

# Dialogic Interaction in Online Distance Education: A Bakhtinian Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Discussions of dialogue have been at the center of education theory for many years and more recently in the field of Distance Education. Prominent in those theories are the works of Borge Holmberg and Michael Moore. In addition, recent discussions of dialogue have focused on the work of Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). As a critic and philosopher, Bakhtin made major contributions to the analysis of dialogue, though he is not a contemporary of online distance education. In the field of education generally, researchers have begun citing Bakhtin's works through epistemological perspectives but predominantly those perspectives have been related to the face-to-face classroom settings. Considerably less material has been written about the online distance education setting. This paper challenges the assumptions of Holmberg and Moore and seeks to put forth some of Bakhtin's ideas within the online class setting. The terms examined include ideological becoming, authoritative discourse, internally persuasive discourse, monologism, dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival, and silence. Each of these terms is discussed with implications to online distance education.

## INTRODUCTION

Online distance education has been around for just a short period of time; distance education a little longer; education is quite old; but dialogue dates back to the beginnings of humanity. One might think it a difficult task to associate the old with the new, yet this paper aims to accomplish that objective. The current discussions of online distance education revolve around the role of dialogue. It is seen as a conduit through which knowledge is passed, it is used as a means of overcoming the feeling of isolation that online students experience, it is always relegated to the metaphor of a tool used only to produce something, it is rarely studied reflectively. This paper offers an alternative view of dialogue as not a tool to be used in education but as a characteristic of education itself. To do this, the concepts of 20<sup>th</sup> century literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin have been chosen to view dialogue in a different light. In so doing the theories of Borge Holmberg and Michael Moore are offered as contrast to Bakhtin's ideas. It is hoped that expanding the discussion of dialogue and allowing a counter-traditional viewpoint will encourage a heartier respect for dialogue as a player in the field of online distance education.

## OVERVIEW OF DIALOGUE

### **Why Dialogue?**

The place of dialogue in education has been an integral part of the transfer of knowledge for centuries. Early educators recognized the importance of the exchange of thoughts, ideas, concepts, and the knowing of facts. The remarkable people of ancient Athens realized that teaching and learning began with the information that each individual already possessed. Through talking, questioning, and positing, people could move toward new discoveries. Even as technology encroached on the teaching and learning cycle, dialogue remained central to

education as a teaching tool. More recently the advent of online distance education has caused some educators to re-evaluate the role that dialogue plays in the learning environment.

Dialogue begins in the realm of perception. As humans we are connected to the world through our sensory experiences, i.e. *perception*. As such we are sensitive to variations across a spectrum depending on the particular sense. To describe perception in terms of variables, Woelfel and Fink note that we can typically detect sounds between 10 hertz and about 20,000 hertz; we are visually sensitive to a limited spectrum of light and colors, and so on. Our ability to understand our environment is based on detecting the differences in these sensations and not relying on a steady state. Smell is an excellent example. We may detect a bad smell when we first encounter it but soon it is barely noticeable. Therefore *difference* is a major variable in our ability to encounter our world.

The second major variable is *time*. We encounter the world linearly from a time perspective. Although some scientists would suggest that time only exists because we choose to measure it, the fact remains that we encounter the world sequentially. While this model of difference and time suggest that one person may process the world individually, it does not mean that all people process the world equally. If we were to plot and sum the sensory experiences of one person ( $p$ ) over a given time interval ( $t$ ), we could represent this in the following way:

$$P:e_i = \sum_{(1,...i)}(t)$$

where  $e$  is the sensory experience (sound, light, etc.),  $i$  is the number of different experiences being measured, and  $t$  is constant interval of time. If we were to do this with lots of individuals there would be many individual differences but a commonality would be recognized as the population regressed. Further, if the individuals were chosen from a uniform culture the regression would become more robust. This regression would suggest that where there are

commonalities of experiences, we construct a social reality which is similarly expressed through communication. As cited by Woelfel and Fink, Einstein said:

By the aid of language different individuals can, to a certain extent, compare their experiences. Then it turns out that certain sense perceptions of different individuals correspond to each other, while for other sense perceptions no such correspondence can be established. We are accustomed to regard as real those sense perceptions which are common to different individuals, and which therefore are, in a sense, impersonal. (Woelfel & Fink, 1980, p. 32)

The implications of Einstein's statement suggest a bifocal view of dialogue. Through the first lens one observes dialogue as individualized, i.e., how an individual might verbalize experienced perceptions to him/herself within the confines of his or her own language and culture. Through the second lens one observes how the individual might express that experience to another person. Once an expression has been declared, it becomes subject to the interpretive filters of that other person with varying degrees of accuracy. The accuracy and agreement of symbolic meaning of the two individuals are indicative of the resultant dialogic connection.

Communication is made of more than just words and sentences and syntax.

Communication includes all kinds of nonverbal nuances derived from paralanguage, haptics, kinesics, artifacts, proxemics, chronemics, facial expressions, and personal appearance. As people, we are walking, talking bundles of communication signals, some are intentional and some are unintentional. In the classroom teachers and students continue to utilize all the signals at their command to engage in a choreography of teaching and learning. In order for us to experience the symbolic world of knowledge as it is passed to us we need a tool for organizing and transferring that knowledge. Dialogue therefore becomes a rhetorical response to learning

exigencies which arise within a teaching-learning situation. What happens, however, when some of those signals are mitigated or removed altogether? Does dialogue suffer? Is the character of dialogue changed? Does dialogue cease completely? The nature of the changes that dialogue undergoes as teaching moves from the physical classroom to the cyber classroom is the subject of much discussion these days within the distance education discipline.

