

EDUCATION, CONVERSATION, AND LISTENING

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Abstract: At the most fundamental level of analysis one may speak of educating as the act of someone saying and showing something to another in a way that leads the mind from where it is to where it might be, in the process widening horizons and fashioning habits of thought that make it possible for students to participate in the conversation that is their culture. The student stands to this conversation not only as learner but as initiate. Students appropriate habits, ideas, and questions that have their origin in the world of the ancients while the overriding imperative of the learning process is to take the conversation further in some respect and to find their voice within it. In what sense, however, is conversation the heart and soul of education, and what is the nature and role of listening in education so conceived? At a time when qualitative matters place a distant second to quantifiables such as test scores, information retention, and marketable credentials, it falls to education theorists to remind us of what philosophers since ancient times have in one fashion or another maintained: that this practice has an identifiable orientation and purpose that transcends the order of the utilitarian.

Keywords: education, conversation, dialogue, listening

The conversational structure of education

At the most fundamental level of analysis one may speak of educating as the act of someone saying and showing something to someone in a way that leads the mind from where it is to where it might be, in the process widening horizons and fashioning habits of thought that make it possible for students to participate in the conversation that is their culture. This notion, or something like it, has found favor among those who speak of education as dialogical or some form of initiation into what Michael Oakeshott called “the conversation of mankind.” The student stands to this conversation not only as learner but more

specifically as initiate, as Aristotle was initiated into the world of ideas by Plato, who was initiated by Socrates, and so on. Though students of today are situated at considerable remove from the conversation these thinkers began, in a more fundamental sense they appropriate habits and ideas, questions and methods that have their origin in the world of the ancients while the overriding imperative of the learning process is to take the conversation further in some respect. The student's task is to find their voice in the dialogue and to offer a contribution that is distinctive. This requires a meeting place in which as many perspectives as possible are brought to bear on a common subject matter in a common inquiry.

Paulo Freire (2004) and Nicholas Burbules (1993) are among the philosophers of education who have made a decisive contribution to the dialogical model, but questions remain about its full implications.¹ In what sense is conversation the heart and soul of education? What is the nature and role of listening in education so conceived? What is becoming of the will to communicate, to hear and be heard in the cultural conditions in which we find ourselves? That education has a purpose that transcends the utilitarian is lost sight of when imperatives of managerial efficiency and scientific rationality reign supreme in many an institution of learning. When qualitative matters including the intellectual virtues, habits of reflection, and initiation into the conversation place a distant second to quantifiables such as test scores, information retention, and marketable credentials, it falls to education theorists to remind us of what philosophers since ancient times have in one fashion or another maintained: that this practice has an identifiable orientation and purpose that transcends the order of the utilitarian.

That the classroom is the site not only of instruction but of conversation or intellectual investigation in some sense of the term is not a new idea. One finds traces of it already in Plato while in the modern literature it is a hypothesis especially associated with John Dewey, for whom education at all levels properly operates on a model of experimental inquiry. When Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) wrote of the art of conversation, he consistently emphasized the manner in which, phenomenologically speaking, interlocutors are swept along in a process that they do not control. There is a certain receptivity that characterizes our authentic participation in any dialogue that is worthy of the name. One of the most important passages on this topic from *Truth and Method* reads as follows:

We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the

one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it — i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists.² (Gadamer, 1989, p. 383)

Gadamer was not speaking of education in this context, although the relevance of this description to our theme is clear. When it succeeds, education involves a voluntary relinquishing of control comparable to the at once active and passive nature of conversation, oriented as it is toward a critical examination of the subject matter and not any merely expertocratic bestowing of information. Insofar as anyone or anything presides over the conversation in an educational setting, it is the subject matter itself that does so – the text, problem, or question that orients the discussion — rather than any particular participant, be it professor or student.

