Philosophy, Dialogue, and Education

*Philosophy, Dialogue, and Education* is an advanced introduction to nine key European social philosophers: Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone Weil, Michael Oakeshott, and Jürgen Habermas. This detailed yet highly readable work positions the socio-political views of each philosopher within a European tradition of dialogical philosophy and reflects on the continuing theoretical relevance of the work of each to education generally and to critical pedagogy.

The discussion in each chapter is informed by materials drawn from various scholarly sources in English and is enriched by materials from other languages, particularly French, German, and Russian. This enhances the comparative European cultural perspective of the book and connects the work of each philosopher to wider intellectual, political, and social debates.

The book will appeal to academics, postgraduates, and researchers working in philosophy or philosophy of education, and in educational, cultural, and social studies more generally. Advanced undergraduate students would also benefit from the book’s discussion of primary sources and the authors’ suggestions for further reading.

**Alexandre Guilherme** is an adjunct professor in the School of Humanities, Department of Education, and the coordinator of the Research Group on Education and Violence at the Pontificia Universidade Catolica do Rio Grande do Sul, PUCRS, Brazil.

**W. John Morgan** is a professor emeritus and former UNESCO Chair of the Political Economy of Education, School of Education, at the University of Nottingham. He is also an honorary professor in the School of Social Sciences and Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow at the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data, and Methods, Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom.
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Alexandre Guilherme
and W. John Morgan
To Alex Anderson, for being always there for me.
To Joyce Morgan for her love and support as always.
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Introduction

‘Sweetest Saviour, if my soul
Were but worth the having,
Quickly should I then control
Any thought of wavering.
But when all my care and pains
Cannot give the name of gains
To thy wretch so full of stains;
What delight or hope remains?’
George Herbert, ‘Dialogue’, The Temple

As our epigraph, from George Herbert’s poetic and spiritual dialogue with Christ, indicates, the concept of dialogue has a long tradition in theological and other religious writing, as well as in philosophy and in education. As a genre, it dates from Plato (427–347 BCE), who wrote most of his work as dialogues, setting an original methodology for philosophy in the West for centuries to come. Plato wrote some forty-two such dialogues, most featuring Socrates (469–399 BCE), who had been his teacher and who left nothing written himself. Socrates is shown in Athens engaging others and challenging their views on subjects ranging from metaphysics and epistemology to ethics. Socrates’ challenge is through questioning and answering, a methodology that first defends one perspective and then changes to approach the subject from the opposite point of view. This is a philosophical and pedagogical method used by Plato to demonstrate the weaknesses and strengths of assuming argumentative positions.

Plato makes use of the genre dialogue to deal, for example, with themes such as pleasure and false pleasure in the Philebus, knowledge in the Theatetus, and rhetoric in the Phaedrus. The Phaedrus is of specific interest as it considers the concept of dialogue directly. Womack (2011, 11) notes that the Phaedrus, believed to have been written between 375 and 365 BCE, ‘comes out of a pederastic culture of its time and place, when it was conventional for mature men to adopt adolescent boys as both intellectual protégés and physical lovers’; Phaedrus, Socrates’ counterpart, makes a speech which ‘argues that a boy is better advised to grant his favours to a man who does not love him than to one who does. Phaedrus thinks this speech very clever, but Socrates disagrees and makes his point by
improvising a cleverer one to the same effect. Then, suddenly ashamed of this game of denigrating love, he makes an even better speech in its praise’. These speeches provide the foundation for a discussion of rhetoric, in which Socrates ‘argues that writing is a trivial and careless use of words, and that the only serious communicative medium is conversation’; hence, the dialogue Phaedrus concludes with an implicit positive reflection on dialogue as a philosophical and educational mode of enquiry.

