

CONVERSATION IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: EMPIRICAL CORRECTIVE OR NARCISSISTIC PAP?

Lynda Stone

University of Hawaii at Manoa

Conversation is back in fashion — an odd remark — unless one means more than the casual talk of everyday life. Specifically, conversational salons are back, reports editor Eric Utne, founder of the *Utne Reader's* Neighborhood Salon Association. Its mission "...[is to help members] reinhabit their neighborhoods and fully participate in the life of their communities."¹ Mention of "salons" reminds of an earlier time, when the arts and their worshippers still formed a "kingdom." More so in Germany, France and England, but also in early America,

men...[and women] of light and leading gathered in a few places of favourite resort...[in which] the desire to be sound mingled with the desire to be clever, and produced that wisdom which the eighteenth century loved to call wit. Wit was aphoristically pretentious to truth. It was of course important to talk...sense... [and] to give and receive information in the ordinary social relations of life.²

Within "a communion of minds," the ideal of the salon, continues Chauncey Brewster Tinker, Yale Professor of English Literature, was educational.

Put forward at this point is an implication, in a historical connection of salons — to conversation, education and a bygone era. Engagement in educational conversation, it seems to me, arises from a longing for romanticism. I can offer no direct proof of this connection save for a tracing of research traditions to roots in the humanities. The present task is not this but rather is something more suggestive and rhetorical. Here is the thesis: Answering the question of the title of this paper, of the function and efficacy of conversation in educational practice and research, depends on what accord one gives the romanticist tradition. By way of answer are the following sections: conversation in education, the character of conversation, the roots of romanticism, and the conclusion, as answer to the central question, "Is conversation in educational practice and research empirical corrective or narcissistic pap?"

CONVERSATION IN EDUCATION

In education today, conversations are increasingly visible and valued among "reflective teachers," in research on teaching and teacher education, and in philosophy of education. Teachers, as anyone with experience in schools knows, have always conversed. Teacher researchers have long been interested in "teacher decision-making" and "inquiry." Philosophers of education (largely like their "brothers") have inquired into speech acts, language games, and discourse practices. But, something more is afoot; conversation has taken on new importance and new meaning.

Conversations of practice. As I see it, two prototypes of conversation comprise large parts of the conventional conversation of practice; these are "lunchtable talk" and "ed school talk." The first is the intense chatter of classroom teachers, whether or not they sit around a cafeteria table, as they describe and discuss events of their days. Lunchtable talk is telling stories about — and evaluative probing about — a successful lesson, a need to call a parent, a gripe about the "district." This conversation is extremely personal. No less personal but routinized and sometimes restrained is the talk of teaching candidates (masters and doctoral students, too) as they "professionalize" their work.

Ed school talk is speaking and writing about a need for student motivation, a valuing of self-esteem, a utilization of teaching and learning styles. The first is practiced naturally by teachers as their common sense; the second is taken up by education students as “what they ought to say.” Most often well-intentioned, lunchtable and ed school talk occur in instantiations whose results are both beneficial and harmful. How these and other educational conversations are implicitly beneficial or harmful is the underlying theme of this paper.

Conversations of research. Over the past decade, the daily conversations of practice become first metaphor and then strategy in research on teaching. An example of metaphor is a call from Robert Yinger for teaching practice as conversation — that is natural, human, healthy and moral, as opposed to over- specialized, technologized and institutionalized.³ An example of strategy is Janet Miller’s “talks with teachers.” Conversations mean a series of longitudinal, open-ended interviews in which women teachers describe the connection of teaching “to family and home life” and to their roles of nurturing and caring in classrooms.⁴

