



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Blurring the Boundaries: Opening and Sustaining Dialogic Spaces*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/208173/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Bouton, E. [orcid.org/0000-0001-6092-8300](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6092-8300), Lefstein, A., Segal, A. et al. (1 more author) (2024) *Blurring the Boundaries: Opening and Sustaining Dialogic Spaces*. *Theory Into Practice*, 63 (2). pp. 182-197. ISSN 0040-5841

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2024.2307837>

---

This item is protected by copyright. This is an author produced version of an article published in *Theory Into Practice*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## **Blurring the Boundaries: Opening and Sustaining Dialogic Spaces**

## **Blurring the Boundaries: Opening and Sustaining Dialogic Spaces**

Dialogic educators have designed strategies to facilitate dialogic teaching, such as establishing ground rules, employing talk moves, and structuring discussions. Though productive, such strategies rarely open dialogic space, in which shared meaning is created through an interaction that blurs the boundaries between participating voices. Dialogic space is facilitated by tension between perspectives; openness to others, which is facilitated by ego suspension, authority relaxation and respect for and interest in others; and acceptance of dialogue's inherent unpredictability. We explore classroom episodes in which dialogic space did and did not emerge, highlighting the importance of playfulness and mutual attunement for maneuvering within dialogic space. These cases also point to 4 challenges that dialogic space poses: tension between curricular coverage and dialogue's unpredictability; the demands such unpredictability makes on teacher flexibility, knowledge and judgment; equity in the distribution of teacher attention and student participation; and the threat of losing control.

Keywords: Classroom discourse, Dialogic pedagogy, Dialogic space, Language arts, Primary education

Dialogic pedagogy is premised on the idea that knowledge and understanding are constructed through and by talking together (Alexander, 2020; Resnick et al., 2015, 2018). To facilitate such talk, teachers are advised to ask open questions, elicit student ideas, and probe student reasoning. However, even when students actively participate in the discussion, offer reasons, and respond to one another's ideas, teachers often sense that something is missing. The essence of dialogue – the meeting of minds that leads to the joint construction of new meanings and understandings – does not emerge. Though students explain and argue their perspectives, they talk past each other as each doubles down on their own position. Other students seem more focused on guessing what the teacher wants to hear than on sharing their own ideas. This paper discusses that elusive missing element, which we and other scholars characterize as dialogic space.

To explain and illustrate the concept of dialogic space and explore how it can be opened and cultivated in classrooms, we compare 2 teaching and learning episodes, one in which the emergence of dialogic space is apparent and one in which the dialogue failed to ignite. Following the investigation of the 2 episodes, we discuss how teachers can open and maintain dialogic space and the challenges and risks it poses.

### **What is Dialogic Space? Why Is It so Special?**

Dialogic space describes the area between voices in dialogue, in which participants transcend their own points of view to attend to and seriously consider their interlocutors' perspectives (Wegerif, 2007, 2013). As such, dialogic space is a space of possibilities, in which novel, shared meanings and ideas can develop. Different scholars emphasize different aspects of dialogic space: Teo (2013), for

example, underscores the importance of creating discursive space that is characterized by broad student participation, in part by creating more egalitarian relationships between teacher and students. Wegerif and Major (2019) explore the affordances of the internet to bring into dialogue multiple voices, thereby broadening dialogic space. Boyd (2023) stresses the effortful creation of safe space, cultivated by teachers over time, in which students are disposed to listen, think, and talk with each other.

Here, building on these and other scholars' work, we define dialogic space as an opening in which multiple voices can interact and create new meanings. Such an opening involves participants both voicing their own perspectives and transcending them in order to attend to and engage with those of their interlocutors. Dialogic space is a narrower category than dialogic teaching, which involves a broad repertoire of interactional forms and principles (Alexander, 2020). Not all dialogic teaching leads to the opening of dialogic space, nor are we arguing that it necessarily should. Dialogic teaching, in which teachers and students make their thinking visible, collectively and purposively explore ideas, and co-construct meaning, has value even if it doesn't lead to the creation of dialogic space. Nevertheless, dialogic space offers a vision worth aspiring to. We highlight 3 conditions for the emergence of dialogic space: a gap between participants' positions; openness, which is facilitated by suspending one's ego, undermining authority, and respecting others; and willingness to follow the conversation wherever it may lead. We briefly discuss each of these ideas.