Indeed, all of the conditions of hermeneutical dialogue of which Gadamer spoke have a direct application to the university classroom where the subject matter lies within any field of the human sciences. Good will, for instance, is indispensable to any classroom discussion and is a disposition that applies equally to the text and to the participants in the conversation. Inseparable from this is the anticipation that what our interlocutor has to say may be true and that our own point of view may be radically mistaken. Without the anticipation that the text that orients the discussion is saying what is true, or possibly true, and that the interpretations or judgments of a given student might be true as well, dialogue cannot succeed and in the usual course of things deteriorates into its opposite. Open-mindedness may well be the most essential condition of educational success in general; without it the mind is unteachable apart from the straightforward acquisition of information that merely confirms what one knows. This is not education in the preeminent sense of the word or possibly in any sense. Education makes demands upon us, and in the absence of a hospitality to ideas and the Socratic recognition of ignorance it cannot succeed.

Conversation requires as well a good deal of background knowledge, including a basic knowledge of the relevant field and its history, as well as

a well-formulated question. Conversation receives its basic orientation from a line of questioning — one that arises from the text or responds in a critical way to what emerges there. Most often it is the educator who introduces this, generally after having lectured for some period of time. Lecturing on the text or whatever subject matter is being discussed serves the dialogical purpose not of speaking in place of the text but of providing an interpretation of its major themes and clarification of some finer points as well as any relevant considerations that will help make the discussion an informed one. Lecturing is not an alternative to reading or thinking for oneself but is a means of ensuring that such thinking and discussion are based on an adequate understanding of the subject matter.

Dewey maintained that educational inquiry leads the students not to any final *telos* but to habits of mind that incline them toward further inquiry and to a love of ideas for their own sake. The point is to train students to join the conversation that is their culture, or some specialized discourse within it, and to cultivate the means of taking it further. Much of the point as well is to demonstrate the value of dialogue itself and to cast doubt on the notion that inquiry and education are mere means to an end — usually gaining a credential which itself is but a means. If understanding is indeed not only what we do but in a fundamental sense what we are, and if dialogue provides the wherewithal for understanding far more than any technique, then dialogue is a value unto itself which students in all fields must be made to see.

Among the more salient characteristics of dialogue as it occurs both within and without educational institutions is the lack of formal structure. Gadamer was correct to liken the structure of dialogue to that of play, with its repeated movement back and forth. What is to be noted about this play structure is its relative informality and fragility. Too much structure or control prevents a game from coming into its own and effectively removes the freedom of the players to invent novel moves, to use their judgment, form questions, and think outside the framework of rules laid out in advance. There is a haphazard quality in every genuine conversation. As the professor steps out of the role of the one who knows and assumes the role of interlocutor and Deweyan leader of inquiry, there is a relinquishing of control that allows the conversation to take on a life of its own and, in the usual course of things, to lead in a direction that no one anticipated. As the transition is made from lecturing to discussion, it behooves us — usually the professor — to pose a line of questioning and to invite students either to hazard

a reply or to refine the question. If the appropriate conditions are in place, the conversation unfolds according to a dynamic of its own and all alike are swept along in a process over which no one altogether presides. If it falls to the educator to keep matters on the rails and prevent the conversation from deteriorating into the pedestrian and pointless, still the professor is neither authoritative judge, orchestral director, expert, nor preacher. The educative quality of such conversation consists precisely in articulating questions and judgments that others may challenge and in the testing of prejudices. Often for the first time in a student's experience, opinions are formed and they are compelled to produce reasons for their views that others may challenge. They are taken out of the role of spectators and obliged to account for their views. Educative conversations generally remove our intellectual comfort by eliciting from us the semi-articulated judgments of which so much of our intellectual life consists. Real knowledge is never more than the tip of the iceberg of what we believe, gather, and suspect, and much as we may wish to limit our utterances to such knowledge, conversation has a way of drawing out of us the rest of the iceberg, sometimes at our peril and always in a haphazard way. The discussion is never quite the one that the professor anticipated — or when it is, it is likely due to overt or covert manipulation on the latter's part. The mind that refuses to relinquish control and to allow judgments to be made that conflict with one's own is unteachable, whether it be student or educator. If it falls to the latter to ensure that the conversation is properly informed, oriented by an intelligent line of questioning, and on the rails, it is not their role to ensure the conversation reaches a predetermined conclusion or indeed any conclusion.

