Turn with Students: Making Conversation a Priority in Teacher Education

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Introduction

On the first day of courses with teacher candidates, I facilitate a small-group activity in which I ask them to consider their best and worst teachers. They share their stories and come to consensus on a list of best and worst teacher qualities. The words vary each semester, but the direction of the list is always the same. It is interesting for me to juxtapose the consistency of these results with the approach taken in policy circles to discover what makes a great teacher by mass quantitative means. The President of NCATE kept repeating in his various appearances at the 2010 NCATE conference that we do not yet know what makes an effective teacher. The ease with which each of my class groups always come to consensus on a short list of best and worst qualities, and the remarkable consistency of these lists year after year, illustrates to me that we know perfectly well who teaches us best.

The short list of qualities from these classes contains various, mostly inter-related attributes. The vital element for this paper is that every list that every class has ever created contains the same sentiment about teachers' communication with students. The worst teachers talk *at* students. The best ones talk *with* students. Poor teachers treat students as objects at which they toss words; excellent teachers carry on conversations.

For this paper, I shall attempt to define conversation in the context of teaching, and then explain why it is a vital focus, both theoretically and practically. I will illustrate how we currently do not pursue the systematic teaching of conversation in teacher education. I then present a few existing ideas which could be productive starting points for a pedagogy of conversation and, finally, offer ideas for what we could afford to sacrifice in order to spend more time on conversation with our teacher candidates. It is my argument that we need to cultivate better in our teacher candidates the ability to converse, to turn things over with students. We must instruct the candidates in how to speak *with* their students, rather than merely *to* them, or even worse, *at* them.

Defining Conversation

Conversation is a general term that includes everything from casual small-talk to targeted discussion. The etymology of converse is *con* (originally in the Latin *com*) meaning with, and *verse*, Latin indicating the turning of something (from the Indo-European *wer* which was plowing the Earth). To converse is to turn with.[1] So really, a preparation in conversation would be getting our candidates ready to turn ideas over with students.

Aside from the etymological approach, which yields that useful definition for teachers, the Halliday (1985) definition of conversation is germane: "Dialogue [in which] there are topics,

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[1] For a thorough discussion of the differences between discussion, dialogue, and conversation, see Brookfield (1998) and Slade & Gardner (1993).

but no topic control. There are interactants, but no status relations. There are turns, but no turn assignment" (Halliday, et. al., 1985, in Slade and Gardner, p. 4). Conversation has purpose without imposition, a mutuality of management and control among all participants. It is likely this quality that makes it the form most amenable to education because the student brings as much control and direction to find out as the teacher brings to explain.

Why is conversation worth including in teacher education?

When I was a high school teacher, a colleague of mine had a student say to him after a class conversation, "We learn a lot more when we're not on-task." My colleague agreed with his student, saying, "It works better when you're in on it, doesn't it?" It is telling that the term "on task" meant to both student and teacher a situation in which the teacher controlled and the student passively received information, even when the student and the teacher both recognized that conversation was more educative.

The proposal that conversation is a superior mode of communication for education is premised in pragmatism. Pragmatism sees knowing as a transaction between the emergent knower and the world outside the knower. We are in conversation with the world. Conversation can be advocated for as the most educative form of communication following various particular theories on the pragmatism spectrum, including Dewey's experientialism and/or Freire's critical pedagogy (note the centrality of "revolutionary conversations" to Freire's views of education). Such pragmatic possibilities are constructivist. While philosophic discourse regarding pragmatism and constructivism has often focused upon the discrepancies between the two, Neubert and Reich (2006) point out how the reconstructive, interactional aspects of constructivism are immediate results of pragmatism's view of mind and knowing. It is this sense of constructivism that is of most value to educating, so for educators a constructivist paradigm means a pragmatic philosophy.

At the level of exploring what is simply the most educational form of interaction, constructivist social development theory is particularly apt, since knowing is seen as the result of continuous, mutually formative language transactions between the interactional and the personal. Vygotsky's (1978) views that (1) all higher thinking stems from language and (2) all language is social before it can become personal (p. 57) tell us that students need to speak *with* more experienced people, to use language together, in order to build concepts into their own structure of knowing. Language exchange, speaking with one another, is necessary to process new concepts. This is a process done together. It cannot be one in which the students merely receive language from others:

> Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment ….Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement (p. 90).

