SIG 25 Newspaper 2 (EARLI)

Interview Series: The role of theory and philosophy in Educational Science

Interview with Eugene Matusov: Introduction

In this interview, Eugene Matusov develops his take on an alternative to what he sees as a positivist paradigm and its associated concept(s) of truth. In doing so, he explicates the relationship between theory and practice and contemplates the role of dialogue. However, he is not talking about dialogues in general, but a particular dialogic attitude: personalized dialogues which radically turn to the subjectivity of all research participants rather than seeking to erase it, or hide it. The researcher's own subjectivity is no exception. What kind of educational research could we expect from that, and how to conceptualize such an approach?

Tina Kullenberg

Theory and practice relationship in Dialogic Pedagogy

Tina: Do you remember when we talked about this in Bergen? We talked about the need to situate theory in the educational practice, from your perspective…

Eugene: Yes.

Tina: You developed an interesting concept in our conversation. You defined theory as "humanization of practice". Can you elaborate on this, please?

Eugene: Yes, well, I guess in Bergen we started to talk about the relationship between theory and practice, right?

Tina: Yes.

Eugene: Yes, traditionally, it's the idea of theory that generalizes practice, and it takes important patterns from the practice and verifies them. Then theory starts guiding the practice by implementing the theory. Theory becomes not just a *guiding* force, but also it makes the practice technical. Theory, generalized knowledge, leads to a technology. I see two aspects of this. We can use the Aristotelian notions of knowing like "episteme" and "techné" (among others). From this point of view, theory – episteme – is generalized and verified patterns of the practice. And then it transfers back to practice as technology as "know-how" – a chain of instructions or rules that predictably leads to the practical success when skillfully applied.

It's related to the notion of practice. It's basically the theory in this kind of classical idea of theory; the positivistic idea of theory. It's about how to transform any *praxis* into *poiesis* (again using the Aristotelian terms). In *poiesis*, the practice's goal and the definition of its quality pre-exist the practice itself in advance. In *praxis*, the practice's goal and the definition of its quality emerge in the practice itself and they don't pre-exist in advance. This is how I see how conventional science is trying to deal with theory and practice. Currently, there are attempts to technologize the practice of teaching by so-called "research-based teaching" or "evidence-based teaching." These efforts are aimed at transforming the art of teaching (i.e., *praxis*) into the technology of teaching (i.e., *poiesis*). Thus, a teacher becomes a pedagogical technician rather than a pedagogical artist.

Tina: Before we leave this idea of the need to ground theory in practice and your idea of the "humanization of practice". Is it a kind of a more dialogic epistemology then?

Eugene: Well, yeah, and this is a kind of a different approach… First of all, I want to say that when we talk about grounded theory it is not Grounded Theory in the sense how Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss defined that in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It's perhaps inspired by Grounded Theory rather than that version, because Grounded Theory also became very technological.

Tina: Yes, it employs a lot of procedures…

Eugene: They try to create a research technology that leads reliably to a grounded theory rather than an art of it! Basically, they want to be positivistic in a classical way, and they try to achieve that. They (at least Glaser) also try to fully eliminate subjectivity of researchers and that leads to this classical version of Grounded Theory. So, what I was talking about is not Grounded Theory in *that* sense, but a grounded theory in the sense that theory emerges from data.

But what is interesting in the *dialogic* approach is that the theory does not necessarily involve the idea of generalization. Let's talk about that! In this dialogic approach, theory is not about verified generalization or creating a universal kind of statements about the world (which can be conditional but still universal). In the *dialogic* approach, a researcher tries to "humanize" the practice: tries to start asking questions about the practice, and, thus, to engage that practice in dialogue about its meaning and values for diverse participants and beyond. It's about engaging myself and others in critical deconstruction of the practice.

Tina: Aha, that's a good explanation. Can we also compare it with our recent publication (Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, Kullenberg, & Curtis, 2019)?