Wegerif (2013) writes that a fundamental prerequisite for dialogue is at least "two perspectives held together in creative tension" (p. 4). If only one voice is considered legitimate, or multiple perspectives are not probed to reveal possible differences among them, dialogue serves no purpose. Hence, dialogue is born in

multivocality, in interlocutors probing and challenging one another's ideas. However, such probing and challenging can lead to arguments in which interlocutors seek to score points and win rather than engage with the substance of conflicting ideas. Or, alternatively, to avoid the argument's unpleasantness, they don't contest opposing positions, instead adopting a live-and-let-live stance, in which all ideas are uncritically accepted. Mercer and colleagues (1999) observed both these stances in their studies of student group discussions in English primary classrooms. They refer to these cases as disputational and cumulative talk, respectively, and juxtapose them with exploratory talk, in which "partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas" (p. 496).

Constructively engaging with disagreements in dialogic space requires openness to others' perspectives. Such openness is jeopardized, especially in school settings, by at least 2 factors. First, our ideas and ego tend to intertwine, therefore we experience criticism of our position as criticism of our selves. When arguing, we are often concerned with winning the argument (or at least not losing it) and with how others judge and view us (Goffman, 1967) Hence, to maintain dialogic space, one must be willing to suspend, at least partially and momentarily, one's attachment to one's own position (Wegerif, 2007). Ideally, in the to-and-fro of dialogue, participants lose sight of who said what and no longer think in terms of my or your individual idea but rather in terms of our collaboratively constructed meaning.

A second threat to openness is the power of authority, for example, a classroom culture in which the teacher and textbook are treated as all-knowing. If an unimpeachable authority possesses the truth of the matter being discussed, then there is little space for difference: one position is correct, and all other positions are mistaken. Or, as often happens in classrooms, the teacher knows the answer, which

the students attempt to guess. In dialogic space, fostering such openness is facilitated by undermining the teacher's authority or at least the teacher stepping out of her authoritative role and joining the discussion as a fallible participant rather than an arbiter of truth.

Openness is facilitated by ego suspension and undermining authority; it also thrives on profound respect for and hence interest in others. We find philosopher Martin Buber's (1937) ideas helpful for thinking about dialogic relations. Buber criticized the instrumental nature of so many of our relations with others in modern society. In instrumental relations, which Buber called "I-It", we relate to the other as an object, a means to further our own ends. In contrast, in dialogic relations, which Buber called "I-Thou", we approach the other as a subject, an autonomous being worth knowing above and beyond any benefit they can offer us. Applying this idea to classroom discussions, teachers can relate to students' contributions instrumentally, as a means to advance their own ideas and objectives. In contrast, in dialogic space, teachers and students value one another's ideas, thoughts and feelings as worthy of consideration in and of themselves. While analytically convenient, this dichotomy between instrumental and dialogic approaches can in practice be transcended by weaving student ideas and curricular contents together in a way that integrates and expands both students' concerns and teacher objectives.

We now arrive at the third condition for opening dialogic space. Openness, the product of ego suspension, relaxed authority, and profound respect for others' subjectivity, means that the process and endpoint of dialogue can be unpredictable. In this regard, German philosopher Hans-George Gadamer (2004) writes, "We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner... the partners conversing are far less the

leaders of [the conversation] than the led” (p. 383). This potential unpredictability of discussions has profound implications for teacher planning and the teacher’s role in managing classroom discourse. Among other issues, dialogic classroom space requires the teacher to be led by the logic of the conversation and accept that its conduct is shared by them and their students, even as teacher and students alike share accountability to community, knowledge and reasoning (Michaels, O’Connor & Resnick, 2008).

### **Bringing Theory into Practice: Contrastive Case Studies**

This article illustrates these ideas about dialogic space and reflects on their pedagogical implications in the analysis of two primary Language Arts lessons, one in Israel and one in England. Both teachers engage their students in lively discussions that advance understanding of important concepts. Though both discussions may seem dialogic inasmuch as students share their perspectives and reasoning, meaningful dialogic space emerges only in one of the episodes. In the next section we substantiate this claim and discuss why dialogic space emerged in one case and failed to ignite in the other.

#### ***Defining a Flood***

In Ms. Levi’s class, the students sit in pairs in columns facing the teacher. Ms. Levi opens the discussion by inviting the students to tell her what they know about floods, but then rephrases her invitation mid-turn and suggests that they define the term instead. This change of request closes the question down, since, as we shall see, Ms. Levi has specific type of flood in mind: the desert flash flood, caused by seasonal rains, which is the schema relevant to the texts that the class are about to read. She proceeds to collect numerous associations from the students, as well as examples and



pieces of information about floods. Each student's contribution is accepted, challenged, dismissed, or ignored, depending upon its alignment with the desert flash flood model. The full 4 minute and 45 second episode is presented and analyzed in detail in Segal & Lefstein (2016); we discuss here the first 18 turns of the discussion.

