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On dialogue in universities

Academic biography

Dr David Harris is Professor of Leisure and Education at University College Plymouth, St Mark and St John (Marjon) where he has spent most of his career after a post as a Research Assistant at the UK Open University. He has taught a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate students at Marjon and the OU in Education, Leisure Studies, Media and Sociology, and has published in all of those fields. Publications specific to higher education range from *Openness and Closure in Distance Education* (1987) to 'Distance Education: in whose interests' in *The International Handbook of Distance Education* (2008). Further details are available from his personal website <http://www.arasite.org/>.

Abstract

Three main types of dialogue are identified and critically discussed: managerial, emancipatory and pedagogic. The possibilities and potentials of each kind are analysed, and inherent problems are seen to arise in practice. Modern universities are assessed in terms of their ability to host and embody these different types, principally via the work of Bourdieu and Passeron. Discussion then turns on the kind of communication that would be needed in modern universities to overcome important social and organisational constraints. Finally, alternative conceptions are outlined, principally via the potential of electronic communication as a form of dialogue.

Key words: Bourdieu and Passeron, class closure, cultural capital, dialogue, Freire, Habermas, ideal speech act, web-based teaching and learning.

Introduction

There seem to be three possibilities currently on offer in educational thought and policy: dialogue as a form of human relations, associated with the style of management that motivates workers; dialogue as a form of a radical emancipation, associated with the work of Habermas (McCarthy 1984 has the best introduction) or Freire (1972 and see Freire in Dale et al. (1976) ; dialogue as a form of practical pedagogy associated with learner-centred activity and other forms of "progressive" practice.

Managerial dialogue

The managerial revolution in education has been much discussed, quite often critically. A number of managerial regimes have been tried over the years, as Westoby (1988) indicates. After an initial experiment with line management or matrix models, sometimes governed by a weak form of scientific management, new approaches appeared, based on the human relations tradition. Partly this was a response to criticisms about the decline of autonomy and collegiality, and partly a response to the emerging problem of maintaining externally-validated quality. In the human relations tradition, it is important to talk to employees in relatively informal ways, not just through the official hierarchy. This is supposed to motivate them, bind them to the mission of the company, and make them responsible for supervising their own work. It is often thought to be particularly suitable for "loosely coupled" organisations (Weick in Westoby 1988) where tight forms of work discipline and supervision are limited, and where employees enjoy a necessarily high level of local autonomy, and educational institutions are the classic case. Characteristic forms of such dialogue are found in periodic committee meetings or consultation exercises, some of them electronic. These forms are associated with managerial significance given to mission or vision statements, which rhetorically represent the shared values arising from democratic discussion.

Of course, this is a strategically limited form of dialogue and discussion, following a management agenda: it is designed to foster committed work and self-supervision, while humanising the workplace. As a result, some analysts believe that dialogue for management purposes will never become properly rooted in the actual social relations of work, which will remain divided along occupational lines. Some of the more spectacular examples, with informal discussion maintaining "quality circles", originated in Japan, and transferring these practices to a different social and cultural context in Britain, as a kind of "technical fix", seem especially unlikely to succeed (Ouchi and Wilkins in Westoby

1988). There is also academic tradition, which insists on the right to disagree without organisational penalty (enshrined in the 1988 Education Reform Act), and to pursue micropolitical resistance to organizational initiatives in the name of external allegiances (to academic subjects, for example, as well as to specific institutions). The divisive tendencies might be expected to increase following the development of a management stratum in modern universities, as managerial salaries, power and conditions draw away from those on academic and support pay scales (Harris in Cope et al. 2006). It is worth noting here that critique is not a matter of blaming individual managers. Many actual managers are also academics and have to reconcile managerial and academic discourses (see Deem 2003).

Emancipatory dialogue

In complete contrast, there are versions of dialogue intended to radically empower subordinates. It is important to establish that these are radical alternatives, since it is not unknown for managerial discourses to attempt to invoke the names of people such as Habermas and Freire as if they were supporters of the far more limited kinds of dialogue described above. In practice, both authors have an interest in radical social change, not just the amelioration of social conditions in companies.

