Commentary on Eugene and Kiyo's dialogue on dialogic pedagogy

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Abstract

This fascinating dialogue raised many questions. In this commentary I will focus on just three questions that particularly stimulated me to further reflection: 'why classification?'; 'what is ontology?' and 'where does agency come from?'

Why classification?

Eugene starts with a complex classification of types of dialogic pedagogy and it is this that sparks Kiyo's disagreement. For Kiyo the division of ontological from epistemological dialogic pedagogy seems too constraining and the whole idea of classification does not seem very dialogic. He prefers to see the terms as related in the way that voices in a dialogue are related. In a dialogue voices are both separate and united, participating in each other. Perhaps terms like 'ontological dialogic pedagogy' and 'epistemological dialogic pedagogy' are more like perspectives on pedagogy than separate practices?

Whenever I see a classification system listing everything into clear relationships I think of Borges' famous alternative taxonomy, which he claimed to have taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopædia entitled 'Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge':

> The list divides all animals into one of 14 categories:
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> Those that belong to the emperor
>
> Embalmed ones
>
> Those that are trained
>
> Suckling pigs
>
> Mermaids (or Sirens)
>
> Fabulous ones
>
> Stray dogs
>
> Those that are included in this classification
>
> Those that tremble as if they were mad

Innumerable ones

Those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush

Et cetera

Those that have just broken the flower vase

Those that, at a distance, resemble flies (Borges, 1999, p. 231).

This is an amusing illustration of why the spirit of taxonomy is not compatible with a dialogic world view. Taxonomy implies that there is only one true way of representing the world, often reduced to a flat two-dimensional map, whereas Bakhtin's dialogic world view leads him to 'hear voices in everything' as he puts it and 'dialogic relations among them' (Bakhtin, 1986, p169). As Borges story illustrates, the resultant polyphony of perspectives makes any attempt to produce one universal taxonomy impossible.

We are often quite unconscious of the impact that the medium of communication has on our thinking. The social anthropologist Jack Goody has a chapter on classification in his 1977 book 'The domestication of the savage mind' (Goody, 1977). His main argument in this chapter is that classification, as Western social scientists practice it, is very much a product of literacy and leads to misunderstanding when we apply it to oral cultures. Classification is the sort of thing you do with pens on paper and, after Linnaeus, it suggests universality and truth. Oral people tend to respond to things in contexts. When anthropologists produce tables representing indigenous classifications of the world, as they often do, these always end up grossly simplifying a complex lived reality.

So why do we classify? In some areas of science, tables have been a valuable tool for research. In chemistry, the periodic table has helped predict the existence of elements before they were discovered, and in biology, now we can add DNA code to Linnaeus's original tree of life and show in a table how every animal is both unique and yet related to every other animal. But in social science classifications have often been linked to less benign forms of domination and control. In a Mexican museum I recently saw a 19th Century table of types of "half-breed" each category with names like 'mulatto' and 'zambo' defined by a particular mixture of European, Indian and African parentage. Why was that table felt to be useful? The ethical issue raised by the classification of people should alert us to the question of why people are producing classification schemes. The desire to define others is linked to the desire to control others. This does not seem to raise ethical issues when applied to atoms in the periodic table. However, I think it does raise issues when applied to types of pedagogical practice because practices are conducted by people and the people who find their practices labelled from the outside by social science researchers might not like the labels that are applied. Why is a figure listing types of dialogic pedagogy useful? Who is it useful for? If it is in order to be able to define a practice from the outside, without the need to enter into dialogue with the practitioner, then it is easy to see why this enterprise might annoy the people who find themselves labelled and defined within the figure. Clearly, Kiyo did not feel that the practice of 'dialogic' teachers in Japan was well described by the labels in Eugene's classification system.

Why ontological?

Definitions of ontology and epistemology and questions of the relationship between them, feature prominently in the dialogue. Like Eugene I think it is important to stress the ontological nature of dialogic and I tend to agree that ontology is more fundamental than epistemology. However, there seem to be a range of views as to what is meant by calling dialogic, ontological.

