



Democratic education and dialogic pedagogy: synergies and dissonances



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Abstract

This paper is a re-publication¹ of an interview between Tina Kullenberg and Ana Marjanovic-Shane, published in the EARLI SIG 25 Interview Series: "The role of theory and philosophy in Educational Science" (Kullenberg & Marjanovic-Shane, 2020)². In the interview, the authors discuss the reasons democratic schools sometimes support but other times do not support or even limit dialogic pedagogy. In the interview conducted by Tina Kullenberg, Marjanovic-Shane makes a distinction between schooling and education. Finally, in the face of global development, while sharing her comprehensive experiences over time and cultures, Marjanovic-Shane critically reflects on predominant approaches to education and the organization of schooling.

Tina Kullenberg holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Education, currently working at Kristianstad University (Sweden) as a lecturer in teacher education programs and postgraduate courses in Educational Science. Her research focuses on pedagogical communication, applying dialogic and sociocultural perspectives on teaching and learning. Lately, she has been especially engaged in Bakhtin-inspired approaches to education. She also has a special interest in addressing democratic issues with a relational lens, for example, exploring the intricate dynamics of power-relations in educational dialogues between teachers and students or peers, premises for student agency, and other institutionally embedded dilemmas or opportunities in schooling. Moreover, she has a background in the area of music education, in theory, and practice.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane is an Independent Scholar interested in ethical ontological dialogism and meaning-making in education, democratic education, students' academic freedoms, and students' critical and creative authorship in self-education. Her articles in English and Serbian were published in various journals (e.g., *Mind, Culture, Activity Journal, Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, Dialogic Pedagogy Journal*) and as book chapters in books on play and education. Two recent publications include: Shugurova, O., Matusov, E., & Marjanovic-Shane, A. (2022). The University of Students: A place for joint self-education. *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal*, 10, E1-E42; Marjanovic-Shane, A., Meacham, S., Choi, H. J., Lopez, S., & Matusov, E. (2019). Idea-dying in critical ontological pedagogical dialogue. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 20, 68-79, and a book: Matusov, E., A. Marjanovic-Shane & M.

¹ We (Tina Kullenberg and Ana Marjanovic-Shane) want to thank the publishers of the EARLI SIG Interview Series for granting us a permission to republish this interview.

² <https://earli.org/node/139>

Gradovski, (2019). *Dialogic pedagogy and polyphonic research art: Bakhtin by and for educators*, Palgrave Macmillan. Ana lives and works in the USA.



Introduction

In this conversation, Ana Marjanovic-Shane and I (Tina Kullenberg) discuss whether democratic education always goes together with dialogic pedagogy or not. Ana raises the question by pointing out why, how, and when dialogic pedagogy and democratic education seem to be in synergy and when they take separate ways. In this context, she also problematizes the common idea that all democratic schools follow liberal values and principles, promoting students' unconditional academic freedoms. By definition, democratic schools can decide to adopt illiberal educational philosophy and practice based on monologic pedagogy as well, she claims. She moreover distinguishes between *schooling* and *education* and explains why that makes sense to her. Finally, Ana reflects on the development of educational systems over time and over cultures as well. Education has become more and more standardized, and governments tend to manage more and more aspects of education. The degrees of freedom for the students and the teachers have thus been diminished in an alarming way. So, in current times there is less freedom of thinking, acting, and personal meaning-making in the education of today.

The interview

Ana: So, what do you want to ask me today?

Tina: Well, based on what we already have set out to discuss, I have this issue in mind: Do you think dialogic pedagogy may imply a democratic education or not? If so, why, when, and how? Perhaps you remember, at first, I was eager to ask you *why* dialogic pedagogy and democratic education go together, but then you advanced my question and told me that you are interested in talking about *when* and *how* as well. A good point, I think.

Ana: Yes, I found that dialogic pedagogy and democratic education do not always support each other. I found this very deeply now, working on my project on the Norwegian democratic school experiment history. Especially while working on the analysis of a particular General Assembly meeting held in the Experimental Gymnasium of Oslo in the first months of the school existence in 1967.