Habermas (1984), for example, sets out to define an "ideal speech act" which represents the most open and participatory kind of dialogue conceivable. In such an ideal act, all participants are entitled to challenge the claims to legitimacy of any utterance, regardless of the power or status of the participant. The main claims to legitimacy, Habermas suggests, relate to three main dimensions (subjective, social and objective), and turn on claims to sincerity, social appropriateness, and truth respectively. Habermas insists that these three dimensions lie behind properly rounded argumentation, and also that the ideal speech act offers a way of adequately "grounding" an interest in emancipation. Such "grounding" was necessary to insist that an

emancipatory impulse was not just an idea in the heads of philosophers but had some material basis in social life. Habermas had long before rejected the idea that an emancipatory political movement would emerge from working class experiences after polarisation and class struggle, as in the classic 1848 model of Marx and Engels. Nor did he see much hope in the "rebellious subjectivity" expressed in alternative lifestyles (see Bernstein 1985). Discovering an emancipatory potential in ordinary speech solved the problem.

Educational theorists are familiar with earlier attempts to provide a genuine basis for emancipation in the work of Carr and Kemmis (1986), who used Habermas's concepts of "quasi-transcendental human interests", which included an interest in emancipation, to inform their notion of a fully rounded curriculum. As Habermas noted himself, though, there is an ambiguity in the expression "quasi-transcendental". Does the expression mean that such interests are transcendental in the sense of being somehow inherent in all human consciousness? If so, there seems to be only a "philosophical" basis for them. If they are transcendental in the sense of being detectable as a generalization from past societies, there is no reason to suppose that they will persist in different societies in the future, any more than will, say, class struggle. However, Ray (2004) argues that the turn towards ideal speech acts fails to solve this ambiguity, and insists on calling the ideal speech act a "quasi-transcendental" scheme too.

In more familiar terms, there is a general and a specific level at which the model might operate. At the very general level, Habermas runs the risk of suggesting that all human speech in any society and any context could be seen as equally inherently emancipatory. This makes it difficult to comment on specific political situations, to distinguish between speech at a strike meeting and speech at a garden centre, rather as with Freire (below), at least without using some external standard of emancipatory potential. At the specific level, it is clear that all sorts of additional elements affect actual speech acts, not just the classic discussion of validity claims, and

these range from the importance of emotions to the effects of cultural constraints which might have the effect, say, of excluding women (Dews 1987). The actual theory is too simple and abstract to explain these constraints properly. Fraser (1989) makes the same point, and says the argument needs to be complemented with some detailed examination of actual dialogues to see how power is exercised. Lyotard is perhaps the most trenchant critic, arguing that real power differentials in actual dialogues will convert the emancipatory potential of the ideal speech act into a form of totalitarianism, a constant demand for justification from underlings (see Dews 1987 on the Habermas - Lyotard debate).

It is clear that this criticism could apply equally to any approach which stresses a general model of action without specifying the concrete conditions likely to affect its development in practice. In the abstract, such approaches are doubtless intended to be emancipatory, but much will depend on the intentions of those in power in practice. Thus well-known models of the "reflective practitioner" could easily become in practice techniques which stress the need for constant internal discipline to improve performance and "quality" without external supervision (Hobbs 2007), a kind of Japanese "quality circle" for academic life. "Lifelong learning" could become the equivalent for students, making people endlessly responsible for their own upskilling and blaming them personally if they become unemployed.

Habermas clearly notices the possibilities, and intends that the ideal speech act should remain "ideal" in one of the more usual senses of the word as well (that is as desirable in an ideal world). We should use it "counterfactually", that is as a critical model to gauge the emancipatory potential of actual dialogues of the kind we are likely to encounter in universities. How close is the resemblance between the ideal act, where legitimacy can be challenged by any participant, to the routine kinds of consultation with management that we mentioned earlier, for example? For that matter, how close is the ideal speech act to the sort of discussion that

goes on in lectures and seminars? Habermas indicates that rather more common types of communication are "strategic" (designed to persuade us to adopt policies that suit others) or "distorted" (pretending specific interests are universal ones, found, for example, when the State speaks for "the nation", or a boss speaks for an organization) – see Habermas (1976).

