Book Review

Megan Boler, ed. *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004.

> We are the only beings capable of being both the objects and the subjects of the relationships we weave with others and with the history that we make and that makes and re-makes us.
>
> —Paulo Freire

q1 If I were to choose two words that best expressed the methods, aims, and hope of education, they would be "democratic dialogue." So, when I started reading a book by thoughtful educators critiquing democratic dialogue, it felt like a polar bear plunge. This book challenges the values and practices that I have committed myself and my school to, asking, who benefits from dialogue across differences?

This collection of essays by educators from across Canada, the United States, and New Zealand reads like a conversation on the adage attributed to Mother Jones: "My business is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." By explaining and critiquing "affirmative-action pedagogy," a deliberate effort to turn down the volume on the culturally dominant voices in the classroom in order to amplify the voices of the "voiceless," these educators explore the possibilities and the dangers of democratic dialogue. The "comfortable" who may be afflicted in the course of this reading are progressive educators. However, there is plenty of crossover between "the afflicted" and "the comfortable," and teachers, it seems to me, have a foot in both worlds. I for one experience both affliction and comfort in the essays.

I want to start with a note on the audience for these essays. Teachers who are thinking about race, class, voice, and power in the classroom and in society should find these essays of value (and will also recognize a largely unspoken shared foundation in Freirian critical pedagogy); however, the authors definitely do not offer a "how to" of democratic dialogue. *Democratic Dialogue* elicits reflection and raises what I have come to believe are necessary questions. The essays are written by university professors, and they often make use of theoretical constructs and language that I believe

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unfortunately limit the range of readers willing to engage the important conversations they initiate. Educational discourse is still, despite some progress, disjointed because of the gap between theory and practice. This gap is as deep and as significant as the so-called achievement gap, and closely related: teachers are the bridge between the world of ideas and everyday life, the intellectual and social anchors of society—and educational theorists should make their work more accessible to them.

So, my emphasis in this review is not on evaluation or analysis of the essays but on presenting—to other teachers—my own little play list: the ideas I have gleaned from these essays that I see affecting my practice.

I focus here on four of the ten essays in the volume: Megan Boler's "All Speech Is Not Free: The Ethics of 'Affirmative Action Pedagogy,'" Alison Jones's "Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue," Jim Garrison's "Ameliorating Violence in Dialogues across Differences: The Role of *Eros* and *Lógos*," and Barbara Houston's "Democratic Dialogue: Who Takes Responsibility." I touch as well on Nicholas Burbules's introduction, which models the dialogic capacities the book suggests. Burbules writes with a collegial tone as he observes patterns emerging from the essays, highlights implied dialogues between essays, and responds to and questions the specific essays in the volume.

In his essay entitled "Ameliorating Violence in Dialogues across Differences: The Role of *Eros* and *Lógos*," Jim Garrison discusses human yearning for "the Other," who enlarges our being in the world. Garrison draws on Levinas's ethics of "the Other" to describe difference in the life work of coming into our selves. He emphasizes that the relationship of self and "Other" across difference is not a rational relationship. He invokes *eros* (in contrast to the cognitive world of *lógos*) to suggest a heuristic for this relationship that is based in spirit and in aesthetics. "The human eros . . . satisfies itself only when the 'Other' draws us beyond ourselves; for instance, when we listen carefully to what they are saying. Genuinely satisfying the human eros requires growing in such a way that we can never return to our former selves. That is because our transaction with those different from ourselves transforms our identity. Only the 'Other' has the vocabulary, meanings, plot lines, grammar, truths, possibilities, and the life, we need to retell the story of our life."

Indeed, Garrison accesses a wide range of language to describe internal growth and change through the lens of *eros* as distinct from *lógos*. Not wide enough, though, to put forth a more workable designation than "the Other,"

the meaning of which is clear in a philosophical discussion but unsatisfactory when applied to real people in real dialogue.

Garrison's philosophical discussion feels like a poetic interlude in this book of strenuous social analysis. In conversation with the other pieces it works, because they offer the examples of "democratic dialogue" and in-depth commentary on it that his piece does not. Still, I wondered, for Garrison, what does this look like? I know what *I* think it looks like.