There are characteristic differences between the traditional classroom teaching venue and the more recent online distance education venue. Notably distance education is just that, distant. Students and teachers are separated physically in time and space. The usual and customary communication rules are confounded by a change in context. Individuals lack the shared physical presence which allows for the full range of communication messages. Technology may come to the rescue with video conferencing, and audio messages, but a fuller view of the world which one person can see existing behind another individual is lacking. For example, one cannot see the top of his own head, or the vista that exists behind, however that information is privy to another individual. However, in text-based online distance education a large amount of message paths are distorted or absent. Does dialogue have to change in this context in order to do its job? How we view dialogue in the traditional setting and how we view it in the new frontier of computer mediated communication is a subject worthy of further investigation.

### **Why Dialogue in Education?**

This paper addresses the traditional explanations of dialogue in text based online distance education (TBODE), notably Holmberg's empathy approach and Moore's transactional distance model (Holmberg, 2005; Moore, 2005). This paper contends that these approaches to dialogue as the cornerstone of TBODE would benefit from a more robust encompassing of dialogic theory based on the concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin. Holmberg and Moore attempt to prescribe functional

approaches to manipulating dialogue in the online setting. Their ideas, even though practical, offer little insight into the nature of dialogue. Beaudoin actually comes closer in his discussion of the online lurker as he questions what we know about student and faculty interaction and if learning has to be 'visible' in order for it to occur (Beaudoin, 2003, p. 121). Beaudoin seems to understand that there is a deeper dimension of dialogue, one that is necessary in order for educators to take advantage of Holmberg's or Moore's advice. A good starting point for this understanding comes from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

### **Why Bakhtinian Dialogue in Education?**

What a Bakhtinian perspective brings to the discussion of dialogue is a phenomenological focus on how humans embrace knowledge based on their own experiences. According to Bernard-Donals, "Bakhtin proposes a human subject that is defined by its relation to other subjects and the ways that relation is manifested in the creation of language." (Bernard-Donals, 1994, p. 3) Bakhtin, though not an educator, focused his work on the nature of language. Bakhtin was a product of difficult times in Russian history. He produced his works mostly during the Stalinist period against the backdrop of a Nazi-occupied Europe. His life was complicated by a bone disease which claimed one of his legs; he lived in exile from 1930-1936 in Kazakhstan. Bakhtin was somewhat of an eccentric and often considered his works to be trivial. One story describes him rolling up part of his documents so he could smoke tobacco. Some of his writings were lost in explosions during the war and there remains the question of authentic authorship of some of his works. In the latter portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars came to recognize that Bakhtin has made a significant contribution to our thoughts about language and dialogue as they affect literature, philosophy, psychology, and education. Given the structural differences between

contiguous education and distance education, Bakhtinian concepts may offer a more dynamic understanding of online dialogue in a computer mediated environment.

## CLOSER LOOK AT DIALOGUE

### **Dialogue as a Part of Humanity**

Humanity shares a characteristic with many other creatures on this earth, the ability to communicate. Unlike the other creatures, however, humans have developed an amazing capacity to formulate thoughts, convert those thoughts into symbols and express those thoughts through speech. While we are startled at the ants' use of pheromones to tell the colony where our favorite honey jar is located, and we marvel at the high pitched squeals of the dolphin, only humans have developed the complex ability to form sounds and words, sonnets and songs. Our thanks go to the *Homo heidelbergensis*, those early humans who had developed a larynx which allowed some rudimentary language-like sounds to be produced. As evolution progressed and our ability to connect thoughts to sounds improved, it wasn't long before we were chatting up a storm.

So basic is the urge to communicate that it is recognized among the basic needs for humans to survive (Wood, J.T., 2010; Adler, R. B. & Proctor, II, R. F., 2011). Philosophers like Martin Buber have recognized how *un*-independent the human creature is and how closely interwoven we are to those around us. The composition of an individual is made up not just of his own cells and space but the dependence upon interacting with others through all forms of communication and particularly through dialogue. The totality of our current existence is a composite of all of those communication experiences we have accumulated up to the current point of our lives, and the totality of who we will be in the future is made up of all previous and future communication experienced until that future point. Dialogue, therefore, is an integrated and necessary component of human growth and existence.

