

Dialogue on ‘Dialogic Education’: Has Rupert gone over to ‘the Dark Side’?



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Abstract

This email dialogue that we record and report here between Eugene Matusov and Rupert Wegerif, exemplifies Internet mediated dialogic education. When Eugene emailed Rupert with his initial (mis)understanding of Rupert's position about dialogic pedagogy Rupert felt really motivated to reply. Rupert was not simply motivated to refute Eugene and assert his correctness, although Rupert is sure such elements enter into every dialogue, but also to explore and to try to resolve the issues ignited by the talk in New Zealand. Through this extended dialogue Rupert's and Eugene's positions become more nuanced and focussed. Rupert brings out his concern with the long-term and collective nature of some dialogues claiming that the – "dialogue of humanity that education serves is bigger than the interests of particular students and particular teachers..." – and so he argues that it is often reasonable to induct students into the dialogue so far so that they can participate fully. On the other hand, Eugene's view of dialogue seems more focussed on personal responsibility, particular individual desires, interests and positions, individual agency and answering the final ethical "damned questions" without an alibi-in-being. Rupert claims that dialogic education is education FOR dialogue and Eugene claims that dialogic education is education AS dialogue. Both believe in education THROUGH dialogue but education through dialogue is not in itself dialogic education. For Rupert dialogic education can include 'scaffolding' for full participation in dialogue as long as dialogue is the aim. For Eugene dialogic education has to be a genuine dialogue and this means that a curriculum goal cannot be specified in advance because learning in a dialogue is always emergent and unpredictable. Our dialogue-disagreement is a relational and discursive experiment to develop a new genre of academic critical dialogue. The dialogue itself called to us and motivated us and flowed through us. This dialogue is much bigger than us. It participates in a dialogue that humanity has been having about education for thousands of years. We hope that it also engages you and calls you to respond.

Key words: Dialogic education, monologism, dialogism, praxis vs poiesis, educational sovereignty, ontological vs epistemological vs instrumental dialogism

Introduction

Rupert [January 31, 2014]:

In the Dialogic Pedagogy Institute meeting held in Waikato, New Zealand this January, the research talk I gave with Sibel Kazak provoked a strong reaction (Wegerif and Kazak, 2014; Kazak, Wegerif and Fujita, 2013). Eugene seemed worked up and claimed that I had 'gone over to the Dark Side'. I was robust in my defense and recall telling one questioner to 'shut up' when I felt she was talking over me (sorry Ana!). Sibel, who is an experienced maths education researcher, looked shocked afterwards and told me 'I have never seen a response like that before!' If we had been in one of our research partner primary classrooms the teacher might have told us not to be so 'disputational' and to try to be more 'dialogic'. But of course we were still being dialogic despite the raised tone and angry body language. To prove it we engaged in an email exchange afterwards to explore the issues further.

Why did the temperature rise? What was really at stake? You decide after reading the debate.

This email dialogue, we record and report here between Eugene and myself, exemplifies Internet mediated dialogic education. When Eugene emailed me with his initial (mis)understanding of my position I felt really motivated to reply. I was not simply motivated to refute him and assert my correctness, although I am sure such elements enter into every dialogue, but also to explore and to try to resolve the issues ignited by the talk in New Zealand. The dialogue itself called to us and motivated us and flowed through us. This dialogue is much bigger than us. It participates in a dialogue that humanity has been having about education for thousands of years. We hope that it also engages you and calls you to respond.

Eugene [February 2, 2014]:

This dialogue-disagreement is a relational and discursive experiment to develop a new genre of academic ontological critical dialogue. We want our readers to judge how much Eugene-Rupert disagreements are paradigmatic or not. In paradigmatic disagreement, people disagree about definitions and values of the practices, nature of inquiries and approaches (Kuhn, 1996). If the disagreements are paradigmatic, it is interesting to build an agonistic dialogue among conflicting paradigms. Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe (2000, p. 103) contrasted antagonistic and agonistic relations, "... the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* [involving adversaries who try to annihilate each other] into *agonism* [involving friendly adversaries, whose right of the existence is recognized by each side, if not even appreciated]." In an agonistic dialogue, the goal is not to try to convince the paradigmatically opposite side of one's own truth but rather to challenge each other (and self) to push one's own paradigmatic ideas further in an honest open-minded reply. Of course, occasionally, we may come to some (temporary) agreements or even convince each other of each other's truths or of new emerging truths. An agonistic dialogue does not expect a collapse or merge of the involving paradigms, even if a collapse or a merge may occasionally occur. The appreciation of the agonistic relations and dialogue comes from a gift of extra-paradigmatic challenges — challenges that come outside of one's own paradigm — that moves the paradigms further and make the participating (and attending) voices stronger. Our agonistic dialogue has been definitely facilitated by personal and professional respect for each other that apparently has only deepened through and as a result of our agonistic dialogue-disagreement.

¹ Ana Marjanovic-Shane.

We present our email correspondence as it has emerged. At times, we replied by embedding our utterances in the text of our interlocutor and at times, we replied by following the text of our interlocutor. This represents a challenge for publishing our dialogue but we hope we successfully address it by marking the author and the date of an utterance. Sometimes we coded our utterances in our texts to mark subheading. We preserved that. All our post-dialogue comments-clarifications are marked by brackets.

Email correspondence

1)

From: Eugene Matusov
Subject: Going to the "Dark Side"?
Date: 24 January 2014 02:02:11 GMT
To: Rupert Wegerif R.B.Wegerif@exeter.ac.uk

Dear Rupert

It was nice seeing and talking with you at the conference. It was very stimulating for me and I learned a lot from you. I really enjoyed our conversations.

I think that a conference short discussion after your last presentation provides only a very limited opportunity for all of us to dialogue. I wonder if asynchronous communication of email can be a good continuation of our dialogue for us. It may not have intonational and emotional display for us to share but, in my view, face to face talk does not provide us enough time to think and fully express our ideas and their nuances. Also, one strength of Face-to-Face communication, which is to quickly correct each other's unnecessary misunderstandings of each other through back-and-forward responses, cannot be usually possible in 15-minute QA sessions with multiple participants.

[Eugene's longer text is below copied in Rupert's reply and with Rupert's responses to each point]

2)

From: Wegerif, Rupert
Sent: Saturday, January 25, 2014 4:32 PM
To: Eugene Matusov
Subject: Re: Going to the "Dark Side"?

