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## COMMENTARY

### **Dialogic Encounters as Art Education**

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**A**lthough educators believe in the importance of dialogue and dialogic encounters, and often propose to engage their students in "discussion," dialogic communication is rarely used in the classroom (Alexander, 2005). Rather than through relational and substantive conversation, most educational dialogue in public schools is limited to telling, asking one-way questions, and seeking "correct" answers (Pinar, 2004).

Educational contexts and methods that restrict and regulate dialogue in the classroom—such as federal education legislation that rewards and penalizes schools based on standardized test scores as sole indicators of student learning—have seriously curtailed the possibilities for a dialogic education. In fact, the mandates that The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has imposed have had a devastating impact on teachers, students, and education as a whole (Apple, 2007; Chapman, 2007; Giroux, 2009; Fehr, 2008; Hursh, 2008; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). Areas of specific concern have been the decrease of instructional time and resources in arts education due to schools' emphasis on improving students' skills to meet NCLB's requirements (Sabol, 2009). The enforcement of NCLB has prevented pedagogies of democratization that foster dialogic encounters.

Henry Giroux (2009), David W. Hursh (2008), and Laura Chapman (2007), propose that educational mandates that rely on rigid standards, assessments, and accountability devalue and de-skill the teacher's role as educator. The function of the teacher is reduced to the position of technician, whose purpose becomes to manage and administrate curricular programs. This diminishes opportunity for critical examination and reflection upon the conditions that organize and construct the ideological and material practices of education (Giroux, 2009).

Robin Alexander (2005), Jonathan Kozol (2005), Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur (2006) demonstrate the same concern when they argue that teaching that is closely focused on standards is counterproductive in that it limits the scope and breadth of education. David Hursh (2008), Jonathan Kozol (2005), and bell hooks (2004) explain that ready-made curricula

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and standardized education have mostly served to amplify inequality between advantaged and disadvantaged students by promoting uniformity (single-voiced discourses) in the *what*, *why*, and *how* of learning.

In short, institutional mandates that put forward measures that regulate and restrict dialogue contribute to power imbalances, which lead to intolerant social and educational practices, such as heteronormative mores and androcentrism. In most educational settings, this asymmetry of power limits or only superficially recognizes social difference (gender, race, ability) and fails to acknowledge curriculum that does not privilege the voices of the dominant (Apple, 2007; Giroux, 2009; hooks, 2004). Ignoring the socio-cultural specificity of linguistic diversity (voice) of students, as well as that of teachers, is tantamount to complicity in creating, and sustaining hegemonic ideologies.

I propose that art educators consider a theory of *dialogism*, a theory developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975); and Pablo Helguera's<sup>1</sup> public artwork, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (SPU), an artwork grounded on dialogic encounters. Bakhtin's (1986) and Helguera's (2006) work is important because their theories make significant inroads, through counter-discourses and dialogic praxis, to (re)envision dialogue as a communicative action from relational, dynamic, participatory, and probing/critical (responsible) viewpoints. A relational dialogue "always includes a question, an address, and the anticipation of a response, it always includes two (as a dialogic minimum)" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 170). From a Bakhtinian perspective, an answer must generate a new question from itself. Otherwise, communication falls out of *true dialogic* exchange (Bakhtin, 1986). Foreshadowing the basic tenets of cultural studies and reader-response theories, Bakhtin rejects the idea of passive transference, reception, and consumption of language and culture. In fact, an instructional practice that excludes reciprocity—or an educational encounter defined by authoritative relationship—is *antidialogical*.

Contiguous with Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism*, Helguera advances the notion that voice is accomplished only when participants in dialogue can *produce*, rather than *repeat* (recapitulate) discourses. For Bakhtin, our utterances can be repeated or inserted onto new contexts which may, in turn, produce new meaning. Encounters with SPU in new contexts generated new meanings. The *repeatability* (*unfinalizability*) of the utterance, therefore, does not necessarily produce straightforward repetition (duplication). Rather, *repeatability* entails (re)contextualization, (re)accentuation, and (re)signification. Helguera's SPU created opportunities for interlocutors to actively participate, to answer, talk back, and (re)signify the discourses of the artwork. *The School of Panamerican Unrest* was an extensive public art project that involved an intercontinental road trip along the length of the Pan-American Highway. At each stop, which included traditional and non-traditional art venues, Helguera conducted artist workshops, round-table discussions, and performances. The topics and ideas for each site unfolded in relationship to the specificity of each location (including such factors as socio-political history and culture) and in collaboration with the interests and visions of local organizers, artists, and participants. At each location, Helguera collaborated with artists, curators, and audience members who created art manifestos and performed civic proclamations.