1. Ms. Levi: But before that I want you to tell me what you know about floods, or let's just define what a flood is. Dan, what's a flood?
2. Dan: A flood, that's if a ton of snow falls, and everything
3. Ms. Levi: Specifically snow?
4. Dan: Uh, rain.
5. Ms. Levi: Yeah?
6. Dan: Everything uh...everything's water and it's impossible to walk and it's impossible to go outside.
7. Ms. Levi: Impossible to go outside? Okay, you said an abundance of rain, you started off well. An abundance of rain, you started off well, what's a flood Amir?

Dan's answer is not wrong in principle, but it does not fit the local, Israeli model of desert flash floods, which are caused by rain. Rather than exploring Dan's thinking about floods, the teacher's prompts channel his answers toward her intended flood model. "Snow" becomes "rain" (turns 2-4) and "impossible to go outside" receives a dismissive "okay" (turn 7). Ms. Levi then complements "rain" with "abundance" and twice praises him: "an abundance of rain, you started off well". After highlighting the word that she finds useful for advancing her own objectives, and changing Dan's phrasing "a ton" to the more eloquent "an abundance", Ms. Levi moves on to another student:

8. Amir: There's also a flood from the sea, which is like a tsunami.
9. Ms. Levi: Okay, you gave some kind of natural phenomenon that's certainly a type of some kind of flood.

What is this tsunami? It's essentially an eruption of water, a natural phenomenon that comes from the sea, that floods the coasts, the closest areas. That's a type of flood but more serious. Let's relate to the flood itself.

Amir notes that tsunamis can also form floods. This answer too is not technically wrong but deviates from the teacher-preferred model for this lesson. Ms. Levi acknowledges that tsunamis are “some kind of flood” but dismisses them as irrelevant to the discussion, requesting instead that the students “relate to the flood itself”. This direction is not entirely clear, except that Ms. Levi is after a different type of flood.

10. Shirli: It's an abundance of rain that collects in one place
11. Ms. Levi: Great, you've already given me some kind of, collects, okay
12. Shirli: Collects into one place, and when it reaches its banks
13. Ms. Levi: Its banks, great. Here's another word, its banks. Yes?
14. Shirli: That in the end it overflows...
15. Ms. Levi: It overflows, great words, I'll find the formulation already.

Ms. Levi's frequent and positive evaluations (we counted three “greats”) signal to the class that Shirli's answers are what the teacher was looking for, and indeed later in the discussion multiple students cast their contributions as building on Shirli's ideas. Ms. Levi seems particularly attuned to specific words that she can exploit in constructing her own presentation of the flood concept: “collects”, “banks” and “overflows”. She explains to Shirli, “I'll find the formulation already”, thereby underlining the division of labor in the dialogue: the students contribute words, examples, and fragments of ideas, which the teacher formulates into a coherent definition. In this way, students' perspectives are broken apart and sifted into materials that serve curricular purposes

known to the teacher but as yet unrevealed to the students. Yet the end result is that the students' voices are entirely subsumed to the teacher's voice.

- Ms. Levi: Overflows, reaches its banks, let's take a cup of water, let's take a cup of water. I
16. took a cup, I filled and filled and filled and filled it, and I continue to fill and then what happens? What happens?
17. Students: The water flows.
- Ms. Levi: The water fl- goes out. So that essentially says that like she said, the cup reaches
18. its rim and it, the water already begins to spill, right? So that's already some kind of type of inundation. More, yes?

In this exchange, Ms. Levi weaves select words and images she collected from her students into an explanation of how floods are formed. As the lesson continues, students carry on participating enthusiastically, apparently taking up Ms. Levi's instruction to "tell me what you know about floods" (turn 1). They cite cases of floods with which they are familiar, presumably through media exposure or personal experience. They mention a hurricane in the United States, flooded roadways in two different Israeli locations, and a flooded shopping mall. The teacher praises the students and elicits further contributions, without the closed questions that characterized the earlier portion of the discussion. However, despite the potential for opening dialogic space, the teacher's flood schema continues to dominate, with student contributions assessed for their compatibility with it. Ms. Levi thus rejects the hurricane example because it "has to do with wind," and questions the salience of the mall flood as related to plumbing and not "an external flood" in her paradigm.

This interaction may seem dialogic inasmuch as multiple students participated, some ideas were elaborated and built upon, and an explanation was constructed in a manner

that seems to a certain extent collaborative. Students eagerly recount examples drawn from their own experiences, initially unprompted by the teacher. However, Ms. Levi makes clear to the students throughout the interaction that she has a specific idea in mind, which does not afford space for different voices or the consideration of alternative perspectives. The potential gap between opinions is closed, almost as soon as it emerged, with hints from the teacher about the answer she seeks. Ms. Levi is responsive to the students' contributions, integrating specific words she collected into her description of floods; nevertheless, she treats the students' contributions instrumentally, as a means to advance the discussion, through prodding, sifting and pruning, to a pre-scripted endpoint. Perhaps if the teacher had been more open about her intentions for the lesson, sharing her model with the students and opening it up for discussion the result might have looked different. As it is, Ms. Levi projected an authoritative teacherly stance, which she used to transmit predetermined, canonical knowledge.