At the heart of Plato’s pedagogy is a constructivist understanding of learning. Plato’s Meno is perhaps the best example of this (Nola and Irzik 2005, 105 cited in Biesta 2013, 452). In this dialogue, Plato discusses epistemology and the paradox of teaching and learning. The central questions are: how can one enquire into that which one does not know? and how does one recognise what one is looking for when one does not know it? (Biesta 2013, 452, footnote 4). Socrates argues that learning is a form of ‘recollection’ and that teaching is a matter of bringing out what is already there in the mind. Thus, the pedagogical method of questioning and answering aims at helping ‘recollection’, and it is this that introduces the ‘constructivist’ element to this Platonic dialogue. The Meno is not the only text in which Plato does this, for in another, less well-known dialogue, the Theaetetus, the method is elaborated and defended eloquently. In this dialogue Plato compares the teacher with a ‘midwife’, teaching to the bringing out of what is already there in the mind,, and learning to ‘being in labour’ (cf. Strhan 2012, 22). Certainly, modern constructivism is more complex than that advocated by Plato. It does not argue that learning is a form of ‘recollection’, arguing instead for the importance of rich environments and of learners’ activity, while continuing to allocate to teachers a role as facilitator (or ‘midwife’).

The influence of Plato and his dialogical style continued in Ancient Rome, during the Renaissance in Europe between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, and during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Cicero (107–43 BCE) wrote his treatise De Oratore (55 BCE) as a dialogue on rhetoric which is set in a Roman politician’s country house (Womack 2011, 14). Another example is Baldassare Castiglione’s (1478–1529 AD) The Book of the Courtier (1528; 1967). This was an influential Renaissance book, translated into several languages and reprinted regularly over the next two centuries. It represents a conversation at Urbino, Italy, in 1507, about various ethical, political, and social aspects of the courtier (Burke 1995; cf. Womack 2011, 18).

During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) and David Hume (1711–1776) again made use of dialogue. Berkeley wrote Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous (1713; 2015), in which Philonous (derived from the Greek meaning love of mind) speaks for Berkeley, and Hylas (derived from the Greek meaning matter) speaks for Berkeley’s opponents, especially John Locke. Berkeley proposes and defends his version of idealism against the materialist philosophers. Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779; 1976) were written during the 1750s but published only posthumously in 1779. They represent a conversation among Cleanthes, who defends natural religion, Demea, a Christian, and Philo, a philosopher who challenges
Cleanthes’ argument. The dialogue concludes by giving victory to Cleanthes, but the arguments of Demea and of Philo cast doubt upon Cleanthes’ position, damaging the peaceful coexistence between natural and organized religion (cf. Womack 2011, 26–27).

It is important to note that, because of the Enlightenment’s preference for science, based on either rationalism or empiricism, it became expected that philosophy proceed methodically in the manner of a mathematical demonstration, and not in an indirect and seemingly improvised manner as with dialogues (Hume 1976, 143; cf. Womack 2011, 24). To fail to do this would be to rely on mere speculation. As Hume (1748; 2014, 176) says, ‘If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion’. That said, it is arguable that some philosophers, such as Hume and Berkeley, chose the genre of dialogue to consider philosophical views because ‘it shows the mental activity that is required, the patience, cunning, friendliness and daring of truly philosophic conversation’; this is to say that ‘Platonic dialogue is exemplary, saying not so much “This is the truth” as “This is the kind of thing you need to do in order to arrive at the truth”’ (Womack 2011, 13). This is to say that the genre dialogue is a prime example of a philosophical enquiry, but one that is in many instances dialectical in nature, rather than dialogical in the sense of being an authentic relationship between individuals. Biesta (2003, 66) notes that Socrates is: ‘a teacher for whom questioning is only a pedagogical technique to bring the student to the right response. Socrates . . . is not really interested in what his partners have to say; he only needs their answers to go, step by step, towards his own inevitable conclusions for Socrates questioning is . . . a dialectical process’.

In this book, we are not concerned primarily with dialogue as a literary genre; we are interested rather in some modern philosophers’ understanding of ‘what is dialogue?’ and ‘what are the implications of such an understanding of dialogue for education?’. This is important for two reasons. First, dialogue is understood usually as a conversation, as an exchange involving questioning and answering between two or more individuals. Secondly, dialogue has been the focus of many projects and enquiries in modern philosophy of education. However, these often concentrate on merely establishing whether communicative exchange is in place. However, these are simplistic and reductionist ways of understanding dialogue which do not consider the relations involved in the dialogue (e.g., power, symmetric, asymmetric).

