

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND DIALOGUE: DEMOCRATIC LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

Building on the framework of Peters and Armstrong's (1998) three Types of Teaching/Learning, this article explores the use of dialogue to foster a collaborative and democratic learning experience. There are three conditions under which dialogue can be facilitated as a part of the collaborative learning experience: (a) intent, (b) a dialogical space, and (c) a shared sense of the other. Each of these conditions is examined in detail, and examples from the authors practice as adult educators illustrate the application of these ideals.

When trying to present a coherent discourse on intangible concepts, we are often constrained by the imperfect nature of our language. In this paper we struggle through this limitation to describe two important and growing concepts in the field of adult education, dialogue and collaboration. Instead of discussing the concepts in the abstract, thus falling into the aforementioned language trap, we try to root this discussion in the concrete experience of the adult education classroom. What follows is a description of collaboration and dialogue as we attempt to implement it in our respective learning environments. This is not an empirical examination of these concepts, but a discussion of them grounded in our experience and presented with the hope that other adult educators may be stimulated by our experiences to reflect on their own pedagogy as it relates to collaborative learning and democratic dialogue.

People speak regularly, but rarely do they engage in dialogue. Most people are far more experienced with other forms of discourse such as discussion, debate, lecture, oration, and, what is generally termed, conversation. However, while individuals may learn by engaging in these various modes of discourse, dialogue is the approach best suited to collaborative and democratic learning. In this article, we discuss how dialogue comprises a central element in achieving collaborative and democratic learning objectives. We begin by distinguishing dialogue from other forms of discourse commonly used in various teaching approaches. We then consider how educators might facilitate dialogue in collaborative learning situations by sharing our classroom experiences and practices.

The Way We Talk As We Teach and Learn

All forms of discourse play a role in learning, and no single approach is inherently superior to others. What differentiates one type of discourse from another is its relationship to the specific learning situation and its democratic implications. This relationship is partially defined by the purpose of the participants within the pedagogical situation and their belief that one or more forms of discourse might best achieve their learning objectives. We can begin to understand this aspect of educational discourse by examining the possible applications and implications of various forms of discourse in three different types of teaching/learning situations (Peters & Armstrong, 1998): (a) Teaching by Transmission, Learning by Reception; (b) Teaching by Transmission, Learning by Sharing, and (c) Collaborative Learning.

Type One teaching/learning refers to Teaching by Transmission, Learning by Reception (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). This teacher-centered pedagogy focuses on the teacher's knowledge and employs the discourse models that enable the teacher to deliver knowledge effectively to learners. We commonly think of the lecture as the mode of instruction that fits this learning situation especially well since formal oration of this nature sometimes suits a teacher's didactic purpose. When students are introduced to a particular discipline or when they are in simple training situations, the direct instruction or lecture model is often entirely appropriate. This form of discourse also meets student expectations when the learning situation calls for them to receive information from a single speaker, a panel of speakers, or an expert discussant in a particular field. The speaker conveys his or her knowledge by means of oral discourse, and the listener receives the information by listening attentively to what the speaker utters.

Although Type One teaching/learning has legitimate and valuable teaching applications, it fails to foster the critical engagement fundamental to meaningful democratic participation. When the role of students is consistently reduced to the passive reception of provided information, their role in constructing knowledge based on their own experiences and perspectives is potentially undermined. Type One teaching/learning, used in the absence of other learning discourses, resembles what Freire (1970) terms banking education where teachers are depositors of information and students simply become depositories. The teacher deposits some piece of information into the student and the student simply stores it until it is required, or withdrawn, as from a bank. Freire argues that this type of education never encourages students to think critically and they become disposed to accept with absolute externality provided information. Such a disposition is clearly inconsistent with the critical intellectual requirements of democratic citizenship and suggests the need for alternative forms of learning discourses.