### ***Opening a Short Story***

The students in Ms. Leigh's Year 5 classroom sit in an oblong circle, pear-shaped to conform to the space available. Before the episode discussed below, Ms. Leigh staged 2 students acting out a boring story opener ("I was walking down the road one day"), followed by the dramatic presentation of an improved version ("Oh no it's a tornado' she shouted and ran") in which, as Ms Leigh explains, "we drop ourselves right in the action to start off with and we have some speech there as well" One student, William, says, "I don't really like that, Miss", suggesting instead that it is preferable to start with a bit of narrator talk beforehand.

At first, Ms. Leigh moves to dismiss the objection, saying "it depends..." but then catches herself mid-turn and asks William to clarify what he means. This move of actively stopping herself and her plans for the lesson, to seriously consider what William had meant, leads to an opening of dialogic space, in which William, Ms. Leigh, a few other students, and a teaching assistant exchange ideas about different story openers, including that of William's story. The full 10-minute episode is presented and analyzed in detail in Lefstein & Snell (2013); we discuss here an abbreviated version of the discussion.

- William: miss I don't really like (.) that
1. I-I sort of like  
a bit of talk before it

Ms. well it depends on how you want to

  2. Leigh: start your story  
doesn't it

3. William: ((nodding)) (yeah)

Ms. so you could have-

  4. Leigh: you mean talk as the narrator  
or talk as the actors
  5. William: no the narrator

Ms. Leigh first asks a clarification question, aiming to better grasp at William's intention. Her use of 'talk' rather than 'speech' (which she had used previously in her description of the preferred story opener) echoes William's utterance and further signals her uptake of the point he has made. When answering her, William repeats and deepens his challenge towards her suggestion, saying: "because that just drops you straight in".

6. Flynn: (like- (.) they [might just])
7. William: they might just tell you what's going  
on

Ms. okay

8. Leigh:

9. William: because that just drops you straight  
in

10. Harry: (oh I know what he means)

11. William: and you're like

12. Harry (xxxxxxxxx)

13. William: what's going on

14. Rachel: (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx because you can have  
the two people that are acting it out  
Ms. what would you use to start off

19. Leigh: with-  
your story then, William

20. William: e::r

As William elaborates his challenge, 3 students vie for the floor: Flynn says, “they might just” (turn 6), Harry declares that he understands what William means (turn 7), and Rachel suggests how his opening could be acted out (turn 14). Though responding to William’s idea, they all address their contributions towards the teacher. In response, Ms. Leigh clears the stage to allow William an opportunity to further elaborate his ideas, which can then be subjected to scrutiny.

21. Harry (*((raises his hand enthusiastically))*)  
Ms. because I've just overheard Ms  
Leigh Forester and Terry  
having a conversation (.)

22. about how they're not going to start  
their story  
let's see if he does it (*((gestures to  
William))*)

William: erm (.) I wouldn't start it like

23. drop it straight in the action with the  
first line

24. Mary: (*((raises hand))*)

25. William: as speech

Ms. okay

26. Leigh:  
William: and that

27. I would  
have a bit of narrator talk

to tell you what's going on  
and the character:rs a:nd  
where you are and that  
and then get into the action

The first test is whether or not William will start his story in the way that Ms Forester and Terry have already decided that they would *not*. Ms Leigh, Ms Forester and Terry all share knowledge to which William is not privy, but William does not appear threatened by this. He simply gives his own example of a story opening. Though challenging the teacher's idea (and the goal of the lesson), William casts his position in terms that were previously used by Ms. Leigh, echoing her words even as he declares he disagrees with her for the third time: "I wouldn't start it like drop it straight in the action." Similarly, when he elaborates his own idea, he distinguishes between (characters') "speech" and "narrator talk," thereby clearing away potential misunderstandings. By fashioning his perspective in terms that Ms. Leigh has introduced into the lesson, William actively brings together his own and his teacher's voices.

