Dynamic Classroom Dialogue: Can Students Be Engaged Beyond Discussion?

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Dialogue used as an instructional method increases student engagement. Dialogue moves beyond discussion, varying greatly in both structure and approach. This paper describes a technique that anchors classroom learning in dialogue referred as Dialogue Lead. A conceptual framework is offered supporting each step of Dialogue Lead. Challenges and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: student engagement, dialogue, small group

INTRODUCTION

Can students by engaged beyond discussion? Simply put, student deep engagement only occurs if the professor structures appropriately and then gets out of the way. This paper describes a technique that accomplishes this paradoxical dynamic. First, a literature review will provide a basis of educating through dialogue. Second, four specific features of education through dialogue are discussed creating a conceptual framework. Last, an action plan for implementing dialogue, *Dialogue Lead,* is presented.

Education rich in dialogue places the autonomy of the learner at its center, requiring the professor become a humble listener (Vella, 2002). Dialogue first conceptualized through works of Martin Buber's *I and Thou* describing listener openness and relational dignity, David Bohm's *On Dialogue* considering scientific collaboration in physics, and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* detailing dialogue strategy (Haase, 2019; Vella, 2002; Vella, 2008; Yankelovich, 1999).

Dialogue is unique to all other forms of communication (Yankelovich, 1999). Dialogue roots in the Greek words dia meaning through and logos meaning word (Howe and Abedin, 2013; Yankelovich, 1999). Dialogue is not synonymous with communication, but rather a sub-type of communication (Howe and Abedin, 2013). Dialogue defines as a process of seeking mutual understanding by internalizing the views of others (Yankelovich, 1999). Most applicable to this paper is dialogue's distinction from discussion.

Emotional consideration of others beyond the exchange of ideals summarizes the difference between dialogue and discussion. More specifically, dialogue varies from discussion in three ways: participants of equal rank, empathic listening, and honest expression of assumptions (Yankelovich, 1999). Empathy is "the ability to think someone else's thoughts and feel someone else's feelings" (Yankelovich, 1999, p. 43). By definition, empathy requires depth of participation as thinking someone else's feelings goes far beyond absorption of information. Hopkins and Domingue (2015) term this concept of emotionally identifying with others as perspective talking. The third component, honest expression of assumptions, is perhaps the most important of dialogue's fundamentals. Assumptions typically help to define our sense of

self; other's questioning of those assumptions breed deep emotions (Yankelovich, 1999). Without deep emotion or deep truths, the feelings of empathy are tough to invoke.

All three features of equal rank, empathy, and exposure of assumptions must be present for communication to reach dialogue level (Yankelovich, 1999). Choi (2014, p.726) labels similar concepts of open-mindedness, compassion, and egalitarian as "authentic dialogue". Dialogue is applicable to all settings ranging from education to workplace conflict to negotiation of nuclear arms (Yankelovich, 1999). While dialogue abstains from an end goal, it is a vital precursor to decision-making and a challenging fundamental skill that rarely gets put into practice (Yankelovich, 1999).

EDUCATING WITH DIALOGUE

Classroom dialogue proves crucial for effective pedagogy across four decades of research (Howe and Abedin, 2013). Positive outcomes of dialogue pedagogy present in the literature for levels ranging from elementary to higher education to industry training (Howe and Abedin, 2013; Vella, 1995; Vella, 2008). Cazden (2001), as cited by van der Veen and van Oers (2017), refers to dialogue as the learning language.

As mentioned, dialogue exchange happens between parties of equals, void of any power dynamic. Therefore, educating with dialogue seeks to eliminate the power structure of professor to student. Essentially the professor becomes an additional learner in the classroom who first and foremost is a listener (Haase, 2019). Even the curricular content is secondary to relational respect between learners of which the professor is one (Haase, 2019). This is a bold concept. Students must view the professor as another learner that can and should be challenged (Vella, 2002). It is important to note that education with dialogue does not remove dissemination of content (Haase, 2019). Rather, dialogue transforms content into active learning (Haase, 2019). Most importantly, content transfers through questions rather than statements and those questions involve doubt in answer (Vella, 2002; Vella, 2008).

