Dialogical Possibilities: Embracing Uncertainty in New Curriculum Spaces
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“When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher -- and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better.”

– John Dewey (1916). Democracy and Education.

“…what must come first in communicative dialogue is understanding – that is, a supposedly innocent, disinterested reading of the other's message… Communicative dialogue works only when we act as if its mode of address is a neutral conduit of reality, and not itself a rhetoric – not itself a mediation of knowledge and of its participants’ relation to knowledge.

– Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997). Teaching Positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address. (pp. 93, 82)

“Media open and deliver to the “no-body's land” between identifiable coordinates on the grid. What they deliver are not merely meanings made different by their arrival in unforeseen, incongruous contexts. Media deliver difference itself… media give body to relationality as they keep potentiality and difference in circulation and motion…Media thus are imbued with the potential for catalyzing new forms of corporeality, new embodiments, new ways of knowing and being human.”


“Art educators interested in creating open environments that access contemporary networks should pay heed to the decentralized structure of the Internet…Teaching in the network society, through hybrid networks consisting of traditional physical spaces and cyberspaces offers, art educators the opportunity to address the potential for complex networks to not only be identified, but for them to form and flourish. This is only possible if the technologies are used fully and critically, in the service of developing new forms of pedagogy and art, and not simply reinforcing the traditions of the past.”

The learning process is facilitated through an open communication process that encourages one to discover meaning within certain ideas, objects, and experiences. A traditional classroom environment, often consisting of a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, does not always allow for this kind of open communication to occur. In a decentralized approach to teaching and learning, the content is placed at the centre of the process, rather than the teacher or student, while participants become inspired and empowered through the experience. Decentralization in the classroom consists of a non-linear exchange of ideas between teacher and students, often leading to critical inquiry through methods of self-reflection. With this new power dynamic at work, students are often motivated to become active learners as opposed to passive participants, and teachers learn to strategically listen and watch for teachable moments. The dialogical relationship between all participants becomes extremely significant in creating an aesthetic educational experience. With my recent writings in mind – “Stephanie Springgay: Relational Meaning and Learning through Embodied Dialogue” and “Art that Examines How We Know: Investigating the Construction of Knowledge” – I believe that the decentralized classroom can be thought of then as a “dialogical space” in which meaning emerges and knowledge becomes personalized in relation to others. To critically inform my understanding of the dialogical space, this paper includes the work of scholar and educator Elizabeth Ellsworth by providing an analysis of her theories of dialogue and learning spaces, while drawing upon the work of other curriculum researchers. Towards the end of the paper, I extend Ellsworth’s research to the decentralized space of networked learning by referring to the work of art educator Robert Sweeny, discussing pedagogical approaches for using the internet within contemporary curriculum.
Pedagogy of Dialogue and the Knowledge it Creates

In *Democracy and Education* (1916), John Dewey wrote about the importance of an interactive and democratic relationship between the teacher and the student. Curriculum theorists today, such as Patrick Slattery and William Pinar, have proposed ideas for curriculum based on hermeneutic inquiry and autobiographical experience, now perceived as Deweyean approaches for the postmodern (or post-postmodern) era. These pedagogical approaches include a decentralized power structure and a call for curriculum spaces that will foster a dialogical relationship between teacher and student. To understand the possibilities inherent within the dialogical relationship between teacher and student, one needs to understand the pedagogy of dialogue.

Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it (Shor & Freire, 1987). In “What is the ‘Dialogical Method’ of Teaching?” the authors Shor and Freire discuss democratic communication within the teacher-student relationship and the role that dialogue plays in forming knowledge: “Dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study. Then, instead of transferring the knowledge statically, as a fixed possession of the teacher, dialogue demands a dynamic approximation towards the object” (p. 14). The authors argue for a level of openness on the part of the teacher, a willingness to relearn the content and to become engaged in the dialogue. Through a conversation of their own, the authors specifically describe how the dialogical process might work in the classroom and what the teacher should be conscious of as they become a facilitator to the discussion. They describe the role of the teacher as an artist who works to uncover key themes and access points to consciousness, recomposing them into unsettling critical investigation (p. 28). The authors use the phrase “verbal reinvention” and state,
“reinventing the visual and verbal aspects of the classroom are two ways of addressing the destructive arts of passive education” (p. 30). Along with acknowledging teaching as an aesthetic exercise that combines art and politics, the authors see the dialogical method as a form of liberatory education.

The dialogical relationships that are produced are, in my opinion, the most significant components to a decentralized curriculum and an aesthetic educational experience. It is not just about a dialogue between teacher and student, it is also about the conversations between student and student, between student and the content, and between the teacher and the content. This dialogical process, based in an understanding of a decentralized network of communication, can allow for knowledge to emerge and evolve out of the curriculum space, as opposed to a centralized approach in which one individual is in control of the knowledge being disseminated. Figure 1 illustrates the difference between the traditional classroom experience with the teacher at the centre (centralized network) and that of a teaching and learning experience that stems from complexity theory (decentralized network). Complexity thinking highlights the importance of neighboring interactions of ideas, a shift towards a more collaborative and non-linear approach to learning (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). With this understanding of the relationship between complexity thinking and decentralized forms of teaching, the power that belonged to the

![Centralized Network vs. Decentralized Network](image-url)
teacher within a behaviorist model of learning can now be thought of as shifting amidst the social
interaction within the teaching and learning experience.

