ROUTLEDGE

BETTER THAN BEST PRACTICE

DEVELOPING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH DIALOGUE

ADAM LEFSTEIN AND JULIA SNELL

Better than Best Practice

Developing teaching and learning through dialogue

Adam Lefstein and Julia Snell

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Joe, Sharon and Ella: It's finally over. Thanks for understanding.

Key transcription conventions

(text)	Transcription uncertainty
(xxxxxxx)	Indistinguishable speech
(.)	Brief pause (under one second)
(1)	Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest whole second)
(( ))	Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
[	Overlapping talk or action
[	
text	Emphasized relative to surrounding talk (underlined words)
te:xt	Stretched sounds
sh-	Word cut off
>text<	Speech delivered more rapidly than surrounding speech
TEXT	Shouting
(.hhh)	Audible inhalation

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Part I

Where we're coming from

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Chapter 1

Better than best practice

Video is hot in educational improvement. It seems to promise an easy technological fix for a long-standing problem in teacher professional development, namely that teachers work largely alone, behind closed doors, and rarely have opportunities to learn from one another. With the advent of relatively inexpensive digital video technology, classroom practice can be easily captured, edited and made public. And, indeed, a number of teachers and researchers have begun to experiment with various models of video-based teacher professional development, in which participants view and discuss recordings of their own or others' practice. When done well, such activities are indeed promising. However, they are surprisingly difficult to do well, especially in settings in which classroom observation is associated with inspection and performance management, and a pervasive 'best practice' mentality shuts down possibilities for critical discussion of the complexities of teaching.

This book offers a vision of teaching as the sensitive and flexible exercise of professional judgment and repertoire, and a set of video-based practices for teacher professional development. It is based upon our experiences researching dialogic pedagogy in a London primary school, and facilitating a series of workshops in which the teachers at that school reflected on recordings of their literacy lessons and discussed how to improve their teaching. The book's primary goals are:

- to challenge current orthodoxies regarding 'best practice' in classroom teaching, advancing instead an approach to pedagogy and professional development that is sensitive to and appreciative of the tensions and dilemmas inherent to teaching and learning in classrooms;
- to develop a multidimensional approach to dialogic pedagogy that is informed by actual practice, is grounded in existing classroom conditions and acknowledges the complexities and problems inherent in dialogue;
- to offer a set of rich and realistic cases for reflection and discussion;
- to model the sorts of professional vision and analysis that we believe are particularly conducive to learning from video recordings of practice; and
- to offer practical guidance for organizing and facilitating video-based professional development.

In this first chapter we briefly outline our view of teaching practice and the implications of that view for teacher learning from video.

Problematizing 'best practice'

The idea of 'best practice' has become part of international educational common sense. In England, for example, it sits at the heart of ambitious and wide-reaching governmental reforms of teaching. The 1998 *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS) sought to radically transform curriculum content, lesson structure and teaching method in all primary classrooms across England, all at once. Michael Barber, then Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards and the architect of the NLS, explained the policy's rationale:

> For years and years primary teachers have been criticised for the way they teach reading. But then nobody ever said to them: 'Here's the best practice, based on solid international research and experience. If you use it your children will make progress.[1]

Barber's confident prognosis nicely captures both the tone and the content of the prevalent 'best practice' approach to educational improvement, which involves identifying, capturing and disseminating proven teaching methods.[2] In such a way, it is assumed, the vast majority of teachers are able to learn from and emulate the innovations and secrets of the gifted few. While such an approach has its merits, which we discuss below, we argue that it can only advance teacher professional practice so far. We offer here a complementary way of thinking about and conducting teacher professional development and educational improvement. This approach involves teachers sharing their practice with colleagues in order to learn from one another's challenges, problems, dilemmas and breakthroughs. Gifted teachers, in this model, appreciate the complexity of teaching, have the courage to expose their practice – 'warts and all' – to their peers and are adept at making sense of and learning from their own and others' experience. This approach is *better than best practice*, because it helps to develop and support thoughtful, flexible and insightful practitioners, who exercise a large degree of leadership in directing their own professional development.

