



## Response to “Moving from collaboration to critical dialogue in action in education” by Matusov & Pease-Alvarez, 2020

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**Ray Paul Middleton**

Ladder4life, a non-profit organization, UK

### **Abstract**

Here I reflect and respond to the article on *Critical Dialogue in Action*: [“Moving from collaboration to critical dialogue in action in education” by Matusov and Pease-Alvarez, 2020](#)

**Dr Ray Middleton** is an independent trainer at [www.ladder4life.com](http://www.ladder4life.com) and the Workforce Development Lead for the [Fulfilling Lives](#) programme in Newcastle and Gateshead (England). With a special interest in trauma-informed care, Ray is piloting a programme of trauma-informed training taking a dialogical approach towards staff development using the ‘Ladder4Life’ social-psychological framework he developed. Ray has a PhD on dialogical/narrative approaches to complex trauma and has written a chapter for a book opening a dialogue between America and Britain about innovative approaches to people without a home ([Cross Cultural Dialogues on Homelessness](#)). Previously, Ray has set up and managed personality disorder services, been a senior care co-coordinator in an early intervention in psychosis service and is a systemic practitioner within systemic family therapy. Ray has personal lived experience of complex needs and has used mental health services in the 1990’s, an experience which motivates him to improve staff skills and services for others in the future.



I started reading it with an emotional attitude of *hope* as I’ve been working towards something for over 20 years which I cannot quite articulate, and do not fully understand. I was sat in my garden trying to make sense of what I’m doing in my day to day working practices. I thought it is something about teaching and training (I write and deliver training to staff who work in homelessness, mental health, criminal justice and substance misuse services). I try to do this though a dialogical reflective practice style - drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogical epistemology (Bakhtin, 1981). I’m also trying to do this collaboratively, sharing power, seeing people always already within a dialogical subjectivity.

Basically - I’m wanting to help people (staff) “get better” at helping people with complex combinations of needs around mental health and substance misuse interlinked with past trauma and a poor future prognosis. My work and values are motivated by my own journey through these issues in the 1980’s and 1990’s - and I want to do all this in ‘plain English’!

I thought what I am trying to do is probably called ‘dialogical pedagogy’ within an academic genre - so I ‘googled’ the phrase - and found there was an online journal about this pretty niche subject! I signed up, got sent a link to this essay - the abstract provoked an interest, so I’m starting to read on, in hope of

something... that it might help my journey of making sense of my practice. So I am responding dialogically as there was an invitation for *critical commentary* on the essay. I've done a PhD – in part using Dialogical Narrative Analysis methodology (Sullivan, 2012) but I have not worked in academia so am not so familiar with the *genre expectations* and what might be expected from a 'critical commentary'- but I can probably draw on my memory of things I have read and have a good guess, and I would like to respond. The style the text was written in is *anticipating responses*. So here is my response.

I felt an emotional connection with the idea of '*critical dialogue in action*'. Initially I could see some of what I do in the words as they appeared – like seeing part of me reflected in a mirror, something I act out but struggle to see or name for some time. There were differences of course (I teach adults trauma-informed ways to better help other adults). The idea that we can create 'zones' of shared problem-solving appealed to me as a useful concept. Particularly '*Zones*' of shared problems that do not need to be seen in the same way by all participants in the dialogue. During the coronavirus pandemic I am facilitating dialogical reflective practice space for staff teams around domestic violence and homelessness in the northeast of England. One of the new tenants had said they had sold all 'white goods' (cooker, fridge, washing machine) for drugs. The charity and the tenant may not agree on what the problem and solution was - but they needed to engage in a dialogue about it, which created a *zone of problem-solving*. This had happened with three different tenants in one week as the virus increasingly impacts those most socially excluded – so learning through 'zones' of shared problem-solving appeals as a way to make multiple senses of problem creation/solution as a dialogical process.

