

Individual Paper:

Two cultures, two dialogists and two intersecting theories

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This paper presents some possibilities for applying the linguistic and psychological theories of two dialogists, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan, to the classroom. There is a short summary of how the two theories may interact with each other and then a discussion of their two opposing views of identity formation. Bakhtin was a Russian, coming from the collectivist paradigm and Lacan's theories were arcane combinations of Freud's emphasis on the needs of the individual and French post-Revolutionary individualism. Lacan insisted that one could only become 'whole' at the cost of incompleteness for another. Bakhtin opined that completeness could only be achieved within experiences shared and co-constructed by others. This paper concludes with the question of how teachers can ensure the positive experience of co-construction rather than one person paying a cost for the other's identity-formation and whether it is possible to fully implement insights from a collectivistic paradigm in an education system where the stated aim is to enable each individual to meet his/her potential.

SCHOOLS ARE, by their very nature, liminal spaces; the people within are all in the process of becoming. 'Liminal' comes from the Latin word, *limen*, meaning 'threshold.' Although a term originating in anthropology, it is now more widely used in many disciplines to refer to 'in-between situations' where there is some uncertainty about what the future holds (Horvath et al., 2009:). Teachers and pupils together compose and construct a shared environment that allows moments of opportunity. Within each collective possibility, the environments themselves take on new meanings and beginnings. This paper is a philosophical rather than an empirical foray into how two eminent dialogists from two very different cultures – Lacan and Bakhtin – visualised the interpersonal and intrapersonal processes taking place in this context. Given that the activities discussed in this paper are postulated to largely exist in the unconscious, it would be most interesting to consider further how empirical research could be conducted into these processes.

Born 13 April 1901 in Paris, Jacques Marie Emile Lacan was a psychoanalyst who

became interested in how the psyche could be constituted beyond the limits of the corporeal body and out into social networks and images. Despite being French, with the Post-Revolutionary emphasis on communal attachment and fitting in, Lacan considered himself a true Freudian (Macey, 1994, p.xxxiii) and was much more concerned with the individual's selfish needs and drives, and the tensions meeting these within society (Wheeler, 1997, p.227ff). Indeed, Goldstein (2009, p.115) suggests that French psychologists' emphasis on the self can be seen in a shift in vocabulary during the 1850s as the traditional form *âme*, (often translated as the English word 'soul') became *le moi*. Some politicians in France blamed the failures of the First and Second Revolutions on this fragmented, sensationalist notion of self (ibid., p.126) put forward by psychologists. It would seem that psychologists in France, perhaps unsurprisingly, had their own subculture where individualism was seen as the antithesis of the collective. Hence, Lacan's 'cultural' *milieu* was more that of biological determinism and individual pleasure-seeking than *fraternité* or brotherhood

and this seems to be reflected in his highly-competitive notion of becoming.

Lacan argued that the ego is never whole but is always 'not-whole,' always *pas-tout* – see Grigg (2009, p.83), for a discussion of the translation of this term – always incomplete, always concealing its fragmentation beneath a mask of coherence and completeness (1953, p.11ff). Some of these fragments are to be found in the symbolism of images, from the mirror, from the gaze of the other¹ (the *semblable*, 1949, p.5) and from meanings conveyed in words and the links between words (1998, p.42). This world of language exists independently, before and after the individual (Julien, 1994, p.92) but constructs the individual within it. For instance, the teacher calling a register constitutes a class at the start of a lesson; the teacher calls into being that class. Those students may not have been together as a group before, some may have been in PE or in DT or in music, but as soon as that register is called, they *become* that class as opposed to the individuals passing through the door one at a time from previous classes or the bus. The teacher addresses them as a class, 'Okay, Year 7, let's do our register!' and a class they become. The list of students who attended that class was on the computer system long before the class and will continue to exist long after the class itself has finished. The lesson was on the students' timetables before they arrived and will be there after they leave. To paraphrase an analogy that Lacan himself used (1998, p.153), the placing of the labels 'Geography Room' and 'History Room' makes that so. Were the labels to be swapped over, the uses of the rooms would also be changed. The language used to refer to the rooms has brought them into being for that function.