Two recently published studies expand the “research strategy” of conversation. In the first, Linda Hunsaker and Marilyn Johnston are teacher and researcher who talk and write together over a four-year period. Their initial focus of “changes in...practices and beliefs of an elementary school teacher” becomes also a study of changes in their collaboration.⁵ Data from their interaction is utilized in collaborative explanations, in individual narratives and in dialogic reconstructions that are “multivoiced and evolving.” In the second, the research strategy is “a conversational approach to learning to teach,” designed as a multi-year series of dinner meetings of a teacher educator and seven pre-service teachers. In her reporting, Sandra Hollingsworth relates that

our talk did not usually take the form of dialogue; nor was it simply a discussion of prearranged topics.... Rather the collaborative talk became the exchange of ideas or informal and intimate conversation.⁶

Conversations of philosophy. The teacher researchers just mentioned cite various theoretical bases for their work, among them feminist and hermeneutic sources. These also appear in writings on conversation in philosophy of education. Best known for “feminist conversation” is Jane Roland Martin’s now classic construction of an analytic conversation between herself and five philosophers on the subject of the education of women.⁷ Conversation is utilized as both metaphor and rhetorical device in a renamed analysis that Martin enters through her interrogation. Her addition is to posit a “gender-sensitive” ideal, one that not only is about the sameness of women’s experience as part of education but that also accounts for difference due to race, ethnicity, and economic status within gender.⁸

Particularly useful for the present undertaking is Karl Hostetler’s recent consideration of hermeneutic and pragmatic content of conversation⁹ that contrasts to Martin’s use as method. He utilizes Richard Rorty’s account of anti-representationalist and anti-essentialist vocabularies (read, conversational tools),¹⁰ and takes on the issues of a frequent incompatibility in inquiry as well as a distinction between inquiry and conversation. For Rorty, the former is an exchange of views that aims at consensus, often through argumentation; the latter aims at “imaginative identification with others” through attempts to “try on different views, to entertain creative recontextualization...[and to pose] a proliferation of ideas.”¹¹ An addition from Hostetler is to recontextualize conversation for educational reform through the development of a common ground for collaboration and a “richer, more complex vocabulary.”¹²

THE CHARACTER OF CONVERSATION

Although in the examples above Hostetler is the only writer to deal directly with the character of conversation, nonetheless some features are apparent. Conversations of practice suggest elements of the situatedness and mutuality of a working through of present experience. This working through is occasioned by a somewhat equal exchange of ideas and feelings. In general, conversations of

practice are highly personal and engaging. In conversations of research, the personal is extended into a greater public realm — actually realms — first of talk over time and of talk recorded for attention by others not party to the primary conversations themselves. Herein conversations take on systemization and sanction, for instance in procedures and their norms. Lastly, they lose their intimacy (in spite of efforts to retain this in citation); their constructed meaning is indirect and abstract rather than direct and concrete. Conversations of philosophy add further to characterization. One significant implication is that conversation is theoretically as well as situationally contextualized. An example of this is Martin’s positioning of women’s experience to conversation — and her own use of it as a feminist philosopher. A second is Hostetler’s warning against conversation in education merely for political purposes.

Implied also are epistemological and ethical dimensions of the use of conversation.¹³ Epistemologically one begins with the modernist distinction between objectivist and relativist foundations of knowledge. Most simply put, objectivists believe that “there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework...[to appeal to] in determining the nature of...[truth and rightness].”¹⁴ Some objectivists subscribe to subjective foundations, such as the transcendental subject or innate universal cognitive structures. In contrast, relativists believe that “there is no higher appeal than to a given conceptual scheme, language game, set of social practices or historical epoch.”¹⁵ Some relativists set great store in realist non-foundations such as contextual influences, while others rely on idealist non-foundations such as ideologies. These stores and reliances, of course, assist in their explanations of human action and are not absolutes.

Objectivist and relativist orientations contribute initially to assessing the efficacy of conversation in education, but with limited utility. One might claim that objectivists are prone to define conversation as “narcissistic pap,” and relativists to define it as “empirical corrective.” This opposition and its modernist framework is returned to and transformed at the end of this paper — in a claim of better use.

