Expanding our Horizons

DISCUSSIONS OF *DIALOGUES IN TEACHING: THEORY AND PRACTICE* and *THE WORLD WE CREATED AT HAMILTON HIGH*

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The time has come for those of us involved in Philosophy for Children to broaden our horizons. For many of us, the phrase `community of inquiry' is synonymous with Philosophy for Children. There is nothing inherently wrong with this association—indeed, Lipman's ultimate legacy may be his appropriation and use of a self-corrective community of inquiry in reconstructing the natural unity of philosophy and pedagogy—, but we can learn from other analysis of the dynamics of such communities and benefit from other narratives chronicling the development of them. It is with this in mind that I share with the reader my perspective on two recent scholarly works that analyze and illustrate the ideal of a community of inquiry.

DIALOGUE IN TEACHING

A recent work by Nicholas C. Burbules exemplifies the kind of scholarship that those of us committed to communities of inquiry can learn from and appreciate. As Jonas Soltis notes in his foreword to *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice*, Burbules draws upon the theories of Baktin, Freire, Gadamer, Habermas, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein as well as Dewey to illuminate the relationships among dialogue, teaching, and democracy. Burbules, the editor of *Educational Theory*, offers a sophisticated analysis of teaching through dialogue, but, more importantly, he makes it accessible to non-philosophers.

In examining the relationship between dialogue and teaching, Burbules suggests that associating dialogue with **the** so-called Socratic method is misleading. He argues that there is no such thing as **the** Socratic method since it means different things to different people. Consistent with Burbules argument is the discussion of the Socratic method Scott Turow offers in his book, *One L.* In describing his trials and tribulations as a first year law student, Turow suggests that, at Harvard Law School, the Socratic method meant everything from the fierce, intimidating teaching style immortalized by Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase* to the often frustrating discussions conducted by a professor who questioned everything—every decision, every argument, and every brief—seemingly never arriving at a sound conclusion. Sensitive to the criticism that dialogue itself has been reified as **the** ultimate pedagogical device or technique, Burbules argues that the Socratic method is "not truly a `method' at all but a repertoire of dialogical approaches that the skilful teacher knows how to select and adapt to varied pedagogical circumstances."(pp. x-xi)

According to Burbules, "dialogue is an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding which stands to improve the knowledge, insights, or sensibilities of its participants." This can occur "even when the roles...do not break out neatly as `teacher and student.' Dialogue represents a continuous, developmental, communicative interchange through which we stand to gain fuller apprehension of the world, ourselves, and one another."(p. 8) In certain instances, those conducting the dialogue may have an intended goal in

mind, such as sharing and already formulated insight or seeking input in response to particular questions. While a certain amount of orchestration is inevitable and at times desirable, dialogues often take on a life of their own that no one can predict or control. There are risks involved in such a process, but there are also opportunities for breaking new ground, for gaining new insights, for expanding our views of the world and of ourselves.

In dialogue, a participant "may prefer a certain position but does not hold to it non-negotiably." As Burbules explains, "the spirit of dialogue is, in short, the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of common meaning."(p.19) For the dialogue to work—for the community of inquiry to be developed—there must be a level of reciprocity, as Burbules calls it, among all choosing to participate in the dialogue. This means that participants must commit to respecting both the person and the perspective of other participants as worthy of consideration. In short, "what we ask of others we must be prepared for them to ask of us; and what we expect of others we must expect of ourselves."(p.82) Without this kind of mutual respect a dialogue is not possible.

A related and equally necessary characteristic of dialogue is active, but voluntary participation. For dialogue to be pedagogical requires that all participants be actively involved. Active participation can take a variety of forms, but there must be opportunities for engagement, questioning, trying out new ideas, and learning diverse points of view. Participants in the dialogue must feel comfortable in posing questions, in challenging other points of view, and in volunteering a seemingly "off the wall" idea without fear of condemnation or ridicule. When these characteristics are present, "the dialogical relation has in itself a strongly pedagogical element, in which participants seek to teach and learn from one another; and the voluntary aspect of this participation is crucial, since a reluctant partner is not likely to gain, or contribute, anything at all."(p.27) As Burbules explains, "a successful dialogue involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusions, failures, and misunderstandings."(p. 19)

Burbules suggests that to deal with the problems of education is to deal with the problems of democracy. Such problems include enabling different individuals and groups

