

“Do You Have Your Baseball Bat?” Dialogic Teaching in a Remote Environment*Dr. Mark Percy**Rider University***Abstract**

Teachers have often relied on a dialogic style in their classrooms—utilizing dialogue and questioning techniques to develop student comprehension, probe for misunderstandings or misapprehensions, and provide “real-time” opportunities for the construction of knowledge and problem-solving. Effective teachers can use these techniques to scaffold dialogue in order to promote deeper understandings of complex problems. But the traditional functions of a dialogic classroom aren’t readily available or apparent in remote environments. For professors and students during the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the vibrant nature of “in person” teaching gave way to remote environments and online-only interactions. How, then, can teachers still make use of the flexibility and energy of dialogic teaching, within the confines of a Zoom portal? The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the curricular and instructional adaptations implemented by faculty at a small teaching college in the spring of 2020, which were aimed at maintaining the advantages of a dialogic style in the midst of enforced remote learning. These changes included both synchronous and asynchronous features in a variety of classes. As teacher educators across the country are preparing for the possibility of extended or renewed quarantines in the future, the adaptations described here not only provide a roadmap for departments with similar needs, but also outline the often-unexpected advantages to a remote environment. This is particularly relevant for those educators who have traditionally relied on a discursive, dialogic style, which places a premium on face-to-face interaction and an improvisatory element found in “live” teaching.

Keywords: Remote learning; COVID-19 Teaching; Dialogic Teaching

Introduction

“Do you have your baseball bat?” The question came from one of my students, though I couldn’t tell immediately which; all of them (numbering 21, for this class) were only visible from the neck up, in small rectangles on my laptop screen. I had converted the desk in my master

bedroom into an ad hoc teaching space, using a folding screen and a length of green drop cloth to complete the enclosure. I was typing in the Zoom application's chat feature when the question was asked—I looked up, and all the students were smiling. That, at least, was a good sign, more than I could've expected.

I taught high school social studies for nineteen years prior to moving to higher education, and I found, in my first year, that I had a tendency to behave a little compulsively in front of students, especially with my hands. I would fiddle with nearly anything, taking apart pens, bending pencils until they would break, tugging on my tie, and, in one ill-considered episode, flipping a stapler open and closed. At one point, while doing a lesson about American popular culture in the 1920s, I brought in a bat as a prop to illustrate the importance of sports at that time (I didn't think much about how bringing such an instrument into a classroom without warning might have looked). It immediately gave me something to do with my hands, as well as to lean on, and point with. It also served as a sort of permanent gimmick, a class in-joke that lasted for most of my career, and into higher education, as well.

Such gimmicks (I called them "shticks" with my education students) were hard to come by in the spring of 2020, when my university, along with most of the nation, went into a surreal version of hibernation, with the outbreak of COVID-19. I teach at a small liberal arts college in central New Jersey, a state that was hit hard and early by the pandemic. When the university administration called a halt to in-person classes and we were forced to move to an entirely virtual environment, I found myself facing a professional and pedagogical crisis—how could I maintain the dialogic, discursive style that I had practiced for over a quarter-century? And more to the point, should I?

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the curricular and instructional adaptations which were aimed at maintaining the advantages of a dialogic style in the midst of enforced remote learning. These changes included both synchronous and asynchronous features in a variety of classes. The specific changes made, along with the way in which educators had to contend with their own biases and beliefs about teaching, have profound implications for teacher educators and preservice educators. As teacher educators across the country are preparing for the possibility of extended or renewed quarantines in the future, the adaptations described here seem particularly relevant for those educators who have traditionally relied on a dialogic style,

which places a premium on face-to-face interaction and an improvisatory element found in “live” teaching.

What is “Dialogic Teaching?”

Teachers at all levels have relied on a dialogic style in their teaching, though there is considerable debate over how to apply the label. The use of dialogic terms, like *dialogue*, *learning*, *talk*, and *pedagogy*, vary from field to field (Asterhan, et al., 2020, p. 1). Kim and Wilkinson (2019) describe it as “a pedagogical approach that capitalizes on the power of talk to further students' thinking, learning, and problem solving” (p. 70). It is often cast as the opposite of “narrow, authoritative, and impersonal approaches in which the classroom discourse does not allow for the bringing together and exploration of students' interests, concerns, and ideas” (Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2017, p. 23). Sfard (2008) describes dialogic teaching as less about a particular kind of knowledge, and more about participating in a certain type of discourse. This discourse is driven by questioning, where prompts “are structured in such a manner as to provoke thoughtful answers, which in turn ideally provoke further questions” (Sedova, 2017, p. 279). Its earlier form, Socratic dialogue, positioned a teacher as an “assistant to the learner's search for evidence and application of reasoned argument,” rather than as an authoritative voice or a definitive source of knowledge (Renshaw, 2004, p. 2). Various researchers have pointed to numerous advantages to this pedagogical style, including greater agency for students, more equitable opportunities to learn and grow, and to foster “increasingly competent participation in communities of practice” (Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015; Ten Dam, Volman, & Wardekker, 2004, p. 63).