So, I think it is important to note that democratic education is a way of governing a school. It is about the participants' rights in making decisions about the organization of the practice of schooling. So, democratic education is not really about *education* itself, but about the shapes and conditions of life and practices in which education can take place! I want to note that here I refer to "education" as a particular kind of practice in the sphere of human practices, like: art, or music, sports, cooking, trade, etc. In contrast, "school" is an organizational, i.e., institutional or just a communal way to organize people around the practice of education. Education can actually take place outside of an organized school. And vice versa, a school can be organized in a way that may harm or even suppress genuine education, while promoting socialization, training, and obedience! Democracy in organizing education as a human practice, is about questions like Who is in charge of organizing this practice? Who can make legitimate decisions? Democracy as a way of governance means that everyone in the community of people *in* the school has equal rights to make their voices heard, their ideas discussed and participating in making decisions about educational practice issues.

Tina: Mhm, and this is what democracy is all about?

Ana: Yes, this is basically what democracy in education is. Ultimately, democracy is not about the content of the decisions the participants will actually be making. The notion of "democracy" is only about how the governance (of the school) is organized: What are the powers, the rights, and the relationships of

the participants in creating their practice. It is about who has the right to make decisions, but not about what kind of educational approaches will be adopted. For instance, in Summerhill and the Sudbury Valley School, education itself was often organized in very conventional ways (Greenberg, 1991; Neill, 1960). The difference was that the students had a right to decide what classes they wanted to have and whether to participate in these classes or not. Dialogic pedagogy may happen to be one of the approaches among several that the democratic school participants decide to practice. But whether dialogic pedagogy will be practiced will not be directly determined by the fact that the school is democratic.

So, for democracy in school governance, two things are critical. The first one is for the school to be sovereign, having full control of their decisions. When we think about democratic countries, that means the country first needs to be self-standing. No other countries are dictating them what to do and how to behave... A democratic country cannot be a colony of another country. In a democratic country, people make decisions for themselves, right? And when it comes to schools, it would be the same principle. You have that in the Summerhill school, and you have that in other private democratic schools in the USA. Potentially, this is so in some other countries. I don't know how it works in other countries so well. However, to go back to Summerhill, for instance, they are educationally sovereign. They don't have to follow any national, educational rules, except hygiene...

Tina: Hygiene?

Ana: Yes, hygiene.

Tina: That's an interesting fact!

Ana: Well, they must have their health guarantee (Windley, Belhiti, Chippington, & White, 2019) after all, and other safety guarantees about the physical and some social aspects of their schooling. But as far as the *educational* [pedagogic] issues in question: how and what will the students learn, what will be the internal policies of the school, their ways of evaluating what would count as being good students or bad students, all of that, – nobody from the outside can make decisions about that and impose them on the students and teachers. That means that there are no external impositions nor any external pressures. In other words, there are no external authorities for democratic governance to be possible.

This is the first condition for truly democratic schools. These schools have to be entirely run by their own communities, and no-one else from the outside can make the decisions for them.

The second condition has to do with the internal practice. It is that *all* participating voices are equal, which means they all have the equal right to participation and the right to be heard. In that sense, there is no hierarchy in the school. This is all about having the right to decide. At the same time, it is not at all about *what* to decide and what the decision will mean or imply.

Democracy has to take into account people's different opinions. Thus, there will always be somebody who will not be satisfied with a collective's decision. In democratic governance, these differences must be resolved when making decisions.

The differences in the opinions and points of view are also important for dialogue in education. In fact, the differences, contrasts, and even contradictions among the points of view in dialogic pedagogy are the very core of dialogic pedagogy.

As you can sense, there is a crucial difference between the role of dialogue in education and its role in democratic governance. Democratic governance needs dialogue for deliberation. It needs dialogue for giving all participants equal rights to express their opinions. But in the end, when it comes to the issues of running the school, decisions have to be made, too. These decisions must be finalized, taken out of the dialogue of diverse opinions, and they cannot always be expected to please every involved participant.

Tina: Please, go on with the issue of pedagogical dialogues!

