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Anders Öhman, »The Dialogic Classroom: Bakhtin and the Valuating Perspective«

ABSTRACT
This article deals with the idea of the dialogic classroom and its influence on the pedagogic discussion in Sweden, especially in the teaching of literature as part of Swedish language education. Through a discussion of Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic, I argue that it is problematic to construct an opposition between experience-based teaching of Swedish and a more traditional approach that emphasises the literary canon. The teacher’s valutive relationship towards what he or she is teaching is important in order to initiate a dialogue with students, regardless whether the material being taught belongs to the literary canon or to popular literature. It is argued that Bakhtin’s theory has an unrecognized potential for the teaching of literature.

Anders Öhman, Professor of Literary Studies and Literary Education, Dept of Culture and Media Studies, Umeå University.

Keywords: dialogic classroom, Bakhtin, teacher’s valutive relationship

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In this article, I will examine the idea of the dialogic classroom, and its influence on the didactic discussion in recent years in Sweden. Most of my examples come from the teaching of literature, which is my field of research. However, I believe that the arguments have a more general applicability. While the notion of dialogue comes from Mikhail Bakhtin, the notion of the »dialogic classroom« was primarily introduced into the Swedish educational discussion by the Norwegian scholar Olga Dysthe and her book Det flerstämmiga klassrummet [The Multi-Voiced Classroom]. The American educational researcher Martin Nystrand, and particularly his Opening Dialogue, has also been highly influential in the Swedish context.

Partly through a discussion of Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic, I will argue that it is problematic to construct an opposition between »experience-based« pedagogy or didactics of the school subject Swedish and an approach that stresses the teaching of traditional literary history. The teacher’s valuating relationship towards what he or she is teaching, whether it concerns works belonging to the literary canon or works outside it, is of utmost importance in initiating a true dialogue with the students. Bakhtin’s theory has mainly been used in the discussion of didactics as a metaphor for the ideal relationship between teacher and student, emphasizing the way – i.e. the didactic how – this relation takes place. This discussion, and didactics in general, would benefit greatly from a clearer and more careful use the concept of dialogue. It is especially important to take the content – the didactic what – into account in the conception of the dialogic relation.

**Approaches to Teaching Swedish**

First I want to discuss the various didactic approaches to the teaching of Swedish, and the differences between these as they have been formulated in the context of the Swedish educational discourse. I then want to show that Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic should not be confined to one or other of these approaches, and that the real potential of the dialogic classroom is precisely to transgress them.

The influence of the notion of the dialogic classroom in Swedish educational discourse is due to what one might call the ‘social science turn’ in the teaching of Swedish for the last two decades or so. It is due also to the influence of cultural
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studies and the thought of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault on Swedish educational discussion and research. The reason why these intellectual trends have made such an impact is quite understandable and is linked to several different factors.

Cultural studies have contributed substantially to the insight that it is important to see every student in his or her unique cultural context. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to treat students as blank pages waiting to be filled with acquired and socially accepted knowledge. Every student attends school with a distinct cultural and social background; it is the teacher’s obligation to consider and refer to this. Although cultural studies did not exclude the analysis of literature, it tended to focus on the use of cultural phenomena by various subcultures, such as punks, rockers and skinheads, which to a large extent were based on musical preferences. By taking bits and pieces from different cultural products, or works of art, subcultures put them together in a new way – a kind of *bricolage* – in order to express and construct a distinctive and often oppositional identity.³ Today, it is not so much subcultures built around musical trends that are of interest to cultural studies, but experiences of new digital media, such as computer games, fan fiction, video games and so on.

The influence of cultural studies has contributed to the focusing on social and cultural aspects in educational discourse. One example is the view of the subject Swedish as *experience-based pedagogy*. At the end of the 1980s, the literary scholar Lars-Göran Malmgren, who belonged to the so-called *pedagogic group* at the Department of Comparative Literature at Lunds University, distinguished between three different approaches to the teaching of Swedish in schools. The first was what he called Swedish as *proficiency subject*. This approach to teaching Swedish focused mainly on making the students practise language skills; the Swedish language was above all to be instrumental to the students. The study of literature had a relatively small part in this form of pedagogy, whose function was mainly to support the acquisition of language skills. ⁴

The second approach to the subject Swedish was labelled by Malmgren *education in literary history*. This focused on the reproduction of a literary heritage in which all students were to take part in order to promote a common cultural identity. Cultural heritage consisted of a selection of what was regarded as the most valuable literary works in Swedish, in other words a literary canon. Language and grammar were studied as independent entities.