Elizabeth Ellsworth: Critiquing Dialogue

Important to the analysis of the role dialogue plays in forming knowledge, however, is the
question of the kind of knowledge being formed. Although these ideas assert a “willingness to
relearn the content” by the teacher (Shor & Freire, 1987), in order to convey a situation of equal
exchange, is it really possible for the teacher to be neutral, to not be affected by previous systems
of knowledge? Elizabeth Ellsworth presented a strong critique to dialogue as critical pedagogy in
her well-known article “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” (1989), in which she argues that
if certain assumptions and issues of who produces valid knowledge remain unquestioned than
critical pedagogues will only perpetuate relations of domination in their classrooms (p. 297). In
this article, Ellsworth reflected on her role as a white middle-class female professor in a course
that worked with students to create antiracist curriculum. Ellsworth applied feminist post-
structural discourse to a study that addressed paradoxes in education, ultimately challenging the
rationalist assumptions held by critical theorists such as Shor and Freire.

In discussing the failure to implement a meaningful analysis of the “institutionalized power
imbalances between themselves and their students,” Ellsworth states, “strategies such as student
empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian
nature of the teacher/student relationship intact” (p. 306). Curriculum researcher Lisa Cary
references Ellsworth as an example of a researcher who uses psychoanalysis as a way of
addressing paradoxes in education (Cary, 2006). In developing the Curriculum Spaces Research
Theory, Cary uses a poststructural perspective to investigate the social practices and subject
relations within the discourse between teacher and students. Cary draws upon the Foucauldian
notion that power circulates and produces knowledge and ways of being (p. 2). Her views seem to be targeted at critical approaches that limit discussion to social/identity issues without analyzing the epistemological perspectives of those involved in the discourse. Cary makes an ethical choice to reveal paradoxes in any dialogue in the classroom to help avoid reductive, socially constructed knowledge (p. 131) Cary is just one example of an academic researcher who has followed in Ellsworth’s footsteps.

**Analytic Dialogue: Working with the Uncertainty**

In her book *Teaching Positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address* (1997), Ellsworth argues that the pedagogy of dialogue is not neutral but is rather embedded in particular “networks of power, desire, and knowledge” (p. 49). Ellsworth does not position herself against dialogue per se, she merely believes that this “mode of address” has the potential to constrain the exchange of knowledge and needs to be questioned. In discussing characteristics of “understanding” Ellsworth points out that understanding can actually be an “act of disagreement” (p. 103), which requires a different kind of dialogue that she terms “analytic dialogue.” (p. 115) Ellsworth suggests that analytic dialogue is transitional, multiple and never complete. Ellsworth, along with several other curriculum theorists I have read, place value on embracing the unfinished and the unpredictable when it comes to teaching and learning, similar to the understanding of knowledge being something that is incomplete and in process. Lisa Cary (2006) states that we should embrace undecidability and uncertainty as teachers. She discusses the construction of the ‘good teacher’ in that it “promotes the mastery of technical competence that ignores the im/possibilities of learning by reducing teaching to simplistic representations” (p. 132). In my review of Stephanie Springgay’s work as an a/r/tographer, I described a pedagogical approach that embraces the uncertainties and disruptions of an embodied
dialogue with understanding art through the sense of touch termed body knowledge (May, 2009a). Springgay draws upon the work of curriculum theorists in developing her concept of body knowledge in art education, stating that “teaching and learning through touch encourages ambiguity and tension recognizing that difficult knowing ruptures open the bodies and lives of students and teachers” (Springgay, 2004, 254).

In “Situated Response-ability to Student Papers” (1996), Ellsworth, coming from a background in media and film, references Phelan (1993) in relating the interaction between the art object and the spectator to the interaction between students and written texts stating, “the interaction between students and “new information” is essentially performative – different students’ readings of any given text will vary considerably, even wildly (Ellsworth, 1996, p. 141). Describing the act of reading as never finished or complete, Ellsworth experiments with a new pedagogical approach by asking her students to write a series of “partial, incomplete, and purposeful papers” rather then a final paper, framing the objective in these terms: “The readings and viewings in this course are offered as materials to be worked with, worked over, worked through. They are intended to be used, not “understood” – not grasped fully…as that is impossible. The are intended to be put to use in the contexts of students’ purposes, projects, imperatives.” (p. 141). In my review of Ingrid Koenig’s visual art practice, I describe how the knowledge itself, within the scientific theories she explores, seems to be expressed as never static and always being “worked through,” similar to the visuals incorporated into my own art work “Mental Note: It’s Not You” (May, 2009b). In her study of how students and teachers respond to the written word, Ellsworth decided to ask students to include a paragraph telling her how they would like her to read the paper (ie. writing style, preparation for thesis, etc.) so that she could “contextualize her reading within the purposes and uses they were trying to make of that
particular writing” (Ellsworth, p. 142). She found that this shift in her curriculum led her to respond to student work as “a creative act of rereading (her) experience of the class” and that it felt like an extension of the classroom relationship. I feel that Ellsworth’s experience from this study is illustrative of a dialogical relationship that works to create relational meaning for both the teacher and the student, and that this is partially due to a decentralized approach to curriculum.

