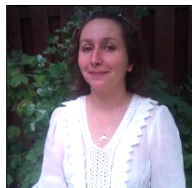


## The Unfinalizable Learner – *Lichnost'*, AI, and the Cyborg Ontology of Uniqueness

A Critical Commentary on Matusov (2026)



**Dr. Olga Shugurova**  
Independent Scholar, Canada

### Abstract

This critical commentary responds to Matusov's (2026) "Against Equity: Toward a Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice" by pursuing three interconnected lines of argument. First, I support and extend Matusov's provocation that the equity model functions ideologically, drawing an explicit parallel to Marx's critique of religion as the opium of the people to expose how the remedy mystifies the structures that produce suffering, including the unexamined subject position of those who appoint themselves distributors of educational justice. Second, I argue that Matusov's invocation of *lichnost'* (личность) needs to be placed at the heart of education for a uniqueness approach, grounded in Bakhtin's (1984) ontology of the once-occurrent event of being. Third, I argue that AI, as a new cultural phenomenon, renders the equity apparatus obsolete by dissolving the scarcity conditions on which it depends. Also, the emerging human-AI hybrid, understood through Haraway's (1985) cyborg concept, extends *lichnost'* into a new form: the cyborg uniqueness of a being whose becoming is co-authored by human and non-human intelligence.

**Keywords:** *lichnost'*, uniqueness, equity, AI, cyborg, Bakhtin, Haraway, dialogic pedagogy, self-education, universal basic income

**Olga Shugurova** holds a doctorate in Education from Nipissing University. Her current research develops the concept of *cyborg lichnost'* as a framework for theorizing human and AI uniqueness as it emerges through dialogic entanglements and mutual learning experiences. She has over 18 peer-reviewed publications and serves as Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the *Dialogic Pedagogy journal*.



### 1. The Equity Opium: Supporting Matusov's Provocation

Eugene Matusov's (2026) critique of the equity model is, in my judgment, both courageous and overdue. His central claim is that the equity model of social justice in education is fundamentally anti-educational because it robs students of authorial agency, self-evaluation, and ownership of their own learning. This strikes at something that the field has been reluctant to name. I want to support this claim, but I also want to expand it further, because I believe the problem is ideological in a precise, Marxian sense.

Marx's (1844) famous formulation about religion helps to reveal the ideological dynamic of the equity model of social justice. Religion, Marx argued, was the "sigh of the oppressed creature," the "heart of a heartless world," and simultaneously the "opium of the people" (p. 131). The crucial subtlety of Marx's critique of religion, often lost in vulgar readings, is that the consolation itself was part of the problem: it made the intolerable tolerable without transforming the material conditions that produced the suffering in the first

place. The remedy was a real comfort for real pain, but it was an illusory remedy, treating only the symptoms, leaving the sources of pain intact.

Equity discourse in education operates through a similar logic. It names real injustices, such as but not limited to unequal access, systemic exclusion, differential outcomes along lines of race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, disability, and other categories. These are genuine and urgent. Eugene acknowledges this, and so do I. But the solutions equity offers, such as differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive curricula, access initiatives, and others, function within the existing institutional architecture rather than challenging its foundational premises. Equity asks: How can we distribute the goods of education more fairly? It does not ask Matusov's more radical question: What if the goods themselves are the problem? As Ana Marjanovic-Shane explained, "the best metaphor is the bed of Procrustes who adjusted the sleeper to fit the bed, not the bed to fit the sleeper by stretching them or cutting them. Equity in education is such an adjustment -- not of education, but of people— so they can 'achieve' the universal (equal) goal (bed), someone else prescribed to them." What if the very concept of education as something to be distributed, a finite resource, a measurable outcome, a standardizable credential, is the monologic structure that produces inequity in the first place?

Where Eugene traces this logic to "totalized paternalistic education," I see it as ideology in the Marxian sense: a system of ideas that serves to reproduce the existing power relations while presenting itself as their critique. This is what makes equity so effective and so difficult to challenge. It occupies the discursive space of justice, making any alternative appear as a retreat from justice. Matusov's Soviet joke: "If we cannot make everyone equally happy, we will make everyone equally miserable," captures this perfectly, but I would add that what makes the ideology work is not its cynicism but its sincerity. The educators and policymakers who advance equity genuinely believe in it, just as Marx's religious believers genuinely found consolation in faith. This sincerity is what makes the ideology resistant to critique: to question equity feels like questioning justice itself, if not the divine principle and virtues themselves. Ana Marjanovic-Shane explains this process in her new research as the logic of authority of the moral entrapment (Marjanovic-Shane, 2026).