Hi Eugene

I am happy to engage in dialogue with you. But first, a short biographical preface might be in order.

Bakhtin pointed out that dialogues involve whole personalities carrying with them their embodiment and their unique histories (Bakhtin, 1986). You have mentioned to me several times the importance of your experience under communism in the Soviet Union for forming your educational and political positions. I therefore feel drawn to also share a little bit of relevant biographical information before we start. Under communism for you, it seems that there was too much indoctrination and too little freedom. My experience of childhood in 1960's Britain was very different. My liberal artist mother, perhaps influenced by the child-centred educational philosophies popular at the time, expected me to make my own decisions and find my own way. I found the lack of guidance and structure I experienced frustrating.

Your claim in the meeting in Waikato (referred to above) that I had 'gone over to the dark side' implied that I had been corrupted by an evil monological system. This makes sense to me in the context

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of a struggle with Soviet communism but it also resonated with me as the sort of thing my late father, Boudewijn Wegerif, might have said, and in fact did say in different words. Like you, my father, who died in 2004, was an avowedly moral man calling for an alternative to the 'evil' economic and political system around us. He could perhaps be called a Christian anarchist influenced by the thought of Nicholas Berdyaev. 'Love not debt' was written on the banner he carried when he did a two-year 'walk for peace' from Sweden to Cape Town in the 1990s. Some traces remain of his thought on the web mostly from people saying what an inspiration he was. My attitude to him was shaped by the fact that he did not look after me when I was little and that later, when I turned to him for guidance, he did not encourage me to succeed within the system. In my view my father played the role of a prophet crying in the wilderness instead of getting his hands dirty with the messy reality of the world as it is. In practice, his moral absolutism was linked, in my mind at least, to his failure to take responsibility for his children. I feel from our discussions that you might also be trying to oppose current reality and go for purity and revolution instead of engagement and evolution. I wonder if this extreme position of yours is also linked to a failure to take proper responsibility for the education of our children?

Apart from its apparent closure I think that the Taoist Yin-Yang symbol expresses one essence of a dialogic world view very well. This is that the other is always to be found at the heart of the same. The 'light' and 'dark' sides of the symbol are intertwined and can be found each within the heart of the other. That you sense 'the dark side' in some of what I am saying therefore seems entirely appropriate to me. As I said in the Waikato meeting, I want to be the dark side as well as the light side and above all, I want to remain with the opening of infinite creative potential to be found in the point of tension between these two false alternatives.

1) Eugene's mirroring Rupert's ontological project [January 24, 2014]:

Correct me, Rupert, if I'm wrong, but I see your ontological, if not your political project, in trying to reform the conventional monologic education by engaging conventional educators into dialogic pedagogy within the institutional (monologic) constraints of their work. If this is your overall goal, if my portrayal of your ontological goals is correct, I do not find it "dark" by itself. However, let me continue to mirror you. You seem to accept the conventional teachers' pedagogical problems of helping the students to achieve the curricular endpoints preset by the designers of the educational standards (e.g., defining educational success by students passing standardized tests). You seem to accept the educational preset curricular endpoints but try to socialize the conventional teachers in dialogic instruction that may more effectively lead the students deeper into acquisition of the preset curricular endpoints. So, by dialogizing the instruction, you seem to want to "corrupt" conventional monologic practices and to push subversively the conventional education into the dialogic realm. The subversion and corruption are in a better path of reaching the monologic pedagogical goals of conventional education through dialogic means, which may create a "crawling revolution" of tacit dialogization of the teaching practice and the teachers themselves. Is my portrayal of your ontological-political project and desire correct? Feel free to correct it, please?

Rupert's response [January 25, 2014]:

Your mirroring is mostly correct but not quite. Firstly, I will outline where I think we agree. I want dialogue as an end in itself to be an explicit goal of education and I see this as both an individual goal and a collective goal. I am not happy with the current focus on reified knowledge exemplified in the emphasis on testing and I think that by bringing more dialogue and dialogic into the process of education this alternative approach will eventually take over to become the main goal. So, for example, once policy

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makers realize that engaging children in outer and inner dialogue from an early age leads to improved scores on every kind of test then the tests will eventually assume less importance and the dialogue that has been a means to the end of test results will take over as the acknowledged main end of education instead of the tests.

However, I do not oppose knowledge and the teaching of knowledge in a knowledge based curriculum. I see knowledge and dialogue as dynamically intertwined. My concern is not to oppose teaching knowledge but to shift the balance to locate knowledge within a larger dialogue. Therefore if we teach inherited useful knowledge we should teach it in a way that enables it to be questioned and developed later on and not as something already inert and fixed. In the context of maths and science there is a great deal of useful knowledge already discovered and constructed by previous generations in the long dialogue of culture. Children need to be inducted into that knowledge as part of their acquisition of their culture and in order to empower them to take it further. (Oakeshott, 1962 and Wegerif, 2013, chapter 2). I oppose child-centered discovery learning as the only approach to science education. Inquiry based approaches are part of the whole but so is the teaching of established concepts (Wegerif, 2013, chapter 6). We must distinguish between knowledge, which is the product of long-term and large scale collective scientific dialogues, and individual understanding of that knowledge. A dialogic approach is essential for understanding. But collective knowledge (science) has a social reality that transcends each of us and is not fully described by our different individual understandings.

So yes I want to dialogize the curriculum but for me that is not necessarily inconsistent with having some curricular endpoints. In the words of a popular song: it is not what you do so much as the way that you do it that really counts. If teachers induct students into the prior knowledge of the human race in a way that enables the students to take up this knowledge and use it creatively in their lives then that is good. Bad teaching focuses on the knowledge as in the tests and good teaching focuses on participation in the living dialogue of science. Normally this switch to a dialogic approach would be manifest in different kind of tests and in a different curriculum but that external change in form is not the most important thing here. Once we switch to a dialogic ontology we discover that the reality of things often depends upon our orientations towards them. Everything can look the same and yet be completely different if we approach it in a different way.