While lecturing is the dominant form of oral discourse used in Type One teaching/learning, other forms of oral discourse are more effectively employed in Type Two teaching/learning, Teaching by Transmission, Learning by Sharing (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Perhaps the most commonly used discourse form is discussion, whether it takes place between the teacher and learners or between learners themselves. Although not always the final word on such matters, dictionary definitions help clarify the common usage of many terms. According to Webster's (1983), *discuss* means "to discourse about in order to reach conclusions or to convince - a sifting of possibilities, esp. by presenting considerations pro and con" (p. 362). The key terms that distinguish discussion from lecture are *convince* and *pro and con* because they introduce an

element of argument evaluation. As Bohm (1980) suggests, this discursive exchange potentially involves argument winners and losers:

(Discussion) has the same root as 'percussion' and 'concussion'. It really means to break things up. It emphasizes the idea of analysis, where there may be many points of view, and where everybody is presenting a different one - analyzing and breaking up. That obviously has its value; but it is limited, and it will not get us very far beyond our various points of view. Discussion is almost like a ping-pong game, where people are batting the ideas back and forth and the object of the game is to win or to get points for yourself. Possibly you will take up somebody else's ideas to back up your own - you may agree with some and disagree with others - but the basic point is to win the game. That's frequently the case in a discussion. (p. 1)

To break things up, to analyze, to get across our point of view - these are among the activities frequently encouraged by teachers who want learners to grapple with the information they receive and represent a major shift from Type One teaching/learning. In classrooms and workshops, questions directed at students by teachers serve to entice students to think about what the topic of focus means to them, to discover the meaning of information they receive, to sort out the elements of the topic, and to understand what the teacher or trainer is trying to say.

There is a widespread belief among educators, even among the most gifted orators, that people can help each other learn what a teacher wants them to learn. Students are sometimes encouraged to talk with one another in classrooms to extend the effect of the teacher's instruction. Whenever the number of people in classrooms or workshops prevents full participation (or simply hearing) among students, smaller clusters of students are formed, and discussion groups become the principal augmentation to the teacher's lecture. In discussion groups, as Bohm's (1980) description suggests, students are encouraged to analyze, to share their points of view, and oftentimes to problem solve or reach a collective conclusion in response to an open question posed by the teacher.

While discussion is not the principal form of discourse in Type One teaching/learning, although it frequently supplements lecture, it is the principal form of discourse in Type Two teaching/learning situations. However, its relationship to lecture and other teacher-directed forms of discourse is not necessarily uniform across these situations. For example, in many K-12 and in some higher education institutions, small group discussion strategies have been formalized, institutionalized, and termed cooperative learning, but cooperative learning remains a teacher-directed pedagogical strategy (Slavin, 1991). In adult education, there is no special discourse designation for small group discussion, but the form that adult educators claim to value the most is discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). This reflects a prevailing view among adult educators that mature individuals learn very well on their own and learn best when interacting with other adults who share their learning needs and interests.

The discussion format is favored by adult educators who believe what the learner already knows is the most important factor in learning and by those who believe that the most effective learning is achieved through life experience, particularly reflected-upon experience (Jarvis, 1999). For most adult educators, therefore, discussion is a staple in workshops and conferences, in training rooms and study circles, in residential centers and in community education programs. However, the role of the teacher or facilitator is sometimes very direct and at other times, less

direct, so the dominant form of discourse in some adult education situations remains the lecture, and within these situations discussion is simply an augmenting discourse. Type Two teaching/learning in adult education is intended to be learner-centered, but discussion that is directed by the teacher may promote a competitive interaction among learners that creates a less than ideal learning environment.

In addition to the critical dialogue encouraged by Freire (1970) as a central requirement to the democratic learning enterprise, the objective of community building is equally important. According to Dewey (1916), for example, democracy, understood as a mode of associated, conjoint, communicated living, is the only type of society in which individuals are able to grow and socially participate in a manner that allows for the realization of their unique interests and gifts. For a democracy to flourish, it requires individuals who maximize their potential in activity with others. Learning in isolation or environments marked by competition perpetuates the duality of mind and action, and of the individual and society. Although aspects of Type Two teaching/learning are consistent with democratic learning, the idea of community building achieves its full pedagogical potential with Type Three teaching/learning.

Discussion and lecturing may also contribute to Type Three teaching/learning, referred to as Collaborative Learning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998), but the principle form of discourse associated with Type Three is dialogue. According to Jones (1997), dialogue is derived from the ancient root *leg* which means to collect or speak, as from the Germanic word *lekjaz* - the one who speaks magic words - and most recently from the Greek *dia-logos* which translates into the flowing through of the word or meaning or relationship. (p. 48)

In Howe's (1963) view, dialogue is the address and response between persons in which there occurs a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block the relationship. It is a dialogic interaction between persons in which one of them self-discloses to the other while simultaneously seeking to know the authentic other as well. This type of reciprocal disclosure discourages individuals from imposing personally held understandings on others. A reciprocal, sharing, authentic relationship characterizes dialogue and comprises the fundamental precondition to meaningful participant communication.

