Dialogic Teaching and Moral Learning: Self-Critique, Narrativity, Community and "Blind Spots"

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In the current climate of high-stakes testing and performance-based accountability measures, there is a pressing need to reconsider the nature of teaching and what capacities one must possess to be a good teacher. The recent report of the *Royal Society of Arts* on social, moral, and spiritual learning in the UK shows that the pressures placed on teachers to focus narrowly on outcomes has gravely limited teachers’ ability to address students’ social and moral learning (2014). Internationally, policies focused disproportionately on outcomes have been linked to promoting — whether intentionally or not — teaching practices that are reified and mechanical and lend themselves to learning-by-rote (e.g. Sahlberg 2011; Ravitch 2010). Such policies, and the practices they engender, unfortunately contribute to the general public image of teaching as a simple, mechanical task of content delivery. This image is a severe distortion of the complexity and difficulty of teaching; it obscures the essential connection between teaching and moral learning.

Philosophers of dialogue and dialogic teaching offer a different view of teaching, one that counters mechanical, transmissive or “monologic” teaching. In this paper, I seek to extend the notion of dialogic teaching as a method of supporting social and moral learning. Specifically, my focus is on answering the question: What capacities must a teacher possess to engage students dialogically? Drawing on Paolo Freire and other contemporary philosophers, in section one, I examine dialogic interaction as involving a way of “being with learners” and explicate three necessary capacities that characterise dialogic teaching: self-critique, narrativity, and building community. In the second section, I examine further what is entailed in dialogical teaching using research in educational psychology. I close the paper with two examples that highlight how dialogic teaching, unlike monologic teaching, involves the teacher’s active ability to support learners’ exploration of their own blind spots and those of others.

Throughout the paper, I emphasise that dialogic teaching, understood as a way of being with learners, aims at promoting social and moral learning by initiating learners’ encounters with differing perspectives. Specifically, I focus on how such encounters contribute to learners’ development of empathy and humility. By examining dialogic teaching through the lens of the teacher’s necessary capacities, I aim to underscore that any educationally valid notion of teaching must recognise its complexity and its inherent connection to promoting social and moral learning.

**Freire on Speaking with Learners and Three Capacities of the Dialogic Teacher**

In his text, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, Freire distinguishes between two modes of speaking as a teacher in a way that helps identify a central difference between dialogic and monologic or transmissive-style teaching. Although Freire is discussing modes of speaking, his distinction does not amount solely to a difference in verbal exchange patterns between the two “styles” of teaching. Rather, Freire’s distinction reveals that dialogic teaching implies a certain kind of relationship to learners, one that I refer to as a way of *being with learners*, which attends to learners’ social and moral development (in addition to their knowledge acquisition). Dialogic teaching as a way of being with learners, as I will explicate, entails three necessary (but not sufficient) capacities of the teacher: the capacity for self-critique; a narrative capacity; and the capacity to build community.

In monologic transmissive-style teaching, we may expect to observe a teacher mostly engaged in what Freire calls “speaking to learners”, that is, giving information or asking questions with fixed right or wrong answers (2005). Freire differentiates “speaking to learners” from “speaking with learners” in a way that identifies the educative relation between teacher and learner connected to dialogic teaching. In speaking to learners, the teacher is taking an authoritarian stance and not listening to learners; when teachers talk to learners on this model, it is only to listen to themselves and “underline the power of their own voice.” (Freire, 2005, 114). The experience of the teacher is one of affirmation of a given power structure and a separation between teacher as the one knowledgable and learner as the one lacking

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1 On the idea that assessing dialogue in teaching goes beyond assessing the content or structure of speech see e.g. Nystrand et al. (1997); and, Burbules/Bruce (2001).
knowledge. Contrasting this, dialogic teaching is associated with democratic teaching. By speaking with learners, the teacher seeks to give learners a voice and listen to them. Freire clarifies that this act of “speaking with” is not permissive. The permissive teacher like the authoritarian teacher, does not talk with learners, rather they take an anything goes attitude and “abandon learners to themselves” (Freire, 2005, 114).