Let me explain what I mean here with an illustration from my own education. In my traditional English state grammar school I was taught the poets Blake and Wordsworth by an enthusiast in a way that helped these poets become living voices for me. If they had not been on the curriculum I would not have read them. I was grateful for the wisdom of the teacher who set the curriculum. At the same time, I was taught maths by a functionary in a procedural way that enabled me to pass the exam but killed any interest in maths for me until I discovered its potential as a living voice much later on while doing a masters in computing. The maths was taught monologically and the poetry dialogically within the same school and the same education system. In my view monologic and dialogic curricula are not so obviously different as you seem to imagine, it is monologic and dialogic teaching and learning that are different.

2) Eugene’s conceptual discussion of Rupert’s onto-political project as Eugene understands it

Eugene [January 24, 2014]:

I think one of the big ethical issues for me in your onto-political project is whether, through this onto-political project, you will indeed corrupt the conventional monologic pedagogical practice or it will corrupt you (or both, and if so, to what degree). In a way and in my view, Rupert, you call for

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transformation of conventional Alienated Education, — in which both curriculum and instruction are *poiesis* (Aristotelian term for a practice, in which its goals, qualities, and definitions are predefined in advance, 2000), — into Progressive Education (cf. Dewey, Vygotsky), — in which curriculum remains to be *poiesis* of achieving the preset curricular endpoints, while instruction become *praxis* (another Aristotelian term for a practice, in which its goals, qualities, and definitions of what the practice is, emerges in the practice itself and is are not pre-given). Ana Marjanovic-Shane and I (2012) called Progressive Education “Closed Authorial Socialization”, in which authorship, creativity, and dialogue are allowed for and, thus, limited to only achievement of the Authorities’ preset goals (Ana and I wrote a short paper for Human Development on that and if you want to I can send it to you, 2012). Rupert, would you agree with this analysis? If not, how and why not?

Rupert response to Eugene [January 25, 2014]

I am not quite sure of this. I feel that you are implying a very idealist separation of pure freedom from conditioned freedom. I think we begin as conditioned animals in nature and only gradually achieve relative freedom through appropriating voices and resources. So scaffolding is required and this is the responsibility of the parent and the educator. The parent and educator show foresight in selecting the curriculum. When faced with babies it is absurd to suggest that they 'choose' a curriculum. Freedom to choose is a cultural product that needs to be part of the curriculum and taught. It is not a given of nature. Quite the opposite, in fact. We are not born free and only achieve freedom to the extent that we are taught freedom, or, rather, taught in a way that frees and empowers and enables subjectivity to emerge.

Is this manipulation? No, it is culture. In England, babies wish to learn English sounds and drop Chinese sounds and in china they learn Chinese sounds and drop English sounds with no overt coercion required - engaging in dialogue with the voices around leads to this motivation and this selection towards a capacity to engage more deeply. Moving beyond the learning of language to the learning of culture is similarly naturally motivated. This understanding of the role of culture in the production of freedom and subjectivity does not in anyway limit the outcomes of education or circumscribe freedom in advance. We must learn to speak within a dialogue in which many things have already been said but what we say can take that dialogue somewhere new and unexpected.

Again things are complex and nuanced and intertwined. What appears to one person at one time as a block to freedom may be a necessary structure for empowerment and gaining freedom for another. Am I right in imputing to what you say a rather extreme unsituated view of freedom? 'Freedom from' instead of 'freedom for' meaning freedom as a capacity to do things like e.g. play the piano? Amartya Sen (2009) has written an interesting book on the dangers of this sort of extreme view of freedom.

Eugene to Rupert [January 24, 2014]:

Alternatively, you may sincerely believe that learning math, specifically math, is about learning the preset math truths. If you do believe in teaching preset truths in math (or beyond), let me know, please and we can discuss this fascinating topic, as I do not agree with teaching any preset truth in any subject unless it is purely instrumental to support some other more existing issue. In my view, messiness — messiness in the goal and definition of the activity and in multiple discourses, voices, and approaches that are viewed as legitimate — is a marker of the Ontological Dialogue. When, we educators, tries to reduce this messiness in the name of order, clear focus, logic, goal, purity, mono-discourse, and so on — I think we kill the Ontological nature of Dialogue.

Rupert's response [January 25, 2014]:

Well, yes, there are useful truths in context that empower people to solve problems. Ultimately Mathematics is part of a larger dialogue, the larger dialogue of humanity (as I understand it this claim is one of the implications of Godel's theory which shows that Mathematics can never close itself off from its context, Casti and DePauli, 2000) but this does not mean there is no collective knowledge that children need to acquire in order to function. I was happy to drill and test the 10 times table with my son using fun software and bribes just as I am happy to drill and test my Spanish verbs or my driving skills - everything in its time and in its context!

3) Eugene's consideration of ethic consequences of Rupert's onto-political project: Is it going to "the Dark Side"? [January 24, 2014]:

Rupert, if my conceptual analysis of your onto-political project is correct, the following question may emerge. Is Progressive Education better — i.e., more humane, thus, more dialogic, — than conventional Alienated Education (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012)? My reply to that, informed by Foucault (1984, Fendler, 1998), is, “Yes and no, but essentially no.” I agree that the Progressive Education has much more elements of dialogism than the Alienated Education. I should admit that I was attracted to the lively dialogue between the two boys with contagious, carnivalistic, Big laughter of one of them.

However, I was also repelled by the hidden exploitation, manipulation, and colonization of their dialogue by cruel excessive monologism. Through skillfully deceptive scaffolding the teacher (and the problem institutionally preset) marched the students' lovely dialogue to the preset math truth by making all other possible alternative truths cognitively impossible and socially/politically dangerous for the participants (the two boys).

Pardon my strong Russian-Jewish simile, but it is like enjoying a Jewish prisoner orchestra playing classical music, while other Jews were marched to the oven in concentration camps (<http://www.holocaust-lestweforget.com/orchestra.html>). Did great classical music make killing Jews more humane? I doubt, even though there is more humanity elements in this terrific classical music, its humanity played a terribly inhumane role in the Nazi crime. I can be wrong but I suspect that adding more humanity and dialogicity for the overall monologic purposes makes pedagogy more, rather than less, excessively monologic. (Of course, in any way, I do not want to compare your Progressivist Education with the Nazi crime but I hope this simile can articulate my ambivalent attitude to any Progressive Education).