The implementation of dialogue inside a classroom takes practice, finesse, and a deep understanding of opposing relationships. Dialogue, in and of itself, characterizes as "the entanglement of both reason and emotion" (Choi, 2014, p. 728). The professor's role in executing education through dialogue requires an abundance of thought and time preparing a rigorous organizational structure. The professor's role then also requires letting students dictate all decisions and direction during actual practice beyond the structure. In other words, equal parts rigid and flexible distinguish dynamic dialogue.

DIALOGUE LEAD IMPLEMENTATION

For practitioners, "the dialogue approach is highly structured to invite spontaneity" (Vella, 2002, p. 75). More specifically, the learning process is highly structured, the dialogue itself is highly spontaneous (Vella, 2008). Again, dialogue is not discussion or conversation. Rather, dialogue is an engaging activity for learning (Haase, 2019).

The learning process includes such things as title, task, and timing; these are all planned by the professor with no ambiguity (Vella, 2008). This paper details a specific implementation of a dialogue learning process called *Dialogue Lead* hoping to contribute to the conversation of dialogue-based pedagogy. While previous works provided inspiration, *Dialogue Lead* is unique from previous techniques identified in that it does not use dialogue to accomplish a task, but rather dialogue is the task. *Dialogue Lead* spans a full semester anchoring the classroom time. Summarized briefly, *Dialogue Lead* positions each student to be the leader of their small group dialogue once in the semester. The leader creates open questions to guide the dialogue based on the professor supplied content.

Yankelovich (1999) states a need for dialogue due to less unquestioned authority in the workplace. Accordingly, *Dialogue Lead* was first designed for a Sociology of Work course. Engagement, small groups, respect, and open questions are four of the many principles behind education through dialogue (Vella, 2002). *Dialogue Lead* designed around these four pillars. These pillars complete the *Dialogue Lead* conceptual model (See Figure 1).

Small Groups

Dialogue requires an emotional safety that allows questioning and disagreement (Haase, 2019). Logistics are important when forming an emotionally safe environment. The first day of class proves crucial during which small groups are formed and seating arranged. Four decades of research show positive effects of the small group method as small groups enhance individual learning (Vella, 2008; Webb, 2009).

Following the lead of Webb (2009), small groups are formed by random assignment and prepared through a one-day training. Previous studies show inconsistency in improving group functioning through manipulation of individual membership (Webb, 2009). In addition, it may not be possible to design groups according to individual traits (Vella, 2008). Similarly, research demonstrates characteristics of individual group members do not predict team effectiveness (Duhigg, 2016). Rather, the most effective teams establish psychological safety and a culture of equal talk time (Duhigg, 2016). Therefore, professor's efforts are best spent promoting team effectiveness rather than controlling membership (Webb, 2009).

The ideal number of students per group is unknown. Vella (1995) reports an ideal number of six to twelve while Bohm (1996) suggests groups of more than twelve. *Dialogue Lead* uses groups of eight for both intimacy and diversity. On a practical note, eight tends to be a perfect number for possible absences. In addition, eight works in a 16-week semester for leader rotation. Groups are assigned on day one and remain intact throughout the entire semester.

Preparing students to work in small groups ranges from a statement of expectations to elaborate training (Webb, 2009). *Dialogue Lead* utilizes a one-day introduction of concept and expectations as ground rules (See Figure 2). The ground rules aid in successful implementation of engagement, respect, and open questions.

Engagement

Student engagement, gauged by attentiveness, is best accomplished by involving students in the learning experience (Collaco, 2017). Dialogue requires student participation and therefore automatically involves students in their own learning. In addition, dialogue incorporates previous experiences (Liberali, 2017). Learning through synthesis of previous experiences is a key component of engaged learning (Liberali, 2017).

