was a holiday chat; we were catching-up. I asked Brandon what was going on in his life. As he talked first about his family, then his school, I asked him about his art class. What was it like, was it fun, what was he learning?

Without hesitating, Brandon began a long list of complaints: his teacher didn’t listen; she had them all doing “stupid assignments;” he was bored; he wasn’t learning “much of anything;” he wasn’t able to do what he wanted to do; and then the teacher always wanted them “to do things her way.” As an example he said, she had recently demanded that he redo a print according to her specifications—in spite of the fact that he felt it was finished. Rather than comply, he had taken a lower grade.

After reciting his list of gripes, Brandon then contrasted his current teacher with one he had had in second grade. He said this teacher, whose name he didn’t tell me and who I’ll call Mr. Smith, made art interesting and exciting. Mr. Smith not only asked what kinds of projects the class might want to do but encouraged them to do what interested them. Brandon said he felt respected, like Mr. Smith “was listening to him.”

Returning home I realized that Brandon’s list of complaints paralleled many of my own critiques of art education. And then I realized something else: Brandon had voiced them all to me but he had never told his teacher. Never said what bothered him. And she had never asked.

Learning To Listen To Children

I've often wondered why don't we listen to children more? Or better yet, why we are afraid to engage in meaningful dialogue with them? What do we fear? Since creating a dialogue-centered curriculum would mandate that we simply tell the truth, perhaps the fear is not in telling the truth but in losing control (Silin, 1995). For that is what schools are about: power and control (Apple, 1979, 1982). The power to convey the messages of the dominant culture and the ability to control the audience.

Yet, listening to children (or anyone, I suppose), requires respecting not only their experiences and opinions, but the contexts of their lives. It also requires a trust between the speakers that can only develop naturally over time. This, in turn, would mandate a genuine interest in the lives of students. For example, my conversation with Brandon was based on mutual interest and affection. We trusted the other to hear our truths. Not only as uncle and nephew, but as two individuals who had two stories about our two lives to tell.

This kind of respectful dialogue means children must be heard, so that they can verify and witness their realities (Felman and Laub, 1992). This kind of dialogue is a mutually informed and empathic speaking and listening. I suspect the type of listening I provided Brandon allowed him enough safety to tell his truth about his teachers and enabled him to feel that he was being heard.

Following Brandon's critique of his current art teacher, children are apparently icons of innocence: helpless, silent and passive others. Within such a paradigm, children are neither seen nor heard because they are the projection of each teacher's own childhood, their own "lost times." The content and process of teaching then becomes so censored that any possibility of dialogue is destroyed. As a result, art classes become environments that are antithetical to creativity, imagination, and expression. Environments that are public stages, paid for by public moneys, where the "numbing out" and "dumbing down" of the American child is played out.

From Monologues to Dialogues

Listening to students and to their needs, hopes and visions, is the first step in creating dialogue. This is not an easy thing to do. As Ellsworth (1997) reminds us, such modes of address are not neat and can be messy and may lead to unpredictable events. And as teachers who have been taught to control or be in control at all times, giving up control is often the bane of our professional lives. Yet what we gain from such a “loss” is a fluid, living curriculum that guarantees dialogue and passion (Silin, 1995). Utilizing the rich contours and texts of student lives opens up our own lives as well, as we—teacher and student alike—explore our common humanity.⁴

None of this is easy to do. I struggle daily with how to incorporate dialogue and humanity into my teaching. And though dialogue, talking, being heard and listening to others has grounded my pedagogy, its still feels out of place for me in school. Why? Because that’s not how I learned to learn or to teach. Schools were places that didn’t have much to do with life. And it’s only now, as I enter my third decade as an educator, that I realize that the most powerful lessons are those that connect students to their lives. Like my students, I have much work to do.

Conclusion

Throughout each of our essays, we reveal personal truths—bits of wisdom—that have transformed our relationships not only to ourselves, but to our students, art, education and the world. We notice that when we speak and are not only listened to, but heard, our individual searches for wisdom are legitimated. Each of us has experienced such kindness in learning and has internalized a self-love, respect and awareness for diversity and inclusion. It would be too easy for us to suggest that what you, the reader, need to do is to change monologues to dialogues. Don’t tell people what to. Stop imposing speeches on controlled audiences in controlled environments. Listen to others. Tell your truths.

Over the years, as we have learned about types of knowledge, others, and ourselves, we have become disturbed by what little power we do possess to radically alter the big picture. As we continue to learn about each other, we learn about our prejudices, fears, strengths, weaknesses,

and visions. We have learned that it is going to be difficult, at best, to return to the person and her/his story and take the time to listen to it and begin to place it in a context of understanding and meaning.

As educators, we have mastered and felt the impact of cultural and institutional power. We have experienced what it means to be othered. We were raised working-class women and men, taught to be straight, lesbian and gay, are now aging, some of us disabled, and still artists. We have come to understand that our strengths and interests come from our differences. Over the years, we have engaged each other as friends, and have continued to articulate the honest and hard questions; who we are, where we came from, what we do, how we teach and how we dream.

As seekers of knowledge, we continue to engage in contesting the pedagogical terrain toward real inclusion; honoring and listening not only to each other, hearing what each of us has to say, but to others as well. That transfers nicely to our classrooms (wherever they may be) where we envision a teacher/learner—learner/teacher paradigm where the process of learning itself is valued.

Part of our vision is reconsidering the value and place of dialogue. It means hearing, trusting and accepting what people tell us as their truths. Within such a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970), we can delight in ambiguity and the unknown rather than fear or distrust it. It started when we recognized and addressed our silence, that “noise,” and began to trust our voices, experiences and visions. No universalities, just differences. All richly textured bits of knowledge. Such is our vision for personal achievement and critical awareness. As we allow ourselves to turn each act of new knowledge into an act of being itself, we transform not only ourselves, but teaching. We started with mutual affection and care. What kinder way to begin a revolution?

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Endnotes:

1. We are purposefully expanding the traditional notion of skill — using it in a non-traditional way. Just as art is a skill and a social construct, so is joy, fearlessness, kindness, etc. It is one way to personalize/humanize the discourse.
2. Seeker is a term I am using here to replace teacher-learner. A teacher does learn each time she/he teaches a particular subject, but because the balance of power in a classroom is usually tilted toward monologic teaching and away from dialogic learning, I preferred creating a “faux” term rather than perpetuating the acceptance of a false dynamic.
3. See Proverbs 4:7-13. See May & Metzger (1962).
4. See Kate Lyman’s essays: “Staying Past Wednesday” (about sickness and death) and “Teaching the Whole Story: One School’s Struggle Toward Gay and Lesbian Inclusion” (homophobia) for examples of utilizing dialogue to create informed critical pedagogy.