Even in the course of a monologue, a reciprocal relationship may emerge and change the monologue into dialogue. Sometime during the monologue, participants may relinquish their pretenses and set aside their social masks through which they seek the approval and good will of others, dare to be authentic with others, and invite them to be a full partner in dialogue. Each of the participants must accept the resulting address and response as the discipline and task of communication. Any relationship less than this would not be dialogue and, therefore, not communication in any meaningful sense of the term. Rather, it would be the exploitation, ignoring, or flight from both the other and personal authenticity. Howe's (1963) emphasis on the relationship between learners is consistent with our own view of how knowledge is constructed in collaborative and democratic learning: "Dialogue...is both the relationship between persons and the principle that determines the nature of their communication. The partnership of persons in dialogue is so indispensably important" (p. 67). Our own view of dialogue is captured in the definitions provided by Jones (1997) and Howe (1963).

For our purposes, we place dialogue in the context of collaborative learning and treat it as an essential form of discourse for protecting principles of democratic learning. As we illustrate above, it is not the only form of discourse utilized in collaborative learning, but is an essential form. Moreover, since our concern here is with how dialogue within collaborative learning experiences can be effectively facilitated, we will describe what is involved in dialogue from the point of view of a facilitator and other participants in a collaborative learning experience. We contend that there are three conditions under which dialogue can be facilitated as a part of a collaborative learning experience: (a) an intent, (b) a dialogical space, and (c) a shared sense of the other. We will discuss what we mean by each of these conditions and share what we do to fulfill these conditions in our own work with collaborative learning groups and promote democratic dialogue.

An Intent

Intent entails at least two key elements. The first element involves understanding what is *on the mind* of a person who is interested in achieving some goal. Second, in the phenomenological sense, intent is an attitude or a *leaning* toward a subject that may include other people and their life-worlds (Ihde, 1986). Our own intent as facilitators of collaborative learning experiences includes a *soft contract* between us and the other participants in Type Three settings. During our initial contact with other participants in a collaborative learning event, we organize, conduct, and share what we have on our mind concerning the type of teaching and democratic learning experience in which we are about to engage. While this seems a given to anyone who has organized and conducted a workshop, seminar, or other formal learning experience, we believe that the facilitator's intent is not necessarily obvious to other participants, even when there are clear and specific learner objectives, goals, or questions laid before them. Consistent with Freire's (1970) banking education, learner objectives typically specify what the learner will know, do, or feel at the end of a learning experience. Teachers often identify enabling objectives to indicate how learning objectives will be accomplished. However, both can only imply what the facilitator's own intent might be and ignore the value of student interests and non-preordinate learning outcomes.

A facilitator working in a Type One or Type Two situation is in a different position, relative to other participants, compared to a facilitator working in a Type Three situation. However, apart from what is communicated to participants previous to our initial encounter with them, such as what a program announcement or workshop description would contain, we actually spend very little time *telling* participants what we have on our minds. Instead, we attempt to share our intent by demonstrating, showing, illustrating or otherwise *acting out* our intents. This is not to keep the other participants guessing; it is, however, deliberate and intentional. We intend for the other participants to begin to see that they are about to experience something with us other than business as usual. We make this initial gesture based on our assumption that most collaborative learning participants have little or no prior experience with dialogue as we view it. Based on our experience with dozens of learning groups in several different countries our assumption in this regard has been sustained. This intent addresses the gap between what most adults initially expect us to do and what we actually do, and this gap is evident to most participants very early in our relationship with them. We have learned to take advantage of this expectations gap by pointing to it as a beginning point for dialogue.

We begin our collaborative learning experiences with a few minutes of small talk with participants we know from other courses. This promotes an early recognition that student experiences, perspectives, and knowledge will comprise an essential component of course dialogue. If we have no prior experiences with anyone in the class, we may initiate conversation on topics such as the size of the room, the shape of the tables, a news event, something that happened to us on the way to the class, or other informal remarks. This typically provokes some kind of response from someone in the group, and our conversation is usually off and running. We do this with the additional intent of letting participants know that we wish to create a safe, relaxed learning environment, and they are invited by this gesture to join us in a relaxed conversation. Conversation is thus a potential topic *in* dialogue *about* dialogue.

