Navigating Curiosity: Dialogic Practices and the Learning Cycle

Swati Aggarwal

Abstract

This paper presents a reflective exploration of my eight-year journey studying philosophy at a central university in India. I have found philosophy intriguing, challenging, and profound, though my interest has been inconsistent. This experiential account is not only about experiences I could identify but also about those that are more difficult to pinpoint and delineate. As a learner, I have always asked questions; however, school discouraged dialogue and inquiry, leading me to question my learning style. This tension between curiosity and conformity persisted until I encountered the Dialogic Method during my Master of Education (MEd) course, which provided a framework for curiosity and wonder, making dialogic practices fundamental to my understanding of dialogue, learning, and philosophy.

The Quest For Understanding

I have studied philosophy in various forms with different teachers on and off over the past eight years as part of my graduation, post-graduation, Bachelor of Education (BEd) course, and lastly, Master of Education (MEd) course. In addition to my formal courses, I have also engaged with philosophy through YouTube videos and lecture series on other websites. All these experiences form my often intriguing, intermingling, and conflicting perception of philosophy. It is also an ongoing journey in understanding myself as a learner—what my learning needs are and my ability to question and appreciate those who are and were in charge of my learning. I believe identity formation is "messy," a slow process filled with self-doubt, questioning, reflection, understanding, feedback, criticism, and appreciation, in which teachers play a substantial role. This note from the field reflects the attempt to understand my rights and responsibilities (not in a legal sense, rather a moral and philosophical sense) as a learner—what I can offer and what I can rightfully seek. This exploration of rights and responsibilities is crucial, as it empowers me to take ownership of my learning journey and engage meaningfully with philosophical discourses.

Through my academic experiences, I have identified a learning cycle that may prove useful for fostering an understanding of dialogue in a classroom. This cycle encompasses stages of exploration, reflection, and application, thereby encouraging an interactive environment where ideas can be exchanged freely. Embracing the learning cycle enhances engagement with philosophical concepts and reinforces the collaborative nature of inquiry, facilitating meaningful discussions among learners. I believe that the principles inherent in this cycle can serve as a valuable framework for educators, policy makers, teachers, and learners by promoting a deeper understanding of philosophical discourse and encouraging a culture of shared exploration and dialogue.

This note is an attempt to understand the often undefined, often indescribable experiences that are difficult to delineate, yet are an important part of the whole learning experience. These are the experiences that make us who we are and shape how we see the world around us. I see the complexity of these experiences as part of the "messiness of just being human." My educational experience at a central university of India can be seen as one example of the complexities of human interaction. The challenges I faced, along with the positive side of my experience, helped me to create a learning cycle to foster dialogue that can positively contribute to educational practices and policies.

The Role of Educators and Barriers to Engagement

Philosophy is one subject that has always caught my attention and interest, but at the same time, I have found it daunting. The role of teachers was central to these experiences because the way teachers approached the course and their teaching styles greatly affected the way I studied philosophy. Different teachers follow different teaching methods (Tomlinson, 2001), which involve varying degrees of interaction. However, in my classes questions and discussions were, more than often not, discouraged. This is not to say that discussions were absolutely absent throughout my experience. However, even if the teachers allowed questions, they typically expected students to ask "intelligent questions," which means that the teachers expected certain questions to arise from a particular topic and they had expectations about students' intellect. First, the teachers already had a framework defining which questions were meaningful and relevant for a particular topic. And second, teachers had notions about the kind of knowledge students of a particular level of education should have had. However, the students were mostly unaware of this framework. If the questions asked by the students did not meet the teacher's expectations, then they usually received negative feedback. Receiving negative feedback discourages students from sharing or reflecting in the future, because the fear of being projected as "nonsensical" and "stupid" promotes a culture of silence that hinders dialogical engagement. Teachers discourage questioning through verbal and nonverbal cues, such as ignoring the questions asked or even snubbing the speaker.

My engagement and interest in philosophy greatly depended on whether or not the teacher allowed me to ask questions and appreciated my curiosity. Many times, I came to believe that my personal inadequacy was the sole reason for my inability to engage with the subject. I often blamed myself and thought I was the reason for being unable to learn. Now that I have experienced a more dialogic classroom teaching approach in my MEd course, which suits my learning style and gives space to my habit of asking questions, I have been able to understand myself and my learning needs better.

Cultivating Independent Thinking

Philosophy requires one to think independently and freely. It requires us to work through the barriers of the mind, such as self-doubt, prejudices, and preconceived ideas. However, the emphasis in philosophy classes has been on learning what the "great philosophers" have said. Students are often discouraged from presenting their independent views (Kumar, 2005; Sen, 1999), especially in the context of the Indian

education system, without attributing the argument to a great philosopher. For instance, throughout my higher education journey students were specifically told not to use their own thoughts while articulating and writing answers. In these situations, the education system systematically kills the child's natural propensities of curiosity, imagination, and creative thinking (Robinson, 2006; Kumar, 2005). Sadly, this culture of regimentation is present in universities as well. Teachers often expect students to listen and write what they are told (Freire, 2000; Kohn, 1999; Kumar, 2005; Nussbaum, 2010; Bain, 2004; Dewey, 1916; Illeris, 2007). There are hardly any opportunities for students to apply their independent thinking. The students who think independently or have non-conformist views are dubbed either troublemakers, attention seekers, non-serious learners, or just inept at learning and are frequently ostracized (Kohn, 1999). Students' constant inability to perform well, teachers ridicule and harsh regimentation, and an unjust system of rewards and punishment aimed to make students fall in line kill their will and ability to think independently. Surprisingly, a highly dialogical subject such as philosophy is taught rigidly and unimaginatively. This makes the teaching of philosophy soulless and dull.

What is the purpose of teaching philosophy but to generate intellectual curiosity and develop free will and independent thinking? Both of these goals can be reached through a dialogical pedagogy. Teachers must be able to relate to the students, respect their experiences and knowledge, and teach them by including and building on their existing knowledge. Teaching philosophy could benefit from tethering the philosophical ideas to contemporary issues or the students' lives. Dialogic practices are essential for the teacher to understand students' realities, contexts, and ideas. For many teachers, the current structure of time allocation for the classes forces them to follow a strict teaching pattern, leaving less space for student engagement. The time constraints automatically make student engagement undesirable and an unwelcome obstruction to their teaching goal. However, when the nature of the subject matter demands dialogue, it seems futile to teach it in a regimented manner. Such a system only demands intellectual servitude, which, in essence, is antithetical to philosophy.

Constructing Knowledge: The Learning Cycle in Philosophy

Through my experience of learning philosophy, I have identified some key factors that are detrimental to the quality of the learning experience and resonate with dialogic practices. Philosophy's subject matter is such that it encourages a lot of self-reflection, questions, and doubts and often sends one into a deep reflection. This inner monologue can also be interpreted as a dialogue with the self, where one tries to think over philosophical issues from different angles. This dialogue is also affected by ongoing classroom discussions, peers' reflections, and the teaching content. This dialogue of the self also prompts students to engage in discussion with their peers and the teacher. In this scenario, teachers should encourage the students' questions and reflections (Dewey, 1938). The inner dialogue is one of the major components of the Learning Cycle.

The next significant aspect of dialogue is related to pauses in conversation. Philosophy or philosophizing requires a great deal of thinking. During a class discussion, students are involved in both active (e.g., teachers pose questions) and passive thinking (e.g., a topic involuntarily invokes certain images and

memories in the students' minds). With passive thinking, students may become preoccupied by this information, which might lead to fragmentation in their thoughts, if they are not given enough time to process or formulate it. To facilitate this thinking, teachers can apply a strategy of introducing short pauses in-between the lectures. They may not be preplanned, but incorporated on the go by an experienced teacher. These pauses can only be effectively applied if complemented by nonverbal cues and visual stimulation that make it a powerful learning tool.

By visual stimulation, I refer to a student's awareness of the thinking faces of peers and the expectant face of the teacher. When students appear to be thinking, teachers believe they are reflecting on the topic and their minds have not wandered. Students' expressions and nonverbal cues can help the teacher understand if they are working through the question or not. This helps the teacher decide if there needs to be more input from their side. If there is a lack of appropriate response from the students, the teacher encourages the students in various ways, including nonverbal and verbal cues. Teachers may use gentle nudges through eye contact, a smile, a quick comment, or subtle hints. The expectant face of the teacher lets the students know that they are waiting for their reflections. This motivates the students to speak and engage in dialogue, and the shared synergy in the classroom enhances learning. Thus, the deliberate use of pauses complemented by visual stimulation becomes an incredibly powerful way of knowledge construction.

Another important feature related to the idea of dialogic classrooms is that of epistemic spaces and physical proximity. A space specially created for learning impacts the teaching–learning process by providing physical proximity between speakers to encourage dialogue. Physical proximity facilitates dialogue by providing students with additional visual and auditory data to help them engage in conversation. For some learners, such as myself, it is crucial to clearly see the face of the person speaking, particularly the lips moving in unison with the words being spoken. Without this visual data, it becomes hard for me to concentrate on the voice and decode the meanings. If the face of the teacher is not visible, it becomes a major source of irritation. Researchers have found that multiple sensory inputs combine into one unified whole and enhance word and sentence comprehension. Several researchers suggest that seeing the speaker's face, especially in reference to lip-reading (Kovačević & Isaković, 2024), can help better comprehend what is being spoken. This facilitates faster response time in the listener, which can be different for every individual. Every student might have a different learning style and look for a different set of visual and auditory data to make sense of what is being spoken, so it is best to provide opportunities for all.

Lastly, there is one more factor that can help classrooms become more dialogic. If there is a healthy, respectful relationship with the teacher, then it facilitates dialogue. A striking thing about learning philosophy at the MEd level was that it didn't reflect the traditional, distanced relationship with the teacher. Philosophy class at this level involved an informal setup that was less focused on routine. The early morning classes were mostly accompanied by snacks (chai, samosa), which, in my opinion, helped to make the class a little less daunting and form a strong interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the students. Socialization and bonding can happen over food, and in this case, it helped ease the social anxiety we were feeling. It can also help people to be free from inhibitions. Learning to philosophize and engage in philosophical discussions requires being free from inhibitions, and sharing food provides a platform. Through this approach to creating better dialogue, one can see a confluence of humans' two sets of needs—

first, the primary instinct or physiological need for food; and second, intellectual hunger. I observed this keenly during our classes. The experience changed my perspective on what a class should be like, and taught me that learning can happen without regimentation, strict lessons, and a fear of teachers and grades. On the contrary, it helped and complimented the teaching of philosophy.

Using the aforementioned elements, I envision the learning cycle in the following way (Figure 1).
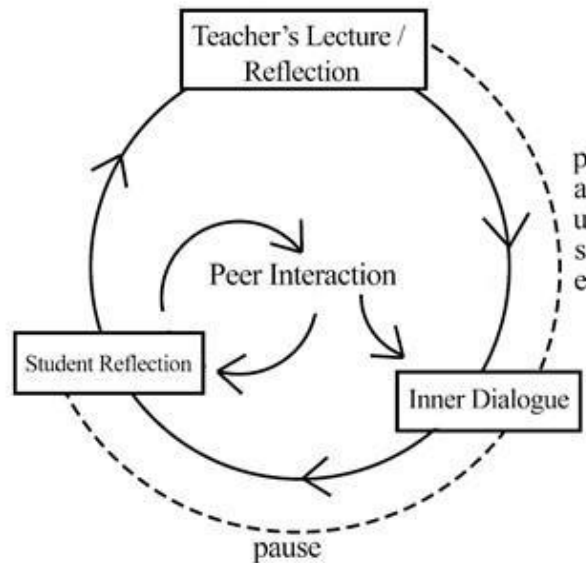
Fig. 1: The Learning Cycle

In this diagram, the learning cycle consists of three major elements: 1) teachers' inputs or reflection (input from the teacher); 2) students' reflections (input from the students), and 3) inner reflection. In the middle of the cycle, there is another critical component: peer interaction. Peer interaction provides inputs for students' reflections and inner reflection. All of these stages of thought can be better facilitated by the pauses a teacher takes between the lectures. These pauses are not silences but an opportunity to provide encouraging visual and auditory cues to engage students in dialogue. The epistemic space of the classroom must support this learning cycle and encourage the constant flow of dialogue. I suggest this learning cycle is at the heart of a dialogic classroom and can best facilitate philosophy learning.

Conclusion

In my exploration of dialogue in the teaching–learning process and its effect on philosophy learning, I have endeavored to illuminate the factors that have positively influenced my learning experience. A significant component of my journey was in the process of discovering my identity as a learner, and discovering that it is "messy" and not a straightforward path. Through this reflection, I have sought to pinpoint and elucidate the factors that encouraged philosophical thought and development within the framework of dialogic practice.

Dialogic approaches are crucial for creating a learning environment that is more democratic. They can be used to shift the classroom from being a place that encourages self-doubt to a space where students feel comfortable enough to speak their minds, discuss problems, and ask questions. Through dialogic practices, learners can come to terms with their needs and identify their negative and positive attributes. This process enables them to take ownership of their learning journey and fosters a sense of responsibility for their educational outcomes, which can foster a reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. Ultimately, dialogic practices through classroom experience can empower learners not only to recognize what they deserve as learners, but also to understand what they can contribute in return to the learning community.

I developed the learning cycle in this note from the field from my experiences in philosophical study to encourage better dialogic practices in the classroom. The cycle emphasizes the importance of reflection, dialogue, and action, and encourages learners to engage deeply with the material and with one another. By participating in a continuous cycle of inquiry and feedback, students can understand their learning processes and adapt their approaches as speakers accordingly. The learning cycle not only facilitates individual growth but also enriches the collaborative atmosphere of the classroom, making it a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. Stronger models for learning and dialogue can help to reinvent learning spaces as places of inclusion (of different learning styles and all voices), negotiation, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

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Swati Aggarwal is a researcher with a keen interest in philosophy, Indian knowledge systems, and politics. She has completed her education at the University of Delhi, India. Her academic journey is driven by a curiosity about how these fields intersect and influence education. She is passionate about researching educational practices and exploring innovative approaches that enhance learning experiences. She aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and philosophical contexts that shape education, promoting critical thinking and inclusive dialogue.