It belongs to the structure of conversation, as of wonder, to begin and to end on a note of uncertainty and openness to further inquiry. The educative value of the conversation may lie in the question itself, posed from the student's point of view for the first time and which will lead one to read texts one otherwise would not have or to pursue the question in private reflection. What is urgent above all is that the student be taken out of the role of spectator — a role to which many are far too accustomed — and become an agent in their own intellectual life and in the larger conversational process. Educators need not and ought not concern themselves more than a little with the content of their students' beliefs but with whether they attain virtues of open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, and reasonableness that largely define intellectual agency.

Whether we are speaking of the conversation of mankind in a large sense or of the ordinary conversations of daily life, the process of conversing involves rather more than uttering propositions. The act of speaking is often awarded primacy and regarded in isolation from the larger process that is someone saying something to someone about something in the world. The conversational process contains two dialectical poles: the first is speaking while the second is a matter about which philosophers traditionally have had remarkably little to say. It is the act of listening. Even the Cartesian meditator, one supposes, anticipates that someone is listening to its otherwise private ratiocinations. Sooner or later the thinking thing must exit the privacy of the mind and say what it imagines it knows. René Descartes himself was after all not only a thinker but an author and a highly skilled rhetorician. So skilled in fact as to lead us at times to forget a few elementary particulars about the very project of thought in which he was engaged. Even the *Meditations*, that quintessentially modern tribute to pure reason, was no private soliloquy but a literary work written and published with the anticipation that someone might read it and respond with a yea or a nay. The vital matter is that they respond, and not only whether we have hit upon the truth or beheld a clear and distinct idea. We speak in order to be heard, but in what sense? To be heard often means to win a convert, to bring low our critic and reassure ourselves that our hypothesis is not as precarious as we feared. But there is more to it than this. What is it to listen, to hear and be heard, given that this modest act is no less vital to the conversation of mankind, and to education, than its more celebrated dialectical counterpart?

Listening – its overlooked educational importance

Students are listeners. “Listen and learn” is a logical pairing in a way that “speak and learn” is not. The latter phrase strikes us as incongruous, even while it has long been implicit to the practice of many educators to esteem speaking over listening. My aim in the second half of this paper is not to reverse the primacy of speaking over listening that is implicit to the standard practice of many educators but to provide a brief phenomenology of the listening act, a consequence of which is in effect to make a case for it. That this case needs to be made is odd given that there is not one paradigmatic conversational act but two, and it is their mutual presence that constitutes participation. On what I am tempted

to call the standard view, it is the speaker who participates in the sense of offering a positive contribution while the listener more or less passively absorbs it. Many a university course syllabus today reads that students will be rewarded for being what is termed “active participants” rather than “passive listeners.” The verb “to educate” is now often used in precisely the sense of speaking and informing. How has it come to pass that the act of listening has been not only assigned a secondary place relative to speaking but relegated to passivity, as if it were a kind of intellectual and perhaps psychological and moral failing? The speaker, on the standard view, is participating in earnest, exhibiting creativity, critical capacity, and a virile character while the listener merely sits there. It is the speaker who advances the conversation and participates in what is called “active learning” while the listener at best is dragged along in the wake of others’ ideas, on the model of the master and the disciple. The former we admire; the latter is at best an enigma but most often an unoriginal and docile mind.

Wherein lies the error in the standard view? My hypothesis is that the underappreciation of listening is rooted in a profound misunderstanding of this act and its significance. Listening, it must be said, is an act, and a highly complex one. It is an act of receptivity to be sure, and receptivity has long been associated if not conflated with passivity. To receive is not to surrender the will and be acted upon but is a mode of engagement. Its salient feature is openness, but this is not the openness of an empty container waiting to be filled. It more resembles an active hospitality and gesture of welcome to an anticipated guest. Listening is an out-going — precisely not a withdrawal into the self or a frightened retreat but a venturing beyond one’s private convictions and into the convictions of an interlocutor and a meeting of minds. Here one’s attention is fully absorbed by the other, or by the claim that the other is addressing to us, in a process that demands a kind of self-forgetfulness. To listen is to acknowledge that we are being addressed, that someone is not only speaking but speaking to us. They are claiming something not only in the sense of uttering a proposition that may be true or false but making a claim upon our attention and capacities. It behooves us to listen and respond, and where the former must be understood with constant reference to the latter.