Another possibility for you being acquired, tempted, and trapped by “The Dark Side” is that the Progressive Education's promise and even delivery of the better and more effective outcomes for monologic education can bring grant money. Again, I do not see a problem of getting grant money from our monologist agency-enemy in general, but I do see its ethical problem, when it is done by selling our “Dialogic Ontological Soul” (Matusov, 2009; Wegerif, 2007) to the “Devil of Excessive Monologism.” In my observation and reverent judgment, you, Rupert, have made and have been making big important contributions to the development of the concept of Ontological Dialogic Pedagogy. I have been learning a great deal about Ontological Dialogic Pedagogy from you and I worry that this temptation to “reach the other side” and to get its pound/dollar traps, distorts and diverts your great “Dialogic Ontological Soul” as well as souls of the other participants.

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I remember many of my friends and relatives and just people I knew in the Soviet Union decided to join the Soviet Communist Party because without joining Communist Party, they might not have jobs and resources to achieve success in their professional life, housing, and overall financial well-being. They tried to be Realists and even claimed that they would corrupt the Communist Party from within, through being honest, good people. My observation on them was that the Party corrupted them more than they corrupted it through compromises they had to do and through trying to be logical and consistent although I felt a lot of sympathy for their needs.

During our debates after your presentation, I remember that you claimed that conventional schools are reality. I refuse accept conventional schools as reality because it is wrong reality. Once slavery was reality but it was wrong reality based on abusive power. I doubt that one would reform slavery by offering dialogic means for making slaves more productive and obedient to their slavemasters... or even dialogic in fulfilling the slavemaster's tasks. Rather than accepting reality of wrong, I think we may better deny wrong in its reality by undermining its normality and legitimacy for its participants.

I think it is better and more dialogically honest to engage our colleagues from "the other side" in a critical dialogue about their (and our) pedagogical desires than to try to help them achieve their oppressive desires by offering means and power of dialogue in hope to subvert them in dialogue and create in them an attraction to dialogic pedagogy.

What do you think?

Rupert's response [January 24, 2014]:

I think there is some methodological confusion here. I see myself as an educational researcher and in the research I reported with Sibel Kazak (Wegerif and Kazak, 2014) our focus was not on changing anything but on observing it to see if the ways in which children were learning things in the current system depended on invisible dialogic mechanisms of seeing through the implicit perspective of others. I think this is interesting. We did intervene a little with adding a 'teaching ways of talking' element to make sure there were more opportunities for dialogue but that was not really the focus. The curriculum goals we derived from the UK National Curriculum in discussion with the teachers. This did not imply that I approve of these goals anymore than if I studied the tides I would need to approve of their movement. These curriculum goals were set by educational mathematics researchers and I am not sure it would be very ethical of me to challenge them since they have more expertise in this area than I do.

I believe in science and science means persuading people who are not predisposed to agree with you. It is kind of like submitting oneself to democracy so as to avoid destructive conflict. You might think you know already but the best way forward is science understood as the open minded dialogue of humanity. This means that while politics and ethics shape my choice as to what to research and shape the way I use what I find out I refuse to let politics and ethics determine what I see in the classroom. I really want to find out how children learn to think. If the processes turn out to be monological then I will learn from that but I suspect that they are deeply dialogical and I am looking for evidence that will persuade me and others of this. I mean rigorous evidence of a scientific kind. If this is persuasive it might teach us how to design education and ultimately contribute to a more dialogic education in the future. It might be counterproductive to junk science and imagine we know how best to teach everything already just because we have passionate political and ethical commitments. This would be unethical. Using children as experiments in a political vision.

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Yes, the children are being manipulated by a hidden hand to learn certain things. I see no alternative to this. I would like to change the curriculum to teach more dialogue and more freedom but this would still be a manipulation of a sort. I do not even begin to understand what perfect freedom on the other side of all constraints and manipulations would be like. I suspect it would involve the irresponsibility of parents towards their children and a failure of their duty of care.

In this debate I think we return to my biographical note at the beginning. I think that there is no freedom without engagement and incarnation involving real world constraints and so freedom is a slow journey of evolution not revolution. In Russia, I would probably have joined the party to evolve it from within. Gorbachev seemed and still seems quite a reasonable person who worked for evolutionary change within the system. Things could have been worse if reasonable people refused to join up. Nuclear holocaust was avoided for example. Things can always be worse.

Of course there is always the danger of corruption by 'alienating monologism' and so we have to keep recalling the larger context of our teaching. Following Derrida I would call this teaching with two hands. Deconstructing at the same time as we construct. Each curriculum 'fact' can be taught in a way that maintains and encourages creativity and freedom or in a way that limits creativity and freedom. It is often as simple as using language differently, from saying 'this is the case' to saying 'this might be the case according to some people, try it and see if it is useful but bear in mind that there might be another way of seeing things that is even more useful just we have not found it yet.' i.e. it is the way that you teach that matters often more than what you teach.

I wonder if we share a similar ontology but that politically and ethically we have very different motivations?

But perhaps our ontology is also different - I do not seek authenticity on the other side of alienation but through embracing alienation and thereby moving up a level of awareness to discover that we participate in the whole messy business, dark side and all - there is no separate pure self nor finalised 'whole' - no point of freedom from the uncertainty and dialogic struggle - no outside that we can refer to as solid ground on which to place our lever to escape the chaos. Yet there is an outside of a sort, all our conceptions are preceded and exceeded by a larger unbounded 'space' of potential - a kind of void - that cannot be expressed but enables the possibility of our questioning what is. This is the always already broken whole. The whole is not graspable but it is in some way relatable. I mean that one can orient towards it. That relating is humility and openness to the infinite other.

I am tempted to paraphrase Nicholas Cage on art here: "I have nothing to teach and I am teaching it and I call that dialogic education."

Best wishes

Rupert

(in a hotel room in Bangkok on Saturday morning 25th January before checking out, but feeling transported by the open-ended dialogic process of writing to a different chronotope altogether)

Eugene [January 24, 2014]:

PS If you feel that my subject title about "Dark Side" is too distractive and/or offensive for you, please, feel free to change it — it is OK for me. As we discussed it at the conference, for me the ethical

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aspect of our pedagogical work is very important. I'm constantly checking if and when I am going to the Dark Side. Actually, I view myself constantly being on the Dark Side but painfully trying to leave it with rather doubtful results in my pedagogical and academic practices. Using the Alcoholic Anonymous approach ("once alcoholic is always alcoholic"), I'm admit that by my upbringing and biographical socialization, I'm a pedagogical monologist who tries to be a pedagogical monologic dialogist (i.e., becoming a "dry alcoholic") (Matusov & Smith, 2012).