> *to learn about and understand competing positions on issues and, while not always coming to agreement or consensus about them, grasp sufficiently the points of view of others so that the outcomes reached by democratic processes are acceptable, if not the most favorable to every group. In this sense, dialogue is essential to democracy.* (p.14)

Burbules suggestion that "the significance of philosophical questions about what is true, or good, or right, or beautiful needs to be assessed in terms of their relation to, and effect on, social life" (p. 2) places him within the pragmatic, if not Deweyian tradition. Further indication that Burbules is a serious student of Dewey's thought can be seen in his unwillingness to fall prey either to the "anti-modern presumption that dialogue must fail, or an Enlightenment faith that it must succeed..." In advocating instead, "a pragmatic, contextual, fallibilistic perspective that regards the possibilities of dialogue with persistence and hope, while being prepared as well for its possible failure and breakdown,"(p.160) Burbules successfully avoids the trap of either\or thinking.

Burbules explains that a defining question of his work was "whether a theory and practice of dialogue that respond to the postmodern critique are possible." Burbules answers in the affirmative, suggesting

> *an approach to dialogue that challenges hierarchies and traditional conceptions of teacher and authority; that is tolerant and supportive of diversity; that does not rely on teleological presumptions of right answers and final truths; that does not rest on isolated individual efforts, but on mutual and reciprocal communicative relations; and that keeps the conversation open, both in the sense of open-endedness and in the sense of inviting a range of voices and styles of communication within it.*(p.7)

Recognizing that navigating between a "fond utopianism" on the one hand and a "bitter cynicism" on the other is no easy task, Burbules argues that "it is possible to develop an account of pedagogical communication that responds sympathetically to the issues raised by postmodern critics, without abrogating the possibility and worth of the educational." In addition to refraining from "prejudging the question, either positively or negatively, of whether and how pedagogical communication can succeed," such an account "must focus on the nature and value of the educational **process**, without reifying or constraining the range of possibilities that this process might actually yield in contexts of practice."(p.31)

Burbules suggests that properly constructed dialogue can meet these characteristics and more. Participants in such a dialogical relationship—or

members of a community of inquiry—"must acknowledge the reality of conflicts and relations of domination that exist in our world and distort the conditions under which communication takes place."(p.31) Basically, Burbules is suggesting that the free marketplace of ideas often does not exist in the real world, but can serve as a guiding vision of that which participants in dialogical relationships should work toward. In this regard, Burbules notes that members of a community of inquiry "must be especially sensitive to the diversity of experience and modes of expression that participants bring to a communicative situation."(p.31)

Burbules offers a critical perspective—informed by an understanding of and appreciation for the postmodernist critique—often missing in others who champion dialogue as a powerful pedagogical tool. While noting that constructing meaningful dialogical relationships is fraught with difficulties, Burbules remains optimistic adding:

> *While it is often difficult to communicate and understand one another across differences, this very situation stands to teach us the most, since it can bring to our understanding the perspective, values, and experiences of a contrasting point of view. The fundamental tension underlying the dialogical relation is this: We need to be similar enough for communication to happen, but different enough to make it worthwhile* (p. 31).

Burbules effectively debunks any illusions that dialogue is the miraculous panacea for the divisiveness that characterizes the postmodern world, but he argues that, when properly constructed, dialogical relationships can contribute to making a difference in our lives. In this sense, his work illustrates the power and pitfalls of dialogue as a means for seeking common ground through a community of inquiry.

HAMILTON HIGH

In 1945, John Dewey advised a young acquaintance to study sociology, rather than philosophy, if he wanted to understand and use philosophy. While such a comment appears puzzling at first blush, Gerald Grant's *The World We Created at Hamilton High* provides us with a contemporary and very poignant illustration of what Dewey might have intended. Grant, a professor of Cultural Foundations of Education and Sociology at Syracuse University, offers us more than just a biography of the deconstruction and transformations that Hamilton High, originally an elite public high school, experienced in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. By conveying "how students and teachers felt as these social revolutions swept through their school," (p.6) Grant brings to life the philosophical and policy issues that our society and schools are grappling with during the closing decades of this century. In addition, he brings into focus the school's role in shaping character and illustrates for us how academic scholarship can contribute to the creation of a positive—intellectual and moral—ethos in our schools.

In addition to providing "a sociologically informed history of Hamilton High,"(p.5) Grant illuminates for us "the dynamics involved in creating a particular climate or ethos." (p.3) In this way he not only offers us a powerful portrait of how multiple and sometimes conflicting beliefs and values interact to create a particular ethos or culture, but he also provides for us a model of how academics can and should make a positive contribution to the creation of a strong positive ethos in our schools and universities.

What began in the late 70s as a National Institute of Education project focusing on the question of What makes a good school?, eventually crystallized into both a historical portrait of a high school and an advocacy of a process for reconstructing schools into moral and intellectual communities. Grant explains that the defining moment leading to the development of the current work occurred in 1982 while characterizing Hamilton High to a group of school superintendents "as a place that had become more democratic, but also more bureaucratic, more adversarial, and officially value neutral."(p.4) Following Grant's suggestion that such an environment was less than ideal for adolescents, one of the superintendents asked him what he would do if he became principal of such a school. To this provocative question Grant responded:

> *I would try to hire the best anthropologist I could find who could pass for a teenager. I would turn him or her loose in the school for several months with the aim of writing a portrait of the moral life of the community. Then I would use that report to initiate a dialogue with all the members of the polity—student, parents, teachers, and staff. I would ask them, Is this portrait true? Is this the best we can do? If we repeated this experiment five or ten years from now, what kind of school would you hope to see reflected in it?* (p.4)

Grant never became principal of Hamilton High, but he did teach an urban anthropology course there beginning in the spring of 1984. Since hiring a pubescent anthropologist was not feasible, Grant decided to teach the high school

students to be amateur anthropologists. Grant indicates that these students did some stunning projects, and,—along with his and other assistants' observation of this school for several years, his own experience as a teacher there in 1984 and 85, plus "subsequent work with teachers and staff [of Hamilton High] in examining the implications of that research"(p.5)—enabled him to develop this biography of Hamilton High and to contribute to the ongoing task of creating a strong, positive ethos there.

Though Grant accurately portrays the intellectual chaos and moral relativism that characterized Hamilton High during these turbulent decades, he does not wallow in despair. Out of the deconstruction of the original white, suburban, upper-middle class ethos of Hamilton High came the opportunity to create a new positive ethos that more appropriately reflects the polity that now constitutes the school. In describing Hamilton High of the 1970s and 80s as bowing down to the twin deities of bureaucratic legalism and therapeutic contractualism, Grant suggests that this school and others like it operated without a vision of what they could or should be. According to Grant, "bureaucratic legalism was the primary expression of the moral order of the school... If something was not legally forbidden it was usually assumed to be tolerated, or at least it was possible to make a stiff argument that it was."(p. 183) The student handbook, rather than explaining to students Hamilton High's intellectual and moral mission, announced to them in legalistic terms the criminal behavior that was not allowed. As Hamilton High and other schools turned to bureaucratic legalism to both fill the vacuum created by the deconstruction of the old order and as the solution to intellectual, moral, and sometimes physical chaos produced by the social and demographic upheavals of the time, visions of what education could and should be were the major casualties.

Accompanying this over-reliance on bureaucratic legalism was the tendency to embrace an extreme relativism or anything goes attitude. At Hamilton High and at other schools this manifested itself in numerous ways. For example, the roles between teacher and therapist became blurred. Teachers, except on occasions where unequivocal legalistic mandates had been broached, often behaved—sometimes out of fear—like therapists. For example, rather than challenge a student caught cheating on moral grounds, teachers often looked the other way or referred the student to a counselor to find out why they chose to



cheat. Having no moral or educational vision to guide them, both teachers and students often rebelled against oughts and shoulds "as an intrusion of external and coercive authoritarianism."(p.184) As Grant explains

> *Therapeutic contractualism tends to relieve faculty of the responsibility of encouraging all students to live by worthy standards and to encourage the view that if a student gets in trouble it is a psychological problem to be dealt with in a therapeutic relationship rather than a failure of the community to morally educate* (p.185).

Grant found this reliance on bureaucratic legalism and therapeutic contractualism as manifestations of a corrosive individualism that dominated the school. While this ethos was pervasive, Grant refuses to abandon hope. Instead, he attempts "to provide a new cultural definition of our situation, to explain how our program for survival went askew, and to show how we may be able to go on"(p.1). Refusing to either be paralyzed by cynicism or to accept "the brittle moral formulas" favored by fundamentalists, Grant chose instead to believe in the possibility of Hamilton High reconstructing itself so as to create a community based on a strong positive ethos. Grant acted upon this belief by using his scholarly research to facilitate the development of such a positive ethos.

Grant's response to a superintendent's provocative question established the parameters for what became *The World We Created at Hamilton High.* As part of the arrangement for his teaching an urban anthropology course at Hamilton High, Grant agreed to share his research with the faculty and staff of the school. In doing so, he hoped "to produce a more truthful book," and "to initiate a process of reflection among teachers and staff about ways to improve their school."(p.235) Outlining what he had in mind at a meeting of the faculty in March of 1986, seventy seven of those present, including the principal, supported his idea. They elected a committee of twelve to participate in this process, and this group began meeting regularly with Grant to discuss the history of their school. Realizing that "the school was too bureaucratized" the principal joined in, choosing to participate as a member but refusing to chair the group.

Meeting during the 1986-87 school year to discuss the research and to consider ways of improving the school, this committee initiated a bottoms-up approach to school reform. Once the space for serious dialogue on what Hamilton High could and should be had been established, Grant suggests that "the dialogue unfolded in five stages."(p.248) While the stages cannot be delineated with absolute precision,

> *the process developed roughly in these phases: (1) testing of the need for change, (2) doubt and resistance, (3) emergence of belief that common action was possible, (4) development of shared meaning about desirable policies and practices, and (5) proposal of a strategy for school-wide change* (p. 248).

Given the school's history and its extant bureaucratic culture, it is not surprising that a cynical, if not pessimistic attitude permeated the group's meetings during their first months of deliberation. As Grant explains, "the emergence of belief that change was possible and that common action could be effective did not arise in a dramatic or sudden way."(p.20) But attitudes did change as pessimism gave way to hope that things could be better. Hope emerged out of this dialogue and with it came the realization that for any meaningful change to take place the faculty as a whole had to be involved. With this insight came the establishment of plans for a school-wide forum to discuss issues surfacing during the committees deliberations and to discuss a strategy for school-wide change proposed by the committee. Through this process the faculty developed shared meanings of what they thought Hamilton High could and should be. While its ethos is continually evolving, the faculty of Hamilton High agreed

> *that they wanted the school to emphasize dignity and respect for all persons, to place a premium on academic excellence and seek to motivate all students, to underscore the intrinsic value of learning, to develop a strong community spirit and encourage everyone to do his or her best, and to value the basic virtues of honesty and integrity. Finally they saw need for a school that was a learning community for faculty as well as students, one that provided for the growth of faculty both intellectually and socially* (p.253).

Grant's role in creating this new world at Hamilton High should not be overlooked or overplayed. He was instrumental in initiating the process and in providing the historical portrait that grounded the reflections and discussions. Initially he convened the meetings of the committee of twelve, but was replaced by a math faculty member elected to chair the group. Grant's knowledge and wisdom came into play as his timely suggestions often moved the group toward a meaningful solution, but these solutions or resolutions

emerged through deliberations of the group. Perhaps his most important contribution was his faith in the power of dialogue to rejuvenate those for whom Hamilton High constituted a major part of their lives. By creating a space for dialogue, Grant rekindled the hope that it was still possible to remake Hamilton High into the kind of school that the faculty, students, and parents wanted. Rather than informing the faculty and staff of Hamilton High of what they should do, Grant initiated a process which enabled and invigorated the polity of Hamilton High to envision and create their own positive ethos.

In facilitating the emergence of a hopeful vision of what Hamilton High could and should be, Grant exemplifies the power of a community of inquiry. In helping others to develop a positive vision of the future, Grant exemplifies public philosophy in the Deweyian tradition. In contributing to the creation of a better world at Hamilton High and in analyzing the factors that contributed to such a creation, Grant provides us with a model of philosophy worthy of emulation. In his work, as in that of Burbules, the process or dialogue is emphasized. While both Grant and Burbules demonstrate a commitment to a vision of what should be, theirs is a faith in dialogue as a process or processes that enable humankind to create and recreate their worlds. Such a vision allows, even compels one to act, but the process is a self-corrective one which must never be reified. In short, the process is the essence of a self-corrective community of inquiry.

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