

Dialogue Education: A Learning-Centered Pedagogy

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Dan Haase 

Wheaton College, Illinois, USA

Abstract

When implemented, Dialogue Education™ offers a system of teaching and learning that moves beyond lecture into interactive engagement. This article highlights some of the principles and practices within this dialogical approach to teaching while also demonstrating the methodological techniques within this system of learning. Attention will be given to the nature of transformational education in light of the following elements: the learner, the community, the content, the context, and the role of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords

Dialogue education, teaching, learning, pedagogy

Are you filling pails or lighting fires?

Ancient wisdom attributed to Plutarch suggests, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Too often in our ministry preparation and training we are taught to fill pails when we could be lighting fires. How often do we talk at and tell the learners in our midst the truth they need to hear when we could be casting a vision that ignites a response? Truth in a pail is a heavy weight and often a burden to carry. Truth as a fire draws forth an image of the Holy Spirit that refines as well as lights our path. So, in your learning environments are you filling pails or lighting fires?

This metaphor of the fire is a helpful image to consider when thinking about how teaching for transformation takes place in our learning environments. Fire brings

Corresponding author:

Dan Haase, Wheaton College, 501 College Ave, Wheaton, IL 60187, USA.
Email: daniel.haase@wheaton.edu

light and warmth. Good things happen around a fire; relationships are deepened and stories are shared. A caution also comes forth, however, as fires need to be tended so as not to grow wild and out of control. Being a good steward of the fire is a serious responsibility for instructors who are seeking to teach the next generation of educators and ministers. At the heart of this responsibility are the best principles and practices of teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, it begins with decreasing that Christ might increase.

Rest in peace through dialogue

Not every death is a defeat. In fact, some of the most profound and inspiring stories of life are born out of a story of death. One such story is “the death of the professor.” My personal experience has shown that this metaphorical death does indeed bring life. When I enter my classroom as a learner among my students, I challenge the power structure within the traditional student-teacher relationship. What I value as a teacher shifts; this, in turn, affects the posture of the students. I am not lecturing at them; I am listening with them. I design for dialogue. My content matters to me deeply, but my learners matter to me even more. The “death of the professor” ushers me into a role wherein the opportunity to link content with students’ lives expands. Together we commit to a learning-centered approach to education. I welcome this “death” because it breeds safety, respect, sound relationships, and a willingness to engage in dialogue. And like all deaths, it carries with it various challenges.

Jane Vella (2002), a global educator who was a colleague of Paulo Freire (the Brazilian educator and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), recalls this interaction with him on the topic:

Another vital principle of adult learning is recognition of the impact of clear roles in the communication between learner and teacher. As Paulo Freire put it in conversation with us one evening: “Only the student can name the moment of the death of the professor.” That is, a teacher can be intent upon a dialogue with an adult learner, but if the learner sees the teacher as “the professor” with whom there is no possibility of disagreement, no questioning, no challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water. Adult students need reinforcement of the human equity between teacher and student and among students. It takes time for adults to see themselves and the teacher in a new role. (Vella, 2002, p. 20)

It is through this “new role” that students and teachers alike can enter into transformational learning. As Vella suggests, this new understanding of roles takes time and death can be a painful process. Due to our traditional learning structures, these ideas are easily questioned: Is such a “death” really necessary? What about all the information my students must possess? I know more than my students, why would I waste time with dialogue? How will the students learn what they need to know if lecture is diminished or removed? As valid as these questions may be, they

are born out of an understanding of teaching and learning that is limited to the lectern. They also tend to be more rooted in fear and control than discernment and wisdom. An educator's role requires expertise of content but also expertise of how one facilitates learning. Knowledge must lead us to care, and care requires an attentive and engaged posture of listening along with meaningfully constructed questions.

When a teacher moves away from a hierarchical relationship with students into one of collaboration and collegial participation, the result is a learning environment framed by active dialogue. The lecturing professor experiences a death, as lecture is no longer utilized as the only way to teach. The teacher will have to talk less and is required to facilitate participation. These practices take serious preparation and knowledge of content, as well as skillful use of open questions while facilitating conversations around topics of relevance. The teacher welcomes and designs for student engagement. The teacher's role is not simply to tell, but rather to invite others to talk. The teacher becomes another learner in the classroom. She starts fires.