Freire’s distinctions point out that in dialogic teaching the roles of teacher and learner, so clearly demarcated hierarchically in traditional teaching, have not simply switched. The teacher’s experience in speaking “with” learners is thus neither solely active and authoritative, nor passive and permissive. Rather, with the designation of “with learners,” Freire is locating a certain kind of interaction between teacher and learner that incites learners to learn what views and ideas counter their own. This means teachers are involved in a two-fold task. First, they must provide learners space to have a voice, that is “to say their critical discourse” and not be silenced (Freire, 2005, 116). At the same time, they must provide learners with the opportunity to recognise that their voice is not “limitless”; having a voice requires taking responsibility for what you have to say, being truthful, and not hindering others from having a voice (Freire, 2005, 116). Thus cultivating the learner’s voice means cultivating an individual who can express a viewpoint and at the same time recognise and respect the views of others.

**The capacity for self-critique**

Freire’s idea of speaking with learners calls attention to a certain way of — what I am calling— being with learners. This is seen more clearly in the fact that Freire notes that in order to mediate the interactions between learners who each have a right to a voice and must recognise that their voice is not limitless (i.e. must hear the voice of others), the teacher must equally recognise her own right to a voice, and that her voice is not limitless. This relates to what Nel Noddings calls executive monitoring or metacognition involved in dialogue, which describes the act of monitoring one’s “own contributions to the dialogue” (1991, p. 163). This activity when applied to teaching means taking on a self-critical stance. When teachers are with learners in dialogic interaction they acknowledge themselves in an ethical relationship in which they must simultaneously be listening and interpreting the contributions from students in order to guide them to critically reflect upon themselves and others. This ethical relationship involves also that the teacher can listen to her own inner-dialogue in order to monitor what she is saying and doing in her interactions with learners. The act of self-monitoring is reflective and it implies that the teacher recognise that she is vulnerable to error and encountering her own blind spots. The teacher’s capacity for self-critique is a way of describing the teachers ability not only to identify these moments in which she may be wrong, but also to confront them as opportunities for professional development and learning.²

**Narrative capacity**

A teacher’s simultaneous oversight over the learners’ interactions with each other and with the material of learning, as well as over her own interactions, points to a certain narrative capacity that is essential to being with learners in a dialogic interaction. Various thinkers have found ways to describe this capacity. Freire speaks of teachers needing to be able to “read the class”, as if it were a text to be “decoded, comprehended” to be attentive to the students’ “syntax”, or “their manners, tastes”, “ways of addressing teachers and colleagues” and the “rules” by which they govern themselves. Similarly, Max van Manen, in his definition of “tact” in teaching points out that teaching involves a “teacherly awareness” of how and to what extent the teacher is connecting to learners (1991, p. 111) and a sensitive ability to “read the inner life” of learners which involves interpreting learner’s “inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanor, expression, and body language” (1991, p. 125).³

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² This relates to the notion of pedagogical tact that I have developed elsewhere, see English 2013, especially Chapter 7.
³ See also connections to Herbart’s notion of pedagogical tact, English 2013, chapter 2 and 7.

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Robin Alexander’s notion of the principle of cumulation in dialogic teaching draws out further what is involved in the teacher’s experience of narrativity as I am defining it. “Cumulation” describes the teachers’ and learners’ processes of building upon “their own and each others ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry” (2006, p. 38). This activity, which Alexander argues is the most difficult to master of his five principles of dialogic teaching, requires that the teacher has “a conceptual map of what is to be taught, the ability to think laterally within and beyond that map, and an appreciation of where children are ‘at’ cognitively and what kind of intervention will scaffold their thinking from present to desired understanding” (Alexander, 2006, p. 49). I would add to this that the teacher’s narrative capacity requires also gaining an appreciation of where the students are ‘at’ socially, morally and emotionally.

These notions help illuminate that teaching involves being attuned to the cognitive, emotional, and moral abilities of students and navigating through that terrain in order to continue to imagine what is possible. In this way, dialogic interaction involves the teacher helping learners discover what they know and do not know, and this involves helping them “see” other perspectives, one that they had not previously acknowledged. The voice the learners are developing is not to be one of self-interest, rather it is to be one that can participate democratically by listening and taking in the other’s perspective, while recognising one’s own blind spots and fallibility. Thus the dialogic teacher is concerned not only with cognitive ability, but with what relationships are being formed with and among students, and these must be relationships of care and mutual recognition.

