1-1-2011

Wondering About Dialogic Theory and Practice

Stanton Wortham

University of Pennsylvania, stantonw@gse.upenn.edu

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/257
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Wondering About Dialogic Theory and Practice

Abstract
This commentary engages with essentially contestable questions raised by the School of the Dialogue of Cultures. It focuses on questions about how theory should relate to practice and how a “dialogic” approach can involve students in simultaneously rigorous and relevant academic discussions.

Disciplines
Education
Wondering About Dialogic Theory and Practice

ABSTRACT

My recent encounter with the School of the Dialogue of Cultures, through English translations published in the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* (vol. 37, nos. 1 and 2), has provided three “points of wonder,” or productive, essentially contestable questions: How should “theory” relate to “practice?” What is so important about “dialogue?” And how can we create a pedagogy that engages students deeply with the fruits of our intellectual traditions, while avoiding monologism and leaving open the possibility of students moving beyond those traditions? I have enjoyed being provoked by these questions, and I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on them here.

Theory and practice

The School of the Dialogue of Cultures (SDC) has involved an unusual and productive association between academic philosophers and psychologists, who develop theory and do research, and educational practitioners who teach children. In recent decades, Western academic institutions have increasingly tried to overcome their image as isolated “ivory towers” and connect theory and research to practice. The SDC might provide a model for how to traverse the “gap” between theory and practice that more and more of us want to cross.

Berlyand (2009) describes how, according to the SDC, education provides a crucial test for philosophy. Philosophy explores the origins or foundations of knowledge and other basic human capacities. Education is the central means through which individual human beings come to develop these capacities and participate fully in uniquely human practices. So a philosopher can usefully investigate the worth of his or her ideas by also exploring how one might educate young people to have the capacities that the philosopher envisions. Like Dewey (1916), in pursuing this link between philosophy and education Bibler (2009) and other SDC scholars go beyond reflection on the philosophy of education. They also help create and implement pedagogical practices inspired by their theories. They thus establish both theoretical and practical connections between theory and practice.

In order to see more clearly how the SDC can provide a model for how we might traverse the gap between theory and practice, we must make a crucial distinction between two senses of the word “practice.” First, an emphasis on “practice” is part
of the sociocentric turn away from decontextualized, individual-centered conceptions of knowledge, part of the focus on how knowledge is embedded within human practices and not separate from them. Second, “practice” refers to a set of habitual activities in which people try to change individual and social realities instead of just conceptualizing them. These two senses of practice do not necessarily go together. One could use a practice-based sense of knowledge to explore academic conceptualization that is far removed from practice in the second sense. One could also use a decontextualized, nonpractice-based sense of knowledge to explore how academic knowledge gets translated into practice in the second sense.

From the sociocentric perspective that I would defend, however, knowledge is not decontextualized, but always embedded in practices (sense 1, hereafter practice1)—there is no in-kind gap to be crossed when we apply knowledge to practice (sense 2, hereafter practice2). This does not make the theory/practice2 gap disappear, however. There is work to be done in moving representations and habitual actions across types of activities. The gap between theory and practice2 involves the use of ideas and tools that have been developed in more decontextualized practices1 to accomplish more direct changes in individual and social realities. Both sides of this “gap” involve practices1, but practices1 of different kinds. In the domain of education, for instance, theories involve representations of teaching and learning and characteristic practices1 involve building conceptual arguments and analyzing data. These practices1 typically occur in academic settings, research centers, and educational bureaucracies. Practices1 in practice2 involve teachers and students engaging with each other in order to improve the students’ facility with various ideas and skills. The theory/practice2 gap can thus be overcome through the movement of ideas, tools, and practices1 across the two domains of activity. This is what the SDC academics and practitioners have accomplished. Bibler and his colleagues have generated ideas about dialogue, history, and human nature in its contemporary form. They have also modified typical academic practices1 of questioning, conversation, and argument, such that these practices1 are particularly appropriate at this socio-historical moment. Then they have worked with educational practitioners2 to use these academic ideas and practices1 in educating children. The results, judging from the deep and reflective classroom conversations reported in the SDC texts published in the Journal of Russian and East European Psychology are remarkable. It is also important to note that the movement of ideas and practices1 has not been one-directional. SDC academics have provided useful resources that allow practitioners2 to teach more effectively, but working with practitioners2 has also given SDC academics new ideas and practices1 that have enriched their work. I know of two Western educational movements that have facilitated similar traversals between theory and practice2, in which practices1 productively move across the two domains. Examining these similar movements may provide a
Western audience with a useful perspective on SDC and its accomplishments, and perhaps it will be useful for SDC advocates as well. I will discuss one of the two movements, “interpretive discussion,” below. The other is the “practitioner inquiry movement,” in which educators do disciplined inquiry into their own practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). As opposed to the traditional unidirectional top-down model of educational theory and practice, practitioner inquiry empowers educators to gather data themselves and draw conclusions in ways that can improve their own practice. Duckworth (1986) argues that the distinction between theory and practice often misleads us into thinking that educators do not gather data to answer empirical questions. She describes how good teaching always involves formulating hypotheses and gathering information to assess those hypotheses. The goal may not be to discover general principles about the world-focusing instead on solving specific problems of practice—but the inquiry is nonetheless empirical and systematic, having a form similar to research done by academics.

The practitioner inquiry movement illustrates traversals across the theory/practice gaps that are in some ways similar to and in some ways different from those accomplished by the SDC. The practices that comprise educational practice are in fact heterogeneous. Even before they become involved in the formal practitioner-inquiry movement, educational practitioners engage in many activities that we think of more as “theory” or “research,” like developing conceptual models of experience, formulating hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data. The practitioner-inquiry movement expands practitioners’ repertoire of models and tools, allowing them to do more systematic inquiry by borrowing ideas and methods from more formal educational research (academic practices) and recontextualizing them, moving back and forth between the domains of theory and practice.