Ana: OK, the big difference between democratic education and dialogic pedagogy is that the latter, the dialogic pedagogy, actually depends on and thrives on disagreements! The more differences of opinions, the more potential to deepen the educational dialogue! And what is essential, one should not be compelled to finalize the dialogue in dialogic pedagogy. In fact, pedagogical dialogue needs to be open to different interpretations and new arguments and opinions in the present and the future. The agreement, i.e., closure in pedagogical dialogue, is assumed to be only temporary. So, here you are, in fact, happy to have both differences and oppositions between teachers and students, and between diverse students. Each of them has an equal right to exist, so their voices can exist parallel to each other. No voices should be suppressed. Each person should, through dialogue, test their own ideas and positions and have a right to form their own, according to Bakhtin, Internally Persuasive Discourse (IPD) (Bakhtin, 1991; Matusov & von Duyke, 2010, p. 346)

Tina: In other words, plurality?

Ana: Yes, but when it comes to the governance, to how to run the school, to questions like what are the rules of conduct in the school, what freedom can students have in making personal educational decisions, what is the scope of educational impositions, what decisions should be made, how to plan the budget and other very concrete decisions regarding the life in school, then you have to finalize, you have to make decisions and close further dialogue. For that reason, you cannot have plurality when it comes to communal decision making about the actual relationships, obligations, chores (who is doing what), etc. You cannot have plurality when it comes to concrete decisions about what is legitimate or not. You can only decide to grant liberties to the students, leaving decisions open to each person.

Tina: In democratic education as well?

Ana: In any education. Democratic education can be more or less liberal. In fact, it does not have to grant a lot of personal freedom, essentially. It could be very illiberal. It depends on what decisions have been made for the school. These democratically made decisions can either widen or narrow that personal sphere of liberty that Isaiah Berlin called “negative freedom” (Berlin, 2006) – a sphere of personal liberty where no one has a right to interfere with one’s personal views, desires, and decisions.

Tina: That’s a good point. Do you then view dialogic pedagogy as a contrast to democratic education?

Ana: Yes, democratic education is about creating an educational environment. It does not have to go along with dialogic pedagogy because the people running the school may ultimately make decisions contrary to dialogic pedagogy.

The difference between dialogic pedagogy, which is about instruction, and democratic education, which is about governance, is that democratic education is about organizing the whole school environment with its practices, relationships, powers, individual rights, responsibilities, and philosophical approaches, etc. So, democracy is about organizing people. It is about what controls this organization. What leading values, principles, world views, philosophical approaches to truth, and life guide that organization. Thus, a democratically run group of people could decide on very conservative principles as well. It would be their decision. A democratic school could become a very illiberal democracy.

Democracy is not dialogue. Democracy, on the one hand, needs dialogue, because making decisions is best when there is a critical dialogue about the differences of opinions, when everyone’s voice is heard and deliberated, and when decisions are made based on the equal rights of all the opinions. Everyone will have an opportunity to provide their point of view, and everyone will be more informed about the Pros and Cons of potential decisions when the decisions are made. Nevertheless, the dialogue needs to be eventually closed when decisions are made. And so, democracy, as a form of governance, ultimately means imposing these decisions on all the participants, whether they agree or disagree with them! Like any other governance, democracy, too, is about LIMITING individual freedoms through creating common rules and laws, to which everyone has to adhere!

On the other hand, *dialogic* pedagogy is not about making decisions. On the contrary, it is about problematizing diverse ideas. Deeply inside, dialogic PEDAGOGY is about what happens in the meaning-making process. What happens with the meaning in the process of its creation for each person and between different people who are examining an educational issue of their interests. We want to, let's say, study Shakespeare's dramas, and so everything you want to know about it, reading them, playing them, discussing them, thinking about how the characters are developed, what the characters go through, what is the meaning of their acts, etc. Whatever becomes a particular educational topic becomes the focus of meaning-making in dialogic education. The student has the right to set the questions, create the issues to study, bring new ideas, and discuss alternative ideas. Dialogic pedagogy is about how we communicate in the process of making meaning, and how we make sense about some topics of education at that time. Dialogic pedagogy is about enabling this never-ending sense-making through critical dialogue.

In other words, let me tell you this. I think we should make the distinction between *education* and *schooling*.

Tina: Why? Tell me why.