Student engagement reaches better depth in student-student interaction as opposed to teacher-student (Howe and Abedin, 2013). Unfortunately, most classrooms are still dominated teacher-led discourse (van der Veen and van Oers, 2017). Small group student-led dialogue rectifies teacher dominated discourse by an abundance of student to student interaction, magnifying the involved learning experience.

Vella (1995) illustrates the engagement power of dialogue by students fearlessly asking tough questions to the point of interruption. In other words, the students are "so deeply engaged in learning they will not pay attention to the teacher" (Vella, 2008, p. 106). Students retain 80% of self-discovered knowledge compared to less than 50% of knowledge seen or heard (Knowles, 1980 as cited by Vella, 1995). Logically, student engagement then positively impacts overall student learning outcomes (Collaco, 2017).

Respect

Respect grows through a system of both challenge and encouragement (Haase, 2019). Voicing alternate perspectives provides challenge while listening with empathy creates encouragement. Group interaction can be organized in a multitude of ways. *Dialogue Lead* aligns most closely with structured controversy as a means of encouraging alternate perspectives. Structured controversy develops the skill of effectively dialoging through conflict (Hopkins and Domingue, 2015; van der Veen and van Oers, 2017; Webb, 2009). Verbalized opposing views allow a forum to compare, contrast, and synthesize multiple points of view (Webb, 2009). Intergroup dialogue particularly shows positive learning outcomes of managing conflict especially with respect to social identities and social oppression (Hopkins and Domingue, 2015).

The comfort to share honest opinions is the heart of successful functioning within controversial dialogue (Duhigg, 2016; Theobald et. al, 2017). This comfort level is unattainable without all-encompassing respect. Membership variables (i.e. gender, race, academic aptitude) possibly create status relationships, high status versus low status (Webb, 2009). Dialogue dominated by sub-groups of students distracts from the needed equitable nature (Howe and Abedin, 2013). Van der Veen et al. (2017) also point to dialogue's ability to productively embrace diversity. Professors must monitor that respect is upheld to mitigate possible status relationships. This requires constant reminders of the essence of dialogue, namely equitable and empathetic. Raising student awareness of strength in diversity and publicly identifying contributions are two additional strategies to mitigate status relationships (Cohen and Lotan, 1995; Webb, 2009).

Listening with empathy distinguishes dialogue from discussion and/or debate (Yankelovich, 1999). Listening with empathy aids in suspending judgement. Since value systems permeate dialogue (Liberali, 2017), sense of self may be threatened. Therefore, small group dialogue involves vulnerability. Suspension of judgement increases the willingness of participants to be vulnerable while also helping the listener create meaning beyond generalizations, greatly enhancing the individual learning process (Hopkins and Domingue, 2015).

The ground rules provided for *Dialogue Lead* (See Figure 2) include measures to foster respect: civil at all times, dialogue not debate, everyone is right mentality, welcoming of alternative perspectives for learning, no names, no eye rolls, no sarcasm, no noises. Generally, ground rules also aid in inclusiveness (van der Veen and van Oers, 2017).

Open Questions

Open questions provide the best means of igniting structured controversy (Vella, 1995; Webb 2009; Yankelovich, 1999). In dialogue, open questions do not have a right answer (Vella, 1995). As mentioned, educating through dialogue requires professors removing themselves from the process. Within *Dialogue Lead*, small groups are student-led as each student is assigned one week to be the leader. Therefore, students "share authority" of classroom functioning and direction (van der Veen and van Oers, 2017, p.3). Leaders prepare open questions prior to class. Assigning a leader role also improves small group functioning with regards to engagement and respect (Cohen and Lotan, 2014; Theobald et. al, 2017). Student role as leader puts them at the center of the dialogue, which also improves inclusiveness (van der Veen and van Oers, 2017).

Student-led topic exploration ensues. The over-reaching topic at hand is pre-determined by the title of that week's module with all material previewed online prior to class. Even guided by the same material, each and every group explores different facets of the topic as questions differ based on leader preparation. Logically, responses to the open questions steer the dialogue as well. The professor becomes a bystander positioning students for effectively dialoguing through controversy.