There is no shortage of literature on the nature of dialogue in the human experience. The study of how people communicate, interact and persuade goes back to at least Plato and our other ancients. Modern scholars have continued the discussion focusing on a variety of perspectives. Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna draw our attention to the complexities we face when dialogue is more than a compendium of words, that it encompasses the interchange of individualism, and creates an element of surprise, “in dialogue, we do not know exactly what we are going to say, and we can surprise not only the other but even ourselves” (Anderson, et al., 2004, p. 1). Mifsud and Johnson address the debate across the communication discipline which pits the humanist’s approach to dialogue against rhetorician’s approach to dialogue. From the humanist perspective, dialogue is dialectic, historically ontological in nature, an attempt to understand human nature and the nature of human interaction. Yet we have come to regard dialogue more as epistemological particularly in educational terms. How we come to learn and understand is seen as the function, the only function, of dialogue in the physical classroom and in the cyber classroom. The rhetorician’s view of dialogue values the opposition that is inherent in public and private discourse. “Dialogue and rhetoric are involved with one another to the extent that they are motivated by opposition, shapers of judgment and action, and attendants to situation and particularity, all for the purpose of creating change in the public, private, and personal spheres of human experience” (Mifsud & Johnson, 2000, p. 95). Additionally, the rhetoricians would add that dialogue is inherently rhetorical because of “directed and purposive use of language” (Ibid. p. 96). According to Stewart, Zediker and Black, at the 1999 International Communication Conference, there were “almost as many different usages of the word [dialogue] as sessions held” (Stewart, et al., 2004, p. 21). Taking each definition of dialogue would be a daunting task, yet Stewart and Zediker sought to bring some order to the debate by categorizing dialogic

theories in to two camps: descriptive and prescriptive. (Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004; Stewart & Zediker, 2000)

Descriptive is used as an all-inclusive term to describe a characteristic of humanity. From this perspective all of human experience is grounded in dialogue. In taking all social, interpersonal, relational experiences, one would agree with Bakhtin that we are born into a world in which dialogue is actively underway; we simply join the show already in progress. Only Adam, the one who spoke the first word in a silent universe, could have claimed independence from the influence of former humans. Thus our dialogue is merely a small thread in the greater fabric that is continually being woven. As such we are influenced and, simultaneously, influence the ongoing dialogue of humanity, and, we could say, that participating in this meta-dialogue is an endemically human characteristic. It is that irreducible quality of the social dimension of humanity. So the term, *descriptive* means that dialogue is part of how we describe the ongoing human existence.

The *prescriptive* term follows closely on the notion of *description*. Both terms recognize the relational aspect of the dialogic action; however, prescriptive proponents see dialogue as a more specific and intentional action. Dialogue, to them, is a particular quality of relational interaction that is more quantifiable, exhibits a beginning, middle and end, and allows for us to negotiate the way in which we choose to manage our interactions. Martin Buber's philosophy is an excellent example of the prescriptive approach. Buber acknowledged that humans can approach others through an "I-It, I-Thou" continuum (Buber, 1970). He says that we encounter others within moments of connection, as Stewart and Zediker explain, "for Buber . . . 'dialogue' labeled a particular quality of relating that Buber argues as an antidote to what he perceived as an over dependence on I-It relating" (Stewart & Zediker, 2000, p. 227, italicized in the original).

The prescriptive approach, therefore, situates dialogue as deliberately reasoned actions, or “situated relational accomplishment” (Ibid., p. 230, italicized in the original). The difference between the descriptive perspective and the prescriptive perspective lies in the focus. *Descriptive* views dialogue as an intrinsic inseparable and irreducible quality of human existence, affecting all aspects of our lives; *prescriptive* is more focused on the quality of interaction as a controlled function of humanity and therefore pragmatic in nature. These views of dialogue cloud the issue because of our desire to categorize and polarize ideas. Descriptive and prescriptive, dialectical or rhetorical, the discussion in the disciplines whether communication, psychology or education; these dialectics seem to require us to take sides. The debate limits our focus and maintains the two-dimensionality of the discussion instead of allowing us to look for a third or fourth dimension in which new philosophies of dialogue can flourish. Even Bakhtin is not immune to the multi-disciplinary debate. Philologists decry the attempt by educators to apply Bakhtinian principles to the field of education. Their observation is that Bakhtin had no intent to address the subject of education; his was a world of literary criticism. However, Matusov rebuts that position “I think that it is a good idea from time to time to summarize the advances made in the field of education through our use of Bakhtin’s literary scholarship as well as to summarize how education affects Bakhtinian scholarship itself” (Matusov, 2007, p. 217). Despite the interest of multi-disciplines, this paper wishes to address education and how dialogue is created and manipulated by educators in the classroom and particularly in the online distance education venue.

### **Dialogue as a Part of Teaching**

One of the features of human speech is the ability to pass along knowledge from past generations to future ones. This ability to learn has greatly advanced humans above other

creatures and that advance is based primarily on dialogue. Steven Johnson said “learning is one of those activities that we broadly associate with conscious awareness” (Johnson, 2001, p. 102). That is, we are actively engaged when we absorb new information. We can think of the classroom as a venue for becoming aware of facts, dates, angles, formulas, how things are related, and how concepts are applied to our lives. This conscious awareness is accomplished through dialogue as Nystrand notes, “. . . learning starts with the premise then, that discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversant, with each playing a particular role” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 8). Socrates valued dialogue so much that he eschewed the written word as failing to offer a total learning experience, and hence, we have no extant works by Socrates’ hand. As explained by Peters, “writing parodies live presence; it is inhuman, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal, and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors; and it is promiscuous in distribution.” (Peters, 1999, p. 47) The importance of dialogue as a means of teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction is obviously more than just a key component in the experience of learning. It is not even enough to consider dialogue a mere tool to be used, or a quantifiable commodity necessary for learning to take place. The position of dialogue is greater and more primal to learning; it is more integrated into humanity than a mere tool; it is a strand in the DNA of education. Without it teaching, learning and the furthering of human knowledge is diseased beyond repair.