The capacity for building community

Finally, being with learners in the way I am developing it, describes a way of being which requires that the teacher has an overview of what kind of community is being built with learners in her classroom. Turning to Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of engagement with narrative arts can help us to illuminate how to describe the teacher’s capacity in dialogue as the ability to build a community of equal participants. Nussbaum points out that stories and novel are important for engaging with different perspective, but can “cultivate our sympathy unevenly, directing our attention to some types of human beings and not to others.” (1997, 101). Part of the task of a critical reading and teaching of stories and novels is finding its “prejudices and blind spots” and looking beyond what is on the page to discover what is missing (Nussbaum, 1997, 101). Whose views are left out of the picture? Are we being asked to sympathise with one group over another, and why? Underlying Nussbaum’s remarks is a particular pedagogy that I view as dialogic. Dialogic teaching builds community by having a view of whose voices are being left out, who, if anyone is being silenced, and addressing the needs of those learners and the group as a whole so that each can see themselves as a participant in the growing democratic life of the classroom. This means that the teacher is not simply monitoring what is happening in the dialogic classroom, but maintains a critical perspective on what is possible and what is necessary for students to see both with respect to subject matter and with respect to social and moral action, and works to support an environment in which these things can be revealed to the learners.

The notion of dialogic interaction as a way of “being with learners” tells us something significant about how we define teaching and how any definition of teaching must necessarily include the teacher’s responsibility to cultivate social and moral learning, as well as cognitive ability. On the basis of the above discussion, I seek to highlight how dialogic teaching contributes to moral and social learning in at least two central ways: it cultivates empathy by exposing learners to the process of seeing things from another person’s perspective; and, it connects to the development of the virtue of humility by exposing learners to multiple perspectives and in turn building their sense of awareness that their own views could be wrong or limited and may have left out others’ voices in the community. In the next section, I illustrate these further how dialogic teaching connects to moral and social learning using examples.

Dialogic Teaching and the Exploration of “Blind Spots” as a Moral Task

Dialogic teaching, on the view I am explicating, is grounded in the recognition that learning is not simply a step-by-step continuous accumulation of information; it is discontinuous and has negative aspects.
involving encounters with unfamiliar ideas and viewpoints, blind spots, not knowing, not being able, and not understanding. Thus, dialogic teaching involves teaching in a way that supports learners’ struggles to find out about the world through participation in the world, but this “finding out” cannot amount to receiving information from an authority; rather it requires the experience of what does not fit, what contradicts our ideas, what goes against our expectations—or as I have referred to it elsewhere, an experience of negativity.

To further clarify the notion of dialogic teaching and its connection to the teacher’s capacity to support such experiences, I draw upon educational psychologists Fritz Oser’s and Maria Spychiger’s two concepts of instruction. In their philosophical and empirical research, Oser and Spychiger differentiate between transmissive and dialogical approaches to instruction on the basis of how a teacher addresses (or fails to address) students’ errors or difficulties with the material of learning. Their work identifies practical differences in teaching that help to further clarify how teachers engaged in dialogic interaction possess what I have referred to as the capacity to help students engage with their own blind spots, that is with the discontinuity and negativity of their experiences. I close this section with the analysis of a video documentation of a fifth grade classroom in order to demonstrate the further nuance and complexity involved in investigating blind spots with learners.

From their studies of classroom interaction, Oser and Spychiger demonstrate that teachers working in the mode of direct transmission overlook and avoid student difficulty and error and fail to make these moments opportunities for learning (see also, Alexander 2006). Oser and Spychinger point out that this creates what they call a “Bermuda-Triangle”, that is often seen in direct instruction forms. The Bermuda Triangle takes on the form of the teacher asking a question, and getting a wrong response from one student, then a correct response from a second student, after which she moves on. The authors point out that teachers in this way completely miss the learning opportunities present in the classroom: “The teacher and second student already knew [the answer] and for the first student everything went too quickly” (Oser/Spychinger, 2005, p. 163). The opportunity to build off misconceptions and see how they connect to common ways of conceiving, and the idea of others in the class has all been lost (Oser/Spychinger, 2005, p. 163).

What is missed in particular in these moments, as the authors point out, is the opportunity to learn what not to do or how not to think, which they refer to as “negative knowledge”. Negative knowledge, as they demonstrate in this and other studies, is vital for learning what is valid and correct or morally justified (Oser/Spychinger 2005; Oser 2005). Teachers who only seek out right answers and become stuck in the Bermuda-Triangle are lead to form habitual modes of instruction that avoid students mistakes altogether, a didactic model they call a “Didactic of Error Avoidance” (Fehlervermeidungsdidaktik) (p. 164). When teachers do not view error and broader forms of experience such as confusion, doubt, perplexity or frustration as part of learning, or avoid those moments altogether—perhaps thinking they are helping a child—they actually hinder learning opportunities from being seen and taken up and thus limit the learner’s pathways of cognitive and moral growth.