Eugene: Yes, this is what we were trying to do, I think. In our paper, we were talking about dialogic analysis as humanization of an educational practice. We asked involved researchers, involved teachers, involved students, our future readers and ourselves questions like "is it good?", "is it bad?," "why?", "good for what?", "good for whom?", "What are the limitations of such a goodness?", "When does good become bad and, again, bad for whom, for what?" and so on. It's about extracting embedded values of the teachers, students, researchers, and our own, while testing them against alternative values, like, "why do we practice them in these ways and not others"? We (as researchers) expect that we are also colonized by cultural values that might be invisible to us or uncritically accepted. Dialogic analysis turns back to this idea: We should be masters of our cultural values and not let the culture be mastering us.

It's not about whether it is *my* or somebody else's value or not, but why I like, or do I really like it, and why? Maybe I don't really like it. Maybe we don't even like the values. Maybe I do not even *see* them as values, maybe I think it is just natural. Dialogic analysis helps to recognize what we do as a cultural value chosen among other possible cultural values. And, in dialogue, all issues are emerging, and while they are emerging, they are also returning back to the practice… In this kind of dialogic approach, theory is about the entire dialogue that tries to deconstruct, cognize, ethicize, and humanize the practice. It's not about particular statements about practice, but Theory is the whole dialogue. Theory with the capital T is this critical dialogue, and in this case, it includes disagreements. Theory doesn't need to be cohesive. And, by the way, positivism is a part of this dialogue: this classical version of positivism. There's nothing wrong with issues about verification or universality or generalizability of observed patterns. All these are legitimate questions to ask, but contra-questions should be also asked because these patterns might be not universal or not generalizable, and that's fine as well.

Tina: Yeah, it sounds like the idea of a non-finalized approach to research. You can bring it up but never conclude…

Eugene: Yes, it is unfinalizable, not just unfinalized (see Nikulin, 2010). So, in this case the theory with a capital T is unfinalizable. It can be questioned and forever questionable. As American Bakhtinian philologist Gary Saul Morson wrote, "truth becomes dialogically tested and forever testable'' (Morson, 2004, p. 319). I think it can be applied to Theory. But on the other hand, it doesn't necessarily mean that everything can go, that we can be sure they are not true in our dialogues. They may be true, not fully, but partially. And it's not like, "let's agree or disagree". That relativism is not dialogue. That's the end of dialogue. It's nothing more to talk about. But considering alternative statements or open discussions in dialogue means that the statements people make in dialogues are not necessarily equal in truth to each other. These statements are to be tested in dialogue by the participants' minds, hearts, experiences, and fates.

Back to the relationship of Theory and practice, dialogized by Theory the practice then becomes more human. More humane, in the sense that it's not that we now are *implementing* theory into the practice, but rather now we are really guided by what we are learning in this Theoretical dialogue that critically investigates the practice. Theory follows the practice, leads it, and co-insides with it.

Tina: Do I understand you correctly in terms of the critical task you ascribe educational research? Are dialogues ultimately critical to established norms, truths or practices, or should they be? What if they are not? Do "uncritical" dialogues also have the potential to constitute dialogical research designs?

Eugene: Now to your second question. For me, the critical feature of the dialogue is NOT primarily to establish the truth (or even truths – subjective "*pravdas*" in Russian), or the good norms of the practice. It's rather to reveal, examine, and test our values/biases, why and whether we really like them against alternative values. From this point of view, "uncritical dialogues" – the revelation of some alternative statements, opinions, goals, values, desires, truths-pravdas, which are not yet thrown in testing these alternatives – constitute the core of the Critical Dialogue. The "uncritical dialogues" constitute the heart-and-mind material for the Critical Dialogue to examine through testing. Does it make sense? What do you think?

Tina: Yes, it makes sense! I like the idea. It seems to be an original twist… The idea that uncritical dialogues in fact may constitute the core of the Critical Dialogue, in your reasoning. Do you mean these dialogues could be seen as uncritical because of the somewhat loose, infinite nature? In contrast to communicative critique as more dogmatic statements or argumentations?

Eugene: I don't think that "uncritical dialogues" lost something from the Critical Dialogue. Rather its reverse, they didn't acquire something yet, namely testing the exposed values rooted in the participants' ideas and desires. However, "uncritical dialogues" can also be unfinalizable, if this is what you are asking.

Tina: So, you don't see the task of dialogic pedagogy-research as a critical one, or have I got it all wrong? I mean, in the sense of critically approaching values or axiological issues in significant but unfinalizing pedagogical dialogues?

