Knowledge and Action in Classroom Practice: A Dialogic Approach

Stanton Wortham
Bates College

In 1987, Lee Shulman and Hugh Sockett had an important exchange in the *Harvard Educational Review*.[1] Shulman argued for the central role of knowledge in good teaching. Sockett responded that good teaching cannot be understood as primarily a matter of knowledge and skills, because it centrally involves moral action in particular contexts. This essay sharpens the question of whether knowledge-based or action-based approaches make better sense of educational practice, by considering the power of classroom *speech* to communicate knowledge and to perform actions. The paper first describes M.M. Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language use — which argues not only that speech simultaneously carries content and performs actions, but also that the two functions inevitably depend on each other. It then provides an example of the interdependence of knowledge and action in an excerpt of classroom conversation. The paper concludes that knowledge-based approaches underestimate how deeply knowledge and action interpenetrate in the classroom.

Shulman and Sockett agree that good teachers use *judgment* to react to particular classroom situations. They disagree, however, on what such judgment involves. Sockett argues that teacher judgment cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge or rules for practice. Teachers judge and react to situations that involve the actions of students as moral agents, and this moral dimension cannot be fully captured by propositional descriptions. Shulman acknowledges that a moral perspective might illuminate some aspects of teaching practice. But he argues that knowledge and rational deliberation form the core of teacher judgment and classroom practice.

Sockett argues that the essence or core of classroom practice goes beyond the knowledge implemented and learned, and involves both knowledge and action in particular socio-moral contexts. But how could we demonstrate the need for an action-based, morally informed approach to classroom practice? Shulman and others who focus on knowledge do not deny the moral and interactional aspects of classroom practices. They argue that morality and interaction can be analytically separated from the knowledge implemented and learned in classroom practice, and that knowledge and rational deliberation are the key to educational practice. Because Shulman and Sockett start from such fundamentally different assumptions, it is impossible to disprove one or the other position in a short paper. This essay has a more modest aim: to support Sockett by showing that knowledge and action cannot be disentangled as easily as Shulman suggests. The argument focuses on language use — the primary medium of both cognitive content and moral action in the classroom. By describing Bakhtin's action-based account of language use, and applying this account to one classroom example, this essay shows how moral action

in classroom conversation penetrates deeply into what might appear to be neutral knowledge.

Bakhtin's Dialogic Approach to Speech

This section argues that knowledge and action are deeply entangled in verbal practice. All speech functions both to communicate content or knowledge and to establish relationships in socio-moral context. This section sketches Bakhtin's account of language use, in order to show how deeply these two functions interconnect. Bakhtin argues that the meaningfulness of speech depends on the moral action performed by that speech.[2] He calls his approach "dialogic," and contrasts it with the predominant "monologic" approach. Monologic accounts act as if speech is "the word of no one in particular" — as if the social position of the speaker is irrelevant to its meaning. Consider the following example: a government spokesperson, reporting events in an ongoing war, who says that "there was some collateral damage yesterday" (*TDI*, 276). From a monologic point of view, we would understand this utterance by interpreting the content or knowledge it communicates. "Collateral damage" is a military euphemism for "unintended civilian casualties," so the spokesperson is referring to civilian casualties suffered the day before.

For Bakhtin, such monologic approaches cannot explain meaningful speech. "The expression of an utterance can never be fully understood or explained if its thematic content is all that is taken into account. The expression of an utterance always *responds* to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it expresses the speaker's attitude towards others' utterances and not just his attitude toward the object of his utterance" (*SGE*, 92). An utterance does always communicate content, but it also always contributes to the speaker's position with respect to others — and this socio-moral positioning is essential to the meaning of the utterance. In other words, we cannot fully understand the content or knowledge a speaker communicates without taking into account various aspects of the interactional event in which it occurs.