Connected to the zone I found the triangular concept of “Teacher (Eugene) - Teacher (Saul) - Pupils” helpful. I identified with Eugene as one of the 'heroes' of the text – because I am trying to teach staff to teach something (hope and skills?) to adults without a home (or in supported accommodation) who are often in various states of intoxication interlinked with mental and emotional distress. I am 'teaching the teachers' or 'training the trainers.' Bakhtin's concept of *zones* (Bakhtin, 1981) came to mind – or at least my reading of it as a specific space in time created by voices – by people with desire and will – who are creating *zones* with multiple spheres of influence, a place where our *will* or intentions must pass through other character's will and so are refracted through a prism. I thought this idea could have been expanded upon more as it is interesting. My desire and will is to 'teach' some skills to staff (motivation building, collaborative problem-solving, being reflective, handling strong emotions, tolerating uncertainty, assertiveness, etc.) in the hope they can 'teach' these reflective / developmental techniques to their clients – but the staff I teach may desire other things (to feel more confident in their job, to feel more certain, to have more support from management) so my strong pedagogical desire is refracted by their desire/will and then again as they interact with their clients – more or less applying some of the skills I 'taught' them (my teaching is weak/weakened in the wake of the world). So, thank you - I can see some value in reflecting on this pedagogic 'zone' of relating *wills*. Part of the pedagogic challenge is that I am trying to teach techniques to change subjectivity, what Foucault describes in his writings on *ethics* as 'techniques of the self' (Foucault, 1988). This is not so much cognitive 'head'-knowledge, but an ethical, felt, relational, embodied knowledge. So I'm thinking these *zones of shared learning* are not just an exchange of ideas or views – they have an emotional atmosphere and an embodied, ethical, relational, spatial quality.

A second response I had was seeing several 'characters' in the text - strong characters, whom we are introduced to, characters called; critical-dialogue-in-action, adult-led pedagogy, child-led pedagogy and collaborative pedagogy. The landscape the authors are speaking within became clearer to me, but it is new territory for me so I may easily misread things in this land. In discursive battles there is no 'no-man's land' free from other's voice on the subject, so Eugene and Lucinda cannot speak on this subject as Adam and

Eve in Eden - naming things for the first time. Clearly, neither are they trying to have the last word - the omega. Instead they are speaking in the way we all speak - within a landscape created by others whilst anticipating other's voices – past, present and future voices. I hear these *other voices* calling out in this text. What I mean is different pedagogical discourses have historical contacts which rhythmically settle in to traditional relationship which shapes how we think. Centripetal forces doing what they do. This centrifugal text attempts to disrupt this and open up a new space - different from the usual dialogue around adult/child/collaborative, and for me it succeeds. I think I understand it because I respond emotionally to it - it opens up a subjectivity for me to fit into – an image to try on – of '*critical dialogue in action*'. This is a new concept for me. Maybe it appeals to me like seeing something in a mirror. I am trying to see something 'inside' my subjectivity and this text appears to me as an 'outside' text contacting me and it becomes to me *internally persuasive*.

So why is this? The authors appear to be sharing their journey of learning / discovery which allows others to try this subjectivity on for size. The authors create a 'hero' of the text – the critical dialogical practitioner of pedagogy – and they shape up some limits for them – reflecting their own struggles to emerge and make sense of their actions retrospectively. The past changes as we look at it through subsequent experiences – the ground of our past is ever changing as it shifts beneath our feet. The authors give the protagonist – the critical dialogical practitioner – some degree of agency but warn their hero and the reader that they are historically hemmed in by other characters in the playground (the adult-led/child-led/collaborative characters, institutional power, etc.)

Anticipating a critical reader-response the authors give permission for the hero of this text to be hybrid in pedagogy. The text is attempting to change the landscape of discourse around pedagogy to allow a different kind of subjectivity to emerge in the space of teacher/teacher/pupil.

Yet there are hidden powerful voices which shape and structure the voice of what is said. For example, it is possible to hear the hidden voice of others:

“You have given up. You are a hypocrite. You have failed!” when the authors say,

“...using elements of traditional adult-run and collaborative philosophies in our work is not evidence of our failure, hypocrisy or surrender...” (p. A17).