Echoes of the 'best practice' idea resonate throughout the education system: Teachers ask, 'What is best practice for grouping children in mathematics lessons?' Scholars systematically review the research literature to ascertain 'what works' in teaching higher-order thinking skills. Policymakers wonder, 'What is the evidence that one early reading intervention is better than another?' The schools inspectorate publishes reports on 'learning from the best' education providers and schools. And government, education publishers, school improvement consultants and even the entertainment industry, produce and market videos of 'outstanding lessons', 'evidence-based methods' and 'best teaching practices'.[3]

We want to clarify from the outset that we see a role for research into which pedagogical practices are more or less effective (for which purposes and under what circumstances), and for demonstrations of productive practices and the principles underlying them, including through video recordings. Teaching involves structures, tools, techniques and routines that can be demonstrated and imitated, and it would be foolish to expect teachers to devise all their methods on their own.[4] Our concern is with teacher professional development that is focused *exclusively* on the inculcation of best practice through demonstration and imitation, and specifically with the dominance of this approach in the production and consumption of video recordings of practice.

So what is wrong with over-reliance on best practice? Our primary concern is that the best practice strategy is founded upon an unrealistic – and distorting – vision of teaching.

Teaching is complicated and difficult, but 'best practice' tends to iron out or overlook complexities, and thereby makes teaching practice appear relatively straightforward and even simple. Teaching is complex first and foremost because multiple factors interact to shape the success of teaching encounters:

- the *pupils* – their relationships with the teacher, their relationships with one another and social dynamics as a group, their differential levels of knowledge, understanding and interest;
- the *content*, its demands on teacher and students;
- *institutional requirements and supports*, such as assessment, performance management and professional development;
- the *physical setting*; and
- the *teacher*, their skills, manner and values; and more.[5]

Such complexity poses formidable challenges for designers of best practice methods: How can they ensure effectiveness across multiple, unpredictable situations? A method that works in one context – in the particular constellation of teacher, pupils, relationships, culture and setting – will likely unfold differently, and with different effects, in a different set of circumstances. Transferring good practices between teaching contexts is possible, but requires sensitivity, flexibility and judgement.

A further source of complexity in teaching is the overwhelming demands practice places on practitioners' attention. There is a lot going on in the classroom, all at once, and from every possible direction. Walter Doyle describes this phenomenon:

> During a discussion, a teacher must listen to student answers, watch other students for signs of comprehension or confusion, formulate the next question, and scan the class for possible misbehavior. At the same time, the teacher must attend to the pace of the discussion, the sequence of selecting students to answer, the relevance and quality of answers, and the logical development of the content.[6]

Teachers must interpret and act upon a great deal of information rapidly. There is insufficient time to process consciously the multiple signals, the issues they raise, the options available, their relative advantages and the overall lesson strategy. Instead, teachers rely heavily upon intuition and habit, and their knowledge about such habitual activity is primarily tacit, that is, knowledge that teachers don't know they possess or find difficult to articulate. Here then is a second challenge for the design of 'best practices': How to recognize, formulate and transfer such tacit knowledge? How can it be acquired except through direct experience?

Another cause of complexity in teaching, which undermines attempts to achieve agreement about which practices are best, are the many and contested goals of education. Teachers are supposed to impart academic knowledge and skills; and also to care for their pupils' emotional and spiritual well-being; and to promote their moral development; and to make sure that everyone is engaged and interested; and that no one is excluded (socially or academically); and to promote civic values such as tolerance and integrity; and to foster safe and caring learning environments; and to instil respect for authority while cultivating critical and independent thinking; and more. Goals conflict, sometimes deeply, such as the tension between maintenance of teachers' authority and cultivation of pupils' critical thinking, and at other times superficially, inasmuch as attending to pupils' emotional needs demands time that might otherwise have been devoted to academic content. Which goals should be given priority, and when? At any given moment goals shift as new opportunities and/or crises present themselves. So, teaching is not merely complex because teachers must simultaneously attend to multiple signals, but also because those signals beckon them to move the lesson in different directions, all legitimate and desirable.