We may respond in this way or that, but what is essential is the response and the preparation that is bound up with it, that we are poised one way or another and in a way that is the opposite of passive. We prepare a response in the way

that we prepare for a guest. Receiving guests once again is not a passive matter. If one is to be at all hospitable there is considerable work to be done. So too is listening a form of work, and of a no less creative kind than speaking. We may indeed speak of the art of listening. One who practices it not only opens oneself to what another has to say but ventures oneself. It is a question of risk, and of a kind that is comparable to the risk of speaking. It is well known that to speak and write is to risk oneself, to venture a hypothesis or an idea, and to expose one's point of view to the scrutiny of others. This partially explains the fear so many have of public speaking; we fear being exposed, criticized in open debate, and badly thought of. We do not think badly of the listener, or not in the same way that our opinion of the speaker may plummet once we begin to hear their message. At worst we might believe the listener has nothing to say or lacks the courage to venture something of themselves. But we do not fear listening in the way that we fear speaking, or so it seems. If we do not exactly fear listening, however, the question we must ask is why there are so few good listeners. Listening requires that we stop speaking, a seemingly elementary (perhaps even non-) act which requires no skill and no judgment. Yet it is not uncommon that one should not have mastered this act, an odd and fascinating phenomenon. A common expression has it that such individuals are in love with the sound of their own voice, yet it is far less a matter of love than dread. The object of such dread is not silence but that someone else might speak, that we might be addressed and obliged precisely to risk our point of view. We might therefore ask whether it is the speaker or the listener who ventures more of themselves. The work of listening, in any event, is to risk being called into question and to prepare a response to a claim that we may not have anticipated. It is the foreign guest who puts us to work most, the strange and unanticipated claim that calls on our resources.

This form of work requires something additional of us. Gadamer spoke of the anticipation of truth as a vital precondition of interpretation in general. We must anticipate, at least in a preliminary way, that the text or speaker is right. To see this, let us imagine what it is like to listen without this anticipation. Somehow we know — or, if this is impossible, expect — the speaker to be mistaken even before they have begun to speak. Why, then, are we listening, and what manner of listening is this? If we anticipate that the interlocutor's claim lacks either truth, value, or meaning then we need not listen at all, and this is precisely what characterizes the bad listener: not that they are incapable of doing so but that they

need not. They need only gather evidence that they were correct all along and may accordingly settle back in their knowledge. In all listening there is invention and a judgment of confidence that the claim to which one is attending is worth the effort. This is readily seen in an aesthetic context. In listening to music we are anticipating again that there is something in this, not merely a pleasure to be derived or propositional knowledge to be had but something far more interesting: some meaning to be glimpsed, something to be shown, and in a way that resonates and potentially transforms us. When the anticipation of meaning or truth is suspended, listening is at an end.

To listen is not yet to speak, but it is to be on the way to speaking. This is the basis for describing this as an act of invention. Someone has addressed us, and since conversation has the structure of a dialectic it behooves us to fashion a response. As the musical example illustrates, listening is a responsive as well as a complex and learned activity. We learn how to listen, what to listen for, and the art of discerning increasingly subtle qualities. Our attention is appropriately directed and discerning. Listening invariably has a purpose, but if we are listening in a genuine sense our purpose is the speaker's purpose. Listening in a critical spirit still requires an anticipation of truth and a shared purpose; it is no fault-finding mission or purely strategic posture. The purpose of listening in an educational context is no different in this respect. The point is to listen and learn, where to learn means to be formed and transformed. The student not only understands what has been said but is able to respond in an intelligent way, which always means with a thought of their own. They are able to participate in the back-and-forth of dialogue and at times to move the conversation in a different direction.