PPS Should we invite other participants of your symposium to this discussion or should we keep it private?

3)

From: Eugene Matusov

Subject: RE: Going to the "Dark Side"?

Date: 26 January 2014 22:52:17 GMT

To: "Wegerif, Rupert" R.B.Wegerif@exeter.ac.uk

Dear Rupert—

Thanks A LOT for your helpful, challenging, and profound reply. Thanks for sharing about your upbringing — it is helpful for me better understand your concerns.

I am not political or parental anarchist. Reading little about your father, I feel more sympathetic with you rather than with him. But I may be an educational anarchist, which is different all together (but I am still not sure and your reply is helpful for me to make my mind).

I agree with you that little children and adults in general are thrown in life that in many ways imposes on them without much their consent or even negotiation. A famous example is kids do not choose language they learn to speak. But, and this is where we may (or may not) different — you are to judge, — I do not equate authorial socialization to human practices as education. For me parenting is not education either. Although, both authorial socialization and parenting may involve important elements and aspects of education. For me education is about critical dialogue that you so nicely described, "I believe in science and science means persuading people who are not predisposed to agree with you. It is kind of like submitting oneself to democracy so as to avoid destructive conflict. You might think you know already but the best way forward is science understood as the open minded dialogue of humanity." However, we still may disagree about whether dialogue can and should lead to consensus at the end of the day. Also, for me there is such thing as "teaching knowledge" or "scaffolding to knowledge" as the core of education (it is OK on its periphery) that is outside of critical dialogue (or "internally persuasive discourse" as Bakhtin would probably call it). I wonder if our core disagreement may lay here. Would you see education as first "teach" (i.e., make the students acquire important knowledge) and then "dialogue" (i.e., deepen their understanding of this knowledge)? If so, this is probably where we are different, because for me teaching=dialogue, not transmission of knowledge.

Like you I want to study messy business of conventional (monologic) education, and yes politics shape my research and teaching practices. But it does not mean for me that in a name of "realism" I accept institutional political goals as a starting point of practice or as the given or my excuse. I see it as a potentially dangerous path of collaboration with "The Dark Side" J.

I do not believe in the whole, ungraspable or otherwise, because holism is for me too monologic.

I love your paraphrase of Nicolas Cage! Thanks!

Take care,

Eugene

4)

From: Wegerif, Rupert

Sent: Tuesday, January 28, 2014 4:20 AM

To: Eugene Matusov

Subject: Re: Going to the "Dark Side"?

Hi Eugene

I suspect that some of these apparent conflicts relate to the way in which dialogic theory points us to the limits of conceptual thought. It is well known that Bakhtin contrasts dialogic to monologic and yet also, in other passages, writes that all meaning is dialogic. I think that this apparent contradiction points us to the importance of the context of reading. The same text can be monologic or dialogic depending upon how it is read. The same is true of pedagogy. Perhaps this contradiction that is not a dead monological contradiction but a fertile dialogical contradiction, offers a way to understand some of the differences between us.

1) Socialisation and education. You, Eugene, make a distinction between these two processes but ordinary language in every culture I know does not make such a clear distinction. Teaching for dialogue is a kind of socialisation. Experience in primary classrooms suggests to me that can only learn to think critically in the context of being socialised into warm human relationships and practices within the context of which we can feel safe and supported when we question and challenge. Practical programmes for developing shared social norms for dialogue in classrooms such as the 'Thinking Together' approach that I helped develop can be useful here although I understand why this might seem somehow compromised as an approach to dialogic education since it assumes we know in advance what is good for the children.

2) Teaching knowledge or dialogue first? You say this might be the difference between us but actually I agree with you that I think we should engage in dialogue first (in the sense of a contingently responsive relationship) and then teach knowledge within the context of that dialogue as a response to questions raised. Knowledge only makes sense within dialogues. But in practice it is not so easy to distinguish the two moments. For example in teaching a good dialogic way of talking in classrooms - a kind of knowledge - our first two 'lessons' in the 'thinking together' programme raise awareness of implicit expectations that children have about talk and then ask them what kind of expectations they would like to have of the way that they talk together in their classroom. Ground rules like 'listening with respect' tend to come up. This is both manipulative, since we have an idea of the kind of talk we want, and open ended, since we really listen to what they children say and each classroom ends up with a different set of 'ground rules' or expectations for talk. I think that this tension is just another instance of the same inevitable tension between dialogic and monologic, centripetal or centrifugal forces, that Bakhtin (1991) brought out and that we keep bumping into in different forms whenever we try to teach for dialogue.

3) Consensus or disensus? Accounts of science often focus on the achieving of a consensus. This is perhaps because we need consensus in order to act. We can't use medical knowledge to inoculate every child against polio unless there is consensus. But any such necessary moment of consensus as a basis for action in the world is born out of dialogue and returns to dialogue.

Dialogue on 'Dialogic Education': Has Rupert gone over to 'the Dark Side'?
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I was amused and pleased to see Lamarck referred to frequently recently as advances in the understanding of transmission of acquired characteristics have led to advances in understanding evolution [<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/12/111205102713.htm>]. In dialogues with the followers of Darwin, Lamarck's account of evolution was defeated in the 19th Century. Consensus was reached in the community. And yet Lamarck's voice was not really dead and has returned to us now. Somehow both consensus (related to action) and disensus (related to ideas) can co-exist and has to coexist in dialogues.

4) You say that 'holism is too monologic' and I agree with you but I think a certain form of holism is implicit in dialogism. This is the idea of Great Time - "the mystery of Great Time" as Bakhtin (1986) writes — which is the mystery that all voices can somehow communicate with each other across all time and space. Bakhtin pointed out that if the meaning of an utterance is given by its position in a dialogue then what it means needs the totality of the dialogue to interpret it i.e. as Hegel said: 'the truth is the whole'. But of course Bakhtin also said that 'there are no first or last words' or the dialogue is never finished so we never reach this final truth or totality. At one and the same time we are motivated by an aspiration to the whole (the truth) and there is no whole (or final truth) for us. The aspiration to the whole, or the assumption that every voice can potentially speak to every other voice, is important in dialogue (and science) and yet implies a counterfactual since there is no whole (for us). I tend to think of this absent 'whole' that is an infinite potential for new meaning, on the model of the idea of the 'void' found in Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu thought. This is what I was connecting with when I paraphrased Cage earlier to say 'I have nothing to teach and I am teaching it and that is dialogic education', i.e. not an empty nothing but a 'no-thing-ness' that is the context of the possibility of all things. [A kind of dialogic space that is not a voice itself but is the context within which voices can emerge and inter-relate].