In summary, many facets of teaching – its complexity and unpredictability; its dependence on the particularities of changing contexts; the centrality of tacit knowledge and the multiple and contested nature of educational goals – all resist reduction to a single, 'best practice' method. On account of them, teachers and pupils often enact 'best practices' in ways that significantly deviate from designers' intentions. For example, in a study of teachers' use of *National Literacy Strategy* lesson plans and related guidance, we found teachers often adhering rigidly to surface features of the guidelines (for example, using the activities provided, or posing the recommended questions) in ways that actually undermined the lesson objectives (for example, by closing down open questions in the subsequent interaction).[7] In these gaps we find another limitation of an over-reliance on 'best practice', or more precisely of the guidance and related materials produced as demonstrations of best practice teaching methods: while these materials may show us what good practice looks like, they are much less informative about the processes through which teachers and pupils can achieve that practice. Learning how to enact a teaching method involves much more than observation and imitation of expert performance.

'Best practice' is particularly problematic when video is employed as a central means of representing recommended teaching methods. In order to focus viewers' gaze on the specific technique being demonstrated, producers of best practice videos typically wash the dynamic complexity out of teaching. Filming techniques simplify the scene, for example, through tight focus on the teacher and/or an individual pupil, with all the other pupils and issues held off camera. Likewise, clip selection and editing can distort, for example by using that one moment in hundreds of hours of filming in which the method worked effortlessly, exactly as planned, or by removing less productive pupil contributions to produce a seamless and elegant 'discussion'. And of course staging, direction and rehearsals can create idealistic images of classrooms as orderly and teaching as easy. Such films raise expectations about what practice should look like, inadvertently causing teachers to feel inadequate about their own practice, which rarely measures up to the unrealistic ideals presented.

David Labaree notes that one obstacle to improving education is that 'teaching is an enormously difficult job that looks easy'.[8] It is hard to persuade teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, education policymakers and the general public to commit the appropriate resources to and have the patience for lengthy processes of teacher professional development if a distorted and simplistic view of teaching is popular. In this regard, realistic representations of the complexities and difficulties of practice are better than best practice.

Professional practice: sensitivity, interpretation, repertoire and judgement

We have argued that an approach to teaching and its improvement that focuses exclusively on the implementation of best practices is problematic and in some cases even counterproductive. We offer a more balanced approach, according to which good teaching requires sensitivity, interpretation, repertoire and judgement.[9] To explicate these four capacities, we find it helpful to ground our discussion in an actual example of practice. Below we briefly introduce a critical moment in Ms Leigh's Year 5 classroom (the full episode is presented and discussed in Chapter 5).

Classroom episode: responding to a pupil challenge

Ms Leigh is teaching the second of two consecutive lessons on story openers. She has just demonstrated to the class the lesson's key idea and objective – to open their stories by dropping the reader right into the action – and begins to set them the task of working in pairs to act out the opening to their own story in order to get ideas about how to improve it. Before she finishes her instructions, however, she is interrupted by an interjection from William: 'Miss, I don't really like that'.

This interjection was both exceptional and mundane. Exceptional inasmuch as Year 5 pupils don't typically challenge their teachers so explicitly. Nor was there anything in the rather emphatic way in which Ms Leigh introduced the main idea of the lesson to suggest that she wished to open the issue to discussion. William also spoke without raising his hand or being called upon (although this was not all that unusual in this classroom). While the particularities of this event may make it seem rare, there is nothing more mundane than a lesson not going exactly as planned. Every lesson is composed of dozens of such moments, in which a teacher must decide – in less time than it takes to read this sentence – how to proceed.

