

# From Monologue to Dialogue Interpreting Social Constructivism with Bakhtinian Perspective

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## Abstract

*At present it is a well established idea that the construction of knowledge is a process of co-construction of meanings through participation in socially negotiated and discursive activity. The pedagogic translation of this idea owes its root to Vygotskian perspective of development and learning. It envisages teaching-learning as a dialogic process. However it is identified that the idea of dialogue as used by proponents by social constructivist theorist is limited to its methodological implications as a pedagogic tool. The present paper argues that dialogue is not a pedagogic tool rather it is an ontological construct. Against this backdrop the paper argues that for developing a substantial theory of social constructivist pedagogy Bakhtin's ideas can be deployed. The paper elaborates the vistas of Bakhtin's idea of dialogue. Further with the help of this elaboration it tries to interpret the epistemological assumption of social constructivist approach to learning. This understanding will enable us to see the agency and the voices of individuals in teaching-learning process. Drawing upon the Bakhtinian perspective, the last section of the paper discusses tenets of dialogic pedagogy which help us to transform the pervasive monologic discourse into dialogic discourse.*

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At present it is a well established idea that the construction of knowledge is a process of co-construction of meanings through participation in socially negotiated and discursive activity. The pedagogic translation of this idea owes its root to Vygotskian perspective of development and learning and it envisages teaching-learning as dialogic process. However it is worth noting that the idea of 'dialogue' has been conceived by the propagators of social constructivist approach to teaching-learning. It emerges from the reviews of literature and studies that under the umbrella of social constructivism dialogue has been used as a pedagogic tool for more effective teaching-learning in comparison to other forms of pedagogic strategies such as lecture or a demonstration (Werstch, 1991; Wells, 1999; Fernyhough, 1996 ). Implicitly this assumption carries the meaning that dialogue can be used as an instructional tool which can be turned on and off. It merely sees dialogue in the classroom as a form of interaction and maintains those conditions under which it is a good idea to organise an instruction as dialogue and when it is not (Matusov, 2007). In this sense, this perspective of dialogue is instrumental as it narrows down dialogue to a tool or strategy. It does not matter how the process of education is viewed – transmission of knowledge, acquisition of knowledge, co-construction of knowledge, education driven by the above mentioned instrumental view of dialogue seeks to make all

consciousnesses homogeneous (White, 2013). The pedagogy guided by instrumental dialogue aimed at reducing the gap between the community of the educated, to whom the teacher belongs, and the community of the ignorant, to whom the students belong, by making the students more like the teacher. It is evident that although methodologically this perspective talks about dialogic pedagogy but ontologically and epistemologically it is ceased in mongolism. It is essential to address this pitfall of social.

### **CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO TEACHING-LEARNING**

Against this backdrop the present paper proposes that the above mentioned chasm between methodology and ontology of social constructivism can be filled with Bakhtin's ideas of dialogue. Instead of viewing dialogue as a tool or method, Bakhtin views dialogue as an essential condition for being in the world: 'life, itself is ontologically dialogic' (Bakhtin, 1986). Matusov (2011) while discussing the uniqueness of Bakhtin's idea highlighted that for Bakhtin, a gap in the mutual understanding between people is a necessary condition for dialogic, humane communication, and for the entire human relationship. This orientation to the gap in mutual understanding is both a precursor and an outcome of dialogue and dialogic meaning-making. He goes further and elaborates:

“Bakhtin developed a pluralistic, essentially synchronic, dialogic, discourse and genre-based approach to the social, involving the hybridity of co-existing competing and conflicting varieties of logic. Bakhtin’s dialogic approach was essentially ontological, defining consciousness through bodily experience, responsibility, addressivity, responsiveness, respect, human dignity, and relationship with the other.”

The paper explores the vistas of Bakhtin’s ideas and tries to interpret the epistemological assumption of social constructivist approach to learning. Doing the same the paper also aims to understand the tenets of dialogic pedagogy from the Bakhtinian point of view.