Ms. Leigh: 28. so you'd start off at the bottom of the story mountain  
with the narrator directing the action  
give me an example  
of what you'd start off for you [story today then  
((puts hand down))  
Mary: 29.  
William: 30. erm  
load of people think nothing's going to happen  
as they go into a tunnel  
Mary 31. ((raises hand))

In the next section, Ms. Leigh reads aloud another story opener which also drops the readers right into the action. She takes this example from a published novel that

Harry, another student, had lent her to read over the holidays. The class briefly discuss that opening before returning to discuss William's opener: "many people go into a tunnel thinking nothing's going to happen." After William reads his opening line, the teaching assistant, Ms. Forester, responds to his suggestion, addressing her challenge directly to him:

- Ms. well that happens every day
58. Forester: I go into a tunnel thinking nothing's going to happen
59. Harry: ((Raises hand))
60. William: but then
- Ms. that's quite normal
61. Forester:
62. William: but then (.) and then
- Ms. hmmm
63. Forester:

Ms. Forester points out that William's opening describes a common, banal event "that happens every day" and "that's quite normal." William responds with "but then... and then...", implying that the common event sets the stage for a dramatic reversal, though he is lost for the exact words to effectively convey his vision. Later, Ms. Leigh comes to William's aid:

- Ms so for William's
- Leigh: he might need to open hi-
70. open his story with  
erm-  
it was a usual day-  
it was a day like any other
71. Harry: but-
- Ms William and his father were driving
72. Leigh: through
73. Harry: ((raises his hand))
- Ms the Euro tunnel
74. Leigh: heading for France  
they were unaware that disaster was  
about to strike and that's where you can



use the ellipsis that you like dot dot  
dot

75. William: ((nods))

Ms. Leigh offers a more sophisticated manner of narrating this type of opening: “it was a day like any other and they were unaware that disaster was about to strike.” Her suggested opening, which maintains the characters in William’s story, opens with the narrator’s voice, thereby maintaining the kernel of his idea, but fleshes out the scene and adds foreshadowing. A discussion of suspense and foreshadowing continues when Harry reintroduces the published novel into the discussion. After a brief exchange between Harry and Ms Leigh, the teacher attempts to draw the discussion to a close by relating the published novel back to William’s story and the topic of effective openers; but, William interjects again, this time with a challenge to both Harry and Ms. Leigh (“Well something sort of goes wrong”):

95. Ms Leigh: so having that in the beginning  
[gives the author-
96. William: *((raises his hand))*
97. Ms Leigh: h- helps to build up the suspense  
and the interest in the story
98. Julie: *((raises her hand))*
99. Ms Leigh: right I’m actually going to stop you there  
because otherwise  
we’re not going to have time
100. Julie: *((puts hand down))*
101. Ms Leigh: *((to William))* so if you’ve got something  
you want to say  
you can come and say it in a moment  
[so what I want you to do
102. William: [xxxxxxx] it’s about the story
103. Ms Leigh: [okay
104. William: [that Harry was reading
105. Ms Leigh: right ten seconds::

- starting [from
106. Julie: [((puts hand up again))
107. Ms Leigh: Now
108. William: well something sort of goes wrong  
in that the truck's about to hit her
109. Ms Leigh: does it actually go wrong
110. William: s- sort of
111. Ms Leigh: okay and is that a hint of danger  
that's what I mean by suspense  
it's a bit like  
you know if I stand behind you  
and you're talking and doing something you  
shouldn't be  
all of a sudden you kind of get that  
aa::hhh feeling
112. Pupils: ((laugh))
113. Ms Leigh: 'she's behind me'  
and the hairs on the back of your neck  
stand up  
that's what we mean by suspense  
we're waiting for something to go wrong  
((signals to Julie to speak))

Ms. Leigh's uptake of William's point pushes forward the discussion of suspense and foreshadowing. She performs "she's behind me" in a mockingly menacing voice as she playfully laughs at herself as the cause of her students' terror. This causes the students to laugh, thereby lightening the tension in the room and helping Ms. Leigh transition into the next task.

Ms. Leigh's handling of William's challenge is noteworthy. She set aside her initial guidance for how the students should open their stories, upon which the entire lesson was premised, engaging with William's idea instead. Both teacher and students are active in weighing the merits of different strategies for opening stories. William's own ideas are subject to challenge and are tested by both Ms Leigh and Ms Forester.

In addressing Ms. Forester's challenge, Ms. Leigh used her disciplinary expertise to elaborate and enhance William's story opener. The resulting interaction embodied the 3 aspects of openness discussed above. Ms. Leigh's responses to William's challenge suggests that she was neither offended by his challenge – she managed to separate her plans for a good story opener, which are based on curricular materials, experience and knowledge, from her ego – nor was her authority as teacher threatened, though William directly challenged the entire premise of the lesson. Furthermore, by concentrating on how William wanted to open his story, she demonstrated respect for his authorial independence. Rather than resisting his ideas or channeling them to advance her own purposes, Ms. Leigh drew out their value and strengthened them. She does this not by appealing to her own knowledge as sole authority, but by drawing upon other sources of knowledge, including Ms Forester and a published author.