Experienced teachers have developed routine ways of dealing with disturbances to the flow of the lesson. After all, we cannot stop at every moment to reassess what we are doing and where the lesson is going. Such constant 'reflection-in-action' would lead to paralysis.[10] Indeed, Ms Leigh immediately responded with a statement that sounds like the first step in the polite dismissal of William's objections: 'Well it depends on how you want to start your story, doesn't it?' William assented, and she continued, 'So you could have –'. But she stopped mid-sentence. Caught short, perhaps she realized she didn't know what William meant, or recognized an opportunity to explore the issue further. She then proceeded to question William, '[Do] you mean talk as the narrator or talk as the actors?' We see in Ms Leigh's hesitation and shifting course the marks of her *sensitivity*, her attentiveness and openness to recognize the critical moments, problems and/or opportunities.[11]

Having noticed that something demands attention, Ms Leigh must also *interpret* the situation, and the problems and concerns it raises. So, what is happening here? For example, why is William challenging her? Is he genuinely concerned about story openers, or looking for an opportunity to assert his individuality by undermining the teacher's authority? And where is William's question leading, and how might it fit into the curriculum? Can addressing it advance the lesson objectives, or perhaps it offers an opportunity to explore other, even more important issues? What's happening with the other pupils – what's their state of mind? Will pursuing this issue engage them and be productive for them, or might it confuse them? And what might the pursuit or shutting down of William's question say to William and the rest of the class about what sorts of pupil contributions are and are not legitimate and even valued, and what are the implications of this for developing critical and independent thinking? What will it say to William and to the class about what sort of pupil William is?

We are not going to address these questions yet. For now we hope that posing them illuminates the complexity of the moment and the sort of issues that must be considered in order to respond adequately.

In terms of response, what were Ms Leigh's options at this point? What would you have done were you in her place? Most teachers to whom we've shown the video recording of this incident – stopping right after William's challenge – have suggested that Ms Leigh should dismiss this issue and get on with the lesson, perhaps by postponing the discussion of his reservations, or by accepting his views as legitimate, but noting that today the class is going to learn how to do it *her* way. But let's assume for a moment that Ms Leigh has recognized William's challenge as a good opportunity to explore alternative methods of opening a story – How might she achieve that goal? One possibility might be to probe William's views by looking at the opening of his story, and perhaps opening the issue to discussion with the rest of the class: What do they think about William's strategy?

Or Ms Leigh might collect from the class a range of different ways of opening stories and discuss their relative advantages and disadvantages. Or change the task: require each pupil to compose and contrast two openings to their story, one with description and one dropping the reader right into the action.

Ms Leigh might implement a tool or technique that she picked up in a best practice professional development session. For example, she might use the think–pair–share technique, in which students first think individually about the topic (here, for example, what is the best way to open a story), then discuss their ideas with their partner, and finally share with the rest of the class.[12]

Alternatively, she might inject some new texts into the discussion – to enrich the dispute by looking at how accomplished authors choose to open their stories.

We could continue this list of possibilities for many more pages, but it should be sufficient to impress upon the reader that there's more than one path forward. We call the flexibility and depth that allow a teacher to call upon a wide range of possible courses of action, and to successfully implement them, *repertoire*.[13]

Which course of action is the best one, right now? Deciding how to act requires *judgement* about how each possibility will likely unfold, and about their relative merits. Each of the possibilities is good for addressing some of the many issues posed by the situation, but less helpful – or even problematic – *vis-à-vis* other issues. The question isn't one of finding the one best, right solution to the problem, but of balancing conflicting concerns. For example, elaborating and exploring William's ideas versus bringing other pupils into the conversation; addressing the question raised by a pupil vs covering the predetermined lesson topics; protecting William's identity as a committed learner versus refuting a bad idea that also threatens to undermine the lesson objective. Classroom practice is experienced by sensitive teachers as problems and dilemmas, which require judgement.[14]

The premise of this book is that sensitivity can be deepened, interpretation enriched, repertoire expanded and judgement sharpened through facilitated reflection and discussion about video recordings of practice.

A balanced approach to the problem of practice

Two entrenched dogmas currently divide thinking about teaching and teacher professional development. Neither provides a good basis for confronting the complexities of classroom practice or the challenges of educational improvement. The first, which we have characterized as 'best practice', views teaching primarily as technique or method, and educational improvement as a problem of identifying, disseminating and mandating the most effective methods. The second, opposing dogma views teaching as fundamentally personal and particular, and teachers' professional autonomy as a key condition for educational improvement.[15] In England, where we have been working, the former 'best practice' view has gained ascendance, and hence this chapter and book have focused on the shortcomings of that view, and have sought to counterbalance it by emphasizing the critical roles of professional sensitivity and judgement. We want to caution, however, against embracing the opposite extreme, and viewing all externally devised methods as undermining teacher professional judgement.

