

**N**ot far from my classroom there is a sculpture of a teacher and two students engaged in dialogue. What distinguishes this exchange as dialogue is that the forward lean of one student's body shows that she is actively involved in listening. The teacher leans toward the student and opens her mouth as though she is caught in a moment of powerful exchange, but the girl's body is poised as if she might be the next to speak. A boy leans back from the two speakers, but it is clear that he is not disinterested. He is thinking about what has already been said. His body language reflects interest and personal involvement in the discussion.



*The Mentor*, by Jane De Decker, 2003. University of Mississippi Rose Garden, donated by the Ole Miss Women's Council for Philanthropy. Photographs by the author.

Curiously, this sculpture—meant to epitomize learning—bears little resemblance to what happens in schools. There are no desks lined up in rows. The atmosphere is relaxed and both teacher and students are involved in a dynamic conversation as opposed to more usual methods of formal instruction.

### Dialogue in the Classroom

Current recommendations for teaching increasingly call for meaning-making and discussion (Walker, 1996). However, new teachers are seldom given instruction or guidelines for creating an environment that nurtures or encourages dialogue or discussion that is not teacher-centered (Milbrandt, 2002). Most art teachers are familiar with questioning strategies used to involve students with looking at art (Anderson, 1993; Barrett, 1997; Feldman, 1996; Yenawine, 1998). But while art teachers are concerned with questioning and getting students to think for themselves, studies show that despite the fact that many teachers

believe students should have opportunities for open-ended discussion, in practice, this is observed by researchers less often than teacher self-reports would indicate (Milbrandt, 2002).

Historically, teachers consistently dominate the talk that takes place in the classroom (Amidon, 1971; Flanders, 1970; Cazden, 1988). Two thirds of this talk is by the teacher. Two thirds of that talk is direct instruction, and two thirds of the direct instruction takes the form of questions that require a predictable response (Flanders, 1970). Teacher-talk generally takes the form of Initiation, Response, and Evaluation (IRE) or what others call IRF (Initiation Response Feedback). In either case, the teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher either evaluates, gives feedback, or extends the answer by directing attention to related topics or opinions (Cazden, 1988).

Very little of what occurs in a classroom can be identified as dialogue.

# Becoming Dialogical: Creating a Place for Dialogue in Art Education

BY MARY JANE ZANDER

Reasons include the fact that most teachers are untrained in its use (Milbrandt, 2002) and the culture of teaching and schools is not always conducive to unrestricted forms of verbal expression (Burbules, 1993). Dialogue is not just a matter of asking the right questions or understanding a teaching strategy but a matter of creating an environment in which the teaching relationship becomes one of open-ended discovery.

In 20 years of observing teachers and student teachers, I can only attest to having seen a handful of classrooms in which teachers and students maintained a dialogical relationship for any length of time. Most of these were in secondary or advanced classes. Even then, the relationships that developed in the classroom were not universal. Initially, some students were not happy because the approach was different; others thrived. They reported, "I've learned more in the class than any other" "He listens! No one

ever listens to us." "He is the best teacher I have ever had" (Zander, 1998).

Dialogue has been described as the epic experience in teaching—the dialogic relationship—an experience that transcends teaching and becomes inspirational, (Burbules, 1993; Greene, 1988; van Manen, 1991) and yet its relative absence in schools is understandable. Dialogue is a process and a relationship (Burbules, 1993) that requires time, commitment and mutual respect. Even though respectful relationships often exist in schools, more often there is not enough time, opportunity, or willingness on the part of both teacher and students to develop the open and trusting exchange that characterizes true dialogue.

So, what determines a dialogical relationship? How is it established and, more importantly, how might it benefit the teaching of art education? There are many who question whether a dialogical relationship is possible in schools (Burbules, 1993). Even advocates admit

that creating a place for dialogue and maintaining the objectivity that it requires is difficult (Gallas, 1994). The dialogical relationship involves not just teaching strategies but a personal philosophy towards teaching that values relationships and the commitment of time to developing an environment in which these relationships can be established. Given the time constrictions in the normal classroom, this is very difficult, even though so many of the characteristics of dialogue are the very reasons given for why we teach art. For example, most art teachers would say that we want students to develop creatively, with deeper understandings while becoming competent in problem solving as they open their minds to new ideas and different points of view. All of these characteristics, while not unique to dialogue, are more likely to be attained through teaching strategies that require active student involvement rather than through more didactic forms of teaching.

## What Determines a Dialogical Relationship?

One way to describe a dialogical relationship is to begin by describing what it is not. Tannen (1998) says that America is an "argument culture" in that most of our public forums present issues as having sides. For example, when a complicated issue is reported in either the published or electronic media, it is usually presented in terms of one or more opposing points of view. The problem is that a two-sided presentation overly simplifies issues, creates dissension, and implies that there may be a right or wrong point of view (Tannen, 1998). Participants tend to become polarized or silenced as complex issues are reduced to short sound bites or ignored altogether. The assumption is that one side is right and the other wrong. An in-depth understanding of issues is essentially reduced to sides (Tannen, 1998).