Helguera's SPU harnesses the *unfinalizability* (*repeatability*) of language that is necessary for dialogic encounters. His work is dialogic, not because of the multiplicity of voices, in the form of collaborators that participated in the project, but because the voices of the participants intersect dialogically, i.e., contrapuntally. Helguera did not place the author's voice (i.e., his own power and knowledge) at the center of the artwork nor were the participants the objects of the author's "expert" knowledge or intent. Rather than repeat (duplicate or recuperate) the artist's intent, SPU interlocutors had a voice and talked back.



Pablo Helguera answering questions from an onlooker regarding the nature and purpose of the portable schoolhouse and the artists' vision and intent with SPU project.

Pablo Helguera assembling the portable schoolhouse that traveled with the project, an architectonic structure that was installed at each of the locations where SPU was presented.



SPU public art project presented at the Plaza de la Merced in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 2006.

SPU participants had semantic authority to re-map, re-contextualize, and change the meaning of the utterance (the sign). For instance, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a panelist, who identified herself as a visual artist, asserted that although SPU presented itself as a public art project, it was clearly not public art. Public art in the Buenos Aires context, the participant argued, was top-down, bureaucratic, and typically state-supported and -promoted. In contrast, she observed that SPU involved audience members in ways that were non-hierarchical. In other words, knowledge was being constructed interdependently rather than given from above. At the same event, an independent curator, who was an audience member, stressed that in Buenos Aires, Helguera's project had not been presented in the public sphere. She declared, therefore, that *The School of Panamerican Unrest* "failed," precisely, because the project did not establish or generate venues with non-art publics, a necessary characteristic of a "new current" of public art.

The purpose of SPU is taken into the participants' own conceptual frame of reference, and contextualized with past and present discourses about public art. Each re-maps it, evaluates it, and disrupts it, to re-signify or generate different or new meaning about public art and its surrounding discourses. Central to the concerns of SPU was the construction of *dialogic encounters*, whereby the meaning of the artwork unfolded through a participatory and reciprocal relationship with the viewer/participant, as the aforementioned example demonstrates. Thus, an *encounter* with Helguera's project called for a dialogic relationship of exchange. *Dialogism* does not mean a conciliatory (equal, democratic, or utopian) model

of exchange that ignores the uneven structure of power in language. Instead it refers to a provocation that both invites and resists (participates, talks-back, re-signifies) various points of view, arguments, and counter-arguments.

I now return to the debates discussed at the onset of this commentary. The research regarding the impact of educational "reform" on teaching and learning makes clear that power is mediated through language and dialogue (Alexander, 2005; Giroux, 2009; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2006). Similarly, Bakhtin's constructs of *dialogism* and SPU dialogic encounters are bound with issues of power and voice. Reflecting upon *dialogism* and dialogic encounters in relation to dialogue and voice as these pertain to pedagogy, I propose that an education based on prepackaged curriculum and instruction is answerable only to itself, specifically, because one-way conversation does not respond to a multiplicity of voices and subjectivities, which are vital to dialogic relationships.

I have argued that the intersection of Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* and the *dialogic encounters* of SPU can be used as a lens to problematize practices and methods that regulate and restrict dialogue in art classrooms. For example, asking: Who gets heard or silenced in the discourses of teaching and learning and making and viewing art? How do people actively respond, how are they ethically answerable to one another? How do people jointly construct meaning? In turn, ensuing insights can be used to create dialogue within pedagogical spaces that is relational, participatory, and responsible communicative action central to democratic society.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Pablo Helguera (Mexico, D. F., born 1971) is a prolific multi-disciplinary artist whose art includes performance, installation, and various experimental formats such as symposiums, phonographic recordings, and opera arias. His work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2003), The Hirshhorn in Washington, DC (2007), The Havana (2003) and Liverpool (2006) Biennials. Helguera has curated exhibitions and has co-directed international forums of contemporary art in the U.S., Europe, and Latin America. Currently, Helguera is the Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Education Department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.