Thanks for helping me unpack a little some of these problems that do not have easy answers but give rise to new questions for me every time.

5)

From: Eugene Matusov

Subject: RE: Going to the "Dark Side"?

Date: 29 January 2014 05:25:40 GMT

To: "Wegerif, Rupert" R.B.Wegerif@exeter.ac.uk

[Rupert's responses to Eugene's points included in this email]

Dear Rupert—

If you do not mind I'd like to summarize important differences and tensions between us *as I see them* — building boundaries of disagreement, misunderstanding, non-comprehension as well as reply to your points below. Please, feel free to comment on my list of the differences, develop your own, alternative ones, and/or develop a list of agreements from your point of view. Or something else you wish to do in our dialogue (maybe I'm an academic, and not only pedagogical, anarchist as well ☺). As you may see, through this list I tried to address your points that you just wrote (but I missed something, please, raise it again).

Eugene's list of tensions, differences, and disagreements between Eugene and Rupert:

1) Education practice sovereignty. Although I agree with Rupert that many practices, including socialization, has elements of education, in apparent disagreement with Rupert I think it is time for the

practice of education to declare its sovereignty from other practices and functions. Many other practices, like art, science, medicine, law have become sovereign and recognized by the society as such. However, the practice of education has not yet achieved sovereignty yet but badly needs this recognition. Art used to be seen as powerful political propaganda or worshipping god or entertainment, and although the boundaries of art will be always contested as art, like any practice, can be always instrumental (and legitimately instrumental), art is viewed as sovereign practice. It is viewed important not because art can raise test scores, or send a powerful political message, or entertain masses, or heal a psychological trauma — all these secondary functions of arts can be legitimate and good — but because people need art in itself. I think education is similar but not recognized yet. Education is still viewed instrumentally: to socialize to a socially important practice, to compete in global economy, to make model citizens, to make people moral, to solve societal problems, to make everybody healthy, to promote national unity, and so on. Although all or some of these goals may be important and legitimate, they do not define education and can be on the way of education as a sovereign practice. In a case of a conflict between these important societal functions and education, it is OK to push education in its sovereignty on a side at times but we need to be clear what we are doing and not to confuse non-educational societal goals with education itself. Like we do with art, science, medicine, law and so on.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

I find this sovereignty of education idea interesting. I agree that education needs to be treated as an end in itself and not as a means to achieve other ends such as economic ends of social ends. However, for me, the end of education should not be defined in a way that excludes the rest of life. I think of the end of education as expanding dialogic space both for apparent individuals and for society as a whole. This end of education therefore includes, for me, science as shared inquiry inextricably bound up with knowledge and it also includes elements of socialisation because social norms, procedures and institutions are needed to support shared inquiry. So it seems that I disagree with Eugene about the possibility or value of drawing a clear boundary around education and what is educational while I agree with him that education is an end in itself, in my view the most important end for society, and never just a means to other socially desirable ends.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

2) Sovereign education as leisure. Following Ancient Greeks and Greek etymology of the word “school”, I view sovereign educational practice as personal leisure in pursue of self-generated inquiries and interests — i.e., critical examining the life and world — embedded in a critical dialogue (“internally persuasive discourse”, Bakhtin, 1991). Of course, I recognize that this is my parochial, particular, and probably culturally biased definition of sovereign education (i.e., personal visionary). Other people may have different definition of sovereign education or even deny sovereignty of educational practice all together. I suspect that Rupert and I disagree on that matter.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

This sounds interesting but idiosyncratic, it over values a tiny part of education for me, something only open to the leisured rich in the past. I see the self as a product of relationships and therefore the questions posed by the self as questions that emerge from responsibility within relationships. If we are open to nature we find that questions arise and we are engaged in a shared enquiry that is not just the questions of the individual but in a sense the questions posed by the universe (Einstein, 2011). More socially we are led by our engagement to want to understand social issues in a way that is the self-awareness of a community and of the emergent global society of all humanity. Education is collective before it is individual. Organising educational activities, opportunities and spaces is therefore a collective

responsibility. Of course there are individual differences and the specificity of individuals should be nurtured but this can be done by negotiation within the larger context of responsibility for a collective life.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

3) Teaching vs. dialogic. In contrast to Rupert, I do not separate dialogue from teaching. For me, for teaching to be meaningful, it has to be dialogic. There are no phases: first teaching and then dialogue (as the Paideia Proposal educators, Adler, 1982, argue) or first dialogue and then teaching (as Rupert argues). In general, I define (dialogic) teaching as teacher's seriously — taken at his/her mind and heart — replying to the student's genuine question of ontological interest. Of course, teaching may have many different forms: generating ontological provocation, bringing alternative ideas, exposure and so on but the core idea of (dialogic) teaching is serious replying to the student's genuine question. Students are teachable when they ask genuine information-seeking ontological questions.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

This sounds irresponsible to me. I wonder where these students with ontological questions emerge from. What language is used to ask these questions? I think that question-asking subjects emerge as a result of dialogic education which begins as early as the womb when key distinctions, such as the distinction between random noise and meaningful signs, begin to be pointed out or 'taught' by parents talking to their babies (or near babies) in ways which are designed to engage them and lead them forth to acquire a voice within a dialogue. In other words dialogic teaching is not only responding to children it is also leading children to ask questions and to engage in dialogue. Dialogic education is education for dialogue and this can be planned with foresight as a series of experiences and activities drawing children or students into dialogue. But the clear distinction made here by Eugene between teaching and dialogue needs to be questioned. There is much mutual teaching within dialogues in the sense of pointing things out, directing attention to evidence etc. Consciously planned teaching programmes delivered to students can also be seen as part of longer term dialogues, often dialogues between generations, in which student feedback and reflection is used to adapt and develop the programmes of teaching.

