

To Provoke or to Encourage? - Combining Both within the Same Methodology

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Can one's teaching be student nurturing and at the same time thought-provoking? Can a student be simultaneously troubled by the concepts that demand critical reflection and yet feel encouraged and supported? This essay maintains that some of the methods utilized by critical theory combined with Buber's dialogical problem-posing approach result in a highly effective teaching methodology.

Critical Theory and Martin Buber

To answer these questions, it is important to juxtapose some of the concepts of critical theory with the ideas expressed by Martin Buber. According to Giroux (1998), the Frankfurt School's contributions to critical theory are especially relevant to the field of education as they provide an essential resource for developing a critical theory of social education. Specifically, Giroux contends that the Frankfurt School's Critical theory directs educators to analyze any social and political tensions and discords. As Giroux asserts, the Frankfurt School's notion of critique and the development of an active critical consciousness are the preconditions necessary for cultural and political mobilization. This focus on the human transformative value, he avers, is directly relevant and thus germane to the field of education. The School's contributions are imperative for the field of education because of "the emancipatory spirit that generated them" (55). Specifically, such concepts as the Frankfurt School's rejection of unquestionable objectivity, critique, and self reflection are essential to pedagogy in general and to critical pedagogy in particular. Critical Theory strongly insisted on the dialectical approach to any problem which allows for both "critique and theoretical reconstruction" (Giroux, 42). Extremely useful for education is Critical Theory's principle of negation and protest. This principle promotes a mode of critique that helps to uncover values that are often seen as invalid or are hidden from direct observation. This principle ensures "the willingness to analyze the reality of the social object against its possibilities" (Giroux, 42). Buber's dialogical problem-posing approach can be seen as an application of Critical Theory to critical pedagogy for

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college-level teaching. Buber, the philosopher of Judaism who worked with Erich Fromm to establish the Freies Judisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish School), devoted considerable attention to pedagogy in general and to the dialogical approach in particular. As Wiggershaus (1994) writes, the program for this school was created together by the teachers of that school and, most significantly, students themselves. This school's approach evokes the spirit of

critical pedagogy since it provided students with agency to influence their own learning. Buber was interested in the encounter through the conversation which he viewed as "the recuperation" of philosophy. As Alan Udoff explains: "The movement of this recuperation begins with philosophy's own beginning in the opening of thinking as 'the primary act of abstraction,' and ends with its closure at the point or moment at which thinking becomes a 'gateway' to that which is irrecoverable by thinking itself: the concrete situation" xvii). It is the dialogue that presents this "concrete situation." Buber's philosophy of dialogue maintains that humans get to know themselves through entering relationship with others; growth results not from one's relationship to oneself but through the "interhuman" relation with the other. Yet, this relationship with others starts with the knowledge of oneself,

In *I and Thou*, his major literary achievement, Buber established the nature of the dialogue that influenced the problem-posing approach subsequently used by such educators as Freire. For Buber, dialogue does not simply characterize a relationship but is "actually creating the participants of that relationship" (Leaman, 1997, 804). The dialogic approach advocates for the mode of learning in which each learner is provided with an opportunity to examine critically his or her understanding; through this dialogical process of discovering the "otherness", one's own positions are discovered. In *The Life of Dialogue*, Maurice Friedman states that for Buber, "the really responsible men are rather those who can withstand the thousandfold questioning glance of individual lives..." (Friedman, 1960, 43). According to Buber, the essence of the dialogical relation is that one "sees the position of

the other in his concrete actuality, yet does not lose sight of his own" (Leaman, 177). It is precisely through the relationship with others, one learns not only about others but also about oneself.

Like the Frankfurt School theorists, Buber was also quite cognizant of illusory objectivity. He maintained that subjectivity in some cases "imprisons the teacher within his own attachments or the absence of value standards" (Leaman, 181). The real choice, however, is not whether the teacher has any value standards or not but whether he imposes those on others as a form of illusionary objectivity. To him, the most important goal of education is to develop "a truly reciprocal conversation in which both sides are full partners" (182). Similarly to the Frankfurt School's theorists, Buber breaks with subject-object ontology and rejects reduction of meaning to a singular interpretation while endorsing dialogical thinking with its multiplicity of meanings that result from the "encounter with the other." Encounter for Buber is a relationship characterized by the undivided attention and full presence of all engaged in the interaction. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, interprets Buber's approach as ethical in its essence. To him, the I and Thou relationship represents at its core reciprocity and consequently, "responsibility of the one for the other" (Udoff, x). By stimulating critical thinking, however, there arises the possibility of uncovering some problematic areas and thus the commitment to sustaining the encounter becomes an ethical prerogative. Troubling a student's consciousnesses requires teacher's commitment for a prolonged relationship. To Buber, the real encounter with its creation of knowledge takes place in the dialogical exchange of *I - Thou*. The *I - Thou* interaction is when man invests his whole being and is characterized by "mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability" (Friedman, 1988, 2). This dialogical approach, however, does not diminish the meaning of silence. Buber opposes "filling in" the moments of silence with any superficiality but instead views it as a sign of respectful relationships.