The essays in *Democratic Dialogue* sent me back to my high school students' reflections on their interactions in our Community Connections program. Based in the independent and well-resourced Francis Parker School in Chicago, the program that I direct centers on growing cross-neighborhood, cross-class, cross-race, and cross-culture relationships. A reflection that a sophomore wrote a few months ago is tinged with the quality of *eros* that Garrison describes: "An interesting moment that happened during our group's composition process was when I noticed the incredible creative synchronicity and group chemistry formed after a couple minutes of work. . . . [Among the] things I learned about how society interacts is that bringing groups together, whether they are from different communities or not, make[s] collaboration a fusion process. Collaboration for a common cause is much easier than I had expected, if only people could change their focus and attention to things that matter around them, within their local area, and areas adjacent."

q5

Collaboration in creative arts work encourages students to get free of the constrictions of academic pressures and school and societal structures and enter into a way of being that is less cognitively controlled. In general, I find that students in segregated schools yearn for connection with those they are separated from. Regardless of their class or race, they experience isolation and disconnection that feels disempowering for them.

Our program is rooted in the belief that providing space for connections to grow between people from different neighborhoods, cultures, races, and backgrounds is key to democratic education. The de facto segregation of our neighborhoods and schools prevents democratic processes that, at every level, local to national, depend on a true diversity of voices, faces, and experiences. If people with social, political, and economic capital only visit other neighborhoods on service projects or to see how the other half lives, the divisions between neighborhoods widen—so the framework that our school has developed is justice-oriented, based in dialogue, reflection, and civic action emerging out of relationships with people from diverse neighborhoods.

In growing school-to-school partnerships, it was clear from the get-go that we couldn't just gather students from very different school environments and set them loose to get to know each other. We built in as much sustainability as possible, with regular meetings throughout the year. We are careful to set up dialogic structures that enable them to sit down together (always including social lubricants of "kid" food, icebreakers, and other shared activities) and tell each other stories about themselves and their lives. We also scaffold the relationships with the framework of shared projects, explicit attention to cross-cultural communication methods, and reflection.

q6

And, even with all these supports, we remain woefully far from holistic experiences of democratic dialogue, and our work necessarily includes attention to the internal and external obstacles to it. Another sophomore reflects on his group's relationship with their partner school:

> I found myself judging Parker students negatively, and I realize that I also have a responsibility to give the Little Village School students more of a voice in the discussion. And in all honesty, they usually didn't want it. The experience today definitely told me a lot about society and how it works, and many of the reasons why it doesn't work (and we have to understand the problems before we can understand the solutions). Some people, namely Parker students in this situation, are simply more outspoken than others, and because of this their voice and opinion is heard more clearly. Those that are less outspoken are often subdued or intimidated by the discussion, and they don't think it's worth expressing their opinion.

As several essays in this book note, silence and voice are socially and politically charged, and this student is clearly trying to make sense of this. While this student is coming to new awareness about himself and his community through his experience, his language still is based in unquestioned power differentials, for instance, when he unconsciously uses terms of ownership in speaking of "giving" others students voice.

Teacher leaders who facilitate these partnerships often feel unprepared to deal with the complexity of the cross-cultural interactions that, we see constantly, have the potential for transformation of individuals and school culture as well as for cementing of the social divisions we seek to break through. Confusion is both a desired and a dreaded state. As they carry out their commitment to stewarding democratic learning, the teachers from many Chicago schools working on cross-neighborhood connections have to accept levels of imperfection, messiness, and unpredictability that they would never tolerate in their usual classrooms.

This book dwells in that uncomfortable space. It adds some big ones to

my very long list of Hard Questions: How can teachers who are themselves bound up in hierarchical structures in school and in society facilitate truly new patterns of social engagement? What are the conditions needed for dialogue to be transformative rather than a continuation and affirmation of existing power structures?

Megan Boler gets the ball rolling with her essay on "affirmative action pedagogy." She dismisses the notion that democratic dialogue means the inclusion of all voices equally, since all voices are not equally empowered beyond the boundaries of the classroom (and, for that matter, by the power q7 dynamics—for some invisible—that still follow students into the classroom). Affirmative action pedagogy means that teachers privilege the voices of minority students over dominant culture voices. Boler recognizes significant liabilities to this approach, mainly various forms of resistance on the part of white students who can feel alienated by such a process and transfer that alienation to hostility toward the students who are being privileged in the classroom. For her, this resistance is a matter to foreground, engage, and respond to. She describes her observations of power dynamics in the classroom through specific examples and general observations, often with a troubling unconcern for the emotional challenges "affirmative action pedagogy" poses to a significant number of students. I will quote just one q8 representative paragraph here at some length:

> Don't white, middle-class male students have as much right to share their experiences in the classroom? I think there are justifiable cases where they do not. [Referring to a white male student who complains of minorities "whining" about their oppression:] the speaker's comment functions first to dismiss the other students' comments as "whining." Second, his interjection shifts the focus of attention back to himself and to his reluctance to recognize white male privilege as an institution and a pervasive reality, no matter how troubled his own individual experience. If indeed the conversation then is redirected to his experience, affirmative action pedagogy fails. The discussion instead becomes one in which the privileged and dominant voice of society is the focus and center of attention, a context that further allows him to take up time justifying his emotional resistance to recognizing historically and socially determined inequities.

Any teacher who has tried to guide dialogue around difference of power and privilege can vividly imagine the scene Boler paints—as well as the ripples of this kind of standoff that she doesn't explore. What is happening with the other students in the class? What is the teacher doing to mediate the difficult power dynamics swirling around the classroom? Boler focuses

on the relationship between teacher and student through a lens that is more ideological than personal, and the reader is left to wonder about the many reverberations of that relationship in the classroom.

Boler ends the essay by referring briefly to educators' feelings of vulnerability and need for support in navigating this difficult territory; she calls for more collaborative teaching models. I agree wholeheartedly with Boler here: the classroom manifests the complexities of power, voice, and race in the wider society, and teachers cannot be left to do triage on their own.

In his introduction to *Democratic Dialogue*, Nicholas Burbules inquires into Boler's affirmative action pedagogy: Is silencing privileged voices in order for marginalized voices to be heard "a necessary, but imperfect, preliminary, and temporary stage toward achieving more open and equitable classroom relations . . . or a desirable educational condition, since it allows dominant groups to experience the same sense of unfairness and frustration that other groups commonly feel in classrooms all the time?" What purpose is served by the disequilibrium at the base of affirmative action pedagogy?

q9

Other essays in the book question the aims of affirmative action pedagogy, as well as the goals of democratic dialogue in general. Alison Jones's essay was, for me, disturbing enough to provoke this book review—I wanted company in thinking it through. I now turn to this essay, "Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue."

Jones begins with the proposition that "talking together is a truly progressive educational exercise that offers to promote identification with others and to create a less divided and ultimately more just society." She follows in an ironic tone: "with a touching faith in the 'talking cure' of dialogue and self-disclosing narrative, emancipator educators argue that, via a multiplicity of voices/narratives, teachers and students can speak and work across difference towards an egalitarian, multicultural, and democratic social order in the classroom—and elsewhere." I am acutely conscious of sharing this "touching faith" in dialogue across difference as both an end in itself and a means of democratic education. But, Jones argues, "wider social inequalities" prevent the democratic possibilities and the practice of shared talk in the classroom.

q10

Silence, Jones observes, is a vexing concern for educators and students who understand democratic education in exclusively vocal terms. Noting ongoing unbalance in vocal participation in her mixed class of white (vocal) and Maori (silent) students, Jones experiments with separating the students along ethnic lines to see if the Maori students would feel more freedom

to participate when they were on their own. She observes, "For the nonwhite students . . . the separation from their white peers was experienced as empowering and positive. . . . This separation was not welcomed by the white students. The profound silence of the other, created by their absence, was met with anger." The white students' anger, Jones suggests, was based in the thwarting of their privilege:

> A sense of exclusion and outrage marks the refusal of the already privileged to accept that some knowledge and relationships might not be available to them/us. The Enlightenment project of mapping the world, rendering it visible and understood, does more than shape our education system: It is also at the root of the threat we feel when nonwhite peers separate from us or show little interest in teaching us. Our education system is based in the western desire for coherence, authorization, and control. This desire fuels the call for democratic dialogue, or hearing the voices of the marginalized. These are in effect calls for access to the other, and to the knowledge and experiences of the other.

So, the blind paternalism of colonialism, which I recognized in "noblesse oblige" attitudes around community service and sought to change through designing experiences of democratic dialogue, hasn't gone away. By placing democratic dialogue in the sphere of interest, ownership, and control of white students, Jones overturns the hopes of "progressive" educators like me who strive to create conditions for dialogue that build toward equity and justice. She derides the Desire for Dialogue as a romantic fantasy, yet another structure that people of privilege set up to try to assuage their consciences: "The desire for the embodied other in the shape of peers may also be a desire for redemption, or forgiveness, on behalf of the white students. The direct (or even silent) attention of nonwhite peers is somehow experienced by the white students as an act of grace ('I care about what you think. I do not really hate you, despite your dominant position') or of forgiveness ('Do not feel badly about my marginalized situation; I hear your anxieties, and your sincere attempts to understand, and I forgive you.')."

q11

Did I mention that this book afflicts the comfortable? I am uncomfortable with Jones's analysis, disturbed by her scorn for white people like me and a number of my students, and threatened by her declaration that democratic dialogue is an exercise in self-deception for people of privilege and an added burden on marginalized people. It gets still more painful: "Dialogue and recognition of difference turn out to be access for dominant groups to the thoughts, culture, lives of others. While marginalized groups may be in-

vited—with the help of the teacher—to make their own social conditions visible to themselves, the crucial aspect of the dialogic process is making themselves visible to the powerful." q12

Not only is the "talking cure" blindly self-serving, it also has the sinister potential of augmenting the oppression levied by the powerful, who now have the benefit of "the inside story" in laying the snares of exploitation. Is there any hope for dialogue then, in Jones's view? She concludes: "With more critical understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in apparently benign and progressives desires for dialogue in education, we might reduce our romantic expectations of dialogue, and set about working alongside and with each other in different ways. Dialogue, if it occurs, will most likely be a serendipitous by-product of that more oblique engagement." q13

Cold comfort, I'd say: Jones mobilizes doubt, distress, and self-examination and doesn't care to soften her blows with any kind of restorative gesture. Dialogue can perhaps emerge from "working alongside and with each other in different ways," but what the "different ways" are that might bring about this state of grace remain unnamed. "Talking Cure" forced me to scrutinize and complicate the terms, assumptions, and aims of the Community Connections program; this is a difficult learning process, but I appreciate the challenge. It is a challenge that continues: I am still too affected to respond without edginess that distorts the value I see in Jones's interrogation of democratic dialogue.

Barbara Houston's essay, "Democratic Dialogue: Who Takes Responsibility," takes up another angle in the critique of democratic dialogue. I found myself in more comfortable territory here. She begins, "I support attempting democratic dialogue about matters of social injustice in education, making sure that the challenge of it and the obstacles to it become part of the discussion." Whew. Where Jones mistrusts the possibility of democratic dialogue, Houston expresses support for teachers attempting to do this work despite the fact that, "given the momentous institutional pressures against it, the political and educational skill required, as well as the emotional difficulty associated with it, there may be few educators with the capacity to effectively cultivate democratic dialogue." She offers a few conceptual frameworks to shore up the work of these teachers. q14

Houston takes seriously the anxieties dominant group students can have around privilege and social justice. She is concerned that people of privilege who notice and care about injustice can feel trapped and isolated in their roles and stiffen into stances of resistance or slump into the paralysis of

"white guilt." This confused disempowerment and its unproductive repercussions obstruct democratic practice and prospects.

She articulates important subterranean currents of power, including the unquestioned expectation on the part of many privileged people that our work will be effective and will matter. This can lead to frustration and disengagement that ultimately enables an unjust status quo to continue. q15

> As members of a privileged majority we are used to being able to take effective action, either on our own or with members of our own groups. However, with instances of large-scale social problems, if we want to move beyond a sense of paralysis or resistance, to move outside the dynamics of guilt and blame, we need our counterparts to also take responsibility. Because when we look beyond the power dynamics, when we look at the possibility of creating a different future, we require a different kind of relationship with those others who invoke such uncomfortable feelings in us now.

Taking responsibility means focusing on the growth of consciousness and clarity within oneself and in one's relationships with others and the larger contexts of those relationships: q16

> When I suggest that in democratic dialogue we might construe taking responsibility for social problems as a matter of taking responsibility for oneself, I want to find a way to focus on what it means to begin right here where we are, in the present, in the midst of all our current resistances, conflicts, confusions, and tensions. . . . Taking responsibility for oneself, in this sense, involves acknowledging our situatedness and location, material, historic, and bodily specificity, the interconnections between our own well-being and the existence of others. Taking responsibility for ourselves recognizes that our existence cannot be severed from, or remain fungible with, the lives of others past and future. It is a matter primarily of recognizing and dealing with my own resistances, the internal conflicts, and tensions, which if acknowledged can operate as obstacles to my being responsive to others.

Democratic dialogue, Houston asserts, is possible—if it is based in vigorous self-awareness and ongoing growth in understanding how interdependence of self and others shapes us, and shapes our world, in the now. Like the other authors in this volume, Houston eschews resolution of the questions spurred by the enterprise of democratic dialogue. She does, however, advocate a balance, between awareness of "the legacy of harm" of a racist system that we have been born into and commitment to changing this legacy in the future. She explains, "The legacy of harm entails alienation

from our understanding of ourselves as moral beings, and from each other. Taking responsibility for oneself can help us to overcome the sense of alienation from ourselves. The best possibility, the one I hope for, is that it might also free us to reach for a different relationship with the other."

"Democratic Dialogue: Who Takes Responsibility" is squarely oriented toward hope: the purpose of analyzing oppressive systems within oneself and in one's history is not to distance and disempower but to bridge and build capacity for social justice work. It is relationships across differences that provide the space for this growth.

I will end this review by returning to Garrison's essay on *eros* and *lógos*. As I wended my way through the fall and another school year in the company of this book, the cautions and analyses of the authors have impacted the way I think about discussion, set up and read students' work, and invite students into social justice projects. What have been most present for me on a daily basis, though, are Garrison's words about where *in the person* democratic dialogue happens—and can't happen. As I mentioned earlier, it can't go very far *in the head*—he and other writers in this book (especially Huey Li, whose essay, "Rethinking Silencing Silences," I regretfully have to pass over here) illuminate the dangers of "logocentrism," which can privilege more verbal cultures and the more verbal sides of the individual, "silencing the silent." Invoking *eros* allows us to consider *the body* in relationship, the experiential, artful, intuitive body—and heart. Garrison writes that "the success of dialogues across differences depends less on ideas and more on attitudes of desire, imagination, possibilities, perceptions, risk, and vulnerability." The best way I can think of to cultivate these attitudes in students is through social arts—theater, dance, and visual arts that engage the risks needed to make openings in the blocks held by rigid and slow mental processes. (Thus, the social arts are a central focus of our program's cross-neighborhood connections.)

q17

At a personal level, Garrison's discussion of *eros* in self-other relationships affected me most in his focus on the relationship of student and teacher in understanding democratic dialogue. Without thinking about it, I approached democratic dialogue with the assumption that my role is that of an invisible facilitator of students' relationships with one another and of students' reflections on themselves. I hadn't thought about how I situated *myself* in relation to my goals for the students. So I was taken aback when Garrison urged the teacher to step into a unique mode of affirmative action pedagogy: he was asking me to risk without expecting the same of my students!

q18

> To pursue the human eros, however, involves risk and vulnerability; therefore, it is dangerous especially to those whose eros is constrained and oppressed. . . . Often, instead of attempting to construct safe spaces in their classroom, it would be better if teachers sought to grow in relationship with their students by rendering themselves vulnerable and at risk without necessarily requiring their students do the same. . . . Teachers who teach this way will experience more difficulty as their personal identity evolves (and even fragments), but they are also the ones most likely to ameliorate the dangers of democratic dialogue across difference and collaboratively create the safest, though not sterile, educational communities.

I have been experimenting with the risk taking that Garrison urges in both my teacher education classes and my high school classes, and I have discovered moments of blossoming within myself as well as in the authenticity of the work I see students doing. I have long mused over the possibilities of the student-teacher relationship as an interesting path for exploring the self-other relationship. The teacher is in a unique position to hold, appreciate, and challenge the unfolding of the student's self; teachers are also energized and nurtured by the unique ways students can stimulate, celebrate, and challenge new growth within us. When teachers engage in learning about these capacities for relationship, with their students and with one another, they breathe life and strength into democratic dialogue.

I will end with the comfort Garrison offered, balm for the affliction of the vexing questions about democratic education this book has scored into me: "We should not renounce life because it is sometimes violent, nor should we renounce discourse because it is troubling or despair at silence, though it is often disturbing. Where there is the greatest danger in life, there is also the greatest possibility for creative growth."

q19

By Shanti Elliott
Francis W. Parker School

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