As a child I was taught many things I found I did not really want but I was also taught, sometimes almost by mistake, many things I later found, in retrospect, that I had wanted to be taught and that I was pleased that some of my teachers had taken the responsibility to teach me. Things like how to ask critical questions. As an adult I now want to learn more about things like quantum theory and advanced statistical methods and I want someone to guide me as to the key questions to ask and the key concepts required to make sense of the key questions. As well as face-to-face dialogues there are long term dialogues and sometimes we cannot participate fully in them until we have been inducted into the history and meaning of the key terms being used. This induction into long-term dialogues such as e.g. statistical theory can also be a form of dialogic education if it is education designed to enable students to participate more fully in an area of dialogue.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

4) Monologic teaching. I define any teaching monologic when the teacher tries to make students arrive to some preset curricular endpoints. It can be epistemological preset endpoints (e.g., conventional school) or social justice preset endpoints (e.g., Freire, 1978; Paley, 1992). Of course, a student can transcend monologic teaching by dialogic autodidact. I can be wrong but I feel that Rupert feels that in some cases monologic teaching is legitimate in education in its core. Eugene disagrees with that (beyond

non-educational peripheral use of preset endpoints like in case, for example, of not allowing people unfamiliar with mushrooms to cook poisonous mushrooms).

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

Yes, I think that monologic and dialogic are often closely intertwined and somewhat hard to distinguish in education. If I ask about why some children in the world are poor while my family is rich, then I may need to find out some key and complex concepts in order to really understand the issues. In this case, my real question could be followed by a 'monologic' course of instruction in order to lead to provisional answers and further questions. Here the 'monologic' moment of instruction is perhaps within an overall dialogic educational approach. But, what if I do not spontaneously ask about poverty? What if I do not appear to care at all about understanding the larger context of my privileged life and then someone (a teacher) uses their relationship with me to manipulate me into experiences that lead me to ask the question? I think teachers have foresight and can design environments and experiences for students that lead them to ask questions and draw them into the process of shared inquiry. That is the dangerous responsibility of teachers as agents of the larger dialogues of society.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

5) Agreement vs. disagreement. I think that Rupert views agreement as a desirable endpoint of dialogue and disagreements, misunderstandings, non-understandings, incomprehension as annoying but productive temporary obstacles. Thus, if this is true, Rupert believes in the principal transparency of human consciousnesses. In contrast, Eugene believes in the principal opaqueness of human consciousness. Any agreement is a temporary epiphenomenon of intentional (if not political and relational) disregard of differences and gaps of incomprehension. People cannot consume each other subjectivities and are needed and attracted to each other through this principal opaqueness of consciousnesses.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

I certainly have found in classrooms that the desire to reach agreement motivates reasoning and understanding. Where there is no desire to reach agreement there is little fruitful dialogue. There is some good research on this by Cristine Howe (Howe, 2005). However this does not mean that agreement can ever fully be reached. This is a pattern in the disagreement between Eugene and myself that takes many forms. I agree that there is a core of misunderstanding and incomprehension that relates to essential difference and that needs to be respected.

In the theory of science area this position perhaps translates to post-positivism based on what Bhaskar (1975) refers to as transcendental realism. The successes of natural science make it clear that there is an underlying (i.e. not humanly constructed) reality which we can get to know better, in any given context of practice, so Einstein's understanding of space-time was better than Newton's for understanding things like long distance space travel. However the fact that we are part of this universe that we are trying to understand means that there is a necessary limit to our understanding and we can never know the truth fully. Nor does our knowledge progress smoothly as each new intervention could radically re-frame all the preceding dialogue to show what had been thought of as certain knowledge in a completely new light. So in every area of shared inquiry, and for me dialogue is always a shared inquiry, there is progress but there are also limits to progress that need to be respected.

Another interesting way of referring to this position that is offered by Derrida (1994) is that of 'messianicity without messianism'. In other words there is always an attitude of hope and openness to the

possibility of each new voice and new insight bringing understanding and agreement within the overall understanding that we will never arrive at the goal of a full understanding. I find this position also in Bakhtin (1986) with his references to the need to have a 'prophetic' attitude and to see things from the perspective of 'great time' not our narrow concerns while, of course, he made it clear, that full agreement was not an option since if I were to be you or you were to be me the dialogue would stop.

So, yes, it is true that I live with an always frustrated aspiration for agreement.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

6) Epistemologico-ontological vs. ethico-ontological approaches. Rupert seems to subscribe an epistemologico-ontological approach focusing on knowledge production, while Eugene subscribes an ethico-ontological approach focusing on addressing "final ethical damned" questions.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

I am not sure that I accept this but I think I see the point. This is perhaps a version of an old distinction that I first came across in my life in the form of the contrast between the injunction above the door of the oracle at Delphi to 'know thyself' in contrast to the more Christian injunction to love others as oneself and to love God with all your heart. Levinas (1989) refers to something similar as the contrast between the Hellenic and the Jewish traditions of thought. Is it 'knowledge of being' we seek first or 'ethics' in the form of a direct relationship with the other?

I find that debates about what we 'ought' to do can be informed by understanding what 'is' the case from biology to social history to our position in the universe. But final ethical questions are more than knowledge and transcend knowledge. I feel that thinking is important: I think that feeling is important. What more can I say?

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

7) Alibi-in-being. In contrast to Bakhtin (1993) and Eugene, Rupert believes that under certain circumstances people have "alibi-in-being" and their deeds (*postupoki*, поступки, in Russian) can be ethically excused by the self and the others .

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

Again, I think this is two sides of the same coin. On one hand, we participate in bigger systems and they often speak us and act us and so, looking from the outside, our actions and utterances can often be understood as the product of these larger systems. On the other hand, from the inside of each conscious act and utterance, we have a choice and we define ourselves in the way in which we act and by what we say and there is 'no alibi in being' for who we are. In reality we live this tension everyday. Who amongst us has not said or wanted to say: 'it was not me it was the a) Vodka b) hormones c) jet lag d) psychological problem e) social conditioning? Yet we also tend to feel responsible for whatever we say and do even though we know how fragile and limited this responsibility often is.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

8) Holism vs personal responsibility. Rupert seems to like systems, whole, organicity, self-organization, and unity (Buddhism, cybernetics, chaos theory) while Eugene sees it as a lack of personal responsibility in this bird's eye's view where a part is often smaller than the whole and completely shaped by it. Eugene refuses this part-whole vision that is impersonal, monologic, cold, and essentially inhumane.