Eugene: No, let me clarify my point, please. I see exactly the goal of dialogic research as being a critical one. I just disagree that it is about searching for (the) truth or norms as its primary goal. However, as secondary goals, searching for the/a truth or good norms can be also OK. The latter is often a sphere of positivist dialogue (see for example, Habermas, Latour). I'm nothing against it, when this positivist dialogue is embedded in the Critical Dialogue of values and desires (see our article, Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, Kullenberg, and Curtis, 2019).

Tina: OK, thanks! Besides, once you told me about another kind of truth in the Russian culture and language: "the istina-truth". As I remember it, this kind of truth instead refers to objective norms, like universal ones? If so, do such truths belong to a non-dialogic paradigm beyond the positivistic notion of truth (cf. Bakhtin's notion of the Exact Science and its conception of truth, in "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences" Bakhtin 1986, pp. 160-172)?

Eugene: The concept of the *istina-truth* has been nicely developed by Positivism (although, of course, it had preexisted in many cultures as folk lore). It's the absolute truth about the world that exists "out there," independently of the human consciousness and subjectivity. To approximate to the *istina-truth*, one must eliminate any subjectivity from the statements about the world. Of course, it's never fully possible, and Positivism agrees with that, insisting on approximating to *the istina*, but never fully reaching it.

In his late methodological essay, Bakhtin started investigating a *pravda-truth* of Positivism, as a form of dogmatic monologism, and its limitations. In my understanding, Bakhtin's resolution of the Positivism vs. Dialogism tension was the following: let the Exact Sciences, studying voiceless objects, be legitimately ruled by Positivism; while let the so-called Human Sciences (i.e., social sciences + humanities), studying people, be primary ruled by Dialogism assisted by Positivism. While I agree with Bakhtin's second part of his resolution, I'm taking an issue with the first one. I think that Dialogism, in Bakhtin's philosophical sense of this term, also penetrates the Exact Sciences (and Positivism itself), and, thus, has to be legitimately recognized as a secondary force in the Exact Sciences (see, Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Gradovski, 2019). In the Exact Sciences, Positivism is primary, while Dialogism is secondary. In the Human Sciences, Dialogism is primarily, while Positivism is secondary. In my view, Positivism must be reaffirmed, protected, limited, and criticized at the

same time to define its legitimate truth and its limitation. This is especially important to do when we live in times of a frontal assault on Positivism by "alternative facts" and "the post-truth regime." Incidentally, I think this is true about Dialogism as well – finding its limitations – but, I think, the latter point is much more inherent in Critical Dialogism than in Positivism. What do you think?

Tina: Very thought-provoking reflections... Yes, I agree with you that Dialogism should be recognized in Bakhtin's "Exact Science" and that Positivism, along with other scientific traditions, ideally has to be reaffirmed, adjusted and tested in and through new contexts, societies and so on.

I think that all kinds of scientific reasoning, also the paradigm of Positivism, are ultimately ingrained in human dialogues, and are socially constructed in this respect. As such, they should therefore be viewed as human practices and why, then, should we exclude the notion of Dialogism from that? Researched objects are never value-free, that is, detached from cultural and ideological sense-making. They are constituted socially and need to be continuously dialogized in order to make sense (especially critical sense, as you mentioned). At least from my point of view.

Thank you very much for this conversation, Eugene! I appreciated your thoughtful words and hope the readers will do it as well.

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences. *Speech genres and other late essays* (pp. 160-172). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Matusov, E., Marjanovic-Shane, A., & Gradovski, M. (2019). *Dialogic Pedagogy and Polyphonic Research: Bakhtin by and for Educators*: Palgrave Macmillan.

Matusov, E., Marjanovic-Shane, A., Kullenberg, T., & Curtis, K. (2019). Dialogic analysis vs. discourse analysis of dialogic pedagogy: Social science research in the era of positivism and post-truth. *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal*, 7. doi:https://doi.org/10.5195/dpj.2019.272, pp. E20-E62.

Morson, G. S. (2004). The process of ideological becoming. In A. F. Ball & S. W. Freedman (Eds.), *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning* (pp. 317-331), doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511755002.016. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nikulin, D. (2010). *Dialectic and Dialogue*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.