Essential to Buber's dialogical relation is the idea of confirmation in which the teacher makes the other feel truly present. He distinguishes between the notion of acceptance or affirmation and confirmation. As Friedman explains, a confirmation allows for a person to be seen "neither as good nor as evil by nature" (Friedman, 1988, 19). Accepting any student "as one is" does not mean that this student should not be encouraged by the teacher to change in order to achieve his or her higher

potentiality. The integral part of confirmation is trust which is developed in the process of mutuality and open-mindedness of the dialogical approach. Through the process of confirmation one is assisted in further actualization of the self. Confirmation means discovering what a person "meant to become" which is clearly in line with critical pedagogy.

Similarly to the Frankfurt school's dialectical approach, the process of dialogical exchanges encourages one to engage in sustained critical thinking. In this active dialogical process one is simultaneously involved in self-growth which is inherent to the notions of critical pedagogy. Buber does not offer either "easy solutions," or "wrapped grace" but challenges one to think deeply and find his own answers. Relationality is central and Hodes (1972) in his encounter with Martin Buber, asserts that according to Buber one can only grow and develop once one has learned to live in relation to others. Hodes contends that in Buber's understanding, education means freedom, the liberation of one's personality through finding one's own meaning for complex ideas and matters. This corresponds to the Frankfurt School's stress on complexity and negation. In line with the Frankfurt school's skepticism of any absolutes, Buber holds that as people live, they change and their beliefs change. He welcomes changes and sees this as an advantage and thus advocates for heightened awareness of living. As Hodes (1972) recalls, Buber maintained that people should "stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience" (69).

Implications and Applications for Teaching

The amalgamation of the Critical Theory and Buber's dialogical approach could be instrumental for teaching any subject matter but might be especially conducive for teaching classes that are inherently controversial or challenge personal beliefs. For instance, teaching religious studies requires both critical probing and gentle encouragement of coming to realize the value of the differences. Rather than focusing only on similarities, this approach allows the teacher to encourage students to appreciate differences without feeling that their own religious views are somehow undermined. Engaging students in a dialogue by allowing them not only to express their own opinions but also challenging them to understand where their opinions come from and how these opinions might affect others, could be one of the applications of this approach. While students are to be supported, they should also be challenged to understand that looking at any subject matter from the position of absolute truth might prevent them from learning about others

as well as themselves and thus continuing their transformational growth. This approach requires teachers' commitment to the challenge of the heated discussions which not only provokes and stimulates students to question their own presuppositions but also seeks to build awareness of their own biases. This methodology, while encouraging the students to express their opinions by validating and nurturing their personal perceptions, seeks to give confidences to their critical reflections in a supportive atmosphere of a dialogical exchange.

Specifically, in religious diversity classes, the students are wrestling with the issue of personal beliefs when addressing different religions groups. In my own teaching, when discussing different religions groups and their beliefs, students often are faced with struggling between commitment to their own faith and the need to respectfully understand and appreciate other traditions. My goal as a teacher is not to undermine students' personal beliefs but to provide them with an opportunity to question any assumptions and to appreciate the diversity of opinions and positions. I structure my teaching as a dialogical exchange in a form of students' presentations and follow up discussions. For these presentations, the students are not only required to prepare the outline of the articles they are reading which address different religious traditions but provide their own questions to be discussed by all of us in class. Students are advised that our focus is on comparing religions in order to allow all of us to see human culture in its commonality and yet uniqueness and diversity without an attempt to disregard and write off the differences. In this class, the students are reading critically and analyzing academic texts from a variety of disciplines. My role as a teacher is not to impart my opinion but to provide the students with an opportunity to formulate their own after being exposed to a variety of articles and the follow-up class discussions. This course is not structured to provide an occasion for either students or instructor to advance (or attack) personal religious beliefs and commitments but to enhance our understanding of the uniqueness of various religious traditions and approaches. Doing this in a format of a dialogical exchange allows the students to learn not only from the written texts but also from each other. The students are encouraged to think critically and yet respectfully of each other and of various religious traditions in order to exchange their opinions in an open-minded and supportive environment.

To conclude, as shown in this essay, Buber's thinking greatly overlaps with the thinking of the Frankfurt School, and both are eminently salient

— and therefore practical — for the college level teaching. While the critical theory approach focuses on critical reflection and interrogation of some prevailing assumptions, Buber's approach encompasses respect, appreciation and nurturing without advocating resistance to change or discouragement of critical reflection. Hence, his approach combined with the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory not only fits well with the main premises of critical pedagogy but clearly enhances it. The dialogical interactions which contain notions of care and responsibility combined with the methods of critical theory provide even greater potential for students transformative development. Learning through critical thinking, while being encouraged and supported, allows for the development of a multiplicity of valuable skills. The dialogical approach itself can be easily adapted to many teaching methodologies either as a method standing on its own or as a method complementing other existing approaches.