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## Idea-dying in critical ontological pedagogical dialogue

Ana Marjanovic-Shane<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sohyun Meacham<sup>b</sup>, Hye Jung Choi<sup>c</sup>, Samanta Lopez<sup>c</sup>, Eugene Matusov<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Chestnut Hill College, United States<sup>b</sup> University of Northern Iowa, United States<sup>c</sup> University of Delaware, United States

### ABSTRACT

In our approach to dialogic pedagogy, the teacher aims to engage students in critical examination, development, and transcendence of their own ideas, values, desires, goals, emotions, perceptions, worldviews, and perspectives, support them in ‘internally persuasive discourse’ (Bakhtin, 1991; Matusov & von Duyke, 2010), in which ‘truth becomes dialogically tested and forever testable’ (Morson, 2004, p. 319). One of the problems for many dialogic pedagogy oriented teachers is that such critical dialogues are not guaranteed to always happen for each important idea. Although the suppression of ideas and repressive silence in traditional monologic classrooms are amply documented, idea-dying has not been sufficiently studied nor understood in educational approaches based on dialogue and promotion of student’s voices. In this paper, we investigate the dialogic circumstances, relationships, and dynamics of testing ideas in dialogic education; circumstances under which students’ voices are not heard, not willing to be expressed, and/or are suppressed, and thus die leading to oppressive, productive, or ambivalent silences. We describe and analyze three cases in our own classrooms with critical dialogic pedagogical orientation, in which dialogues nevertheless collapsed and ideas died.

### 1. Problem

The main principle of a critical dialogic approach to education is to support the students’ authorial voice<sup>1</sup> in their critical examination of life, self, the others and the world,<sup>2</sup> including education itself (Matusov, 2009; Matusov, Smith, Soslau, Marjanovic-Shane, & von Duyke, 2016). From this critical dialogic ontological perspective, education has mainly a deconstructive nature. The purpose of education is to engage students in critical examination, development and transcendence of their own ideas, values, desires, goals, emotions, perceptions, and worldviews, and to support them in ‘internally persuasive discourse’ (Bakhtin, 1991; Matusov & von Duyke, 2010), in which ‘truth becomes dialogically tested and forever testable’ (Morson, 2004, p. 319). The student is viewed as the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [shaneam@chc.edu](mailto:shaneam@chc.edu) (A. Marjanovic-Shane).

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “authorial” to indicate the importance of being an author, a creator of one’s own learning and forming one’s own position – i.e. to own one’s own understanding of and beliefs about the truths. Authorial Agency/Voice in our approach means that the students are the agents (those who act, create, and are responsible) of their own learning: they become aware and know why they want to learn something and they create steps to learn it (with the teacher’s guidance).

<sup>2</sup> To be engaged in critically examining life and issues that are felt relevant and significant for one’s own, others’ and the world’s existence – means to be engaged ontologically. Ontology, “is the study in philosophy of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations”, a compound combining the Greek *ὄν*, *on* (gen. *ὄντος*, *ontos*), i.e. “being; that which is”, and *λογία*, – *logia*, i.e. “logical discourse” (Wikipedia - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontology>). Thus, “critical ontological dialogue” is critical examination of what is for the participants (students, teachers) considered to be the significant, meaningful and consequential issues of life, self, the others and the world.

final authority of his or her education (Klag, 1994), while the role of the teacher becomes to promote and support the student's critical authorship.

One of many important problems for teachers with dialogic pedagogy is that such critical dialogues, in which students engage in testing their own ideas, are not guaranteed to always happen. A critical dialogue is always an encounter between different subjectivities of its participants, their diverse “dialects” with long individual and cultural histories, in which their distinct and disparate ideologies create boundaries where they may reveal themselves to each other, or battle and suppress each other, and where the ideas in this dialogue may blossom or die-off,

A social language, then, is a concrete socio-linguistic belief system that defines a distinct identity for itself within the boundaries of a language that is unitary only in the abstract. Such a ... [dialogue] ... is pregnant with possibilities for further ... [dialogical] individuation: it is a potential dialect, its embryo not yet fully formed. [Dialogue]... in its historical life, in its heteroglot development, is full of such potential dialects: they intersect one another in a multitude of ways; some fail to develop, some die off but others blossom into authentic languages (Bakhtin, 1991, p. 356).

Silence during the classroom dialogues, when the voices fade and ideas seem to die off,<sup>3</sup> may be a threatening indicator of a break in dialogue, and some dialogic teachers experience it as intimidating. Alternatively, silence can serve an enabling and articulating role in the classroom dialogues, and sometimes its role can be ambivalent (Bakhtin, 1986; Matusov, 2009). In this paper, we investigate dialogic circumstances under which students' voices, for some reason die off in the classroom. This may happen either because the students are not heard, or because the students may not be willing to express themselves, or because their voices may be actively suppressed. And when students' ideas and voices die, this leads to either oppressive, productive, or ambivalent silences. We describe events in classrooms with dialogic pedagogical orientation, in which dialogues nevertheless collapse and ideas die off for good or for bad or a bit both. We discuss the (un)desirability and the dynamics of these events, their participants' relationships, their histories, cultural and ideological backgrounds that they bring into the classrooms, and potential meanings, values, and implications of these events for dialogic classrooms.

We first describe our espoused approach to dialogic pedagogy as ontological critical dialogues about curricular topics that are important to the students in testing their ideas, facing and transcending themselves and their relationship to life and to others. Then we present three cases from our own teaching practices, in which we will ground our analysis of the issues that cause breaks in dialogues, silences and dying of ideas. In our analysis of these cases, we ask questions about ontological, relational, axiological, epistemological, political, cultural, normative, and other issues, trying to understand the meaning-making dynamics and points of view of the students and the teachers.

## 2. Democratic dialogic education – espoused philosophy

We define Democratic Dialogic Education For and From Authorial Agency (Matusov et al., 2016), inspired by Bakhtin, as “a leisurely endeavor of critical examination of the self and the world through development of one's own authorial positions and voices, testing them against alternative ideas that historically emerged in the Big Dialogue (i.e., the never-ending dialogue across the time and space of humanity), and gaining ownership of one's own life” (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2015, p. 194). In this approach, teachers are genuinely interested in the students' ideas, opinions, values, desires and ways they relate to life, themselves, the others and the world (Matusov, 2009). Here dialogue is seen as an ontological, open-ended, interested, intersubjective way of relating to others and the world by engaging all the participants in testing their subjectivities, without trying to impose on the students a demand or an expectation to arrive at any preset ideas, values or ways to relate to the world. Dialogic teachers do not assume that they know or can know the students' consciousness, but continue to be curious about what the students are thinking. Furthermore, we argue that genuine critical dialogue requires voluntary participation. Thus, a critical ontologic dialogic approach requires democracy and students' legitimate freedoms: to make decisions whether to participate in the dialogue or not, to make their own judgments based on the “internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin, 1991; Matusov & von Duyke, 2010). Democratic negotiation of all the curricular topics, issues, and values also includes negotiation of class regimes, commitments, policies and assessment (Matusov et al., 2014; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2014a, 2014b, 2017).

In this sense, our approach is different from some other dialogic pedagogy approaches that instrumentalize dialogues as a powerful tool to get students to the teacher's (or schools, state's or society's) preset answers (Fecho, Falter, & Hong, 2016; Lefstein & Snell, 2013; Wegerif, 2007, 2013). Moreover, it is contradictory and paradigmatically different to the traditional concept of education (even dialogic education) that emphasizes students' socialization into an existing culture or practice (Lave, 1992; van Oers, 2012), rather than students' critical examination and creative transcendence of the existing culture by becoming a culture maker and developing one's authorial agency (Matusov, 2011a; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2014a).

<sup>3</sup> One of our reviewers challenged us regarding our rationalization for the micro-level analysis of classroom dialogues using Bakhtin's work as follows: Can you equate “ideas that die-off in a specific micro dialogue” with Bakhtin's quote about social languages and “dialects”. Bakhtin seems to be exploring social languages in time and place – their historical social life. In our view, macro-historical discourse and micro-social discourse are interrelated in any social practices. Micro-level social practices exhibit local significance as well as the representation of macro-structures where the situation occurs (Schegloff, 1999). Our speech is inherently responsive to other chains of communications from other contexts (Bakhtin, 1986) and “the word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (Bakhtin, 1991, p. 284). Classroom dialogue, living on the boundary between the classroom and other contexts that teachers and students bring up to the table, is a micro-social discursive situation that is connected to macro-structures.

### 3. A word on “methodology”

We investigate three cases of auto-ethnographically collected, recorded, and reconstructed classroom dialogues that occurred during our own classes. We collected written and audio-visual data in three higher education courses we taught (Ana, Sohyun, and Hye Jung) in four-year teacher preparation programs (course titles: Educational Psychology; Multicultural Children's Literature; Cultural Diversity Schooling and the Teacher). Here, we continue to develop a new, dialogic “methodology” in constructing, interpreting and analyzing our data. Unlike the “excessively objectivizing” lens of the conventional natural sciences studying voiceless objects (Bakhtin, 1986), we approach events among our students from necessarily biased dialogic point of view – claiming that any interpretation of events among people, by its nature represents dialogic meaning making among the immediate and remote participants, including any researchers. Our particular investigative meaning making leads to an interpretation of the classroom cases based on a dialogue between: an “insider” point of view, i.e. an *emic* point of view of the teacher who participated in the event, and the “outsider”, i.e. *etic*<sup>4</sup> points of view of the rest of our authorial team as critical peers (Headland et al., 1990; Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003; Samaras & Freese, 2006). We asked questions, offered critique, and provided feedback to one another. As an investigative team, we provided significant insights to one another that helped our interpretations and our dialogic analyses of the data. Sometimes these insights are in the form of hypothetical “what if” modality. In addition, neither as dialogic teachers nor as dialogic researchers, can we be able to completely see into our participants' “heads”, since we think that all subjectivities are opaque. Therefore, we understand a dialogic analysis, not as an attempt to create an objective “bird-like” view from the above, but as making our own analytic meanings dialogically, in response to ourselves (as former participants), and in a new response to our students. This new response, can only be hypothetical (what could have happened!) and we construct it as an attempt to create boundaries to what had transpired through the lens of what could have happened.

We are also aware (and encourage this development), that our readers may start to develop their own “outsider” (*etic*) points of view about what transpired in the events we discuss, points of view that might differ from ours. In that regard, this article may become a “seed” for what Tobin called a “multivocal ethnography”<sup>5</sup> (Tobin et al., 2009).

We use a variety of organizational and textual conventions to present these dialogues, in the tradition of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and ethnographic and anthropological studies: “thick description,” analysis and interpretation of events (Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1974; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; White, 2011), and sometimes “using commentary and explanation with ‘stop motion analysis,’ to reconstruct an event and stay very close to it” (Rainio & Marjanovic-Shane, 2013).

Our finalizing analysis is not the last word: neither in terms of describing the events “how they really were,” nor in terms of our interpretations of the events and the intentions of the participants (including our own intentions at the time). The reasons for that is not only the complexity and dynamism of the events and the participants' subjectivities, but also the dialogic nature of meaning that keeps emerging long after the events are “done” (thus, the events are never fully finished). As mentioned above, we do not assume the transparency of the participants' subjectivities, including our own past subjectivities, rather we assume the principled partial opacity of subjectivities (Matusov, 2015). We expect that our readers might disagree with us from time to time or even completely. Our aim is dialogic – to provide our readers with an opportunity to engage in critical dialogues we started among ourselves – about events we experienced as teachers when the dialogues among our students stopped and died. We see our contributions not so much in our claims but in these critical dialogues that our readers may further develop. We invite alternative interpretations and disagreements from our readers. From this point of view, we don't have a research *method* – we have a research *dialogue*. (Matusov & Brobst, 2013). To that end, our investigation is focused on describing events in our classrooms, providing our “insider” and “outsider” insights of our classroom practices, searching for types and patterns in described events. We want to address potential implications of our existing and our ideal practices – in order to inform our own teaching, and hopefully to be useful to other teachers and educators.

### 4. Idea-dying in classroom

The context of each case and the transcripts of classroom dialogue are presented including commentaries that help to vividly present and understand how the events unfolded from the point of view of the teacher. In these transcripts, all students' names are pseudonyms. We refer to ourselves in the third person (Ana and Hye Jung) and change our names (Sohyun) in attempts to acknowledge the distance between our past selves, as the participants in the events at some past point of time, and ourselves in the present, as dialogic researchers, whose opinions are based not merely on our raw memories, but also on critical dialogues with our peers and co-authors.

#### 4.1. Idea-dying case 1 (pedagogical suppression): Staying on a preset topic vs. dialogic development of ideas

Ana taught Educational Psychology in a teacher preparation program in a small Mid-Atlantic college. The class consisted of six students - three pre-service teachers majoring in the Middle School education (4th–8th grade): Sarah, Peter, and Dina; and three Music majors who took this course for getting a Music Teacher Certificate – Maria, Yerin, and Eva. Ana conducted this class with an

<sup>4</sup> Terms *emic* and *etic* originate from the linguistic terms “phonemic” and “phonetic” which in turn refer to the “smallest sounding unit of meaning – phoneme” and “the smallest unit of sound – phon.” Phonemic, referring to the meaning – refers to what a sound may mean to the speakers of a language, hence, an insider point of view; Phonetic – refers to the sounding aspect of the sound that “anyone” can hear, hence, an outsider point of view (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Tobin and colleagues created this methodological approach inspired by studies in video ethnography, psychodynamic psychology, Bakhtinian polyphonic (multivocal) analysis and Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009).

Open Curriculum pedagogical regime (Matusov et al., 2014; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2014b), in which the students are engaged in co-creating the curriculum together with Ana. They were invited to choose and/or propose curricular topics of their own interest in educational psychology, based on a Curricular Map – a big list of possible curricular topics comprised by Ana and gradually amended by the students. In this particular class meeting the students proposed to study “Respect in Education” – a topic that students themselves added to the class’ curricular map. Ana prepared the class, choosing several provocative subtopics to promote a critical dialogue.

The following transcript begins at the point in class after Ana introduced a provocative idea. She suggested to her students that it may be the school as an institution (teachers, authorities, society) that does not respect the students rather than (or in addition) students who may disrespect their teachers. She asks her students whether they agree or disagree that the school should respect children’s interests and their desires to learn, rather than impose a preset subject-matter that may not be interesting to the pupils. This question leads the students to shift their focus from the topic of respect to a provocative idea of the learners’ right to choose what to study (as it was practiced in Ana’s class).

1. SARAH: Yeah! [I should not be required to take calculus] ... Cause I want to be a math teacher in middle school. But if I wanted to be a math teacher in high school, that’s when I see taking calculus, but middle school, I don’t see why I have to take it.
2. ANA: (confirming Sarah’s idea) Right. In other words, somebody would tell you: “If you want to be a ... music teacher, these should be things that you might want to consider knowing... Or if you want to be a middle school teacher of math, or something like that... or history... How can you teach math or history if you didn’t learn that?”, but not say “You are required!” Just like, YOU [should] know that, and that is YOUR choice”. What about that?
3. MARIA: I am just thinking, about that... ‘Cause you said there is like a college where nothing was ever required<sup>6</sup> ...
4. ANA: Right.
5. MARIA: And you asked if someone is going to go there. In my opinion, I wouldn’t because it would be too overwhelming... for me...
6. ANA: Why would it be overwhelming?
7. MARIA: Because there would be too many... choices that *I would be too tempted to take things that have nothing to do with where I was going for...* ‘Cause, I hate math, and like we had a math requirement here. And, I wouldn’t have [to] take any math course, but, I feel like having taken it, I can use it later on...
8. ANA: Okay. Let me rephrase it back in terms of respect. Was it disrespectful from this [our] college, to require for you, the music majors, to take math? To impose on you to take math for a music major?

At this point, Maria drops from the conversation. It looks like Ana does not let Maria develop her emerging idea about potential negative effects of students’ abusing or not using wisely their own educational choices and a lack of exposure to new, potentially useful material – an idea that may lead to more examination of the current status quo and the alternative approach to education. It can be that Ana does not recognize the connection between the issue of respect and Maria’s counter-argument, or she may be afraid of Maria’s powerful arguments, challenging Ana’s own dear ideas, or she may feel pressure of time. Also, there can be several plausible reasons why Maria drops from the dialogue, whether she feels being undermined and silenced by her professor or something else.

9. SARAH: I don’t think it’s [i.e., school curricular imposition on students] disrespectful because I think it’s getting people to familiarize themselves with other material that ... I mean, it might be useless in the music education stuff, but, you still need some of the math skills ....

Sarah supports Maria’s claim about usefulness of curriculum imposition on students by adding another argument about the importance of students’ familiarization and expose to the material that they might not even know. Sarah also agrees with Maria’s implicit point that this imposition has to be limited and meaningful for the educational goals embraced by the student.

Ana-researcher remembers that at the time, Ana-teacher interpreted both Maria’s and Sarah’s views as uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy and necessity of the curricular imposition. At the time, Ana saw their position as problematic for two reasons: 1) their positions were uncritical and taken for granted and 2) they did not see how the curricular imposition is essentially disrespectful to the students as “the highest authority for their own learning” (Klag, 1994, p. 4). That is why Ana was very happy when Peter introduced his “piano provocation” (see below). In our current analysis, both Maria and Sarah were engaged in a critical dialogue of investigating legitimate reasons for the curricular imposition as well as accepting its possible limitations.

10. PETER: [continues Sarah’s last point] or what if you are required to take, like, a piano course?

With this hypothetical question, Peter deepens Maria’s and Sarah’s argument about possible illegitimacy of curricular imposition with a provocative idea: “What if music was a required course for all students, the way math is required now?” This “piano provocation” opens a path to problematizing curriculum imposition, focusing on when the curricular impositions are illegitimate, in contrast to Maria and Sarah’s legitimating of the curricular impositions.

<sup>6</sup> Maria refers to the New College of Florida we briefly mentioned before the class, where the students choose their courses based on their interests, while no course is mandated (see more here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_College\\_of\\_Florida](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_College_of_Florida)).

11. SARAH: [over Peter's voice] I mean (..)  
 12. ANA: [over Sarah's and Peter's voice, confirming Peter's question] Yeah, that's that's (.)

Ana interrupts Sarah, which might have been an important contribution contrasting legitimate and illegitimate curricular impositions. It seems to us Ana wanted to give Peter the floor.

13. PETER: (over Sarah's and Ana's voice): There is no way I want to take a piano course, like, no way!

With this remark, Peter explores the very idea of the illegitimacy of the imposed curriculum. The idea of a hypothetically imposed curricular piano requirement on a student who is not interested in music exposes (potentially) the arbitrariness of the imposed curriculum. However, the lurking issue here is whether music can be parallel to math, in its educational value for our society. Peter was a science and math major for middle school, while Maria was a music major and education minor. It could have been interesting to ask Peter if he, as a hypothetical math teacher of Little Maria, would have let her not to study math because she hated it, as much as Little Peter had hated learning to play piano. By this question, we could have learned if Peter saw the complete parallel between these two subjects or not and why. It is not clear whether Peter would have accepted Maria's premise that regardless of the child's interests, the future usefulness justifies curricular imposition.

However, at the time, Ana does not envision this possible line of dialogue. She supports Peter's piano provocation probably because it implicitly sides with her dear idea that any curricular imposition is school disrespect. This precludes having an opportunity for deepening the discussed issues.

14. ANA: Let's say, *to be a rounded person*, you have to know math and piano, and some drawing and a philosophy ... everything, to be a rounded person. And you have to take everything. [in an exaggerated parodic voice] we impose on Peter to take piano, just to graduate this college. Ha, ha, ha!

Ana's laughter probably intended to highlight the absurdity of such imposition, and strengthen Peter's argument at expense of Maria's and Sarah's arguments about partial legitimacy of the curricular imposition. It looks like Ana viewed Peter's idea as an assault on illegitimacy of the curricular impositions and even continues to develop it by eliminating the difference in how the society values math and music curriculum in her idea of "a rounded person". She also makes the conventional position of curriculum imposition absurd. Yet, her parodic and sarcastic tone, might have actually undermined Peter's further exploration, and thus strengthened students' normalization of the imposition of the curriculum (this actually happens below). At this point, Ana's active suppression of Maria's and Sarah's positions, makes it more difficult to critically compare Maria's and Peter's ideas.

15. PETER: I would hate it, (..)  
 16. ANA: [through laughter] Wait a moment...  
 17. DINA: [jumps in, cutting Peter and Ana off] There is also requirements for us to graduate that have nothing to do with our major, which (.) I think it's good (..) Everyone has mentioned "well rounded", cause it's, a (.) the ways of knowing requirement.  
 18. ANA: Okay.  
 19. DINA: Like a, you are required to take [unintelligible] nothing to do with your major, so you can graduate here...  
 20. PETER: **Wait.**

Peter seems to want to return to his original point, but Ana is now listening to Dina.

21. ANA: [to Dina] M-hm...

By this time, it looks like Ana dropped Peter's idea to compare math requirement to piano requirement and Maria's and Sarah's arguments for the imposed curriculum. This closes several important educational opportunities for all to engage in exploration of the issues of pedagogical imposition: when curricular imposition is legitimate and when not, is curricular imposition always disrespectful, what is imposed and what not, why, by whom, is beneficial or not, for whom it is or it isn't, and who and how defines beneficial, etc. Instead, Ana seems to be focused on Dina inviting her to explore ideas....

Ana-researcher remembers now, that Ana-teacher wanted to support Dina because in contrast to Maria, Sarah, and Peter, who were always active participants in the class discussions with strong well-articulated voices, Dina's participation was uneven and her voice was weak. Often it was unclear to Ana what point Dina was making either for her peers (and Ana) or even, probably, for Dina herself. Ana wanted to give another chance to practice public argumentation in her class. Ana was fishing what Dina wanted to say as it is unclear for her then and unclear for us now.

22. DINA: ... which, I don't think is a bad idea, because everything can be useful, especially if you are an education major.  
 23. ANA: Okay. That's very true, and it's your opinion, so that's (..)  
 24. DINA: Yes!  
 25. ANA: *What if they [i.e., the educational authorities] didn't require it [i.e., courses that nothing to do with a student's major]? Would you ask them to require it? [in other words, Ana asks Dina, "What if the college did not require something unrelated to the student's major, would you ask the college to require it because you argue that everything is potentially useful?"]*

26. DINA: [laughing] No!

We wish Ana asked Dina, “Why not?” but Ana did not ask.

27. ANA: [through a short laugh] And would you take things freely, anyway, because you agree that that's all necessary?

28. DINA: Like, if I wasn't overwhelmed, then yes, like if I didn't have to take 18 credits per semester, then I would...

29. ANA: [after a 3 s pause] ... otherwise you wouldn't.

This is either Ana's slip – she should have said, “otherwise you would” – or it could have been that Ana wanted Dina to agree with her that studying random curriculum just because it might be useful later.

30. DINA: But, if I was not in the same kind of situation like right now (...)

31. ANA: [interrupting] No, but let's discuss what requirements you would impose on yourself, like in our course... here. I didn't impose any requirements, everything that we do is going to be your commitment for this course (...) Okay. So... Here, we are in two different kinds of systems (...) *Which one is more respectful?*

It seems to us Ana was successful in helping Dina articulate her point to the class but then she interrupted her, blocking an opportunity to explore Dina's argument and its relationships to Maria's, Sarah's, and Peter's ideas. Ana's last question potentially indicates that she still tries to return the dialogue to the topic of respect and her apparent dear idea that the curricular imposition is always illegitimate and disrespectful.

32. ANA: [continues] The one that sets, that pre-sets the curriculum for you, without asking you, just telling you [saying with sarcasm], “You need to do that because for us (whoever is ‘us’) it means that you are going to be a rounded, well-rounded student, a music educator or an educator. This is what we think. Whether you agree or not.” or, somebody should ask you, like, “Do you agree with that?” [A few students together raise hands. Ana arranges the order in which they should speak.] Peter, then Eva and then...

Ana seems to want to channel her students into the “right” conclusion using leading questions and rhetorical moves making disagreement difficult but not impossible as Peter shows,

33. PETER: I feel like it's obvious. I mean the second one is obviously more respectful, when it is going to give you a freedom of choice. But it's necessary, to, like (...) Ugh, like, you need to pass these courses. That's what they are telling you, or else you will not graduate with a degree. So it's like, necessary and it is still, its like demanding... But...

Peter now formulates the tension between curricular imposition and respect in education. Like Maria and Sarah, he seems to want to explore the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate curricular impositions, complicated by the issue of respect. But Ana cuts him off.

34. ANA: [cuts Peter off] Okay! So the question is only who is the authority [that decides the curricular requirements], not whether that's true or not [i.e., whether the curriculum is useful or meaningful for the student or not]. *We all agree that for graduating certain things, knowing to be something, we need to learn something. We don't disagree.* The question is just who is the authority.

Ana again does not let Peter develop his idea, not recognizing its potential, as she seems to be trying to go back to the topic of respect.<sup>7</sup> To an outsider it feels like Ana wants to push her students to appreciate her own democratic educational approach, according to which students should have study choices. Simultaneously, it looks like Ana continues to normalize the idea that some curriculum perhaps may need to be pre-set and required for the students. With “We all agree... we don't disagree,” she further undermines a possibility to deconstruct the idea of imposed curriculum. Usually when an authority invokes “we all agree” – it is a call to stop personal investigation and deconstruction of ideas and to follow the leader (Marjanovic-Shane, 2016). Ana's words have a power to strengthen normalization of curricular imposition – originally Maria's claim, and to further push down and suppress Sarah's concerns about illegitimate curricular impositions and Peter's piano provocation to test the idea of (arbitrary) “required curriculum.”

In our judgment, Ana's reason for this manipulative move of building “collective consensus-based We” was relational. At that time, Ana seemed to be afraid to explore students' genuine deep disagreements. Her pedagogical and relational approach was harmonious, “Let's little bit disagree and then agree at the end.”

We can abstract at least three monologic, authoritarian impositions by Ana, in this excerpt:

1) *ideological* silencing, when she actively silenced Maria, Sarah, and Peter through use of an absurd and sarcastic example of an all-rounded person (line 14) and her prioritization and insistence on her dear idea of students' curricular free-choice and unconditional illegitimacy of the curricular imposition;

<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, or even in addition, cutting off can be Ana's cultural practice being raised in an Eastern European Jewish family (Tannen, 2005).

- 2) *pedagogical* silencing, when she switched the discussion to prioritize Dina's participation (lines 17–31), and
- 3) *relational* silencing, when she decided to get along with the students' normalization of imposed curriculum to create “all-agree we” (line 34).

Based both on Ana's *emic* understanding of the event and the *etic* meaning of the episode to the outsiders (Ana-researcher and the other research team members), Ana-teacher apparently had a strong pedagogical desire to stick to the preset topic of respect in education – her students' curricular choice. This pedagogical desire to “stick to the point,” took her attention and interest away from carefully listening in her students' ideas. This led Ana-teacher to miss creating opportunities for her students to test these ideas (e.g., Lines 8 and 14).

Ana was interested in her students' contributions in part genuinely (dialogically) and in part instrumentally (monologically) to use them as opportunities to stir the students up to her desired outcomes. Her introduction of “a rounded person” was a very helpful deepening Peter's piano provocation. Although it concealed the music-math axiological tension, Ana's move seemed to be sincere and not instrumental (manipulative) – genuine dialogic moves often cut off some other fruitful opportunities, which is probably unavoidable. Also, Ana was partially dialogic with Dina genuinely helping her develop her ideas.

In our analysis, Ana's focus on a preset topic of “institutional disrespect” and students' unlimited curricular choice, reducing disagreeable ideas to absurd, and prioritizing harmonious relations among her students and herself, all played an important part in her missing several occasions to create deeper dialogic possibilities for the students to test their ideas.

We argue that in educational dialogues in the class, the teacher is not only an epistemological authority, one who supports students in the developing and testing their ideas, but also a pedagogical authority, playing the role of a discourse moderator, having power to decide what to prioritize and what not at any moment (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2015). We saw Maria, Sarah, and Peter just starting to lay out their ideas regarding legitimacy and illegitimacy of school's imposition of the curriculum from different angles. Then Ana interrupted the flow of Maria-Sarah-Peter-Ana discussion to give floor to Dina to strengthen her academic voice. This pedagogical move is both questionable and contested, but also defensible. While silencing Maria's, Sarah's, Peter's and Ana's interesting ideas, Ana promoted Dina. Could Ana achieve both goals at once? Maybe.

Finally, we want to comment that just because several ideas died out in the class, it does not mean that they died out for the students entirely. Some students may continue thinking and discussing these ideas (and resurrect many unrealized opportunities) later.

#### 4.2. *Idea-dying case 2 (ideological, axiological suppression): Doubted pride*

Camila (the pseudonym for the second author) taught “Multicultural Children's Literature” course for pre-service teachers in a Mid-Western American University. Historically, this course has been used for teacher training in culturally responsive teaching at the University of Mid-America.<sup>8</sup> Camila sought to engage pre-service teachers in dialogue about multicultural children's literature written by authors of various cultural backgrounds, which often proceeds to discussions about different cultures and pedagogy for students with various cultural backgrounds. In her teaching experience, the pre-service teachers with limited exposures to people from other than European American middle-class cultures, often get angry and shut down when class conversation involves touchy matters such as racism, LGBTQ or immigrants' issues.

In this case Camila's students read Sandra Cisneros' (2013) “The House on Mango Street.” After that they watched an interview with Sandra Cisneros, talking about her perspectives about diversity and social justice. Her stories regarding diversity and social justice were broad and complex. For example, her stories included her writing workshops for girls from disenfranchised families, her right to paint her own house in magenta pink color regardless of the control of the homeowners' association, and her horrible experiences of being discriminated as a Latina in Mid-America.

In the middle of the Sandra Cisneros' interview, Steve, one of the few White males in the class of predominantly White female students, usually quiet, raises his hand and starts speaking up.

1. STEVE: [in an **angry and frustrated** voice] I don't understand what she is talking about.
2. CAMILA: [short pause] STEVE, can you tell us more? I see you sound somewhat frustrated.
3. STEVE: She is here and there. Talking about women's rights for abortion, writer's workshop.

Steve seems to be exasperated about Cisneros' pro-choice political views and her use of writer's workshop – an educational event – to promote them.

4. CAMILA: [short pause then with a neutral tone] Why do you think she is mentioning women's rights for abortion and writer's workshop at the same time in her interview?
5. STEVE: I know writer's workshop can be good. But I just don't get it. Do you know what I am talking about?

<sup>8</sup> In order to fully preserve the students' anonymity, we don't name the state after which this university is named, and which the students and Camila later mention in their discussion as a qualifier of identity. We changed the actual name of this Mid-Western American state to just “Mid-America” throughout the transcript and its analysis.

Camila feels that she really does not understand why Steve is frustrated. However, her question apparently makes Steve even more frustrated. Camila's question seems to ignore Steve's challenge of the legitimacy of Cisneros' political agitating in the educational context of writer's workshop. Rather, she asks Steve about understanding Cisneros' motives in the workshop – the question that does not make much sense for Steve. Steve appears to reject the very idea that Cisneros' propagating her political views, possibly in opposition to his own (political, religious, existential?) views, could be legitimately presented as education. It seems to us that after the exchange, Camila assumed that the issue for Steve was that he politically disagreed with Cisneros (which might or might not be the case). However, she seemed to ignore possible professional pedagogical issues there namely complex and contradictory relationship between education and politics, between education and advocacy, education and (political) propaganda, and so on. We suspect that Camila saw education in general and her teaching role as making her students commit to liberal, social justice, tolerance, and equity values (that she subscribes), especially the students who had “limited exposures to people from other than European American middle-class cultures.”

For us, there was a clear non-understanding between the professor and the student. By itself it is not a problem until both sides are aware of the problem, have trust to and genuine interest in each other, and are committed to investigate their non-understanding in an open-minded way. But we doubt that it was the case here. Specifically, we doubt that both sides were aware of honest non-understanding of each other positions, just before this point. Too many unnamed issues were there. For one, apparently, it was not clear for Steve, why Camila brought Cisneros' writer's workshop for the class' attention: did Camila consider it as exemplary or problematic? Did she want her students share their honest views on the workshop and analyze it in an open-ended way or did she want them to like it?

Steve's rhetorical question seems to help Camila realize that there was some kind of non-understanding there. So, Camila decides to ask Steve to elaborate his position to better understand him.

6. CAMILA: [with a neutral tone] STEVE, can you tell us more? I want to understand your point better.

7. STEVE: **Never mind.** [He turns his back on the instructor and looks at Katie – his classmate at the same table].

Steve's frustration seems to peak now, leading him to stop addressing Camila in a demonstrative gesture of turning his back to her. It seems that he makes his mind that Camila is insincere about her interest in his position, but rather wants to manipulate him and his peers into accepting her own political liberal values. He may be taking Camila's question as false/fake and a part of an attempt to impose on him her political and educational values with which he may feel at odds and with which he may or may not disagree (e.g. feminist, liberal, pro-choice values, internationalist, and that education is about making students accept “the correct” values). The interesting question emerges for us, what in Camila's behavior/action/emotion/communication. Up to this point was a trigger for Steve to withdraw his trust to his professor? Up to the line 7, we saw Steve treating his professor as a genuine, open-minded partner of dialogue, in whose subjectivity Steve seemed to be interested (cf. “interaddressivity”, see [Matusov, 2011b](#)). Not anymore.

8. KATIE: [with furled eyebrows] I am proud to be a “Mid-American”.

Katie joins Steve in opposition to her professor. She seems to sense that Camila aligns herself with Sandra Cisneros' political and pedagogical views, that education should serve to instill liberal political views. Camila perceives the conflict as purely political and ideological (i.e., conservatives vs. liberals), and not as educational (i.e., what is the nature of education about), as she reflected on the events afterwards,

Katie seems to understand where Steve's frustration is coming from and joins him with support and with opposition to the professor. She potentially shares similar conservative views with him (or not), as she stands by him in support. Her remark seems to be calling for a respect of her and Steve's ideological stand. Their conservative ideology is in opposition to the official authority voices of Sandra Cisneros and Camila. Judging by Katie's strong affirmation of her (and Steve's?) pride in who THEY are, Katie stands in defiance of these views and refuses to be questioned (by Camila), and even affronted and insulted by Cisneros.

9. CAMILA: Do you feel offended by the fact that Cisneros hated the University of Mid-America experience? The University of Mid-America does not represent the whole Mid-America?

10. STEVE: [after a short pause] Never mind.

Camila feels the tension and, now open, confrontation. She offers what may potentially be a “safe” question: asking the students if they were offended by Cisneros' potential attack on their identity as students of a Mid-Western American state university. However, this only seems to make the matters worse.

At that point, Steve expresses his resignation through his non-verbal body communication: he apparently feels silenced... his views overlooked, unheard, illegitimate, and unappreciated, but at the same time not challenged either.

11. JACKIE: I don't think I would let my neighbors to paint their house with magenta pink.

Jackie also seems to try to deescalate the debate, moving it away from the minefields – e.g., confronting the professor, discussion of abortion rights, and direct confrontation of political values – to a less value intensive terrain of cultural conventions and tastes, the field of “architectural aesthetics” – yet, she also challenges Cisneros' (and potentially Camila's) pro-immigrant, pro-diversity values, and stands by Steve and Katie.

12. CAMILA: How about this type of conflict happens among parents of your students. So one family just moved from a foreign country wanted to paint their house with magenta pink. The neighbors are trying to ban it using the homeowner's association rule. The kids of these families are your students. And you see kids talk about it in your classroom and the child of the immigrant family is bullied.

Camila seems to go along with this, less charged aspect of the cultural and ideological disagreements between her and her students. Following Jackie's hint, she redefines these disagreements as potentially “different cultural tastes”, and provides a new provocative, “what if” scenario for her students. However, with that change of focus, the ideological differences between the students' conservative views and Cisneros' and Camila's liberal views and hanging out unaddressed educational issues, the very differences that need to be tested and examined, are further suppressed and forced underground.

Commenting about this event at a later time, Camila wrote:

Steve was not so much articulating or communicating. In a few utterances of his, without further elaboration, I could tell this male pre-service teacher was just angry about Sandra Cisneros' interview regarding her experience in University of Mid-America, as he was unable to calm himself down and be communicative about his perspectives. I tried to be responsive to him. Or even more precisely, I tried to show him that I am responsive to his frustration. I could not fully understand Steve's points, because he simply stopped talking. Until Katie said that she was proud to be a “Mid-American”, I had a hard time understanding why Steve looked frustrated and angry.

Why did I show Sandra Cisneros' interview video to the class? I wanted my teacher education students to be exposed to different perspectives about Mid-America education environments. This was an axiological pedagogical decision that I made. I believed that Sandra Cisneros' story could be a good dialogic tool that could engage my teacher education students ontologically in critically investigating their points of view regarding teaching students with various cultural backgrounds. This pedagogical intention resulted in silencing among the students.

Although Camila raises a very good pedagogical question in her reflection and provides a very interesting pedagogical reply, “Why did I show Sandra Cisneros' interview video to the class? I wanted my teacher education students to be exposed to different perspectives about Mid-America education environments,” she did not realize her “teacher's pedagogical desire” in her lesson. She did not encourage her students to develop perspectives, alternative to Sandra Cisneros, on writer's workshop and on “Mid-America education environments”. Her open-ended questions sounded to her students (at least, to the vocal ones) as manipulative and disingenuous. The antagonistic ideological win-lose confrontation emerged, making a genuine critical dialogue very difficult. If our analysis of the students' emerging antagonism is accurate, Camila was much less manipulative than her students might have attributed to her. We think that her interest in her students' political view was genuine and sincere. However, we also side with her students that she wanted to impose her political and pedagogical values them, in accord to her pedagogical beliefs.

Camila's dialogic provocations – Cisneros' book, “The House on Mango Street” and, especially, Cisneros' interview – had a very strong potential. They led to an axiological breaking point in the dialogue between her and her students, who had very different, opposing and conflicting ideologies regarding cultural diversity, minorities, the position of women in the society and feminist issues. Camila's own liberal progressive political views and monologic pedagogical desires, as well as the mandatory liberal-progressive curriculum for such a class, clashed with the students' ideological values, which seemed to be based on conservative, anti-multi-culturalism, anti-feminist and pro-life principles. As Elkader writes, “One of the biggest challenges of the anti-racist [monologic] paradigm in multicultural education is the students' resistance to it” (Elkader, 2015, p. A3). The students may be opposed to the whole curriculum of this course in general, and may feel ideologically threatened, clamming up, silently resisting various ideas, or, as in this case, openly showing resistance when their frustration reaches a boiling point when they were provoked by Sandra Cisneros' advocating for abortion rights, and Camila's comment that the University of Mid-America does not represent the whole Mid-America, with which she sided herself with Cisneros' liberal position. As one of the major problems in this episode, we see Camila's reluctance to openly address and explicate the students' conservative positions. Not publicizing/explicating students' positions, despite the fact that she as the teacher does not like them, leaves these students' positions, unexamined, illegitimate and pushes them further underground.

Elkader (2015) criticizes the mainstream multicultural education that attempts to impose liberal views and values on the students. When a teacher takes an ideological side, she/he delegitimizes students' opposing views, thus making them improper, banned, incorrect, etc. Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) described how when a teacher upholds a correct “first script”, some students may not comply may create their own counterscript. Gutierrez argued that, the only space where a true interaction or communication between teachers and students can occur is in the middle ground, or, “third space,” in which a Bakhtinian social heteroglossia is possible (Gutierrez et al., 1995, p. 447).

In our analysis, Camila did not embrace pedagogical pluralism, a “third space” that legitimizes every idea for honest, open-minded dialogic examination, however disagreeable or even oppressive this idea feels. She could have asked students to explicate Cisneros' political and ideological liberal views and their own opposition to them. These discussions might have opened a path for Camila to problematize the issue of teaching values in school: whose values should be taught, whether values should be taught at all, whether it is legitimate or not to impose values on others, why, when and how. Such problematizing of axiological positions, might have invited all views into a dialogue, creating a polyphonic “third space,” in which participants are genuinely interested in each other, different ideas would have a chance to bounce off of each other, and the students would have a legitimate right to express, critically test and potentially transcend their existing points of dear views. The “third space” is a necessary, although not sufficient,

condition for critical ontological dialogue. In our view, when diverse points of view and diverse ideas can be put into contact with each other, opportunities are created for critical dialogues in which the participants' may develop their Internally Persuasive Discourses (Bakhtin, 1991).

However, Camila's monologic embrace of a pedagogical and political ideology and her imposition of this ideology on her students was not only insulting to them, but the insult was also self-evident. Camila's questions asking for an explanation of their frustration, were not interpreted as an invite for a dialogue. More likely, they were interpreted as disingenuous and fake, potentially an oppressive attempt at "brainwashing." The students united in their resistance. The dialogue was impossible now, and it collapsed.

#### 4.3. *Idea-dying case 3 (ontological silence): Traumatic memories*

Hye Jung's (the third author) class was for multicultural requirement of the university in general as well as a professional class particularly designed for pre-service teachers to deal with various issues on cultural diversity such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and disability.

That day the class had a conversation about suicide issues in education. This topic was proposed by one of the students (not by the student presented in this event). Became the top-ranked topic for this class meeting through students' voting. Hye Jung reported that she saw many signs that the students did not feel comfortable about discussing this topic. There was a lot of uncomfortable silence, no eye-contact, tense body postures compared to other times of this class. In the beginning of each class meeting, Hye Jung would usually invite her students to share any personal stories or experiences regarding the curricular topics in order to make it easy for them to start a discussion. However, in this particular class, Hye Jung decided not to ask the students for personal stories and experiences about such a sensitive topic, in order not to risk a potential threat to the students who might have some tragic memories with suicides. However, unbeknownst to Hye Jung, there was a student, called Taylor, in the class, who had someone in her life who committed suicide. As the discussion became more detailed, about such points as, for example, how can a teacher recognize signs of suicidal behaviors and how teachers can help students with suicidal thoughts and behaviors, Hye Jung realized that Taylor had a hard time and was expressing uncomfortable feelings. In other classes, Taylor was usually vocal, but in that particular moment, she became emotional with tears in her eyes and she made a long pause in a small group discussion at her table (of 5–6 students), where she seemed to have shared more details about something.

As Hye Jung saw that Taylor became upset, she tried to communicate with her. She asked Taylor if everything was okay and encouraged her to share what her group discussed. However, Taylor was reluctant to speak up in the large group discussion.

1. TAYLOR: [talking to the instructor with tears] **This is so hard for me.** (...) [looking at her peers at the table] They know my situation. (...)
2. HYE JUNG: [a long pause] OK. (...)

Hye Jung just looks at Taylor for a while with a long silence and moves to the next activity.  
Later on Hye Jung reflected on the case:

The peers around her table knew what was going on with her. But I didn't know what was going on with her. I wanted to ask her to share her situation, but I was thinking, 'if I asked if something was wrong with her, or what's going on with her, it would invade her privacy.' This situation made *me* silent because I didn't know what to do. In retrospect, I would have asked her if she wished to leave the classroom since she did not feel comfortable. Instead, I made a long pause, a silence, and just moved on. Later, Taylor shared her story with me: why she was uncomfortable and why it was hard for her to discuss suicide issues. In an online class feedback, she wrote, 'I have a huge background of suicide, my best friend's dad committed suicide when I was in fifth grade and he was like a second father to me. It hurt me as much as my best friend's family of 3 siblings and now single mother.' Taylor responded and elaborated her silence after the class.

There are educational and personal issues that cannot simply be discussed at any time, in any situation, nor by anyone, because they are too private to be disclosed or too threatening and disturbing for the participants' psychological well-being. They may open traumatic memories, or may lead to painful realizations related to the participant's self and/or their relationships to others. In other words, there are issues that may penetrate and hurt a person's very being – their ontology. In the case #3, discussion of suicide aroused such a painful memory that it threatened to pull Taylor into suffering of reliving it. Taylor reacted with tears, and tried to withdraw from the further exploration of this topic, while turning to the circle of her friends for support. We believe that even such sensitive issues could be dialogically explored, but under different circumstances: away from the public arenas (like a classroom), in very safe and personally supporting settings, e.g. with very close community, or in one-to-one, person-centered therapy (cf. Cooper, 2003).

In a classroom setting, however, silence and legitimate leaving of the class, might be the best way to reduce threatening ontological pressures. In these cases, it is evident that the participants' life situations and events, may lead to dialogic breaks and dying of ideas. For instance, in one of Eugene's similar classes there was a student who proposed studying issues of suicide in education. However, this student asked Eugene's permission not to come to the class meeting because of her traumatic experiences and Eugene granted it asking the student permission to share this event with the rest of the class. The student agreed and it became his successful dialogic ontological provocation in his class.

In some cases, students' well-being is more important than critical dialogue and education in general. At the same time, the issue of personalizing/ontologizing and depersonalizing/de-ontologizing dialogic themes is very important in ontologic dialogic pedagogy.

Yet, personal experiences may not always be good entries into critical dialogue. At times depersonalized problematic statistics, research, cases about other people, imaginary scenarios can provide safe dialogic provocations.

## 5. Conclusion

At any point in any dialogue, there are innumerable possible ideas, associations, potential side stories, memories, novel insights, agreements and oppositions, etc. that could gain the focus on the dialogic stage. In the words of Bakhtin, it is:

...a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static co-existence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born: co-existence and becoming are here fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous. ... these [ideas] take their openness, their inability to say anything once and for all or to think anything through to its end ... (1991, p. 365).

As much as this natural ecology of ideas gaining the floor and being lost, could also be a fertile area to investigate, we focused in this study on particularly dramatic educational events in which the participants' ontological engagement in testing ideas, positions, values, relationships, desires, etc. had encountered insurmountable obstacles. The three cases we presented open a topic of teacher's (instructor's) *pedagogical orientation* defined by the teacher's *pedagogical desire*. Teacher's orientation may support or block development of a dialogue in class, i.e. teacher's pedagogical orientation can be monologic or dialogic. Teachers' monologic pedagogical orientation, is based on a pedagogical desire to make his/her students to predictably arrive at some preset curricular points and/or values (e.g., social justice, liberal progressive political values, tolerance). Focusing on such "correct" epistemological and/or axiological points in class, suppresses dialogue (Elkader, 2015). Teachers' pedagogical orientation is dialogic, when teacher's pedagogical desire is to support and promote open dialogues among the participants with equal rank (Bakhtin, 1999) in which everyone's ideas, positions and values can be heard and tested, and where the students have a legitimate right to construct their own internally persuasive discourse (Matusov & von Duyke, 2010).

In the cases described above, student's ideas and positions could not be developed in the class discussions in which the teachers' guidance was based on wrong pedagogical desires, i.e. a monologic pedagogical orientation. We found these cases not as merely random and inevitable cases of breaks in dialogues that just happened to take place in our classrooms, but otherwise could happen anyway or anywhere. Rather, we find the presented cases significant from the educational point of view and important for further development of democratic ontological dialogic educational approach. We raised several issues about the nature of critical dialogue in education, and ways it may define educational goals and purposes.

We discussed five aspects of dialogic breaks: ideological, pedagogical, relational, axiological, and ontological. These aspects of dialogic breaks are neither categorical nor mutually exclusive. They are inter-related. For instance, the ontological aspect relates to all other aspects since our dialogic approach to education attempts to engage the students in exploring their relationships to what matters in their lives: their relationship to themselves, to the others, and to the world. Similarly, axiological and epistemological aspects of educational dialogues are concerned with the highest questions of human life, which involve people's value judgments, ideologies, recognized and questioned truths, etc. Critical ontologic dialogue involves deconstruction of personal truths (epistemology), values (axiology), beliefs (philosophy, ideology, religion), norms and conventions (politics, cultural identity), etc., that are part of ones' subjectivity and existence. When any one of these multiple and related existential aspects of the "dialogic contact" breaks or is blocked, the dialogic relationships break. But, ideas can only live in the dialogic space, between serious questions and serious answers. "... in dialogue [an idea] not only shows [it]self outwardly, but [it] becomes for the first time that which [it] is—and, [...], not only for others but for [its author] as well. [For an idea] to be, means to [be] communicate[d] dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends" (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 252). In each one of our cases, ideas died when dialogues ended.

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