### **BACKGROUND OF BAKHTIN**

Bakhtin was a literary theorist and a teacher. He preferred to call himself a philosopher. He was born in 1895 at Oryol, Russia to a liberal and educated family of old noble ancestry that encouraged his academic studies. He lived through the same time period in Russia as did Vygotsky, experiencing the Russian Revolution as well as the Stalinist era, a time of both enormous social and economic need as well as extraordinary cultural and philosophical creativity. As a youth, Bakhtin grew up in cities that had a clashing of unusually large amounts of diverse cultures and languages. Holquist (2004) identified it as a fact that influenced his future theories on the nature of language. After completing his studies in philology

at a university in St. Petersburg in 1918, Bakhtin moved to the cities of Nevel and Vitebsk. In both of these locations Bakhtin became a member of a small group of intellectuals who fiercely debated and discussed philosophical, religious, political, and cultural issues. The group was known as Bakhtinian Circle. The discussions that took place in this group influenced and contributed in development of Bakhtin’s ideas and scholarship. His academic background in philology and participation in intense debate and discussion in intellectual circles, promoted his engagement in a series of writing projects between 1918 and 1924 that intersected philosophy and literature. As a literary theorist, his writings critically explored the ideological structure of novels. As a philologist he critically analysed the work of authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Francois Rabelais, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. He published his first major work, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* in 1929. Bakhtin wrote his critical analysis of Dostoevsky’s work from a more sociological stance. Holquist, (2004) highlights that while Bakhtin was a very active writer his entire life, it was not until after his death in 1975 that the academic world started paying attention to his writings, and their applicability to education.

### **A BAKHTINIAN APPROACH TO DIALOGUE**

Dialogue is a pivotal concept in Bakhtin’s writing that informs his

ontology, epistemology and theory of language. Bakhtin uses the term 'dialogue' to characterise a number of planes of human existence. According to him humans engage in dialogue in multiple ways and this dialogic engagement manifests what it means to be human.

"The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue.... In a dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit... he invest his entire self in discourse and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium." (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293)

It is evident that for Bakhtin dialogue as an ongoing social process of meaning making occurs between people as subjects. He also affirms that dialogic communication takes not only the form of words but also gestures, facial expressions, postures, the whole array of body language, apparel and social behaviour. Dialogue is both ontological—reflecting the way we are constituted as humans—and ethical—the way we should be. Bakhtin points out that people do not take words from a dictionary, but from the mouths of other speakers, and so they carry with them the voices of those who have used them before. Unlike other scholars (particularly Vygotsky) Bakhtin does not consider language only a cultural tool rather

he focused on language-in-action as a living source of insight and renewal.

## **VISTAS OF DIALOGUE IN BAKHTIN'S IDEAS**

### **1. Dialogue: Utterance and Addressivity**

Bakhtin identified two forms of Dialogue: external dialogue and internal dialogue. External dialogue is a verbal exchange in which interlocutors take turns to deliver their utterances and responses. This type of dialogue is a compositional form in the structuring of speech, but it ignores the semantic and expressive layers of the dialogue. Internal dialogue was of paramount interest to Bakhtin. For him, any utterance, whether spoken or written, that people use in communication with each other is internally dialogic because of its "dialogic orientations" (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin (1986) considers utterance as the unit of dialogue and insisted that utterance is always directed toward the other utterance or toward the responsive utterance of the rejoinder in dialogue. It means that utterances are always addressed to someone. Further he introduced the concept of Addressivity. Addressivity, according to Bakhtin, is a necessary condition for an utterance, it denotes that each utterance must be addressed to someone and seek response from someone. Bakhtin draws a contrast between an utterance and other units of linguistic analysis such as words and sentences. He points out,

that words and sentences belong to nobody and are addressed to nobody. Moreover, they in themselves are devoid of any kind of relation to the other's utterance, the other's word. He writes:

"In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee."

He acknowledges the listener's active role in a dialogue. The listener's participation shapes the dialogue along with the speaker's contribution. The same can be said about the dialogue between the reader and the writer, and meaning construction from the text. This seems to be simply another way of saying that, through their perspective, outlook, and "conceptual horizons," the listener and the reader also have a voice in a dialogue, even when they are silent (Vice, 1997). Thus a communication is always a multi-voiced process. Bakhtin (1984) described socio-historical aspect of utterance as follows:

"The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered."