The third form of the subject Swedish was termed by Malmgren *experience-based didactics*. This approach differed from the other two by taking as its point of departure the special circumstances and experiences of the actual group of
students. The purpose was to develop the student’s social and historical understanding of important human issues. Literature was important not because it was part of the cultural heritage or the canon, but because it represented in different forms all kinds of human experience. Malmgren’s three approaches to Swedish were certainly influenced by Stephen Ball’s four forms of English: English as skills, English as the great literary tradition, progressive English and English as critical literacy.

Malmgren’s and the pedagogic group’s analysis of the different forms of teaching Swedish has been highly influential in educational discourse in Sweden, although it is not in any way an unanimous discourse. It is important to add that Malmgren declares that the categories are very seldom to be found in a pure form. They are often mixed, however one can generally distinguish a dominant trend. The impact on the teaching of Swedish by the category Malmgren labels »proficiency teaching« has long been the predominant trend in the teaching of Swedish, as Karin Dahl has shown in an interesting study.

Among more radical pedagogues, however, it is the approach to teaching Swedish as experience-based didactics that has come to be seen as the ideal, in stark opposition to the other versions. Kerstin Bergöö, who herself endorses this version, argues that the curricula of compulsory and grammar schools in Sweden have been highly influenced by experience-based pedagogy. She argues that in recent years there has been a displacement of focus »from immanent linguistic and immanent literary knowledge to socially oriented learning«.

In her study on training teachers of Swedish, Bergöö discerns two different factions among those responsible for teaching them. One emphasizes the future teachers’ knowledge about language and literature. Using Malmgren’s terminology, Bergöö declares that this group takes both the proficiency approach and the literary-historical approach. The other faction advocates a much broader notion of Swedish. This contains theories about the individual, knowledge about students and their ideas, knowledge about different didactic and pedagogical strategies, and knowledge about the organisation of the educational system. This faction, according to Bergöö, represents an experience-based approach and, with its wider conception of the subject Swedish, contains strong features of a more critical and historically questioning notion of the discipline. Bergöö adds that, »This includes a social view on learning, what Dysthe (1996) sums up with the concept ‘the dialogic classroom’«.

Although Bergöö is more outspoken than others in her advocacy for a more »social view« on learning, she still is representative for those who support experience-based pedagogy. Bourdieu and Foucault have made it possible to understand the teacher as a representative of societal power discourse and as a carrier of symbolic and cultural capital. This understanding
is vital in order for the teacher to be aware of his or her problematic position between society and the students. The teacher is regarded as having a reproductive function for social and symbolic power. However, experience-based didactics – at least as Bergöö formulates it – also includes the Bakhtinian theory of the dialogic.

--- THE DIALOGIC CLASSROOM ---

The concept of dialogue, in the way Dysthe and Bergöö use it, entails that every student in the classroom is seen for what he or she is culturally and socially, and that a climate is created where the students have the confidence to voice themselves and to expect to be listened to. Of course, treating the student’s cultural and social background as the most important factor in the learning process is a laudable approach. However, if it focuses on the student’s experiences alone, it risks being as one-dimensional as the exclusive teaching of canonical works. In both cases, there is no meeting ground between student, content and teacher.

According to Dysthe, the monologic classroom is characterized by »mediated lectures«, in other words teacher-managed questions and answers where the emphasis lies on being correct. The dialogic classroom, on the other hand, is characterized by an open and searching relationship, where teachers try to elicit and make use of the student’s experiences and values. Martin Nystrand also stresses the importance of »dialogic instruction«, where the teacher genuinely tries to enter into conversation with students. Among other things, this implies avoiding asking »inauthentic questions«, in other words questions whose sole purpose is to test what students already know.

Of course, Dysthe’s and Nystrand’s suggestions are both urgent and vital for realizing a multi-voiced classroom. The multi-voiced classroom is perhaps more necessary than ever, with the massive increase in demands to standardize and assess knowledge, not only in Sweden, but also in the United States and other Western European countries. In the pursuit for a qualitatively better school, the complexity of knowledge and learning is often reduced to more or less static and reductive operations of measurement.

However, both Dysthe and Nystrand miss an important point in Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue. They concentrate on the conversation between the teacher and the student, but fail to recognize one important aspect of that relation, namely the content of their conversation. This might be a consequence of applying a theory from another subject area in what is basically a metaphorical way. Because of this problematic reception of Bakhtin, I think that Dysthe and Nystrand, and others who have applied Bakhtin’s theory to didactics, have interpreted his notion of dialogue in a somewhat reductive manner.
BAKHTIN AND THE THEORY OF DIALOGUE

Had they embraced the full potential of Bakhtin’s theory, they might have called into question the common view of the teacher’s role in the classroom, and the power that the teacher exercises with his or her “symbolic” or “cultural” capital. This can apply to everything from the social power of the educational system to more concrete actions in the classroom, such as when Dysthe regards a teacher who is lecturing as exhibiting monologic behaviour.

What then characterizes Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic mode? To begin with, it is crucial that he developed his concept of dialogue in relation to the novel. The dialogic mode means something different and much more complex than a situation in which a multitude of voices are able to speak to one another. At a first glance, one might assume that theatre is the most dialogic of arts: after all, drama’s most distinctive feature is dialogue. Instead, Bakhtin insists that drama belongs to the monologic genres. This doesn’t mean a depreciation of drama, but simply a way to define it. The characters in a play, Bakhtin said, are in a literal sense the author’s mouthpiece. There is no mediated speech in which several voices, or several perspectives and values, confront one another in one utterance – so called hybridized speech. Both poetry and drama contain inherent formal traits that make them monologic in Bakhtin’s terms. So why is the novel for Bakhtin the dialogic form?

In Bakhtin’s early work, from the end of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s, he tries to show what is characteristic of literary representation in general – what its secret consists of.10 His conclusion is that creation is an objectifying process that gives the characters what seems to be a life of their own, independent of their creator. Obviously, they are still figments of the author’s imagination; but in order to become characters the author has to view them from the outside and in their environment. Just as Bakhtin proposes that we obtain ourselves through the other, so the fictive character obtains itself and its context from the author. This makes the characters in the novel autonomous creatures.

Autobiographical writing is a good illustration of this. In order to be able to write autobiographically, one must construct an image of oneself. This image is not wholly congruent with the image one has inside oneself. The constructed subject becomes another to whom the writing subject can relate and speak. A number of contemporary Swedish writers, including Maja Lundgren and Carina Rydberg, take this mechanism to the extreme by appearing in their autobiographical novels as protagonists with their real names. This has caused heated debates. However, what some critics and readers fail to understand is that the protagonist need not be synonymous with the biographical person. Rather, the protagonist is a version of the author.
In Bakhtin’s early texts, which set the basis for his future theory, he does not articulate the notion of the dialogic imagination as such. It is in *Dostoevsky’s Poetics* that he takes the crucial step towards dialogic thinking. Here, he shifts his focus from characters as created objects to the relationship between the author-creator and characters, and between the characters themselves. Bakhtin’s concern is now the discrepancy between the author-creator and the characters. While the author-creator gives life to his creatures, it is the rendition of their speech that reveals the friction between author and character. This tension is what makes the novel dialogic. Essentially – and this is very important for my argument – this relationship consists of a valuating perspective.

