

Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogism, and a Novel Approach to Interaction

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- Resistance is not really about power—it is about resisting the monolithic monologicality of social life. (Sidorkin, 1999)

Agenda

- Why Bakhtin?
- Interaction and the application of literary theory
- Intro to Bakhtin
- Dialogism
- Novel and Epic
- Novelness and Interaction

Why Bakhtin?

- Roland Barthes
- Umberto Eco
- Stuart Hall
- Wolfgang Iser
- Mikhail Bakhtin
 - More “educational” concepts
 - More penetration into the education literature
 - Tom Barone
 - Alexander Sidorkin
 - Douglas McKnight
 - Rupert Wegerif



Interaction

- “Reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions, and...occur when these objects and events mutually influence one another.” (Herring, 1987)
- This “mutual influence” is what defines interaction, where the learner influences the educational experience reciprocally, where the dialogics of learning are strived for and achieved and are not simply a gesture.

Interaction

For most of the field, it is...

“a means to an end.”

Wagner (1997)

A Means to an End...

This concept of an “end” to interaction is problematic in that it implies an ultimately predetermined, but veiled, purpose. True interaction must involve a process of negotiation which leads to unanticipated, collectively achieved ends that depend at least as much on creative student input as on the predetermined learning objectives developed by the online instructor.

The Scholarship of Online Learning

I hope to

- Inject some theoretical rigor into the conversation about interaction
- Apply literary theory to the concept of interaction in online courses

Literary Theory

- Derives from many of the same theoretical and philosophical traditions that have shaped anthropology, sociology, and qualitative education research
 - Poststructuralism
 - Semiotics
 - Cultural Studies
 - Marxism
 - Feminism
 - Reader-Response Theory, etc.

(Re)Theorizing Interaction

- Learner-Content Interaction

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.



Wallace Stevens
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird (1917)

A Theoretical Conception of Interaction

- Barthes’s Writerly/Readerly Texts
- Bakhtin’s Novel/Epic Texts
- Eco’s Open/Closed Texts

Roland Barthes

- Readerly Texts: limited number of possible interpretations
- Writerly Texts: require the reader to actively participate in the production of the text’s meaning, “to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.”



Barthes

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. (*S/Z*, 1970)

Barthes Rewritten

Our *modern teaching practice* is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the *education establishment* maintains between *the provider of instruction* and its receiver, between *the school* and *its customer*, between *the teacher* and *the student*. *This student* is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—she is intransitive; she is, in short, *not playful*: instead of functioning herself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of *learning*, she is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject *the curriculum*: *learning* is nothing more than a *vote*.

Umberto Eco

- Open Texts: the “important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process,” that all aspects of a work should “contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities.” (1989)



Mikhail Bakhtin

- Epic Texts: “seek to suppress a variety of discourses by converging upon a correct, final interpretation of events” (Barone, 2001).
- Novel Texts: offer a multiplicity of voices, and therefore, a multiplicity of possible interpretations.



Mikhail Bakhtin

- Born near Moscow in 1895
- Accused of participating in the Russian Orthodox Church’s underground movement and sent into exile
- Did not receive wide notoriety until after his death in 1975



Mikhail Bakhtin

- Philosopher
- Literary Critic
- Semiotician
- Scholar
- Best known for his concept of “dialogism”



Novelness

- Novels participate in what might be considered a contemporary world view, where truth and meaning are decentered, where there is not simply one point of view.
- Novelness, and not the novel itself, is the “real hero” of Bakhtin’s work. (Holquist, 1990)
- The “history of the novel has its place in literary history, but the history of novelness is situated in the history of human consciousness.” (Holquist, 1990)

Novelness

- The reality of the novel is “only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities.” (Bakhtin, 1941)

Novelness in Education

- Therefore, in educational terms, this sense of novelistic indeterminacy and writerly open-endedness gives the student a new authority in the online classroom, and ultimately in the teaching and learning process itself. This insight helps reposition our conception of the online classroom as an unrestricted forum that demands active engagement on the part of the learner/reader in a dynamic and interactive interrogation of the course text.

Novel vs. Epic

- The epic world must be experienced passively, uncritically, and uncreatively.
- The novelistic world opens up semantic and epistemic possibilities strictly because of its semantic instability and inconclusiveness, because of its insistence to speculate in what is unknown.
- When this world is applied to education, it opens up the possibility for learning.

Novel vs. Epic

- “The epic knows; the novel asks how we know.” (Morson, 1981)

Dialogism

- Traditional pedagogy is, more often than not, a monologue.
- The tendency, if not the perceived responsibility, of the instructor is to deliver content monologically, in a single statement from a single voice of authority.
- It is reduced to a didacticism, which reduces language to “a means to transfer what is already defined and coded as official knowledge.” (McKnight, 2004)

Didacticism

- Language is no longer a “shared relation” in this context but rather a function of authority that ultimately serves to determine, to control, to limit possibilities of thought, understanding, and insight.

- But what would it mean to deliver content dialogically or novelistically?

Bakhtin, Expression, & Authorship

- When we express ideas, as in the act of teaching or delivering content, we must realize that we are like the author of a novel.
- The act of saying—and even the character, the professorial persona, that we’ve created—is a construct, a kind of fiction.
- Bakhtin saw that “we cannot *be* ourselves, we must *cite* ourselves.” (Morson, 1981)

Dialogism

- Concerns the interplay of voices, of perspectives
- It can be present in written texts, or rather, in the reading of written texts, where there is conversation between the text and reader, where meaning is negotiated, translated, and appropriated.

Dialogism

- For Bakhtin, the audience shapes the utterance *as* it is being made—which I suppose is another way of saying that every utterance is, as Bakhtin puts it, a “two-sided act,” “the product of the reciprocal relationship between the addresser and addressee,” “territory shared.” (Morson, 1981)

Dialogism

- It can be present in online courses where the instructor provides some content and then asks questions or makes demands of the reader to fill in the gaps or finish the lesson.
- It can also be present in the incorporation of multiple perspectives in that content delivery, in the form of guest speakers or intertextual connections.

The Dialogic Process of Interaction

- “Instead of trying desperately to defend the notion that individual utterances, or texts, have a fixed, original meaning which it is the business of criticism to recover, we can locate meaning in the dialogic process of interaction between speaking subjects, between texts and readers, between texts themselves.” (Lodge, 1990)

The Dialogic Process of Interaction

- We must begin to think of interaction as a many-layered phenomenon where multiple types of interaction (learner-content, learner-learner, and learner-instructor, etc.) happen simultaneously and interconnectedly.
- And if we are to move meaningfully beyond our traditional concepts of interaction, we must also pay more attention to the contextual and discursive factors that mediate the learning/interpretive process.

Dialogism as Learning

- When a thought is translated into an expression, it must be edited, reshaped, added to, translated from the fog of mental abstraction to the concreteness of language.
- “The thought becomes different from what it was, which means expressing may be a form of learning.” (Morson, 1981)

Dialogue in the Online Classroom

- “Dialogue in classroom discourse is not what many people believe it is. It is not when students are asked ‘Socratic’ questions, and encouraged to participate in an orderly discussion. Rather, dialogue may happen when a holistic text of curriculum is broken down, challenged, retold in one’s own words, made one’s own, and ‘stored away,’ that is, dismissed from immediate conversation and put in memory.” (Sidorkin, 1999)

Dialogism in Education

- The process of the dialogic requires that every understanding “includes deliberate misunderstanding, because meanings are born between a speaker and a listener, not only within one or the other head.” (Sidorkin, 1999)
- Meaning takes place in the spaces in between, in a dialogic communication process.

Toward Dialogism

- “The teacher’s and textbooks’ monological texts should have some elements of self-destruction, self-doubt, self-irony, or should I add, self-deconstruction.... Any monological texts should include hints and glimpses of possible dialogues.” (Sidorkin, 1999)

This is not to say...

- “Regular, monological classroom discourse is a crucial tool for building the foundations of dialogue. This is something important to realize: the secret of dialogue lies outside of the dialogue proper. The dialogical discourse is very hard, if not impossible, to guide and manage when you are already in it. The reason for this is that the very basic nature of the dialogical goes against monological guidance and management.” (Sidorkin, 1999)

Toward Dialogism

- Such a surrender of power from the instructor to the student is not only a large step toward the democratization of education, but also the enabling of the student as a co-writer of the meanings of their learning.

Toward Dialogism

- It is a move away from mere web-based “training” toward true online “education,” from the teaching of methods to the learning of methodologies, from the memorization of bulleted lists to the generation of concepts and understanding, from the epicness of monologic pedagogy to the novelty of a dialogic online curriculum.

Toward Dialogism

- It is a move that opens the texts of the online classroom and creates a more active and writerly learning environment.
- If we can find ways to make some accommodation to the dialogic, some hints and glimpses of possible dialogues, we will make tremendous strides in how our students encounter the texts that constitute our teaching.

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