The student leader dictates the timing moving through open question as he or she sees fit. Open questions continue the dialogue; answers stay incomplete (Liberali, 2017). Labeled exploratory talk by Barnes and Todd (1977), professors tend to struggle with relinquishing this amount of control over time spent on curriculum (Emanuelsson & Sahlstrom, 2008; Howe and Abedin, 2013). However, "when such dialogue involves exchange of views, all students typically benefit" (Howe and Abedin, 2013, p. 343). In addition, doubt is a fundamental piece to learning (Vella, 2008). Varied student experiences shared through dialogue inspire doubt creating deeper learning.

DIALOGUE LEAD

The four main pillars provide a conceptual model (See Figure 1) that breeds the psychological safety necessary for effective dialogue. The *Dialogue Lead* technique has been used in various settings (i.e. class size, content, timeline). Each setting may dictate variation of method or alternative "logistics". However, two main premises based on this framework are crucial to *Dialogue Lead* success: student-led dialogue in small groups and non-evaluative feedback.

FIGURE 1
DIALOGUE LEAD CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Small Groups Randomly assigned Eight students per group Groups stay intact throughout the semester	Respect Ground rules presented and practiced Dialogue itself is not evaluated Strength in diversity of opinion emphasized
Engagement Students lead the dialogue Each student has a turn at being the leader Ground rules presented and practiced	Open Questions Content available online Content reviewed by all prior to class Dialogue Leader prepares 5-7 open questions

Dialogue Lead begins with random assignment of groups of eight. Group assignments post online and display on screen day one. Seating enhances group psychological safety. While professors should give a general area for each group to congregate, students ultimately design their seating on the first day. Ideally, student groups sit circular with an unobtrusive table in the middle. Hopefully, seating provides distance enough between groups to limit distraction. With these suggestions, during the first 5-10 minutes, groups move furniture to create their ideal setting. Logically, seating success varies depending on room specifications. Students are encouraged to bring a cup of coffee, snacks and the like to further enhance the comfort level. Groups stay intact with the same seating throughout the semester also furthering comfort and emotional safety.

Next, the professor gives a mini-lecture explaining the concept of dialogue and student-led dialogue. For purposes of this paper, mini lecture defines as an absolute maximum of ten minutes professor "talk". A list of weekly course topics displays on screen. Students, in coordination with their group, choose one topic in which they will be the leader. The professor instructs each group to share with each other: name, memorable personal fun fact, and preferred lead topic. This sends groups on their first dialogue experience.

As discussed above, dialogue provides an avenue for structured controversy. As Vella (1995, p. 45) states, "if you don't dispute it, you don't learn it". To establish respect necessary for productive controversial engagement, the professor issues a list of ground rules (See Figure 2) accompanied by a mini lecture. Ultimately, groups strive for respectful controversy and depth of learning through diversity of opinion. Emphasis is best placed on cell phone/ laptop use. Dialogue defines as empathetically feeling the perspective of another (Yankelovich, 1999). An electronic device removes the affective human connection creating discussion rather than dialogue. Therefore, all electronics need to be removed. In addition, number three, everyone is right mentality, also requires special emphasis. Dialogue removes judgment. Everyone is right mentality guides students towards successful suspension of judgement.

FIGURE 2
DIALOGUE LEAD GROUND RULES

1) Civil at all times
2) Dialogue <u>not</u> discussion or debate
3) Everyone is right mentality
4) Welcome alternate perspectives
5) NO NAMES
6) NO eye rolls, sarcasm, noises, etc.
7) Breaks okay
8) Confidence to participate
9) CELL PHONE/LAPTOP policy
10) Equal talk time among group members

Day two begins with an activity to bolster dialogue within groups. The activity named *Social versus Individual* lists several community topics (See Figure 3). Groups are tasked to discuss each topic in turn and make a decision whether it is a social issue or an individual issue, a choice must be made. Please note a "right" answer does not exist. No additional professor information is given as dialogue requires a structure followed by spontaneity. Each group now spontaneously takes the dialogue in student-led direction; the professor removes themselves completely during this time. A verbal or written reflection exercise following this initial small group dialogue is advised.

