

Interchange

Lyotard and Bakhtin: Engaged Diversity in Education

ALEXANDER SIDORKIN
Bowling Green State University

ABSTRACT: This article compares the views of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jean-François Lyotard on difference and diversity. Both philosophers elevate diversity on a higher level, considering it to be a fundamental fact of human existence rather than a temporary and superficial phenomenon. However, while Lyotard emphasized the depth of differences amongst various discourses and language games, Bakhtin thought of diversity as a form of connection. Lyotard envisioned a multitude of separate and internally coherent discourses, while Bakhtin traced diversity within each discourse as well as among them. The Bakhtinian notion of the polyphonic truth helps to move diversity from an abstract goal into a working part of the educational enterprise.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtin, dialogue, difference, diversity, Lyotard, multiculturalism, philosophy, polyphony, postmodernism, teachers.

Postmodern interpretations of diversity present a serious problem for education. Education involves changing someone else's view of the world, but how is it possible without imposing overarching totalizing truths? This paper offers an interpretation of diversity that could be useful for education. Depending on how we understand diversity, teachers can be assigned roles as uninvolved spectators or active participants in the educational drama of diversity. This article attempts to bring together the views of Lyotard and Bakhtin in order to develop a notion of engaged diversity as a foundation for postmodern education.

I begin with setting an imagery context for the issues of the postmodern education. An examination of Lyotard's defense of diversity leads me to question his assumptions about diversity. Then I turn to Bakhtin's writings and find his defense of diversity to be inviting for active engagement rather than delineation of boundaries. Bakhtin's

idea of polyphonic truth addresses Lyotard's problem of incommensurability of language games. And finally, I give a sketch of a possible pedagogy of engaged diversity.

Postmodernity Described but not Explained

Postmodernity for me is not as much a concept as a vivid image. It is a memory of walking during a particular high school lunch break a few years ago. It was a spring afternoon, students going through their lockers, a tall student languidly dribbling a ball, some voices angry, some joyful, a kid dancing, and a kid doing martial arts moves. The commotion was both pleasantly exciting and somewhat threatening. Mine were the eyes of a substitute teacher – a stranger enough to notice the familiar and an insider enough to remain unnoticed. Nothing really happened, just a walk through rather narrow and crowded school halls, yet I can still hear the sounds and feel the commotion. Many other school experiences blended together into that one walk, when a simple realization came to me. The spectacular and unabashed multitude of languages, accents, styles, dresses, shades of skin color, and racial features cumulatively made a powerful statement one has to be blind and deaf to miss: “we are here to stay.”

In America, diversity itself is not new. However, it was only recently that diversity firmly announced that it will not go away or diminish. I looked at the students and realized that they will grow up as different as they are now, and it is not in the school's power to become the melting pot once again.

Diversity has been perceived as temporary, and superficial. It appeared temporary because, in a historical perspective, the differences were meant to disappear in favor of American or humankind's unity. It appeared superficial, because deep down inside we all were supposed to be the same; the universal human nature, if only properly understood, would make our differences only skin-deep. This is just one way to invalidate difference. Another way is to proclaim diversity significant, but only as a problem in connection with the great difficulty teachers must face to overcome this diversity. “We have a very diverse student population” – a school principal says, meaning – “What can you expect of *these* kids?”

Many still perceive diversity as a curious anomaly. For instance, consider a political speech-writer's cliché: “Diversity is our strength.” At least two assumptions can be recovered from this cliché. First, diversity is reduced to a means toward some other goal. Without a useful function, diversity would have no point to exist. Second, diversity is *our*

strength, that is, some other nations do not possess it, and therefore are somewhat lesser than we are. The idea of diversity can then serve as a basis for exclusion. This brief example shows that there are many ways to overlook and dismiss diversity, and also ways of glorifying or utilizing it. Yet when I walk in the hallways of a school, the plurality of human worlds presents itself as an inescapable reality, regardless of whether one perceives it as a strength or as a threat. It simply demands respect, which in turn demands making sense of diversity.

Making sense of diversity brings a nagging feeling of worry. What is education, if not normalizing? How is education at all possible in the postmodern world? And most importantly, what are we, teachers, to do about it? Is there an active role to play without hurting diversity by exercising our authority? Does respect to difference imply non-interference?

Lyotard's Defense of Diversity

Postmodern philosophy has made a very effective effort to pay due respect to the issue of diversity. Lyotard's now famous definition states: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives" (1988, p. xxiv). This is a negative statement, and negative statements rarely make good definitions. Such formulaic negativity brought about a good deal of criticism against postmodernism, much of it deserving. However, one should bear in mind that this same statement springs from a perfectly positive assumption, namely, that difference, diversity, pluralism, and so on, truly matter. "I wonder, if the failing of modernity, could be connected to a resistance on the part of what I shall call the multiplicity of worlds of names, the insurmountable diversity of cultures" (Lyotard, 1993, pp. 30-31). For the purpose of this paper I will define postmodernism as the concern for the significance of difference and diversity. The meta-narratives, to which Lyotard is skeptical, represent the opposing concern for the significance of the universal.

In order to show that human diversity is neither accidental nor superficial, postmodernists emphasize the *depths* of difference. Lyotard, for instance, makes a point that various language games are incommensurable. Then he develops the notion of *differend*, that is, essentially, an impossibility of true understanding across discourses. His logic seems to be the following: the difference is significant, because it runs so deep, to the point of incommensurability. This is a perfectly acceptable move, and it sits well with observable facts of our lives. Examples of incommensurability are easy to find, and hard to deny.

In reviews of an earlier version of this paper, it was pointed out to me that Lyotard could not support total heterogeneity of discourses, because this would make movement from one discourse to another all but impossible. This is true; nowhere did Lyotard attempt to exaggerate the incommensurability. However, Lyotard's defense of diversity comes from that fact that he perceives diversity to be an important fact of reality. Lyotard respects diversity because it is there, because it exists. His is an ethical argument based on certain ontological premises. My aim is to suggest that Lyotard's way of showing the significance of diversity is not the only conceivable way. Something might be of great importance for reasons other than the scope of its existence. Mikhail Bakhtin presents an example of such an alternative logic. He respected diversity whether it is there or not there, which constitutes a normative claim without specific ontological assumptions. He wants to invent diversity if it did not exist. Or, to put it differently, his ontology is relational and thus thoroughly blended with his ethics.

Bakhtin: Similarities and Differences

As far as I know, Bakhtin never commented on postmodern philosophy. He shared some of the basic assumptions of postmodern writers, but also significantly differed from these writers. It is not among my goals to "classify" Bakhtin in relation to postmodernists, who are remarkably unclassified towards each other. Very few people would be interested to find out whether Bakhtin was a modernist, a postmodernist, or something else. More importantly, Bakhtin's writings possess a potential to contribute significantly to the debate on diversity in education, and this potential remains little noticed.

Bakhtin clearly understood the indefensibility of the modern concepts of universal truth. For instance, the following passage from Bakhtin could be as easily found in Lyotard's texts: "The consolidation of monologism and its permeation into all spheres of ideological life was promoted in modern times by European rationalism with its cult of unified and exclusive reason, and especially by the Enlightenment" (1984, p. 82). Bakhtin was obsessed with finding variety, difference, and polyphony everywhere he looked. As Caryl Emerson points out, "For Bakhtin ... what grace there is must be found in *drugost'* and *inakovost'* [otherness and otherwise-ness]; an ideal coming together is always predicated on subsequent departure and vigorous differentiation" (1997, p. 212).

Bakhtin's concern for diversity places him very close to Lyotard and other postmodernists. However, let us consider on what grounds

Bakhtin critiques modernity. Arguing about the ways ideas are used in monological thinking, Bakhtin states that, in idealist philosophy (which is the quintessential modernity for him), the unity of existence is replaced by the unity of consciousness.

From the point of view of 'consciousness in general' this plurality of consciousness is accidental, and so to speak, superfluous In the ideal, a single consciousness and a single mouth are absolutely sufficient for maximally full cognition; there is no need for a multitude of consciousnesses and no basis for it. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 81)

The general direction of Bakhtin's and Lyotard's thought is similar – there can be no universal truth, as there is no “consciousness in general.” Now, Lyotard rejects the universal truth because it does injustice to other, separate and incommensurable truth claims. In other words, he rejects the overarching or universal truth because of other competing truths. He rejects the universal truth not because of its content, but because of what is happening outside of it; namely, the existence of other truths. One can plausibly continue his thought by saying that if there would be no other discourses, no alternative truth claims, then the universal truth of modernity would be acceptable. Thus Lyotard bases his ethical claim against universals on an ontological assumption that diversity already exists. Unlike Lyotard, Bakhtin rejects the absolute truth because of its internal structure, namely, that it speaks in a single voice. Absolute truth is a-relational and therefore false. If the multiplicity of human cultures and discourses would vanish, if only one, very homogeneous group of people would survive some global disaster, even then Bakhtin would reject the type of monological truth developed by modernity. In fact, Bakhtin's criticism is not limited to the case of modernity, which is just one of the most prominent cases of monologism.

There is a subtle, but very important difference between Lyotardian and Bakhtinian concepts of truth. For Lyotard, there is a multitude of discourses, each of them capable of producing its own truth claims and criteria of validity. In effect, he allows each of the many truths to play a role not unlike one played by the old universal truths of modernity, with one difference: the former do it within the circle of their language games or discourses, while the latter played such a role across the discourses. Lyotard demotes modernity one level down without changing its monological nature.

For example, in his critique of Habermas, Lyotard endorses local consensus:

We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.

A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. (1988, p. 66)

I see several objections against the local consensus idea. First, let us look at the distinction that Lyotard makes between the universal truth and a local, or a particular one. Assume there are other forms of intelligence in the universe. Then, on the larger scale, the great narratives of Enlightenment are just local narratives of our small planet. From a great distance, the differences among cultures, political orientations, and so on may seem quite insignificant. Thus, the distinction between the universal and the local is a rather questionable one. Locality and universality signify quantitative, not qualitative difference.

Second, the local consensus really never happens even in the smallest of games. There is *always* a minority, a voice of dissent, unless someone takes measures to silence it. And if such a voice is missing, it should be invented, for dialogue is impossible without dissent. Any relation is impossible without difference. And finally, the voluntary nature of a local consensus is not in any way different from grand narratives of modernity, for the *voluntary* acceptance of rationality through education is exactly what Enlightenment envisioned.

While Lyotard's critique remains very powerful, his own solutions are less than convincing. Moreover, the type of solution he proposes (local determinism, small temporary consensus instead of global determinism, universal consensus) shows that he views diversity as a multitude of discourses that are different from each other, but each of them is homogeneous inside. In his afterword to Lyotard's *Just Gaming*, Sam Weber raises similar criticism – "Otherness, then, is not to be sought *between* the games that are supposed to be essentially self-identical, but *within* the game as such. This amounts to saying that the game is necessarily *ambivalent* from the start" (1985, p. 106). Thus diversity, according to Lyotard, presents itself as a multitude of totalities.

Separate but Equal Language Games

The language games are not only separate from each other; they also *should* be kept separate, says Lyotard:

Here the Idea of justice will consist in preserving the purity of each game, that is, for example, in insuring that the discourse of truth be considered as a 'specific' language game, that narration be played by its 'specific rules.' (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985, p. 96)

This idea of justice, which is similar to that of Michael Walzer (1983), views plurality in the same general way the classical liberal theory views the separation of powers. Many language games should be put against each other, so none becomes dominant and domineering. This postmodern version of the "checks and balances" concept calls for several objections.

I fail to see how allowing for several parallel discourses without changing the nature of each discourse addresses the basic issue of difference. How is the domination *within* a particular language game better than domination *across* different language games? How is a metanarrative, developed within a particular group, better than the metanarrative intended for the whole of humanity? The scale of monologism and domination does not matter that much. Some of my friends create elaborate metanarratives just for their own families. Corporations, associations, and schools do that all the time. And finally, many individuals produce utterly dominating personal discourse, where one main idea of the self excludes any sort of plurality within the person's inner world.

Lyotard (and Walzer) may object to this by saying that the plurality of independent discourses allows a person to move from one discourse to another in order to avoid any possible totality of either one. However, this very ability to shift from one discourse to another, from one language game to another, goes against the idea of separate pure discourses. What is the point of changing language games if you cannot take anything from one to another, if you cannot mix them together, and speak across several ones? I also doubt that small language games are easier to escape than the big ones. The mechanisms of terror can be essentially the same within each small language game and within the grand narratives of modernity. Any group *must* allow for internal diversity, otherwise we simply break the metanarratives of modernity into a number of baby modernities, each capable of producing terror.

Again, plurality cannot be limited to only the top level. What Lyotard does not properly address is that the plurality of discourses should go all the way down. This comes from his emphasis on unrepresentability and incommensurability. He makes an attempt to show that difference among language games is significant, but the type of significance is tied to the degree of difference. As a consequence, by blowing this particular level of difference out of proportion, he dismisses

other forms and levels of difference. For when you speak of incommensurability of discourses, to what exactly do you contrast it? Apparently, the assumption is that there exists full commensurability of statements within each discourse or each language game. Such an assumption is dubious at the very least.

Some things are unrepresentable, asserts Lyotard. According to Bakhtin, nothing is ever fully presentable, in a sense that a true and full understanding is impossible. Any understanding implies co-authorship. In the moment of understanding, one who understands co-creates meaning with one who is being understood. Which in turn means that what Lyotard calls the *differend* is not an exception, but rather a universal practice: any understanding includes misunderstanding – any presentation includes misrepresentation. This gap in understanding is omnipresent and does not necessarily lead to exclusion. In fact, this gap is the only thing that makes a conversation possible. The *differend* is not an obstacle, but a condition of understanding, because, according to Bakhtin, to understand something means to embrace two or more incongruous views on the subject. Thus only the presence of what Lyotard calls *differend* makes understanding at all possible.

Polyphonic Truth

Lyotard assumes multiple but whole truths, while Bakhtin says that truths are not only multiple, but also that every one of them consists of a number of statements. Let us turn to his concept of truth in more detail:

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential*, and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 81)

A couple of clarifications need to be made here. First, “unified” is better translated here as “one.” Second, what Caryl Emerson translates as *full of event potential*, is actually one Russian word of Bakhtin’s own invention, *sobytiyna*. This is an adjective deriving from *sobytie*, which generally means *event*, but literally translates as *co-being*. Bakhtin is not simply saying that truth arises momentarily as something happens (with this much Lyotard would certainly agree). He implies that a) the truth can never be expressed as one statement, but it can be expressed as a certain number of simultaneous and contradictory statements; and b) the truth is not a number of disconnected statements, but a number

of statements that came to certain interaction via their carriers in the course of a shared event.

The concept of polyphonic truth does not in any way imply anything like “the truth is somewhere in the middle.” Quite to the contrary, Bakhtin explicitly rejected Hegelian dialectics with its idea of eventual synthesis of the opposites. The individual voices that make up the polyphonic truth never merge. In this regard Bakhtin definitely sides with Lyotard in his debate with Habermas. There is never a consensus, and consensus is not at all what validates the polyphonic truth. Here is how Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky’s ability to see the polyphonic truth:

Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality Dostoevsky’s visualizing power was locked in place at the moment diversity revealed itself – and remained there, organizing and shaping this diversity in the cross-section of a given moment. (1984, p. 30)

Despite some similarities, Bakhtin’s concept of truth also disagrees with Lyotard’s. No one individual language game or discourse is capable of producing truth on its own, just because no single voice has enough capacity to generate the truth. I cannot explicate the concept of the polyphony here at its full extent, and will refer to Bakhtin’s own work. Let us entertain the possibility of truth as a number of simultaneous statements about the same thing without trying to reconcile or average them.

At this point Lyotard, without a doubt, would have asked, “What is the source of legitimacy of such truth, polyphonic or not?” How is it being distinguished from a non-truth? Indeed, if the truth is multiple statements, how do we distinguish it from a simple cacophony? Apparently, by denying internal consistency to the truth-statement, Bakhtin implied some other form of internal organization, or connection between heterogeneous parts of the polyphonic truth. Simple mechanical juxtaposition of different points of view is no better a solution than a metanarrative. Some of the less successful multicultural textbooks on United States history can serve as illustrations to such a mechanical, disengaged diversity. Thus Bakhtin must show Lyotard some other “rules of the game,” and then show that these rules do not exercise terror to exclude those who do not play according to the rules. Obviously, any concept of truth implies both existence and exclusion of false statements.

Bakhtin allows for one absolute, which he calls dialogue. Dialogue in his view is not merely a form of communication, but the most

fundamental human relation. At the end of his book on Dostoevsky he states: "To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends All else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (1984, p. 252). Let me rephrase his logic: On the one hand, no statement can claim truth without interaction with other, contradictory statements. On the other hand, no existing statement is refused entrance to the big dialogue or the polyphonic truth. Yet for a statement to exist, it must be addressed to someone else. Statements and voices that do not possess this dialogic potential simply do not exist, or have no significance. Thus at least statements that claim to be the absolute truth, and thereby deny the possibility of a dissent, are excluded when dialogue (in the Bakhtinian sense) is the name of the game. This much exclusion may be problematic in itself, but it is something Lyotard should be able to accept. Lyotard, for instance, presents Habermas' claims as invalid, therefore excluding at least one language game, one of modern rationality.

Am I creating another grand narrative of dialogue and polyphony with Bakhtin's help? Perhaps not, because Lyotard explicitly defines metanarrative as a project, a certain vision of the future, the Idea, which has legitimating value (Lyotard, 1993, p. 50). Dialogue has no end, and no other purpose but perpetuation of dialogue. Dialogue is a strictly non-teleological good. Bakhtin, not unlike Lyotard, rejects the linear time of modernity, where history has an end. Rather, he accepts the present as privileged time, as time of the fullest existence.

Let me restate the description of the polyphonic truth: a number of statements will be considered to constitute a polyphonic truth, when they are engaged in a dialogue. This means that the inclusion of all statements that allow themselves to be included will constitute the criteria of truth. In other words, if one wants to know the truth about something, one should attempt to solicit everything everyone has to say about it, make all these voices talk to each other, and include one's own voice as an equal. One should listen to this big dialogue, not in order to get the main idea, but only to get all the voices to address each other. There is always an element of the "dialogue of the deaf," when parties do not really hear each other. The ability to hear the truth depends on minimizing this effect. Everyone can probably remember such a high-intensity conversation when all the opposing positions present themselves as distinct, and yet really addressing to each other. At a certain point, one notices that in order to really talk, the voices should implicitly include each other, echo each other, so that the difference

“travels down into depths,” ultimately splitting every individual voice. And just before it falls apart again, the truth emerges as in musical polyphony, where the multitude of different voices forms a higher form of harmony.

One practice that tries to address diversity can be called inclusion. Inclusion usually means bringing marginalized groups into a mainstream conversation. For Bakhtin, inclusion would mean *mutual inclusion*, mutual penetration of different perspectives or voices. Lyotard, who defends the purity of discourses, would find himself in basic disagreement with Bakhtin on this issue. The very point of plurality for Bakhtin is constant touching, shifting, penetrating, mutual inclusion of voices. His idea that the multiple voices never merge, never come to a grand ending of a grand narrative, does not in any way mean that the voices do not change each other. Quite the contrary, the interaction is the most authentic moment of their being. To be changed is the destiny of all meanings we produce. One should speak in order to generate a dialogue. We must abandon this absurd desire to be fully understood or to express the truth. No one should speak in order to express truth. One should speak in order to provoke a response, so truth could be heard and experienced together.

