

Commitment in Dialogue

Suzanne Rice

University of Kansas

In responding to Biesta, I feel rather superfluous. While in his paper, Biesta wishes to distinguish what he calls “ethical” and “empirical” varieties of pedagogical communication, Burbules is cast as the sole representative of the first of these varieties, and Biesta himself as the second. Biesta’s paper is concerned largely with distinguishing his ideas from Burbules’s, and PES provides a forum where the two could discuss their views directly, face-to-face. If anything, this third-party response is likely to add confusion because, as I read them and as I will suggest here, the key difference that Biesta sees between his position and the one articulated by Burbules is more superficial than substantive.

Much of the apparent disagreement between these positions hinges on a particular understanding of “commitment” and its relation to dialogue. In Biesta’s account, “commitment” is viewed as wholly self-conscious, and dialogue is viewed as requiring self-conscious commitment: “Burbules makes dialogue totally dependent upon...commitment. Dialogue will only happen when two human subjects have committed themselves to engaging in it. This ethical commitment comes first; dialogue is derivative.” This particular view of commitment undergirds the criticisms of dialogical, or “ethical,” pedagogy that follow in Biesta’s paper, and it provides the backdrop against which Biesta develops his own “empirical” alternative.

Viewed differently, however, “commitment” and its manifestation in dialogue will appear much less problematic, when judged from the “empirical” perspective Biesta outlines. Now, typically, commitment does connote self-consciousness. Most of us have numerous commitments of which we are fully aware; and accurately or not, we see ourselves as acting, at least sometimes, out of self-conscious commitment. I assume that we are all self-consciously committed to our families and friends, to our academic work, and to various other educational, social, and political projects. Some of us may also be self-consciously committed to the value of dialogue, and because of this seek to cultivate and nurture dialogical relations in educational contexts.

But commitment can also be implicit. For example, that players in a game are committed to its rules is implicit in the fact that the game proceeds.¹ If they were not committed, the game would come to an end. Commitment is made apparent in the playing of the game. In dialogue, the presence of commitment is implicit in the fact of two or more partners actually engaging in dialogue, regardless of whether they have made a self-conscious commitment to the process. No one can force another to engage in dialogue, and where at least implicit commitment is lacking, dialogue, like a game, comes to an end. A commitment to dialogue is implied when partners do talk with one another; its lack is implied, among other ways, when one or both partners inflict the “silent treatment,” leave the room, or throw a punch.

There are also those instances where individuals’ commitment to certain values or practices is implied, even as they explicitly, self-consciously reject these values or practices. Recent discussions about “dialogue” itself are illustrative. Several authors argue that dialogue is an undesirable educational aim;² but that they *do* argue this case (rather than, say, remaining silent or physically attacking persons who try to engage them in dialogue) reveals, implicitly, a commitment to dialogue--the very value they want to reject. Habermas describes the simultaneous embodiment and explicit rejection of a value as a “performative contradiction.”

On the account offered here, self-conscious commitment is not a precondition of dialogue, but instead may develop out of commitment that is merely implicit. Over time, what begins as wholly unselfconscious chatter, can develop into the kind of commitment to which Biesta refers. I take this to be Burbules's point when he says: "A commitment might not precede...dialogue, but [arise] only gradually in the spirit of the engagement."³ It is in light of this understanding that many authors struggle to identify the conditions that enable "the spirit of engagement."⁴ These authors do not assume that all students arrive at school with a fully developed sense of commitment to engaging in dialogue with teachers or with one another, but they do assume that dialogue is generally a precondition for such commitment, when it is lacking. This assumption should not be confused with the naive belief that dialogue always results in self-conscious commitment, either to persons or to the process of dialogue; sometimes dialogue not only exacerbates pre-existing tensions but also creates new ones. The assumption is merely that if commitment develops, then this will be because students have actually engaged in dialogue. Indeed, from Aristotle to Vygotsky, a recurring idea is that actually participating in dialogue engenders the capacity for making a self-conscious commitment to dialogue (or other values).

Overlooking the sense in which commitment can be implicit, it is reasonable to conclude, as Biesta does, that dialogical pedagogy presupposes "intentional subjects," and that such pedagogy is at odds with the "brute facts of child development." Biesta paraphrases Richard Peters regarding these "facts": "At the most formative years of a child's development he is incapable of a communicative or dialogical form of life."⁵ Judging against the view of child development he attributes to Peters, Biesta concludes that those who find dialogical pedagogy appealing "either ignore [the facts], or act against their better judgment." Dialogue, in this view, is impossible for the young child because he or she is not yet an "intentional subject" who can make a self-conscious commitment to dialogue.

There are differences between the babbling and cooing that occurs in the nursery and the more clearly dialogical posing and answering of questions that occurs in the classroom (to pick one variety of dialogue); and, as Biesta says, it may be the case that infants and young children lack the ability to commit. But, as I read him, Burbules does not argue that mature commitment must precede dialogue; at one point, as indicated above, he even explicitly denies that this is his view.

I understand the argument he does make to be at least roughly compatible with Biesta's own. Burbules argues that much human learning occurs implicitly, rather than through direct instruction. To pick an obvious example, babies and toddlers are not "instructed" in their native language; they learn this language through everyday interaction with mature speakers. Burbules uses the terms "initiation" and "involvement" to characterize this kind of learning.⁶ In this view, our ability to engage in communication that is clearly recognizable as "dialogue," develops over time in the context of communicative relations. We learn to engage in dialogue by actually engaging in dialogue; and it is in this sense that the learning process is "bootstrapped."⁷ Obviously, this view, like Biesta's own, presupposes some form of community. It is in virtue of community that we are provided, among other things, a language (which Burbules argues is itself "dialogical") with which to engage in dialogue.

There may be many differences between Biesta's and Burbules's views on dialogue and education. Perhaps these would be clearer to me if Biesta discussed the implications for educational practices that follow from his empirical claims: What recommendations for policy or pedagogy might follow from the assertions that "education is communication" and that "community...is a constitutive precondition...of education?" Here, I have merely suggested that dialogue need not be viewed as somehow at odds with Biesta's claims. It seems, however, that if Biesta were to spell out the positive implications of these claims, at least in one respect, his account would become more like Burbules's; then, he too would be offering an "ethical" variety of communicative pedagogy.

1. Many have discussed this basic idea at length, including Burbules in *Dialogue and Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); see also, John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 52-

54.

2. See, for example, Mustafa U. Kiziltan, William J. Bain, and Anita Canizares, "Postmodern Conditions: Rethinking Public Education," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 3 (1990): 351-69.

3. Burbules, *Dialogue and Teaching*, 15.

4. Burbules himself discusses such conditions in *Dialogue and Teaching*; see also, for example, James W. Garrison and Stephanie L Kimball, "Dialoging Across Differences: Three Hidden Barriers," in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994), 177-85; Mary Field Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

5. My copy of Peters's essay reads: "What then is the paradox of moral education as I conceive it? It is this: given that it is desirable to develop people who conduct themselves rationally, intelligently, and with a fair degree of spontaneity, the brute facts of child development reveal that at the most formative years of a child's development he is incapable of this form of life and impervious to the proper manner of passing it on." "Reason and Habit: The Paradox of Moral Education," in *Moral Education in a Changing Society*, ed. W. R. Niblett (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 54.

6. Burbules, *Dialogue and Teaching*, 58.

7. *Ibid.*, 61.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED