

# Dialogue, difference, and imagination: Building a conceptual framework for a pedagogy of imaginative dialogue

Anundsen, T. W., Waage, I. Ó, Boven, M., & Anttila, E.

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## Abstract

This article aims to outline key theoretical concepts for a pedagogy of imaginative dialogue, and explore the theoretical foundations for these concepts. The empirical foundations for this investigation are teacher and student experiences from an ongoing project with the same name, abbreviated *PIMDI*. These foundations are particularly drawn from a student–teacher workshop in Helsinki in October 2021, and a recorded dialogue between four teachers in the project, January 2022. Based on these materials, we present and explore three concepts that emerged as important points of inspiration behind the project; *dialogue*, *difference*, and *imagination*. The article thus offers some theoretical tools to develop and reflect on a pedagogical methodology in the making.

## 1: Preface: An imaginative dialogue

*An international group of students meets a group of elderly people in an assisted living community in Finland. The students study arts in different areas and in different ways; artistically, educationally, academically. The elderly people live with dementia, in different ways. In this meeting the students bring movements, objects to touch, colours, songs. The two groups interact; touching grains, feeling various textures, listening to their sounds. Because of the language barriers, it is hard to engage in a regular dialogue, but still everyone in the room seems fully concentrated on their shared experiences.*

[\[Insert image; hands touching grains\]](#)

This is one example of students' early interpretations and responses to a 'pedagogy of imaginative dialogue', abbreviated *PIMDI*, which is also the title of a 3-year collaboration project between four different European Master's programmes in the fields of art and arts education.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to outline key theoretical concepts of a pedagogy of imaginative dialogue, and explore the theoretical foundations for these concepts.

The writing of this article started with a recorded dialogue between four members of the staff from each of the four institutions, from four countries, involved in the PIMDI project: Ingimar (IS) and Tormod (NO) posing questions about the conceptual background of PIMDI to two of the founding members of the project, Eeva (FI) and Gudrun (NL).<sup>2</sup> This meeting brought up three core concepts that a *pedagogy of imaginative dialogue* may build on. The first two, *dialogue* and *imagination*, are quite self-evidently elemental to the notion of imaginative dialogue, whereas a third concept of *difference* complements and deepens this framework, and gives it a direction. Each of these three concepts has its own conceptual history, and this article seeks to explore how these ideas and concepts may be utilized in building a pedagogical model that can be applied in arts education and exploratory dialogical practices. Before discussing these concepts in more detail, we will give a short introduction to the project itself.

### **Background: The PIMDI project**

PIMDI – the *Pedagogy of Imaginative Dialogue* – is an exploratory arts educational project between four higher education institutions in the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Iceland, the aim of which is to explore and develop the imaginative dialogue as a pedagogical tool that can be used within the education of arts, as well as creating ways for arts education to situate itself in and relate to contemporary society through dialogical methodologies,

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<sup>1</sup> The project involves four partners from four European countries:

- The Master of Education in Arts at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen, a joint degree with NHL Stenden University at Leeuwarden in the Netherlands. (Hanzehogeschool Groningen & NHL Stenden Hogeschool)
- The Master Arts Education at the Iceland University of the Arts in Reykjavik in Iceland. (Listaháskóli Íslands)
- The Master of Fine Arts at the University of Agder in Norway. (UiA)
- The Master Dance pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki in Finland. (Taideyliopisto)

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the interview, Eeva was identified as a co-founder of the project, but later also became one of the co-authors of the article.

addressing pressing issues such as paradoxes of democratization, societal diversity, or polarization.

The ideas behind the *Pedagogy of imaginative dialogue* particularly grew from an increasing awareness within the master's programme *Education in the Arts*<sup>3</sup> in Groningen, the Netherlands, of how a broad diversity among their students had become increasingly pronounced; students had very different backgrounds regarding their disciplines, demographics, age, social status, and so forth. As teachers invited students to explore their differences and learn from them, *difference* eventually began to emerge as a central concept in the master's programme itself, with students even starting their own learning communities, applying these ideas in their own teaching.

Gudrun states:

We had diverse students of all ages, with different backgrounds from various disciplines, and we were convinced that they all could learn a lot from each other. (...) So, while the idea of a dialogue and learning from the differences of each other is interesting, it also introduces the question of practicality; *how* can we learn from the differences?

The teachers found that in order to learn from the differences, they needed to go further than what a methodology of conventional discussions allowed, and tried taking *dialogue* to a different methodological level by giving it practical and artistic directions, and further by situating dialogues in personal experiences, meanings, backgrounds, and histories.

We think that the dialogue can be deepened. You enter the dialogue with your personal experiences, your history and background within a complex society where there is a lot to explore—but then you need a direction to move on. For that we ask if we can find methods or exercises that make the direction visible. [[Gudrun in interview / dialogue, January 2022](#)]

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<sup>3</sup> At Hanze University of applied sciences, <https://www.hanze.nl/eng>

The methods and exercises introduced to develop the dialogues would be explorative, embodied or sensory approaches from art and arts education. These experiences informed the initiative for the PIMDI project.

## **2: Difference**

The discourses on difference and diversity in European contexts tend to gravitate towards ethnicity and multicultural questions. Seeing diversity more universally may – without masking the critical and necessary themes related to European colonial history or cultural diversity – perhaps be a useful tool to establish a pedagogy that not only embraces difference (i.e. multiculturalist approaches), or, in Hegelian terms: offers *recognition*, but one where difference is the resource that creates the pedagogical dynamic.

Dilemmas of multiculturalist politics of recognition are highlighted by Appiah, Gutmann and Taylor (1994), who weigh the (justified) claims from societal minorities for recognition of difference against the risk of *producing* difference, as politics of recognition also tend to identify and label the differences it seeks to recognize.<sup>4</sup>

Deleuzian philosophy of difference is also known as positive philosophy of difference as it rejects foundationalism and “totalitarianism” that marginalize or attempt to eliminate that which is different. It strives toward multiplicities and possibilities in life and the world rather than toward negative categorical difference that makes a separation or distinction between things (see, e.g, Löytönen 2017). It signifies a conceptual move from categorical difference to differentiation or becoming and seeing “...difference as a constitutive element in some part of our experience” (May 1997, 2).

According to Williams (2013, p. 65), such philosophy is interested in “how things become different, how they evolve and continue to evolve beyond the boundaries of the sets they have been distributed into”. In this view, categories are always illusory, as *being* resists categorization. In Deleuzian terms, “identity is only a cloak thrown over deeper pure differences” (Williams 2013, 61). The following paragraph is often quoted and seems important for our work as well:

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<sup>4</sup> See also Anundsen, 2014; 2021, for a discussion of these dilemmas

[E]very time we find ourselves confronted or bound by a limitation or an opposition, we should ask what such a situation presupposes. It presupposes a swarm of differences, a pluralism of free, wild or untamed differences; a properly differential and original space and time; all of which persist alongside the simplifications of limitation and opposition (Deleuze 1994, 50).

Such a notion of difference is informing our exploration of *imaginative dialogue* as a mode of education which, rather than simply trying to overcome differences, uses the notion of difference to increase awareness about the process of valuing (and categorizing) as such, highlighting its historical and social conditions.

### **3: Dialogue**

[F]irst of all we should understand liberating dialogue not as a technique, a mere technique, which we can use to help us get some results. We also cannot, must not, understand dialogue as a kind of tactic we use to make students our friends. This would make dialogue a technique for manipulation instead of illumination.

(Paulo Freire in Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 15)

Much has been written about dialogical education, and how the properties of dialogue in education—as well as in society at large—challenge the monolithic structures of power and knowledge represented by the *monologue* (see e.g., Bakhtin, 1929/1984; Yakubinsky & Eskin, 1997; Freire, 1970). According to these critical perspectives, the agents of power structures—the teacher, the politician, the bureaucrat, the parent—represent what 'needs to be understood' and thus hold the power to declare the 'truth'. In contrast, *dialogue* can challenge such representations of truth and power, and comes as a way of *building* knowledge, not receiving it (Dewey, 1938). Pedagogies of dialogue have also been described as vehicles of liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and/or democracy (Dewey, 1916/1997).

In Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) understanding, dialogue is not about the best argument winning, nor about convincing the other party, but engaging in a process where you actually create or develop something—an understanding, an experience—together. Drawing on Bakhtin's work further, we may say that the problems of many ways of

theorizing dialogue are that they give too much importance to notions like the self and the other, as if these are pre-given to the dialogue. To Bakhtin, this element of *difference* (between 'self' and 'other') is thus not something that will or even can be overcome, but rather a prerequisite for the dynamics of existence, the relations which are described as *dialogical*. It is this relation that enables meaning-making.

From this perspective, we may say that participants in dialogue are a function of that very same dialogue. In other words, they are *produced* by the dialogue. Not in the radical sense that they have no existence outside of it, but similar to the way a 'rider' is being born as a function of the horse that he/she is riding. In the same way that the rider has different options and limitations when riding the horse, the interlocutors have different options/limitations within the confines of the dialogue. Also, rather than having a common point of view, they are embedded in the larger point of view (that of the dialogue) from which they emerge as interlocutors.

Martin Buber's (1878-1965) work may support building our argument further. In his essay *Ich und Du* (originally published in 1923, translated first in English in 1937 as *I and Thou*) he introduced his view of human existence as relational. He established that there are two kinds of relations: the I-It relation, where the other is an object, separate from I, and the I-You (or Thou) relation, where the other is part of I, but still the other. It is important to note here that in Buber's work, the other does not only refer to another human being but also to an inanimate object, natural phenomenon, artwork, or a spiritual being. The relational foundation of human existence means that a human being "becomes an I through a You" (Buber 1937/1970, p. 80).

Two notions coined by Buber support understanding dialogue as a holistic, embodied phenomenon: Inclusion (or embracing; *umfassung* in German) and turning towards the other. Inclusion refers to taking part in the other's experience, in other words, "experiencing the other side" (Buber 1947, 96).

From an educational point of view, it is important to note that according to Buber, not all dialogical relationships require mutual inclusion, and that relationships that consist of one-sided inclusion have not lost anything of their dialogical character. Buber confirms that there are many I-You relationships that "by their very nature may never unfold into

complete mutuality if they are to remain faithful to their nature” (Buber 1937/1970, 178). Pedagogical relationships are characterized by one-sided inclusion. This means that when an educator practices inclusion, s/he “experiences the pupil’s being educated, but the pupil cannot experience the educating of the educator” (Buber 1947, 100).

The second key notion, *turning towards the other*, refers to an inner orientation and intention that can be conceived as movement that is initiated from within. According to Buber” the basic movement of the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other” (1947, 22). Buber constantly emphasizes the essential nature of the turning towards the other in becoming a person. This basic movement of turning towards the other includes both an inner movement and bodily action, for example, the “very tension of the eyes’ muscles and the very action of the foot as it walks” (Buber 1947, 21). Buber explains: “If you look at someone and address him you turn to him, of course with the body, but also in the requisite measure with the soul” (1947, 22).

The merging of an inner attitude and outer movement integrates the mind and the body and can be understood as the basis for embodied dialogue. Dialogue, understood in this way, does not require language nor verbal communication. Buber (1947, 3) confirms that, “for a conversation no sound is necessary, not even a gesture” and that, “a shared silence can also be dialogue” (1947, 97). The following passage where Buber differentiates becoming aware from observing and looking may clarify the nonverbal nature of relational existence further:

It is a different matter when . . . a man meets me about whom there is something, which I cannot grasp in any objective way at all . . . But it means, says something *to me*, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life (Buber 1947, 9).

Becoming aware is about something entering one’s life in a way that cannot be analyzed or verbalized at the moment of the encounter. This something can be another human being but also, an animal, an artwork, or a spiritual being. Becoming aware denotes an I-Thou relationship, where observing and looking on are based on the subject and object as separate from each other. This means also that the observer or on-looker do not become transformed through the process of observing /looking on. When a human being becomes

aware s/he may become transformed. Becoming aware is based on the dialogical relationship between the object and the subject: the object becomes a part of the subject, of his/her life. For Buber, imagination as the ability to transform anything into You is a central capacity for relational existence (Buber 1937/1970).

#### **4: The role of imagination in dialogue**

*As the student invites the elderly residents to either move with her or to play a rhythm to accompany the movements, the man in the wheelchair next to me seems unable to follow up either initiative on his own. But I sense he wants to participate. So I take my rhythm egg and tap it gently to the beat into the open palm of his hand. He looks at me, and we continue playing together for as long as the activity lasts. Is this a dialogue? How will we know it is a dialogue? It certainly is imaginative. In my imagination; we play together, and also become part of the moving and playing ensemble. And I sense he is experiencing taking part in this dialogue, too, through the open palm of his hand which receives and invites the tactile, rhythmic element of playing together in an ensemble, which is always, in my experience, an imaginative dialogue.*

[Tormod, on imaginative dialogues in Helsinki October 2021]

Where does 'the imaginative' enter dialogue, and what does a methodology of 'imaginative dialogue' offer the existing field of dialogical pedagogy? While dialogue is a concept and a theoretical foundation that has been applied extensively in educational practice and theory, 'the imaginative' or 'imagination' is less applied and discussed. At a first level, imagination in this respect may be understood as ways of entering explorative dialogue beyond verbal communication, that is, to broaden or deepen dialogue by including aesthetic or sensory dimensions. Although this is an important property of our explorations, we will argue that the concept of imagination is, in itself, deeply embedded in the concept of dialogue. Or, as one student asked: "When is dialogue *not* imaginative?"