In the UK tradition of research on classroom talk, dialogues are often discussed in terms of epistemology as a form of 'shared inquiry' and a way of helping in the 'collaborative construction of

knowledge' (Alexander, 2000, Mercer, 2000). In my own earlier research on talk in primary classrooms I found that this missed something important which I described as children entering into 'the space of dialogue', a phrase I now realise that I had picked up from Buber (1947) but that, at the time, I thought was my own (Wegerif & Mercer, 1999). The idea of 'dialogic space' suggests ontology. Using the term ontology suggests that dialogic space, is not just an analytic construct but is pointing to something real. To call something 'real' is another way to say that it can have a causal impact on the world. Talk is something that can be recorded and measured, everyone agrees that it is 'real', but the space of dialogue that surrounds the talk is harder to pin down. I found that the dialogic space that some groups created in classrooms had a certain reality that could be felt in their long shared silences and the way in which the group members could finish each other's utterances. This 'dialogic space' had a causal impact on their improved problem-solving.

One issue for me is understanding how the use of different communication technologies frames and shapes the way in which we make meaning together and so influences the meanings that we make. The ontological idea of dialogic space might help understand the changing experience of reality in the Internet Age. I heard recently that immigrants to the UK from the Philippines spent on average several hours every day in Skype calls to relatives, often leaving the Skype on whilst they did everyday tasks. Does it make sense to think of these people as living in England or as living in the Philippines when so much of their lives is spent living together in the new 'space' of the Internet? What kind of space is that?

The term ontology is useful to suggest that the aim of education is not simply knowledge or ways of knowing but might also be about new ways of being. Dialogic is not simply a way for a subject to know about a world out there beyond the subject (epistemology) but it is also about a way of being in the world (ontology). An epistemological interpretation of dialogic leaves the subject unchanged but an ontological interpretation of dialogic allows us to think about the subject changing to become the space of dialogue (in the moment of openness) and to become more dialogical (over time). Referring to an ontological interpretation of dialogic makes it possible to claim that dialogic education is education *for* dialogue as well as *through* dialogue in which dialogue is not only treated as a means to an end (epistemological) but also treated as an end in itself (ontological).

Like Eugene, I picked up the phrase 'dialogue as an end in itself' from Sidorkin (1999) and I associated this phrase with the claim that the dialogic in dialogic education is an ontological and not just an epistemological category. However, as Eugene presents that claim here, I now have some misgivings that in place of what I understood by ontology we have some sort of humanist existentialism (Sartre, 1947/2007). Eugene writes, perhaps following Sidorkin, that dialogic is ontological because it defines being human and human meaning making. The problem with this, in my view, is that the distinction between 'human' and 'non-human' is one that can only be made after the opening of dialogic space (a space of infinite possible meaning within which identities are constructed) and not before. For me a dialogic ontology is making a bigger claim than that. Let me explain. (And let me also note the irony that earlier I accused Eugene of trying to locate others within his classification of dialogic in a way which does not respect their unique perspective on the world but here I am labelling Eugene's version of dialogic as 'existential humanism' within my own way of seeing the world.)

In Heidegger's 1957 lecture on 'Identity and Difference' (Heidegger, 1969) he interrogates what he calls the 'A = A' principle of identity thinking and finds the origin of meaning in an unmediated 'ontological difference', which he refers to as the difference between Being and beings. Heidegger's account of this ontological difference is also an account of how 'mankind' and Being belong together in what he calls 'the event of appropriation' (ereignis) which he describes as a movement of 'overwhelming'

and 'arrival' and as the circling (his word is 'ineinander') of the Being of beings and the beings of Being around the invisible unmediated difference between them (Heidegger, 1969, p69).

One possible way that I have found to make sense of Heideggers' distinction between beings and Being is through Merleau-Ponty's more visual account of the difference between figure and ground, the idea here is that explicit things or objects always stand-out from and are defined against an implicit background. Merleau-Ponty, whose later work was strongly influenced by Heidegger, offers an account of perception that shares some of the structure of Heidegger's account of 'ereignis'. When a person stands forth in a landscape, a horizon instantly forms around them stretching away in every direction as far as the eye can see (perhaps Heidegger's concept of 'arrival') but at the same time as the person's gaze precipitates this horizon they also experience themselves placed as an object within their horizon as if the gaze of the horizon was looking at them and locating them within it (a possible picture of Heidegger's concept of 'overwhelming'?). Merleau-Ponty refers to these two sides, the looking out and the looking in, together as a 'chiasm'. 'Chiasm' is a term borrowed from grammar where it refers to the reversability of the subject and the object in a sentence and is used by Merleau-Ponty to refer to the mutual envelopment (a translation of Heidegger's term 'ineinander') and reversibility between two total perspectives on the world around an 'unbridgeable gap' or 'hinge' which is also, he writes, an opening or 'déhiscence' of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p 194, 201: 1968, p 148, 153).