Courtney Cazden (2001) developed scaffolding (a term she credited to Bruner, Wood, and Ross) as a classroom tool in conjunction with Vygotsky's version of constructivism (pp. 61-62) and moved it into the realm of situated learning theory. While there are uses of scaffolding that more resemble a Montessori-style use of tools and artifacts, Cazden's advocacy of it was in terms of discourse: "The metaphor of discourse as scaffold applies [most easily] to adult assis-

tance with mental actions….Teachers….need to induct [students] into new perspectives and new ways of thinking about, reconceptualizing, or recontextualizing whatever phenomena (referents) are being discussed" (pp. 71-72). This is a process of the student as novice doing the construction, and the teacher as expert applying assistive language as platforms: new ways of getting at the work at higher levels. This implies a conversational mode as opposed to a recitative one, since the language acts of the students are even more important to the result than the language assistance rendered by the teacher.

From this situated learning perspective, Rogoff and Gardner (1984) asserted that the students' active search alongside those who know is the key to their own coming to know:

> Generalization from one problem to another is a function of the individual searching for similarities between new problems and old ones, guided by previous experience with similar problems and by instruction in how to interpret and solve such problems….Social interaction with people who are more expert in the use of the material and conceptual tools of the society is thus an important 'cultural amplifier' to extend children's cognitive processes (pp. 96-97).

The norms of conversation support this work of combining the student's own initiative to search and the need to interact with someone more expert to carry out the search.

John Dewey's (1938) experiential theory also implied that conversation would be pedagogically desirable. His focus was reflecting on enacted experience, but he realized how important communication was to learning, writing that "all human experience is ultimately social:…it involves contact and communication" (p. 38), and he wrote of how experiential education would

> mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others. The problem then is: how these contacts can be established without violating the principle of learning through personal experience (p. 21).

The answer to this problem is a communicative form that is shared, that enables the student to express her/his own experience in her/his own way, but also to be open to receiving other ideas about it from the teacher: conversation.

The imperative for students' willful involvement to process experience is described by Nystrand and Gamoran (1990) when they discriminate between *procedural* engagement and *substantive* engagement. The former

> characterizes the typical classroom….In such classes, students and teachers go through the motions of schooling: they ask and answer questions, assign and carry out homework, and maintain reasonable standards of comportment….whereas most students are regularly engaged in school, they are less often engaged in their studies (p. 3).

The far less common substantive engagement is defined by "a sustained commitment to and involvement with academic work" (p. 3). They conclude that a key to getting substantive

engagement is what they label "high quality classroom discourse" (p. 9): conversational norms of interaction with students rather than recitation-style norms.

A movement that seeks to increase substantive engagement, and to include experiential, situated, and social developmental approaches into the daily life of classrooms is the paradigm of classroom as community. In an article critical of the progress in creating true classroom communities, Roth and Lee (2006) indicate that the trouble in producing learning communities is a lack of authenticity. The interests and motivations of the students are not in close enough synchronicity for them to be a genuine community of practice. The exchanges in which they have interest and take part are not diverse or functional enough for them to constitute a general community (p. 28). They point out that

> people in [genuine] collectives have the choice whether they want to participate in this or that practice; they enjoy freedom regarding the specific ways in which they can contribute.…The situation is turned on its head in schooling situations whereby children…do not…exercise much choice over the objects of their tasks….which subverts introducing any instructional strategies based on the notion of community (p. 29).

They go on to propose ways for classrooms and schools to be actual communities. The key is the autonomy of individuals to choose purpose, activity, and engagement in their contribution to the shared activities and goals of the group (pp. 34-37). The communicative form in which this ideal is realized is conversation.

Of all the modes of interpersonal communication, only well-crafted conversation promises to answer the calls made by social development theory, situated learning theory, experientialism, and the related approaches to engagement that seek to inspire deep, authentic learning.

The scholars mentioned constitute only the briefest review of all the work available that suggests, points to, and even demands that we develop an effective pedagogy of conversation (please see Appendix for an additional reference list of such work). Tharp and Gallimore (1991) made the argument for such work twelve years ago:

> Lectures, demonstrations, cooperative learning, exercises/activities, and textbook reading can all assist learning, and even recitation and assessment (used judiciously) are necessary elements of the assisting classroom. But for the development of thinking skills – the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in speech and writing – the critical form of assisting learners is *dialogue* [italics in original] – the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happen in conversation (pp. 2-3).

Do We Already Teach This?