There are additional complications. The general theory insists that all normal members of a community are competent speakers, made equally able by the very nature of language to engage in dialogue. However, there may be circumstances where the participants are rightfully thought to be not fully competent – teaching children might be one example. In this case, a benevolent kind of strategic communication might be needed, instead of the full ideal speech act, at least until the children have learned enough to participate fully. There are clear problems in judging when full competence is to be granted, of course. Who should decide? How could we tell if a restriction is benevolent, and not just a way of refusing to address challenges to validity? It is tempting to conclude with Ray that Habermas has actually got it all upside down. It is not that ideal speech acts will create a new democratic form of public sphere, but rather than a democratic community is needed before the ideal speech act can be developed.

Freire's occasional incorporation into management discourse is even more curious, since his educational practice is clearly connected to a radical political project to emancipate the oppressed in Brazil – his most famous book, after all, refers to the oppressed in the title! (Freire 1972). The oppressed are to be liberated and empowered by being able to take on and challenge the dominant discourses of local and national elites. Such liberation and empowerment is to occur first by making the oppressed literate and able to think and read about terms that they commonly encounter in their everyday lives, such as "rent". They are then supposed to think and read about alternatives. Whereas the notion of rent is classically defended as some kind of natural and

traditional payment to a benevolent owner of the land, for example, Freire would want to encourage the oppressed to read, say, Marx's account of rent. For Marx, there is nothing natural and traditional about modern forms of rent at all, of course, and the traditional name for the payment is just used to disguise and legitimise the central process of the extraction of surplus value from labour, in this particular case from agricultural labour. The oppressed are to follow these alternative and radical accounts after a process of dialogue that involves identifying and problematising their existing concepts: oppressed people identify rents as an important issue in their lives, radical educators skilfully show the limits of existing conceptions of rent and the superiority of radical conceptions. There are hints of a phenomenological model in such dialogues, where the parties thematise elements that the other has left in an unexamined horizon. Freire's dialogue therefore involves the inevitable development of a radical political consciousness, one that will lead to liberating practice, as illusions and false consciousness are stripped away -- "conscientisation".

This conception of liberation probably grants too much weight to the role of ideas or "consciousness" in practices of domination, however, and many commentators have noted with regret the subsequent depoliticisation of Freire's concept of dialogue (for example Kane 2005). Freire might have only himself to blame, however, in developing such an idealist conception. In the piece on "conscientisation" in Dale et al. (1976), Freire develops a broad notion of oppression, not just material oppression in the sense of being emiserated, imprisoned or economically exploited. In effect, Freire suggests that anyone who fails to realise that social reality is socially constructed is oppressed. The problem with this very general notion is that nearly everyone, therefore, is oppressed, not just political activists but amateur gardeners as well. Similarly, any sort of action designed to overcome the slightest constraint could be seen as "praxis". This idea became popular among some radical educators in the 1970s, such as Fay (1975): comfortable academics "struggled"

to liberate themselves from the oppression of an inconvenient timetable, and saw themselves as part of the same struggle as the war in Vietnam (Harris 1992).

Dominant groups will always be able to bend general concepts to their specific ends, and so it should not surprise us to find even senior executives claiming they are engaged in "struggle" -- perhaps the best example is the literature on entrepreneurship which often emphasises the heroic struggles of innovators to overcome inertia and early rejection, in order to fulfil their dream (see Beard 1982 on Walt Disney).

Dialogue and pedagogy

Universities above all institutions are supposed to enshrine critical debate and discussion. Of course, until recently, these discussions were confined to heavily selected members, or potential members, of an elite. Nevertheless, even in modern universities it is possible to find echoes of the old values implying communities of scholars, governing themselves collegially, with an agreed purpose of pursuing the best arguments regardless of their immediate use or political convenience. Even Habermas (1971) saw some value in this inherently democratic and emancipatory tradition in German universities of the 1970s, although he warned that, as the outcomes of student revolts of the period demonstrated, real coercive State powers were also at play. We now realize the considerable effects of the financial and regulatory powers the State possesses as well.

Much of the "new pedagogy" intended for new lecturers in new universities derives from UKOU practice in the 1970s. It shows its origins in placing most of the emphasis for stimulating interaction on academics themselves, often curiously combined with advocating the use of pre-specified and apparently closed list of objectives or learning outcomes. (A parallel development is noticeable in the modern idea of a textbook, where various pedagogical devices, including "activities", "exercises", or "in-text questions" are used to pre-structure the reader's interactions with the text,

just like an OU course 'unit'). Well-known advice offers ways to make seminars more "interesting" or "interactive", for example, often by using stimulating material such as problems to solve, questions to answer, activities to pursue, or other variants of "learning through discussion" (Northedge 1993). Study skills advice is also available, ranging from recommending more "active" ways to take notes, to suggesting techniques to develop academic literacy (see Arksey and Harris 2007). The combinations of "active learning" and study skills could be seen as a parallel to the human relations school of management, however (Harris 1994). Any "free" discussion can still function rather like the dialogue in management discourse—to develop motivation and commitment for the task in hand not to challenge it.

The major problem affecting those who wish to encourage open-ended discussion in universities is the assessment system, however. The growth of the amount and type of assessment indicates the importance of credentialism as a major public role for the university, but pervasive assessment distorts communication: strategic reason dominates, to revert to Habermasian terms. Student "instrumentalism", a strategic approach to academic life which makes gaining good grades the centre of effort, has been researched since Becker et al.'s classic (1995) study noticed that students took a significantly instrumental stance towards their studies, practising the "selective neglect" of discussion which was not assessed, the strategic choice of course likely to provide better grades, the tactical analysis of tutor preferences, and an overall collective effort to manage educational requirements in a way that provides the most efficient return for the effort expended, a semi-deviant underdogs' counterpart to rational management. A number of recent studies (for example Norton et al. 2001, Sheard et al. 2003) have shown similar stances by modern students, who have less time, probably fewer cultural resources, and rather more focused vocational interests in grades and certification than did the classic students of elite universities. A punishing assessment schedule encourages behaviour

that is used to reduce the risk of discussion and debate and that delivers what is required with minimum effort or risk. We find a range of awareness of effective techniques to "play the game", though, from risky and naive types of plagiarism, to simulated discussion and open-ended inquiry in what Entwistle (2000) calls a "technified deep approach".

It is also reasonable to assume that increased attention to institutional performance, in the form of student retention rates and distributions of grades, will exacerbate the tendency for university tutors to teach to the test. Miller and Parlett, in Hammersley and Woods (1976), noticed that tutors varied in the "cues" they would offer to students facing a traditional unseen examination in an elite university. The role of "revision sessions" or "supervision" in the modern university would be a fascinating area to research.

We might still find non-strategic values officially embodied in course design documents and marking criteria, which stress the importance of "critical thinking" and independent argument. It is still common to find passionate defences of conventional seminars too, usually directed against enthusiasts for electronic teaching, in the name of open-ended discussion and debate. We have some rather unsystematic case studies that give quite an interesting picture of actual seminars by contrast. Casey et al. (2002), for example, find that students commonly experience their seminars as stressful and as potentially embarrassing, and wish to avoid any process of subjecting their views to discussion and debate, while Reay (2002) reports that having to discuss matters in seminars is a major source of anxiety for those non-traditional students thinking of applying to university.

The most systematically critical discussion of academic discourse is found in Bourdieu's work, however. Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" refers to an unconscious system of categories and distinctions that is used to make judgements about the world: in fact, the system generates judgments when novel cases are

encountered as well, but the unconscious nature of the system means that these appear as 'second nature', simply obvious to the individuals concerned. This notion does a great deal of work in Bourdieu's diverse writings, but in particular it offers a way to systematize the empirical data gathered in the substantial work on taste (Bourdieu 1984). In this study, two underlying "aesthetics" are identified: the "popular aesthetic" which values emotional engagement, immediacy, direct involvement and participation, and content, and the contrasting "high aesthetic", which values emotional coolness and disengagement, an intellectual rather than an emotional engagement, and an emphasis on form rather than content. Whereas the popular aesthetic takes visible form in the passionate support of football fans for their team, for example, the high aesthetic is apparent in intellectual discussions of the relative merits of particular film directors.