By saying this Bakhtin emphasises that as speakers and writers we do not create our own words out of nothing. We use and reuse what others have brought to us, what has been already known and said—now shaping those words differently, reflecting on them, evaluating them, and sending them further in our communication with others. The socio-historical aspect of internal dialogue is characterised by the presence of the others' words in one's utterance, by the words that have "already [been] spoken" (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus Bakhtin understood utterance as the compositional unit of a dialogue formed by at least two voices, occupying a place in a socio-historical space and responding to a concrete social situation.

## **2. Dialogue: Voice and double-voiced discourse**

Utterance, according to Bakhtin, becomes possible only through the use of voice, which he understood as both spoken and written channels of communication. He understood dialogic relationships within an utterance, as a collision of two voices. Internal dialogic relations between these voices result in double-voicing or double-voiced discourse. This is another way by which Bakhtin describes how through an utterance one's voice is linked to the social context of language. As James Wertsch (1991) observes, for Bakhtin, "there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices. . . . He insisted that meaning

can come into existence only when two or more voices come into contact. It is crucial to recognise that for Bakhtin voice was not merely an analytic concept but a moral category. In his discussion of Dostoevsky's novelistic poetics, he established a distinction between an authentic and fictive voice within consciousness. The authentic voice is the one that connects the individual with the human community. The fictive voice, on the contrary, obscures this connection. In order for the authentic voice to manifest itself, it needs to overcome the fictive voices that push it into a monologue and prevent it from unfolding its own dialogic nature (Bakhtin, 1984). Wertsch (1991) remarks that, according to Bakhtin, voice is a manifestation of the speaker's or the writer's overall perspective, worldview, conceptual horizon, intentions, and values.

### **3. Dialogue: Authoritative and internally-persuasive discourse**

According to Bakhtin, one's own words are always partially the words of others. The word of the other can be authoritative, monologic, and admitting of no transformation by the interlocutor. In this case Bakhtin refers to it as authoritative discourse. When one reproduces this discourse, one speaks in inverted commas, as it were. Bakhtin calls such speech "quoted." Dialogue breaks down in such cases and communication does not happen. The same word, however, can become one's own,

Bakhtin argues. Thus the words of others can also be assimilated by the interlocutor and transformed into "indirect speech," as it were. In these cases, the words of others become partially one's own, and Bakhtin calls such speech "internally persuasive discourse." Bakhtin (1981) viewed the relation between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses as a dynamic process in which one gradually makes the other's words one's own: 'As a living socio-linguistic concrete thing, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.' It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Bakhtin views the word of internally persuasive discourse in aesthetic, creative terms. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition.

### **4. Dialogue: Value-laden nature of language**

In Bakhtin's understanding of language, no utterance is value-neutral. Our entire discourse, according to Bakhtin, is saturated with ethical and aesthetic meanings. This is true of utterances within

political, artistic, and even scientific contexts. Bakhtin (1986) insists that utterances come alive only insofar as they are “true or false, beautiful or ugly, sincere or deceitful, frank, cynical, authoritative, etc.” He is quite aware of the fact that such a view of language is not compatible with the traditional linguistic approach in which language is assumed to be value-neutral and to consist of abstract, schematic rules. By contrast Bakhtin (1986) maintains that an utterance is not defined in merely formal terms, but it possesses what he calls “contextual meaning”. Furthermore, in Bakhtin’s view dialogue in general has an intrinsic ethical dimension. When one engages in a dialogue with another person, Bakhtin believes, one inherently assumes responsibility for what one says to that person and for that person herself. The ethical and humanistic import of Bakhtin’s theory has been noted by Holquist (1990):

“Each time we talk, we literally enact values in our speech through the process of scripting our place and that of our listener in a culturally specific social scenario” (p. 63).

### **5. Dialogue: Heteroglossia and polyphony**

Another important dimension of Bakhtin’s theory is the idea of multiple dialogues constituting an act of communication. As we engage in a dialogue we bring to it a multiplicity of dialogues among cultures, historical backgrounds, social groups, genders,

age groups, various levels of literacy, etc. The multitude of voices in a dialogue creates interplay of discursive forces that Bakhtin (1981) called heteroglossia. Heteroglossia means that a single utterance may be shaped by a variety of simultaneously speaking voices that are not merged into a single voice, but “sing” their respective “melodies” independently within the context of the utterance. Holquist (1990) explains this concept:

“Heteroglossia is a way of conceiving the world as made up of a roiling mass of languages, each of which has its own distinct formal markers.”