Different advocates promote different markers of dialogic teaching. Alexander's (2017) framework for dialogic teaching is frequently featured in literature on the subject and is often used as the foundation for exploring dialogic practice. He describes five characteristics of dialogic teaching (p. 28):

- 1) It must be *collective*: if possible, all students should participate, given that the “classroom of joint learning and [inquiry]” (Alexander, 2018, p. 6).
- 2) It must be *reciprocal*: teachers and students should listen to each other, share ideas, and consider differing viewpoints.

- 3) It must be *supportive*: students should feel free to express their ideas without fear of being castigated over “wrong” answers, and they should work to help each other to reach common understandings.
- 4) It must be *cumulative*: all communication should be aimed at the accumulation of knowledge. Participants should build on their own contributions, along with others, to create a coherent line of thinking and understanding.
- 5) It must be *purposeful*: interaction should be subject to given educational goals and objectives, ones which are specific and clear to all participants.

Of course, what dialogic teaching is in theory often differs from its practice. It is a time-consuming, often messy form of pedagogy, and an emphasis on both collaboration and the willingness to modify (or even abandon) one’s perspective in light of contrasting evidence isn’t a regular feature of most classrooms (Asterhan, et al., 2020, p. 8). Stewart, et al. (2019), points to the complexity and difficulty of enacting a dialogical stance towards the practice of teaching, one factor that surely limits its growth. Research compiled by Reznitskaya and Gregory (2013) indicates that the dominant form of discourse in schools “remains largely monologic,” dominated by teachers’ voices (p. 114).

To that point, the social studies is a discipline in which teachers may style themselves as dialogic practitioners, though in reality that is rarely the case. Russell (2010) found that social studies teachers routinely skewed towards lecture and “taking notes” as the featured pedagogy in their classrooms; at the same time, more than 80% of teacher respondents reported having students “complete written assignments from the textbook” (p. 69). While almost 60% reported having students work in cooperative learning groups more than half the time (p. 70), such practices can hardly be termed dialogic, either ideally or functionally.

There are elements of dialogic teaching that any teacher can recognize in their own practices, though all educators, to one degree or another, are susceptible to the monologic nature of more traditional pedagogies (Sidelinger, 2018). These practices have been interrupted by the pandemic of 2020; but it’s difficult to know, at this stage, what teachers are doing to promote a dialogic style, or how they can accommodate student interaction, dialogue, and communication. As one colleague remarked to me, in reference to the spring term of that year, in the wake of closure and quarantine, “we were all crisis teaching.”

The Challenges of 2020

The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the adaptations that followed, were no different, at my institution, than most others—an abrupt closure, an extended break, and a resumption of classes (virtual only) till the end of the term. Over the summer, our university offered faculty a choice of modalities for teaching in the fall of 2020. These ranged from “fully remote” to “fully in-person,” with gradations in between—either *light hybrid* (up to six in-person class meetings, with the rest of the semester to be conducted remotely) or *heavy hybrid* (seven or more meetings). The conception of an “online course” was suddenly complicated by questions of “fully synchronous remote” or “asynchronous modalities.” Any faculty member who proposed meeting face-to-face had to provide an alternative hybrid approach for students who could not (or would not) attend.

There was considerable debate among the faculty over which modality to adopt. Some professors immediately opted for remote instruction, while others delayed making a decision (“[it’s] so difficult,” one colleague confided via email—“it’s all I think about”). Some couldn’t see a pathway to adequate pedagogies through a computer screen, while others had the same criticism about a heavily regulated in-person experience—“if one must hide behind a Plexiglas screen to talk to face-masked students seated six feet apart in a huge-but-almost-empty room,” one asked via email, “how different is that from a Zoom classroom?” This faculty member bluntly and unfavorably compared the situation to the hypothetical scenarios often featured in philosophy classes: “The choices suck, and unlike Kohlberg’s choices, these are for real and will affect real people. Good luck with these impossible decisions.”