ROOTS IN ROMANTICISM

The central point of the paper thus far is that “conversation” is currently de rigueur in educational practice, research, and philosophy. Particular value comes from giving voices to women teachers long silent about their own lives, and in employing natural forms of intercourse and reflection in order to present their viewpoints (i.e., using their own vocabularies). Any politically-incorrect disparagement is based not on denial of voices per se but on maintenance of value for generalization and universalizability of conversational content, and of “objective” over “subjective” research.

Those who approve of and engage in educational conversations do value the subjective elements of their endeavors. They value inquiry, reflection, teacher thinking and theorizing, phenomenological and descriptive explorations. They value the persons and the processes of educational situations more than the outcomes of interactions. Moreover, they do not value as much aspects of educational life that they view as abstract, sterile and distanced from actual classrooms, teachers and students. Finally, if they employ an educational language of technical rationality and prediction, they do so without recognizing its contradictions to the vivid experiential world they inhabit.

Educational “conversationalists,” especially those who are researchers, do understand that there are theoretical roots for their beliefs. Many are trained in the more therapeutic schools of psychology, in interpretive anthropology and in curriculum theory of various sorts. Many, also, acknowledge debts to the writings of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey.¹⁶ Most are qualitative researchers. Most see themselves as reacting against a dominant “scientism” in educational practice and research and acknowledge their allegiance to insights in the humanities. They do not, however, cite romanticism as a source or as a present orientation for their work.

Nonetheless, the rhetorical thesis of this paper is that educational conversations are fraught with a longing for something “else” in the conditions, situations and lives that constitute schooling and teaching. Often this longing is encapsulated in the stories — the form and content — of conversations:

[There is a] kaleidoscope of stories, changing, flowing, crashing against one another, each one playing, light and shadow, off the others in an infinity.... There are moral myths and heroic accounts, subversive parables and standard homilies...tales of humiliation and of triumph, tragedy and transcendence, the sad story of the slow and silent erosion of passion and concern.¹⁷

A first step in finding, or recapturing, or creating this something else is one of speaking out and being heard. A claiming of “voice,” this breaking of “silence,” is a desire for recognition, for empowerment and power, for efficacy.

In their best instantiations, the romantic conversations of educational life acknowledge their own limitations and failings. One of these is the danger of narcissism. One researcher puts it thus:

[There was a] troublesome tendency...in our...conversations to become insular and self-absorbed. Initially we had thought it wonderful just to know others felt the same joys and frustrations in their work...[and to share these]. But after a few months of sharing and venting, the wonder wore off, and it seemed that we ought to do something more. In fact...[often] we felt worse about our work than better, as if...we had recognized our bitterness and sealed ourselves in.¹⁸

The point, to emphasize, is not that conversations *are* romantic — nor that there is anything inherently wrong with the romantic attitude.¹⁹ But there is potential danger in educational terms if romanticism becomes narcissism. Part of the present thesis is that acknowledgement of this danger is itself preceded by a recognition of romanticist roots.

Root one: temper of the times. The rise of educational conversation, and of conversational salons for that matter (seemingly among the euro-american, middle class), requires a bit of contextualizing. Compare the following description of another time to these times. It was a period of “rapid growth of population, urbanisation, trade dislocations and periodic famines, [when] social misery was such to breed discontent and revolt.”²⁰ This was the period beginning around 1750 and ending about 1840.²¹ Today seems little different: a time of economic depression and widespread homelessness, of imminent ecological disaster and ethnic unrest. Not surprisingly, the educational institution mirrors the societal instability. Some look for quick fixes but most are skeptical of these. Most wonder what can be done, a wondering that brings its own malaise. To counter this, there is both a longing for impossible answers and a kind of fervent assertion of optimism. To me, this reads like a return to, or better said, a resurgence of romanticism.