The ubiquity of dialogue secures its place in the transfer of knowledge. Many sources have investigated the influence dialogue plays in educational settings. Clearly the bulk of the research applies to classroom education, traditional education, or what Moore calls “contiguous education” (Bernath & Vidal, 2007, p. 436). Martin Nystrand recognizes not only the physical presence of the dialogicians but the psychological presence as well, “the initial conversant seeks

to establish not only the topic of discourse but also her relationship with the other conversants and the scope of the talk” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 19). In this contiguous venue Moore would say that dialogue is high and structure is low, ergo the transactional distance is low. Moreover, dialogue as a particular teaching approach is fostered by Baxter who argues that communication is a between experience not an individual experience. Communication should not be considered as a mere transmission but instead complete dialogue is the product of multi-person interaction. In the face-to-face environment dialogue provides a means of expressing not only our ideas, but is laden with our experiences, culture, expectations, prejudices, attitudes, beliefs, and values. “In short, communication is conceptualized as an instrumental activity of replication.” (Baxter, 2006, p. 105) We might assume that Baxter would approve of a constructivist approach to teaching, one that draws upon the past experiences and history of the individual to construct unique and personalized learning.

Poulos draws our attention to moments of connection that occur as “accidental dialogue.” He describes accidental dialogue as “moments when it becomes clear that a strong, heartfelt connection is made between humans” (Poulos, 2008, p. 117). It is these moments, Poulos would argue, that potent transcendence arises, internalization occurs and knowledge, aka learning, takes place. “Dialogue, it seems, allows us to break out of the bounds of ordinariness into a space imbued with an extraordinary sense of connection-or at least of shared meaning-making” (Ibid. p. 119). The power of dialogue in education is infused with untapped energy. Any attempt to quantify it, examine it, and manipulate it saps much of its energy and renders it less compelling. “Dialogic imagination opens up in the aimless, uncharted spaces of talk merging into dialogue, of transcendent meaning and connection emerging spontaneously from our co-presence. It is in the dialogic imagination that we find an opening for learning, for growing, for changing, and for

constitutive transformation in encounter” (Ibid. p. 122). For the constructivist, activating the dialogic imagination unleashes the student’s unique self to devour an idea and make it his or her own. Each student will be different, each imagination will be unique, still learning becomes internalized.

An interesting Master’s Thesis by University of Maryland University College student, Steven Smith, makes an unsupported assumption that “online dialogue is more superficial than deep” yet he raises a good question “what makes for effective dialogue?” (Smith, 2009, p. 3) Perhaps the underlying fallacy is the educator’s penchant for measuring outcomes. Smith, for example, wants to “questions how to measure a dialogue’s effectiveness” (Ibid. p. 4). Here, again, there seems to be an attempt to quantify dialogue as a commodity that can be packaged. Would Bakhtin say that dialogue can achieve objective effectiveness? Would Poulos wish to market accidental dialogue? This is like grabbing gas, we know it’s there and we understand its properties but it is difficult to quantify and impossible to describe its shape. Smith even recognizes the problem when he says, “the literature is not robust on measured outcomes and there may be unexpected hurdles yet to be discovered” (Ibid., p.5). The desire to quantify, to measure, to objectively observe dialogue as a tangible thing is the difference between the traditional view of online distance education dialogue and the view proposed in this paper.

### **Traditional Views of Dialogue in the Contiguous Education Setting**

An interesting observation of educational settings is made by Michael Moore who notes the distinction between “contiguous teaching” and “distance teaching” (Moore, 1972, p. 76). ‘Contiguous’ is that teaching environment which is most well known; one teacher stands on the ‘stage’ in front of a class and imparts knowledge to an audience of students who are expected to absorb and repeat a perfect replica of the lessons presented. There is a social presence in the

environment that allows for dialogue to mediate the transfer of knowledge in a somewhat ritualistic manner. Students and teachers are expected to maintain these rules within cultural perspectives. For example in some cultures, questioning the teacher is considered disrespectful while in others students are expected to ask questions and even challenge the teacher on issues. (For an interesting discussion see Howard, 2009). Therefore, contiguous education depends on face-to-face interaction which includes verbal and non-verbal cues as well as the contextual rules of interaction accepted by the particular culture.

Distance teaching introduces the notion of separation. Teacher and student share a commonality of distance not only in time and space, but also a psychological distance. To bridge this gap both Holmberg and Moore suggest that dialogue performs a panacea-like function and that skillful manipulation of dialogue can facilitate learning.

Learning can be seen as two different processes: *instruction* occurs when information is transferred and skills are mastered; education occurs when humans are fully interacting with one another and human growth takes place (Kaplan, 1969, p. 38). The second process envisions dialogue as totally involving the human facilities of both the teacher and the student in a fully united activity of learning.

