# The Dialogical Path to Wisdom Education

Maya Levanon

*ABSTRACT: In the following pages, I make an argument on behalf of "wisdom education," i.e., an approach to education that emphasizes the development of better thinking skills as well as socialization and the development of students' sense-of-self. Wisdom education can best be facilitated through dialogical interactions that encourage critical reflection and modification of one's presuppositions. This account presupposes that wisdom is given to dialectical forces. While the paper is primarily theoretical, it touches upon my work as a teachers' educator, which almost always utilizes dialogical pedagogies in the belief that these pedagogies are potent platforms for better learning and thinking and thus are more meaningful and transformative.*

The idea that dialogical interaction can be a most potent facilitating apparatus for authentic learning and transformative education can be traced back to Plato's dialogues, which illustrate how dialogue, understood as a pragmatic manifestation of the dialectical method (Gonzales, 1988), actually works. We see how Socrates creates spaces where the interlocutor has to pause, reflect, doubt, and then, ideally, reconstruct his or her ideas. By so doing, Socrates doesn't brutally defeat his interlocutors for the petty purpose of "winning" an argument. Instead, he gradually disrupt their assumptions by using logical cross-examination until they find their *beginner mind*—a position from which they are able to receive new ideas—or rather re-find their innate, a priori knowledge that precedes but also enables our interactions with other minds, what I am referring to as "wisdom." A close reading of Plato reveals that dialogue is a way to epitomize dialectic as a method in which the interlocutor represents the thesis, that is, existing beliefs and assumptions, and upon hearing these from another person's perspective, recognizes potential antitheses. After all, "[it] is easier [...] if you do not have to invent the arguments against your prejudices yourself, but have them presented to you by a person who believes in them" (Russell, 1968, p. 23). Finally, a synthesis is formed. If we recall that *dialogue* means *dia-logos* or "through words," we can see that practicing genuine dialogue means putting our thoughts into words so we can articulate our own innate wisdom, then assisting our counterparts in doing the same, and finally working together to assign meanings and actual applications to these findings. This is where the idea of wisdom comes full circle: it is innate but can only count as wisdom once it is being applied and used in the actual world, where human interactions and the overall process of construing meanings take place.

### Translating our Thoughts to Others

I have always loved words; I have trusted them to deliver my thoughts, ideas and feelings to others. As I have grown older, however, I have learned that words should be taken with a grain of salt: their fuzziness, mirroring the fuzziness of life, can cause great problems. Words, after all, once vocalized, are no longer private but rather move into the public sphere, where actual events and human interactions co-exist, and it is in this very sphere that words can often be misunderstood. Indeed**,** as some of the world's great wisdom-systems have suggested, words are capable of both creating and destroying, healing or bringing evil (Dein, 2002; Gaster, 1971). In Genesis, for example, we read that the world was created by the means of speech: "And God *said*,[1] Let there be light.... And God *called* the light Day..." (1:3-10). For the Greeks too, *Logos,* i.e., "words," was the animating force of the universe (Beck, 2004). And later, in the Gospel of John (1:1), we read that "[i]n the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God, and the Word was God."[2] Within these traditions, divine forces are capable of creating and manipulating the world with words, and humans can do so as well. In Jewish mythology, for example, we find the famous story of the Golem from Prague, a clay-made creature who came to life when the Maharal[3] put a word on his forehead. Then, by taking one letter away (and subsequently creating a different Hebrew word), he took the Golem's life.

Words are the very building blocks of understanding. From our early stages of development we learn to articulate our experiences with gradually increasing levels of complexity until we are able to construct a highly developed cultural matrix in which we integrate different ideas and experiences into a shared narrative. The process of integration inevitably happens through ongoing dialogue. Being part of this collective process, we need to learn how to make our thoughts sufficiently available to others, and for that to happen, we must understand the nature of our own thoughts and accept ownership of them. In that sense, through the collective process of exchanging ideas, we not only participate in the dynamics of creating meanings, but also improve our own thinking. Articulating our thoughts forces us to slow down and reflect, and to trace our patterns of thought and thereby see them more clearly. The dialogical act is essential, then, for our development as individuals and of the community. which is formed when individuals truly come together.

**From Individuality to Interdependence**

As a collaborative engagement, dialogue is based on a few suppositions. First, the meanings we give to our ideas are communal and accumulative, in the sense that meanings expand and shift as more individuals contribute. Second, these individuals contribute to the much richer process of construing meanings by sharing their diverse ideas, experiences, and thinking styles (Dewey, 1938, 1997). For these reasons, differences in a dialogue are valued when they are understood as a means to advance the inquiry. Despite the differences among individual perspectives, some values appear and reappear enough to be ubiquitous. Realizing this enables participants to see beyond moments of difference, which in turn creates the safe-space that is necessary for a collective inquiry to thrive.

**Je est un Autre**

Written by the nineteen-century visionary French poet Arthur Rimbaud, these words remind us that "otherness" is relative and transient: just as "you" (or "s/he") is an-other to me, I am an-other to everyone else but me. Failure to apprehend otherness within, in the form of contested meanings within the self, often results in the establishment of a partial sense of self. We are so accustomed to the paradigm of dualistic thinking, according to which something, e.g., darkness, can be known only in relation to its opposite, e.g., light. This paradigm has taken over the very way we think of ourselves: we constantly compare ourselves and subsequently feel good or bad about who we are in relation to how good or bad others are. But since we cannot really control others, we develop an existential anxiety, thanks to which we irrationally and on an unconscious level fear for our own existence in the midst of so many competing perspectives. Using this comparative, dualistic paradigm, hoping it will help us establish a valid sense-of-self, in fact takes us further away from who we are. As mentioned earlier, we begin to overcome this existential anxiety only when we feel confident enough to embrace differences and contradictions, especially within ourselves. Having a more complex, "imperfect" sense-of-self is a reflection of the dialectical nature that is at the heart of our very existence: Yes, we aspire to create and live with a balance, but we know every balance is temporary, till the next thought/feeling/perception/event occurs and creates a new, but also temporary, state of disequilibria. In other words, fully accepting ourselves depends on whether or not we learn to operate dialectically instead of dualistically.

What we see, then, is that for a genuine dialogue to take place, participants need to first bring themselves fully to the public place of inquiry, and then to identify otherness and allow it to exist—by refraining from trying to change others, and also by practicing turning our own self into an-other. The beauty is that without realizing

it, these acts open up for us the possibility of accepting ourselves. By learning to feel safe with others and with otherness in general, we slowly learn to feel safe with our inner dichotomies and paradoxes.

Indeed, as ever-changing beings, once we become familiar with the dialectical model, we derive comfort from it rather than anxiety, because it reflects a productive way of being-in-the-world. Investigating the world with a method of inquiry that reflects what we are, i.e., dialectical creatures, can provide us with ontological security –the sense that we are part of and able to embrace the world as it is, which is a necessary condition to entering relationships fearlessly, authentically and compassionately. This happens when we understand that though we do affect each other, it is not through structures of opposition that put us in relationships of comparison and contrast, but rather through a process that binds us to, and calls upon us to take responsibility for, one another (Levinas, 2000).

In order to meet the challenges of wisdom education, even in an inconsistent, ever-changing world, we need to overcome the dualism mentioned earlier, which also finds expression within the self through its persona, that is, the "face" we choose to present to the public, as opposed to one's authentic self. In order to create a healthy dialogical environment, founded on genuine responsibility, sensitivity, and care, we need to cultivate an integrated self. In order to maximize the chances of this happening, we need to bring dialogical practices into the classroom, at as early an age as possible. In the classroom, the facilitator should also model authenticity and integrity while working within a supportive, safe environment.

## Facilitation

In his dialogues, Plato illustrated how, although wisdom is within us, we need someone to facilitate our "recollection" of it. Because the dialogical journey can be challenging, it requires a chameleon-like facilitator, who can alternate roles and responsibilities and mirror the different phases of inquiry. Ideally, though, the facilitator eventually becomes invisible, and the learning community can facilitate itself. This signifies an authentic internalization of the dialogical process and the capacity of learners to apply it in different contexts.

By being exposed to different narratives and discourses, learners are given an opportunity to broaden their spectrum of possible orientations. This is the beginning of learners' personal transformation. Further transformation can occur after the dialogue, where participants can congregate to discuss and share both lived experiences and their interactions with the curriculum. In this multi-layered, ongoing activity, meanings are allocated and the act of learning becomes meaningful.

## Dialogue and Wisdom Education

Like many other dialogical practitioners, I also owe a great deal to the Platonic noesis, according to which dialogue enables us to access our inner self, where wisdom resides. In the current educational system, however, this model of what we today refer to as "Socratic Dialogue" is not always feasible. For dialogue to assist us in the delicate process of recollection, we need to remind ourselves and our students that in wisdom-education, it is not about winning a position but about coming together to help each other access our innate wisdom and then creating meanings together. The result is what Bohm (1998) describes as a "win-win" situation. We want students to leave behind the model of competition and choosing sides that is currently so dominant, and instead to adopt dialogue as a way of thinking and learning that is both ancient and new, both internally and externally directed.

Understanding life in terms of ongoing change and cooperation, those committed to dialogue construe meanings collectively, while letting go of the comparative paradigm. Participants in the dialogue can do that because they come to realize that they can question and unpack almost any concept or set of beliefs; this, after

all, is what the philosophical tradition stands for. At the same time, after practicing dialogical learning for some time, participants come to see that even when it seems that discussions are caught in a tangle of repetition and inconclusiveness, if they listen for the gentle sound of dialogue, they can detect progress even in an inquiry that seems deadlocked,[4] and also develop personally by listening to new views and new ways of thinking to supplement and complicate their own.

When learners truly listen, they go through both cognitive and social development (Dewey, 1997). According to Vygotsky (2002), we develop both social and cognitive skills through social practices. What first may appear as a cognitive crisis—when we recognize the limitations on our own perspective and the presence of other selves and different views—is in fact where the individual builds new, stronger thinking skills. Internalizing new cognitive "voices" requires a context that allows, even celebrates, new ways of thinking, communicating, and learning. Dialogical settings do just that, because dialogue is intrinsically social. As in other social activities, participants tend first to play roles based on a particular understanding of their own beliefs and inclinations. Nevertheless, in an authentic dialogue, participants are encouraged to switch roles and expand their epistemological repertoires so they can employ new styles of thinking and knowing. In his discussion of learning-communities, Grinberg (2005) speaks about respect and trust, which are the premises but also the results of learning through informal camaraderie. Palmer (2003) suggests that mutual respect and trust among teachers, students, parents and principals is necessary for an approach to education that encourages exchange of ideas and expression of feelings. For this to occur, we must learn the practice of "listening for" (Lipman, 2003). Like a meditative practice, "listening for" is about attending quietly while suspending judgments and presuppositions. It requires participants to slow down and carefully analyze their own ideas and beliefs as they apprehend and probe the ideas and beliefs of others.

We see how dialogue facilitates individual and communal development, and as such it is distanced from a regular conversation among friends, where the flow of ideas is often spontaneous and therefore tends to be loose. Although in such conversations changes within or among participants may occur, and perhaps even some progress in the inquiry, these occurrences are often random. Dialogical engagement, on the other hand, focuses on inquiry as its objective.

## The Inquiry

Some thinkers suggest that dialogue, when it is facilitated spontaneously using techniques such as free association, cannot assume a pre-determined objective (Bohm, 1998; Burbules, 1993; Kennedy, 1999). According to this approach, true dialogue aims at understanding participants' ongoing inner processes and nuances and, therefore, cannot have a predefined purpose other than seeking a mutual understanding through exploration of the participants' thoughts and feelings while in the dialogue.

In my view, however, based on professional-educational experience, a well-structured dialogue needs to have a direction and goal. Otherwise, it risks becoming a chat, where there is a danger that no process of inquiring together will take place, or worse, that more dominant participants will exert undue influence on the discussion. Furthermore, as a form of inquiry and a tool for construing meanings, a genuine dialogue will aim at having a better understanding of the question/concept at hand, as conceived in terms of participants' interests. In practice, it is usually helpful to begin a dialogical gathering by asking participants questions such as "Why are you here?" or "What do you hope to learn, achieve, or improve through this process?" Because the answers to these questions usually change throughout the dialogical process, participants take notice when they digress to a side-conversation that may or may not be found relevant to the inquiry-at-hand.

Although the philosophical method of inquiry is indeed systematic, it is nonetheless flexible. Dialogical inquiry, as noted earlier, is the manifestation of dialectics, and as such is at the core of the philosophical method. When invested in a dialogical inquiry, we can take different directions and approaches, sometimes digressing in

order to reach a better understanding of a particular concept. Yet, we keep in mind our preliminary question or goal, and keep our awareness of the shifts as these occur. Although digressions often occur during the dialogical process, participants and their facilitator are obliged to look for a direction, for relations among statements and arguments to take shape. In that sense, inquiry is like a person: when one goes through changes, one often feels as if one's sense-of-self has been lost. With the realization that the self can be fluid and transient, however, one can re-gain confidence. Likewise, a dialogical inquiry can appear to fall victim to a digression from the inquiry-at-hand, but through an effective facilitation and reflective participation, it is brought back into focus.

**Conclusion**

There is indeed more than one path to wisdom, and one of these is dialogue, the path of brotherhood (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). It is especially useful if we want to transform the educational experience of our students into one based on the values of wisdom, authenticity and interconnectedness, rather than competition and the achievement of statistical benchmarks representing "achievement." Dialogue is an ancient way to approach the deepest questions of life, in which, through hearing others, the wise mind learns to understand its own limitations and flexibility.

In this paper, I have attempted to illustrate how dialogue has the potential to advance philosophical thinking, social and ethical virtues, and authenticity, which together constitute wisdom. I examined the ongoing nature of reflective questioning in a group as a practice with the potential to advance a deeper understanding of the world. By appreciating the learning process as an ongoing journey in which questions are as important as answers, educators and parents can interpret children's critical-reflective questions as indications of the kind of cognitive development that enables independent thinking.

At a time of increased calls to "spiritualize" our educational system –that is to make it a more effective vehicle for promoting values beyond mere knowledge—it is helpful to recall that what characterize the dialogical approach are virtues such as empathy, tolerance, gratitude, and humility. With that in mind, we might want to practice more of this pedagogy with our students at all levels of life and education, and hopefully create future generations who are better thinkers and also better persons: compassionate, tolerant and humble. These qualities suggest some of the many facets of wisdom.

Endnotes

1 Italics are mine.
2 All biblical quotes are taken from the King James Bible.
3 Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609) was an important Talmudic scholar who served as a leading rabbi in Prague.
4 In the Hebrew script of laws (*Gemara*), when the sages try to resolve an issue, they often end a discussion declaring "*Teko*" (deadlocked). This doesn't imply they gave trying to resolve the issue. Instead, they leave it open for future generations of sages to add layers of interpretations.

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*Address Correspondences to:*

*Maya Levanon*
*Interdisciplinary Studies in Curriculum and Instruction Dept. of Integrated Studies in Teaching, Technology & Inquiry*
*National-Louis University, Milwaukee Campus*
*Maya.Levanon@nl.edu*