Our perspective seeks to avoid the extremes of both dogmas. Professional teaching practice involves sensitivity, interpretation, judgement *and* a flexible repertoire of methods. Sensitivity, interpretation and judgement are fundamental for knowing when and how to use techniques; and, conversely, judgement is only useful in practice inasmuch as it is informed by a broad repertoire of techniques and strategies. Moreover, methods and routines can free teachers' attention so that they can focus on critical issues necessitating interpretation and the exercise of judgement. Ultimately, a comprehensive programme for improving practice will involve multiple forms of professional development: one cannot learn how to implement a technique by merely hearing about it in a reflective discussion, nor are best practice demonstrations a good means of honing judgement.

What's in the book?

This book is designed as a casebook to support the development of teachers' sensitivity and judgement about the problems and possibilities of dialogic pedagogy. At its heart (Part 2) are a series of eight classroom episodes intended as material for teacher reflection and discussion. These episodes were recorded in literacy lessons in Years 5–6 classrooms in one East London school during the 2008–9 academic year. Each episode is presented to the reader through a video recording and a detailed transcript on the companion website, www.routledge.com/cw/lefstein. There are narrative accounts of main events and key contextual information along with discussion of key pedagogical and interactional issues raised. Two to four guest contributors comment on each episode and on our interpretations of it. Readers can of course engage with these materials on their own, but we envisage them ideally being used as the basis for study groups in school-based learning communities, professional development workshops or higher education courses.

Preceding these case studies, in Part 1, we introduce our views of teaching, dialogic pedagogy and the research project upon which the book is based. Following the case studies, in Part 3, we conclude the book with a discussion of video-based professional development, including advice for collecting and preparing materials for investigation of practice in your own school or related setting. For those more interested in research methodology and theory, we've included an appendix with information about our linguistic ethnographic approach to analysing classroom discourse and interaction, and endnotes with suggestions for further reading and/or references to support our claims are included throughout the book.

Finally, we offer a few words about the different voices that inhabit the book. The main voices are ours, the authors, and we should say a few words about ourselves and our perspectives. Adam Lefstein is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Education at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. He was a lecturer at the University of London Institute of Education when the research reported in this book was undertaken. He earned his doctorate in educational studies, examining literacy teaching from anthropological, philosophical, and sociolinguistic perspectives. In a previous career he worked as a teacher and facilitator of teacher professional development (in Israel). To this day he wrestles with reconciling anthropological and pedagogical perspectives on classroom practice. Julia Snell worked with Adam as a researcher at the Institute of Education between 2008 and 2010 and is currently a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King's College London. Her background is in linguistics, but her research has always focused on educational settings, investigating, for example, the relationship between language, identity and learning.

We recognize that our perspectives on the episodes and related questions explored in the book are partial, reflecting our unique backgrounds and experiences. In order to open up the discussion, we have invited a broad range of educational practitioners and researchers to comment on the episodes and on our interpretations. The commentators include one of the teachers appearing in the episodes, the head teacher at the school in which we recorded the lessons, a local authority advisor, literacy consultant, a poet whose poem was analysed in one lesson, and leading researchers from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Singapore, New Zealand, and Canada. We have also endeavoured, to the best of our ability, to bring the teachers' and pupils' own voices into the discussion. We thank them for their openness and generosity. The book would not exist without them.

Notes

1 Ghouri (1998).

2 Barber's confidence has not been vindicated by the NLS results. For an assessment of test scores, see Tymms and Merrell (2010). On evidence regarding changes in classroom discourse and interaction, see Smith *et al.* (2004). And for an exploration of the policy's enactment, and why it so frequently deviated from designers' intentions, see Lefstein (2008a).

