

FORUM

Buber and the Dialectic of Teaching

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Martin Buber, building upon the time-honored pedagogical method, proposed a dialectic whereby the teacher is able to engage the student in an *I-Thou* encounter. From such an experience, the student learns experientially the human relatedness between "self" and "others." Such a pedagogy required that the teacher lives in the present to encounter the full freedom of the student's otherness, an otherness that is addressed and that responds in the total unpredictability of human freedom. Although these experiences are fated to be of short durations, relatedness between "self" and expanded "others" is fostered in the student.

Martin Buber, faisant fond sur la méthode pédagogique consacrée par l'usage, proposait un dialecte de laquelle l'enseignant peut engager l'étudiant dans un rencontre *Moi-Toi*. À partir d'une telle expérience, l'étudiant apprend par l'expérience les relations humaines entre *soi* et *les autres*. Une telle pédagogie exige que l'enseignant vive dans le présent pour qu'il puisse rencontrer la liberté pleine de l'autre de l'étudiant, l'autre qui est adressé et qui répond avec la liberté humaine dans une manière tout à fait imprévisible. Quoique ces expériences sont destinées à la vie éphémère, les relations entre *soi* et *les autres* sont entretenues chez l'étudiant.

Martin Buber, the existentialist, building upon the time honored pedagogical method, proposed an *I-Thou* dialectic as a point of departure for teaching. The basic difference between relating to a thing or to an object which I observe, and to a person or a "Thou" that addresses me and to whose address I respond is the fundamental dichotomy of this pedagogical approach (Buber, 1965; Wyschogrod 1967). A person, as well as an object, can also be addressed as an "It." This insight became a theme that ran through all of Buber's work on

such diverse topics as history, religion, sociology, and economics. In education, Buber's I-Thou dialectic has influenced a host of areas, including adult education (Cohen, 1980; Weinstein, 1979), bilingual education (Kupinsky 1983), educational leadership (Gehrke, 1988), ethics and values in educational practices (Watress, 1986; Weinstein & Schwartz, 1979), peace education (Cohen, 1980; Gordon, 1980), reading and literacy (Rasinski & Nathenson-Mejia, 1987), teaching hearing-impaired students (Teller & Lindsey, 1987), communication (Arnett, 1982; Stewart, 1978), teaching of composition (Matott, 1976), counseling (Gutsch & Rosenblatt, 1973; Seckinger, 1976), and educational theatre (Buss, 1974). This model of education assumes a dialectic between two persons, teacher and student. The teacher does not hide behind a role but engages in a dialogue in which the teacher and student speak to each other. The teacher encounters the student for the individual he or she is, attempting to provide a grounding in the student's life for the infusion of human relatedness between *self* and *others*.

This paper will briefly discuss the history of dialectic. This will be followed by a description of the I-Thou dialectic as a process where the teacher lives in the present to encounter the full freedom of the student's otherness, an otherness that is addressed and that responds in the total unpredictability of human freedom. Buber's I-Thou dialectic is presented as a humanizing teaching model whereby the teacher educates the student so that the knowledge becomes an organic part of the student's existence.

History of the Dialectic

The word "dialectic" originates from the Greek expression for the art of conversation (Hall, 1993). Aristotle recognized Zeno of Elea, the author of the fifth century B.C. famous paradoxes, as the inventor of dialectic (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives V*). Zeno employed dialectic in refuting the hypotheses of opponents by drawing unacceptable consequences from those hypotheses. By demonstrating the law of formal logic known as *modus tollens* (i.e., if p implies q , and q is false, then p is false), Zeno was also a pioneer of logic (Hall, 1993). While Zeno used such indirect logical arguments to defeat an opponent, the Sophists assumed the method as merely a means for winning disputes, employing invalid argumentation and sophistic tricks.

Although Socrates was not above using the dialectic as a method for winning an argument, he was more inclined to use the dialectic as a means of seeking the truth. Under Socrates, the dialectic became a search for truth by question and answer, supplemented by leading the opponent on to a generalization by getting him to accept the truth of a series of propositions about particular cases.

By the middle dialogues of Plato, dialectic is viewed as the supreme philosophical method, "the coping-stone, as it were, placed above the sciences" (Republic, 534E). Later, Aristotle viewed the distinguishing feature of dialectic as the epistemological status of the premises rather than the type of reasoning. For acquiring knowledge proper, Aristotle asserted that demonstration is required. Valid reasoning starts from true and self-evident premises. "Dialectic, being a process of criticism, contains the path to the principles of all inquiries" (*Topics*, 101b3).

Hegel regarded dialectic not merely as a process of reasoning, but also as a process inherent in history, and in the universe as a whole, composed of a necessary movement from thesis to antithesis, and then to a synthesis of the two. Later, Engels made Hegelian dialectic part of Dialectical Materialism, which, in turn, became, the philosophical basis of Marxism.