Though she sets aside her original lesson plan, Ms. Leigh nevertheless managed to advance important disciplinary concepts in Language Arts, such as foreshadowing and building suspense. In both interactions shown, the students participated willingly and shared their ideas and positions in the whole class discussions. Likewise, in both classrooms observed, dedicated and attentive teachers encouraged the discussions and allocated precious lesson time to them. Yet while one interaction was an orderly, instrumental discussion used to channel students' ideas into a predetermined model, the other interaction afforded heterodox contributions, which, after some negotiations led to new understandings. In the next section, we discuss central factors contributing to these 2 very different outcomes.

## **Returning from Practice to Theory: What Have We Learned about Dialogic Space?**

To better understand the complexities of opening and participating in dialogic space, imagine yourselves in Ms. Leigh's shoes. William did not mitigate his challenge towards his teacher with polite hedges or other face-saving gestures. He directly negated Ms. Leigh's view of a well-constructed story opener and the task she had designed for the class. Ms. Leigh reflected on this episode a few years later, after reading an analysis of the episode (Lefstein & Snell, 2013, chapter 5):

It wasn't until I read this chapter, with its analysis, that I realized that I had been challenged on many levels. My authority had been questioned by William's interjection, as had my expertise and rather than being affronted, it pleased me greatly. First, he had the self-assuredness to voice a controversial opinion in front of his peers, second he had confidence that he would be listened to and finally, due to the culture of the classroom, his opinion was placed on a par with my own. (p. 77)

Ms. Leigh's description of this moment is dramatic. She acknowledges, in retrospect, that William's challenge was not limited to authorial preferences or task design, but rather extended to questioning her expertise and authority as a teacher. Though she expresses pleasure at his confidence and the openness of the classroom culture, she also notes that in such a situation a teacher might take offense, given the extent to which our professional egos are tied up with our lesson design, content expertise and their appreciation by students.

Ms. Leigh's account also touches on the importance of relaxing one's role and authority in adopting a dialogic stance. She recognizes that by challenging the idea of the assignment William's opinion was placed on par with hers, despite his student status. In so doing, she set the stage for the opening of dialogic space that gave

William a voice and offered the rest of the class an opportunity to contemplate different perspectives.

### ***The Power of Playfulness***

One notable way by which Ms. Leigh alleviated some of the tensions that accompany dialogic space was through framing the interaction in a more playful, light-hearted manner (e.g. Episode 2, turns 111-113). Adopting a more playful approach may allow teachers to suspend their ego involvement and distance themselves from the ideas discussed, thereby also modelling for their students this important ability. It can also allow teachers to enter dialogic space without losing their actual authority and position in the classroom. Finally, it can infuse the process with joy, whimsical creativity, and light-heartedness.

Classroom discourse norms, teacher authority, curricular goals, and social tensions persist outside of dialogic space; within it, however, they can be reframed, allowing students to question facts, stretch rules, play with ideas and laugh about their fears in a way that is not always possible in routine classroom spaces. In contrast, the things said in the dialogic space, the ideas tested, and the roles that were reversed can have consequences in the real world, but in a limited way. Much like when teachers lose to students in a game of soccer, it may resonate in real life but not actually affect it.

### ***Mutual Attunement***

One striking aspect of the episode in Ms. Leigh's classroom is the extent to which William and Ms. Leigh are attuned to one another's perspectives, each casting their responses to the other in a way that their interlocuter can hear and comprehend. This mutual attunement is evident, for example, in William's use of Ms. Leigh's

terms “narrator” and “character” and in his anticipation of potential questions and misunderstandings. Likewise, when helping William develop his story opener, Ms. Leigh both keeps the kernel of William’s idea and addresses the problem identified by Ms. Forester. Common to these examples is that interlocutors echo the ideas and thoughts of others in their own contributions, partially stepping outside of their own perspectives in order to find common ground with others’ ideas and concerns. Not all echoing is evidence of attunement. Compare, for example, how Ms. Levi repeated students’ words in fashioning her definition and explanation of floods. In that case, she broke students’ ideas apart, sifting through the pieces for the words that best served her purposes and inserting them into her own formulation – more a mining of words than a meeting of minds.

### **Before Diving into Dialogic Space: Review the Warning Labels**

In the above analysis, we have sought to shed light on what dialogic space feels and sounds like in real classroom settings and how it did and did not emerge. Contrasting the interactions in the 2 classrooms showed that in Ms. Levi’s classroom the students were trying to guess their teacher’s ideas, while in Ms. Leigh’s classroom, the interlocutors joined forces to develop a student’s voice. However, dialogic space is not necessarily good and its absence is not necessarily bad. Like any other teaching practice, it advances some goals and hinders others; it is appropriate in some conditions and problematic in others. Moreover, even when enacted successfully, dialogic pedagogy poses numerous challenges and tensions, especially in mainstream classrooms.