Bakhtin's approach is "dialogic" because it describes how any utterance opens up a dialogue with others who have taken positions on similar topics. "Collateral damage," for instance, is a phrase associated with certain types of speakers — particularly those connected to the military, who often present dead civilians as an unintended but inevitable consequence of war.[3] Such speakers (for example, military strategists and spokespeople) are not represented in the utterance at all. They are presupposed, as part of the interactional event of speaking. These military-affiliated speakers need not be physically present in the briefing room, because they are part of the social world known and inhabited by everyone in the event of speaking itself. This social world also contains critics of military action that endangers civilians. These, too — even if they are not actually present in the briefing room — are indexed by the phrase "collateral damage," as the group opposed to the military's acceptance of civilian casualties.

In order to understand what the speaker means by the utterance, according to Bakhtin, we must understand what position the briefer is taking up, with respect to the military and the critics in the interactional event of speaking. Does she use this

10.47925/1998.370

phrase in a straightforward referential way, as military personnel generally do? If so, how would she respond to those who decry this euphemism for the intolerable evils of war? Does she use the phrase instead in a mocking or ironic way, and thus place herself against politicians and soldiers who use the phrase merely referentially? These questions describe a rudimentary dialogue opened by the use of that one phrase. In order to understand the full meaning of the phrase as uttered by this particular speaker, we must understand the social position the speaker occupies with respect to other speakers who have used the same words, and with respect to others in the audience who might respond in the interactional event of speaking. Meaning is dialogic, then, because it goes beyond the denotational content of an utterance to the social position taken by the speaker in saying what he or she says.

But is the inevitable positioning that goes on in conversation really integral to the knowledge communicated in that conversation? The next section will address this question more directly, but we need first to elaborate Bakhtin's approach in more detail. Bakhtin explores the dialogic aspects of meaning using two central concepts: voice and double voicing. Bakhtin begins his definition of "voice" by observing the "internal stratification" of language, which he also calls "heteroglossia." "Heteroglossia" refers to the natural state of language, where any given language contains forms associated with a wide variety of social groups. "All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (*TDI*, 289). The social world is composed of many, overlapping social groups — such as religious groups, family groups, and ethnic groups. These groups can generally be defined by social position and by ideological commitments. "Certain features of language take on the specific flavor" of particular groups (*TDI*, 276). "Dude," for instance, would not normally be a word used by elderly Episcopalians. In speaking, we inevitably use words that have been used by others, words that (in Bakhtin's colorful metaphors) "taste of" or "echo with" the social locations and ideological commitments carried by those earlier uses. Note that there are as many voices as there are recognizable types of people in a society. This set constantly gains and loses members over time.

We can now formulate the first part of Bakhtin's theory: An utterance has meaning in part because of the voices it indexes or echoes with. This alone, however, does not make the theory dialogic. We also need the concept of "double voicing," from Bakhtin's theory of the novel.[4] Double voicing is the process through which novelists represent voices, as well as the process through which voices develop through contact with others. Double voiced discourse "has a twofold direction — it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another's discourse*, toward *someone else's speech*" (*PDP*, 185). In double-voiced discourse the speaker's meaning emerges in part through an interaction with the voice of another, as the speaker layers his own intonations over the still live words of another (*PDP*, 74).

Novels are built around double-voiced discourse. Bakhtin offers the following simple illustration from Book 2, Chapter 12 of Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*:

10.47925/1998.370

> It was a dinner to provoke an appetite, though he had not had one. The rarest dishes, sumptuously cooked and sumptuously served; the choicest fruits, the most exquisite wines; marvels of workmanship in gold and silver, china and glass; innumerable things delicious to the senses of taste, smell, and sight were insinuated into its composition. *O, what a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man, what a master man, how blessedly and enviably endowed* — in one word, what a rich man! (*TDI*, 304).

In Bakhtin's analysis, this passage begins with a "parodic stylization of high epic style." The first two sentences might echo the thoughts of Merdle himself — Merdle the self-satisfied businessman, who fancies himself as important as royalty. The italicized portion is "a chorus of his admirers in the form of the concealed speech of another." These words echo with the voice of Merdle's hypocritical admirers, who sing his praises only because they want to share his wealth and fame. Bakhtin calls the last seven words "authorial unmasking." Here Dickens replaces all the earlier praises with the single word "rich," and thus shows the irony of Merdle's view of himself and the hypocrisy of his sycophants.