FIGURE 3
SOCIAL VERSUS INDIVIDUAL

Topic (mark I or S for each)	Individual	Social
Obesity		
Hunger/Poverty		
Mass Shootings		
Drug/Alcohol Abuse		
Unemployment		
Health Care		
Communicable Diseases		
Education		
Discrimination		
Mental Health		
Gender Identity		
Prostitution		
Suicide		
Food and Drug Safety		
Child Safety		
Police Abuse and Corruption		

On day three, the professor demonstrates how to be the dialogue leader for weekly topics. The professor becomes the dialogue leader showing each piece in front of the class. Prior to class, the leader is

tasked to prepare: 1) a three-minute overall material summary (note: material is located online), 2) a five minute summary of one facet of the material that was most impactful to them personally giving the answer to "why" it was most impactful and 3) five to seven open questions to guide the group dialogue. A deliverable gauging the leader's preparation is suggested. Deliverables are outside the scope of this paper. Briefly, professors may require dialogue leaders to submit the prepared questions, a report, reflection, or handout for group members.

Day four begins the normal routine. Each group has one student assigned to that week's lead. The leader will enter the class prepared. The leader then immediately begins their prepared summaries and then leads the dialogue through open questions. The professor stops the dialogue after a period of 30-45 minutes. Class proceeds from there in accordance with subject matter and professor preference. A personal preference includes preceding in the following order: *Dialogue Lead,* professor led recap of small group time, a mini lecture, followed by a group application exercise.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of any pedagogy is to enhance student learning. Teaching can very well get in the way of learning (Vella, 2008). Dialogue raises common concerns of the professor as content expert and student led dialogue removing or stifling professor expertise (Haase, 2019). Haase (2019, p. 361) explains such concerns are "more rooted in fear and control than discernment and wisdom". As mentioned, dialogue only occurs through equal parties. Often those in authority deceiving believe they treat lower ranking parties as equals (Yankelovich, 1999). The professor, as the authority in the classroom, inspires dialogue only when stepping aside. *Dialogue Lead* allows this to happen. The professor establishes the task at hand, but then involves only as a listener (Vella, 1995). As an aside, *Dialogue Lead* improves tremendously when the professor models dialogue in most aspects of course communication.

Another common concern surrounds grading the *Dialogue Lead.* Feedback differs greatly from evaluation. Successful classroom dialogue requires non-evaluative feedback (Howe and Abedin, 2013). Feedback, separated from evaluation, rests in describing rather than judging (Vella, 1995). Within *Dialogue Lead,* non-evaluative feedback flows verbally from teacher to student, student to teacher, and student to student on a daily basis. Feedback, by definition, is a suggestion with the recipient in control of what to accept or reject (Vella, 1995). Obviously, modern education requires evaluation in the form of assigning a grade. Dialogue removes power dynamics and suspends judgement (Yankelovich, 1999). A professor applying a grade automatically introduces differential of power and judgement. Even though education carries a need for evaluation; evaluation is not applicable to every aspect of a course. Therefore, *Dialogue Lead* could be a non-graded course activity. Alternatively, a deliverable of leader preparation (i.e. written product of the summary, open questions, or process) could be required and graded. Most importantly, the dialogue itself does not get evaluated. If evaluated, the activity has become discussion rather than dialogue.

While a variety of activities, assessments, and pedagogical methods are present my courses, antidotal evidence alludes to *Dialogue Lead* impacting students the most. Future direction naturally includes empirical research. Empirical research methods may involve a pre-posttest design for both learning outcomes and student perceptions. Another exciting future direction could be guided by Vella's (2008) principle of transfer surveying post-graduates to gauge transference of dialogue skills to the workplace.

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