

**Book Review by Stephen Bigger, University of Worcester, UK.
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Bakhtinian Pedagogy: Opportunities and Challenges for Research, Policy and Practice in Education Across the Globe
Edited By E. Jayne White, Michael A. Peters
Global Studies in Education, Volume 7, Peter Lang Publishers, 2011.

Book reviews summarise contents and try to add to the discussion. In reviewing a work on Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, it is particularly relevant to write in the spirit of dialogue. After an introductory chapter come twelve chapters, multi-authored, divided into three sections: Pedagogy as Authorship, emphasising the pupils/students as authors of their new understanding; Pedagogy as Answerability, emphasising the exchange of ideas through dialogue; and Pedagogy as Chronotope, emphasising real/fictional time-place relationships (“chronotype” on the contents page is an error). The chapters will be described in the second half of this review. It is a useful book, which I recommend.

Bakhtin’s main literary focus was on literature (Dostoyevsky and Rabelais especially): within this, authorship, dialogue and time/space/location issues make perfect sense. A novel’s author continually makes choices about characterisation, plot, dialogue and locations. However, Bakhtin used literary studies to express his interest in moral philosophy and the philosophy of knowledge, which makes his work generalizable (it was necessary to be cautious in Stalinist USSR). He viewed the self as dynamic rather than static, and continually shaped, de-shaped and re-shaped by relationships, conversations and influences (or to use other language, constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed). Kurt Lewin, not disconnectedly, made similar points (Lewin and Gold, 1999). In a novel, a character is puppet-like, shaped by the author; similarly in education we might view pupils’ characters as shaped by teachers and parents. Yet pupils are not puppets and teachers have no authorial rights: pupils write themselves, develop their own characters and produce their own life-scripts. So on authorship, Bakhtin is saying that relationships in life are not like fiction: our dynamic progress towards understanding and fulfilment is of our own making and not controlled by others, like a novel is controlled by an author. Along our self’s journey are many voices, our own multiple voices within, and of others who have influenced us: not all are mutually compatible and harmonious. Nevertheless, there are power relationships involved in dialogue and to differentiate between true and false, right and wrong, is to exercise that power. The author holds power in a novel, the teacher in a school – unless we can develop schooling democratically to allow the pupils to shape their own thoughts and lives.

So, authorly hegemony (indeed, absolute control) is affirmed as not applying to real life situations, including education. We cannot view the teacher as author, constructing character, plot (time/place) and dialogue: all individuals involved co-construct dynamically, influencing each other. Each pupil therefore authors his or her life-script and is fully responsible for character/characterization, the propriety of dialogue and environmental (time-place) happenings. A child’s (or adults) character is not ‘given’, final and unalterable, even when an individual may be resistant to change.

Bakhtin talked of the unfinalisability of the self (Bakhtin, 1984), that our concept of self is continually influenced by dialogue with others. Thus, dialogue in school affects the way pupils think about themselves, for better for worse. Many children live up to labels given to them in home and school, both by adults and their peers: these labels may be helpful or harmful, and may later affect their aspirations and even mental health – this at least should prompt reflection on the nature and quality of such dialogues.

Two examples in my own experience illustrate the deep potential of dialogue for pedagogy. The Tranquillity/Discovery Zones worked with children aged 9-13, using visualising meditation with story and self-discovery activities. The story, usually of a special imagined island, was visualised with eyes closed, the pupils being asked to accompany in their minds eye a wise guide modelled on a significant adult whom they knew (grandparent or aunt for example). This created an inner dialogue on topics relating to the self and to ethics. The child was in charge, constructing the imaginary mentor and authoring the conversation. This helped the children to rationalise emotions by talking them over inside. One pupil, a badly behaved and emotionally disturbed girl, was found after an outburst calming herself down by talking to her ‘wise guide’, after which she apologised and got back to work. A year later she received a good progress and a good behaviour award. A number of written-off children made it to college and university. One scenario on the island was a ‘mine of inestimable gems’, which encouraged discussion about value and personal qualities within ourselves and also in others. This use of stories was accompanied by a series of activities called The Discovery Zone (the programme’s beginning coincided with the Millennium Dome in London) focusing on personal discovery, morality, what holds people back in life and so on. This is dialogic, the answers being personally constructed through group discussion and resulting personal strategies becoming internalised.

In 2009, when researching this project, I wrote a series of stories for this age group to provoke thought. Though unpublished, some of these are available electronically.¹ The various characters are involved in dialogue throughout, as is natural in a novel for children. The central characters, girls and boys, have experiences and dialogues from which they deepen their self-understanding and reflect on their behaviour. These extracts focus on Jake whose experiences reflect the experiences discussed in the Discovery Zone. Using the story in class was intended to stimulate discussion on bullying, name-calling, and more generally on relationships.

A second example is being explored by Fawzia Gilani-Williams, a PhD student working in the middle east with Muslim pupils aged 9-10. Her model uses the three polarities right/wrong thought, act and talk to provoke dialogue, using stories she writes herself with the explicit purpose of provoking discussion (she has published a substantial body of fiction for Muslim children). Bakhtin has drawn generalisations out of his study of the novel; and it is possible to use story, with its rich characterisation, dialogue and time-place emphasis to further Bakhtin’s insights into dialogue and self-concept in the school curriculum. This needs to affect the *whole* school curriculum (much as I illustrated in Bigger and Brown, 1999) and to democratise all relationships in school. When schools focus on content, assessment

and league tables, these present often insurmountable barriers to this happening across the week, though talented individual teachers may succeed.