### **Traditional Views of Dialogue in the Distance Education Setting**

Distance education exists within a different context from that of contiguous education. Early distance education depended strictly on text based communication. The separation of the teacher and the student has been a characteristic of distance education and as technology expanded the possibilities for distance education to take place, so have the options for bridging the psychological and physical distances. Among the researchers who have examined the unique characteristics of distance education is Borge Holmberg. Holmberg has recognized the

importance that dialogue plays in bridging the isolationism that is characteristic of distance education. Holmberg suggests bridging distance with what he calls the 'Empathy Approach.' "I regard empathy and personal relations between the parties involved in the teaching-learning process as central to distance education" (Holmberg, 2005, p. 38). His postulates acknowledge the centrality of dialogue in forming that bond of education to which Kaplan alludes.

Holmberg is not alone in recognizing the significance of dialogue. Michael Moore focuses on dialogue as a centerpiece of his 'Transactional Distance Theory' (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, pp. 223-227). Three variables are important to Moore's theory: dialogue, structure and autonomy. He perceives that a student's ability (read that, *desire*), to engage in autonomous, or self, learning is influenced by the perceived transactional distance. Further that transactional distance is lengthened or shortened by the degree of structure built into the course and the degree of dialogue initiated or encouraged by the instructor. The dependence on dialogue, both written and audible, in the distance setting, must be accomplished on a greater scale than in the contiguous setting since there is a limitation on the non-verbal cues available in online teaching and learning. According to Moore, there is more responsibility on the learner to take control of the learning process and that responsibility is best managed through dialogic interaction.

In distance education, as already noted, these two theories emerge as the most prominent: Holmberg's Empathy Approach, and Moore's Transactional Distance. Both of these treat dialogue as a noun, a thing to be used and manipulated by the instructor. Neither pays much attention to dialogue - the verb, or dialogue - the concept. A closer look at these theories will reveal their shortcomings.

Holmberg bases his theory on six postulates:

1. Feelings of a personal relation between the learning and teaching parties promote study pleasure and motivation.
2. Such feelings can be fostered by well-developed self-instructional material and communication at a distance.
3. Intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favorable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods.
4. The atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favor feelings of personal relation according to postulate 1.
5. Messages given and received in conversational forms are comparatively easily understood and remembered.
6. The conversation concept can be successfully applied to distance education and the media available to it. (Holmberg, 2005, p. 38)

From this Holmberg suggests that friendly interaction in a conversational-like atmosphere fosters motivation and a learning environment. Holmberg finally sums up his theory, “feelings of empathy and belonging promote students’ motivation to learn and influence the learning favorably” (Ibid., p. 121). Holmberg says that his theory is empirically supported; however he offers little citation for his claim. Only one reference appears in his book, *The Evolution, Principles and Practices of Distance Education*, on page 122 and the only one to support conversational style is one in which he participated, Holmberg, Schuemer, & Obermeier, 1982. Moreover, the six postulates raise more questions about the complex nature of dialogue than they explain. For example, in #1 the question arises: where do the “feelings of personal relation” originate, with the student, with the instructor? In addition, are these feelings generated simply by using verbally friendly instructional material and communication? Is it reasonable to assume

that “pleasure” and “motivation” are causally related? Holmberg does not offer a completely satisfying answer, to these issues - lacking in detail and support. Postulate #4 also raises the question of cultural intervention. Are “atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation” impaired by cultural conventions that may not be universally shared? One strength of distance education is its ability to reach a widely diverse population, the assumption of universal communication conventions is an important one. Understanding Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia may help us to understand this shortcoming. Holmberg’s theory, while intuitively satisfying, lacks dimension sufficient for a robust understanding of dialogue in distance education.

Michael Moore’s theory of transactional distance recognizes the difference between physical distance and psychological distance, what he describes as “a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the instructors and the learners . . .” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 223) An interesting characteristic, that Moore says must be present for dialogue to take place, is feedback. If there is no feedback then, “no dialogue occurs” (Ibid., p. 225). Beaudoin might argue that point by citing the ‘lurking student’, Cissna might argue that point by citing ‘self-talk’, certainly Bakhtin would argue that point by citing anyone who engages in the literary experience. Bakhtin views dialogue as a highly personal communal experience that can occur without the necessity of direct feedback. Moore goes on to discuss the nature of dialogue and structure as two antithetical constructs. The more dialogue that exists, the less structure; alternatively the more structure that exists, the less dialogue. Dron sees this as a loophole in Moore’s theory. Dron points to Grassé’s term *stigmergy* to describe the relation of structure to dialogue (Dron, 2004, p. 41). Dron argues that structure generates dialogue, but dialogue also generates structure. Therefore, “if such an approach could be applied in an educational learning

environment then such systems might paradoxically exhibit both high and low transactional distance simultaneously” (Ibid., p. 41). Emergence is perhaps a better word to interpret the ‘dialogue-structure’ dialectic. The sense that learners obtain in a dialogic experience, emerges from the complex building of communication, a structure, through dialogue. Does that mean that structure precedes dialogue? In an educational system the structure that is employed will determine the channels of communication, the amount of communication, the type of communication, etc. This idea seems to follow Moore’s theory. However, if dialogue precedes structure then the environment in which the dialogue takes place will dictate the structure that emerges. For example, given a group project, students may choose to work through a group chat room or they may choose to meet in a virtual world, like Second Life, or they may choose a voice meeting via Skype. Within those groups meetings, group norms will develop to facilitate their interactions. The resultant, co-constructed structure emerges as a product of the dialogic choices made by each individual. Thus, Moore’s distinction between dialogue and structure becomes blurred.

