

Conversation in Education

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Summary

Conversation is a topic of burgeoning interest in the context of educational theory and as a prospective means for conducting empirical research. As a non-formal educational experience, as well as within the classroom, or as a means to researching various aspects of educational practice and institutions, research on or through conversation in education draws on a range of theoretical resources, often understanding conversation as analogous to dialogue or dialectic. Although only brought in to this research context in the early 21st Century, the philosopher who has engaged most extensively with conversation is Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003). His text, *The Infinite Conversation*, originally published in French as *L'Entretien infini* in 1969, responded to and took forward many elements of what would go on to be described as post-structuralist or deconstructive thought. Blanchot's notion of conversation (in French, 'entretien') is distinct from those reliant upon philosophical conceptions of dialogue or dialectic. Itself the subject of philosophical research, Blanchotian conversation has been interpreted variously as either not sufficiently taking in to account the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, or else expanding beyond its more limited scope. Some of these interpretations stress the ethical and political implications of conversation, however, none engage specifically with its educational implications.

Blanchotian conversation allows for contradicting and contrasting thoughts to be voiced without being brought to shared consensus or internal resolution. Its 'lesson' is not only in the thought that it produces but also in the ethical relation of sincerity, openness, and non-imposition that it develops. Unlike some recent applications of conversation to educational context, Blanchotian conversation does not re-entrench the subject to be educated but rather deprioritises the subject in favour of the movement of thought and the ethical 'between' of conversation itself. This notion of conversation has corollaries in political thought, notably with Jacques Rancière's understanding of 'dissensus' and Karl Hess's thought of an 'anarchism without hyphens', as well as the politically informed educational ideas of Elizabeth Ellsworth and the educational practice and research of Camilla Stanger.

Keywords

Maurice Blanchot; ethics; politics; anarchism; critical pedagogy; dialogue; dialectic; Jacques Rancière; Elizabeth Ellsworth; Karl Hess; Camilla Stanger

Introduction

Conversation is a relation where language itself takes priority, rather than the perspectives, positions, or arguments of particular individuals (Bojesen, 2019). It is, in following the thought of French philosopher, Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), a relation wherein thinking about what is said becomes more important than saying what we think. In conversation (which, in Blanchot's French, is the more serious 'entretien', as opposed to the more casual 'conversation'), representation, including self-representation, loses its force. This deprioritisation of the individual's ownership and development of their thought expressed in words also reduces the educational authority and power attributed to dialogue and dialectic, which can be, in effect, alternating monologues. That said, dialogue and dialectic cannot escape the conditions of conversation, which is to say, speech effects difference to the extent that it turns from the person who speaks. The speech which follows an interruption or interval is then always preceded by the possibility of igniting conversation. Conversation, though, unlike dialogue and dialectic, does not imply that contradicting and contrasting thoughts should be brought to shared consensus or internal resolution. The educational dimension of conversation is not beholden to conceptual synthesis or argumentative progression. Conversation researches – but it does so in such a way that is directed towards the unknown rather than the confirmation of the known. Conversation develops – but in doing so, it does not leave its initial propositions intact, distinguishing it from classical philosophical conceptions of dialectic and dialogue.

Applications of Paulo Freire's (Shor & Freire 1987) and (to a lesser extent) Mikhail Bakhtin's (1987) distinct but in many ways complementary work have dominated theoretical discussion on dialogue in education. Their notions of dialogue have, in some interpretations, more in common with Blanchot's conversation than they do with classical philosophical conceptions of dialogue, both de-emphasising authoritative voices (primarily of the teacher) and drawing on the liberatory possibilities of ethical transformation in social and educational relation (Roberts 1994, Hamston 2006). Prominent feminist engagements with dialogue in education are similarly close to Blanchot's notion of conversation, as opposed to any classical philosophical conception of dialogue (Lugones & Spelman 1983; Lather 1991). While this

article follows a line through from Blanchot, the fact that educational (rather than philosophical) uses of ‘dialogue’ tend to have much in common with Blanchot’s philosophically and politically loaded notion of ‘conversation’ raises issues relevant to future research and theoretical development in both education and philosophy.