Contrasting this, the authors demonstrate that dialogic forms of teaching follow a different instructional approach, one they call a “Didactic of Error-Encouragement and Error-Exploring” (Fehlerermuutigungs- und aufsuchensdidaktik) (p. 164). On this approach, teachers aim to facilitate students’ exploration of what they do not yet understand, or cannot yet do and thus helps students access vital moments for learning, moments that point to what I have called discontinuity in learning (English, 2013). The process of learning includes discontinuous moments in which we encounter a blind spot and struggle to find ways out (English, 2013). Moreover, this relates to what Robin Alexander associates with the aim of dialogic teaching, when he writes that in dialogic teaching, “learners learn to articulate what they know and don’t know, and what they need to learn” (Alexander, 2008, 93).

If classrooms are spaces for confirming what is already known, and overlooking what a child does not yet grasp, that child not only loses the opportunity to grasp a particular point in a lesson (their own particular blind spot), but also the opportunity for social learning. The type of social learning I am

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4 I refer to this as discontinuity in learning, see English, 2013.
5 English 2013.
6 All translations of Oser/Spychiger in this paper are mine.
referring to is that in which we learn from others’ errors or misconceptions. In monologic classrooms, the teacher does not make room for multiple perspectives, such that a child who raises his or her hand to “speak” (i.e. give a right or wrong answer) actually has no bearing on the content of the lesson and therefore has no bearing on the experience of learning. In contrast, the dialogic teacher by having the capacities for self-critique, narrativity and building community (as mentioned above), is able to draw out the diverse voices that represent any classroom, since children are always arriving with their own personal histories. Dialogic teaching, by presenting diverse perspectives, invites learners to engage in self-questioning, see the fallibility of one’s own views, and to explore and imagine other possible views in developing empathy.

Dialogic teaching, by giving learners the opportunity to see multiple possibilities and viewpoints as relevant, not only allows learners to see that the path to coming to new ideas involves tentative, muddy or even wrong notions; it also allows them to be as John Dewey says held in “suspense” as an essential moment of moral learning (see e.g. Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 155). When we are held in suspense, and “stop and think” we can reflect upon and discover what our own and others’ blind spots consist in. This engages them in the experience of moral judgement involved in a search for the Good. In this search, learners gain an understanding of the reasons to choose one path over the other, and since the options were contemplated and made explicit, the search provides learners with an understanding of what may be harmful to others, and provides points in the thinking process for returning to if the path chosen does not yield expected results (see Oser/ Spychinger, 2005, p 165-167; see also English 2013).

Two examples of exploring blind spots

From the foregoing it should be clear that I am not simply advocating that dialogic teaching simply means allowing children to make mistakes and struggle. Rather dialogic teaching necessarily involves providing experiences in which students can find, reflect upon, and discuss their own blind spots and the blind spots of others. Although these are often revealed in mistakes, the concept of “mistake” is too narrow to fully grasp the sense of what a “blind spot” could mean. To illustrate the complexity of this way of teaching and pull together many of the ideas I have been discussing throughout this paper, I take two examples of a teacher helping students understand their own and others’ “blind spots” in a 5th grade classroom from the documentary film “August to June” (1:13:35- 1:15:45, transcription mine)

[Teacher handed out K’nex models, which come as sets with complex lego-like pieces for building various structures. The building sets used in this 5th grade class are designed to introduce students to scientific concepts associated with levers and pulleys. The teacher gave out different models for students to work on in pairs. The camera shows that the teacher in a whole class discussion about an error made by one of the pairs that is now fixed]

T: What makes this pulley work?, when the girls first built this, the string did not have a rubberband and it was just a string and their pulley was not effective, Why did they have to change their design?

[Zoey raises her hand]

T: Zoey

Zoey: ‘cuz the rubber band is stretchy, something about it has to be tight, like stretchyness

Other students: [chiming in] really tight

T: OK what’s the word, what’s the word? the stretchyness is helpful, because it makes it… what was the other thing you said? .. tight

[The camera cuts to pairs working together on the models. The teacher sits with one pair of students who are having difficulty with the task; the camera shows them mid conversation with the teacher listening to the two students (A and B)]

A: Yeah, but she wasn’t trying to understand it, she kept on trying to do it her way

B: I was trying to understand it, it’s just you weren’t explaining right

T: [To B] Right now, I need you and Alani to find a way to cooperate to get this done and you need to, that’s your job, that is the job that you have right now, to prove to each other that you can pass the test

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of working together, a much more important test to me than whether you do the star test right, I want to see how you learn to cooperate with each other, that is one of the big parts of this job.