### ***Between Dialogic Space and Traditional Classroom Norms***

Opening dialogic space involves accentuating tensions between interlocutors’

positions, ceding greater control to students, heeding their ideas and purposes, and accepting that previous or established lesson goals may not necessarily be met. Some of these conditions contradict conventional expectations regarding school aims, the teacher's role and classroom norms. Hence, creating conditions for dialogic space entails considerable risks, which should be acknowledged and reflected upon, alongside its considerable advantages.

First, opening and sustaining dialogic space requires slowing down the lesson and investing time – time that could have been devoted to covering mandated and important curricular topics. Teachers are under constant pressure to meet such curriculum requirements, for which they and their students are held accountable. Lesson planning reflects this need and is designed to address it. This pressure is real, though note that teachers do not face a dichotomous choice: either teach *or* engage in dialogue, since teaching and learning also occur in dialogic space. Ms. Leigh managed to weave important content knowledge into the discussion of William's challenge, alongside other important aims such as modelling openness to contrary ideas, the creative process of developing and elaborating one's ideas and creating a classroom climate in which students' voices are heard and heeded. Nevertheless, dialogic space can be time-consuming and therefore not necessarily the most efficient means of covering the curriculum.

Second, dialogic space sometimes involves teachers setting aside their prior plans for the lesson, and instead going with the flow of students' ideas and following the logic of the conversation. However, such deviations from the lesson plan, especially deviations that involve entering unfamiliar territory outside of one's comfort zone, can be stressful. Addressing this challenge requires tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, a firm command of the content knowledge taught, and

professional judgement. Note that this idea of (sometimes) following the logic of the conversation wherever it may lead does not preclude planning; on the contrary, a flexible lesson plan offers teachers a critical point of reference from which they may sometimes choose to deviate and to which they likely will eventually return.

Third, a seldom questioned tenet of dialogic pedagogies is that all students are expected to participate. While this lesson may have been perceived by William as an empowering and influential learning experience, consider it again from the point of view of other students. For example, Mary patiently raised her hand on multiple occasions in bids for the floor but was repeatedly ignored in favor of other, more boisterous (male) students. Towards the end of the discussion, many of the non-participating students appeared disengaged. This is a thorny dilemma, not necessarily a failing. Robin Alexander (2013) discusses this issue regarding the episode in Ms. Leigh's classroom, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of different ways a teacher can distribute her attention among 25-35 students in a lesson. Opting for a meaningful exchange with one student always comes at the expense of hearing other students' voices and securing their sense of involvement. Reflecting on teachers caught up in such dilemmas, Alexander concludes,

“Values send us in one direction, a classroom's human and physical circumstances in another, anxiety about inspection, accountability and national tests in a third, evidence about the conditions for effective teaching in a fourth and so on. It's our job as teachers to reconcile such competing imperatives while striving to keep children's learning and well-being paramount. That's education. That's life.” (p. 74)

Finally, the relaxation of teachers' authority, together with eliciting students' voices and actively seeking conflict, can help generate dialogic space, but they can



also unravel the gentle fabric of norms that hold the classroom together, leading to the discussion deteriorating into disorder. Even in Ms. Leigh's lesson, in which the students were remarkably compliant with classroom rules, there were 2 instances, one right after William's challenge of Ms. Leigh, and the second right after Ms. Forester's challenge of William, in which multiple students spoke at once, all trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. Each time Ms. Leigh restored order but the threat of disorder is nevertheless real and teachers would be wise to prepare students for engaging productively in dialogic space and develop ways of moving the class between more and less permissive interactional spaces.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we outlined 3 conditions for opening and sustaining dialogic space: tension between perspectives; openness to others, which is facilitated by ego suspension, authority relaxation and respect and interest in others; and acceptance of dialogue's inherent unpredictability. We then contrasted 2 classroom episodes to illustrate dialogic space and the conditions for its emergence. Our analysis uncovered 2 additional facilitating conditions: playfulness and mutual attunement. We concluded by highlighting 4 challenges that should be acknowledged: a tension between curricular coverage and dialogue's unpredictability; the demands such unpredictability makes on teacher flexibility, knowledge and judgment; issues of equity in the distribution of teacher attention and student participation; and, finally, the threat of disorder and loss of control.

Dialogic space is a promising pathway for broadening participants' perspectives, clarifying ideas, working through differences, and deepening understanding of content and one another. As such, it should be welcomed into

mainstream classrooms. However, fostering such space entails myriad hurdles, challenges and dilemmas that are scantily acknowledged in the research literature. By choosing to bring these issues to the fore, we do not mean to put teachers off from trying to cultivate dialogic space in their classrooms. On the contrary, we hope that the identification of facilitating factors through empirical analysis, alongside acknowledgment of potential impediments, will make opening dialogic space a more approachable and less daunting prospect for teachers and their students.