The I-Thou Dialectic

Buber's I-Thou dialectic emphasizes the process between persons meeting in authentic relation. Buber's I-Thou dialectic has the capacity to both inform and transform education. The opposite of the I-Thou is an *I-It*. The I-It relationship is not a genuine relationship because the dialectic does not take place between the I and the It. When a person is an It, I am perfectly alone. I may observe him or her, and find elements that he or she has in common with other persons and things and elements that distinguishes him or her from them. This all takes place within me; I am judging and I am observing. In contrast, the I-Thou relationship is genuine because it is between me and the Thou that addresses me. The Thou is no longer one thing among others; rather, the whole universe is seen in the light of the Thou, and the Thou is the light of the universe. "I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being; I-It can never be spoken with the whole being" (Buber, 1965).

The very nature of the I-It relationship is maintained by only part of ourselves; another part of ourselves remains outside the relationship and views the relationship from some vantage point. In contrast, the I-Thou relationship involves the whole being. Should the teacher attempt to hold back any part of his or herself, the result will be an I-It situation, because part of the teacher is not a participant but a spectator. The Thou who is addressed must be encountered in the full freedom of his or her otherness, an otherness that is addressed and that responds in the total unpredictability of human freedom. Consider Buber's remark concerning the I-Thou encounter:

If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I-Thou to him [or her], he or she is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things. Thus, a human being is not he [or she], a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he [or she] a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbor, and whole in himself [or herself], he [or she] is Thou and fills the heavens So long as the heaven of Thou is spread over me the winds of causality cowers at my heels, and the whirlpool of fate stays its course.

In the I-Thou relationship, the teacher is genuinely living in the present because he or she is prepared for any and every response of the student, the expected as well as the unexpected. Hence, the teacher is genuinely listening. Rather than hearing what is determined by the teacher's past knowledge of the student, or according to the teacher's own theories, the teacher is hearing what the student is saying, aware that the student is saying something that is new. The teacher does not know ahead of time what the student will say nor does the teacher filter what the student says according to the teacher's own prejudgements. The student in the I-It dialectic, in contrast, is regarded as a vessel, an object to be filled with information and not experiences. Rather than impressing a vast array of facts on the student's memory, the teacher in the I-Thou dialectic educates the student so that knowledge can become an organic part of his or her existence. Although the I-Thou encounter is a moment that is bound to pass, what is learned from such encounters continues and informs new experiences. As Buber (1965) points out:

But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every Thou in our world must become an It. It does not matter how exclusively present the Thou was in the direct relation. As

soon as the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the Thou becomes an object among objects – perhaps the chief, but still one of them, fixed in its size and its limits The human being who was even now single and unconditioned, not something lying to hand, only present, not able to be experienced, only able to be fulfilled, how now become a He or a She, a sum of qualities, a given quantity with a certain shape Every Thou in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things. The It is the eternal Chrysalis, the Thou the eternal butterfly.

Indeed human life would be impossible if there were only I-Thou encounters. Hence, Buber maintains that although the person who lives with only I-It encounters is not human, the person without I-It encounters cannot live.

Through the I-Thou dialectic, an attitude of communion and relatedness between self and expanded others is fostered in the student. The I-It relationship is a relationship toward the other or the world characterized by impersonalness, arrogance, and willfulness that is based on a dualism that divides life and institutions while lacking the courage to risk real openness with personal involvement. The I-Thou relationship toward the other or the world is characterized by an immediate, spontaneous, and humble attitude. Hence, the student is educated to become a person with authentic social consciousness.

Rather than imposing moral beliefs upon the student as part of a curriculum, the I-Thou dialectic helps the student to become aware of moral beliefs toward the world and others. Instead of attempting to help students acquire “universal principles of justice of the reciprocity and equality of the human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons” (Kohlberg, 1976), the I-Thou dialectic is a process where the purpose is to cultivate human beings who are capable of keeping in mind (and heart) the human dimensions of experience precisely in the kinds of situations in which is it so easily lost sight of (Perarsky, 1982). Moreover, students taught in the I-Thou dialectic may question the concentration of political force and authority, as a result of having had an I-Thou encounter.

Conclusion

The dialectic is a time honored method of teaching. Buber's I-Thou dialectic enlists the teacher to engage the student in an authentic dialogue. The teacher does this by being deeply him or herself, recognizing the student for the person he or she is. Although such dialectical experiences inevitable pass, such experiences can infuse in the student a sense of relatedness between self and others. Because the school often serves the role of halfway house between the personal walls of the home and the increasingly impersonal outside world, the I-Thou can help cultivate human beings who are capable of keeping in mind (and heart) the human dimension of experience, especially in the most impersonal ones.

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