They are answering the other voices in their head. The hero of this text is “ready to confront this challenge” which to me sounds *double voiced*. By this I mean it addresses the 'outside-in' powerful voices of competing pedagogies attempting to penetrate the subjectivity of the authors. There appears to be an 'outside-in' / 'inside-out' struggle with the discourses on pedagogy and the author and their hero (See Sullivan, 2012, Ch. 6 & 7). I imagine those other voices have hit a '*sore-spot*' and so are being pushed back out of the subjectivity of the authors and hero. These powerful voices are oscillating on the boundary of the author's subjectivity – 'outside-in' and the authors pushing back - 'inside-out'.

The text raises interesting questions for me about the teacher/student relationship, enabling me to think in new ways. I think the metaphor of the teacher as 'author' creating the student as 'hero' in the way Bakhtin (1984) thinks about the author/hero relationship in a polyphonic novel is useful here. Eugene and Lucinda are writing a story with three characters – the teacher of teachers, the teacher and the student. Perhaps all three are heroes, or perhaps they take turns author/hero? The relationship is dialogical, mutuality in the relationship is a hope. The ideas exchanged are not abstract (*istina*) but lived knowledge

(pravda) - embodied ideas saturated with personal values and judgements. Here the ‘hero’ is the other, given a gift by the author (teacher). Using this metaphor to help us think - the learner/hero anticipates and reacts to attempts by *others* to *author* them (as we do unendingly in lived-life). The learner’s reaction may provoke dialogues around identity/subjectivity for both teacher and learner.

Such dialogue takes place in an ethical zone of unequal power where self and other are mutually shaping. The dialogical teacher appears to me to be a *reluctant author* who is always trying to shift the balance of power (the authority to author) to the hero/pupil. Maybe the dialogical teacher feels conflicted, or maybe they think in different ways about the same thing at the same time? To encourage the pupil to become the author of their learning – but this is difficult, impossible (?) (even to articulate) as no one can author themselves in a vacuum – we always need *the other* to dialogue with. The pupil to some extent needs an authoritative author/teacher to enable them to take something into their subjectivity as internally persuasive (or reject from the inside-out). The teacher also needs a learner.

When the pupil is the hero they are (intertextually) exposed to different kinds of characters (the different types of pedagogy) – characters in this story who could influence their subjectivity, including ‘*critical dialogue in action*’. I see the Eugene (as teacher) as a searching-author in a relationship to the other/hero (pupil). Power relationship exist between texts (e.g. other pedagogies) but what is interesting is the responsiveness of the other/hero/learner to the shaping activity of the teacher. Both teacher (author) and hero (pupil) anticipate the judgement of others. This is what I mean when I say the author/hero relationship helps us think about this text.

In an earlier publication Miyazaki (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014) proposed this idea that the teacher is the dialogic author and the learner is the dialogic “hero” in a polyphonic novel. Eugene responded a caution that they may be the hero of a monological discourse, so the dialogic teacher/author has a responsibility to make an effort to keep the lesson dialogic. For me this connects with Lensmire’s (1997) exploration of this idea of teacher/student as author/hero, where he concluded the *responsibility* of the dialogic teacher is to impose *reflection* and sharing of themselves through dialogue and not to abandon the student to a ‘freedom’ stuck in their childhood without a teacher/authority figure. There is something about taking responsibility for encouraging reflection as a teacher and not anxiously avoiding the responsibility of our positive productive power. Power can be productive and not just negatively valued, avoided or always to be freed from – as it is always relational. To some extent, less in a dialogical approach, the teacher holds some authority/power to shape the subjectivity of the pupil/hero and the pupil has varying degrees of power to resist, or listen and learn, to become something new. Eugene wants the learner to be active as a responsive ‘author’ of their learning. Here we encounter one tense knot of the ontological/epistemological puzzle for me – the author (teacher) wants the hero (learner) to become, to some degree, free from them... to become their own author. Basically, Eugene does not want to treat his students as heroes and heroines in his polyphonic teaching but ideally prefers to treat students as authors authoring their own learning/lives because they have the highest authority on their own learning/lives (Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). However, I think this is an ideal extreme end of a spectrum that does not exist in everyday lived life. Instead we are ontologically always embedded in dialogues with more powerful discourses and others with more or less power, so no one can author themselves. To have a consciousness and subjectivity is to be subject to something. We can teach learners to become aware of this but not to be free from it. We can free ourselves from limiting subjectivities by believing a new story about ourselves, re-orientating the co-ordinates of our life-trajectory within a new narrative with a go-ahead plot, but we cannot author ourselves I believe, we can only co-author ourselves amongst others through dialogue. We can free ourselves from destructive dialogues by subjecting ourselves to believable alternatives about the ‘good life’, but for me identity is too

dialogical and social for us ever to author ourselves. We have to co-author our lives and this is where we can oscillate between learner/heroes and sometimes teacher/authors. We can do both.

To illustrate we can think of the article as a “lesson” and the reader as the learner. To some extent they may use some of this to ‘author’ their future self – but always in dialogue. Degree of belief in the new (lesson) is an important factor. For example, the text provokes me to wonder if the authors use *a word with a loophole* when they say they ‘...**probably** will continue to utilize these pedagogical approaches [adult-led and collaborative pedagogy]’ (p. A16). “Probably” provokes the reader (Maybe they will / maybe they won’t?). The anticipated super-addressee (reader) is positioned to wonder – their subjectivity is given some wriggle room and in a way an escape pod. Perhaps this is expressing the hope of more space for the subjectivity of the teacher or teacher/teacher to grow into/not feel hemmed in? Perhaps this ‘probably’ is just a ‘sideways glance’ at the critical powerful other/alien voices in the room – the other (usual) characters – or other subjectivities available for the teacher to adopt as a position. To be honest I’m not sure. I find myself thinking in different ways about the same thing at the same time (i.e. the hero’s possibility of using the other pedagogies). It does not have to be that I am conflicted or confused. Perhaps I do not need to ‘confront’ myself, just take a sideways glance at another *self* in another universe (‘In this world I believe this, and in that world, I believe that – how strange!’). It may be enough that the range of subjectivities available for me to think about my teaching is a bit broader, the landscape mapped a little more into previously uncharted territories.

The hero they have authored is becoming detached from the authors as they support their ‘hero’ to take on a life of its own – they let go as it is published. As the authors anticipate response and invite critical commentary I tune into an emotional atmosphere of some anxiety about the reader response mixed with hope (that it is understood, that it is internally persuasive, that it is responded to in some way- even in the anticipated ‘confrontational’ way that they promise to confront ‘in themselves’). In this utterance of promising to confront themselves is a micro-dialogue with an absent other. The absent other structuring the discourse is the power of educational institutions (as funders). The *double voiced-ness* here is how the educational world is and how it ought to be – two ‘truths’ addressed simultaneously in speech.

As I read Lucinda and Eugene’s text, I thought about how I was responding to it. This responding has led me down a path to seeing – to see that they have created a hero of this text – a hero/teacher (different from the hero as learner) that can use adult-led/child-led/collaborative and **critical dialogue in action** pedagogies in hybrid ways, depending on the local context, needs and will/desire of the participants. Creating such a hero in this text I think offers the reader a new subjectivity to move into. Personally, it appeals to me. I am fitting some unarticulated subjective half-thoughts and feelings into it and I like it. I’m going to try it out to test how internally persuasive it is – to see what response I get from others. Thank you for taking the time to write it up and share your new pedagogic dialogic teacher/hero!

My takeaways are to think about the different characters involved in co-producing a local zone of shared legitimate problems where teaching/learning can take place – a place where the differences between teacher and learners are up for reflective dialogue and where diverse perspectives and approaches are encouraged by opening up dialogue on each valued topic being taught about. Everyone is bringing something into the zone, some of what I bring into the zone I cannot see until *the others* see it, and visa-versa - so it will be a zone full of surprises! Perhaps we are characters appearing in each other’s narratives, sometimes as author/teachers and sometimes as learner/heroes within the heteroglossia of centripetal and centrifugal forces at play. I will take up my responsibilities to facilitate dialogic reflective

learning on topics I think have value (or topics that emerge / are requested by learners) and ready to respond to their response.

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