This idea that meaning depends upon a gap of difference is also found in Bakhtin. At times he goes further and applies dialogic to reality as a whole. In his notes on 'Methodology for the Human Sciences' Bakhtin appears to reach towards a similar view to that of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm writing:

> Thought about the world and thought in the world. Thought striving to embrace the world and thought experiencing itself in the world (as part of it). An event in the world and participation in it. The world as an event (and not as existence in ready-made form)(Bakhtin, 1986, p. 162).

By 'event' Bakhtin means something like an act of paying attention. He is claiming here that the world does not exist until an act of differentiation separates a self (or perspective) from a world. In this passage Bakhtin comes out explicitly against the ontology of selves in worlds trying to understand them through dialogues which is implicit in the epistemological interpretation of dialogic referred to earlier. Here he is suggesting that our sense of the world, and of our own perspective within it, are constructions within a kind of dialogue that unites 'us' and 'world'. This passage reinforces the interpretation that Bakhtin's dialogic joins Heidegger's ereignis, Derrida's différance (1968) and Merleau-Ponty's chiasm as a variation on the theme of ontological difference.

Eugene and others might respond to this way of thinking about a dialogic ontology by saying that it all sounds very abstract and philosophical and not much to do with real dialogues between real people. The tradition of thinking about ontology from Heidegger through Merleau-Ponty to Derrida seems different from much of Bakhtin and the concern about human essence that Eugene seems to express. However, I think that the dialogic relation explored by Merleau-Ponty is precisely what underlies the opening of meaning in a dialogue. A dialogue cannot be viewed from outside. It cannot be represented on a two-dimensional table. To be in dialogue is to be inside a dialogic space that opens on infinite potential precisely because of its dialogic structure. In any dialogue with another person, let us take this dialogue between you and me now, I am outside the other and contain them, they are outside me and contain me and yet, in the dialogue, we are linked and cannot escape each other. This is the 'ineinander' relation of 'ontological difference' exposed by Heidegger. It is because I am outside you and locate you as an image

in my world that I transcend your understanding and it is because I am, at the same time, located as an image within your world that you transcend my understanding and out of this mutual transcendence and mutual envelopment an infinite potential for new meaning is born.

Ontology is about Being, not just about human being. This interpretation of ontologic dialogic fits better with Kiyo's claim that the dialogic relation is not just between voices within a world but also between voices and the world that surrounds and apparently contains them. This bigger sense of dialogic ontology is significant in this debate because it rejects humanism. Humanism depends on assuming a distinction between the human and the non-human. In my view, dialogic ontology says that this distinction is just another way of dividing dialogic space. The 'human' is always in a dialogic relationship, a relationship of mutual intertwining, with the 'non-human'. Humans are always more than human (and less than human). We do not only need to identify ourselves with our animal bodies but also with the trees, the stars and the awesome extensions of our capacities made possible modern communications technologies. To quote the Upanishads: 'thou art that'. This is because each one of us really is the dialogic space and not simply the image of ourselves that we construct within the space by dividing 'me' from 'you' and 'my body' from 'the world'.

Where does agency come from?

This question occurs in the dialogue between Eugene and Kiyo in the form, should students decide what they want to learn or should teachers decide what they should learn? This seems to be one of the issues at stake in the dialogue between Eugene and Kiyo. When Lakatos describes a class as interested in a maths problem Eugene is concerned that really they were not interested but that the teacher imposed this interest upon them:

> What if some of the participants had not cared about this math problem in particular or math in general – how did Lakatos made them interested or, at least, cooperate with his dialogue? Was pedagogical violence (Matusov, 2009a; Sidorkin, 2002) involved in that process and if so, how? (Eugene Matusov, above, p. 10)

Kiyo's notion of the teacher as an author of the classroom text and the students as like the heroes in a dialogic novel also raises Eugene's concern. Yes, the students can show some agency in this scenario, he writes, but their agency is constrained to being responsive to the teacher who has the dominant and controlling agency. In response to this Kiyo, raises the question of how students become agentive in the first place and points out that this is an educational question.