Root two: style of discourse. Related to instability and to change that it signifies, is a reactive response to previously prevalent forms of discourse. In the case of the earlier romantics, this was both to a perceived failure of the Enlightenment and at its end, to a brief flowering of scholarly and artistic classicism. Then as now, science is a romantic target in its prediction of certainty and its failure to provide it. As historian R. W. Harris writes, “The Romantic poet and philosopher started from the assumption that empirical science and philosophy were inadequate as a means of answering all the important questions concerning human life.”²² The romantic belief remains that science is too sterile and too far removed from “life.” And, since everyday life is valued, forms of describing it are valued that get at its everydayness. In the past age, the turn was to poetry, to what Shelley called “the poetry of life” that placed imagination above reason for the moral good.²³ In education today, as previously set out, the turn is to conversation and then to narrative as its scholarly medium. Once again, this seems “romantic.”

Root three: way of the folk. Mentioned above as “everydayness,” the content of romanticist conversation revolves around commoners and common life — as a kind of utopia. This is subtle because under the guise of “real” discourse forms, the idea is to be liberated “from the

oppressiveness of what is extant, actual, established and determined.”²⁴ Folkways are valued because they are authentic in feeling and image. Authenticity, furthermore, comes in direct, unmediated “experience.” Likewise, just as experience is valued, so are other concepts (and their experiential practices) such as nature and myth, family and community. There is a longing, it seems to me, for the pastoral and for the pastore. Lastly, in spite of their collective name, folkways are individualistic. This means in conversations of research, for instance, that individual teachers desire and ought to have voice and that individual classrooms are studied and interpreted. The particular is valued precisely because it counters the general. This counter is both to science and to the abstract, alienating life of the times.

EMPIRICAL CORRECTIVE VS. NARCISSISTIC PAP

As a teacher, teacher educator, or philosopher of education, the issue of conversation in education is more than just deciding whether to take up a modernist longing for romanticism. It is to consider the educational implications of a romantic position; some are epistemological and some are ethical. Both are best understood when the theoretical base of conversation is transformed from the modern to the postmodern. Epistemologically, postmodernism retains some valuable features of a romantic attitude: the value of particular, lived situations of conversation and their working through. Gone is any need either for an objectivist foundation or for a narrowly conceived relativist orientation. Gone also is the need for an abstracted scientific basis and a testing of conversational process or content. Conversation is now understood as “empirical corrective” to a positivist project of over-analysis of educational meaning. In this regard, while definition and conceptual clarification are useful, educational meaning is more than essentialized analysis; it is a continual reconstruction of meaning-in-use. The empirical, the experimental, the existential surely counts.²⁵

However, accepting conversation as an empirical corrective does not rid educational practice and research situations of an ethical problematic — of a limiting narcissism. The initiating question of this paper is not answered so simply. Rather there persists a danger in an narrow privileging of conversational experience. The nature of this danger is explored following some comment about its constitution.

What is the creation, use, and valuing of narcissistic pap has three forms, it seems to me. The first is a narcissism of experience, the second is a narcissism of voice, and the third is a narcissism of self. Each is a kind of naive, personal reliance that results in three uncritical attitudes. Narcissism of experience is the creation of a new dualism, no longer of theory and practice, but now in the conceptualization of “my experience and my practice,” as opposed to those of others. Narcissism of voice is the assumption of personal arrogance, in believing that one’s own experiences, ideas and beliefs are always the best because they are one’s own. Narcissism of self is an individual dogmatism, in either refusing or being incapable of seeing any other positions but one’s own, and even of recognizing any difficulties with one’s own views. Narcissisms of experience, voice, and self are manifested in exemplars of conversational content: First, “I did it, so I know it’s true.” Second, “I have a right to my own opinion.” Third, “I feel it in my gut.”

As indicated, narcissistic pap results in non-critical attitudes toward educational practice and research (and philosophy too). Such attitudes are conserving in nature and work against the creation of new ideas and visions, and clearly against reforms. But in general they do more. What becomes narcissistic privilege promotes harm against others, since their experiences, voices, and selves are not acknowledged or valued. Now, one can partially value others but, it seems to me, that the tendency is toward valuing only similarity and sameness — those who agree with me — and not in valuing plurality and diversity of views. The point is that anyone’s experience, voice, and self — anyone’s life — is necessarily limited and limiting. This is because there is so much more, so much other possible and different from what any one person or any one group of people can know.