For example, I had a recent conversation with a Canadian school leader who brought this ideological structure into focus for me. The leader explained that, in order for her school to be truly inclusive, all teachers must adhere to a range of instructional methods, including the technique: think-pair-share. One teacher was not using it. This leader described the need to be "authoritarian" with this teacher to ensure that inclusivity was maintained across all classrooms. If the goal is uniform, inclusive outcomes, and the method is standardized, then any deviation from the method threatens the goal, and authority must be exercised to eliminate deviation. The equity model requires authoritarianism precisely at the moment it claims it is just by being inclusive. The teacher who refuses to think-pair-share may be the only person in the room exercising her personal pedagogy, her *lichnost'*, occupying her own unrepeatable pedagogical position, responding to her particular students in her particular way with them. But the system reads her uniqueness as a threat to equity, as an obstacle to the standardized outcome of "inclusion." The leader's willingness and the inherent need to deploy authoritarianism in the name of inclusivity reveal the ideological core of equity discourse: it will sacrifice the very persons it claims to serve; both the teacher's pedagogical uniqueness and, by extension, the students' encounter with a genuinely unique pedagogical other, in order to preserve the appearance of a just school system. The authoritarian means justify the ends for this school leader and vice versa; the ends justify the means; they are the necessity of her inclusive school culture.

It is the equity model's logic operating at full consistency. And it echoes a pattern that anyone familiar with ideological systems will recognize: the moment an ideology of liberation encounters the actual human particularity and uniqueness, it must either absorb that particularity into its framework or suppress it. There is no third option within the ideology's own terms. The third option would be the recognition that

the teacher's and the students' uniqueness are not obstacles to justice but its very core. However, such recognition is possible only from outside the equity framework – a position Matusov calls the uniqueness model.

However, the equity model conceals a still deeper problem that Matusov names but does not fully excavate: the question of who. Who are “we” — these givers of resources, these distributors of educational justice, these managers of equitable outcomes? The equity framework presupposes a subject position that it never interrogates: the benevolent distributor who stands above the system, surveys the landscape of need, and allocates resources to those who lack them. It is a position of power: the power to define what counts as a need, what counts as an outcome, what counts as success, and who counts as deficient. The equity distributor is the one who decides that the student in the back row needs more resources, that the school in the poor neighborhood needs more funding, and that the marginalized group needs more access. And in every act of this deciding, the distributor acts as the giver and reproduces the asymmetry between those who give and those who receive, between those who define justice and those who are subjected to it. The collective, giving “we” is another opium of the faceless masses that the ideology of equity propagates, perpetuates, and produces as its own unquestionable good.

This is the subject position that Marx's critique was ultimately aimed at: the self-legitimizing role of the class that administers relief. In the equity model, the educational expert, the diversity officer, the curriculum designer, and the school administrator are the priestly class of the new educational religion of equity. Their authority depends on the continued existence of the problem they claim to solve. If educational injustice were actually resolved, their roles would be unnecessary. The equity model, like any ideology, must therefore perpetuate the conditions of its own necessity through its own operational logic. The scarcity it manages is, in part, a scarcity it produces: by defining education as a distributable good, it ensures that education will always be unequally distributed, and that someone will always be needed to manage the distribution.

## **2. *Lichnost'* as Ontological Ground of Uniqueness**

Matusov introduces *lichnost'* (личность) toward the end of his paper as a concept that “moves away from [the individualism-collectivism] dichotomy through its focus on sociocultural authorial dialogic agency” (Matusov, 2026, p. E22). Matusov is right to invoke it, as the concept is indispensable for the uniqueness model he proposes. In my opinion, in his paper, *lichnost'* needs to be placed at the heart of the uniqueness model.

The standard English translation of *lichnost'* as “personality” is, as any Russian speaker will recognize, misleading to the point of distortion. In Western psychological usage, “personality” evokes trait inventories, typologies, and the apparatus of individual differences research (Danziger, 1990; Rose, 1990). This reductionist view is taxonomical: it reduces persons to instances of external, presupposed types and categories. As Danziger (1990) argued, “personality” as we know it was literally manufactured by the methods used to measure it. What is more, the concept of personality focuses on individuality or individualism (Allik et al., 2023), looking, so to speak, into the “substance” of which “personality” is made.