In this passage, then, Dickens juxtaposes at least three voices: Merdle, his admirers, and those like Dickens himself who appreciate the irony of the situation. Dickens describes Merdle and his fawning admirers using cues (largely a modified form of quoted speech, which represents the thoughts or words of characters as if they were being spoken) that index certain groups in the socially stratified world: self-satisfied businessmen and their sycophants. In this passage, Dickens' descriptions are double voiced. They describe their referential objects, carry presuppositions about the voices or social positions of the characters, *and* establish a social position for Dickens himself with respect to those other voices. Because Dickens takes a position, the characters and the author have a "dialogue," at the level of the social positions that their words represent. In this case, the dialogue is relatively simple: Self-satisfied businessmen like Merdle admire themselves for their worldly success; their sycophants admire them for this too; but people like Dickens think this admiration is ridiculous, and really a disguise for base materialist motives.

Note that Dickens makes his point in this passage by positioning himself with respect to others, not by representing the point propositionally. In later work, Bakhtin argues that all our utterances — not just novelists' — are "filled with others' words.…These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (*SGE*, 89). This "re-accentuation" is a matter of interactional positioning, not representation of content. Part of any utterance's meaning involves *action*, as that utterance positions the speaker with respect to other voices in the interactional event of speaking. In order to understand what the military briefer meant we must go beyond knowledge of what "collateral damage" refers to, and appreciate how she was positioning herself socially. In order to understand Dickens, we must appreciate the positioning accomplished through his language. If Bakhtin's account is to support Sockett's arguments for the centrality of moral action in classroom practice, however, two issues must be addressed. First, does Bakhtin's theory really apply beyond novelistic discourse, to classroom speech? Second, does the positioning Bakhtin describes really penetrate the knowledge communicated in, and learned through, classroom speech, or does it simply occur alongside a cognitive "core?"

10.47925/1998.370

Dialogic Speech in the Classroom

This section addresses these two questions, by applying Bakhtin's approach to an example of classroom talk. This example occurred in a ninth grade history class, in an urban American public school. Two white teachers are leading a class of mostly lower class black students. Students have read selections from Plutarch's "Life of Lycurgus." This text describes the Spartan political system, in which the society was more highly valued than the individual. Sparta was ruled by a committee of elders, called "Ephors," who made decisions on behalf of the community. In this classroom conversation, the students object strongly to one particular Spartan practice: Each newborn had to be brought to the Ephors for judgment; if they felt the child was sickly and would likely be a burden on the society, the baby was left outside to die of exposure. The classroom discussion raises the question of whether a society should support disadvantaged members, or whether those members should be sacrificed for the good of the whole. As we try to understand the students' and teachers' utterances dialogically — with respect to the interactional positions they adopt in the classroom — we will see that the relationship between disadvantaged and more privileged members of society plays an important role.

The teachers defend Sparta's treatment of unhealthy infants. Right before the segment in question, one teacher argues that "if a baby is going to be a problem in the future…you get rid of it." A student responds with the following example.[5]

> ST: if *she* had a baby and hers lived and *I* had a baby and mine didn't. we not equal.
>
> T1: yeah you're *right*. you didn't produce a healthy baby.
>
> T2: that's right.
>
> ST: how do you *know* that. they just say that one ain't *heal*thy. and then lookit. mine probably grew up to be *tall*er and *stron*ger.
>
> T2: because they're the Spartan *E*phors who make a dec*i*sion. the Ephors know what makes a *good* Spartan because they're *six*ty years old and they've seen an *aw*ful *lot*.

The student, "Jasmine," introduces herself as a hypothetical Spartan mother in this example. She also nominates another student as a second hypothetical Spartan mother.

