

Interview

Democratic Dialogic Education For and From Authorial Agency

An Interview with Professor Eugene Matusov

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Abstract

In this multi-topic interview, Professor Eugene Matusov from the School of Education at the University of Delaware discusses the desirability and necessity for a psychological and educational shift from knowledge, ability, and skill to dialogically and a democratically understood notion of authorial agency. In this discussion, Professor Matusov tells about his own transition from his interest in Vygotsky to Bakhtin, discusses conceptual and ethical tensions among these scholars, and how his pedagogical practice informs his educational research. Professor Matusov provides a somewhat optimistic view on the transition of our society from knowledge-based to agency-based and discusses the role of education in this transformation. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed following closely the discussion. We tried to preserve both orality and the Russian and Serbian accents of the participants without sacrificing the readability of the text.

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Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Let's talk about Dialogic Education For and From Agency – this is what I'm interested in asking you today. Can you explain what that is? What does that mean? Why do you use that term?

Eugene Matusov: Well, uh, I'm constantly working on this concept, and currently I would call it "Democratic Dialogic Education for and from Authorial Agency" (DDEFFAA).

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: "For and from Authorial Agency?" Wow, so many words there.

Eugene Matusov: Let me tell you that it actually started with "EFA," which was the abbreviation for "Education for Agency." And then the more I was working on this concept, the more I specified... I hope deeper and more specific, it became "DDEFFAA." So everything is double except E.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Ok, so let's jump to the past, to the actual beginning – how did you start thinking about dialogism, and about dialogic education in the first place.

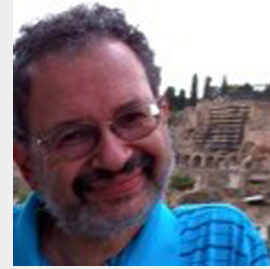
Eugene Matusov: Well, I was interested in education despite my PhD being done in developmental psychology, because... It's an interesting story in itself. Back in the Soviet Union, in Moscow, I attended a special high school 91 that was a pedagogic lab for the Soviet Pedagogical Academy. Some of my teachers were graduate students working with a very famous Russian educational psychologist Davydov. But at the same time, the school was innovative also for a completely different reason. It was run by a number of people, who were interested in math education, and so it had very many diverse sources of pedagogic innovations.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: How did you feel in that school with these innovations? Did you know there was something different about your school than other schools at that time?

Eugene Matusov: Yes, of course. I actually chose that school, because I was interested in math, so it was a school that had a special focus in math and science. The science at that time was mostly defined by physics, rather than chemistry or something else. So, math education was interesting because it was organized by a person, whose name is Konstantinov. He invited undergraduate college students who were highly interested in and enthusiastic about math to teach us math. They were teaching us in a very interesting way. They gave us very interesting and serious math problems, which we could do in class or we could leave this classroom and do them elsewhere. I remember at some point we were asking our teachers to provide some guidance and they were doing that. So they were mostly teaching when we asked them to teach. When we solved the problem, we were telling them the solutions and sometimes asking for help. It was a very strange way [of teaching] because they were mostly providing some lectures, for example, where we asked them in advance. Without this explicit request from us, they would not do it. Plus, the problems were very different from traditional math problems. For example, I remember we were asked to develop alternative axioms for arithmetic to see what kind of new math would be taking off from that, and what practical application it might have in real life. Or, we were learning about computers by playing in the computers, like life computers, so we were creating programs for each other and seeing...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ... what will happen?

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, we were enacting the programs. There were many interesting pedagogical innovations. We had several different branches of math taught by completely different people with completely different ideas of how to teach it. We learned math from people from the most prestigious Soviet university, which is Moscow State University. So that was one side. But another side was physics. The physics teachers were graduate students of Vasiliy Davydov, a student of Leont'ev who was a founder of Activity Theory and a colleague of Vygotsky. They



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conducted some psychological experiments with us, plus one of the teachers, who was my physics teacher, was very dialogic in his way of teaching.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: What do you mean by that?

Eugene Matusov: He was dialogic in a very particular way, I would say he was Socratically dialogic. He constantly challenged any statements we made, which sometimes was very discouraging for some of us. Thus, I remember he was teaching physics by introducing interesting problems-provocations for us, and then we would discuss and approach to them. One of the problems, I still remember, was about why in the locations where there is a lot of sun people have black skin, while in the locations where there is a lack of sun, people have white skin. From a straight physics point of view, it should actually be reverse, because white surface better reflects the sun, and black is actually more absorbs the sun. From this straight physics point of view, it should be reverse: black people should live in the places with little sun while white people should live in the places of a lot of sun. Europeans should have been black, and Africans should have been white. Why is that not the case? So, puzzles like that. Plus, he had a very interesting style of dialoguing because he crushed almost any position that you had. Which upset a lot of students who didn't like him because of that.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Were you upset by that?

Eugene Matusov: No... uh well, yes, I was upset but I liked him a lot. He puzzled me and I was intrigued by him. Once I introduced his own position to him probably to please him or maybe in agreement with him. I expected that he would affirm that position, since it was his own and he was invested in it. To my big surprise, he crushed it as well... Possibly he might not have a good memory and did not recognize his own points that he used to crush my own position in past. After that, I was intentionally bringing his own past arguments to see how he would crush them. I have learned a lot from him – his self-dialogue -- not to stick with dear positions and constantly to seek for limitations of my own ideas.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Or maybe you experienced it as crushing but it was just like, uh, deconstructing?