Ana: OK. Schooling is about how to organize education institutionally. As an institution, a school must decide on some common set of values, principles, and rules. In other words, as an institution, a school is about creating and setting an environment where education can take place. As an institution, school sets limits on what the shape of education could be for each student. The premises of the actual schooling environment delineate the educational practice, i.e., the roles and responsibilities of each student, their rights and freedoms to be (or not) the authors of their own education, the nature of their responsibilities to self and the others, and the opportunities and rights to transcend the given. In other words, a democratic school environment can be more liberal or more illiberal. It depends on the scope of personal (negative) freedom that the democratically organized school has decided as legitimate. Can the students personally decide both how to participate in the educational activities and whether to participate in these activities or not? Is there a non-negotiable part of educational activities? Can a student decide to only engage in cooking (either in classes or outside of classes) and nothing else? A democratically run school may make a decision that everyone has to learn basic mathematics and basic reading, whether that makes sense to them or not. Even though it is democracy regarding how decisions about schooling are made, these decisions in a democratic school may impose something on the students. Right? As you see, this is very concrete and practical. It's about *schooling*, but not about education. However, it shapes the education by leaving more or fewer possibilities for the students to be the authors of their educational meaning and sense.

For me, *education* is about the personal endeavor of examining the world, the others, the self, and there are no limits.

Tina: Where does the teacher-student dialogue come in?

Ana: If in communication, especially educational communication, the teachers think they already know everything, and don't listen to the student, and are not trying to understand where this student's perspective comes from, then there is no dialogue, as I define a genuine educational dialogue. In a genuine educational dialogue (in my understanding that is inspired by Bakhtin), students and teachers are trying to understand the other one. They engage in testing their own and each other's ideas – in the process of meaning-making. What is important in dialogic pedagogy is that the teachers and students don't need to agree with each other. For me, the dialogue is really a very creative discourse among people in this sense. It means listening to various perspectives about an idea, or some issue, and bringing alternative ideas, providing evidence, examining pros and cons, exploring implications both in general and in particular: what is good or bad for whom and for what, etc. Does it matter, for whom and for what, under what circumstances, etc.?

Tina: Yes, the creativity for me in such “dialogic dialogues,” besides the clearly ethical aspect of it, implies the transcendence of the given into something new: novel insights, expressions, knowledge, thoughts, perspectives, and so on.

Tina: I happen to know that you have extensive experience of education throughout time and cultures and have been engaged in this topic for a very long time in exploring what both democratic and dialogic education could mean in terms of organization and consequences. If you look at the education of today, comparing it with education in earlier times, what do you think has changed? What are you afraid of, or what are your hopes?

Ana: Well, a lot has changed for me, from the time I was a child in Yugoslavia to our present time living and working as a professor in the USA. I think that the changes took place all over the whole world. Education has become more and more standardized, and governments manage education more and more. The degrees of freedom for the students and the teachers have been diminished. So, there is less freedom of thinking, acting, being an author of one’s own meaning-making, and one’s own education. Although we, too, had non-negotiable aspects of the curriculum, instruction, policies, and evaluation in education, there was a lot more time and space for free choices and personal educational activism. Instead, today, there are more and more *prescribed* and predetermined things in schooling, where there is less and less room for education as a personally pursued examination of life, others, and the self (Matusov, 2020b). You have standardized testing; you have constant measuring and ranking people; you have a mindset where education is conceptualized as the production of people, almost like objects that have certain characteristics. Such ideas perhaps existed before, but these views and practical school organization seem to be much stronger today than they were in my childhood and youth! However, in the modern era, a germ of ideas about public education, or public schooling, is based around a central premise that the role of public education (for the masses) should be training people to read and write to become workers in an industrial area. Consequently, the expected educational outcome had to be identical for each person to function effectively in that kind of society.

Tina: I see, thanks for sharing this, Ana. Finally, your last words to the readers?

Ana: I am always an optimist. I think that the idea of education as a central sphere of the personal pursuit of meaning and sense has a lot more chance to become legitimate for more people in the future than it had a chance before. Although it always existed for some people some of the time, I think it will become a reality for more people more of the time in the future. I base my optimism on the development of science and technology that makes it possible for humankind to increasingly relegate tedious and senseless work to smart machines so that people can dedicate more and more time and resources to essential human creativity in making life more meaningful (Matusov, 2020a; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017, 2019). Although I know that this will not take place over-night, I hope that each person’s rights of freedom in their own education (Matusov, 2020b) will become the most important guiding principle for creating educationally rich human existences for all. Democratic education is probably the first step in giving powers of self-determination and self-direction to all people through their lives.

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