Within this context the work of Mikhail Bakhtin presents itself as pertinent to the study of dialogue in distance education. While Bakhtin's concepts could apply to contiguous education, the constraints of distance education seem to provide a particularly potent arena for his ideas. It could be said that since Bakhtin was not an educator, nor did he write particularly about education, and certainly online distance education was not contemporary to Bakhtin's life, the concepts he presented are unprejudiced by traditional educational conventions. Within this paper we will examine the Bakhtinian concepts of:

- ideological becoming,
- internally persuasive discourse,

- authoritative discourse,
- monologism,
- dialogism,
- heteroglossia,
- carnival,
- silence.

These ideas offer insights to the role of dialogue in education generally, but carry specific importance to the online distance education milieu. By joining education's use of modern technology and a Russian literary critic's views on human communication, a new perspective on Moore's transactional distance and Holmberg's empathy approach in distance education might be more fully developed.

#### BAKHTIN'S MAJOR TERMS

Several of Bakhtin's concepts provide a kaleidoscopic insight to an understanding of dialogue particularly in the text-based online distance education venue. There is no particular order to the presentation of these concepts and some color our understanding more than others. In some cases it is necessary to understand one term before the other but that should not lead to an implication of value of importance. Also some of these concepts may take on different hues when viewed against the online distance education as opposed to contiguous education.

#### **Ideological Becoming**

For Bakhtin the word 'ideology' does not carry the political overtones which we in the United States may ascribe to the term. The Russian meaning seems to be broader and more inclusive of the individual's total world view. As Emerson notes the translation of the Russian word for ideology, "Its English cognate, 'ideology' is in some respects unfortunate for our word

suggests something inflexible and propagandistic, something politically unfree. For Bakhtin and his colleagues, it meant simply, an ‘idea system’ determined socially, something that *means*” (Emerson, 1996, p. 125). Of course, the more narrow political implications still exist within Bakhtin’s definition but only as a part of the totality of linguistic individualization. A person exists within a language world of his own making. Partly this comes from the society into which the person is born and is developed within the community through which he navigates. These linguistic erosions mold the person and allow him to fit into his surroundings.

Educationally, when a student, or teacher, comes to a classroom he or she interacts with the language of a particular socioeconomic background. In meeting with the authoritative voice of the subject matter, the student must adapt to new linguistic dogmas and learn to navigate anew. In order to incorporate meaning the student must transform these new ideas into the existing landscape of his linguistic self, thus ‘ideologically becoming’ a different individual. Dialogically speaking, the challenge to TBODE is more potent than in the contiguous learning environment. The classroom student has richer exposure to communication pathways from fellow students and instructors. However, the distance of the online environment mitigates some of those pathways. To overcome that limitation, online interaction needs to be richer and more robust. Online text dialogue is frequently more detailed than spoken dialogue as students have more time to thoughtfully craft responses. There is more opportunity to ‘take back’ words and rewrite for clarity before actually posting a response. Robust thought translated into text reinforces the linguistic transformation necessary to achieve ideological becoming.

### **Authoritative Discourse**

Authority is unquestionable, it is non-negotiable, and it is absolute. For Bakhtin it is “that which may not be challenged, and so it has the status of taboo; it seeks to withdraw beyond

dialogue, to surround itself with an uncrossable exclusion zone” (Dentith, 1995, p. 57). Authority is the voice that speaks from the past. It is *uni-voiced* and does not submit to the challenges of dialogue. The single voice of authority does not wish to procure the experiences and interpretations of the ‘other.’ It prefers anonymity. The authoritative voice prefers the linear model of communication: a sender transmits a message to a receiver. There is no necessity for feedback, no acknowledgement of interference, no respect for context. Indeed, there seems to be implied violence in the use of the term but as Matusov points out,

Although it is true that violence can be a part of “authoritative discourse” — when it is used to force a person to accept certain ideas, for instance — violence alone does not always or necessarily constitute authoritative discourse. When violence does not serve the purpose of persuasion—as, for example, in a case of a punishment voluntarily accepted by a the perpetrator of a crime, or in a case of genocide where perpetrators use violence to kill people rather than to persuade them or use it as a form of anger relief—it is arguably not an instance of “authoritative discourse.” (Matusov, 2007, p. 229)

The place of authoritative discourse is prominent in many teaching circumstances. Teachers may assume unquestionability as a right of office. Students may feel that challenging the authority voice is an affront or that some topics, such as religion or scientific truth, are sacred cows and must be accepted. What is the place of authoritative voice in the classroom? Matusov addresses the issue, “As early as the 1920s, the American educator Henry Morrison similarly articulated the need for the teacher’s authority to be clearly in place initially in order to jump-start the authentic learning process. . .” (Matusov, 2007, p. 232) In other words, for the learning process to take place a base-line needs to be established. In a sense the very fact that

unassailables are presented provides the opportunity for challenges to be made. In TBODE, should the instructor assume too great an authoritative voice it could inhibit the quantity and quality of dialogue. Authoritative voices place the teacher in the spotlight yet the strength of distance education is to place the student at the center of learning.