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, maybe, but I would say crushing, there was like...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...was it personal?

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, there was some personal thing because he had this personal judgment, which was also supported by Davydov's work – to finalize and label people... You see, he followed Davydov in labelling people... Davydov had this approach of empirical thinking and theoretical thinking. So he divided people into those who think mostly theoretically or mostly empirically. And that is kind of finalizing and very snobby one – looking on people from above and calculating them. Anyway, I became more and more interested in psychology, my interests shifted from math – especially when I was in college, — to psychology and specifically educational psychology. Although I was a sophomore in a college, where I studied computer science, I visited my high school physics teachers, participated in designing their psychological experiments with kids, and attended Davydov's lecture at Moscow State University and his Institute of Psychology, where he was the director. I read a lot of Vygotsky on their advice, which I liked a lot. Once, my physics teacher asked me to go to a local bookstore to buy a new book for him and his psychology colleagues that was just released. I asked him, "Who is the author of that book?" He pronounced the name, I'd never heard it before, and it was Bakhtin. I asked, "So, it is another book about psycho-

logy?” and he said, “No, it isn't about psychology.” I asked him, “What is it about?” and he said, “It is about like, literary criticism, but very important so I'd recommend you buying it for yourself as well”...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...Is it “The Poetics of Dostoyevsky”?

Eugene Matusov: No, “The aesthetics of verbal art.” I went to the bookstore. There was a huge line, so I stayed there several hours, and I bought several books. Including for myself.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: This was in the 70s?

Eugene Matusov: 79. The book was called “The aesthetic of verbal art,” which was not a book written by Bakhtin, but it was a collection of fragments, from different writings by Bakhtin. It was the first book that was published since probably the 1930's by Bakhtin in the Soviet Union. Initially, it was very difficult to read for me – I remember the first part was almost entirely incomprehensible for me, – it was called “Author and Hero”, very difficult. And then there were fragments from his book on Dostoyevsky “Poetics of Dostoyevsky”, and from many other books and texts by Bakhtin. But, I got very excited! I became very excited especially about his essay on methodology of humanitarian sciences. It gave me a completely different view on science making. It called to address people, to ask for their replies, to dialogue with people rather than to finalize them, objectify them, measure them, calculate them, label them, predict them, and sort them – as we did in Davydov's lab. Studying Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin discovered that the author did not tell anything about the characters to the reader that the characters did not know about themselves. I thought that psychology should do the same with people it studied -- no talking behind people's back. So, I remember I said to myself and my high school teachers, graduate students in educational psychology, “Well, there should be a different psychology after that.” But my psychology colleagues were not as excited as me. They were saying that Bakhtin's texts were interesting but esoteric... I remember their advice, “You should stick with Vygotsky.”

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: And you knew already Vygotsky?

Eugene Matusov: Before that, I was reading a lot of Vygotsky. Again, there was not much published in the USSR by then, but I went to a very interesting library, the Ushinsky pedagogical library in Moscow, where they kept old texts, forbidden in the USSR. I forgot who helped me to get a permission to go there, since, at that time it was very difficult to get such permission. In the library, there were a lot of books saved from destruction during the Stalinist time. There were a lot of old texts of Vygotsky that were published in the 20's and 30's that miraculously survived thanks probably to unknown brave heroes and heroines. I found even old Russian translations of Nietzsche there – during the Stalinist time these authors were forbidden and their books were destroyed. There were many rare and forbidden publications from the Tsarist time and the earlier 20s when Soviet censorship was much lighter than later, so I was reading things other than Vygotsky. I also read early Piaget that was published in the 20s and the early 30s. The library had many very good sources. I was very interested in Vygotsky until I met Bakhtin. I should admit that after reading Bakhtin, my heart was not with Vygotsky, never again.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Do you remember what in Bakhtin that was, from what you were reading, that was for you so promising?

Eugene Matusov: Well one thing that I really liked – at that time it was not so much for education, it's interesting, that idea came later – but for psychology; that idea that science should be not about people, but it should be with people, and...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...It should not objectivize?

Eugene Matusov: It should not objectivize and it should be asking people what they think about any observation that was done, not for the purpose of verification and checking with them whether is it right or wrong. Of course, it can still serve that purpose as well, but that was not the primary reason that I was interested and excited about that. The primary reason I was excited with it was the idea to share with the people what you observe about them. That the people know what other people think about them or even what people have noticed about them, so they can reply, change, transcend – and do something about it, whatever they want to do.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So the humanistic part?

Eugene Matusov: It's the humanistic part that I really like. Ah, actually I put it together with pedagogy because after graduation of my college I didn't go into computer science, which was my major, but became a physics schoolteacher. My teaching then and, it's probably now, was very... I would say, looking back, uneven. Partly because at that time, I really didn't know much about pedagogy — what good teaching is, — which probably was good because I would have studied traditional pedagogy to learn about it. Although, traditional pedagogy had interesting sides as well, especially when it is contextualized into a subject area and so on. But anyway, I struggled as a young unexperienced and pedagogically ignorant teacher. One thing I remember that was interesting for me, one struggle was how to engage students in physics, the subject I taught in school. How can a teacher genuinely engage students in learning physics, especially those students who might be not very interested in that? How can a teacher make all students interested and passionate? Then I believed that it is possible, if a teacher finds the right pedagogical tricks. I invited my physics schoolteacher, my former high schoolteacher, to the classes I taught, and I was observing how he made his teaching magic, getting almost all students involved, this was at least how it felt at time. And again, some students hated him for crushing their ideas -- but! They might hate him, but they were definitely engaged in physics. At that time, I thought his magic was about asking students good questions. So, I tried to write down all his questions, and I used these questions again in my other classes but nothing good happened. I also noted that sometimes I was successful ... and I tried to remember what I did... aha!...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...This was also what I have done, all the time.