Despite these debates, the university administration decided, with a few weeks to go before the start of the semester, to move the campus to remote-only for the upcoming term. This solution was disrupted briefly by the state’s governor, who announced via executive order (less than 48 hours later) that many of the previous restrictions on in-person teaching were summarily lifted. Still, though, most faculty members opted for the remote approach—at this point in the term, greater than 80% of our remote courses are taught either fully synchronously or as a blend of synchronous or asynchronous delivery. In person or heavy hybrid (a blend of in person and remote delivery) courses represent approximately 20% of the courses taught this term. Over the spring of 2020, and now into the following term, professors have dealt with jarring changes in

how we approach teaching, and we have been forced to contemplate what we do in the classroom, and why.

Study Methodology

This paper focuses on strategies and modifications adopted by faculty in the spring 2020 term. Descriptions of modalities and pedagogical approaches were the product of both personal experience and dialogue with fellow faculty members in weekly sessions (biweekly department meetings and more informal gatherings known collectively as “Research Tuesdays”). Our department is made up of eleven full-time faculty members, along with several veteran adjunct instructors (one of which is our former dean), as well as our director of field placement. The section below, in which I describe these different approaches, focuses on the pandemic’s impact on our field-based components, the different teaching strategies adopted during this period, and the analysis of my own practices, using Alexander’s (2017) five characteristics of dialogic teaching.

Teaching Dialogically in the Zoom Classroom

The spring term ended with most faculty conducting limited synchronous meetings (which were largely restricted to sporadic check-ins, akin to “wellness checks”), paired with asynchronous assignments. This was a consequence of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 outbreak in our state; the school’s closure and the strict nature of the subsequent lockdown kept most faculty from creating notably innovative lessons.

One element of our program which was immediately disrupted was our work in the field. Our department is committed to practical experience in the classroom, alongside working teachers; practically all of our classes feature either short-term or extended field components. This became immediately untenable during the spring term, and the decision was made departmentally that we would not ask school districts to take our students in the fall. Given all of the variables that these schools faced, and the unusual stressors to which teachers would have to adapt, it seemed excessive to force more upon them. We have endeavored to create virtual conferences with partner teachers, with varying success.

As for teaching, faculty members began to experiment with what tools were available, and how they might be used. Like many universities, we utilized the Zoom platform, which is ubiquitous around the educational world. The Zoom application has several features which can create the conditions for dialogic teaching—breakout rooms, annotation tools, and student

polling features being the most prominent—but early in the term, I found myself struggling with a variety of constraints which I hadn’t anticipated. In describing the difficulties facing educators in this environment, I will utilize Alexander’s (2017) conditions for dialogic teaching, described above.

The class I am focusing on, for this example, is a senior-level methods class that is required of all secondary education majors. The class is offered every semester, and the students take it in a specific sequence based on their subject areas (social studies, sciences, and foreign languages in the fall term; English, mathematics, and business education in the spring). Typically, we have 12-15 students in each section; ironically, this semester it was one of the largest groups in our recent history, at 22 students.

It Must be Collective

From early sessions it was clear that making the class collective would be challenging. As any instructor knows, there will always be a handful of extroverted, opinionated students who will dominate the dialogue; this is true in a traditional classroom, though it can be mitigated through careful planning and teacher intervention. It is much more difficult, however, to limit such behavior in a virtual environment. The usual forms of etiquette that apply in a traditional classroom—students regulating their own tendency to interrupt by reading visual and physical cues (both from their colleagues and the teacher), instructors using nonverbal cues to signal the availability of speaking time, the willingness to concede the spotlight when noting another students’ dismay or agitation—did not translate well into a Zoom session.

In the second week of class, I received an email from one student who was complaining about a classmate’s tendency to dominate the conversation and to sidetrack the class with spontaneous anecdotes. “I feel like lately I couldn’t talk or participate as much as I would want to,” the student wrote, “and much of our class discussions end up being taken over by one person.” The student informed me that she was speaking on behalf of several other students, as well.

I assured the student that I was aware of the issue, and that I would endeavor (through the use of rotating small groups, meeting separately throughout the semester) to provide more inclusive opportunities to participate. However, it was clear that promoting a collective dialogic experience would be challenging, at best.

It Must be Reciprocal

In a dialogic classroom, instructors and students must listen to and share with each other. In a Zoom session with 23 participants, it would be easy, as described above, for a small group of voices to practically govern the discourse, and for others to feel left behind or ignored. Interestingly, the class sessions I've conducted thus far have been more reciprocal than I might have anticipated, due to the use of the Zoom platform's tools.

Zoom incorporates three basic tools for an instructor's use—breakout rooms, in which students can be grouped either randomly or purposefully (though, to be fair, it is substantially easier to opt for the former, since the latter requires substantial pre-planning and the full attendance of the class); the chat feature, in which students can send messages to each other or the whole class; and the annotation tool, which allows students to attach visual features (like text or “stamps”) onto a shared screen. These tools, when used with intention and design, can promote a reciprocal dialogic experience—particularly the breakout room.