Lacan suggested that this ability of language to bring structures 'into being' – *le devenir* – extends into our psyche (1949,

p.2) but at the cost of a feeling of incompleteness. Freud had theorised that the function of the ego was to mediate the unrealistic demands of the id with reality. Lacan proposed the mechanism by which this occurred: reality is seen as an utterance to which the ego must always reply in the position of subject (Rose, 1982, p.27ff). Lacan points to the effort needed to communicate with another, to sustain the relationship between two or more speakers. Perhaps that is why teachers are always so tired at the end of the day? For Lacan, nothing is a *propos* of nothing. However, as a Freudian, he would say that this takes huge amounts of psychic energy because to be in relationship with anyone else necessarily involves the anti-cathexis of some of our own drives (Freud, 1900, p.605) but it is worth it when our needs are met in the joint accomplishment of certain tasks, for example, food preparation. In the classroom, one has to ignore these drives the majority of the time. Parents will recognise that very young children at the start of their school careers are exhausted by the end of the day and often 'horrible' when they get home as if they cannot ignore these drives any longer. From personal anecdote, one parent described it thus: *It's like they use all their 'good' up at school and haven't any more 'good' left when they get home.* Certainly delayed gratification at an early age is predictive of educational success later on (Twenge, 2006, p.66).

Relationships were viewed very differently by the Russian people at the start of the 20th century. Richmond (2008, p.14ff) suggests that the roots of the Russian emphasis on communal living can be traced back to a prehistoric need to work together in order to survive in the harsh environment. Villagers held communal lands and worked on communal tasks. The word for village – *mir* (МИР) has three meanings: village commune, world and peace and often meant

¹ This is not the Other of Simone de Beauvoir, for example, de Beauvoir, S. (1997) *The Second Sex*, London: Vintage, whereby status as Other is inscribed upon those who differ from the normative understanding of what it means to be a human being. Here, the term refers to a theoretical viewpoint in binary opposition to 'self'.

all three simultaneously. It could be argued that because of the length of time that the *mir* had been central to Russian life, it became central to the Russian psyche. Lev Tikhomirov (in Richmond, 2008, p.16) wrote, *'The Great Russian says: 'The mir is a fine fellow, I will not desert the mir. Even death in common is beautiful.'* Relationships were regarded as the source of energy and survival; rather than being sustained at a cost to the individual, relationships sustained the individual.