Eugene Matusov: Exactly. Well, sometimes I had parallel classes in the same grade, teaching different students the same topics. So, if I got something pedagogically successful, I was just thinking, "In an hour or two I will apply this to the next [group].", "Best practice!" – ha, ha, ha! Except, it didn't work at all. And I thought, "What was the trick?!"

I felt, on one hand, it was something systematic, my seasoned schoolteacher came and created this teaching magic in a predictable way; but, on the other hand, what is it about, why cannot it be repeated using word-by-word, letter-by-letter?! If it was not about asking good questions, what was it? He came to my classes not knowing much about my students and his questions were about physics, but when I repeated them they did not work! Why? Also, I noticed that he never repeated his own questions. Something was always new, exciting, and fresh.

I was struggling back and forward with that puzzle when I was a schoolteacher. Later, I've recognized that solution of this puzzle was in Bakhtin, not in Vygotsky.... When I came to the US, again people were mostly interested in Vygotsky, not Bakhtin. There was some peripheral interest in Bakhtin. Like my PhD advisor, Barbara Rogoff, she was interested in Bakhtin, but not as her primary interest. My interest at that time was about the concept of inter-

subjectivity, which I didn't realize. Only later a colleague of mine, Tony Whitson helped me to realize that I was looking at the issue of intersubjectivity from a more Bakhtinian side, rather than from the mainstream.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: How did you define intersubjectivity?

Eugene Matusov: Well, at the time when I was studying intersubjectivity, almost all people, whom I knew, defined intersubjectivity as something that people share. Something in common, something people have in common. I think, I always felt that this idea of sharing and having in common was actually, deep down, inhumane... Unethical.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Where does that come from?

Eugene Matusov: I don't know. I think that deep down, it is some kind of influence by Bakhtin. But, [it was very] deep down. Because, I realized that Bakhtin was anti-Hegelian, and I thought that this idea of common and sharedness is a very Hegelian idea. So I was rebelling against that. The main reason why I think intersubjectivity as having common subjectivity was inhumane was because, well if something is shared, why one person would need another? And even from Activity Theory...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: On the other hand, even Tomasello in his language theory, and even Holliday, almost everyone talks about shared attention on an object or event, and how language can develop only within that shared attention....

Eugene Matusov: Yeah... and if you think about, there are a lot of social linguists who talk about how to repair misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication, it's like, anything that is not shared is considered as temporary and bad...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Because you're not coming to an agreement.

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, because you're not coming to an agreement. And this is where I feel extremely, ah, politically and ethically bad, because this demand for agreement – agreement as a proxy for truth.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right.

Eugene Matusov: Again, I feel this idea of sharedness is unethical because you don't need other people after you have an agreement with these people. Like why do we need people when you already got anything important from them? In this approach, you need them only to accomplish something together with them — something that you couldn't accomplish without them. This instrumental relationship with other people dominates traditional defining of the concept of intersubjectivity in psychology and education. When you reach an agreement with people or accomplish something together, you don't need them anymore. Traditionally, in psychology as well, education it looks like the main issue is how to get some things off other people, how to squeeze their subjectivity and then throw them away as useless pulp. You get all the juice out of them, then they are useless.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Well even Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is first interpersonal and then it becomes intrapersonal.

Eugene Matusov: Right, and then that's it, and other people are not needed anymore.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So, then you are self-sufficient.

Eugene Matusov: Exactly! And this is where I felt deeply that Bakhtin is taking a completely different stand on that. For Bakhtin, it's very essential that we will never understand each other, and that's good – it's not a bad thing – people will always have interest in each other, there will always be more and more... Human consciousnesses are essentially opaque to each other and cannot be fully transparent. Actually, agreement is an epiphenomenon – when people can temporarily disregard differences and opaqueness with each other for some practical purpose. I was very much attracted to this Bakhtinian position and more and more away from Vygotsky's Activity Theory. It took me a while there, though both my teaching and my research interests were coming back to Bakhtin without my own realization. I think it was 2003, when my graduate students asked me to teach a class on Bakhtin and education. I thought, “What should I do?!” because I didn't know much of what's Bakhtin got to do with education.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Oh, even in 2003 you still did not think of Bakhtin in terms of education?

Eugene Matusov: No, although, again looking back, I was doing a lot of things in that direction, but I didn't realize that... I didn't yet realize that my project is to translate Bakhtin's philosophy embodied in the material of literary studies into the material of education. Looking back I was already highly engaged in this project, but I just did not realize that.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So you were not aware of it for a long time! You were in the US from 1988, and graduated in 1994 and started to work in Delaware in 1997! So it was more than 10 years that you were working in Delaware... how would you characterize what you were doing in that time?

Eugene Matusov: That's a good question. I think a part of that was rebelling against Vygotsky.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: At that time still, still without Bakhtin, or dialogism in mind?

