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Editors

Cultivating Future-Oriented Learners

Polyphonic Education in a Changing World

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Foreword: A Polyphonic Humanizing View of Pedagogy and Technology

I believe all schools, all theories can be useful in some place, at some time. But I have discovered that one can only live by a passionate, and absolute, identification with a point of view. ... For a point of view to be of any use at all, one must commit oneself totally to it, one must defend it to the very death. Yet, at the same time, there is an inner voice that murmurs; "Don't take it too seriously. Hold on tightly, let go lightly." Peter Brook, author, theater and film director

Polyphony, in music, is used to describe a texture consisting of two or more independent melodic voices. It is a style of composition in which each voice has its own melody, rhythm, and expressive qualities while harmonically interweaving with the other voices. Polyphonic music often results in a complex and rich sound, where multiple voices create both harmony and counterpoint, leading to depth and interaction in the composition, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Polyphony is often contrasted with monophony where there is just one dominant melodic voice.

The Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, expanded the idea of polyphony from music to human discourse, describing it as a feature of texts or utterances that incorporate multiple voices or perspectives, without subordinating them to a single authoritative or dominant voice. Polyphony, according to him, allowed for diversity, complexity, and ambiguity in meaning, and challenged the idea of a single truth or interpretation. As he wrote, even “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110). Bakhtin saw polyphony as a positive and creative force that enriched and transformed language and culture. He contrasted it with homophony which he described as the tendency to impose a single voice or perspective on others, a tendency that he saw as oppressive and limiting. As he wrote, “The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 17).

At the heart of polyphony and its respect for multiple voices is a deeply humanizing worldview. By reflecting the diversity and complexity of human experience, expression, and cultures, polyphony allows for multiple voices and perspectives to

coexist and interact in non-reductive ways. By not imposing a hierarchy and valuing the uniqueness and autonomy of each voice, it fosters dialogue and understanding. By encouraging listening with openness and curiosity while questioning existing norms and inviting new possibilities and meanings, it stimulates creativity. It thus celebrates human dignity, freedom, plurality, and potential.

This contrast between multiple voices vs. a single voice becomes particularly relevant in educational contexts. Most traditional educational systems are more akin to monophonic music, where the voice of the teacher (or the broader educational system) is given primacy over others (learners for sure, but sometimes even teachers). As Bakhtin would argue, these structures and systems are limiting, dehumanizing, and oppressive. In contrast, polyphony in an educational context creates humanistic systems, where every individual, including learners, in a particular context is valued for what they bring to the educational conversation. It seeks to be multi-directional and non-hierarchical, valuing openness and creativity, recognizing multiplicity as being key to learning and education.

Polyphony helps prepare our learners in the globally interconnected, complex world we currently live in and for the indeterminate, emerging future as well. Learners are learning within the context of globalization; the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic, imminent challenges of climate change, rapid technological change (particularly the expansion of internet and social media technologies and now AI), and the re-emergence of (post)colonial indigenous narratives. We have come to realize that a dominant monophonic approach to education only oppresses and does disservice to the complexity of current educational contexts, and the cultures and histories of learners and educators.

One of the critical drivers of change in the world and in education comes from technology and its evolution: from the invention of writing to the printing press and all the way to our social-media saturated present. Looking specifically at the invention of the printing press—arguably one of the most significant technological advances of human cultural evolution—it allowed for mass literacy, and in some ways, it can be argued that our educational system is built around the “book.” Books facilitated the inscription and sharing of ideas, leading to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. They democratized information access, challenged authority, and popularized transformative ideas, with lasting effects. Today, because of the advent of the Internet and social media, we are seeing the next round of how changes in technology impact how we think, work, and socialize. In many ways, the culture of social media is more akin to an oral culture than one solely based on print (Leahy et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 1996). We can see the relative unraveling of the ways of thinking and being that were based on a print culture as we move into a social media dominated world. One can only guess how the rise of new AI technologies will influence how we live and work. These digital media, and their protean nature (Koehler & Mishra, 2008), can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for polyphonic humanizing pedagogy. Digital and networking media make possible new forms of communication, interaction, and expression—through online forums, digital storytelling, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence.

That said, technology also brings forward new risks, such as fragmentation, alienation, and manipulation.

These ideas of humanistic polyphony and the role of technology are key to understanding this book. Drawing on these themes, as well as on developmental psychology, learning theory, and humanizing pedagogy, this book presents a framework for designing and implementing educational experiences that foster dialogic and polyphonic learning. Learning in this context occurs through active participation in meaningful communication with others, where learners co-construct knowledge, challenge assumptions, explore alternatives, and reflect on their own thinking. The diversity of these voices and perspectives helps learners develop critical awareness, empathy, creativity, and intercultural competence.

In addition to offering learners humanizing polyphonic learning opportunities, this edited book humanizes teachers' current lived experiences. The vision offered by this book is exciting and yet ambitious, given the weight that teachers and administrators currently carry. The vision and frameworks describe a very different way of doing instruction and schooling, within very different systems than we currently have (Wong & Mishra, 2021). This book asks a great deal of educators during a time when the demands on them are greater than ever. In addition to helping their learners meet grade level standards and manage the stress of high-stakes tests, educators bear the burden of public expectations to catch their learners up because of a perceived "learning loss"; the very real responsibility of helping their learners, colleagues, and themselves heal from the multiple traumas caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; the current political and culture wars; the rise of tribalism across the geo-political sphere, the socio-emotional impact of social media, and more.

It is within this complex context that the chapters in this book offer a way forward, by providing examples that bring these ideas to life, illustrating what the vision could look like within educational contexts. The authors demonstrate that creating humanizing curricula and learning spaces where learners thrive is feasible in our current socio-historical, political, and economic contexts (Wong & Mishra, 2021). In fact, humanizing curricula and learning spaces can address some of these challenges by helping learners, educators, and families heal (Wong & Mishra, 2021).

Finally, this book itself is an example of humanizing polyphonic discourse, living by the ideals that it preaches. Though each chapter in this book is complete in and of itself, it is the way in which these different pieces speak to each other that give this book its intellectual heft.

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