In class, I will pose a question for class discussion, and then I will place the students in breakout rooms. I've found, when I insert myself into these digital spaces, that there is very little of what a teacher would find, in a small group in a traditional classroom—small talk, busying oneself with moving a desk or finding a pen, a lack of focus on the problem at hand. Instead, it is routine to find students discussing the prompt, offering responses, and working more effectively than they might in a “real” setting.

Of course, this is anecdotal, and the nature of breakout rooms prevents a teacher from doing what is typical in a standard classroom—moving around the physical space, listening in without interrupting, offering suggestions and guidance without overt interruption. Still, my experience thus far with Zoom-based instruction has seen, in my view, a degree of reciprocity that is refreshing and welcome.

It Must be Supportive

In a dialogic classroom, students should feel free to express themselves without fear of repercussions or abuse. In truth, this is the feature that has been the most pleasantly received in our Zoom sessions thus far. Students have been warm and welcoming and have shared more details of their personal lives than is common (at least in my experience).

Perhaps this is a function of the stress and anxiety that we have all felt over the recent past, or perhaps it is the uniquely intimate nature of virtual class sessions—we are able to peek

into each other's private spaces, our bedrooms and kitchen tables, with dog barks, lawnmowers outside, and various family members walking in the background. It has created a shared experience in which we all seem to understand that, without collective support, a dialogic experience can't take place, and the educational mission is endangered.

It Must be Cumulative

A dialogic style requires that all communication in the classroom is aimed at the eventual accumulation of knowledge. Even in a class in which the teacher tries to strictly control the flow of dialogue, it is likely that tangents will appear, and the discussion will take unexpected turns. Paradoxically, this may be less likely in a remote experience—I've found that students are less likely to spontaneously interject a non-relevant point, possibly because it is difficult to do so without the requisite nonverbal cues one can read when physically in the same space. However, I do recognize that the person most responsible for such tangents, in the experiences I've had thus far, is me.

Part of my teaching style is extemporaneous, but not necessarily improvisational; over my time in the classroom, I've made Eisner's (2002) evocation of Dewey's principle of "flexible purposing" central to my pedagogical choices, in which teachers opportunistically make use of the "emergent features appearing within a field of relationships" (p. 10; Dewey, 1938). I often diverge from a preplanned task or activity if, in my estimation of the students' emotional and intellectual status, it serves the overall objective more effectively. There are elements of this style, however, which can seem jarring and too abrupt, in a virtual setting where I am sharing my screen with the entire class and such cues are less spontaneous.

It Must be Purposeful

A dialogic classroom is one in which student-to-student interaction, as well as teacher-to-student, must be subject to specific educational goals and objectives. In large part, we are able to adhere to this feature whether in a remote or "real" classroom; but I have found that one goal which I have always tried to emphasize in my teaching is more difficult to achieve through Zoom, than face-to-face.

While purposeful teaching, in the strictest sense (and in Alexander's framework) applies to aiming one's strategies towards a specific goal or objective, there are elements of this dimension that are less anchored to academic outcomes and more so to dispositional ends. A colleague of mine has, for his entire career, adopted a regular ritual—he will stand outside his

classroom and greet each student personally, and shake his or her hand. He sees this as a chance to develop the non-academic relationships which create a culture of trust and respect between the instructor and the student. By nature, these relationships are imbalanced, since a student has been placed in a subordinate position to a figure who has taken on the obligation to help this person improve, intellectually and emotionally (Tom, 1980). So, developing a strong bond between those who teach, and those who will (ostensibly) learn, is vital.

These relationships are more difficult to develop in a remote setting. There are no hallways in which to bump into a student, no quick interactions that provide a quick chat. Students appear with a gentle audio tone as a square on my laptop screen and disappear with a quick wave at the end of the session. Teachers in a virtual setting have to work not just harder, but more creatively, in order to build a durable relationship with students—and that effort, understandably, must be purposeful.

I have found, in my experience thus far, that such efforts are limited by the realities of virtual learning—students who are reluctant to speak freely in a public venue may be even less so in a Zoom session. They may be part of families with crowded living spaces, in which parents might be working from home alongside housebound children who are simultaneously in their own remote learning environments. The virtual “bubbles” that we are currently occupying often overlap with each other, and that reality can constrain a teacher’s ability to intentionally develop trust with his/her students.