Eugene Matusov: I think it was, but it's interesting what you mean by 'in mind'. Yes and no. It was in practice, but not very deliberate. And, of course, if you look back, actually, I increased more and more citing Bakhtin, but not committing to him. This was, probably, what I was doing. I criticized the traditional notion of intersubjectivity, especially... the one that Vygotsky had. And uh, but I'm not sure when I arrived at...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...So what would you say, what was the breaking point, if there is any. Were you suddenly... Was it this course that they asked you to do...?

Eugene Matusov: ...I think through teaching this course on Bakhtin in 2003, I became more and more aware that I was onto something different than I had thought before... At that time, I was working on several empirical projects. In my mind then, these projects existed separately, all by themselves, but later they became a part of my book, my first 2009 book “Journey into Dialogic Pedagogy”. But initially I didn't feel that they even connected. It was only after a conference presentation, I think... it was when I came to the Bakhtin conference in Crete, somebody told me that I should write a book, and I asked with surprise, “What book?!” and I made a presentation there...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...What was the presentation?

Eugene Matusov: I'm trying to remember... no, I don't remember, sorry, but it was definitely a chapter of this book. And I realized that it's not a self-sustained journal article, it's chapters of a book I'm going to write.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Yeah but when one reads that book, it seems already mature thinking about dialogism. Not a beginners' [thinking], but kind of really much further in dialogic pedagogy.

Eugene Matusov: Well, that might be true, but again I was so prepared, I was almost like doing an underground work on Bakhtin and Bakhtinian topics and dialogic pedagogy without much realizing what I was doing, but I was doing that.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right.

Eugene Matusov: So, it was not the case that I suddenly become interested in Bakhtin.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: No, but I was asking when, in your mind, it became a project that unified them?

Eugene Matusov: It's uh, in my view, I would say that other people saw it before me. I was Bakhtinian in eyes of other people before I was Bakhtinian in my own eyes. It was like other people's gift to me. I don't remember who was the first person who was saying, "It's a book," let me give the names so they should receive the deserved credit. At some point, Chris Clark, who was actually director of the School of Education in Delaware who initially encouraged me to teach the class on Bakhtin. He attended that class, initially I hoped we would co-teach the class together. But, he was not teaching the class, he was just attending the class for his interest in Bakhtin, he was almost like a student there. I remember he was telling me, "Write a book on Bakhtin! Write a book!" My Spanish former graduate student, colleague, and dear friend, Maria Candela Albuquerque was telling me, "Eugene, this will be a book," and I was asking, "What book?" she said, "I don't know, it sounds like so many interesting things you are talking about, it sounds like a book." Uh, my Norwegian colleague Olga Dysthe. She told me I need to work on the book, so there's... and probably I've missed some other people – someone in Finland in 2005 - now I can't remember who told me that, actually, it's a book. And, it's about, it's about, something about dialogic in Bakhtin, or something like that. And, uh, so I would say that other people told me about that. And, I would say, one person who told me a long time before I knew what it was, that I was working on dialogic pedagogy, was... my good University of Delaware colleague, Tony Whitson. He was on my promotion committee, twice, and he was kind and generous to study carefully my scholarship -- he told me, on the second time, "You had it for a long time, and this is your trajectory." I looked after that at my papers and exclaimed, "Wow, that is true." I wish I knew earlier, but I didn't.... So, I have been blessed with many generous colleagues who kindly provided me with their gifts of surplus of vision of my scholarship — a kind of dialogic finalizing.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Ok! So that's it about dialogism and Bakhtin. What about "democratic"? Where does that come from?

Eugene Matusov: So, back to the Bakhtin. At the end, this is kind of poetic because of attraction to Bakhtin. Bakhtin worked with literary material. He developed this kind of philosophical framework of dialogism, right, what can be called ontological dialogism, but he worked with literary material. My challenge became to translate his literary ontological dialogism into pedagogical material. In terms of democratic dialogism, it came to me later when I was teaching my 2nd class of graduate students on dialogism, where I did this disastrous experiment on dialogic pedagogy that I described in my second 2013 book. I was trying to apply Bakhtinian dialogism to my own teaching. It was, not completely unsuccessful, but, I would say, it was disastrous rather than unsuccessful, which is not the same thing.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right, right.

Eugene Matusov: No, I would say it was rather a successful disaster! A lot of good things happened, but disastrously happened, rather than nothing good happened at all, in my judgment. I really wanted to break with traditional educational chronotope, when students do the professor's assignments. And, I would say that these assignments that I had were pretty good... maybe. But still, what I didn't like, the students, at the end of the day, tried to please me... they were working for me. The problem was not that my assignments were bad – they were not bad at all, in my professional judgment. What was bad for me was the fact that almost anything what my students did in the class was driven by my assignments and not by their own professional and learning activism. I wanted to fight it, I wanted to change it.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Did you feel like that in your high school math classes, when your enthusiastic teachers were giving you excellent math assignments, did you still feel that you were working for them and not for yourself?

Eugene Matusov: Yes... it's not like... Actually that's a very good question that you ask! Thank you! Back then, in my terrific innovative high school, I often felt tired with these excellent assignments... as a student, I remember that very well. On the one hand, I felt constantly being tired of these terrific thought provoking assignments, — and not only me, other students, my peers, felt like that, it was like, "Oh gosh... and another thing to do". It was constant struggle for having your own time, your own learning activism, and your own self-assignments. At the same time, I got very excited about some of the assignments and exposure to deep math that the teachers did to us. I started doing something new in response to the teachers' terrific assignments. Now I almost had to fight with my exciting initiatives that I was running in my head to let the perpetual flow of the teachers' assignments go. So, the teachers' assignments provoked something very interesting in me – and then I started competing with them for my own ideas and initiatives, and it's... ah, I felt very tiresome, with this constant flow of the teachers' assignments. Very ambivalent and confusing indeed. Currently, I see it as a struggle in Dialogic Pedagogy between the student's responsive authorship — an authorship that comes to the student's response to somebody else's provocation and assignment — and the student's self-generated authorship — an authorship that comes from the student's own learning initiatives, self-assignments, and learning journeys.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So you thought that it's, you translated that feeling to your students, you're giving them assignments and...?

Eugene Matusov: No, I didn't translate it – I think they felt that as well in my class. My students got very excited with my assignments — I saw clearly that. The class was very dialogic in its nature. But they also were tired and confused, similar to me in my high school. There was something missing in my view. I came to a realization that they didn't feel ownership over what they did. I mean, it's also not exactly true – they felt kind of ownership, but also they had a feeling that they were not having ownership. I was constantly commanding them, "You need to do this" or "You need to do that," which was with the graduate students even more interesting because this were people who came, or many of them came to become scholars... And the practice of scholarship, I believe, strongly requires the participants' self-generated authorship. Also, I had known some of them well outside of the class and I was excited because they demonstrated this ownership for their own learning and scholarship. We had had almost the same discussions in class and out of class, or almost the same kind of experience, in terms of its intellectual nature in the class and outside of the class. Outside of the class, it felt like a free thing, but in class this felt to my students like that they worked to please me and do it "for me". I asked them, "Why to please me? You need to please yourself, rather than me," so I couldn't understand what it was coming from, all this oppressive part of the school. Of course, you can say it was because we were in an oppressive institution of conventional university,

which is true; but on the other hand, a conventional university has a lot of freedom, and power for the professor to do a lot of innovative things. I could not justify oppression in my class because of imposition of my traditional institution on me or because of my fear of the institution. Rather, I felt that I didn't know what to do to shake of this real sense of oppression that my students felt in my class. So, gradually through these bizarre pedagogical experiments – I would say disastrous, rather than unsuccessful, ah, I came to a realization that the issues of ownership and democratic decision-making are the key... Looking back it sounds like a very obvious thing, but ownership was democratic... Without decision making about your own fate, your learning and professional development, when it's absent, it's very difficult to – take ownership of your education. So, that led to my interest in and practice of democratic education. Democratic education has been exemplified by Summerhill in UK, The Circle School in Pennsylvania, the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, and the like. In democratic education schools, students make decisions about what to study, how, and whether to study it at all. Again, I was slowly coming to that through my own teaching while reading what has been done before me in that direction. I studied the existing democratic education practices and have realized that these terrific educators were not coming from a dialogic position either, they were coming from therapeutic or democratic citizenship positions. I also started investigating my pedagogical desires and I have discovered that many pedagogical desires were progressive in their nature, “How can I make students to want what I want them to want?” Michel Foucault would love that! I have come to a realization that I should legitimize and respect the students' disengagement, non-cooperation, and non-participation — i.e., their own pedagogical and non-pedagogical desires.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: It's almost like there are two strands that are coming together for you – one from the dialogic position and another from the democratic traditions that uh...

Eugene Matusov: ...But also, there is thinking about studying agency and conceptualizing agency! I also felt – and not only me, a lot of people, I would say, talk about that in socio-cultural approach, coming from Vygotskian strand, and beyond Vygotsky, approaches that heavily include Vygotsky's perspectives, especially certain versions of them, -- there is a sense that agency... first of all, it's needed. But at the same time, it's almost like the concept of agency has to be sacrificed to avoid individualism of traditional cognitive approaches.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Mhm, people try to resurrect it?

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, they try to resurrect the notion of agency. But in my view, there were unsuccessful attempts to resurrect it, because they tried to resurrect it within Activity Theory. And in my view, strangely enough, this does not exist...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: That's very strange because you would think that's its empowering agency, is activity theory.

Eugene Matusov: Yeah.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: But no! I think that maybe it's because they are looking at a system in which individuals are part of a big machine, so they don't have their own agency.

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, and especially a sociocultural scholar talks about how a person/actor is shaped by culture, society, institutions, history and so on and so forth, which is good and important, but it's also a very conservative approach – focusing on how culture maintains itself, reproduces itself. By “conservative”, I'm not talking here about NOT *politically* conservative [but *culturally* conservative], focusing on how a person is shaped by [ready made]

culture and institution. On one hand, it is very exciting, but on the other hand, I always felt a sort of a conservative strand in that. It's about preservation of the culture, preservation of...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...But you don't see where the innovation, where the personal uniqueness comes out.

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, exactly! Because as soon as you look at innovation in a sociocultural approach, you start tracing "shapeness" by the given – the ready-made culture, institutions, history, social relations, social structure, language structure, even dynamics, and so on. "Shapeness" means, it's some kind of "there" – and shape again means that you are a part of something and not a universe in yourself. And again, it's not like I'm giving a new critique of a socio-cultural approach — I'm giving an internal critique of socio-cultural approach from the practitioners of that approach. I've heard a lot of the dissatisfaction from my sociocultural colleagues, who have been saying for years, "Well, we need to include that." "That", meaning "human agency." And there have been some attempts to do that, but again, in my view, they are not successful because the problem is that they become either individualistic – which was not satisfactory from a socio-cultural approach – or conservative focusing on what shapes the human agency.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: What about those who are trying to resurrect the agency to play? Like van Oers' work on play and imagination? Remember how van Oers' program in Amsterdam includes the whole person back into the process?

Eugene Matusov: I'm not sure I know exactly what you are talking about...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Well, the article that he published in "Human Development" that you and I commented on... remember it was his struggle to include the whole person?

Eugene Matusov: Oh, yeah! I remember. But again, the whole thing is about his focus... Back to Vygotsky, since van Oers' focus on imitation, I think, comes from Vygotsky... Not only from Vygotsky, also from many others, like probably Piaget as well, but Vygotsky definitely. In this focus, the interest is in how culture reproduces itself, which again, is a very conservative inquiry. It's kind of how the past continues in the future and not how the future comes up in the present and how the present breaks up with the past while being embedded in it.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Yeah, and you can't account for how...

Eugene Matusov: And that's why innovation is either... unexplained, or again, reduced to the past and the given which is not innovation anymore.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right, although Activity Theory scholars have this idea of, like, a breaking away... they're trying to...

Eugene Matusov: ...Yes, in my view its, sorry to say, but [I] often [feel that] it becomes almost like the dialectics' equilibristic of suddenly something coming out of nothing.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: OK, say what, for you, is the difference between dialectics and dialogic?

Eugene Matusov: Well, there is nothing new I can say other than what Bakhtin already said. I think Bakhtin viewed dialectics as the highest and most interesting form of monologism, where voices of other people are reduced to their logical positions and put in the heads of one person. So, voices are extinguished, ontological intonations

are removed -- voices become dead. It's kind of dead dialogue. I agree with him. There are two ways to look at that. On the positive side, it's the highest and smartest form of monologism with the focus on the word "highest." On the negative side, it's still a form of monologism. It is abstracting others' subjectivities, becoming not interested in alive people, their corporeal bodies, and their ontologies anymore, because they are now in your head. You don't need alive people for that. I have many ethic concerns about dialectics. Because, for me, again, dialectics is killing life, and deeply down, in its totalizing form, dialectics is a very unethical position because you don't need other people. Dialectics is pregnant with totalitarianism. Like any extreme monologism, it is potentially homicidal. This is why I really feel very anxious and suspicious about focus on internal dialogue – not by itself, there's nothing wrong to study internal dialogue, but viewing it as being the highest form of dialogism or cognition or anything like. And sometimes people refer to Bakhtin for references to internal dialogue and dialogic self. But remember, Bakhtin studied the work of Dostoyevsky, where characters were marginal people who were suffering from, what Bakhtin called, "excessive dialogism," which is a form of monologism, and that's not a positive thing.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right, talking to yourself all the time, or answering to imaginary people...

Eugene Matusov: ... which by itself is not bad when you return back to a dialogue with alive people. However, in the case of Dostoevsky's characters, it's a very hostile dialogue, internal dialogue that's started by hearing hostile voices constantly challenging the voice of the character. And again, viewing internal dialogue as the highest form of dialogism, I think is unproductive, wrong, if not straight dangerous.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: You also say that for the concept of agency, for the way it is mostly used in education, is instrumental: it is really for gaining knowledge and skills. I think that that [your concept of agency] may be the biggest difference – maybe – from all other educational positions you have, even from dialogism or even democracy; something completely different.

Eugene Matusov: It's interesting to explore how much democratic education practitioners and theoreticians, who are interested in the issue of students' ownership of their own life, would disagree about my notion of authorial agency – it's an interesting question. They are definitely interested. For example, our great sociocultural scholar Jim Wertsch is interested in this notion of educational agency. But, the way I see it, educational agency is not about gaining knowledge and skills or even identities, as these folks may believe, for several reasons. One reason is... well, if you're looking at how quickly knowledge, skills and identities become obsolete in our society, which is rapidly changing. The changes are accelerating. What were valuable skills and knowledge about 10-15 years ago, and sometimes even 5 years, and sometimes 3 years, and sometimes 2 years, and sometimes 1 year ago, become completely obsolete...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Well that's really all at the cutting edge of technology, but there's still a lot of knowledge that's not obsolete, in many different areas of life -

Eugene Matusov: Like what?

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Well, social work...

Eugene Matusov: ...I think that's changing rapidly – listen, if you think about what was considered to be knowledge at the time, I'm not even talking about what was knowledge in schools, in our time – you and me – which was...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...Yeah I mean like the helping professions. Yes, details of how you navigate the day to day are very different -

Eugene Matusov: Well, read Dr. Spock, and see how different views are now, and not only substance but even the idea of, in Dr. Spock, the idea of finding *the correct* way [the best practice] of raising children – the idea which is collapsed, the meta-narrative collapsed. Not completely, again, not fully, but it has collapsed. And it keeps collapsing in an interesting way.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: That's right.

Eugene Matusov: But again, even the specifics have also collapsed, like childrearing – I'm just bringing something that people will say, 'Well, children are children, they're kind of biologically the same'. No, no, no. Ideas about the childhood, what's ok, what's not ok, are very different.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: I'm just thinking in science technology definitely very, very big changes, what about ...

Eugene Matusov: Well, if you think, what we're talking now about gay marriages... For the last five years, American dominant views on gay marriage have rapidly changed. There are a lot of things I remember teaching our students about many social issues that have dramatically changed. Certain things that were scandalous before stopped being scandalous now, and then other scandalous things have emerged, which were not scandalous before. One good example is about the 1988 video "Preschool in Three Cultures": suddenly in the early 2000's my students have started noticing American preschool kids using real knives for making soup with the teacher, which becomes scandalous for them. This was completely not scandalous, not noticeable, for my American students before the 2000s. You see, knowledge and skills become heavily more and more obsolete and cheap – they are available cheaply on the Internet. So if it's not about teaching knowledge and skills, what is it about? Again, people are spending in school more and more time. But if you look at knowledge, it becomes obsolete. So what is it [education] about if it's not about knowledge and skills? One possibility is that it's about authorial agency, which is not about knowledge and skills, and not even about ability to get knowledge and skills! It's about production of culture.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Is that how you would say what agency is?

Eugene Matusov: Yes. It's about production of culture, not reproduction of culture, but production of culture, which is making new culture.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So that's why you're calling it authorial agency?

Eugene Matusov: Um, yeah I call it authorial agency. Working with my colleagues Kathy Von Duke and Shakhnoza Kayumova, we realized that the notion of agency is used so differently in the literature, in four different ways. One of these uses and, probably, the most common one is instrumental – a capability of doing something, which is very common in the literature on agency, but it's not what we meant. Like ability to read – ability to do things.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So, authorial agency is not in the domain of ability, what about the domain of initiative?

Eugene Matusov: Ah, well it could be part of initiative, but also could not be part of initiative but a response to somebody. Initiative can be focused on agency, or have high concentration of agency. Even students pleasing their teachers demonstrate authorial agency because it is not easy to please another person — one have to be

creative, just ask advertisement businesses! I define authorial agency more as a transcendence of the given, recognized by the self and/or others. Recognition by the self and/or others can problematize the notion of agency, because it is a contested term – it's not something you can observe... easily or "objectively" – if I say, "This is agency," other people may disagree with me. I can only make a discursive bid on recognizing "agency" to other people and to the author.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So it's a dialogic...

Eugene Matusov: ...Yes, it's dialogic. It has dialogue, it is discursive. It's this constant sense of dialogue, whether or not you have agency and [what] agency is...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Is it like that an example about kids playing video games and many adults do not recognize creativity and educational value of the games or the values of playing in itself?

Eugene Matusov: Yes. The example was about some kids playing games...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...Some people think playing video games is a waste of time, some other people [are] recognizing that... it may not be a bad thing.

Eugene Matusov: And people have interesting life trajectories. If, for example, children spent almost all their time playing video games in high school and not doing much of anything else and then later on created their own business as a gaming company that made video games, or tested or designed new games, and became millionaires -- suddenly other people said, "This is a valuable thing!"

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Even, look at the guy, who created Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg.

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, right. At the time, I just imagine his parents, who might not seen his work of designing Facebook as being valuable – chasing for and flirting with girls, gossiping, or something like that -- and might have seen it as a distraction from his academic studies.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: What's the social media? Like people just chatting and...

Eugene Matusov: ...Yeah.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: "Tell me, what is it about?"

Eugene Matusov: "Waste of time, waste of time." Yes, and now we don't think so, a lot of people might think like that.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Like tweeting! People say like, "What's that stupid thing ... tweeting?!"

Eugene Matusov: Yeah, so, that's why it's very important that the notion of authorial agency is very discursive and contested, that is why, in my view, it's so elusive. Constantly, people are trying to validate or invalidate agency or whether or not it...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: It is contestable.

Eugene Matusov: Right. Plus, authorial agency is not necessarily a positive thing. Not always. Like, for example, according to that definition, Hitler had a lot of authorial agency. It will be probably agreed by a lot of people —that it's true: Hitler was extremely creative, transcending so many things. That's why he was so innovative, creative and so on and so forth. That's something that you cannot take from him. On the other hand, a lot of people – maybe not all, but a lot of people – will see that as a very bad evil and asocial, unethical, immoral thing – bad agency. Hitler had a lot agency but it was bad agency, if not evil. He was a genius, an evil genius.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So still it's very hard to right my mind about this notion, it's kind of like a *praxis*. Because it may or may not be recognized, but it may be in a phase, like when you were talking about your life trajectory, you didn't really know that it's turning into some particular direction, so would you still say that you had agency?

Eugene Matusov: Absolutely, and this is what I meant when I said “recognized by others,” so you might not recognize your own agency, but other people can recognize that. That's a very good point. Another interesting thing in this case, is that it's not individualistic in a sense that it breaks with a sociocultural tradition. In fact, culture, institutions, cultural mediation, history, language and so on – everything that is given – is the material for the transcendence, the material for agency. It's not about *shaping agency* by culture or institution, it's about *transcending* -- it's about using the given as material for transcendence. Culture, institutions, existing social relations, or existing practices are the material for agency. In this case, agency does not exist in the vacuum and uh, it's not by itself without other people or other practices, it's history, and so on so forth... It is historic...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: What do you mean it's historic?

Eugene Matusov: Well, again, it's about transcendence. I'm transcending the historically given. So the history is material available for the person's transcendence, agency cannot exist without history and culture and other people, in the vacuum. Transcendence doesn't happen, like transcendence that was 2000 years ago is not the same as now, because there is a historical change – history is kind of... ok let me give a wonderful example.