3 Here are some examples that jump to mind: the Teachers' TV programme 'From Good to Outstanding' (http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk/series/from-good-to-outstanding); MediaMerge's 'Evidence-based Teaching DVD' (http://www.evidencebasedteaching.co.uk); Lemov's (2010) *Teach Like a Champion* (http://www.uncommonschools.org/our-approach/teach-like-a-champion); Ofsted's 'good practice' surveys and 'learning from the best' reports (Ofsted 2010, 2011); and even BBC Newsnight's 2005 reports on synthetic phonics teaching, which were essentially a hybrid current affairs–makeover programme (for description and analysis, see Lefstein, 2008b).

4 The question of how we should think about teaching – for example, as science, craft or art; or as primarily involving technique, habit or judgement – is an old debate, and we do not intend to rehash the arguments here. For a concise programmatic statement advocating scientifically-based, best practices in teaching (and education more generally), see Slavin (2002). For a critique, see Elliott (2001). For an overview of both sides, which shows how each depends on the other – no teaching method without teacher subjectivity and *vice versa*, see Lefstein (2005).

5 For a concise discussion of the complexity of teaching (and related difficulties), see Labaree (2000). For a more extended exploration of the issue, see Cohen (2011). The classic statement of these ideas is Lortie (1975).

6 Doyle (1986).

7 For examples, see Lefstein (2008a, 2009). For an example of a teacher tacking new methods onto traditional teaching practices, see Cohen (1990).

8 Labaree (2000).

9 A similar approach to professional practice can be found in Alexander (1997: 267–87), which also includes a fascinating analysis of then-current thinking about 'good practice'. Alexander argues that good practice 'resides in the teacher having a clear sense of educational purpose, reflected in his or her planning and the context in which teaching and learning are to take place; a well-developed range of pedagogical skills, firmly grounded in appropriate knowledge of children, curriculum and pedagogy; and the capacity to judge how and when this repertoire should be exploited' (pp. 277–8).

10 Reflection-in-action, the way that professionals think about what they're doing while doing it, is developed in Schön (1983). For a discussion of the way the frenetic pace of teaching limits opportunities for reflection-in-action, see Roth, Lawless and Masciotra (2001).

11 It's not always so obvious that something is happening that requires our attention as teachers. In this case, William's direct challenge was difficult to miss, but imagine if he'd spoken under his breath, to the boy sitting next to him, or had made a disapproving face. A key element of good teaching is being attentive to these and other cues about pupils' thinking and social dynamics.

12 We mention this possibility in order to drive home a key point about the limitations of best practices. Think–pair–share is a useful method to have in one's repertoire, but there's no reason to assume automatically that it is best practice in any given situation. Imagine a teacher who used the method for each and every question that arose in class discussion. Think–pair–share would quickly lose its appeal. The key questions that must be asked before using this or some other practice is 'What is happening?' 'What problems do I need to address?' 'What are my options?' 'What are their relative advantages?' And only afterwards to decide on the best course of action.

13 The idea of repertoire is key to Robin Alexander's (2008a, 2008b) thinking about dialogic pedagogy.

14 For analyses of problems and dilemmas in teaching we recommend Alexander (1995), Berlak and Berlak (1981), and Lampert (2001). For an application of this view to teacher professional learning, see also Loughran (2010).

15 See Lefstein (2005) for elaboration and critique of this dogma.

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Chapter 2

Towards dialogic pedagogy[1]

Do we really need another book about dialogue in education? Dozens of books about dialogic pedagogy or similar constructs have been published in the past decade, among them Robin Alexander's *Towards Dialogic Teaching*, Karen Littleton and Christine Howe's *Educational Dialogues*, Eugene Matusov's *Journey into Dialogic Pedagogy*, Neil Mercer and Karen Littleton's *Dialogue and the Development of Children's Thinking*, Debra Myhill and colleagues' *Talking, Listening, Learning: Effective Talk in the Primary Classroom* and Rupert Wegerif's *Dialogic Education and Technology*.[2] The UK government has similarly championed 'dialogic' practice, and a community of international scholars have recently established a *Dialogic Pedagogy Journal*.[3] So do we really need another volume about dialogic pedagogy? What more could possibly be said in such a crowded field?