There are two significant implications arising from the identification of these aesthetics. The first one is that they are both grounded in social ways of life: they are "class cultures". Cultural background provides an unconscious socialization, which takes place not just through words and conscious experiences, but through various forms of social practices, sometimes involving notions of social distance, which are deeply held, sometimes even manifested in bodily behaviour (Bourdieu 2000). The second implication is that these aesthetic and cultural systems are deeply implicated in forms of social solidarity and exclusion, ongoing cultural class struggle. It is clear that the high aesthetic is formulated deliberately to oppose the popular one, to exclude those who hold the popular one, and to claim a cultural superiority. It is also clear that intellectual engagement and an interest in form require a particular stock of "cultural capital". Those who deploy the high aesthetic as second nature have been born to it; have experienced a particular family culture that enables the effortless reproduction of stock-in-trade distinctions and categories.

The system of unconsciously held aesthetics enables a powerful critique of academic culture and educational practice as well. Bourdieu's work here includes sociological criticisms of academic knowledge and practices in elite French educational institutions. In one example, Bourdieu (1988) offers a study of the actual assessment practices of elite French schoolteachers, which discloses that beneath the apparently explicit and rational procedures there lies an unconscious structure of judgment. This structure is closely related to the high aesthetic. French schoolteachers use unconscious judgments to assess the worth of student work, and often refer to matters of taste as well as to technical merits. They also rely on other social judgments, which produce a "whole collection of disparate criteria, never clarified, hierarchized or systematized... 'handwriting', 'appearance', 'style', 'general culture', "'external' criteria' such as accent, elocution and diction", and "finally and above all the bodily 'hexis'" which includes "manners and behaviour, which are often designated, very directly, in the remarks" (Bourdieu 1988: 200). These bodily social judgements are likely to thrive especially in face to face teaching, of course.

Bourdieu and Passeron, in Bourdieu et al. (1994), critically examine practices of teaching and assessment in elite French universities. They note that the traditional teaching pattern reproduces the same sort of unconscious structure of judgment and taste, and this determines academic style. Classically, the style is more to do with taste rather than technical content. This style is "creolized" in student work, especially in the traditional essay.

Both sets of participants recognise that technical misunderstandings are chronically likely, but both students and lecturers see such misunderstandings as inevitable, and as socially important. Lecturers are keen to demonstrate their mastery of suitable academic discourse, and justify their role in a variety of ways, from claiming that using more technical discourse would be damaging to their careers, to insisting that the proper role of academic discourse is to inspire rather than to

directly inform. Students for their part are content to find the whole exercise mystifying, although they can clearly appreciate its high status and the benefits that might be passed on. They express frequent criticisms of academic discourse, but in a rather tolerant and fond way, much as they might rebuke a parent for being out of touch. Students can also appreciate the advantages of agreeing to be treated as an ideal student rather than as an actual person, and are aware that they will not be personally interrogated. They know that lecturers will actively interpret their impoverished efforts to reproduce academic discourse as understandable, when their work comes to be assessed.

Unconstrained dialogues are extremely unlikely to develop in universities, therefore, even in elite universities, with traditional assessment. In most cases, dialogue will represent only the professional ideology of the university, that which goes on “officially” between ideal lecturers and ideal students. None of the participants has a real material interest in emancipation. Instead, they will be content with reproducing considerable misunderstanding and social constraint, all the time seeing that their interests lie in preserving the ideal and disguising the reality. This adherence to an idealized version of events makes research in universities difficult too, Bourdieu and Passeron note, and they advocate a critical stance towards any data arising, especially from interviews.

The unconscious nature of these cultural and academic preferences means that reforming them will be almost impossible, particularly without substantial change in the social composition and functioning of the university. Bourdieu’s and Passeron’s students sometimes expressed a wish to change traditional patterns of teaching into what looked like more democratic and participatory forms – round table discussions instead of formal lectures, for example – but these will only make the traditional notion of academic discourse more “comfortable”. Until unconscious cultural preferences, and the real material advantages accruing to credentials, change, lecturers will still dominate the exchanges, since

they are the only ones who can effortlessly expound academic discourse, and possess the power to translate ordinary language back into academic terms.