> In the sense that no one can put agency into some other, agency of human being is self-generated. Simultaneously, agency in human being grows up by interacting with other people. The learner can enter into the dialogic lesson and act as the dialogic heroine/hero because she/he is originally an agent. Her/his experience of being the dialogic heroine/hero in the dialogic lesson helps her/his agency grow up (Kiyo Miyazaki, above, p. 41).

I think it is significant that Kiyo draws examples from primary education with young children in Japan whereas Eugene tends to draw examples from older students and adults in Russian and the USA. Agency is not just a given fact but it is something that develops over a lifetime and it develops in different ways in different cultures. Earlier Kiyo had pointed to the importance of recent developmental psychology in helping us understanding the role of dialogic in early years development. I think this same area of research literature can help us understand where the apparent agency of children comes from in the first

place. Understanding where agency comes from can help us understand more deeply what agency really is. Perhaps understanding agency will help to re-frame and even dissolve the apparent contradiction between Eugene's view of the student as agent of their own learning and Kiyo's greater focus on the role of the teacher and the curriculum.

Both Kiyo and Eugene acknowledge that agency is 'self-generated' and seem to associate this 'self' that is at the source of agency with individual human beings. Presumably they are referring, if only implicitly, to our apparent physical separateness each one of us having (or being?) a different body with a unique location in physical space. I think this way of thinking about 'self' and 'agency' is problematic from the ontologic-dialogic point of view I sketched above.

The kind of agentive self I think that Eugene is referring to is a self that is able to make conscious choices. But where did this separate agentive self come from? At some point each individual human being emerged from a situation without agency. The very beginning of separation lies in conception. The relationship between the egg and the surrounding mother moves at conception from being an external or mechanical relationship between physical objective external things to becoming, at least in part, an internal relationship. I mean by this that the growing foetus behaves in ways that are not totally determined by the mother's body around it but could be said to respond to the movements of that body (Gallagher, 2011). But of course this proto-dialogue between bodies is not yet 'agency' as there is no conscious separate sense of self. In fact a conscious separate sense of self only emerges much later in the developmental process. This means that before there is a separate self there is a relationship. The sense of self as the source of agency is something that only emerges within the context of a prior relationship.

Search 'you tube' for illustrations of 'the still face' experiment and you will see just how unhappy very young babies get if their mothers do not respond to them. When mothers keep their faces still, babies seek their attention, becoming more and more desperate until, eventually, they turn away in obvious distress.

It seems natural to think, as I wrote just above, that the 'baby' is relating to its 'mother' but the baby does not really exist as a separate person with a separate sense of agency at this point. When the baby smiles the mother smiles and when the mother smiles the baby smiles but the baby does not smile with an intention nor is it aware that it is smiling. The baby does not cause the mother to smile and the mother does not cause the baby to smile, both are caused to smile by the relationship between them.

Dialogic relationships, in this case the dialogic couple between mother and child, are real, albeit invisible, 'mechanisms' that have causal agency. This is perhaps obvious but is worth stressing only to correct for the tendency of those who hold a, often implicit, physicalist world view, to ascribe reality and causal agency only to visible material objects like bodies and to see relationships as always secondary to these physical bodies. A dialogic ontology is precisely the claim that dialogues are just as real, and perhaps even more fundamentally real, as visible physical bodies. I think this failure to take full account of the causal agency of dialogues might be a trap that Eugene, and to a lesser extent, Kiyo, are falling into in their disagreement over where the agency lies within education. Once we recognise that dialogues are agents, not individual human bodies, then I think that the agency at work within education becomes easier to understand.

We all tend to find the notion of an individual self with individual agency easy to grasp and we all tend to think that we have a self and free will to decide and act but where did this sense of self, this

agentive 'I' of ours actually come from? Peter Hobson (2002) describes how the separation of 'consciousnesses' arises in the context of the to and fro of imitation, role-taking and joint attention found in secondary intersubjectivity (an area of research that Kiyo refers to in the dialogue above). If a child looks at a strange new toy, shall we say a robot Buzz Lightyear toy that says "to infinity and beyond"; she might be concerned and so checks with her mother to see what her reaction should be to the new toy, perhaps amusement, surprise or the mother may even note the child's anxiety and show mild feigned anxiety to help the child cope with her anxiety, at the same time reassuring the child about the toy. In this way the child relates to her mother relating to the world and looks back at the toy with modified feelings. Through this sort of encounter, the child learns to take on another's point of view and to take on two points of view about the same object at the same time.