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**THE VALUATING PERSPECTIVE**

When the author-creator describes what a character says or thinks, he or she valuates the utterance from an exterior position. It is the content of the utterance that forms the valuation and, in some cases, the response. Hybrid or double-voiced utterances, in other words utterances where one can observe the speech of the character being valued by the author-creator, and where the character and the author-creator not always agree, are plentiful in the novel. There is an obvious friction in the utterances. This is perhaps why writers sometimes say that characters start to live their own life, and that they can never be sure which path they are going to take. Bakhtin, however, would say that they do, not because they are independent from the author-creator, but because they show that they are different from him or her, and that there is a friction between them. The essential thing in Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic for the present discussion is therefore that it is neither a question of the independence nor of the fusion of views. Dialogue is always a matter of relational difference and never of harmonious unity.

The idea of the relationship as a difference in values recurs in various aspects of Bakhtin’s thought. It is worth noting that the monologic mode for Bakhtin consists not only of authoritarian and dogmatic attitudes, but is also relativistic. In his book on Dostoevsky, he argues that “both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)”.

He returns to this when he discusses the importance of the author arranging a plot in such a way that the characters have the means to refract their voices towards each other.

In the novel it is therefore crucial that the author-creator regards his characters with a valuating gaze. The author-creator has what Bakhtin calls a “surplus of seeing”, which is what completes the characters. This completion can occur only when the author-creator enters into dialogue with them, judging them...
and, like characters among each other, taking a perspective towards them.

The valuating relationship is essential to Bakhtin’s thinking. He declares that the aesthetic view is wholly dependent on the author taking a stand as a witness and judge towards his or her characters. Towards the end of his life, he declared that this means not that a protagonist receives an »epitaph«, whether positive or negative, but that the protagonist receives the author’s attention. He can be regarded »good, beautiful‘ and so on, these epitaphs can be totally negative, he can be bad, piti-
ful, [...] but to him my whole aesthetic attention is directed.«.12 In other words, the important thing is the process of judging; the gaze always consists of supplying an opinion of some sort.

The valuation is therefore central to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue, and not just as an element of the novel or of aesthetics in general. Values are at the very centre of the creation of meaning — or, as Bakhtin formulates it, the rise of a consciousness in the world. The original appearance of consciousness means that the material world for the first time has a witness and a judge; it has stopped simply being, and has started being in and for itself, as well as for the other: »it has been reflected in the consciousness of the other (the witness and the judge): this has caused it to change radically, to be enriched and transformed«.13 Evaluation is therefore crucial in the creation of meaning. Bakhtin states quite frankly that understanding »is impossible without evaluation. Understanding cannot be separated from evaluation: they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act«.14 The importance of Bakhtin’s valuating difference and its full potential is missing in the idea of the dialogic classroom.

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Dialogue in the Classroom

The point of departure for Dysthe’s vision of the multi-voiced classroom is that communication in the classroom occurs through interaction both between teacher and students, and between the students themselves. The monologic classroom, on the other hand, is »dominated by mediating lectures, questions directed solely by the teacher and sequences of answers, where the aim is to come up with the right answer and where the main emphasis is on the ability to memorize and reproduce«.15

How, then, is it possible to realize the vision of the dialogic classroom? According to Olga Dysthe, the teacher needs to be open-minded and »searching«, and to allow different practices of oral communication and literacy to benefit each other. It should be emphasized that Dysthe is careful not to harmonize. Even if she sometimes stresses the importance of interaction between different voices in the classroom, and that the multi-voiced class makes it possible for a broad spectrum of voices to be heard, she points out that Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue
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consists of differences. This is why the teacher must try to «provoke differences and distinctions, encourage dialogue and make different opinions clearly recognizable», 16

Nevertheless, I think there is a risk that Dysthe’s version of the dialogic classroom remains superficial, concerned with formal techniques such as «mini-lectures» and switching between written and oral tasks, or with the importance of response from the teacher and open and «authentic» questioning. There is certainly nothing wrong with these kinds of techniques, but there is a tendency to treat knowledge as if it were something unproblematic or neutral. On the contrary, the most important thing is not that the teacher is aware of the risk of lectures becoming monologic, but that he or she takes a position towards the knowledge and material he/she is teaching in the classroom.