Bourdieu and Passeron end their analysis with a hint of what might be done in some utopian university that manages to escape the social structure. The idea would be to develop a much more rational and technical form of communication, with the cultural judgments stripped out. Many pedagogues have had similar ideas, at least since Bentham in his proposal for a school. There, teaching could proceed on utilitarian principles, with pupils guided through a series of steps with a system of rewards and punishments (not corporal punishment though) until they internalised the principles for themselves. However, academic subjects would also have to be drastically simplified and rationalised, with their inner logic exposed clearly. A “rational nomenclature” was needed to both present to view the contents of a branch of knowledge (its “ordinary” purpose) and reveal the relations between different branches of knowledge (the “systematic” purpose). “Conceptions” should be “as clear, correct, and complete as by and in the compass of a single denomination can be afforded” (Bentham 1983: 142), and the relations between these unambiguous conceptions should be depicted. Such clarity and consistency would enable what these days would be termed a “closure principle”:

...the parts...[of a subject]...must exhaust the contents of the whole...the information, contained in a work which is composed of them [i.e. the conceptions], can be complete...[If not]...the form in which [a work] presents itself will be no other than that of a confused heap of unconnected fragments - each of them, in respect of form and quantity, boundless and indeterminate. (Bentham 1983: 218).

I have argued (Harris 1987) that the same general principles surfaced again in the UK Open University in the 1970s with its reliance on “educational technology” to teach the unqualified, involving clear and effective communication, stripped of “irrelevant scholastic

displays" (Lewis 1971). One research project attempted to lay bare the very structures of academic knowledge, conceived in terms of Russell's logic (hints of the project persist in Laurillard's (1993) better-known notion of "conversational learning"). Harris (1987) suggests that the project failed, partly because academics were able to argue that academic discourse contains so many non-logical procedures and judgements, such as "justifications" and other essentially rhetorical forms. The attempt to code them into logical forms revealed itself as arbitrary: they could not all be grasped as unclear logic or dismissed as irrelevant display. Such procedures and forms might be understood as centrally valuable elements, of course, but Bourdieu's critique of their social and political role remains.

Concluding thoughts

In the modern university, dialogue seems highly likely to be confined to the first and third types that we have been discussing. Neither managerialism nor credentialism are going to go away because they are strongly supported by the State. In these circumstances, critics like Cohen (2004) have suggested that universities can no longer be seen as the natural home of open-ended discussion. Trying to avoid reliance on the State is one limited option, probably available only to elite universities. Cohen has recommended the development of "community universities" like some found in Scandinavia. My own preferences, for what they are worth, lie in the direction of open-ended electronic communication of the kind which is possible, if not too frequent, on the Web. The potential has been much discussed, although often in the form of official, university-mediated electronic communication (as guides to a huge literature see Slater 2005, or the JISC Innovation Forum 2008). I am advocating instead the development of non-official sites.

The Web is, of course, clearly contradictory, initially driven by commerce and the military (and now by the sex industry especially), but also with a curious potential for relatively unconstrained participation, established

from the beginning. A kind of electronic democratization becomes possible. Participation is limited, of course, to those who possess a computer, an online connection, and the ability to speak or write English. Given those still important constraints, it is possible for many more users to read, critique, discuss and compare any of the vast materials available, without any constraints of costs, and no need for organised course programming and timetabling, bureaucratic regulation, or, above all, assessment. It is equally possible to publish views of one's own and so have them read, critiqued and discussed (assuming a little technical knowledge about how search engines operate). It has been argued that substantial liberation from social constraint, especially those indexed by bodily characteristics like age, skin colour or gender is also available (Haraway 2003).

I myself have had stimulating open ended discussions with a wide range of people who have emailed me to discuss material on my website, or whom I have emailed. I do not assess them, and nor do they evaluate me. I am not provided with details about their status or power. Neither party has given any sign of wishing to dominate the agenda. My correspondents include famous academics, who are more accessible than they have ever been, and students in foreign countries. Of course, it is still entirely in the hands of the participants whether they wish to make the exchanges cumulative, or use their access merely to "play the game".

Electronic teaching and discussion is still far from a complete correspondence to the ideal speech act, but increasingly I turn to it for the closest available alternative. Such an alternative can never be mainstream, since it does not credentialise, but it offers a valuable counterfactual alternative to official (including university) uses of electronic software and pedagogic dialogue.

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