We then typically invite students to introduce themselves to the class, and they are encouraged to share anything they wish about themselves, including their reasons for being in the course. Unlike a simple introductory session, we try to engage each student in a bit of talk as they introduce themselves to initiate the dialogical format we wish to establish in the course. After a few introductions are made, we try to relate one student's comments to another, and we leave plenty of room for humor along the way. We also use this approach in workshops, including those we have organized in a number of foreign countries.

We strive to create a learning milieu marked by student comfort, and some measure of personal intimacy and reciprocal disclosure during the introductory exercise. After completing our introductions, we share with students the course format and objectives and invite their active participation in all aspects of course design. We formally present the course/workshop topics, requirements, and other such information usually found in a syllabus or workshop agenda, but we remain as informal as possible, inviting democratic participation in the conversation about these issues. Although we enter the classroom with a plan, we do not always know exactly how we will get to the desired ends, and we share all of this with the participants. Our intent in this regard, that is, our openness to learner input in designing course parameters, sometimes provokes considerable unease among students more familiar with Type One teaching/learning. Teachers and trainers are expected to be organized experts, prepared to convey their expertise to the audience before them. At this early stage in the experience, we convey a message other than what is expected - not for the sake of confusing the other participants, but to be as authentic as we can in our intent and approach to creating a dialogical collaborative and democratic learning experience. Admittedly, our intent at this stage is rarely fully understood by everyone, but it is a beginning, and a beginning that invites other participants into the experience with us. When accepted, this invitation to participate in all aspects of the learning experience is the students' ticket to a different kind of engaged classroom environment.

A Dialogical Space

We and the other classroom participants jointly construct a dialogical space, the second condition for dialogue to be facilitated, in which we try to make sense of the understandings that each of us brings to our learning experience. To achieve this objective, we ask students to write a short *learning autobiography* in which they craft their story as learners in whatever terms they choose and share that story with others in the class. We seek to mediate our traditional position of authority by participating in the learning autobiography experience. The group rapidly

acquires more material for dialogue than can be covered in the available time we have to spend on each story, but we manage to pick and choose our topics from as many of the stories as possible. In this exercise, we enter the conversation as equal participants, asking questions of others and fielding questions about our stories and questions, and the dialogically communicative and democratic learning experience is well under way.

Participants in nearly every workshop, course, seminar, conference session, and other formal learning experience that we have led enter the experience with traditional images of student and teacher roles, and these images are basically consistent with Type One and Type Two teaching/learning situations. We look for early expressions of those images and preconceptions while attempting to develop a Type Three situation. Such expressions of traditional expectations are usually part of the learner's tacit understanding and reveal a third kind of knowledge (Shotter, 1993). Expressions of this kind include learners addressing the teacher when commenting on things others say to them in class; asking questions of the teacher, but not of other students; requesting directions or instructions from the teacher, and so forth. In response to these expressions, we encourage students to turn toward one another when commenting on a topic of discussion. However, if we have adequately demonstrated the seriousness of our intent to be co-participants and to jointly explore meaning in a relaxed, conversational manner, our attempt to crack the traditional image of student and teacher will not result in embarrassment or emotional injury on the part of any student.

We encourage the dialogical participation of students through all aspects of collaborative learning to promote their political participation as citizens within a democratic society. The ability to participate fully in the conversation is critical. Silence marginalizes voices whereas dialogue opens new possibilities, invites critique, and encourages shifting perspectives. When all learners participate fully, power and control shifts from the teacher to the students, thinking expands, and social expectations begin to change. Collaborative learning based on dialogue operates on the assumption that disagreement, disclosure, and debate are healthy, necessary components of both adult education and a meaningful democratic society.