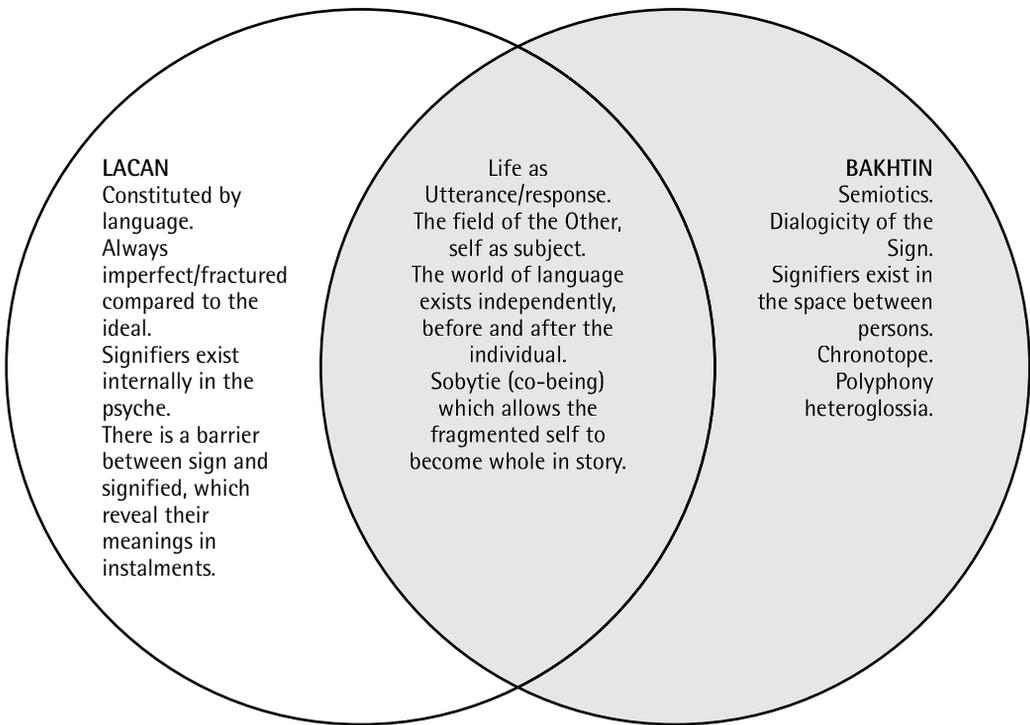
Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was born into this worldview in Oryol, Russia and, unlike the psychologists in France, it would seem that Russian thinkers did not form a subculture of individualism. He was a literary critic and semiotician. Bakhtin suggested that every utterance may be considered as a rejoinder in dialogue and that *'...there is neither a first word nor a last word'* (Emerson & Holquist, 1986, p.373). This resonates with Lacan's ideas of utterance and answer. He introduced the idea of the chronotope (ХРОНОТОП) (discussed in Holquist, 1990, p.109ff) which is the connectedness of time and space in the classroom. It is not unrelated to Einstein's concept of relativity and to the notions of figure and ground in perception. This is more than feeling confined in a dusty assembly hall on a sunny day, watching the clock tick ever so slowly by. It involves the notion of small subplots acted out against the general passage of time and the 'flow' of dialogue. It is the supply teacher entering a new school, knowing enough to negotiate the day but not knowing specifics such as where to go in the event of a fire alarm. It is the boy asking to borrow a girl's eraser in hesitant first moves of love which have been acted out so many times before, yet are precious and special to that couple. It is the child's first day at school where the Reception teacher taught their mother. It is both a re-living and a living anew, a looking-back and a looking-forward. As all teachers have been pupils, it is doubly resonant in any pupil-teacher interaction.

Further features of Bakhtin's writings are the related notions of polyphony and heteroglossia (разноречие) (Emerson & Holquist, 1986, p.272) which allude to the multiplicity of worldviews within any classroom discourse. That is not to say that a Hegelian 'averaging out' of these world views would come to an approximation of some truth or other. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that there may be more than one truth, even of one event. When the teacher sees a 'cheeky' comment as a personal slight upon their authority, the pupil who made it may simply be repeating something often said at home, other pupils will see an opportunity to stop work for a bit, other pupils may see someone who has 'gone beyond the pale'. These viewpoints may all be simultaneously true. Some of these truths will be incomprehensible to a number of the actors in this story; some will be familiar to all.

The dialogue between the theories of Lacan and Bakhtin may be conceptualised as shown by the Venn diagram shown in Figure 1.

The overlap between the two theorists is clear and even the differences could be perhaps described as heteroglossia in action; two voices from two world-views, both being concurrently true if you take those world-views into account. Writing about literature, Bakhtin would necessarily emphasise meaning-making in language whereas, writing about psychoanalysis, meaning-making in the psyche would of course be the focus of Lacan's work. Further differences in emphasis could be explained by the different cultural starting points of each thinker; Bakhtin would see an individual as incomplete without the rest of the *mir* and thus the state of an incomplete individual is a natural state that it not to be mourned. However, the idealised, cohesive and complete person, the Ideal-I (1949, p.2), that Lacan privileged in the Mirror Stage would seem to be his theoretical ideal too. For Bakhtin, the lack of a unified single subject is to be viewed a positive – the person is always in the state of becoming. However, Lacan grounds the

Figure 1: The relationship between the theories of Lacan and Bakhtin.



person's experience of incompleteness in a sense of loss and fragmentation. Both of these can be regarded as simultaneously true if one recognises the starting points whence these theories arose.