[Camera shows the two students working again on building the model]

A: [to herself aloud, frustrated]: No, now the first one came off
B: [laughs congenially]
A: [to herself aloud while working on the model]: These things are dumb, I hate it
A: [to B]: now hold that, go like that
B: [holding the string in a particular position]
A: [audibly]: Patience
B: [inaudible at first] Patience
A: [whispering]: Hold it
B: [inaudibly]: Patience is just not my thing
A: [to B in a whisper]: Patience is a virtue

[Both Laugh.]

A: [Looking at the model that still does not work]: What? you want mo… [turns around in frustration playfully] I’m mad, this is so mean, oh my god

[They try again, using both of their hands to hold the string at the right place]

B: Good, good, good
A: [Singing as they continue to thread the string]: “You’re the nastiest smelling toy in history”
B: [Looking at what they are doing, they need all four hands]: OK, tie it Alani
A: [Still working and singing]: “and I will let you go during history”
B: OK, I’ll hold it
A: [Holds up the model] We finished.
B: [screams rejoicing]
[They walk off together]

In each of the above cases, the teacher had to challenge the students sufficiently, identify what the students were struggling with and also when to make particular students’ struggles into a lesson for the whole class. She demonstrates developing the kind of instructional method Oser and Spychiger refer to as “Error-Encouraging and Exploring”. The first scenario discusses an error made by a pair of students, who subsequently were able to fix, and makes not only the error, but also the reasons for its resolution, points of learning for the whole class. In this case the teacher identified an epistemological “blind spot”, or a lack of knowledge about pulleys which was causing the error in thinking about how to construct them. Together with the learners, the teacher is exploring the grey area of learning that is between the making of the error and its resolution.

In the second scenario, even though we do not have the full discussion on film, it is clear that the teacher has allowed the students to voice their social difficulties with each other. The teacher is helping them pull apart and distinguish between not being able to do a task, due to lack of knowledge, and not being able to do a task, due to social and moral capabilities, which require mutual respect and collaboration. It seems apparent from this and from other scenes in the film, that the teacher sees the students as capable of completing the task from a cognitive standpoint. Her discussion with them allowed them to share their own perspective, but at the same time openly listen to the other’s perspective in a way that cultivates empathy. This sharing and hearing allowed the students to identify the distinction between self and other, in a way that placed them outside themselves to discover social and moral blind spots. The encouragement from the teacher to work together, posed as a challenge, required the judgement to reframe the task for these two girls. This reframing allowed them to re-enter the learning experience with an eye to see for themselves if they could work together.

Both of the above cases reveal how the teacher helps the learners “see” what they did not see, a form of teaching I have called “being with learners”. In these cases, students are exposed to new perspectives. This exposure provides them with the opportunity to see that there exists a concretely different perspective than their own. It also goes beyond this, to contribute to their ability to imagine that any ideas and beliefs they hold to be true could be otherwise. Developing learners’ capacity to imagine that things could be otherwise contributes to moral agency in that it supports learners ability to act on their
imagination by seeking out concrete change to improve personal and social conditions (Greene 1995). In this form of imagination the virtues of empathy and humility come together, since by placing ourselves “in another’s shoes”, we simultaneously recognise that our own initial view is limited, in so far as we were not aware of the different perspective of the other. In building the capacity to recognise the other, dialogic teaching supports learners to reflectively and imaginatively interact with the world.

Conclusion

As research on dialogic teaching increases, and dialogue is viewed as a method not only for teaching in the humanities, but also for teaching across all disciplines, including sciences and maths, to learners of all ages, then it becomes increasingly important not to overlook the connection to the teacher’s capacity to build certain kinds of relationships within the classroom. I contend that we cannot lose sight of the notion of teaching as a moral endeavour that requires certain capacities to facilitate moral and social learning. On the basis of the three capacities I have developed in this paper, we can understand expertise in dialogic teaching as lying in the extent to which the teacher is able to support learners to experience what was previously “hidden from their view,” that is, to experience the struggle of finding, confronting and critically reflecting upon personal and social blind spots, and the discontinuities in learning they engender. This means that the teacher is not simply monitoring what is happening in the dialogic classroom, but maintains a critical, imaginative perspective on what is possible and what is necessary for students to grasp, both with respect to subject matter and with respect to social and moral interaction.

References

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7 On this point see, Paul 1993.