It does not mean that systems, wholes, unities, assemblies, networks, and organisms should not be study but they should not model dialogue or dialogic human communities. When humans are a part of a system, it is always a problem to be solved. System and network have to be overcome and transcend — dialogize — to regain people’s humanity.

Rupert [January 30, 2014]:

My model of dialogism was very shaped by an early passionate engagement with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (2005/1945) moving onto his later concept of the 'chiasm' or flesh of the world (1968/1964). I see the ultimate dialogic relationship as between every 'figure' and every 'ground' or between the smallest 'part' of the universe and the unfinalised whole. I suspect this is true of quarks as well of moments of perception. But this is a relationship between an inside and outside which are balanced because mutually enveloping each other. My freedom comes from the fact that I define my situation just as much as my situation defines me. So, I see my task as to apply insight derived from human dialogues to understanding science and maths just as much as it is to apply science and maths to understand human dialogues. I refuse to accept the usual subject/object or human/nature distinctions that clearly informed Bakhtin and inform many current Bakhtinians. Perhaps my love of science and maths leads to a difference in my tone and in the focus of my approach to dialogic education.

Eugene [January 29, 2014]:

Any other tensions and differences? Rupert, please feel free to disagree with my portrait of you either because of the substance or form I put our disagreements and tensions.

Last words in the manuscript but not in dialogue

Eugene [February 3, 2014]

Bakhtin (1999) described Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels as ones where the author does not say anything about the characters to the readers that the characters do not know about themselves. There is no talking behind the other person’s back. This is what my colleague Mark Smith and I (2009) called as “dialogic finalizing” — providing the other a surplus of vision of the other for the other to respond, correct, and transcend it, rather than to cage the other in a box of monologic finalizing of the last word about the other. I think this exchange of gifts — dialogic finalizing — what Rupert and I did to each other in our agonistic dialogue.

Bakhtin (1986, 1999) argued that dialogue — not as a genre but as a quality of personal relations — defines meaning making process and humanity itself through interaddressivity (i.e., deep interest in the other, Matusov, 2011a), responsivity, answerability, responsibility, deeds, heteroglossia, heterodiscoursia, and so on. From this perspective, monologue — again not as a genre but as a certain quality of relations — is a distorted dialogue and not a phenomenon in itself, i.e., epiphenomenon. I feel we, Rupert and I, both agree that monologue — distortions of genuine dialogue — are unavoidable. However, we seem to disagree about the nature of education.

I feel that Rupert believes that education is essentially monologic because students should arrive at some important curricular endpoints preset by the society. In his vision of education, dialogue apparently serves this monologic process by making students ontologically deeply engaged to preset curricular and by making a personal trajectory toward the preset curricular endpoints through skillful scaffolding by the teacher. Education is essentially viewed by Rupert as reproduction of culture, socialization into the given, ready-made culture, “At the end of the lesson, term, school, the students will

learn such as such knowledge and master such and such skills.” If my characterization of Rupert’s vision of education as cultural reproduction correct, his vision is somewhat similar to positions of Alexander Sidorkin (2009) and John Dewey (1956).

In contrast, my view of education as students’ production of culture, culture making by students’ socially recognized transcendence of the culturally give in a critical dialogue (2011b). Students’ socialization in the given, ready-made, culture occurs through its transcendence and critical reflection on it. The curricular endpoints are unknown for the students and the teacher in advance but only looking back and these curricular endpoints are constantly on the move as the participants keep learning and engaging in a critical dialogue.

Rupert [February 4th, 2014]: My ‘last word’: The disputed definition of Dialogic Education

I think I am finally beginning to see why Eugene was so worked up by my apparent support for a kind of education that specified in advance what the misconceptions were and what the correct conceptions were. It is true that in a real dialogue we cannot determine in advance where the end point will be. It is also true that each child and each student is unique and will have their own unique educational journey. So how can I claim as ‘dialogic’ a curriculum that specifies in advance what is to be learnt?

It is not true that I advocate education as social reproduction. I would tend to see elements of social reproduction as an inevitable and necessary part of education but that is not really the point of my position on dialogic education. I am arguing that what makes education dialogic or monologic is not whether or not there is a learning objective on the course but whether it is taught in what Bakhtin called a ‘persuasive’ voice that engages the student where they are and draws them into dialogue in a way that leads to further dialogue or whether it is taught in an authoritative voice that closes down dialogue.

For me what defines dialogic education is that it is education ‘for dialogue’ as well as and in addition to whatever content knowledge is at stake. This implies a minimum curriculum endpoint of the skills and dispositions required for dialogue. It is necessary to teach in a way that produces a dialogic self. It is necessary as a minimum to talk to your baby in responsive and contingent way. To access the powerful knowledge bearing dialogues around us that shape our lives other skills are required such as a language, some mathematics and knowing how to use communications media. The new model of education emerging in the Internet Age allows for an almost infinite number of educational routes responding to the different interests of individuals but this does not mean that, to be dialogic, any given course should not have learning objectives. If I want to study advanced statistics I would expect to learn certain things specified in advance by the teacher precisely in order to equip me to participate in dialogues about statistics at an advanced level.

The dialogues I want to equip students to enter are not just face-to-face dialogues happening here and now in the classroom but are also global and historical. Although every educational dialogue is unique there is also a sense in which all dialogues participate in the same larger dialogue. This is just another way of saying that all the dialogues inter-connect so that learning about any one thing can and should be a way in to learning about almost everything. Whether we are teaching a course on ancient Sumeria or a course on Astro-Physics there is an important sense in which we are always inducting students into participation in the global dialogue of humanity.

I think that Eugene sees me as teacher-centred in that I do not oppose the need for some cultural reproduction in the form of a disciplined and sustained induction of new participants into key elements of

the dialogue so far. I see him as too student-centred. In my view dialogic education is not student-centred, nor is it teacher-centred, but it is *dialogue*-centred. The dialogue of humanity that education serves is bigger than the interests of particular students and particular teachers. It has its own logic and if we allow ourselves to be open to its voice we find that it calls us all forward in an open-ended way on an exciting adventure.

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