For instance, in his important work Dialogue in Teaching, Nicholas Burbules (1993, 8–9) well describes dialogue as a practice in the classroom when he says that: ‘[d]ialogue represents a continuous, developmental communicative interchange through which we stand to gain a fuller apprehension of the world, ourselves, and one another. In some cases, a dialogue might have an intended goal, such as answering a specific question or communicating an already-formulated insight. In other cases, however, none of the participants know exactly where the
dialogue is headed, or whether it will be successful; if one takes a process-oriented view of dialogue and its benefits, this uncertainty can be seen as educationally worthwhile’. Burbules describes the fluidity involved in dialogue, that sometimes it has a final aim and that other times it is more like an endless process. He (2005, 202) notes in the essay ‘Dialogue and Critical Pedagogy’ that: ‘[d]ialogue is never simply . . . operating across a divide between two persons or groups; it comprises internal tensions and contradictions as well’. There is a range of complexities, dynamics, and effects implied and caused by dialogue that the simple notice of a process of questioning and answering does not capture successfully.

In a similar way, Gur-Ze’ev et al (2001, 95) note that ‘dialogue’ has become a fashionable pedagogical concept and criticise attempts to institutionalise it as a way of fostering ‘critical skills’. They note,

By contrast, liberal and Enlightenment conceptions of reflection represent it as a dynamic process which can be institutionalised. We think there is indeed such activity that confirms, advances and develops the realm of the currently self-evident, but we want to call it ‘reflectivity’, to contrast it with ‘reflection’, the process discussed above which requires judgement and the transcendence of the supposedly self-evident. Within a dialogic process, there can be a place for genuine reflection, provided dialogue remains uninstitutionalised. But ultimately dialogue which remains open to ‘reflection proper’ can never be pre-required to be ‘efficient’, ‘profitable’, ‘right’ or popular. So we shall reserve the term “dialogue” by definition for an uninstitutionalised form of interaction.

This is to say that when educators and educational researchers (and policy makers) attempt to institutionalise ‘dialogue’, they fail to understand the complexities that are involved, such as power-relations, history and culture with their normative values, and the necessity of a common space. Thus, dialogue is not simply to achieve; rather, it is dependent on disposition and on situation and is often difficult to initiate, let alone sustain.

We argue that different understandings of dialogue may be discerned behind Burbules’ description and Gur-Ze’ev, Masschelein, and Blake’s portrayal of attempts to institutionalise it. Hence, Chapter 1 discusses Martin Buber’s concept of dialogue as a symmetrical relation, as being inclusive of the Other; Chapter 2 analyses Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogic imagination, and of dialogue as emerging in social and cultural contexts; Chapter 3 follows from this, commenting on Lev Vygotsky’s psychological dialogue as an historical and cultural tool, as well as a form of mediation between the individual and Others; Chapter 4 examines Hannah Arendt’s political understanding of dialogue as requiring a public space; Chapter 5 turns to Emmanuel Levinas’ ethical notion of dialogue as an asymmetrical relation and as attending to the demands of the Other; Chapter 6 assesses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist and phenomenologist understanding of dialogue as being present to the Other; Chapter 7 investigates Simone Weil’s understanding of dialogue as connected to relations
of power; Chapter 8 considers Michael Oakeshott’s political dialogue as conversation fostering civilized values; finally, Chapter 9 appraises Jürgen Habermas’s dialogue as communicative rationality.

Notes

1 George Herbert was an Anglican Christian priest and Metaphysical poet. Herbert’s poetry, and especially the poem ‘Love’, found also in *The Temple* (1908), had an influence on Simone Weil’s turn to Christianity (see Chapter 7).

2 Compare this with the concept of *tacit knowledge* or the *tacit dimension*, developed by Michael Polanyi (2009). We refer to this elsewhere (see, for instance, Chapter 8).

3 Freire’s criticism of teachers as agents of reproduction of the social order is connected directly with this idea of them as mere facilitators. Freire and Shor (1987: 8) note that: ‘[w]hat happens generally is that we dichotomize these two moments; we make them separate. Knowledge is produced in a place far from students, who are asked only to memorize what the teacher says. Consequently, we reduce the act of knowing the existing knowledge into a mere *transference* of the existing knowledge. And the teacher becomes just specialist in transferring knowledge’. This allows for both the controlling of teachers and the curriculum, turning the former into mere technicians who deliver prescribed knowledge and skills (Giroux 2004: 40; Apple 1993: 54; cf. Yaakoby 2002: 15). Biesta’s recent work on this should be noted also (cf. Biesta 2013).
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