After Jasmine introduces this example, there are two types of represented content in play: the text, which describes Spartan society, including relations among Ephors and citizens; and the example, which describes the two students' hypothetical babies and how the Ephors might treat them. The example describes two types of relationships, and three general voices. There is the relationship between the two hypothetical Spartan mothers — one of whom must leave her unhealthy-looking child to die of exposure, while the other gets to keep her child. This is a relationship between the out-of-favor and the favored, or between the unprivileged and the privileged. The other relationship is between the mothers and the Ephors. This is a relationship between the subordinate and the powerful.

A monologic account would focus only on these two types of represented content. It might explore the relationship between the conceptual structure set up in

10.47925/1998.370

the example and that in the text, to see whether the example helped students grasp the thematic contents of the text. But it would not attend to the classroom interaction among teachers and students. According to Bakhtin, we cannot fully understand the meaning of teachers' and students' utterances unless we also attend to the types of people who might make similar utterances, and to the implications of these utterances for teachers' and students' own interactional positions.

In exploring the dialogic meaning of this case, we must look for connections between the content represented and the action performed by the students' and teachers' speech. Note that the example of Jasmine's baby includes some of the speakers participating in the classroom interaction itself. The example *doubles* the roles played by Jasmine and Erika. Jasmine, for instance, now has two identities in this classroom conversation: as a student participating in class discussion, and as a hypothetical Spartan mother. As we will see, comments about Jasmine's character within the example come to have implications for Jasmine herself. We can begin to see these implications in the following excerpt, which occurs soon after Jasmine gives her example.

T1: *wait* a second. you're baby's going to grow up and be this unhealthy runt. her baby's going to grow up and be healthy.

JAS: *I'm* equal to *her* then

T1: yeah *you're* equal. but you know take it twenty years in the *fu*ture. *her* baby's going to have to do what for your baby. your baby's going to do what. lay around.

STS: hahahaha drinking beer

T1: drinking beer — eating their bean soup.

If we read this monologically, as represented content, the students and teacher are simply elaborating the pro-Spartan argument here. They articulate the Spartans' reasoning, by imagining how an unhealthy baby would become a burden on the society. If we examine implications for the classroom interaction itself, however, a more disturbing pattern starts to emerge. What sort of person would stereotypically say "your baby's going to do what? lay around…drinking beer?" We would need more evidence to make firm conclusions, but this accusation might "echo" with the voices of U.S. welfare critics, who often decry the alleged laziness of welfare recipients whom taxpayers must support. This particular echo has the potential to shape the verbal interaction among teachers and students, if we remember that the students come from a social group often stereotyped as lazy welfare recipients (lower class blacks).

As the class progresses, one teacher does (perhaps inadvertently) position herself alongside contemporary U.S. welfare critics. A few minutes later this teacher (T1) says, in an animated tone, "but that's the *hitch* isn't it? you've got this baby that's not *hea*lthy and you're afraid's going to *go* in the army, and why should the rest of us support your baby." Note the teacher's use of *us* in this utterance. For the first time, she includes herself in the example, in a group opposed to Jasmine's. Earlier in the discussion teachers and students have attributed a definite voice to

10.47925/1998.370

Jasmine's baby: He is an unproductive freeloader. In this utterance, the teacher presents herself and her social group (whoever is included in *us*) as taxpayers forced to support such freeloaders.

Thus our Bakhtinian analysis of this classroom conversation has uncovered the voices of irate taxpayers and welfare recipients, which are indexed in the discussion of the example. It has also shown how one of the teachers engages in double voicing and positions herself with the welfare critics. The fact that most of these students are lower class blacks also makes it possible that they themselves are being positioned — through the too-common U.S. stereotype — with Jasmine's hypothetical, unproductive baby. At this point, what should the teachers do? Deciding their next move clearly will require judgment, both to help students learn and to defuse a potentially damaging interactional situation.[6] But will such judgment be primarily a matter of knowledge and skills?

Conclusion

The character of the foregoing interaction suggests a negative answer to this question. Despite the apparently rational or cognitive focus of this classroom conversation, things with moral and interactional significance were clearly said. Having been present myself during the classroom event, I argue that no one was fully aware of the socio-moral action going on. Transcription and analysis have allowed us to see it, but teachers and students themselves participated in these events without knowing consciously what they were doing. Others have described more fully how people commonly participate in interactional events without explicit thought.[7] So when teachers use judgment to react at this implicit interactional level, they will not have recourse to propositional knowledge.