Accepting this limitation brings a kind of humility to the conversations of daily practice, teaching research, and educational philosophy. There are no grand schemes, no final answers, no “perfects” or

ends to what is undertaken in the name of education. Such humility need not be enervating: rather, it can be invigorating — first in enhancing curiosity and second, in fostering generosity. Curiosity comes in seeking new ideas, new views that extend conversations; generosity comes in receiving other parties and their new views with openness.²⁶ Such an openness need not be uncritical, of course, since to be uncritical perpetuates narcissism.

One final understanding underpins educational conversations that promote better teachers, better students and their learning, and better classrooms. This is that educational narcissism is unethical. It harms the narcissistic person by limiting her own growth; it harms others by perpetuating dualistic and hierarchical stereotypes and discriminations. It harms the educational institution in general. Eradicating this harm entails commitment to conversations that are inclusive and varying, that are “critical” in the best sense, and that attend to “longings” for great changes that are coupled with purposeful, present-centered action. In this new view, both critical attitudes and longings are transformed for the postmodern era. Given this transformation and its ethical results, conversations of educational practice and research become appropriate and worthwhile.²⁷

¹ See Eric Utne, “Editor’s Note,” *Utne Reader* 52 (July/August, 1992): 50.

² Clarence Brewster Tinker, *The Salon and English Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), 6-7.

³ Robert Yinger, “The Conversation of Practice,” in *Encouraging Reflective Practice in Education*, ed. R. Clift, W. R. Houston, and M. Pugach (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 74.

⁴ Janet Miller, “Women as Teachers: Enlarging Conversations on Issues of Gender and Self-Concept,” *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 1 (Winter 1986): 111-21.

⁵ Linda Hunsaker and Marilyn Johnston, “Teacher Under Construction: A Collaborative Case Study of Teacher Change,” *American Educational Research Journal* 29 (Summer 1992): 351.

⁶ Sandra Hollingsworth, “Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation: A Feminist Approach,” *American Educational Research Journal* 29 (Summer 1992): 375.

⁷ Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁸ Martin, 177.

⁹ Karl Hostetler, “Rorty and Collaborative Inquiry in Education: Consensus, Conflict and Conversation,” *Educational Theory* 42 (Summer 1992): 285-98.

¹⁰ See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 156. See also *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹ Hostetler, 294, 295.

¹² Hostetler, 297-98.

¹³ I return to ethical considerations in the conclusion.

¹⁴ Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 8.

¹⁵ Bernstein, 11.

¹⁶ *Reflection in Teacher Education*, ed. Peter Grimmet and Gaalen Erickson (New York: Teachers College Press and Pacific Educational Press, 1988); and Donald Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching*

and *Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).

¹⁷ William Ayers, "In the Country of the Blind: Telling Our Stories," in *Teacher Lore: Learning from Our Own Experience*, ed. William Schubert and William Ayers (New York: Longman, 1992), 155.

¹⁸ Joseph McDonald, "Raising the Teacher's Voice and the Ironic Role of Theory," *Harvard Educational Review* 56 (November, 1986): 356.

¹⁹ See Crane Brinton, "Romanticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1967), 206.

²⁰ R. W. Harris, *Romanticism and the Social Order* (London: Blandford Press, 1969), 9.

²¹ Various interpretations are offered about the dates and themes of romanticism. See Arthur Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1948), 228-53.

²² Harris, 19.

²³ Harris, 20.

²⁴ Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 89. See also 5-9.

²⁵ The term "empirical corrective" is from Nel Noddings (personal communication, 1991).

²⁶ Much of my approach to ethics is indebted to Noddings. See *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).

²⁷ Thanks to Al Neiman and Michael Parsons for initial conversations about this paper, and to Marilyn Johnston, Clemence McLaren, Anne Phelan, and Gay Reed for specific references.

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