Conversation is daily practice for all of us, which is perhaps the very reason that we neglect it as a purposeful skill. Even regarding general speaking and listening, Mortimer Adler (1983) pointed out the weakness of our preparation throughout school:

> I doubt if anyone can recall being given such instruction [in speaking]…at the time that some training in reading and writing occurred. Except for special [usual-

ly elective] courses in what is called 'public speaking,'…there is no instruction in speech – the general art of speech – anywhere in the course of study" (pp. 4-5)….What about listening? Is anyone anywhere taught how to listen? How utterly amazing is the general assumption that the ability to listen well is a natural gift for which no training is required. How extraordinary is the fact that no [explicit] effort is made anywhere in the whole education process to help individuals learn how to listen well (p. 5).

This points out the assumptions guiding our practice. Since we all speak and we all listen sometimes in some ways, it is assumed that we do these things well, with direction, purpose, and skill. It is especially important to question this assumption for teachers, as it seems likely that casual conversation skills would merely be primers for knowing how to guide purposeful learning through conversation.

To illustrate that we do not systematically teach conversation skills to teacher candidates, consider the college catalogs of five Midwestern teacher preparation programs: the University of Illinois at Champaign, Illinois State University at Normal, Northwestern University, Missouri State University, and Dominican University of Chicago. Add in the catalog for Teachers College, Columbia, as it strives to represent the state of the art in teacher preparation. Each of these schools has some mention of instruction in communication and collaboration buried among the courses, most often in training special-education candidates to interact with families and other teachers. Teacher's College has Dr. Stephen Brookfield visit from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul for two-day seminars for teacher candidates. Brookfield's work is specifically in methods of discussion, not of conversation more generally, although in his publications and seminars, the value of speaking *with* students is a dominant theme (Brookfield, 2005). None of the schools have any dedicated coursework in learning to converse with students.

Another indication that the pedagogical use of conversation is undeveloped is that none of the rigorous NCATE standards require teacher preparation programs to give evidence that they have done any work with their candidates on talking with their students.

Finally, a lack of scholarly concern with instructive conversation is evidence that it has not been considered for teacher preparation. There was a sudden appearance and even more rapid disappearance of conversation from articles regarding teacher practices and preparation in the 1980's and into the 1990's, when interest in constructivist and situated learning ideas was growing. Approximately thirty references that roughly match the consideration of conversation as a pedagogical tool exist in general teacher preparation literature between the late 1980's and 1993. Not one occurs after 1998. Its decline correlates with the rise of the standards movement. I suspect that this is more than correlation, that it suggests causation. If that is indeed the case, I am hopeful that the failure of the standards movement will encourage us to resume development of a productive pedagogy of conversation.

What Sources Exist for Creating a Pedagogy of Conversation?

The development of a pedagogy of conversation includes consideration of purposes, approaches, and techniques, and then methods for imparting all of them effectively to teacher candidates. The purpose is the creation of pedagogical method that invites deep, authentic learning, so the conversational approaches and techniques that we ask our candidates to master must be

aimed primarily at the cognitive growth of the students (what Tharp and Gallimore, 1991, called *instructional* conversation).

This paper is to advocate in general, not to promote a specific existing curriculum or program. It is encouraging that there are definite places to start that already promote versions of teaching by conversation. I submit here two specific examples.

In the field of educational leadership, there is Costa and Garmston's (2002) Cognitive Coaching. They describe it as

> a simple model for conversations about planning, reflecting, or problem resolving. At deeper levels, Cognitive Coaching serves as the nucleus for…communities that honor autonomy, encourage interdependence, and produce high achievement (pp. 4-5).

Becoming a Cognitive Coach in their system involves learning to apply scripts to guide conversations in ways that allow the other person to develop her/his own thought processes. People trained in the scripts become

> skilled at constructing and posing questions with the intention of engaging and transforming thought. They employ nonjudgmental response behaviors to establish and maintain trust and intellectual engagement. They use nonverbal behaviors to establish and maintain rapport….They delight in assisting others in becoming more self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying (p. 6).

While Costa and Garmston's program was designed specifically for one-on-one conferences between educational leaders and teachers, it aims at the kind of substantive engagement that is the prerequisite for any instructional conversation.