Dialogue

As Matusov (2009) points out, “dialogue” is a term that is used in many ways. Academics and practitioners in education often use the term to mean simply “conversation” or to refer to pedagogical techniques in which students converse in order to achieve cognitive insight. Both the SDC and complex Western accounts of dialogue agree that the term can refer to something crucial that goes beyond these vague or merely instrumental processes (Lensmire, 1994). It is not wrong to refer to instrumental pedagogical techniques as “dialogue,” as long as we recall that the word can also describe something deeper about human nature and the possibilities of human transformation. Both SDC and Western advocates, however, typically argue that we should reserve the term for these more fundamental processes so as not to overlook them.

Instrumental accounts of dialogue, especially educational ones, often focus on knowledge arguing that contact with others’ ideas and the need to articulate one’s
own ideas in conversation can transform individuals’ understandings. But dialogue
can also change who people are. People are not merely decontextualized cognizers
who can have their representations of the world changed through conversation. We
participate in activities that involve cognition as well as emotion, motivation, self-
and other-identification, and our dispositions and positionings in these activities
help constitute our selves (Michel and Wortham, 2009). The term “dialogue” can
be used to capture this deeper level of human activity, when our engagement with
others changes dispositions and positionings central to us.

The SDC goes beyond both of these accounts, however, arguing that dialogue
characterizes human nature in the current historical epoch. Instead of proposing a
Hegelian account in which each succeeding epoch incorporates the preceding
ones, they describe an ongoing inter-animation of the voices characteristic of
preceding and current epochs. Like Bakhtin (1935/1981), the SDC sees
contemporary humans as existing “on the boundary” between these voices,
emerging only through the contributions of others in the dialogue. This SDC
account goes beyond a focus on the dialogic constitution of self in two important
ways. First, unlike “ontological” accounts that focus on dialogue as a location for
the construction of self, the SDC points out the historical emergence of the
dialogic self and its interconnections with the types of knowledge and self that
characterized earlier epochs. Second, unlike most Anglo-American accounts, the
SDC highlights the generative potential of contradictions and oppositions. We
become who we are our selves and our practices develop in significant part
through the confrontation of contradictory voices. In Bakhtinian terms, the self
remains on the boundary and is not ever defined as an inner region in which
diversity is harmonized. Self is instead an ongoing dialogue between genuine, live
voices.

The epochs described in the SDC are themselves heterogeneous, and one wonders
what would count as a voice that might participate in the dialogue the SDC
envisions. How many schools of thought within an epoch would qualify? How
many institutionally located positions and practices could serve as a voice in the
dialogue? Would the distinctive perspectives and practices of one corporation
qualify, for instance (Michel and Wortham, 2009)?

**Dialogic pedagogy**

Armed with this rich conception of dialogue, the SDC has implemented
pedagogical practices that help develop a “person of culture,” a person whose
inner speech and habitual practice involves dialogue in their sense. The SDC
pedagogical practices are both impressive and appealing. Too often, educators
choose between “teacher-centered” and “student-centered” approaches, between
demanding that students follow the curriculum and challenge their habitual
understandings, on the one hand, and allowing students to explore ill-defined
domains and develop their own ideas, on the other. As Dewey (1916) also
believed was possible, the SDC manages to do both at once. They push students to reason more deeply, demanding arguments and forcing students to confront the resistance in the object of understanding, to discover how their views of the object do not suffice. But they do not do this by challenging students to learn what teachers already know and solve problems that teachers have mastered. Instead, they push students to explore essentially contestable questions. Their curriculum starts with such “knots of wonder,” but the curriculum is emergent in many respects as students develop their perspectives and confront other possible positions in the ongoing dialogue.

This pedagogy forces students to maintain openness. As the SDC argues, “ignorance” is important. Students and teachers should become comfortable with contradictions, with doubt and uncertainty. A central goal is to create students who are estranged from ordinary habitual understanding, who are disposed to wondering, interrogating, and engaging in dialogue. In order to help students develop these dispositions, SDC educators use multiple dimensions of difference to confront students with other voices: the voices of other epochs, by learning how Ancient Greeks, Medieval Europeans, or Enlightenment philosophers would have conceived of the object; the voices of specific intellectuals who take opposing positions, with teachers sometimes playing the role of these intellectuals in the classroom; the voices of contemporaries from different classrooms, bringing groups of students together to capture how older and younger students would conceptualize the text or object; the voices of theorists who adopt meta-level positions, like those who debate authorial intent, textual structure, and social context as determining features of a text’s meaning (Osetinsky, 2009).

I find this pedagogical approach quite appealing, and I am impressed by the rich intellectual discussions it generates with young children. I am struck by similarities between the SDC approach and what has been called “great books discussion” (Great Books Foundation, 2007), “Paideia seminar” (Adler, 1982), or “interpretive discussion” (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991). As Haroutunian-Gordon describes it, such discussions start with a point of doubt formulated as a question that has multiple plausible answers. Students offer answers and arguments to support them, with the group considering the relative strengths and weaknesses of different positions and individuals amending their views through contact with others’ views. Teachers must listen carefully to run such a discussion, as their role is to draw out students’ answers and introduce alternative views. Discussion focuses on the text or object being discussed, with students required to cite the text and extraneous political or evaluative considerations ruled out. Such “interpretive discussions” appear to have much in common with SDC pedagogy, although there are some potentially productive differences of emphasis.

In each of these three areas—traversing the gap between theory and practice, reflecting on the nature of dialogue, and developing dialogic pedagogy. I have found SDC a useful and provocative voice to think with. I hope that my reflections
facilitate further productive engagement.

References