Neither is dialogue discussion. A common scenario has the teacher asking questions to lead students to a particular point of view. As opposed to dialogue, teacher-led discussion can be one-sided and thus limit students to contributions, as opposed to encouraging partnerships through discovery.

While most art teachers say that they are happy to have students discuss important issues, they also complain that a lack of time, parental concerns, competing curriculum, and a lack of personal knowledge inhibit their ability to do so (Milbrandt, 2002). The rarity of dialogue in the classroom is also due to the fact that the role of teacher and student are unequal (Burbules, 1993). Most teachers find that maintaining the kind of impartiality that is required for dialogue is not only unusual teacher behavior, but is also uncomfortable and involves serious decisions about when to participate and when to step back (Gallas, 1994, 1995).

(London)...also says that teachers should consciously make a shift in how they approach language. They should learn to speak from their heart and with a non-judgmental point of view. Teachers should also aim to share ideas rather than impose their own thinking on students.

Burbules (1993) writes that dialogue is a non-teleological and open-ended process in which the teacher acts as participant and facilitator of new and different understandings, rather than as a guide or leader. Tannen (1998) describes dialogue as a "conversational involvement" that is a shared acknowledgment of respect, concern, trust, affection, appreciation, and hope. For teachers, it requires not only a personal commitment to the highest order of personal relationships but also the establishment of a delicate balance between caring and the authority inherent in being a teacher.

Some educators question whether teachers can truly manage a dialogical relationship with students because of that inequality. However, Burbules (1993) insists "making such personal qualities as tolerance, patience, or the willingness and ability to listen into primary educational objectives has enormous implications for the organization of the classroom, our assumptions about curriculum and instruction, and the relation between school and home" (pp. 45-46). Deference is not a common trait in most teachers, but perhaps it should become more familiar.

Art is one discipline in which teachers might well recognize the benefits of a dialogical relationship. Artist, art therapist, and art educator, Peter London (1989) says that we should engage students in, "A dialogue that creates deeper levels of understanding, empathy and mutual enlightenment," (p. 62) and warns that when teachers are critical as opposed to helping students reflect, they run the risk of inflicting emotional damage (London, p. 63). One only needs to talk to a few people who define themselves as non-artists to recognize the serious consequences of judgmental review.

London says that in lieu of criticism, A more forceful exchange between artist and viewer is the clarifying inquiry. In this mode the viewer takes a more active role in guiding the exchange. Not judging or opining but mirroring, testing, challenging the artist's assertions in order to accelerate the process of acquainting the conscious mind with the wisdom of the unconscious material as expressed in images. (London, p. 69)

This is the same impartiality that characterizes dialogue. Another viewer, who can offer a different perspective or point of view, is beneficial to the art maker. However, artists put themselves at great risk by revealing their true feelings, and great care must be taken to protect them in their openness. London suggests that teachers "bear witness" (p. 85) for their students rather than offer criticism. He also says that teachers should consciously make a shift in how they approach language. They should learn to speak from their heart and with a non-judgmental point of view. Teachers should also aim to share ideas rather than impose their own thinking on students.

This shift in language from winning to sharing—perhaps done at first mechanically or, we might say in this instance, ritualistically—eventually sets in motion a corresponding shift in consciousness. This in turn invites deeper, more authentic expression. And that is what we desire. (London, p. 85)



In a typical classroom, the teacher initiates a question, students respond, and the teacher evaluates or gives feedback to their answers.

Many topics relevant to student life are controversial, and teachers do not always know how to address them. As teachers, we should responsibly question whether we have the knowledge, training, or even the right to influence students in these issues or beliefs. However, if we conceptualize teaching as needing to meet not only the academic but also the societal and everyday needs of students, then there exists a certain obligation to address issues and themes relevant to students' lives.

One art teacher who created opportunities for dialogue in his classroom told me, "I've tried to teach others how to teach as I do, but I can't because they don't really believe that the purpose of education is to teach people to become more human" (Zander, 1998). In his opinion, most teachers view education as something to be imposed on students. He felt that a better approach would be to encourage students to develop their own opinions and understandings through research and problem solving. Perhaps the larger question is: How can we presume to teach students if we do not hold them responsible for becoming active participants in constructing their

own understandings, and how can we be responsive teachers if we are not willing to become learners ourselves? This question doesn't suggest that teachers abdicate control, but that they create an environment in which there are rules, the allocation of time, and the social structures to support dialogue.

### **Establishing Space for Dialogue in the Classroom**

Communication built on care, trust, openness and egalitarianism does not come without the investment of time. It also does not come without risk or negotiation. Wittgenstein (1958) and Gadamer (1982) describe the dynamics of dialogue as a game; one that does not have winning or losing as an end, but a variety of moves which are guided by what went before and what comes after. Abstractions like trust, respect, and openness come not from a single act but from a series of actions that are consistent in their message or intent. An environment that supports the possibility for dialogue comes from a variety of factors which consistently work together to communicate a message of safety and trustworthiness.