In the field of business leadership studies, Miller and Miller (1997) have a program called Core Communication. The goal of their approach is to make explicit many aspects of conversation that are usually taken for granted. By clarifying these aspects, we can approach the best potential of each interaction. They consider four different kinds of talk and listening that emerge out of seven approaches (pp. 8, 120). They divide what one can get from conversing into five areas (p. 54). A part of the work that is very promising for teacher preparation is their view that effective conversation comes from a combination of skill and care, charted to illustrate how low skill/low care leads to abuse, low skill/high care leads to misunderstanding, high skill/low care leads to manipulation, and high skill/high care results in "positive esteem and relationship" (p. 36). As in Cognitive Coaching, active listening is emphasized in Core Communication, explicitly divided out into a listening cycle that includes attending, acknowledging, inviting, summarizing, and asking. (p. 97). They also include a section on defusing negative talk in conversations (pp. 140-142).

Aside from specific programs systematically focusing upon conversation, there are also ideas already within our methods courses that can be gathered and taught more systematically within a pedagogy of conversation: Active listening, wait-time, speaking order variations (varying from I.R.E.), and even some tools from operant conditioning and neuro-linguistic programming (although I would hope that their use within a pedagogy of conversation would avoid the pitfalls that come with manipulation and control).

There are also many explorations of conversation in field-specific scholarship in education. Specialists in English Language Learning seem to have the most scholarship concerned with conversation. Following them, the specialty that has the most publications about conversation is language arts. Usually, the concerns of the articles in these specialties are specific to their own domains, but they may contain productive ideas for a more general pedagogy of conversation (the Appendix contains some examples of work in these fields regarding conversation).

We can also get help in developing the best possible programs from other fields of scholarship, particularly linguistics and communications. From the broadest considerations, like those provided by the late Neil Postman, to minutely detailed considerations of aspects of human conversation, linguistics and communications specialists provide a potential treasure trove for our practical application. This presents an opportunity for true interdisciplinary advancement (a few examples may by found in the Appendix).

If We Add Classes in Conversing, What do We Take Away?

Much of the scope and sequence work for our teacher preparation programs has been removed from our hands by states and accreditation agencies. They have implemented systems that tend to add requirements while subtracting none. Our curricula are now crowded to the point where our candidates are usually best served to take an extra year or two of schooling to complete their programs. The last thing most programs are looking for is to add yet more required components to their programs.

At the same time, it is our responsibility to consider, independent of external agencies, what kind of teachers will emerge from our programs, and to adjust the curriculum so that we are producing the kinds of teachers that we feel our society needs. Every one of us will come up with a different list of what we would add and what we would subtract. Since I recommend expanding explicit instruction in oral communication, particularly conversation, I come to the table with two items that I believe could be diminished, if not eliminated, to make room, and improve teacher education:

1. We could make better teachers by removing much of the instruction on systems of management and control that are premised in behaviorism. I do not recommend taking them away entirely, since operant conditioning and all of the newer variations are powerful tools that can be used to help students in specific situations. However, I am against dedicated, required courses in which behaviorism is an assumed context, which leads us to take for granted the teacher as controller. Alfie Kohn (1996) expresses the same disapproval:

> With punishments, we come to be seen as enforcers to be avoided; with rewards, as goody dispensers on legs. In neither case have we established a caring alliance, a connection based on warmth and respect. Like punishments, rewards try to make bad behaviors disappear through manipulation. They are ways of doing things *to* students instead of working *with* them (p. 36)….

The reason to expand our candidates' acumen in conducting instructional conversations is so that they work adeptly *with* the students; thus, the reason for its inclusion is the very reason for diminishing courses that promote a management approach.

2. The most destructive element to deep, authentic learning that has come to occupy more and more candidate class-time, even dominating some methods syllabi, is standards. The

dehumanizing influence of standards is a valuable reason to compensate by transcending them in preparing our teachers. If we reduce all of the criticism of standards to their salient point, I suggest that it is this: standards (as they are currently understood) inevitably turn students from subject to object. The student becomes the passive recipient of content. Teachers are influenced to be concerned with students only inasmuch as they perform according to specifications. This is an appalling metastasis of a cancer that was already prevalent in public education. To the extent that we cater to the standards mentality we undermine humane, genuine education (for extensive consideration of this position, please see Meier and Woods, Ed.s, 2004, *Many Children Left Behind*).

Conclusion: The Ultimate Benefit of a Pedagogy of Conversation

The criticism of complying with the standards regime suggests the ultimate benefit of going the other way. Instruction in interacting *with* other people effectively and instructively is concerned with what happens to those people for their own benefit and according to their own will. Creating and putting into practice a pedagogy of conversation holds the promise of putting teachers into proper and beneficial relationship with students. It will educate our future teachers to properly understand students as agents, as real people – as the *subject* of our calling. Once this is the norm, far more education will be available to students in their daily classroom experience.

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Appendix
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