We recommend the journal and those books as well as this one; each offers an important and useful perspective. Our unique contribution in this book is an approach to dialogic pedagogy that:

(a) is informed by actual practice and grounded in existing classroom conditions. Rather than starting with an ideal image of what we believe dialogue should look like and then criticizing teachers and pupils for not living up to that lofty standard, we start with the actual activities and communicative practices that we have encountered in English classrooms, and endeavour to understand them on their own terms. That is, we first seek to understand the rules of the classroom game and the conditions constraining teaching practice, and work out from them to the development of dialogic possibilities;

(b) is multidimensional, that is we examine a range of different aspects of classroom communication and interaction. These include communicative forms, interpersonal relations, the exchange and development of ideas, power, pupil and teacher identities and aesthetics. This multidimensional analysis locates classroom communication within broader contexts of pedagogic activity and educational and social structures. As such, our approach to dialogic pedagogy looks beyond classroom *talk* to consider additional factors such as the use of space, organization of the curriculum, design of learning tasks and assessment;

(c) views dialogue as a problem rather than a solution. We argue that dialogic pedagogy is most helpful as a set of dilemmas to consider, concepts to think with, commitments to pursue and balance and practices to add to our repertoires. It is less helpful as a narrow best practice solution to each and every classroom situation.

Similarly, habitual interactional patterns – for example, providing all participants opportunity to voice their views, demanding and providing justification for arguments, questioning assumptions, clarifying concepts and so on – are internalized as habitual ways of thinking.[18] Indeed, Anna Sfard argued that the similarities between interpersonal communication and individual cognition are such that they can usefully be thought of as different manifestations of the same processes.[19] In short, the ways of talking into which we are socialized shape both the cognitive tools at our disposal and the habits of mind whereby we put those tools to use.

This view of dialogue as thinking together raises important questions about classroom discourse: What is the quality of the thinking articulated by participants? For example, how valid, clear and relevant are the arguments? To what extent do inquiry and evidence conform to disciplinary standards?

Dialogue as relation

Dialogue can be threatening. Contrary to Socrates' view, few of us are happy to have our ideas refuted, and most prefer winning to losing an argument. Partly for this reason, discourse is rarely the cooperative, orderly and attentive affair commonly evoked by the word 'dialogue'. Indeed, attention to emotional and relational factors is important specifically because dialogue is also implicated with competition, argument, struggle to be heard, persuasion, 'ego' and power relations. Hence, Nicholas Burbules pointed out that the 'cognitive interest is not all that attracts us to the dialogical encounter, or keeps us in it when it becomes difficult or contentious'. This is one of the reasons that, for Burbules, dialogue is chiefly a relation, which thrives on emotions such as 'concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection, and hope – [which] are crucial to the bond that sustains a dialogical relation over time'.[20]

The thinker perhaps most closely associated with the view of dialogue as a relation is Martin Buber (1878–1965), an Austrian-born philosopher and theologian who lived and worked in Germany until, fleeing from the Nazis in 1938, he emigrated to what was then Palestine (now Israel). Buber argued that people have two basic orientations toward others and the world: instrumental or dialogic.[21] To approach another instrumentally means to treat that person as an object, as a means to advance one's own interests. To approach another dialogically is to enter into a relationship of respect, mutual concern and solidarity. When we adopt an instrumental attitude, we relate to others partially – involving only those parts of our and their selves that are relevant to the transaction (for example, institutional roles and/or economic interests). The mutual concern in a dialogic relation is all-encompassing, and relates to both our and the other's whole beings. Dialogue, according to Buber, is unplanned and indeed unplannable, a matter of grace rather than calculation. Finally, Buber argues that we cannot live without instrumental relations, but we are not fully human without entering into dialogue.[22]

Viewing dialogue as a relation opens up questions about the quality of relations between the participants. For example, which part (or all) of their selves do they bring to the encounter? What are their motivations? To what extent are they accepting and caring of one another?

Dialogue as empowerment

Underlying the approaches to dialogue reviewed above is a basic assumption that participants freely enter into dialogue and enjoy equal rights and opportunities within the dialogic encounter. Yet, we live in an unequal society, which often constrains our participation and