To listen is to take in creatively and to take seriously what another has to say, and this is inseparable from the questioning act. Conversation involves a questioning that runs in two directions; as the speaker calls into question the standpoint of the listener, the latter must actively interrogate, interpret, and judge what is being said. Where there is interpretation there is interrogation, a search for connections, a negotiating of the hermeneutical circle, and an estimation of importance. The interpretive function of the question is to bring a phenomenon into the open and to reveal it as this or that kind of thing. No rule governs how we do this, how to see what is questionable and then formulate the question that allows the thing itself to be shown. This again is a creative act, and it belongs as much to listening as to speaking. It is only when regarded as abstractions that

listening, discerning what is questionable, and fashioning a productive question are separate acts. Phenomenologically, listening already anticipates the latter.

The undervaluing of listening by educators may be traced in part to an epistemological problem — how is one to know whether the student who does not speak is listening in earnest or tuning out? But I suspect that a deeper explanation lies in a larger cultural phenomenon. Ours, I believe it is fair to say, is not a culture of listeners. What it prizes is the sort of venturing that is directly conducive to utility — “putting oneself out there,” as it is said, in such a way that is calculated to bring gain, most especially reputation. Being well thought of, and often sheer visibility, is the point, and while there is nothing particularly new in this it is a phenomenon that has a darker aspect. In the cultural conditions we now face, including the ubiquity of mass communication technology, what is becoming of the will to communicate, where this means not only the will to speak and be visible but to listen in a process that is dialectical rather than one-way? One does not listen to the mass, and when one speaks to them, what manner of speaking is this? However interactive mass communication technology often claims to be, what form of interaction is this? Does it include the listening act in any sense that includes creativity and freedom or does our freedom here mean selecting between options that have been planned and laid out in advance?

Inseparable from the will to listen is the will to read, and here as well is a matter that warrants concern for educators. Conservatives like Allan Bloom undoubtedly exaggerate when remarking that “Today’s select students know so much less, are so much more cut off from the tradition, are so much slacker intellectually, that they make their predecessors look like prodigies of culture.” (Bloom, 1987, p. 58). This is overstated, but what is not is the observation now frequently made by professors that our students are not reading for pleasure and interest in the way they once did, and books in particular. If Bloom’s criticisms are harshly stated, it is nonetheless true that knowledge of the canon has eroded among university students of today. A declining number of students appears to believe that the canon is where they may expect to find truths more profound than in popular culture or the mass media. The love of reading and expectation of personal and intellectual growth through exposure to quality literature appear to be in decline and are being replaced by more immediate forms of information acquisition and entertainment. In the university as well, many professors are increasingly reluctant to assign books of any difficulty or length on the premise

that students will not read them, that they lack either the interest, work ethic, or attention span necessary for the task, and instead assign textbooks that, in a field such as philosophy, include descriptive accounts of certain philosophers' views supplemented by brief passages from the primary texts. Dewey maintained that the well-educated mind is inquisitive, broadly curious, and motivated to learn and to continue learning long after formal education is at an end. It exhibits habits of mind that incline it to read in a variety of fields and as an end in itself, yet what habits of mind are instilled when students may achieve high grades without being expected by their educators to read more than short selections or third-person accounts? When books and ideas no longer change the lives of the young, the prospect of education achieving any ends higher than the utilitarian is dim indeed.

The educated mind is not only well informed but able and inclined to participate in a genuine sense in the conversation that is their culture, and the structure of participation itself is fundamentally dialectical. One speaks — one is capable of speaking, of having something to say — only on the basis of having listened for some considerable period of time, and where listening is no mere preliminary to what matters but is of the essence of education. It is the constant tendency of educators to undervalue the intangibles of their practice, and this is especially true of the act of listening. It is not a mere means to an end, where the end is to be informed. The current reign of utilitarian rationality, with its continual emphasis on mastering information and training the next generation of producers and consumers, leaves little room for what Gadamer has called “living with ideas” or learning to participate in the conversation of mankind (Gadamer, 1992, p. 48).⁴ To live with ideas means to listen and continue listening until it comes the student's turn to participate in that other sense of advancing views of their own. Martin Heidegger emphasized that to think is always to be “on the way,” and this is the salient quality of the listening act. We are on the way to speaking, attending to what matters, and preparing to be persuaded or to resist depending not on any prior disposition but on what another has to say. In the listening act no less than in speaking, we venture ourselves, catch hold of what is said, and undertake to take it further.

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