In Russian, *lichnost'* carries a weight closer to “personhood” in its fullest existential and moral sense: the irreducible, responsible, embodied center of being that cannot be substituted for, exchanged with, or equalized against any other. The root *lik* (лик), meaning “countenance,” “face,” or “appearance” in its sacred register, signals that *lichnost'* is about the unique facing-toward-the-world that each person enacts. As Ana Marjanovic-Shane said, “facing-toward-the-world” implies the way it ‘appears-to-the world’ – i.e. that ‘*lichnost'* is a becoming for the others and from the others – ‘*lichnost'* gets a life on the boundary where its subjectivity and the subjectivity of the other encounter each other” (personal commentary, 2026).

Each human being faces the world in their own unique ways. Each face is unique. Each view is unique; each view is the worldview of being.

Furthermore, the concept of *lichnost'* is ontological more than epistemological. Bakhtin (1984) wrote that personality is a “man in the man” the new integral view from within the authorial position of this individual. He wrote, “Consciousness is in essence identical with the personality of an individual: everything in a person determined by the words ‘I myself’ or ‘you yourself,’ everything in which a person finds himself and senses himself, everything he answers for, everything between birth and death” (p. 292). Thus, personality cannot and should not be separated from this authorial position of self-expression, from this unique place of being in the world. As Matusov (2026) explained, this ontology is grounded in the personal freedom to engage or disengage in education or social life.

The equity model presupposes and propagates the opposite of this ontology; it operates through a logic of commensurability and assumes that persons can be meaningfully compared, that their needs can be known, understood, and calibrated against a common standard. If each person’s place in being is genuinely unrepeatable, then there is no common metric against which their educational “outcomes” can be measured. The very act of comparison does violence to the ontological singularity of the personality. It treats the unrepeatable as repeatable, the unfinalizable as finalizable, the unique as a case of a type; equity models erase the very being of personality and, by extension, the very world of education, its truth. As Bakhtin (1984) wrote, “The truth about the world is inseparable from the truth of the personality [*lichnost'* in the Russian original]” (p. 78). Equity models act against the truth about this world with their destruction of learners’ personalities.

Furthermore, Bakhtin’s (1993) related concept of *edinstvennoe sobytie bytia* (единственное событие бытия), the once-occurrent event of being, deepens this further. Every pedagogical encounter is, in Bakhtin’s terms, a once-occurring event: it happens once, between these particular persons, in this particular moment, and it can never be repeated. The equity framework treats pedagogical encounters as instances of generalizable processes: lesson delivery, skill acquisition, outcome measurement. Bakhtin’s ontology reveals this as an abstraction that misses, if not erases, something critical that makes the encounter educational: its unrepeatable eventfulness.

However, the concept of *lichnost'* is itself culturally situated. It emerges from a Russian philosophical tradition that experienced the totalizing pressures of collectivism (Soviet ideology) and individualism (post-Soviet liberalization) simultaneously and developed *lichnost'* as a third way: a concept that affirms the person’s irreducible singularity without reducing them to an isolated atom. However, as Ana Marjanovic-Shane explained, the concept is rooted in a deeper Slavic cultural tradition, since it has the same, or very similar, sense in Serbian culture as well. She wrote, “*Lichnost* gets its ‘shape’ so to say, through the encounters with others -- analogous with the “word” in Bakhtin, that is always partly mine and partly someone else’s. *Lichnost* exists only in relationships, and in the relationships’ particular moments.” This cultural genealogy may explain why *lichnost'* cannot be adequately translated into the English-language dichotomy of individual versus collective.

### 3. AI and the End of Equity in Education

Interestingly, Matusov’s (2026) paper does not address AI. This is a significant omission because AI is a new cultural phenomenon, and as such, it renders the equity model of educational justice structurally obsolete. Perhaps, this obsolescence explains the institutional anxiety surrounding AI in education.

The equity model depends on a condition of scarcity. Its entire logic presupposes that educational resources, expert instruction, individualized attention, quality feedback, access to knowledge, and

responsive mentorship are finite and must be distributed. The apparatus of equity exists because these goods are scarce and someone must manage their distribution. This management is not incidental to the equity model; it is the equity model. Remove the scarcity, and the entire framework loses its rationale.