## References

- Alexander, R. (2020). *A dialogic teaching companion*. Routledge.
- Boyd, M. P. (2023). Teacher talk that supports student thinking and talking together: Three markers of a dialogic instructional stance. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2023.100695>
- Buber, M. (1937). *I and thou*. T. & T. Clark. ISBN-13978-157898997
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum.
- Lefstein, A. & Snell, J. (2013). *Better than Best Practice: Developing Teaching and Learning through Dialogue*. London: Routledge .
- Mercer, N., Wegerif, R., & Dawes, L. (1999). Children's talk and the development of reasoning in the classroom. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25, 95-111.
- Resnick, L. B., Asterhan, C. S. C., & Clarke, S. (2015). *Socializing Intelligence Through Academic Talk and Dialogue*. AERA. <https://doi.org/10.3102/978-0-935302-43-1>
- Resnick, L. B., Asterhan, C. S. C., Clarke, S. N., & Schantz, F. (2018). Next generation research in dialogic learning. In G. E. Hall, L. F. Quinn, & D. M. Gollnick (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Teaching and Learning* (pp. 323-338). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955901.ch13>
- Segal, A. & Lefstein, A. (2016). Exuberant, voiceless participation: an unintended consequence of dialogic sensibilities? Contribution to a special issue on International Perspectives on Dialogic Theory and Practice, edited by Sue Brindley, Mary Juzwik, and Alison Whitehurst. *L1: Educational Studies in Languages and Literature* 16, 1-19.
- Teo, P. (2013). 'Stretch your answers': Opening the dialogic space in teaching and learning. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 2, 91-101.
- Wegerif, R. (2007). *Dialogic education and technology: Expanding the space of learning* (Vol. 7). Springer Science & Business Media. ISBN: 978-0-387-71142-3
- Wegerif, R. (2013). *Dialogic: Education for the internet age*. Routledge. ISBN-10: 0415536782 ISBN-13: 978-0415536783
- Wegerif, R. & Major, L. (2019). Buber, educational technology, and the expansion of dialogic space. *AI & Society*, 34, 109-119.

## Transcription key

- (text ) Transcription uncertainty
- (xxx) Indistinguishable speech
- (.) Brief pause (under one second)
- (1) Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest whole second)
- (( )) Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
- text Emphasized relative to surrounding talk (underlined words)
- te:xt Stretched sounds
- sh- Word cut off
- (.hhh) Audible inhalation

## Additional Resources for Classroom Use

1. **Alexander, R. (2020) *A dialogic teaching companion*. Routledge.**

Robin Alexander, one of the seminal thinkers and practitioners of dialogic teaching, has introduced the topic to decades of teachers, policy-makers and scholars. This volume, *the* definitive book for teachers on dialogic teaching, consolidates his and others' research and experience. Alexander lays out the case for dialogic teaching, research on its benefits, what it looks and sounds like in practice, how it is shaped by policy and cultural contexts, and how it can and should be cultivated. The book includes cutting-edge research, numerous practical examples, insightful analysis, and considerable wisdom.

2. **Resnick, L. B., Asterhan, C.S.C, & Clarke, S. N. (2018). *Accountable Talk: Instructional dialogue that builds the mind*. *Educational Practices Series*. 29, 14-34.**

This booklet was written for practitioners aiming to integrate more *accountable talk* in their classrooms. Accountable talk is a term that both captures the aim and the means of engaging students with active and critical learning, but it also clearly distinguishes it from recitation style learning, more commonly found in the classroom. In short, speakers must be held accountable both to their peers (i.e., other students in the classroom), to the body of knowledge (i.e., existing theories, facts) and to the pursuit of reason (i.e., use

of logic and facts to support claims). The booklet summarizes one of the leading and holistic theoretical frameworks of dialogic teaching.

3. **Asterhan, C.S.C., Howe, C., Lefstein, A., Matusov, E. & Reznitskaya, A. (2020). Controversies and consensus in research on dialogic teaching and learning. *Dialogic Pedagogy An International Online Journal*. 8, 1-16.**

This paper is a written account of a thought-provoking panel held on dialogic pedagogy in which some central thinkers in the field commented on four crucial and provocative questions: the variation and overlap of the different definitions of dialogic pedagogy; shortcomings of systematic measurement methods designed to capture the quality of talk; equity in dialogic pedagogy – who gets to speak, how and what types of talk are legitimized (e.g., standard vs. non-standard language, logical vs. emotional thinking); and the stubborn challenges of large-scale implementation efforts. The diverse answers of these scholars give an in-depth look into the less discussed issues of dialogic pedagogy.