As a teacher creates a safe space where students are invited to dialogue and practice the truths they are exploring, an opportunity for transformation arises (Palmer, 1993). This application of learning through dialogue is a desperately needed practice in all our venues of teaching, from church ministry to higher education. Through dialogue, as opposed to monologue, the teacher and student enter into the possibility of disagreement, questioning, challenge, and correction. This dialogue (or *dia + logos*: "the word between us") turns the chairs of the classroom away from the lectern and toward one another. When one conceptualizes this *dia + logos* with a capital "w" ("the Word between us") one finds an invitation to construct a practical theology of the Holy Spirit that is defined and implemented. In this pedagogical shift, the professor, as lecturer alone, dies; yet the classroom is not a funeral parlor but transforms into a living room of celebrated learning. No longer does content matter more than the people in the room. The complexity of learners and their multiple intelligences and learning styles are identified and engaged. The teacher and student are together and a meaningful human relationship is fostered. The "death of the professor" does not end with a lifeless corpse in the classroom. Rather, the "death" that Freire suggests is one wherein the teacher and the student are led to a new relationship. Therein, a communal experience with our triune God is also made available if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Burden of proof

It is important to note that lecture can be an effective way to bring new content before a learner. At times it can even be the best way. In fact, this article represents a form of lecture and I believe learning can come from it. However, lecture is but one methodological approach and tends to accommodate a limited frame of learning styles, which is all the truer if new content is not engaged physically, emotionally, and mentally. For the use of lecture to be effective, one must consider how the

learners are actively connecting with the material. Even with the famous (yet fraudulent) statistic (Thalheimer, 2017), often attributed to Edgar Dale—that we remember twenty percent of what we hear, fifty percent of what we hear and see, and ninety percent of what we do—the inference resonates with what we know about how humans learn. I am not suggesting we remove lecture from our ministries. I am asking how our learning environments provide points of engagement and interaction within the lecture-style teaching so prevalent in our settings? The point: knowledge is more than content and information. For learning to matter, there must be real-life transfer and impact. Simply sitting and listening to a message does not lead to transformation. It can be a helpful point of contact with content but the whole person must be invested for deeper learning to take place (Knowles, 1984). Dialogue education is not anti-lecture but, rather, pro-learning.

How we understand what we know is also a crucial factor. Too often the design for learning defaults to lecture with the assumption that if the teacher speaks it, it is known. Freire (1990) questions this approach when he refers to turning students into “containers” or “receptacles to be filled by the teacher.” He continues,

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p. 58)

Freire reminds us how quickly an educator can create a space wherein creativity and curiosity are devalued all the while damaging the opportunity for exploration and inquiry.

Kurt Lewin (1951), a founder of social psychology, draws attention to the fact that sustained learning is more effective when it is an active process. Unfortunately, the traditional lecture format found in most educational settings (from churches to schools to businesses) tends to be informed by the passive tendencies within a monologue approach. The invitation in active learning is for the teacher to bring their expertise to bear on the lives of those in their midst and to design for interaction. For deep and impactful learning to take place, the environment must be one where the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of being human are engaged. Educators must pay attention to the learners in their midst and ask, “What will enhance the learning?” The answer should include the whole person as well as the multi-faceted variables involved in any system of learning. One must ask, do our learning environments foster relational points of deep connection?

Figure 1 is a representation of the core elements involved to ensure learning through connections. Herein, we can explore what is required for transformational learning encounters. It is through connections with self, connections with others, connections with content, and the connections we have with God that the best principles and practices of teaching and learning are meant to be engaged.

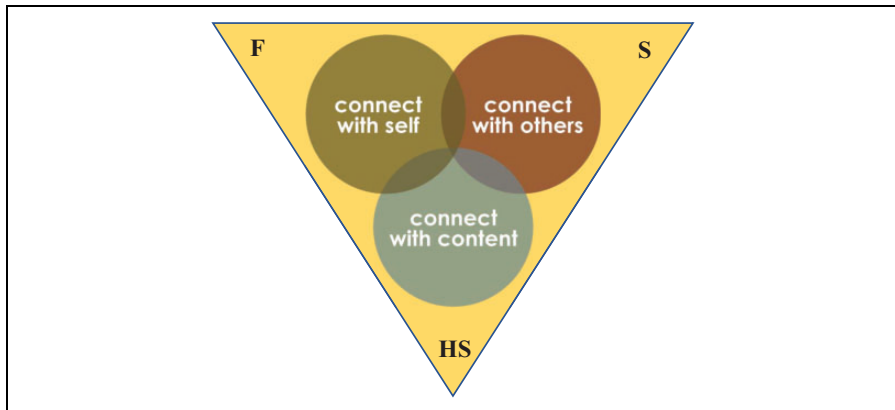


Figure 1. How to ensure learning through connections: The 4C model.

1. Connect with self. Learners need to connect new content to existing knowledge or experience. They need to compare it to what they already know and do, and decide how it lines up and if they like it. They need to weigh it against what they believe is right and true, and see how it feels. They need to imagine it in their lives and ask themselves: “Do I want to start using/doing this? Why?” To decide this, they need solo time for reflection, introspection, imagining, and questioning.