### **Internally Persuasive Discourse**

The counter to authoritative discourse is internally persuasive discourse. It does not yield to unquestioned dogma and it does not acknowledge a single voice but rather seeks multiple voices. In Bakhtin's words, (translated of course), "One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348). This may be Bakhtin's most important contribution to the realm of education. The locus of this discourse is within the individual. The process of incorporating new ideas and concepts means that the individual must carve a place for the material within his or her own experiences – educators might see this as constructivism. However, the knowledge is not absolute; it is not a perfect replication within every person because each individual is incorporating the material through their own unique filters. "It is what each person thinks for himself or herself, what ultimately is persuasive to the individual" (Freedman & Ball, 2004, p. 8). The internally persuasive voice is at the seat of learning because it challenges the authoritative voice and negotiates with it until an understanding that is acceptable to the individual is reached.

The interpretation of the internally persuasive voice to education seems obvious but is it more or less potent within TBODE? The process of internalization is what Peters would call autonomy (Peters, 2003, pp. 52-55; Peters, 2004a; Peters, 2004b, pp. 215-218.). There remains the penchant for students to be manipulated by a heteronomous system that Peters describes as

dependent on schedules, prescribed content materials, regulations, and many other controls none of which contain student input. Autonomy, on the other hand, places the student at the center of the learning process and recognizes the importance of the student's internally persuasive voice as the ultimate teaching tool. Well developed TBODE takes advantage of internally persuasive discourse, while poorly designed on-line courses may rely so heavily on structure that the ultimate teaching voice is silenced. Allowing students to internalize subject content is at the heart of constructivism as a teaching philosophy.

### **Monologism**

Similar to authoritative voice, monologism is a uni-voiced concept. Monologism is a tool of the authoritative voice. It silences other voices and takes the stage to become the only speaker and acknowledges the speaker as the unassailable expert voice. It establishes a hierarchy in which those below become merely the audience for the expert.

The teaching analogies are obvious. Especially in the face-to-face environment of the classroom, the 'sage on the stage' commands the monologue. Excessive monologism forbids rebuttal. Students may be awed by the thoughts expressed by the teacher or they may be intimidated into submission or, worse, they may respectfully listen but fail to engage in internally persuasive dialogue. Monologism may exist as either intended or unintended. A professor who wishes to impress and not to engage in thoughtful interaction may purposefully develop a monologue style of teaching particularly in the contiguous setting. In the TBODE setting in which autonomy is encouraged, monologism may have a harder, but not impossible, time manifesting itself. A professor who actively engages in actions that could dissuade students from entering into dialogue would be encouraging monologism. Lengthy online lectures, excessive reading assignments, and 'busy work projects' may be strategies used by teachers to establish a

monologic style. On the other hand, a teacher who does not receive students' input, may feel that more explanation is necessary and inadvertently becomes monologicistic.

### **Dialogism**

The alternative to monologism is dialogism. Dialogism gives voice to the many. It encourages a challenging of ideas and an expression of alternatives. Like monologism, dialogism can suffer from excessiveness. Excessive dialogism can be divisive and result in the creation of too many voices. Matusov says, "It may create paralysis of action, relativism or cynicism, and even rationalization of oppression among educators" (Matusov, 2007, p. 224). Therefore dialogism needs to seek alliances. For Bakhtin, dialogism depends on contact with another and finding common areas in which agreement occurs. Likewise it depends on finding others where disagreement occurs and challenging ideas based on previous alliances. Within the classroom setting, monologism is characteristic of authoritarian voice however dialogism opposes monologism. Excessive monologism or excessive dialogism stifles the advancement of idea creation. A characteristic of TBODE is to encourage participation by students and therefore the online setting may be more conducive to dialogism than the contiguous setting. However, dogmatism by the instructor can easily mitigate the desire of students to engage in dialogic interaction and to seek alliances.

### **Heteroglossia**

Heteroglossia exists in the world of dialectics where a multitude of voices co-create harmony and cacophony. Bakhtin talks about the multiplicity of voices that make up a universal stream of dialogue into which we are born. These voices have created a cultural dialogue that has been developed long before we each individually join the conversation. Those voices of our ancestors have already established the language and syntax to which we must adhere in order for

us to participate. The utterances that people make exhibit both centrifugal and centripetal forces. Centripetal force, the binding-together force, is manifested by the commonality of words, the adherence to syntax and the acceptance of cultural norms that allow each individual to make meaning out of another's utterance. It is the binding together that language provides which makes communication possible. The centrifugal force is that pulling away force that allows the creation of new ideas, even the forming of neologisms which allows us to internalize new concepts and express new ideas. The result is that each individual has developed their own glossary of words complete with their own connotations specifically unique to that individual. Each word in our lexicon has been filtered to create a unique meaning that is specifically individualistic. My glossary is different from yours. However, where those glossaries match with a reasonable degree of accuracy, then meanings can be exchanged and dialogue can occur. Central to understanding the concept of heteroglossia is to understand Bakhtin's notion of self and other. The importance of the presence of the other person in a dialogue is necessary to develop the ongoing determination to understand one's self. "For the other may be conceived as an individual characterized by a distinctive use of language that contributes to make the self individual and distinct from all others in his use of language" (Danow, 1991, p. 60). The problem of heteroglossia is imbedded in sorting out the terms of one's own speech and aligning them with the alien terms of another's speech.