This article is divided into three sections, which build on and inform one another. The first section, *The Meaning of Conversation*, introduces Blanchot’s notion of conversation, emphasising its distinctiveness, and especially how it differs from dialogue. Drawing on readings of Blanchot, as well as recent educational research which shares some of its characteristics, a relational mode of educational engagement is sketched out, where individual development is de-prioritised in favour of a mode of relation which is primarily concerned with the movement of language. The second section, *The Politics of Conversation*, contextualises conversation more explicitly in terms of its political implications and dispositions, demonstrating its compatibility with radical educational and political thought and practice concerned with a responsible reconfiguration of authority. Conversation is shown here also to be a relational metaphor for an ethics of non-domination. The final section, *Conversation as Liberatory Praxis*, focuses the political dimensions drawn on in the previous section towards innovative school-based practices, which also expand the theoretical reach of conversation, illustrating its potential for non-linguistic means of relational communication and expression. In the conclusion, some recent examples of how Blanchotian approaches to conversational educational relations have been explored and implemented are noted, and provisional suggestions for future research and practical applications are outlined.

The Meaning of Conversation

The most direct engagement with the concept and experience of conversation in the thought of Maurice Blanchot is provided by Ann Smock (1996), in a short chapter titled ‘Conversation’. Writing very much in the literary-philosophical style inherited from Blanchot, Smock suggests that conversation isn’t defined by a ‘back and forth, to-and-fro’ nor a ‘function of their being two distinct persons taking turns talking, but rather a function of their being neither one nor two.’ (p. 126). Instead it is ‘something like the pulse of their relation: together-apart; separate-joined; divided-united [...] the throb of that ambiguity (discontinuous – uninterrupted; without cease-without start; surging up-subsiding).’ (p. 126). An interval maintained which ‘must be felt as a beat.’ (p. 126). Similarly, Blanchotian conversation, for Gerald Bruns (1997), is ‘not reducible to an exchange of speech’ but rather the ‘movement of

speech that is neither mine nor yours [...] outside the give-and-take of dialogue [...] that interrupts my relation with the other (is it you?) who addresses me.’ (p. 141). He specifies that the *infinite* conversation (the title of Blanchot’s most substantial engagement with conversation) would be ‘dialogue without dialectic’, without and as a ‘refusal of negation’, wherein ‘the one is always turning into the other without progress or regression, or where repetition occurs without sameness or identity.’ (pp. 151-152).

More critically, Jill Robbins (2004) suggests that Blanchot removes his notion of conversation too far from the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, arguing that ‘the formal polyphony of plural voices, something that was crucial in Levinas’s account drops out: the *concrete* welcome of the other’s face. The mobility of face, as an expression and approach, seems frozen. The opaqueness of the encounter is emphasized at the expense of the way in which it obligates.’ (p. 78) For Robbins, it ‘may be nontotalizing, but it is still not yet ethical in Levinasian terms.’ (p. 79). This would seem to be contradicted by Blanchot’s (1993) statement in the preface to *The Infinite Conversation*, that ‘*As always, one of the two awaits from the other a confirmation that, in truth, does not come, not because accord would be lacking, but because it was given in advance: this is the condition of their conversation.*’ (p. xiii, original emphasis).¹ Which would suggest, not that conversation is the condition of obligation, but rather that obligation, as accord, is the condition of conversation.

In a book which implicitly avoids (without denying the importance of) a didactic and teacherly style, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot’s Exilic Writing*, Christopher Fynsk (2013) carefully evades affirmative statements about the concept and experience of conversation presented in *The Infinite Conversation*, and lets Blanchot’s texts speak for themselves, accompanied by the questions they provoke. However, Fynsk’s conclusion, informed by the questions posed to/by a large number of Blanchot’s texts (especially *The Step Not Beyond*), explicitly shifts to a didactic style, briefly contextualised in the first few pages of the book (pp. 1-2) and then again in the final chapter, where he states that, ‘Blanchot would have us recognize (and here again we see the need for the didactic function) that the abject, fearful, anguished other is in fact already in us. Thus we start from a political imperative that Blanchot might have found in Leviticus: allow strangeness to be native to you’ (p. 234). This imperative might then be seen as conditioning the possibility and experience of conversation. That is to say, conversation occurs when strangeness becomes native to you. Fynsk also asks – it would seem, rhetorically – if the ‘teaching relation’ must ‘as regards both ethics and politics themselves, not take form in, and end in, an act of hospitality?’ (p. 231). He then slips into rare didactic style, arguing that ‘Blanchot recognized fully the pressures that force the writer into the didactic

position. These have their origin in nothing other than the necessity of representation in the established (or to be established) public space – the requirement of naming political injustice and identifying the conditions for its overcoming. Thus the need for rigorous, insistent exposition, and often struggle.’ (pp. 231-232). As such, while Robbins is not wrong in stating that Blanchot is not ethical in exactly Levinasian terms, he nonetheless exhibits an ethics which is – if Fynsk is correct - in fact, broader than Levinas’s.

In Blanchot’s (1992) terms, from *The Step Not Beyond*, the relation of proximity, rather than of presence, means that ‘he [the other] is so near that he is there outside among the signs borne by the distant.’ (p. 72). And further that, ‘He who speaks does not, through speech, have a relation to being nor in consequence to the present of being: thus he did not speak.’ (p. 89). This helps to show that, for Blanchot, language and signs both make possible and also separate our relation to one another. As an example of how the Levinas’s and Blanchot’s ethical formulations might vary, we could imagine two teachers in conversation, who are obligated to one another. This would be ethics in Levinasian terms relating to the other person. Instead, we might imagine two teachers in conversation, whose shared obligation might be (amongst many other things, including one another) to children whose faces they do not yet know and questions around the educational expertise most appropriately enriched and mobilised to be able to support them. This would be ethics in the Blanchotian sense, relating, from the ‘between’ of conversation (rather than from the individual person), to the ‘other’, not simply as person, but as ‘outside’. Conversation might be interrupted by, or lead to, communication in a didactic form, but such a form effaces the identity of the teacher in the name of what is taught. Nevertheless, if we reduce the teacher to their didactic, rhetorical, and performative functions and preclude the other aspects of the conversational dimension of their experience, we produce a socially constrained army of empty signifiers.

The ethical and politically engaged reading of Blanchot that Fynsk produces, moves the discussion of Blanchotian conversation beyond a fixation on its interruptive and ambiguous characteristics, exhibited by Smock, Bruns, and Robbins. It is not that these ‘unworking’ dimensions of conversation can be overcome but rather that they are also accompanied by its ‘work’. This is rarely better expressed by Blanchot (1988) than in the conclusion to his text, *The Unavowable Community*, where he writes that:

Wittgenstein’s all too famous and all too often repeated precept, “Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent” – given that by enunciating it he has not been able to impose silence on himself – does indicate that in the final analysis one has to talk in

order to remain silent. But with what kinds of words? That is one of the questions this little book entrusts to others, not that they may answer it, rather that they may choose to carry it with them, and, perhaps, extend it. Thus one will discover that it also carries an exacting political meaning and that it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, *oeuvre*, and what we call unworking, *désouevrement*. (p. 56).

Conversation, as the means of relational and responsible speech is, then, one of the ways in which unknown spaces of freedom can be opened: spaces conditioned by the infinite promise of both the work and unworking of speech.

This notion of conversation is open to the political, being the communicative definition most able to accommodate something like Jacques Rancière's (2010) notion of 'dissensus', as the 'essence of politics', which 'is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself.' (p. 38). Demonstration, through language or other forms of signification, does not guarantee that the desired effect of this manifestation can or will be established. Dissensus, or at least its demonstration, might itself be conditioned by the unproductive, non-linear, non-developmental dimensions of conversation. However, conversation's non-dialogical and non-dialectical dimensions are also that which offer the possibility of non-unifying forms of communication, meaning that a dissensual demonstration might elicit ethical responses which are not the result of agreement but of some kind of incomplete and impersonal, although not necessarily ineffective, understanding or comprehension.

Danny Wildemeersch (2017) draws Rancièrian dissensus and a more casual, less theoretical, conception of conversation into relation in the context of citizen education. He is explicitly concerned with 'how "dissensus", rather than "consensus", and "interruption", rather than "dialogue", can be fruitful for conceiving of citizenship education for newcomers as a democratic practice, whereby participants and facilitators open spaces of conversation about the world they come from, and the world they want to live in' (p. 114). For him, this produces 'a multi-directional experience creating opportunities for both participants and facilitators to articulate their own, unique voices' (p. 124). While such an entrenchment in subject position – even in the context of an openness towards one another – might be necessary to conversations in the political context of citizen education, it also shows how surreptitiously conversation transforms into, or is interpreted through the lens of dialogue, even if that dialogue is explicitly

non-teleological (p. 121). Through the lens of Blanchotian conversation, on the other hand, the self-representation of one's assumed uniqueness is always already set at a distance and complicated through speech. Rancière (2010), too, it would seem, approaches dissensual demonstration through a lens more akin to that of Blanchotian conversation. 'The aesthetics of politics', as he describes it, 'consists above all in the framing of a *we*, a subject a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts, an element that I call the part of those who have no part – not the wretched, but the anonymous.' (pp. 141-142). Without giving 'collective voice to the anonymous [...] it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of shared impersonal experience.' (p. 142). It is through this impersonality described by Rancière (see also 2010, pp. 19; 179; 182) rather than the articulation of unique voices facilitated by Wildemeersch, that the political, and perhaps therefore also educational, distinctiveness of conversation, as opposed to dialogue or dialectic, becomes most apparent.

More clearly demonstrative of the dialectical interpretation of conversation is recent educational research which utilises what are called 'conversations' to be able to experience 'the value of identity formation as an emerging leader of learning and teaching' and to be able to engage 'in networks that bring legitimacy to their leadership actions within the university community.' (Readman & Rowe, 2016, p. 1022). Equally 'reflective career conversations' are implemented 'to allow students to become aware and self-directive, to gain more control over his or her own learning' as well as helping 'the student to gain insight into his or her motives by giving meaning to recent experiences.' (den Boer & Hoeve, 2017, p. 182). While engagements with conversation in the context of educational philosophy and theory have looked especially at the 'pedagogy of conversation' in the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne (Williams & Williams, 2017) and, in an edited volume, the legacy of Michael Oakeshott's concept of the 'the conversation of mankind' (Bakhurst & Fairfield, 2016). What is common to both of these conceptions, and the development and interpretations of them provided in these texts, is the understanding of conversation as dialogue or dialectic, which is 'open to the challenge of better argument' (Williams & Williams, 2017, p 262) or, in more or less different ways, as a metaphor for liberal learning as personal development (Bakhurst & Fairfield, 2016).

The exceptions in the latter text are a chapter by Emma Williams (2016), which, primarily through a reading of Jacques Derrida, which is not at all incompatible with Blanchot's approach (Bojesen 2019), but is however less concerned with conversation or dialogue than with thought; and a chapter by Paul Standish which, through an engagement with Stanley Cavell, contrasts conversation with dialogue, 'which can (though it need not) leave the

subjectivities involved too secure in themselves, related too contingently to the thoughts that they exchange, and insufficiently exposed to the fate of the words to which, in speaking, they commit themselves.’ (Standish, 2016, p. 122). In Standish’s reading of Cavell, conversation suggests ‘a turning of thought such that it cannot proceed solely, and in many respects does not proceed best, when it travels along straight, systematic lines: openness to conversation, a readiness to be turned (to be shaped, fashioned, sometimes diverted, sometimes rebuffed), requires that I do not seek to shore up my own identity but rather am ready for new possibility – that is, ready to become.’ (p. 123). This final elaboration is that which, in the context of contemporary educational philosophy and theory, comes closest to the concept of ‘conversation’ that this paper seeks to introduce through a reading of Blanchot. Given their proximity, it is useful to distinguish more carefully between Standish’s approach and my own. While Standish is concerned with subjectivities being too secure in themselves and shoring up their identity, he nonetheless seems primarily concerned with what an individual person can *take* from a conversation; ‘as the field within which I might discover what my projects might be.’ (p. 122). In contrast to this engagement with conversation, principally in the name of becoming or self-discovery, Blanchot foregrounds the speech of the other and the othering of speech. This is to say, Blanchot is less concerned with the individual development a conversation might facilitate than with the research made possible in the irreducible distance between interlocutors that language traverses, or, possibly, converses.

The Politics of Conversation

An important reference point for locating the politics of conversation in the academic context of educational theory is Elizabeth Ellsworth’s important and perhaps somewhat infamous essay, ‘Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?’. This ‘infamy’ is primarily due to the negative response it elicited from the critical pedagogues Ellsworth so critiqued, especially Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (see Lather 1991, pp. 43-49). In this text, Ellsworth describes how she is ‘trying to unsettle received definitions of pedagogy by multiplying the ways in which I am able to act on and in the university both as the Inappropriate/d Other and as the privileged speaking/making subject trying to unlearn that privilege.’ (p. 323). Similarly, conversation is not possible where privilege is not recognised and attempted to be unlearned. Of course, aiming to unlearn privilege does not mean that it can be eradicated or overcome either in or through conversation. While conversation cannot erase privilege, it can delegitimize its authority.

Ellsworth positions herself as distinct from the critical pedagogue (and implicitly also the conservative educator) who might behave as if they are the classroom's 'origin of what can be known and origin of what should be done.' (p. 323). In opposition to this, she writes that:

Right now, the classroom practice that seems most capable of accomplishing this is one that facilitates a kind of communication across differences that is best represented by this statement: "If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and 'the Right thing to do' will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive. (p. 324)

The Blanchotian qualities of conversation resonate with this relational unlearning of asserted authority and rectitude, as well as the more positively effective political results of this form of educational experience. While Ellsworth is specifically concerned with the classroom, I would suggest that the practices she outlines are no less applicable to broader contexts that could be called educational (e.g.: a 'serious' conversation between friends). What Ellsworth calls 'communication across differences' would be no less educational in all of the contexts where conversation might be possible.

An advocacy of conversation is not a rejection of the necessity of political action and of other forms of communication. It is rather precisely because the state of non-domination, at least aspired to in Blanchotian conversation might be considered desirable that action in its name, against oppression that blocks its possibility, is necessary. In this way, conversation is also a relational metaphor for an ethics of non-domination, which, of course, would not imply that those attempting to live by such an ethics would, without resistance, allow themselves to be dominated by those who were not. Importantly, a defence of conversation is not the same as a defence of 'free speech'. Speech in the name of oppression, supremacy, or any other imposition of a hierarchy of power relations has no place in Blanchotian conversation and its concomitant ethics. Such an assertion has implications for education. Most relationships explicitly 'nurtured' in formal educational settings, and not only those between teachers and students, aren't primarily conversational. This will often be for reasons considered relatively benign, in the name of what passes for education.

Given the constraints and demands of dominant political-economic systems, it is little surprise that 'excellent' conformity is often prioritised over resistant ethics. The harsh irony of

this bind being that those least likely to have the power, privilege, or wealth to resist or benefit from systematic oppression are those that educators are often most concerned to assist in conforming. To put it another way, those most likely to be oppressed by the state-capital nexus are, often with the best intentions, those most explicitly targeted to submit unreservedly to its educational logic. Practically speaking, to ‘fail’ at education enhances the precarity of individuals already at the mercy of the system. As such, educators are hardly in need of a justification for submitting themselves and their students to an educational logic they – often – see as somewhat absurd.

One of the reasons for describing and advocating for conversation in the context of education is that the modes of communication, evaluation, and development that are prioritised in contemporary education are not only excessively standardized, abstract, and divisive, they can also condescend towards both teachers and students, especially those whose knowledge, skills, and wisdom do not readily conform to those that are externally valued. Fifty-five years ago, in his book *Compulsory Miseducation*, Paul Goodman (1971) wrote that:

My purpose is to get people at least to look for an organization of education less wasteful of human resources and social wealth than what we have. In reconstructing the present system, the right principles seem to me to be the following: To make it easier for youngsters to gravitate to what suits them, and to provide many points of quitting and return. To cut down the loss of teacher hours in talking to the deaf. To engage more directly in the work of society, and to have useful products to show instead of examination papers. To begin to decide what should be automated and what must not be automated, and to educate for a decent society in the foreseeable future. (p. 127)

From the perspective of an ethics of non-domination, where conversation is possible, these are still pressing demands. Perhaps even more pressing, given increasingly taxing and all-pervasive systems of accountability. In a more recent book, *Radical Education and the Common School*, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2011) write that, ‘As the doomsday clock ticks, educational systems seem stuck in a time warp, suffering both historical amnesia and future myopia, displaying an unwillingness or inability to engage with either new thinking or the state we are in – and worse, the state we are heading towards.’ (p. 33).

While Moss, Fielding, and Goodman all go on to make explicit proposals for better educational systems, conversation in the context of education thought and experience does not produce a specific alternative vision. In fact, conversation would go in the opposite direction,

where the speech it gives the space to is necessarily productive of a multiplicity of thoughts without ever allowing one to become an ‘imperious monologue’ within the context of the conversation. In this way, the space of conversation has something in common with what Karl Hess described as ‘anarchism without hyphens’ (1980, p. 120). In Hess’s formulation, anarchism, and implicitly, an anarchism without hyphens, does not impose; it only states. It ‘does not tell you a thing about how free people will behave or what arrangements they will make. It simply says the people have the capacity to make the arrangements. Anarchism is not normative. It does not say how to be free. It says only that freedom, liberty, can exist.’ (p. 120). Anarchism, then, is not an ideological movement but rather an ‘ideological statement’ that

says that all people have a capacity for liberty. It says that all anarchists want liberty. And then it is silent. After the pause of that silence, anarchists then mount the stages of their own communities and history and proclaim their, not anarchism’s, ideologies – they say how they, how they as anarchists, will make arrangements, describe events, celebrate life, work. (p. 120)

In a sense, the silence between the ideological statement of anarchism and then any ideological movement that follows it makes space for, or perhaps even is, the space of conversation and conversational research where non-coercive speech can be free so long as it does not assert tenets that necessitate conformity or imply oppression as a means or end. This distinction between conversation and more imperious forms of communication, is that it neither demands nor expects conformity. In fact, like the basic premise of anarchism, it relies on difference. For Hess:

A person who describes a world in which everyone must or should behave in a single way, marching to a single drummer is simply not an anarchist. A person who says they prefer this way, even wishing that all would prefer that way, but who then says that all must decide, may certainly be an anarchist. Probably is. (p. 120)

This is not to say all conversational learners, researchers and educators must be anarchists, or the reverse, but rather that anarchism (or at least an anarchism without hyphens) shares with Blanchotian conversation a form of freedom that is also a kind of allergy to enforcement, oppression, domination, or coercion. As with the literal and metaphorical space of conversation, ‘Liberty finally is’, for Hess, ‘not a box into which people are to be forced.

Liberty is a space in which people may live. It does not tell you how they will live. It says, eternally, only that we can.’ (p120).

Conversation as Liberatory Praxis

Conversation as educational research requires thinking through how educational spaces – even those that are somewhat more progressive – are often marked far more profoundly by enforcement, oppression, domination, and coercion than freedom, and far more productive of ‘failure’, depression, inequality, anxiety, conformity to a damaged and damaging system, than a real and actionable sense of non-oppressive liberty.

A negotiation of both the theoretical as well as the practical constraints placed on contemporary schooling is elaborated in Camilla Stanger’s (2018) ‘From Critical Education to An Embodied Pedagogy of Hope: Seeking a Liberatory Praxis with Black, Working Class Girls in the Neoliberal 16–19 College’. Amongst other things, Stanger helps to illustrate how ‘conversation’ is not just limited to exchanges of verbal speech but can extend to other signifying practices, including those that are more obviously embodied. Stanger convincingly evidences that ‘a rhetoric that prioritises individualised success through a focus on attainment, whilst silencing considerations of structural inequality and covertly prioritising a particular cultural norm of embodiment, creates particular difficulties for young, black, working class women in UK educational institutions.’ (p. 51). Going on to argue that

within the rhetoric of such a system there is little room for contextualized understanding of oppressive social forces that shape these young women’s lives, both material and discursive, nor the space for actively valuing these young women’s embodied identities, forms of agency and resistance, and their cultural practices. (p. 55)

In contrast to this, Stanger seeks to ‘articulate a pedagogic praxis with black working class girls, a group of students whose bodies (and emotions) can become pathologized and excluded within white middle class, neoliberal institutions.’ (p. 52). Importantly for her, this even happens with the best intentions of some educators, including those that inform or are informed by attempts at liberatory praxis. She compares her own efforts, where she has assisted students in creating a space for what she, after Ruth Nicole Brown (2008) and Janell Hobson (2003; 2005), calls ‘black girl dance’, to those of a creative writing club in the same school:

Indeed, the creative writing club, whose identity statement conveys a sense of Freirean pedagogy, has not in fact become a liberatory educational space for young black women who study on vocational courses in my workplace. The primary student group who attend this club are academically high achieving male and female A Level students, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, who in some respects embody middle class identities. One young black woman who did attend a few of the sessions of this creative writing club decided not to continue, citing the experience as “boring”; another, who studies on a vocational course, spoke about more generally feeling distant from A Level students in the college, a group who she referred to as “the clever ones”. This creative writing club is certainly engaged in its own form of liberatory praxis; however, it does seem that a different, and particular, form of pedagogical praxis needs developing in order to welcome and serve the liberation of black, working class girls who study vocational courses in this college. (pp. 52-53)

Different contexts and means of conversation (e.g. around or through creative writing or dance) are appropriate for different individuals and groups, and inappropriate and potentially disempowering for others. Seeking to build and support spaces for liberatory educational experience – where individuals can live and learn as freely as possible – is, as Stanger is keen to emphasise, not without ‘risk’ and ‘moments of failure’ (p. 61). Such spaces, too, are not intended to produce hermetically sealed educational experiences but rather to be resistant to pernicious rhetoric and practice, rife in educational institutions and pedagogized society at large.

For Stanger, ‘black girl dance as a praxis through which a sense of embodied community and hopeful self-definition is built in resistance to racist, sexist and neoliberal discourses that serve to pathologise young black women’s embodied subject positions and forms of knowledge.’ (pp. 60-61). What makes this form of educational praxis liberatory, for Stanger, is that means and ends are both determined by those who are being educated. Educationally, it seeks to create a conversational space and praxis as devoid of oppressive characteristics as possible, while also, directly or indirectly, challenging and resisting in a manner that is no less political (and perhaps less insistent on a particular politics and conception of the educated person) than critical pedagogy. It is a partial escape from oppressive norms of what it means to be educated and the characteristics or qualities an ‘educated’ person should exhibit, while also being a self-legitimizing launching point for critiquing, challenging, and overcoming the barbs of those very norms, without ever prioritising the politics over the

persons to be educated and the conversational relations they might experience in those endeavours.

Conclusion

Conversation, in the Blanchotian sense explored here, can be accessed through non-formal educational experience and in the physical or virtual classroom. It can also be utilised as a means of researching various aspects of educational experience, practice and institutions. The Blanchotian conversational approach to educational relation (Bojesen, 2019; 2020a) has, quite recently, been taken up in mathematics education (Nemirovsky et al, 2020), exploring the possibilities for conversation with materials and diagrams; teacher education research (Harrison et al, 2020) concerned with (un)teaching the ‘datafied student subject’; relational approaches to educational leadership (Elonga Mboyo, 2019); and institutional listening (Bojesen, 2020b). Its most distinctive feature, though, is not its broad applicability, but rather its emphasis on forms of relation that move away from the educational entrenchment of the subject in a particular identity and/or hierarchical relation, where linear development is deconstructed and unworked.

To employ conversation as an educational mode of relation in formal and non-formal contexts by no means implies the obsolescence or obviation of other modes of educational relation, it might nonetheless complement these or prove a more appropriate mode of relation in particular contexts. It prioritises the experience of relational development itself, rather than the individuals in that relation. This is not a rhetorical knot or a theoretical complication of educational relations; it is a fundamental and wide-reaching shift of educational dispositions, means, and priorities. Conversation is a means of thinking and practicing a more liberatory experience of educational relation than the individualising, end-oriented, and hierarchically imposed forms of education that currently dominate the majority of socio-educational contexts. The ethico-existential implications of conversation open ‘unknown spaces of freedom’ and provoke a responsibility ‘for new relationships’ (Blanchot, 1988, p. 56) that, as the tremendously variable directions of contemporary research in this area show, are neither anticipable nor prescriptible.

Further Reading

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Notes

¹ See also Blanchot’s (1988) affirmative gloss on Levinasian ethics (p. 43) and the development of this gloss in its associated footnote (pp. 59-60), where he refers to ‘a teaching’ which must ‘renounce its primacy when the urgency of bringing help to someone upsets all study and imposes itself as application of Law which always precedes the Law.’