2. Connect with others. Learners need to share their stories, experiences, thoughts, and questions with other learners. They need to hear what others think and debate it. It is through this testing, trying, and challenging with others that learners can discover new meaning and understanding for themselves. It is by seeing ourselves in others or learning from them that clarity is sometimes found.

3. Connect with the content. Learners need time to examine the new content they are learning. They need to decide how they feel about it and how it compares to what they already know. They need both challenge and support to grow and develop in their knowledge and its application. They need to see how the new content fits in the bigger picture and with other content. If they are learning a skill, they need to try it out. Learning is in the doing and deciding, and this needs time in the learning design.

4. Connect with God. Learners need to experience Truth as they engage in the learning process. Herein their connection with self, connection with others, and connection with content leads to transformational encounters (i.e. *dia + logos*: the Word between us). And this is always situated in a specific *context*. This fourth point, as illustrated by the triangle on the diagram, has been added to the original three themes and corresponding circles created by Global Learning Partners (<http://www.globallearningpartners.com/>). This is to highlight the transcendent, Trinitarian reality that is always contextually present in transformational learning (whether that be explicit or implicit in expression).

Consider Henri Nouwen's chapter titled "On Teaching" in his book *Creative Ministry: Beyond the Transference of Knowledge*. He warns against the dangers of "teaching as a violent process" marked by competitive, unilateral, and alienating characteristics. He concludes by stating, "The core idea of this chapter has been that ultimately we can only come from a violent form of teaching to a redemptive form of teaching through a conversation that pervades our total personality and breaks the power of our resistance against learning" (Nouwen, 1971, p. 20). In essence, we need dialogue. And this dialogue is not merely conversation for conversation's sake. It is rigorous and thoughtful engagement built around structured tasks designed for learning. Content matters for sure, but the learner matters first; for our interaction with information is a relational endeavor. Herein our pedagogy is worked out through these above connections as they form within contextual realities of the learning environment. And at the center of it all, we are invited to come and gather around the fire of God's truth.

After death comes resurrection

The foundation that educators build is crucial, as it determines the support offered to their students; or, to use an axiom of Jane Vella's, "The design bears the burden." Ironically enough, when one designs for "the death of the professor" one offers life to the student. When one designs for the connections unpacked above, one offers life to the student. The teacher's knowledge and expertise, as important as it is, is not of utmost importance. The learners and the learning take precedence over the lecture. In fact, use of lecture, if it is to be used at all, is to propel learning. The teacher is identified not by the accumulation of knowledge but by the opportunity to invite others on an adventure of learning. The teacher is a wise guide and a trusted friend. Parker Palmer (2007, p. 10) provides a helpful orienting posture when he asserts that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique but comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. Again we find that teaching is more than information. The teacher finds an enlarged identity as she/he leaves the lectern and takes a seat in the circle of learners. In the end, the death of the professor leads to the resurrection of an educator. The fire is lit and people come and gather.

Dialogue heals

Dialogue Education™, Jane Vella's learning-centered system of teaching and learning, offers the principles and practices to employ as the teacher moves away from monologue and into dialogue (Vella, 2001, 2002, 2008). The lecturer takes a seat and listens, for dialogue requires attention. As the teacher becomes a learner among learners, safety and sound relationships guide the teacher-student interaction. This does not negate the needs for expertise in the teacher's field of instruction. Educators grow as students of their content areas, they also become students of their students, with the result that the power divide, which too often separates teachers from




students, diminishes. Respect is fostered within these relationships as well as a love of learning. Voices of critique and encouragement, meeting through challenge and support, are welcomed and issues of relevance are addressed with immediacy and engagement. Learners are invited to be decision-makers in their learning, and accountability is offered as learning happens through practice and reflection. Ideas, feelings, and actions all come together so that the whole person is taught. Learners flourish in such environments where these principles and practices are reinforced; teachers flourish as well. The learning is sequenced in a way where the above characteristics continually mark the experiences inside and outside the classroom. These qualities, once embodied, invite the learner into a transformed consciousness wherein peace is made manifest.

The brilliance of Vella's approach to teaching and learning is that it is a structured and yet open system (About Dialogue Education n.d.). The educator is called to design with great intentionality where definition leads to direction. Attention to sequence and reinforcement of learning is key. The steps of design within dialogue education focus on eight questions. My own brief summary is listed below, but it is crucial to note that the execution of what looks like a simplistic list of steps requires great diligence and intentionality to master.

1. Who: understanding the learners, of which the teacher is one
2. Why: the situation in light of the needs of the learners
3. So That: the desired indicators of change in the learners
4. When: time frame and its influence on depth of learning
5. Where: location and factors that will enhance or distract learning
6. What: content (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)
7. What For: achievement-based objectives addressing what the learners will do
8. How: the design and facilitation of learning tasks (Vella, 2008, pp. 41–46, 215)

One of Vella's greatest offerings to the field of education is in the linkage of content (step 6) and the construction of achievement-based objectives (step 7). This approach to design requires the educator to identify specific content (as nouns) and the corollary achievement-based objectives (as verbs in the future perfect tense, i.e. "At the end of our time, learners *will have*..."). This tense forces a strong achievement-based verb and allows for accountability in the learning as well as clear objectives that can be evaluated because they lend themselves to a specific achieved product or behavior. The opportunity for backward design is made available as the overarching purpose (step 2) of the learning is identified along with a clear articulation of the desired change (step 3) to be exhibited by the end of the learning. Due to the close attention given in the design work, opportunities for feedback and evaluation are in place from the beginning before the learning actually happens. Recalling the roll of connections previously addressed in this article, one again sees the importance of starting with the learner (step 1) as the content only matters if it is transferred into true learning.

Table 1. Kinds of learning tasks.

Anchor (or inductive tasks) Related to life and topic	Tells the learner not only what she has to learn but also what she perceives she already knows; honoring her experiences as true knowledge, and as the beginning of knowledge. Used to introduce new content.
	
Add (or input tasks) New content	Presents new content: substantive concepts, data, research, knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc. This is done through a lecture, PowerPoint presentation, story, reading, multiple media, etc.
	
Apply (or implement tasks) Do something with the new content	Invites learners to DO something with the new content in the learning environment—practice it. Rule of thumb: for every new piece of content (add) make sure you are immediately applying the learning.
	
Away (or integrate tasks) Move new learning into life	May be a projection task that invites learners to imagine integrating the new learning in their work or life. It may be a task that happens after the course, with some element of reporting or feedback. This is where potential transfer of the learning gets strengthened. Connects with the “desired change.”
	

The instructor designs with the learners in mind through this learning-centered approach. Students are given all the resources they need to respond within the learning environment (step 8). Table 1 offers a brief overview of the four kinds of learning tasks that are a part of this dialogue education learning-centered system (Vella, 2001).

To establish the resources in a learning task, the educator commits to the rigorous preparation of design and development of tasks that will enhance learning. This leads to a trust of the design with a focus on the learning. As Vella says often: “The means is dialogue, the end is learning, and the purpose is peace.” The

teacher is offered a vision and construct for transformational and healing encounters. With this focus on learning through dialogue, the teacher is released from an arrogant approach to the educational endeavor. Death humiliates. Peace is restored. The fire is ablaze.

When the educator puts to death the traditional model of lecture where content is king, a new order is established. For the Christian educator this invitation “to lead out” (i.e., to educate) is an opening of oneself to a new kind of rule. A rule established within epistemological humility wherein the Holy Spirit is the ultimate guide. The teacher is no longer alone. The Helper has arrived—and has arrived within a community of believers. The teacher, the students, and their Maker all meet together and the classroom becomes a sanctuary. Light enters the world and the darkness flees.

Dialogue education: Believe it, or not?

I invite you to engage with the content in this article and offer the following learning tasks to move from monologue into dialogue:

IDENTIFY a learning experience (in a traditional or non-traditional setting) where you learned through dialogue. **NAME** how this differs from an experience where you learned through lecture.

LIST two phrases from the article that strike you as valuable in your setting. Next to each selected phrase, **WRITE** down one practical way you will implement it with your learners.

CHOOSE one tip (from the list below) to apply in your context. **CREATE** a detailed design of how you will engage your learners through dialogue:

1. Facilitate 5 minutes of dialogue for every 12 minutes of lecture.
2. Discern what content is most valuable to the learners and guard yourself from simply trying to cover material: tell through dialogue.
3. Invite immediate engagement when new content is brought before the learner and ensure holistic learning and teaching by paying attention to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor needs.
4. Engage multiple intelligences and learning styles as you teach.
5. Guide learners from simple to complex content and interaction.
6. Ask open questions that lead to meaningful and relevant interaction.
7. Restructure the learning space set-up for easier engagement and dialogue.
8. Break into small groups or pairs to stimulate interaction with posed open questions.

READ one of the resources in the following Reference List or search the Global Learning Partner’s website for more on Dialogue Education™. **SHARE** your learning with me at daniel.haase@wheaton.edu

ORCID iD

Dan Haase  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7346-3231>

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