

What Dialogic Instruction Is Not

When dialogic philosopher and critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who worked starting in the early twentieth century, was discovered in the West and his works were translated into English, he and his colleagues (The Bakhtin Circle) became widely celebrated among Western scholars in literature and eventually history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, music, psychology, and education. Needless to say, as dialogism spread, it has blurred (Bakhtin would say “refracted”), especially in education, and taken on many meanings not to be found in the work of the Circle.

We therefore need to understand what dialogic instruction is not. Dialogic instruction is not:

- Conversation, dialogue, and turn taking. Communication requires the interaction of two conversants. This interaction is obvious enough in the give and take of talk. But it is true of writing too. When readers understand a text, an exchange of meaning has taken place. The writer has spoken to the readers. Writers and readers obviously do not interact in the sense that they take turns as do speakers and listeners. But then speaking and listening are not interactive simply because the conversants conspicuously take turns. Turn taking is merely one of the many ways speakers exchange meanings and understand one another. Other ways include furtive glances, quizzical looks, and so on. On occasion, it is a conspicuously absent turn that provides critical information to the listener. This is why turn taking is not interaction per se but merely the way conversants accomplish interaction. The interaction of interest is what the turn taking accomplishes, namely an exchange of meaning or a transformation of shared knowledge. Dialogic instruction is about the semiotic act of exchanging, developing, and transforming the understandings of teachers and students. This is the reason dialogic instruction involves open-ended discussion, as well as authentic questions and uptake, which valorize student voices. On the dialogic structure of understanding, see the dialogic structure communication [link to Szasz PowerPoint].
- Egalitarian. Habermas is sometimes noted for his dialogic conception of discourse in his emphasis on norms for good, benevolent communication practices. By contrast, Bakhtin’s dialogic refers to “heteroglossic,” literally multi-voiced, struggles and competition for meaning. Again, dialogic instruction involves open-ended discussion, as well as authentic questions and uptake, which valorize student voices.
- Socratic dialogue and Dialectic. Socratic dialogue as in Plato’s *Republic*, is sometimes cited as an example of dialogic interaction. Vygotsky too is sometimes treated as dialogic, but his focus as a psychologist, unlike Bakhtin, is on the development of thought whereas Bakhtin’s focus as a discourse theorist is on dialogic interaction. The focus of dialectic processes is to merge point and counterpoint (thesis and antithesis) into a compromise or other state of agreement via conflict and tension (synthesis). Questions in such discourse are always prescribed whereas dialogic exchanges, inasmuch as they are about competition of voices and the transformation of understandings, are never prescribed. In dialectics, the meaning of the text is fixed and precedes the exchange; in Vološinov’s (1976) terms, it is “finished off” independently of the students whose main task, in the view of the teacher, is to figure it out or, more accurately in this case, take it in as he explains it to them. Bakhtin (1984) specifically

called such discourse “pedagogical dialogue”:

In an environment of . . . monologism the genuine interaction of consciousness is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well. In essence idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousnesses: someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and a pupil, which, it follows, can only be a pedagogical dialogue (p. 81).