In order to have a dialogue in Bakhtin’s sense of the word, the important thing is that the teacher has an attitude towards the topic that he or she is teaching. The problem then is not whether the lecture is long or short. The dialogue is never only a dual relation, in this case a conversation between teacher and student, but is a triadic relation; the conversation always concerns something, always has a content. It is something to which participants in the dialogue bear witness, but which can also bear witness to them in the way that it appeals and addresses them. The importance of the triadic relation has not been obvious in discussions of Bakhtin’s thought. Sigmund Ongstad is an exception in claiming Bakhtin’s work to be «mainly triadic», contrary to the majority of commentators, who tend to classify it as dualistic. 17

To use a Bakhtinian phrase, the teacher must therefore have intonated his or her teaching material in order to enter into a dialogue with the students and their intonation. Attempting this is extremely important in order to approach a dialogic classroom, even if one does not necessarily talk about it in Bakhtinian terms.

To intonate means to bear witness to a phenomenon, to have a perspective on what you are teaching, be it a novel by August Strindberg or the television series The Wire. One might say that one has made it one’s own, left one’s mark on it, in the sense that one has valued or responded to it. The most important thing a teacher can do for their students, which all teaching ultimately aims at, is to get students to learn to intonate the knowledge and the content of the curriculum themselves. Learning includes establishing a relationship, achieving a perspective and becoming aware of different kinds of phenomena. It means bearing witness to and becoming a judge of circumstances, of the people and things that surround us in the world, in other words valuating and issuing judgement. The teachers must first valuate themselves, and then make the
students valuate from their different and unique perspectives.

Dysthe’s discussion of the importance of different techniques can be very useful. However if it only concerns communication in a general sense, there is a risk of formalisation, of not entering in a true dialogue, at least in the way Bakhtin understands it.

The need for valuating has implications for the way one looks at traditional or canonized knowledge, and for the question of the teacher’s power in the classroom. If the teacher is merely the mediator of generally accepted knowledge and the cultural power, it is because he or she hasn’t adopted an independent attitude. If this is the case, he or she becomes a purveyor of information, instead of having a valuating perspective.

Partly due to the influence of Bourdieu and Foucault, there has been a tendency in theoretical debates on didactics in Sweden to make the (unaware and uncritical) teacher a representative of power and the bearer of cultural and social capital. Gun Malmgren, for example, states in an important study that there are two different positions in the teaching of Swedish. An »academic-based subject with the mediation of given literary material is opposed to a student-oriented teaching of the mother tongue, based on an experiential connection, which aims towards social development more than cultural reproduction«.18

It takes both knowledge and commitment to prevent the teacher being a mediator of tradition and social power. In everything that he or she does in the classroom, the teacher must be prepared to bear witness, to deliver his or her perspective, and to try, as an author does, to design a plot. This plot, which is triggered by the didactic question »why?, is the thread that the student’s perspective must relate to and refract. Naturally, in this process it is crucial that the teacher knows who his or her characters really are, in other words his or her students’ social and cultural background. This might be seen as a triadic encounter between the teacher, the student and the subject.

Placing value and valuation at the centre of the dialogic classroom also has other implications, which I can’t dwell upon here. It suffices to conclude that valuation does not simply determine what is good and what is bad. Values are something that one must be prepared to discuss, negotiate, provoke and defend.

Finally, my reservation that Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic mode primarily concerned the novel is not just a caution about the applicability of theoretical notions from one subject area to another. The novel, and perhaps fictional texts wherever we find them, whether in books, computers or television, is a magnificent model for showing us how the world comes into being by being given shape and value. Fiction is unsurpassable as a witness and judge on the world, and our place and our actions in it.
ENDNOTES

1 Olga Dysthe, Det flerstämmiga klassrummet. Att skriva och samtala för att lära (Lund: 1996).
5 Malmgren, Svensknundervisning i grundskolan, 89.
9 Bergöö, Vilket svenskmän?, 119.
13 Michail Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, eds Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: 1986), 137.
14 Bakhtin, Speech Genres, 142.
15 Dysthe, Det flerstämmiga klassrummet, 118.
16 Dysthe, Det flerstämmiga klassrummet, 121.