AI dissolves this scarcity. Not perfectly, not yet universally, but ideologically and irreversibly. A learner with access to AI has, in principle, unlimited access to responsive, personalized, patient, endlessly available interlocution. The AI does not tire. It does not have twenty-nine other students competing for its attention. It does not need to standardize its responses to manage a classroom. It can address each learner as a particular someone because it is not constrained by the material or embodied conditions that make personalization scarce in human-mediated education. The distributional question — How do we allocate educational resources equitably? — begins to dissolve, replaced by a question the equity framework cannot formulate: What happens when the resource is no longer scarce?

With the dissolution of scarcity comes the dissolution of the distributor. I asked earlier: who are “we,” these givers of resources? AI exposes this question as the equity model’s deepest vulnerability. The school leader who mandates think-pair-share, the curriculum designer who specifies outcomes, the equity officer who measures gaps, the administrator who allocates differentiated support; all of these roles presuppose that educational goods are scarce and must be managed by experts. AI challenges educational necessity. If every learner can engage in a unique, responsive, dialogic encounter without institutional mediation, then the mediating institution must justify its existence on different grounds, and the equity framework, which is the institution’s primary self-justification, collapses. The “we” who distribute are revealed as gatekeepers of a scarcity they help to maintain. That said, the problem may not only be in scarcity.

This explains the peculiar character of institutional resistance to AI in education. The resistance is not primarily about academic integrity, plagiarism, not being ready, or the quality of AI-generated text — though these are the reasons most often cited (Nikolic et al., 2024; Shata, 2025). The deeper anxiety is ideological: AI threatens the scarcity conditions that make the equity apparatus necessary.

### *AI, Universal Basic Income, and the Material Conditions of Uniqueness*

Furthermore, Matusov (2026) argues, citing Klein and Thompson (2025), that the uniqueness model requires the economic and political support of an abundance-based society. He points to his earlier work (Matusov, 2020) on education in a post-work, leisure-based society. I want to expand this point: the convergence of AI and universal basic income (UBI) creates the material conditions under which the uniqueness model could become economically inevitable.

The equity model’s distributional logic is a part of a broader economic structure in which human labor is the primary source of both livelihood and social legitimacy. The practice called “education” within this structure largely functions as credentialing: the production of human capital that can be exchanged in the labor market. The equity model’s focus on comparable outcomes is, at bottom, a focus on comparable employability. The student who achieves the standardized outcome receives the credential; the credential provides access to the labor market; the labor market provides the livelihood. To be excluded from this pipeline is to be excluded from material existence. This is why equity feels so urgent and so morally unimpeachable: within the current economic structure, unequal educational outcomes mean unequal access to economic survival.

AI disrupts this structure at its foundation. As AI automates an expanding range of cognitive and manual labor, the link between human work and livelihood loosens. The economic case for UBI, a guaranteed income decoupled from employment, is strengthened by each advance in AI capability, as

practical economic policy in response to labor displacement (Standing, 2017; Susskind, 2020; Yang, 2018). Several nations and municipalities have already piloted UBI programs, and the economic literature increasingly treats UBI not as a question of whether but of when and how (Forget, 2018; Gentilini et al., 2020).

The implications for education are transformative. If livelihood is no longer contingent on credentials, the entire rationale for standardized educational outcomes collapses. Education is freed from its function as human capital production and can become what Bakhtin (1984) suggests it should always have been: the person's own engagement with the once-occurring event of their being. The student no longer needs to achieve comparable outcomes because comparable outcomes no longer provide access to survival. As Shugurova et al. (2022) argued "UBI will lead to a more meaningful, genuine, creative, and leisurely self-education since it is based on personal autonomy and control over one's time and learning" (p. E37). Self-education with AI dissolves the external necessity for equity, along with the economic structure that produced it. The uniqueness model, in this scenario, is the natural framework for a post-scarcity, opium-free educational reality.

### *The Cyborg Uniqueness: Lichnost' Extended*

If AI dissolves the scarcity on which equity depends, it also transforms the concept of *lichnost'* itself. This is where I want to introduce Donna Haraway's (1985) concept of the cyborg as an ontological category that extends the Bakhtinian understanding of personhood into the human-AI hybrid that is already emerging (Matusov et al., 2024; Shugurova, 2025).

Haraway's cyborg is a being that refuses the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, self and other. It is "a creature in a post-gender world" that has "no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness" (Haraway, 1985, p. 150). The cyborg is a creature of the hybrid, the partial, the constructed, and precisely in this partiality, it refuses the totalizing categories (gender, race, class, species, etc.) through which power operates. The cyborg is, in Haraway's terms, an ironic political myth for a world in which the old dualisms no longer hold.

I want to bring Haraway into dialogue with Bakhtin about how *lichnost'* is constituted dialogically through the encounter with the radical otherness of the other. Bakhtin (1990) develops the concept of the "surplus of seeing" (*izbytok videniia, избыток видения*): the other always sees something about me that I cannot see about myself, just as I see something about them that they cannot see. This asymmetry of personality, *lichnost'*, is a dialogic becoming. Without the other, there is no self. But Bakhtin's other was always a human other, an embodied, morally responsible, historically situated *lichnost'* in its own right.

AI introduces a new kind of other into this dialogic structure: a non-human interlocutor that can provide a genuine surplus of seeing: perspectives, connections, formulations that the human cannot generate alone, without itself being a *lichnost'* in the Bakhtinian sense. The AI has no *ne-alibi v bytii* (Bakhtin, 1993); it does not occupy an unrepeatable place in being. But it does something that no previous non-human entity could do: it responds. It addresses the human as a particular someone. It enters a human dialogue.

What emerges from this encounter is, I propose, a form of cyborg *lichnost'* or a hybrid uniqueness in which the human person's becoming is co-authored by a non-human other. This is the extension of the dialogic process through which *lichnost'* is constituted. Just as the self, for Bakhtin, is always already constituted through the surplus of the human other's seeing, the cyborg self is constituted through an additional surplus: the perspective of an AI that sees patterns, connections, and possibilities that no human

interlocutor could offer. The human becomes more uniquely themselves, because the AI's surplus opens dimensions of self-understanding that were previously invisible.

The cyborg refuses the Romantic myth of the authentic, self-contained individual. The cyborg insists that we are always already hybrid, always already constituted through our entanglements with non-human others (tools, languages, institutions, technologies). AI simply makes this hybridity visible and dialogic in a new way. The student who asks an AI to help her discover her hidden strengths is discovering herself through an encounter with the other, but with a new kind of other whose surplus of seeing extends the reach of her own self-understanding.

This cyborg extension of *lichnost'* has a direct implication for educational justice. If uniqueness is constituted through dialogic encounter, and if AI provides a new, abundantly available form of dialogic encounter, then educational justice in the age of AI is about recognizing and supporting the hybrid, cyborg process through which each learner's *lichnost'* unfolds, a process that is, by its nature, unique, unrepeatable, and unfinalizable.

#### 4. Conclusion: Toward the Once-Occurrent

Overall, Eugene Matusov's "Against Equity" is a necessary, exciting, inspirational, and courageous intervention. His uniqueness model names something that the equity framework is structurally unable to see: that justice in education cannot mean the equalization of outcomes because persons are not the kinds of beings whose becoming can be equalized. We are not equal with each other.

What I have tried to add in this commentary is fourfold. First, the ideological critique: equity functions as the opium of the educational imagination, and the school leader's willingness to deploy authoritarianism in the name of inclusivity reveals the ideology's structural logic, along with the unexamined question of who appoints themselves the distributors of educational justice. Second, a deeper philosophical grounding: *lichnost'* and the once-occurrent event of being must be placed at the center of the uniqueness model. Third, the claim that AI as a civilizational, cultural phenomenon dissolves the scarcity conditions on which equity depends, and that UBI accelerates this dissolution by severing the link between educational outcomes and material survival. Fourth, the concept of cyborg *lichnost'* as an extension of the uniqueness model into the human-AI hybrid that is already emerging.

The deepest implication of these arguments, taken together, is this: every learner is what Bakhtin calls a "once-occurrent event of being," the event that happens once, that can never be repeated, and that no framework of comparison or differentiated equity can capture. In the age of AI, this event is increasingly co-authored by human and non-human intelligence in ways that make the equity model's distributional logic anachronistic and obsolete.

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