But should we not work to *prevent* teachers from reacting in an unreflective way? Shulman argues that teachers ideally make issues explicit and reflect on them. Surely this would be the best strategy for the teachers discussing Jasmine's baby. I would agree that rational deliberation has an important place in education. But the project to eliminate unreflective action in favor of rational deliberation has at least two important shortcomings. First, interactional challenges like the one facing Jasmine's teachers often happen too quickly for reflection. The person who can quickly make an appropriate interactional move is often more interactionally useful than the person who insists on thinking every problem through. Second, even the most deliberate rational discussion involves dialogic action. (The discussion of Jasmine's baby was cognitively complex and quite rational in some respects.) We cannot ever finally escape the interactional consequences of our words by using reflection, because all verbal reflection creates more action.[8]

Nonetheless, defenders of knowledge-based approaches might say, we should try to insulate the cognitive core of education from the inevitable distractions of interactional events. We cannot refute this position definitively. But it seems less plausible in light of the deep interconnections between knowledge and action in classroom practice. The subject matter of the Spartan babies class, for instance, is woven into the dialogic activity surrounding the teachers' position as taxpayers. It is the parallel between roles represented in the example and positions in the

10.47925/1998.370

classroom interaction, after all, that allows the interaction to proceed as it does. We could, it must be admitted, describe the content about socio-political organization in Sparta, independent of any interactional events. But would such a decontextualized representation capture the best teaching practice? Perhaps the goal of education should not be simply to communicate knowledge and nurture the ability to reflect on it. Schools should prepare students to participate in civic life, and this life involves dialogic positioning as well as reflection. Everyday and civic discussions of Sparta's political system, for instance, or of current welfare policies, inevitably involve complex interactional positioning. The socio-moral "dialogues" engendered by any discussion of such subject matter are the very sorts of practices that we want to help students participate in. To overlook such interactions in classrooms would seem to miss part of the educational point.

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1. Lee Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1987): 1-22; Hugh Sockett, "Has Shulman Got the Strategy Right?" *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1987): 208-19; Lee Shulman, "Sounding an Alarm," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (1987): 473-82.

2. The reading of Mikhail Bakhtin presented here is based on three volumes: M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. and trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). These books will be cited as *PDP*, *TDI*, and *SGE*, respectively, in the text with page numbers for all subsequent references.

3. Technically speaking, this phrase *indexes* a particular social group. Speakers in a recognizable social role characteristically use this phrase, and use of the phrase points to that group. In Bakhtinian terminology, which will be elaborated below, subsequent uses of that phrase "echo with" the "voices" of military strategists, spokespeople, and aficionados. As we will see, this does not mean that a speaker cannot use the phrase and distance himself or herself from the military, but to do so would require work to overcome or redirect the presupposed connection.

4. Bakhtin developed most of his insights into language through an analysis of novelistic discourse. But the central points apply to all speech; see Michael Silverstein, "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function," in *Reflexive Language*, ed. John Lucy (New York: Cambridge University Press).

5. In these transcriptions, italics indicates stress, and a period indicates falling intonation.

6. To see how this interaction turned out, see the transcript in Stanton Wortham, *Acting Out Participant Examples in the Cassroom* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994).

7. Erving Goffman calls this level of action "the interaction order," and illustrates how people skillfully participate in interactional events without really *knowing* what they are doing, in Erving Goffman, "The Interaction Order," *American Sociological Review* 48, (1983): 1-17. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" describes a similar level of practical, non-cognitive activity, in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

8. Defenders of knowledge-based accounts might claim that people only act by implementing tacit representations of some sort. This would be a form of reductionism, claiming that all interactional patterns depend on mental representations. This is a deep disagreement, but reductionist mentalism would seem unparsimonious. Why posit redundant mental structure to explain observed interactional structure?

10.47925/1998.370