A Shared Sense of the Other

Collaborative learning that promotes democratic participation can only be understood in terms of the relationships formed among learners and creating a shared sense of each other, the third condition for dialogue to be facilitated. One can acquire significant knowledge about oneself from another person's perspective and position, and this essential identification is a reciprocal one. According to Bakhtin:

In life, we do this at every moment: we appraise ourselves from the point of view of others, we attempt to understand the transredient moments of our very consciousness and to take them into account through the other; in a word, constantly and intensely, we oversee and apprehend the reflections of our life in the plane of consciousness of other men (sic.). . . I achieve self-consciousness, I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. (as cited in Todorov, 1982, p. 94)

According to Todorov (1982), this suggests, "We can never see ourselves as a whole; the *other* is necessary to accomplish, even if temporarily, a perception of the self that the individual

can achieve only partially with respect to himself” (p. 96). So it is in dialogue. Meaning is negotiated, and each person’s meaning is interpreted in terms of the other persons’ knowledge and understanding. This communicative dialogue lies at the heart of successful democratic living.

The potential for greater personal understanding and development lies in the presence and active participation of multiple others, when multiple others are available and willing to engage in dialogue. In our classes and workshops, we are in the presence of others, each of whom brings his/her knowledge and capacity for knowing to the Type Three setting. Unfortunately, as we discussed above, most students and trainees arrive with expectations more reflective of Type One and Type Two settings. Thus, they are far more likely to view the teacher as *the other* and not a collegial learner within a shared learning experience. Their attention is directed entirely to the *front of the room* (if there is a front), not to the other learners around them. In our repertoire, we include a few techniques designed to help participants attend not only to us, but also to others in the setting in order that we might all benefit from multiple understandings and shared, community established viewpoints rather than be limited to a teacher-centered approach.

We wish to return to that dialogical space we began to construct at the outset of our encounter with other group participants. Dialogical space is enhanced when the participants acknowledge each other as they speak, listen, and respond. We make every effort to deflect a student’s gaze away from us as they speak to a topic and encourage each student to simply look in the direction of others in the room. They need not look at a particular person unless they are responding to that person, but rather to the group as a whole when they are introducing a point or responding to an idea that has been generated by the group. After all, it may be the group’s idea and not the teacher’s idea that comprises the basis for present group dialogue, and our interest is in building community.

It is often the case that a student is asked a question by another student, and he/she answers. In our experience, the person answering the question does only that, and rarely will he/she dialogue with the student who posed the initial question. We encourage our students to ask questions of those initiating the dialogue. We often do this by posing a question to the answering student such as, “If you were to ask (the questioner) a question, what would it be?” Usually, this request produces a puzzled look in the face of the student who first gathers his/her thoughts and then poses a question of his/her own to the initial questioner. We encourage this format because questioning in Type One settings is usually done by the teacher, and rarely by students, and when they do ask, students nearly always ask the teacher questions (Pollio, 1992). Reciprocal questioning, or *asking back*, is a process of posing such questions as “Why did you ask me that?” or “Would you please say more about what you were getting at in your question?” It is a request for the person to describe what they are doing in their part of the relationship, a way for one person to see the other as necessary for him/her to explore their own understandings.

In Type Two settings, especially when small groups are formed, students are more likely to ask each other questions, but not necessarily in a dialogical manner. In Type Three settings, however, it is necessary that they question each other. By asking back, students accomplish four things. First, they acknowledge the questioner’s intent by responding to the questioner’s own terms. Second, they open the door for the questioner to elaborate what he/she is thinking so that

some of his/her assumptions are more likely to be placed between the participants for their further consideration. Third, in Bakhtin's (1990) terms, the questioner is now in a position to better understand his/her own thinking as it was merely introduced in the form of the initial question. This understanding is made possible partially by the answerer's own initial response to the question and by the question that followed being asked back to the first student. Fourth, we have established the underpinnings of engaged democratic dialogue where each person expresses individual meaning with some topic and the setting in which the communication occurs. This process encourages the formation of dialogue, which is the foundation upon which a collaborative, democratic learning experience is constructed.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested that although Type One and Type Two teaching/learning play legitimate roles at various stages of student learning and in particular learning situations, the communicative dialogue fostered by Type Three teaching is most consistent with protecting the principles of democratic learning (Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2001). These principles respect learner agency and rationality, entertain alternative perspectives on presented subject matter, and encourage the perpetual critique of externally provided information. Type Three teaching satisfies these principles by providing all learners with a genuine voice, promoting collaborative dialogue and community building between classroom participants, and exposing participant viewpoints presented to sensitive, authentic discussion. For these reasons, then, we are convinced that Type Three teaching, properly understood and implemented, is the appropriate pedagogy for adult educators seeking to promote meaningful democratic participation, both in their classroom and in society, among their students.

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