Driven by assessment, learning goals, and the requirement to teach a certain amount of information within a specific time period, the standard curriculum leaves little room for creating dialogical relationships. Of what value is any curriculum that emphasizes the subject matter but not the person doing the learning? The challenge becomes: How does one create an environment in the art classroom that is friendly to student opinion and welcomes self-expression while maintaining educational purpose? Too often a lack of structure feeds the "do your own thing" or "art can be anything" mentality because teachers don't know how to set up experiences which are open-ended or classrooms that are open to student opinion. Teachers are often afraid that if they encourage discussion, students will get out of control or will use this as an opportunity to ramble meaninglessly (Milbrandt, 2002; Burbules, 1993).

In any conversation, participants should be taught to use "I" messages when talking about their beliefs and to avoid generalizations such as "everybody knows" or "you ought to."

A very real danger of dialogue is that students will use it as an opportunity to waste time and get off-track. It is also possible that wrong answers may reinforce incorrect thinking and error. However, the purpose of dialogue is not to come to conclusions but to get to know different points of view and to examine possibilities. Classroom teacher and researcher Karen Gallas sets aside a specific amount of time in her kindergarten and first grade classrooms that she calls "science time." During "science time," students speculate on ideas about science and come up with hypothetical answers for scientific problems. Gallas finds that this is particularly successful prior to beginning a unit of study. It enables her to listen to students' understandings and design learning experiences that require students to examine inaccurate perceptions and build on previous understandings. In this classroom, dialogue helps to clarify what has already been learned and what still needs to be addressed. Rather than have a number of isolated experiences that "cover" the information to be taught, dialogue helps students to focus on important questions and think about what they already know. It also helps teachers understand the logic of children rather than automatically making the assumption that students are "blank slates" waiting for advice (Gallas, 1994).

Questions worthy of dialogue are those that relate to student experiences and personal knowledge. In dialogue, the role of the teacher is to provide students with the kinds of questions that deserve

inquiry, yet are not so hard as to be incomprehensible to the student, while being meaningful and open-ended enough to merit rich discussion. London (1989) explains that the kind of questioning that is likely to invite the depth of thinking that can become dialogical is the "creative encounter" (p. 87). Qualities of "creative encounters" include that they should be challenging, engaging, inward-seeking, and involve a variety of solutions. They should also be universal to human experience, pertinent to the problem solver, and invite curiosity and originality (London, 1989).

Gallas (1995) says that in teaching science, the kinds of questions that engage her kindergartners, are those that children naturally wonder about. "How do people age? How does the brain work? How is blood made?" (p. 70). The kinds of questions that children wonder about in art are likely to be very different. They might be questions like, "How do artists get ideas? What do artists do? Why did they use a particular style or material?" Terry Barrett (1997) encourages dialogue in the art classroom by asking children open-ended questions such as, "What do you see?" "What is the artwork about?" and, "How do you know?" Other questions might include, "How does art express meaning?" or "How does art relate to my own interests?"

Teachers can develop guidelines so that all students feel comfortable in making thoughtful contributions and having various opinions. Children can also be taught to listen to one another. Some students are reluctant to participate and may need more time and encouragement while others may dominate the conversation. In either case, each student needs to learn how to manage his or her own participation and behavior as a basic life skill.

Rules or guidelines that can be taught are those that guide student responses to opinions different from their own. These rules have to do with demonstrating courtesy and mutual respect rather than defending one's own opinion. They include behaviors that respect everyone's right to expression, and the avoidance of talk that is derogatory or

defamatory. This includes talk that implies the correctness or superiority of one point of view over another. Even though participants might feel passionate about an issue, it is important that they learn when to back away from the discussion, particularly if they are beginning to feel out of control.

It helps if students are involved in the making of these rules. By modeling how to negotiate different ideas, a teacher shows students how to respect differences of opinion and perspective. In any conversation, participants should be taught to use "I" messages when talking about their beliefs and to avoid generalizations such as "everybody knows" or "you ought to." It should be made clear that dialogue is not about winning or making a point but about listening, sharing, and exploring different points of view. Students should learn that the purpose of dialogue is to gain new understandings and to practice respectful listening rather than argument.

Skills that students need to develop in this process include clarifying ideas that have already been presented, and practicing listening skills that require analysis and understanding of what has already been said. Students also need practice to develop their own confidence and skills in doing research so that they can expand and extend the discussion through related ideas and issues. As teachers prepare students to live in a world with increasing diversity, we cannot afford to simply "cover" the subject matter. We should also be teaching students to communicate in ways that require them to listen to one another and engage in meaningful dialogue, without resorting to argument or debate. This is a tall order for teachers of art, and I am not sure that it is possible in every classroom, but it most certainly should not be entirely absent.

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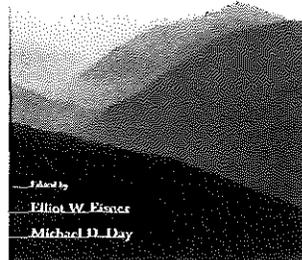
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