Having two perspectives on the world, ones own and someone else's, implies a third perspective, the perspective of the relationship itself from within which the child can see her mother and, in return can see herself. Perhaps this is what Kiyo refers to as the third relationship in dialogues, the relationship with the surrounding world. The child does not learn to see herself only by seeing herself reflected in the eyes of her mother, she also learns to see herself from the perspective of her relationship with her mother. When, playing alone, the child says 'I can'. This means that she is seeing herself as a separate person, just as she has learnt to see her mother as a separate person. To be self-conscious is to be able to take the perspective of another person towards oneself. But this is not a specific person, this is a dialogic relationship with the 'world' understood as the space of relationship that preceded the separation of two consciousnesses and that continues to envelop the apparent separateness of different selves.

I am arguing here that 'consciousness', 'self' and 'agency' are properties of dialogues and not of separate individuals (Wegerif, 2013). Agency only appears to be a property of an individual through a kind of illusion that attaches the self-awareness of dialogues to particular physical bodies or even physical organs like eyes. This illusion is to some extent historically and culturally specific and has been linked to the practice of reading alone and silently made possible by the advent of print literacy (Ong, 1982).

It seems obvious from experience that relationships with real people; mothers, fathers, teachers, scientists, role-models, have a huge influence on motivation for education. But what are these 'real people'? In what does their 'reality' subsist? I would argue that they are voices rather than bodies and voices are cultural. In the nice quotation offered by Kiyo it is clear that Bakhtin's concept of voice was not limited to 'real people' in the sense of physically embodied individuals. I remind you here:

> [Dostoevsky] heard both the loud, recognized, reigning voices of the epoch, that is, the reigning dominant ideas (official and unofficial), as well as voices still weak, ideas not yet fully emerged, latent ideas heard as yet by no one but himself, and ideas that were just beginning to ripen, embryos of future worldviews. (Kiyo Miyazaki above quoting Morson and Emerson quoting Bakhtin referring to Dostoevsky – and the claim in Bakhtin is that this fractal chain of voices within voices within voices goes on forever).

Cultural voices are not the same as individual bodies even if they have to use them in order to exist by speaking through them.

Eugene is concerned that the children in Lakatos's classroom might not have been really interested in the problem but that the teacher imposed this interest on them. But why would the teacher be interested in the maths problem in the first place? Where does the agency in education really originate? Mathematic problems are interesting for mathematics. Mathematicians are people who have allowed themselves to be to some extent possessed or taken over by the spirit of mathematics. It is not

the teachers in themselves that find the problem interesting, but it is the voice of mathematics within them that responds to the call of the problem. This 'voice' is a moment in a dialogue. Eugene is concerned to defend the agency of the children here but perhaps we should also be concerned about the agency of the mathematics. Mathematics is a long-term global dialogue that needs to recruit voices to survive and to expand. If it fails to recruit bodies to carry it forward then it will die. Why is Eugene so concerned about the children here and not about the Mathematics? After all there are billions of children in the world, more are born every minute, but there is only one Mathematics. From one perspective, we might say that while human lives are short and mostly insignificant, Mathematics is eternal and magnificent. So perhaps what we call education can also be understood as how long-term cultural dialogues recruit participants?

Of course, there are many dialogues at many levels and it would be wrong to allow the long-term dialogues of culture to dominate and suppress the short-term dialogues of everyday experience. But realising that agency is an effect of dialogues and that all dialogues inter-communicate can help us to understand why 'dialogic' education is bigger than the question of what students want or what teachers want. Dialogues are not limited things like pebbles – they are open to the outside and inter-penetrate each other, which means that there is ultimately only one dialogue and we are voices within it now. We always already discover ourselves within relationship, not only in relationship with individuals and with communities but also in relationship with the world as Kiyo puts it. Another way of saying the same thing is that we find ourselves in relationship with Otherness as well as with specific others and with specific communities. We experience all these relationships in the form of a call, not just a call to respond ethically but also a call to find some things, like maths problems, 'interesting'. Perhaps dialogic education, which is, as Kiyo mentions, the kind of education that multiplies questions just as fast or faster than it answers them, can be understood as one aspect of our response to the call of others and, above all, to the call of infinite otherness.

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