In the end, Lyotard and Bakhtin both elevate diversity to a new status, making it a fundamental fact of human existence rather than a superfluous and temporary feature of the world. Nevertheless, they introduce substantially distinct understandings of diversity. Lyotard proves the value of diversity by emphasizing the depth of difference. His diversity is a multitude of independent and incommensurable discourses. For Lyotard, the defense of diversity means giving autonomy to every culture, discourse, or language game. This is essentially a vision of disjointed diversity. Bakhtin, to the contrary, values diversity for its epistemological and ethical power. Difference is important for him not because it is large, but because it is more capable of capturing the truth. He does not address the *degree* of differences among various human agents, because diversity for him is unthinkable without engagement, without constant interaction. For Bakhtin, diversity is just another name for connectedness. In other words, Bakhtin implies that difference, just like sameness, is a form of connection.

Diversity and Education

The subtle differences between Lyotard's and Bakhtin's interpretations of diversity may be important beyond purely academic interest. It is fairly obvious that any school houses a multitude of language games

and discourses. Some of them, like adolescent slang, are designed specifically to keep adults out. Youngsters invest significant energy into inventing new code words and learning the words invented by peers in order to protect the independence of their linguistic territory. On top of this, more and more students maintain and support their ethnic, racial, and subcultural identities, making it clear that teachers' authority will not transgress their group boundaries. If we follow Lyotard, such boundaries must be respected, and the language games kept separate. This, however, would contradict the very idea of teaching, for teaching involves crossing the boundaries between language games with the purpose of changing those games. Teachers either invade their students' discourses or cease to be teachers.

Bakhtin's version of diversity portrays a difference that allows for active interaction. The new status of diversity does not mean we leave our students alone in fear of imposing another grand narrative upon them. As I have tried to show, difference does not arise and does not exist without the other, who is the co-author and attends to this difference. When my student wants to assert the difference of his or her way of life from mine, it is my duty to engage, challenge, "distort" (which really means "co-author") his or her vision of difference. One can either invade other discourses or keep away from them. But these are not all the choices. One can invade with a purpose of destroying, or with a purpose of engaging in dialogue.

Teachers must not be in awe of difference; they must instead develop a respectful but inquisitive stance toward it. Teachers should not be afraid to misunderstand, misinterpret, or corrupt someone else's culture. Rather, education is only possible as dialogue, where different voices intensely interact, change, but never merge. A teacher, walking down the school hallways, should keep in mind that his or her task is neither to reduce diversity, nor to stand still watching diversity grow. Students obviously do not discover their diverse identities on their own. Yet for a teacher, it is important to realize that student's own cultural group does not have a monopoly on self-definition. We need to be a part of dialogue about who the students are even if we do not belong to their group and even do not know much about the group. An Asian student, for instance, cannot figure out what it means to be an Asian in America without her or his White, Black, and Hispanic teachers. The point is not to know about someone else's culture, but to help construct an individual understanding of it. An Asian student may have all the important conversations about her or his identity at home or in church, or with friends. Yet if she or he does not discuss that identity at school, the identity *does not exist* at school. When teachers only listen and not

talk back on the issues of identity (granted, with best intentions), they deny the student an important part of their identity. Diversity makes sense when it involves engagement.

My undergraduate teacher education students want to know about other cultures, so they can be more effective teachers. I tell them that this is an impossible task. I tell them that a culture can never explain a person, but a person can explain a culture. When your student is explaining his or her culture *to you*, you must talk back.

Author's Address:

Educational Foundations and Inquiry
Bowling Green State University
Education 550
Bowling Green, OH 43403
USA
EMAIL: sidorki@bgnet.bgsu.edu

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