That does not mean, of course, that the effort is wasted. The discourse of a dialogic classroom is shaped by the organizational features of a school as a public and educational institution, just as much as a teacher’s personality or pedagogy (Strobelberger, 2012). Within those restrictions—for instance, the expectation that a teacher’s intentions are benign and that his/her efforts will redound to the benefit of the student—can help bridge some of the obstacles that a remote learning experience presents by default.

One Example of Dialogic Teaching

While I made regular use of the tools available (particularly breakout rooms, to encourage collaboration, and the embedded annotation tools, to allow students to contribute directly to class activities by “writing” on my shared screen), it was challenging to create lessons that regularly, or even intermittently, featured all five of Alexander’s characteristics of dialogic teaching. This surely was a consequence of the inherent limitations of the virtual environment

and my own pedagogical shortcomings. There was one occasion, however, where the deficiencies of this environment worked temporarily in our favor.

In my foundations-level class, we had always incorporated a module on the history of American education. Part of this module included an activity called “Argument Circles,” in which I arranged five tables with chairs surrounding them, with a single sheet of paper taped to the table’s surface. I would instruct students that they had to visit each table and could go in any order; when the desks were filled, each group was ready to “argue.” On the underside of the paper was a single sentence that they would then have to discuss. After a short period, I would instruct the students to move to another table, and another “argument.” The statements they were discussing were:

- Should American schools be separated by age?
- Should students of different gender be taught together, in co-educational classes?
- Should indigenous peoples be allowed to maintain their cultural identity?
- Should ELL students be allowed to speak their primary language?
- Should private schools be allowed in the U.S.?

The questions were designed to highlight the ongoing tension over educational goals, norms, and practices in the U.S. since its founding. However, this activity—which was always marked by lively and energetic debate, fueled by strong opinions and questions—seemed nearly impossible to replicate in a virtual setting.

However, there was one new feature of Zoom that allowed for this activity, in theory at least—rather than being preassigned to breakout rooms (or being randomly selected), students could pick which breakout room to enter. I was able to create five rooms, with each one dedicated to one of the activity’s core statements.

During the discussion period, I entered the different rooms and found that the peculiarities of the Zoom-based experience were, this once, working to our mutual benefit; students were quicker to move to the discussion, more respectful of other students when they expressed their views (possibly because students had become acutely sensitive to speaking over each other in a virtual environment), and more willing to consider creative solutions and concepts. As before, this is anecdotal; but it was enough to serve as encouragement for future endeavors, and more creative attempts on my part.

Conclusion: “When I’m Teaching, I Can’t be Watching *Them*”

I have two school-age daughters—one in high school, one in middle school. Recently I attended their schools’ respective “Back to School” nights (virtually, of course). Both schools have adopted a hybrid approach to reopening, in which the first three weeks of the semester were entirely remote. Most of the teachers used Google Classroom to both teach and to meet with parents.

During one session (attended, according to my screen, over 100 parents), one teacher was explaining his approach to remote instruction. As a math teacher, he explained, he couldn’t guarantee that students would be paying attention in the same way he could in his classroom. If a student was losing focus, or drifting off, or talking to a neighbor, he would note this and correct it; but in a virtual setting, this was impossible, in his view. “When I’m teaching,” he said, “I can’t be watching *them*.” He said that he would “teach for 30 minutes or so” and then give the students “hands-on” work to do individually.

This artificial bifurcation—in which the teacher “teaches,” and then the student “works”—is, in most ways, the opposite of a dialogic classroom. Dialogic teaching calls for extensive questioning and feedback, in order to promote class discussion, probe for misunderstandings or misapprehensions, and to provide “real-time” opportunities for the construction of knowledge and problem-solving. So, it isn’t just that “teaching by Zoom” inhibits this practice; it is also that some teachers see their obligations as primarily about delivery of content, rather than promoting more critical understandings of complex problems.

But, to paraphrase a recent euphemism, perhaps we “shouldn’t let a good crisis go to waste.” The transformative effect of the quarantine and school closures that followed haven’t, in my view, made a compelling argument for the value of virtual education; if anything, it seems an indictment of the idea that somehow, “brick-and-mortar” schools are a thing of the past. But if nothing else, moving to a remote-only platform has compelled teachers to ask hard questions about their own pedagogical habits, and the relationships they form with students. The crisis we all face has given us the opportunity to critically examine our practices and their impact.

As it happened, I didn’t have my baseball bat that day, and I told the student as much. She laughed and said, “Well, you’ll have to find something else.” I agreed, and mentally made a note to look for a new shtick.

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Author Biography

Dr. Mark Percy is an assistant professor in Rider University's College of Education with a specialization in social studies education. His research interests include American History, "historical thinking," "Just War" theory, moral education, and the teaching of war.