

# The role of dialogue in teaching and learning

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## **In her previous piece for Open Access Government, which emphasized the importance of educational philosophy and the value of every school debate, Stephanie Schneider now shifts her focus to the essential role of dialogue in teaching and learning**

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In my last [contribution to Open Access Government](#), I outlined why the philosophy of education is an important endeavor. In short, every school debate can be considered a subject of study. In this article, I specifically discuss dialogue and its critical role in teaching and learning. To achieve this, I will analyze two influential educational philosophers: Martin Buber and Paulo Freire. Both philosophers played a key role in understanding the uses of dialogue in the classroom, revolutionizing teaching and learning. Martin Buber and Paulo Freire, two influential 20th-century thinkers, centered dialogue in their educational philosophies. However, their views on dialogue stemmed from distinct philosophical traditions and highlighted different, yet arguably complementary, aspects of its transformative potential in the academic context.

Buber's dialogic philosophy, rooted in existentialism and Hasidic thought, centers on the fundamental distinction between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' relationships (Buber, 1958). For Buber, genuine dialogue requires a mutual and holistic encounter between two beings, an 'I-Thou' relationship characterized by presence, openness, and reciprocity. In the educational setting, this means transcending the objectifying 'I-It' dynamic of teacher-as-knowledgeable- authority and student-as-passive- recipient. Instead, Buber advocates for a dialogic pedagogy in which teachers and students engage as whole persons, co-constructing meaning through authentic, multi-directional exchange (Buber, 2002). Freire's theory of dialogic education, grounded in Marxist critical theory and liberatory praxis, emphasizes dialogue as a means of conscientization and empowerment (Freire, 1970). Rejecting the 'banking model' of education in which students are treated as empty receptacles to be filled with knowledge, Freire positions dialogue as central to a 'problem-posing' pedagogy that fosters critical consciousness. Students and teachers become co-investigators in reflective action and transformative learning through dialogic engagement with their lived realities. For Freire, genuine dialogue is thus inseparable from the struggle against oppression and the collective pursuit of social justice (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

While both thinkers critique instrumentalist approaches to education that reinforce unequal power dynamics, Buber's idea of dialogue primarily functions on an interpersonal level, highlighting the transformative encounter between individuals. On the other hand, Freire places dialogue within a wider socio-political context, emphasizing its role in confronting systemic oppression and sparking social change. Nevertheless, Buber and Freire converge in their insistence on the humanizing and democratizing power of authentic dialogue in education. Both challenge hierarchical notions of the teacher-

student relationship, advocating instead for a dialogic partnership in which all participants are recognized as bearers of knowledge and agents of their own learning. Moreover, they commit to education as a practice of freedom – affirming human dignity, fostering critical consciousness, and nurturing the capacity for transformative action. First, we will look at Buber’s impacts.

Martin Buber’s contributions to educational dialogue begin with his widely referenced I-Thou relationship framework. Buber’s philosophy focuses on two fundamental ways humans interact with the world: the I-Thou (Ich-Du) and the I-It relationships. These concepts offer a profound reconceptualization of the educational encounter that continues to challenge contemporary pedagogical thought. Central to Buber’s educational philosophy is his rejection of the traditional subject-object dichotomy in teaching relationships. While many educational theorists of his time viewed education primarily as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student—a notion considered an I-It relationship in Buberian terms—Buber urged us to view education as a dialogical encounter. This dialogue is not merely a verbal exchange but a mode of being that acknowledges and engages with the full humanity of both the teacher and the student.

Buber’s influence on educational philosophy highlights the community’s role in education. Unlike many individualistic approaches, Buber emphasizes the communal aspect of learning while still valuing individual growth. His concept of ‘genuine community’ in education suggests that authentic learning occurs within a network of relationships that recognizes individuals’ uniqueness and fundamental interconnectedness. The contemporary significance of Buber’s educational philosophy becomes particularly clear when we consider current debates about technology’s role in education and the growing focus on standardized testing and measurable outcomes. Freire takes a different approach to dialogue.

In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire develops his critique of the banking model of education by contrasting it with problem-posing education. The dialectical relationship between these approaches reveals how traditional pedagogy reinforces existing power structures while problem-posing education is a practice of freedom. The key dialectical elements include the following: The teacher-student relationship transforms from a hierarchical contradiction into a dialogical synthesis in which both parties simultaneously teach and learn—knowledge shifts from being treated as static deposits to being understood as a dynamic inquiry process. Consciousness evolves from passive acceptance to critical engagement with reality. Freire’s dialectical lens reveals how education functions as a practice of domination or liberation. The banking model maintains oppressive structures by treating students as adaptable, manageable beings. In contrast, problem-posing education engages students in critical thinking about their existential situation, leading to what Freire terms “conscientização”—critical consciousness of one’s social reality.

This theoretical framework has profound implications for educational practice. It suggests that effective pedagogy must create opportunities for learners to examine the relationship between their subjective understanding and objective conditions, foster dialogue beyond

pure abstraction and mere description of facts, and integrate reflection and action to develop critical consciousness. Freire's treatment of objectivity and subjectivity thus represents a sophisticated attempt to overcome traditional philosophical dualisms while maintaining the tension necessary for critical consciousness and transformative action. His framework suggests that authentic education must engage both dimensions in dynamic interaction rather than privileging either pole.

Martin Buber and Paulo Freire take different approaches to dialogue. In education, there needs to be a dialogue between students and students and with teachers and students. Schools today have top-down pedagogy. As much as we need student-centered learning, more can be done. Buber and Freire show us the way.

## References

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