## **Social imagination, education and the arts**

John Dewey (1934) argues that imagination is needed for everything that goes beyond the level of direct physical response, and that imagination is a faculty that makes present that which is absent. To Dewey, the ability to see beyond what is directly available for the senses elucidates the educational power of the arts, as artistic activity invites us to interact creatively with social and physical reality.

American theorist Maxine Greene (2000) developed the concept of “*social imagination*” to explore the role of imagination in social development. Greene believes social imagination helps challenge oppressive structures, advocates for marginalised groups, and inspires transformative change. A core tenet of social imagination is empathy, as it allows for an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of others—allowing us to recognize their struggles and desires. Social imagination entails perceiving and interpreting social and cultural contexts while envisioning alternative possibilities and potential futures requiring active participation in shaping society. In her book, “*Releasing the Imagination*”, she writes that imagination,

[...] enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (Greene, 2000, p. 3)

According to Greene (2000, p. 19), “to tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real.” By using imagination “we extend our experience sufficiently to grasp it [other people’s world] as a human possibility” (Greene, 2000, p. 4). She defines social imagination as “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society” (Greene, 2000, p. 5). We need the capacity of imagination to see how things are, and to become aware how they could be otherwise.

## **Buber, Greene, and imaginative dialogues**

Going back to the brief narratives from imaginative dialogues in an elderly home – such as the sensory interactions of touching grains, or an open palm of a hand inviting or enabling playing a rhythmical instrument – Buber's notion of dialogical relationships as 'becoming aware' and 'turning towards the other' may expand on Greene's notions, and highlight how these encounters can be seen as dialogical and imaginative. In these examples, embodied, multisensory awareness and focused presence enabled the students and teachers to receive and respond to the other's – residents of an elderly home – embodied presence. This encounter may have had a deep impact on the students and teachers in an affective, visceral level where words are not needed for understanding otherness and difference. Difference, thus, becomes felt reality that “means, says something *to me*, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life” as Buber (1947, p. 9) articulates, or as Williams (2013, p. 65)—referring to Deleuzian philosophy of difference—elucidates: “It is not what you are or what this is, it is what you are becoming and why this becoming is significant for others and other things.” In this way, encountering difference prepares us to be open to constant differentiation within ourselves. This means that we may be better equipped to resist categorization and labeling others according to their observable characteristics. In the case of encountering elderly people, we may see more than an old person, or a person with reduced abilities to move, or a person with dementia: we may experience, dialogically, something happening that creates a surprising and affective 'us'. This affective impact on a personal level may become a political force, a dynamic energy and will to make a difference in the world. Thus, imaginative dialogical encounters may, as Greene points out, be significant in developing a sense of social justice, and becoming able to imagine and work for a different world.

## **5: Results & methodology**

Proposing a need to construct a methodology that puts the pressing issues of modern society – e.g., the paradox of democratization, societal diversity, and polarization – more into focus, the PIMDI project has proposed that a dialogue that learns from differences would be a viable path. Applying the theoretical concepts above (*imagination, difference*

and *dialogue*), a *pedagogy of imaginative dialogue* may be developed using artistic and sensory modes of encountering that invites dialogical ways to collectively *create & be created* (Bakhtin), to *turn towards* (Buber), and to *imagine what might become* (Greene). The broad realm of the arts – which is not discussed broadly in this paper – already provides a platform for exploring the tensions between incompatible values. We have proposed and explored *imaginative dialogue* as a playful and productive clash between contrasting values by using available artistic forms and strategies of interaction, and a mode of creating and exploring something together – while being created and explored.

After articulating an operational definition of the notion ‘dialogue’ and ‘difference’, explicating what we mean by ‘imaginative’, we have related theories of imagination (particularly Greene and Buber) to existing theories of dialogical education. This is entering a domain that is complex and intriguing. Working on these issues alternates between a desire to work on this theoretical complexity, and the practical need to find a framework within which to develop the imaginative dialogue as a practical exercise.

For this article, we have sought to present and discuss theoretical foundations that may inform and shape a pedagogy of imaginative dialogue, and through these theories also point to what such a methodology could do and where it could be situated. The further practical sides of developing such a methodology based on these ideas and tools will be covered in other publications in the PIMDI project, and, furthermore, remains an open invitation *from* the project.

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