New Curriculum Spaces and Relational Meaning

In Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era (2nd ed.), Slattery discusses the work of Ellsworth (1989), in addition to the work of Cary (2006), as texts that critique how exclusion occurs within the construction of knowledge and remind us of the necessity for us to examine our dialogue and rhetoric: “In other words, we must deconstruct our own complicity in oppression and recognize that our knowledge is partial and evolving. We must open up new curriculum spaces” (Slattery, 2006, p. 33). Slattery agrees with Ellsworth and the need to investigate new curriculum spaces to help us understand how we know what we know. In Places of Learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy (2005), Ellsworth examines the “pedagogical force of anomalous places of learning” that reshape the activities of education (museums, visual art, media, etc.) and which have the potential for new meanings to emerge in what Ellsworth credits D.W. Winnicott in defining as “transitional space” – the time and place out of which experiences of the learning emerge (Winnicott, 1989). The book is structured in a way that reflects back upon the incomplete nature of knowledge, a writing strategy which Ellsworth feels is informed by film and video documentary practices that “juxtapose, complicate” definitions by “opening up volatile spaces of difference between things and ideas that are often seen as being the same” (Ellsworth, p. 13). I believe this to be an a/r/tographical approach to understanding new curriculum spaces and the
relational meaning that can take place within them. Ellsworth’s research of the “spaces” of learning connects to the current interest in complexity theory and emergent knowledge within the field of education and can be extended to concepts surrounding “networked” learning.

Since the beginning of the postmodern era, educators have been calling for curriculum and pedagogy that responds to the challenges of contemporary society. Robert Sweeny (2004) proposes a decentralized approach to art curriculum, similar to the decentralized network in Figure 1, and acknowledges an inherent connection between the pedagogical philosophies associated with the open classroom movement of the 1960s (emphasis placed on learning in small groups with the teacher being less of an authority figure) with networked structures today that exist through the internet (Sweeny, 2008). In “Unthinkable Complexity: Art Education in the Network Society” (2008), Sweeny questions if the place/space of the internet is really ‘unthinkable’ or if it can bring about new forms of thought, perhaps those that could be described as networked. He asks the question: “What should education in a networked age look like?” (p. 95). When referring to the field of art education, Sweeny feels that the “possibilities for forms of pedagogy that address visual culture have done much to create critical dialogue and debate… (but) the social impact of the digital simulation of images has not adequately been discussed” (2004, working paper for 2008 publication). Similar to Elizabeth Ellsworth, Sweeny draws upon the work and practices of artists to inform his pedagogical research. He argues that the properties of complex systems (such as a decentralized classroom or a networked space of learning) can be compared with the practices of contemporary artists and, if compared, suggests that art educators might have a better understanding of developing forms of creation, distribution, and collaboration currently in practice (2008, p. 89). Sweeny then poses the
question: “If art educators were to then structure pedagogical approaches accordingly, what might these forms of networked art education look like?” (p. 89).

When writing about learning in these complex times, Ellsworth refers to Bill Green (1998), stating there is a new order of learning emerging out of a convergence of oral, literate and video conduct in our society: “This convergence, Green says, exceeds text-based learning and understandings and requires us to embrace and engage the “semiotic possibilities of electronic media and the (postmodern body)” (Green, 1998, p. 193 cited in Ellsworth, 2005, p. 121). In discussing the study of pedagogy, Ellsworth writes that the “grid of knowledge already known” can not see knowledge in the making: “It has no faculty to sense the movement/sensation our of which knowledge itself emerges, the experience of the learning self in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 120). I am interested in creating further understanding around this particular dialogical space, in addition to other kinds of dialogical spaces, and examining how knowledge emerges and relational meanings are produced.

In order to address issues of networked learning and the impact these “spaces” have on dialogical relations between teachers and students, decentralized approaches to curriculum first need to be embraced, along with the uncertainty that accompanies them. Researchers in the field of education need to follow the path of Elizabeth Ellsworth. Freire described the teacher as both an artist and a politician (1987, p. 12) and when dialogical pedagogy is inserted into the mix, perhaps we can begin to also understand the teacher as a psychologist or sociologist who negotiates the aesthetic experience of curriculum.
References:


