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Martin Buber's Relational Philosophy: Filling the Pedagogy Gap for Effective Teaching

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Abstract

Teaching is more about adopting the right principles and dispositions that enables an individual to relate well with others in the learning process and contribute positively to the development of the society. The purpose of this study is to contribute to educational research about relational competence in teacher education by adopting Martin Buber relational philosophy for effective teaching and learning. Education founded on dialogue is the platform that will instills in the learners the ability to be analytical, intellectually curious, culturally aware, employable, leadership and societal development. The article studies relational/dialogue, as a core value in the philosophies of Martin Buber. It suggests that Buber's philosophy of education founded on the principle of I-Thou is a blueprint to resolving the problems arising from the pedagogy gap. Hence, Buber's ideas on education are more practical and may be projected as the definitive end for effective teaching.

Keywords: Relational Philosophy, Education, Martin Buber, Effective, Teaching

Introduction

Teaching is an educational activity involving two major actors: the teacher and the student(s). Teaching impart worthwhile knowledge, experiences, attitudes, values and skills to the learner.¹ The teacher is seen as someone who with the use of content facilitate learning. However, the general trend in the discourse on education has been how to achieve the effective methods that bring about maximum transfer of knowledge. This had led to the shift in focus from the traditional school which is teacher-centered to modern school which is learner-centered. The essence of teaching in the traditional school was to transfer knowledge from the outside, while the modern school focus on creating the right conditions for learning from inside.

In these two broad methods lies the gap between the teacher and the learner with physical effects on learning outcome. This calls for the evaluation of traditional method of teaching as limiting learners' self-determination and transforming them into objects while on the opposite is the conservative discourse trying to re-establish teachers' power and control. In filling this pedagogy vacuum between the traditional and the modern, it could be appropriate that a relational perspective would be the best alternative to adopt since it is not possible to teach in solitude.

Relational pedagogy is founded on the premises that relationship is the substance of education. The idea of man as a '*relational being*', has been contrasted with the dominant view of man as a 'bounded being'². Martin Buber's philosophy is commonly regarded as an important source within relational theory. Buber's 'I-Thou' relational philosophy presents the alternative for teaching that best filling the pedagogy gap for effective teaching and learning.

Buber's Dialogue Philosophy

Buber's dialogue theory reflects the view that knowledge and understanding come from testing evidence, analyzing ideas and exploring values through the use of dialogue, rather than unthinkingly accepting someone else's foregone conclusion. The theory is hinged on interpersonal relationship that exists in two forms: "I-Thou" relationship and "I-It" relationship.

Buber explains the difference between these two types of dialogue with regard to the educational act. Buber's theory of dialogue is based on the premise that there are two basic types of interactions that human beings can have, the instrumental "I-it" and the relational or dialogic "I-Thou." For Buber, the most ethical and rewarding relationships occur when people treat others as inherently valuable, rather than as "a means to an end."

Relational learning is a practice that invites both students and teachers to enter into a dialogue about learning. The involvement of multiple parties in the task of learning deconstructs the hierarchy within the traditional teaching relationship and opens space for more collaborative experiences. Most students come to the classroom with the traditional model in mind, as this is the way in which they have been taught to interact within a classroom their entire lives. While there may be a place and time for a teacher-centered model, the relational approach lends itself to the active process of co-constructing knowledge not only in the classroom but outside world.

The educational tie in Buber's philosophy is a reciprocal relationship between educator and student in which there is an "I-Thou" dialogue, defined by reciprocity. The "I-Thou" relationship, even where equality is limited, allows educational encounter that extends beyond the transmission of information or the development of skills. In this dialogue relationship there are special conditions which promote effective relationship. The conditions Buber discussed include; the need for presence, unreserved communication, confirmation and inclusion.

Presence: Presence is the situation in which the individual presents him/ herself as he/she is, in the full essence and uniqueness, without needing to deal with how others perceive him/her. At the same time, he/she is connected and open to another person and respects his/her presence, for its own sake, and without analysis. Concern about "how I look to others and the impression I make" is almost nonexistent. Full presence creates a situation of mutual contact with the

humanity of each of the participants in the dialogue and it enables them to be willing to possess strength, ability and knowledge, but also to lack these.

Unreserved Communication: Unreserved communication takes place when both parties are involved directly and say what is important, even if they are concerned about how it will be received. This does not mean that everything that happens to an individual has to be said. One has to say what is suitable and contributes to the dialogue, things that fit the time, the subject, and the focus of the dialogue, that will encourage and help the individual to grow. Even if the subject of the dialogue is criticism, it should be voiced, but it must be constructive. The emphasis is on honesty and lack of falsity in what is said. Such communication creates a true sense of partnership between educator and student. This is impossible if the educator leaves him/herself in a position of neutrality and objectivity, as an observer from the side. This is not a situation of equality between educator and student or over-involvement of the educator, but a situation in which there is openness and involvement of the educator in a manner relevant to the educational event.

Inclusion: Inclusion is a situation in which the educator can see the event shared by him/herself and the student from two points of view simultaneously: his point of view and that of the student. The inability to see things in this way will preclude a dialogue relationship. The educator maintains his perspective and identity, “stays within him/ herself” and at the same time, using the imagination, enters into the experience of the other. Buber³ refers to this as the ability to simulate another person's reality. This imagining oneself as the other is not achieved by blurring boundaries, but rather by maintaining separation between the educator and the student. This enables confirmation, which is the next component in the “I-Thou” relationship.

Confirmation: Confirmation is the situation of accepting the other as a whole, unique and separate being, without judgment, even if you do not agree with him/her or if there is opposition and conflict. The student needs the educator's confirmation, the knowledge that the educator accepts him/her fully, including his/her potential and thus allows him/her the change required by the educational process.

Dialogue theory is relevant to the present study because dialogue brings about inclusiveness on the part of the learner which promotes warm and cordial interaction between the students and the teacher. This will arouse and maintains students' involvement, interest, communicates and exchange of ideas in clear, lucid and organized manner in learning environment.

Effective Teaching and Learning

Effectiveness is a term more often used in reference to having the power or ability to bring about the result that is desired or intended. Oriaifo and Nwaokolo⁴ state that the extent to which a process is able to produce the needed outcomes is a measure of the effectiveness. Effective teaching therefore, is the ability of the teacher to carry on instructional programme to achieve a relatively direction-specific and lasting change in behaviour of the learner. Effective teaching according to Marcia & Gayani⁵ also can be seen as that which results in beneficial and goal-oriented student learning through the use of right procedures and the creation of situations in which appropriate learning occurs. Allan, Clarke & Jopling⁶ define effective teaching as the application of multiple sources of information to better students' strengths and development in

the areas that provide the most targeted and useful coaching as good teachers. To provide the right and proper learning atmosphere and experiences, a teacher must know the learner, how he grows, how and why he learns, and when he should learn what. Effective teaching requires classroom interaction and the application of a variety of strategies are highly recommended.

Concern for a learner's uniqueness is central to ensuring teaching effectiveness. Obi⁷ asserts that effective teaching is a process related to the teachers' consciousness of the individuality of each learner, including his needs, strengths, weaknesses, growth patterns and background of experiences. This implies that an effective teacher has to put into consideration the uniqueness of each of learner while teaching create an enabling atmosphere for teaching and learning. The teacher should therefore provide a democratic situation in the classroom for effective teaching and learning of each subject. According to Amissah, Sam-Tagoe, Amoah, & Mereku⁸ the teacher should create a conducive atmosphere for learners to enable them freely express their points of view and provide them the opportunities to have the best learning experiences that help construct their own knowledge. The authors add that the teacher must focus on the use of learner-centered innovative pedagogical strategies such as demonstrations, discussions, peer teaching, brainstorming, discovery learning and role play during the teaching and learning process to foster active involvement of learners in the classroom.

Every appropriate teaching aims at effectiveness of the process. To achieve the desire effectiveness, the teacher is required to put in what it takes for teaching and learning objectives to be attained⁹. This is why classroom interaction and application of a variety of strategies are highly recommended. Effective teaching is characterized by certain elements. Hence, Gurney¹⁰ came up with what he called "Five Factors for Effective Teaching". To him, the key elements of effective teaching are teacher knowledge, enthusiasm and responsibility for learning, classroom activities that encourage learning, assessment activities that encourage learning through experience, effective feedback that establishes the learning processes in the classroom and effective interaction between the teacher and the students, creating an environment that respects, encourages and stimulates learning through experience. In effect, the teacher should disposed to new experiences so as to shape the environment which favours learning. The teacher should also have favourable attitudes towards individual differences, eschew sarcastic statements, ridicule and fault finding among the students he handles, have sympathy, understanding and compassion for all students especially those who have learning difficulties, by seeking to compensate for deprived children. In this study, effective teaching and learning means instructing with the right procedures, materials and in the right environments to bring about imparting, and learners acquiring maximum knowledge that brings about lasting changes in their experience.

Relevance of Relational/Dialogic Teaching

Relational/dialogic teaching method is one of the teaching approaches that may bring about meaningful and desirable learning outcome. This method promotes warm, cordial interaction and relationship between the teacher and the students. According to Nwafor and Nwogu,¹¹ the interaction is established through exchange of ideas between the teacher and the students while the relationship recognizes and respects the personality of both the teacher and the learners. Akinkuotu and Quadri¹² stressed that, it is an all – inclusive or bottom - top approach in which

the teacher initiates learning and maintains engagement with the learner during the process of students' development as independent lifelong learners.

The merit of this method lies in the fact that it arouses and maintains students' interest, communicates ideas in clear, lucid and organized manner, helps students develop appropriate skills, develops their thinking processes, motivates students towards achievement, arouses intellectual curiosity and creates a conducive learning environment¹³. By this method, both teachers and students establish a shared environment of values, beliefs, knowledge and appreciation that have impact on their perception of what is real as described by Buber in his relational or dialogical philosophy.

The use of dialogue makes teaching and learning pragmatic by encouraging the learners to think, usually from a known premise (concrete life situations) to an unknown, and to rely on their experiences and the environment as the foundation for knowledge. Dialogue in the class makes learning meaningful and easy for application of knowledge. However, non-dialogical relationship gives priority to objective knowledge and discourages active role of the learner in selecting and building his/her knowledge. This has several negative effects on students' academic achievement. For instance, it can lead to mass failure, lack of interest and so on. Thus, the application of the 'I – Thou' relational philosophy as posited by Martin Buber may be the best option in attaining effective teaching and learning.

The role of Relational Teaching in achieving Learner Involvement

Involvement refers to the investment or devotion of physical, mental and psychological energy and time to programmes, activities, services, objects and the likes which can be highly generalized or specific. It is the process of integrating people or individuals who receive and use services in decisions that affect those services. According to Noble¹⁴, involvement is the process of allowing individuals to participate in decision-making activities that concern them. This entails that people who are concerned are made part and parcel of the events and are provided with the enabling environment to contribute and air their views as members of the groups. The process empowers these stakeholders to voice-out their opinions, ideas and sentiments. It also encourages stakeholders to speak for themselves on issues that bother them without restrictions.

Involvement requires that people are allowed to participate actively in the events that have to do with their interest. In this context, people will genuinely contribute to any activity that concerns them. Thus, involvement can be active or passive. Active involvement implies that individuals are obliged to totally take part in the activity or decision-making process while in passive involvement, the individual partially participates in the activity.

Involvement is a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of stakeholders. As one of the actors in the process of education, student involvement is vital to achieving the aim of education. According to Azurdee,¹⁵ students learn more when they are involved in all aspects of school life, and an involved student devotes energy to academics, spends a great deal of time on campus, participates in students' organization and activities and interacts well in the class.

Learner involvement refers to student's sense of ownership for education demonstrated in cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses to in-class and out-of-class activities. Thomas¹⁶ describes learner involvement as a pedagogical approach in which the learner is responsible for identifying and addressing gaps in their knowledge. In this respect, the students take charge of their own learning and are being responsible for aspects of learning such as goal setting and self-monitoring process¹⁷.

Learner involvement can come in different forms, such as students' questions and comments. It can also be manifested in their desire, resourcefulness, initiative and persistence in learning.¹⁸ This requires that student should have the willingness, need and desire to participate and be successful in the learning process, promoting higher level of thinking for enduring understanding. At the class level learner involvement entails participating in routine class lessons, submitting required class works and home assignments, following teachers' direction in classroom, and the likes.

In any process of education, active learner's involvement is *sine qua non* to the success of the program. Active learners' involvement requires democratizing the learning process and giving more voice to the learner. Giving more voice requires some form of dialogue that enables the student to 'talk with' the teacher while grappling with the subject matter. Dialogic environment negates an atmosphere of monopoly of voice and knowledge which has hitherto been the prerogative of the educator. Thomas¹⁶ notes that many students are reluctant to take responsibility for learning and as a result face stress, uncertainty and use ineffective learning strategies. In order to remedy this situation, learner involvement is paramount. When learners are involved in the teaching-learning process, it brings about self-direction and accountability, immersion, passion, enthusiasm, individualization, exploration and investment in the individual learning process.

There are various advantages when students are appropriately involved in the teaching and learning process. These include motivating students, making study interesting, maintaining a dynamic class, allowing students to learn from one another, promotes learning, building confidence and trust among students.¹⁹ According to Moguel,²⁰ the involvement of learners in small group discussions provides an opportunity to develop their understanding and ability to think critically as well as encourage hard work. It is a way to bring students actively into the educational process and to assist in enhancing lively classroom.²¹ Students are more motivated,²² learn better,²³ become better critical thinkers²⁴ and have self-reported gains in character²⁵ when they are prepared for class and are involved in discussions. The more they participate, the less memorization they do, and the more they engage in higher levels of thinking, including interpretation, analysis, and synthesis.²⁶ Students' involvement also brings improvement in communication skills,²⁷ group interactions²⁸ and functioning in a democratic society²⁹. Learner involvement is increasingly seen as an indicator of successful classroom instruction and a valued outcome of school reform. It is important and beneficial for students' academic competencies, achievements, socialization, welfare, life satisfaction as well as effective learning³⁰. Lack of student involvement in teaching-learning process is a predictor for poor learning outcomes and dropping out of school. In this respect, it is seen that there is a positive relationship between student involvement and learning outcomes.³¹ In this study,

involvement means commitment and active participation of both the teacher and the learners in the routine teaching-learning process such that both parties contribute to teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Dialogue is a fundamental recipe for balanced education. Without a balanced dialogue between the teacher and students, education becomes an unhealthy accumulation or imposition of the experiences of the teacher on the students. Buber's relational philosophy of 'I-Thou' presents the alternative for teaching that best fill the pedagogy gap for effective teaching and learning. From Buber's point of view, teaching essentially means that the teacher, on the basis of inclusion, enables the student to stand in relationship with the world, that is, to be present 'in between'. If the traditional teacher's guiding principle is control, and the progressive teacher's is freedom, that of the relational teacher is communion.

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