Further, Bakhtin (1981) spoke of the processes that shape any discourse in terms of the interaction of centripetal (or “official”) and centrifugal (or “unofficial”) forces. By the former, he meant the forces that aspire toward a norm, standard, and fixed order, whereas by the latter he meant those forces that resist systematic order, lead toward chaos, and result in constant change. Bakhtin (1981) understood language not as a homogeneous unity, but a simultaneous co-existence of many languages—those of social groups, “professional” and “generic,” literary languages, languages of generations, etc. Bakhtin also proposes metaphor of polyphony to denote multi voiceness. He sees the desired outcome of dialogue not simply as unrestrained play of centrifugal tendencies, but diversity brought under unity. By polyphony Bakhtin means a multiplicity of

languages that is brought together under a single organising principle. He calls the resulting unity of several languages “the universum of mutually illuminating languages” (Bakhtin, 1981). The centrifugal forces of heteroglossia, must be balanced by the centripetal impulse of a single consciousness in order for polyphony to subsist.

**KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING AND  
PEDAGOGY: A BAKHTINIAN  
PERSPECTIVE**

Bakhtin (1991) argued that any discourse has two forces: centripetal force and centrifugal force. Centripetal force works in uniting, homologising, and monologising the discourse. Centrifugal force works in diversifying, diffusing, and dialogising the discourse. These two forces are representative of monologism and dialogism respectively. Monologic classroom driven by centripetal force of discourse has following dimensions: mono-topic, activity-based, unilaterally owned by the teacher (Sidorkin, 1999; Skidmore, 2000). Critics of conventional pedagogy argue that this type of discourse especially as prolonged and prioritised by the conventional teacher has several problems. It reduces inter subjectivity between the teacher and the students (and among the students) which makes the teacher’s guidance blind without access to students’ subjectivities and forces the students into passivity

(Gutierrez et al., 1995; Matusov and Smith, 2007; Sidorkin, 1999). Further, it positions some students with regard to class and content that they start feeling unwelcomed due to emerging negative positioning. Implicitly it conveys a message to them and their classmates that they are dumb and/or that academic subjects are not for them (Lampert, 2001). Sidorkin (1999) argues that this monologic type of discourse cannot be naturally sustained because it generates upheaval and rebellion in the students and which in response to provokes the physical and psychological violence of the teacher who is supported by the school institution to suppress it. This violence is often mediated by classroom rules, school policies, and discipline and classroom management techniques.

Traditional approach to learning, influenced by behaviourism, defines the main purpose of education as indoctrination in the universal truth. It is expected from students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on the authority’s demands. Constructivism recognises flaws of such a de contextualised and passive approach and offers an alternative perspective to learning, in which students construct the contextual truth. In this approach to education, students are active in developing their worldviews that collide together in development of unified truth that exists objectively and separately from the participants. From Bakhtinian

perspective both the approaches are monologic, although each in its own different way (Skidmore,2000; Matusov,2009 ). The first approach dismisses the students' worldviews and imposes ideas from outside. The imposed ideas are rooted in the authority of imposition itself. Thus learning becomes only affirmation or rejection of ideas of others. The constructivist approach is also monologic although it takes into consideration of worldviews of the students. It sees the learning as transformation of the students' worldviews, skills, knowledge, and attitudes into the correct and powerful ones through a series of guided discoveries that the students will do. This approach essentially manipulates the students into the purely-epistemological truth of the united consciousness. The students' worldviews are seen as erroneous misconceptions that have to be corrected. People's ideas are placed on the scale of their approximation to the truth to be taught through guided discoveries and construction. Thus, the relationship between ideas does not know truly dialogic relations (Matusov, 2009). According to Bakhtinian perspective teaching-learning is a process of engaging students in collective search for their own truth and its testing with others (Roth, 2013). The ontological truths of the participants (their worldviews, knowledge, skills, attitudes), have to be "informed" by dialogue with ontological truths of others. People

do not simply expose their equal truths but address, response, take responsibility, evaluate, and judge each other truths. Individual's idea is neither divorced from a person, like in the transmission approach not rooted in the individual, as in the constructivist approach. Bakhtin express this view as follows:

"The word in language is half someone else's. it become one's 'own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adopting it to his own semantic and expressive intention..."

It is evident knowledge is always shaped by a dialogue and in dialogue. To teach means to broaden student's participation in dialogue. In Bakhtinian perspective consciousnesses of the teacher and the students are taken with equal seriousness. It refutes the notion of stable knowledge and affirms that there is no such thing which can be considered as 'final knowledge'. Bakhtin writes:

"Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction."

According to Bakhtinian perspective since learning is the transformation of a student's meaning, it is unpredictable, undetermined, and cannot be designed or controlled by the teacher (Wenger, 1998). It is always discursive, that is, the process and product of a new meaning always

exists among diverse, real or virtual, consciousnesses. It is mediated by the students' questions (explicit or tacit). Thus both curriculum and instruction is genuine information-seeking questions that both the teacher and the students ask of each other.

Unlike the instrumental dialogue, an ontological view of dialogue proposed by Bakhtin envisions education as a dialogic process. It does not assume the 'pedagogy should be dialogic' rather it considers that pedagogy is always dialogic. Further it also highlights that whatever teachers and students do (or not do) whether in their classrooms or beyond it, they are locked in dialogic relations. The dialogic pedagogy based on Bakhtin's idea envisions education as process leading individual to Ideological becoming (Freedman and Ball, 2004). The term 'ideology' has different connotations here than its popular English meaning. In Russian it implies a set of ideas and their contexts rather than inflexible ideas imposed through the use of propaganda and other coercive mechanisms (Matusov, 2007). Therefore 'Ideological becoming' is the development of ideological subjectivity within the ideological environment in which individual lives. Greenleaf and MIRA-Lisa katz (2004) explains it ideological becoming of students as a transformation of their discourse from authoritative to internally persuasive. Charles Baserman (2004) explains it in terms of pedagogy and insists that pedagogy has to aim at fostering a powerful sense of

authority, agency and texts within the students' internally persuasive discourse around academic subjects. For fostering such attributes a strong discursive community is prerequisite (Matusov, 2007). In a Bakhtinian classroom, pedagogy will open the pathway for ideological becoming. Bakhtin (1991) observes that authority carries an aura that is monologic, absolute, and unquestionable. Authority is fused with demands for allegiance. Therefore dialogic pedagogy also aims at challenging authority. However, as Gary Morson (2004,) suggests, engaging authority in dialogue, asking a question of the unquestionable, challenges the infallibility of authority. Through this dialogic challenge, authority "ceases to be fully authoritative". Thus once the truth of authority is dialogically tested, it becomes forever testable. Enacting a dialogic pedagogy in classroom develops an orientation among students toward justice, suspicions of hegemony and taken-for-granted societal assumption. Cultivating this dialogic capacity prepares students for democratic life where the search for the common good is forged through community, not through authority. As Bakhtin (1984) suggests, "truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction." Likewise, our classrooms should reflect this ideal

by preparing students to improve on society and recognise the unrealised potential of democracy shrouded by authority and hegemony. Bakhtin's dialogic pedagogy will help students to see and develop their own perspective that is not guided by the centripetal forces. This attempt will be a move to subvert the traditional approach to teaching-learning and challenge to the authority imbued in its various forms. Another element of a Bakhtinian classroom is the development of voice. Teacher and students constructs an environment that welcome diversity through dialogue. Teacher should ask students to position themselves in relation to others—such as the opinions of other classmates, the regime of authority speaking through schooling norms. Through this continual positioning and repositioning through the exchange of ideas, students will develop a voice. In absence of multivoices classroom become a place which resigns the individuality, does not enable any individual to exercise his/her capacity to author his/her self. Unfortunately,

in many classrooms, the monologic presentation of content muzzles the voice of students. Avoiding contention and controversy in the classroom neither give students an opportunity to voice an opinion, nor provided them with the chance to be transformed by the perspectives of others. Although the consequences of these actions may not be immediately visible in the classroom, it will contribute in developing critical literacy among them.

Thus this paper is an important lead to reinstate that a dialogic classroom will have a combination of multiple voices (essential condition for ontological dialogue) and its orchestrating (role of the teacher) by the teacher creates a polyphonic environment (classroom discourse)-where every voice is heard (agency of teacher and learners), where melodies (content of learning) are not-predetermined and always surprising for all the voices. Such classrooms can be envisioned keeping the Bakhtinian perspective at the core of the argument.

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