What does this mean for distance education? The tools available for contiguous education are not as readily available in distance education. Opportunities to express the subtleties on nonverbal expressions are limited, and since the contextual environment of each individual is different, finding commonality of glossaries becomes more difficult. In other words there is greater centrifugal force in the distance setting. Simply recognizing this barrier can be helpful to

the online teacher. Moreover, the opportunities for communication failure increase exponentially. If there are 20 points in a dialogue where communication errors can occur the mathematical opportunity for success is small. Assume that the probability for misunderstanding is 0.1. That means that the chance for success is  $1-0.1$  and the chance for success in a message with 20 potential points of failure is  $(1-0.1)$  to the 20<sup>th</sup> power. Therefore there is only a 12% chance that accurate meanings will be transferred. Online teachers would be well advised to recognize the heteroglossia challenges of trying to communicate with a variety of students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures.

### **Carnival**

Bakhtin's notion of dialogue and authority is rooted in the medieval carnival. Carnivals were extraordinary events that suspended daily life. There was an upheaval of status during carnival. Power distances between people were scrambled.

Authority is decrowned, we become aware of the laughing side of things, apart from fear, and there is a profound and collective engagement with alternative 'truths' to the officious, the convention, and the tradition – e.g. to see such monolithic concepts as death or religion as serious as well as humorous and open to parody. (Sullivan, et al., 2009, p. 329)

The turning around of authority in the classroom defuses the teacher as the authority. Instead students are allowed to be in charge of their learning, gathering information from each other and critiquing each other's work and ideas. The traditional 'teacher-role' is replaced with a less hierarchical role of mentor, or even 'tour-guide'. Does this mean that vertical power is supplanted by mob rule within the classroom? It was true that medieval carnivals threatened the weak and ostracized the non-conformists, neither of which is desirable in education. The carnival

metaphor instead provides us with a link to move from authoritarian monologism to internally persuasive dialogism. The metaphor may be more at home in the world of online distance education where the presence of the teacher is on a more equal footing with that of the students. The dilemma for teachers is finding the balance that carnival offers. There is the potential for too much authority and too little authority, too much independence and too little independence, too much monologue and too much dialogue, too little specificity and too little ambiguity. The spectacle of carnival allows educators to maneuver the dialectics that are characteristic of both contiguous and distance education.

### **Silence**

Silence is not the absence of communication, nor is it the gap between speech acts. Silence occasionally carries a negative connotation; in a dialogue the speaker is the privileged, dominant player, while the listener is the silent submissive player. Those who are silent may be seen as inarticulate, uninterested, or passive. As a conversation progresses, the roles may exchange positions. To Bakhtin, silence could be a response or a form of address. People may be silent in response to an offensive statement or to an event such as the rise of Nazism. In the classroom silence is often taken to mean a lack of understanding. However, as Beaudoin recognizes with the lurking student, silence may also mean that consideration is taking place, that the student is engaged in internally persuasive dialogue seeking to incorporate new material with the past experiences. Silence may also mean disagreement. In TBODE a student who has been engaged in an academic argument with another student or instructor may suddenly stop posting responses. This silence might be a signal that the student wants to drop the subject and not engage in further debate. It may also connote an act of defiance, that the statements made in prior rebuttal are not considered worthy of a response. The variety of signals that silence generates

again demonstrates Bakhtin's belief that dialogue is a complex co-construction of individuals' previous experiences.

## CONCLUSION

This work is designed to expand the vision of dialogue as it applies to education and specifically online distance education. Previous epistemological discussions have highlighted dialogue as a tool, a thing to be used, manipulated and wielded. Here it is proposed that dialogue is multidimensional, that it exists in a realm beyond simple interaction. Dialogue is a transactional phenomenon that begins and ends far beyond the overtly observable trappings of conversation. A more diverse understanding of dialogue is critical to the distance education venue if teachers seek to build knowledge rather than to tell knowledge.

There are two lessons that this paper promotes. First, the epistemological discussions of Holmberg, Moore, and others represent only one approach to an understanding of dialogue in education. Bakhtin represents an axiological approach that challenges us to remove dialogue from its earthly bounds and delve into another dimension. We are thrust into the Matrix where Bakhtin is our Morpheus, who sheds light on the dark realities of a mysterious dimension of teaching. No longer should we accept the surface realities of dialogue but we should look deeper into new axes for a fresher understanding. Second, the uses and functions of dialogue are not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Distance education is being used in all grade levels K-12, colleges and universities, adult continuing education classes, business, industry, and military. It is not sufficient to say that dialogue should be empathetic, or that dialogue should transcend distance. Dialogue must be contextualized and understanding the context requires an understanding of the subtleties and nuances of dialogic interaction. While Bakhtin may sensitize us to those subtleties,

other authors such as Buber, Gadamer, and Freire, will also offer a more robust view of dialogue in both contiguous and distance education settings.

Expanding a robust vision of dialogue is a desirable goal of teaching professionals. The works of Holmberg and Moore have guided us on the right track to using dialogue in the emerging world of text based online distance education. Now it is time to expand on their guidance. Increasing our understanding and sensitivity to the complexities of human communication will increase our ability to learn and exchange thoughts, ideas, and concepts for many centuries to come.

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