An interesting feature found in both theorists' work is the notion of co-being and completeness, the dialogic relationship between the self and other. For Lacan, the other's incompleteness offers the opportunity for a 'transient transcendence' (Zizek, 2006, p.49). This is an opening which can be exploited as a freedom from any deterministic positioning by the other. As an example from the classroom this could mean that the teacher can be surprised by what a pupil says with regard to a certain issue. The liminal nature of schooling means that the future is not sure, that surprises may occur. For instance, a student may demonstrate a perspicacious understanding of the motives of a character in a text. This may, in turn,

lead the teacher to reposition that pupil in their 'ability' schema and present them with more challenging material to be studied. This may further lead to that pupil getting a better grade in their English GCSE, which could open doors and horizons. All of this stems from that one passing moment of completeness achieved in the liminal space left by another. Think of a time when a teacher of yours was caught out in a mistake. Is that clearer in your mind than the times when your teachers were instructing you perfectly? Are there students in your classes that seek to 'catch you out' or to 'catch others out' in order to escape their position at the bottom of the pile?

Is completeness really only achieved at the cost of someone else? This is not a pleasant concept. Bakhtin used the word *Sobytie* which has more connotations than its simple translation into English of 'event'. It also is something that is shared, perhaps inevitably

with Bakhtin's roots in the philosophy of Communism. It is, however, a much more positive view of completeness. For Bakhtin, although being is a solitary activity, paradoxically, completeness can only be achieved within the narratives co-written with others; one can only be viewed as complete from a perspective outside oneself (Holquist, 1990, p.31). The collision of polyphonic voices, even incompatible voices result in a new mode of thinking or working. This has echoes of the work of Vygotsky's 'More Knowledgeable Other' (e.g. Kozulin, 2003, p.43) and of Bruner's 'jigsaw learning' (1974, p.125) There is, of course the shared Russian, collectivist culture between Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and Bruner was one of the first to read Vygotsky when his theories eventually came to the English-speaking world.

Instead of waiting to be 'caught out', we can organise learning experiences so that polyphony and heteroglossia are a normal part of our classrooms. In a task to build the highest tower out of newspaper, suddenly a girl with moderate learning difficulties but a strong spatial awareness becomes the strongest member of a group. In a 'whodunit' detective task, a young man who has Asperger's syndrome becomes the lead detective as it is known that he has an eye for detail. It is challenging for the teacher to stage these types of experiences in many ways; there is a tension between such learning and 'cramming' which many management teams prefer; how does one become confident enough to do this if there are classes where discipline is an issue? Sometimes ideas for such an experience do not present themselves. How also to ensure harmonious groupings where the experience is a positive one and reappraisal within the group is affirmative? There is often a lot of groundwork to put in before such learning experiences can be put into practice. However, polyphony must be the way that we encourage *Sobytie* or we leave completeness to the darker, liminal junctions left at the unplanned intersections of our classrooms.

The point is that any act is of our own choice for which we must take responsibility, whether we leave *Sobytie* to chance spaces of momentary transcendence at the cost of another or planned, shared experiences supporting common goals and positive in-group reappraisal. By any measures, as teachers in the UK, we are teaching in an highly-individualistic culture; the Geert Hofstede Index (2011) ranks us as on the 89th percentile. There are only seven countries in the Geert Hofstede research that have Individualism (IDV) as their highest dimension: US (91), Australia (90), UK (89), Netherlands and Canada (80), and Italy (76). The Wolfe Report (2011, p.1) encapsulates the individualist view of education when it states that

'...it is only through reforming education that we can allow every child the chance to take their full and equal share in citizenship, shaping their own destiny, and becoming masters of their own fate.'

If one is in charge of shaping one's own destiny, when is it appropriate to ask for help? What place do common goals have in such a society except as chance intersections of individual interest? The actual phrase 'self-actualisation' implies that one has done it alone. *Sobytie* seems to run counter to the very aims of our educational system. When teachers/lecturers have to decide which comes first, their relationships with their students or their exam results, sadly, there is no doubt which they have to prioritise. Notwithstanding these concerns, context cues can and should be developed within our classrooms that allow even the most individualistic student to become allocentric (rather than egocentric) for a short while.

Dialogism as proposed by Bakhtin and Lacan implies the simultaneous existence of numerous possibilities from which we must all – teachers and students -make choices in how to respond. It can be joyful, hopeful and open or only at the cost of another. Surely the former is the classroom that we want.

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