This book explores how members of the Bakhtin Circle placed dialogue at the centre of pedagogy and at the heart of the philosophy of knowledge. The PS from teenage Hannah (p. 38) says: “PS to the future teachers in the classroom—take your future students seriously no matter what they say because the world can be viewed in many kinds of ways.” Encouraging pupils to be authors rather than fixed cardboard characters means permitting pupils/students to think and imagine for themselves, actively, a form of learning that contrasts with passive rote learning when memorising given content for exams and tests. Matusov comments (ch.2):

“The authorial nature of dialogic teaching reveals itself in its emergent, uncertain, improvisational, creative, dialogic, eventful, situational, and opportunistic features even when it is planned.” (p. 39). The teacher needs to be seen as a partner in learning, and therefore needs to share in authorship, being “a subjective and interested epistemological learner among other fellow learners ... both teaching and learning are unique, situational, creative, unexpected, personal, eventful, “deedful,” risky, capricious, improvisational, fateful, dialogue-oriented, emergent, just in time, collective, and inspirational.” (pp. 39f).

He ends: “At the end of the day, the teacher exists for the students and not the other way around.” (p. 41).

Olga Dysthe (ch.4) gives an example of teaching which prepares for testing by means of interactive dialogic pedagogy, so ending the argument that there is no classroom time for active learning and interactive discussion. It just needs a new way of thinking. I like White’s phrase (ch.3) “taking the time to aesthetically linger with the learner” and also the “messy pedagogy of *not* knowing” (p. 63) reflecting the dynamic uncertainty of knowledge. In section B, on Answerability, exciting pupils in their own learning similarly comes across in Kanellopoulos’ chapter (ch.5) on music, and Lensmire’s piece (ch.6) drawing on carnival. The importance of dialogue in forming relationships comes strongly through Jenefelt’s chapter (ch.9) on infancy, emphasising the importance of ‘otherness’. The Other dominates the discussion by Pollack and Kolikant (ch.7) on pedagogy in Israel/Palestine. Finally from section B, Hagstrom, Deggs, and Thompson point to the possibility of e-dialogue: I certainly have found that blogging and chatting to PhD students electronically provides daily opportunities for real dialogue, so helping to refocus weekly or fortnightly supervisions (see Bigger, 2009).

Section C deals with chronotope, the time-space ‘location/plot’ dimension, the fact that we are *here now*, bridging the past and the future, maybe with realism, maybe in denial, maybe adventuring on our own not always appropriate story. Odegaard (ch.10) describes several improvised play plots “co-narrated” with early years children. Marjanovic-Shane (ch.11) continues with play, set in imagined time, space and rules. She distinguishes between the Reality Chronotope, the Imaginary Chronotope and the Community of Players Chronotope. She concludes:

“Building communities of learners based on the relationships that emerge from the community of players might mean to put the agency and the authorship in the hands of all the participants, transforming both teachers and students into

heroes who explore imaginary and real domains of knowledge, and into authors and creators of such educational projects”(p. 221).

Shields (ch.12) urges school leaders to encourage freedom, excitement and enjoyment of diversity and difference. Bakhtin, she says, “calls us to live life as an exciting journey, always unfinished, always open to new ideas, new ways of thinking or acting, never totally constrained by hierarchies, rules, roles, attitudes, or expectations” (p. 243).

Peters (ch.13) ends with an account of the Bakhtin Circle, the other writers associated with Bakhtin: the chapter is in but not conceptually part of section C.

I find little in general to disagree with in Bakhtin’s method and philosophy – though my own journey has been influenced by other voices, especially John Dewey whose major works, including *Democracy and Education*, were translated into Russian by 1921 (Mchitarjan 2000) to support the Marxist call for anti-authoritarian self-reliance (see also Craig Brandist’s Foreword to this volume). It was ironic that Bakhtin and his circle had to hide their social philosophy behind literary criticism, and even so some under Stalin paid with their lives. Bakhtin was arguing against authoritarianism and state centralisation to support local management by the common person. ‘Dialogue’ was a less contentious term – safer therefore – than Dewey’s ‘democracy’ in his own time-place ‘here and now’. The workers in soviet society were no freer than characters in a novel, and ideologically should have been – they should not be subject to the whims their new masters but able to make their own choices of character, activity/plot, becoming authors of their own lives. Vygotsky (1987) in similar fashion emphasised the social nature of learning.

It has been good to meet a fellow traveller on Dewey’s road to emancipation. Dewey’s ‘working from where the child is’ becomes Bakhtin’s ‘authorship’; Dewey’s democratic group activities have become ‘dialogue’; giving relevance to experience in the here and now becomes ‘chronotope’; and playing with ideas and life has become ‘carnival’. Put another way, everything that makes us human comes out of social relationships. Such a social vision does not inform educational policies today, in which testing and behaviourist punishments are more to the fore. Bakhtin hints at a more interactive way, as more explicitly did Dewey and Ernest Thompson Seton (1940) of the American Scouting movement. Dialogue, talking together and joint decision making, is not the same as argument or conversation where there are quiet hard-to-hear voices, constantly interrupted by overwhelming voices, as in Pratchett’s children’s story *Nation*. The loudest voices do not often talk the best sense, but dominate decisions unless the (dialogic) process prevents this. Dialogue is impossible where power relationships are uncontested, so *how power is held* has to be the first issue.

A final point on jargon. The contributors to this book are clearly fans of Bakhtin and I can understand why they wish to hold true to his terminology. Nevertheless, when this becomes jargon, it presents difficulties for Others to decode it, i.e. those outside this club. Those Others would find interest in his ideas when presented simply: Bakhtin himself had clear views on being open to Others.

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<http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/index.htm> is a useful online compilation.

¹ <http://fiction4children.blogspot.co.uk/2009/08/jake.html>.