I saw a wonderful documentary about an Inuit community of traditional jewelry making. There was an Inuit jewelry maker, who was accused by members of his community for using modern materials and deviating from traditional methods of jewelry making. He defended himself by claiming that he followed the tradition of his forefathers by using any materials and tools that “the ocean brings to shores” including shipwreck from a Western ship. Since, speaking metaphorically, “the ocean of the modern life brings modern materials, tools, and methods to his shores,” he must use them according to the tradition. He argued that locking the practice in the past by limiting it to old materials, tools, and methods was a distortion from this tradition, not following it. So, there is a lot of things coming up, right now, from “the ocean of diverse cultures” – speaking metaphorically – and according to the tradition we must use that treasure, if we want to continue the tradition. When people are trying to create a “cultural zoo” or a “cultural museum” by refusing to innovate, — in my view, they make this tradition dead.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So they're keeping conservative with some old materials...

Eugene Matusov: ...Keeping conservative..., which is again, I'm not against that. “The ocean of history,” so to speak, brings a lot of rich old materials as well that are worth of preserving. There's nothing wrong to use them. Conservation of the historically given provides us with the rich material for our agency and creativity. But, like that Inuit traditional jeweler, I question some people's insistence on conservation without its transcendence, or insistence on using only the old materials, and not to see what other, new, things the ocean brings. This innovative traditional

Inuit jeweler said, “And that’s my mission. Because our forefathers used everything that was available, and there’s now so much available and it’s our tradition to use that.” In my view, this is an interesting thing about agency and history and tradition -- they get in an interesting relationship. In my view, this is where the socio-cultural paradigm and approach continues in my notion of authorial agency. How a personal agency is shaped by history and culture through the given as the material for transcendence by a person. Culture and history do not determine authorial agency but shape it by constraining it with what is possible and impossible and giving the material for the personal agency to work with (i.e., transcend).

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Uh huh. Yeah, because it’s also mystifying, I mean the conservatism of the sociocultural approach is mystifying really the origins of anything. It often focuses on cultural reproduction and cultural socialization in the given culture. Sociocultural conservatism loses human agency and personal creativity. It’s not human.

Eugene Matusov: Right. Well, it’s always like culture, like everything before people... but again, I don’t want to criticize sociocultural scholars too much – to whom I also think I belong. I think many, if not all, that I know, talk about this challenge in a sociocultural approach -- a need to connect culture with the personal agency. But again, agency, unfortunately, was traditionally – at least from my understanding – was understood as “ability.” And that is a decontextualized, universalized, individualistic ability – a traditional notion of agency. It is outside of socio-cultural approach. The way some sociocultural scholars are often trying to resolve that is to make agency a *social* ability, like “asking for help”, for example. But again, they didn’t solve the problem of agency, in my view.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Is it something you can develop, or is it something you are... traditional. But you are... kind of like... because, if you have... good circumstances of life, you are almost endowed agency because you are in a richer environment, or something like that?

Eugene Matusov: Well, it’s very interesting to look at an issue of agency historically, from a historical perspective. In my view, you don’t need to develop authorial agency because we constantly demonstrate our authorial agency at a small or big scale. The presence of agency is not the issue, because we are full of authorial agency... And this is why I was justly criticized by my colleague Kathy Von Duyke: when I initially labeled my new approach “Education *for* Agency,” she said, “So it’s from nothing to agency?” and she was right about that. I accepted that criticism, so I added “from” agency as well. Authorial agency is always there. The issue is that actually, society was heavily interested... historically actually, for some time society was interested in suppressing authorial agency. Educational philosopher Sasha Sidorkin writes about that in his last 2009 book, but he thinks that suppressing authorial agency is a good thing — as a part of education to reproduce culture. And the reason for that societal suppression – a little bit of authorial agency is fine, but not much, — is that the society is very much interested in pressing a little bit on gas but heavily on brake when it’s concerned about authorial agency, so to speak. So it’s uneven. Authorial agency of some, actually very few, people will be supported, but it’s not so for many other people. The reason for that, basically, is that this kind of western civilization gets really... accelerated... or I don’t know how to say, it almost is getting on the drugs of technology. Which means that the first machines were people. So, the idea is to make people behave like machines. Very specialized machines, very complicated, even smart (like smartphone)... but very predictable... According to a machine vision of people, people-machine should be predictable, replaceable, standard... -- which is all anti-agency. You see, authorial agency cannot be standard, predictable and replaceable. And this trend is very much with us now, it is not like I’m saying, the time of people-machine has been passed, but I’d argue that it starts breaking now. It’s... at least this is how I see it. Maybe I’m too optimistic, but I see the raising wave of changes. More and more things that people can do, as machines,

machines can do. So, it seems to me that now we have reached a point where machines are becoming what people call “smart” machines. Machine-like human labor becomes devalued and outsourced from developed countries to China and India as cheap labor. The fact that we are calling machines “smart”... is freeing people back to agency. The agency-labor – design, creativity, innovation, practical wisdom, critical thinking, authorial judgment and leadership, responsible risk-taking, personal relations, caring, and so on -- becomes more and more in demand and value in the new emerging agency-based economy. Before even reaching the destination of knowledge-based economy, we already start transforming from knowledge-based economy and society to agency-based economy and society.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Right, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is also freeing people from income, because there are less and less jobs that are given to people to do, because machines can do it.

Eugene Matusov: I'm not an economist to talk about that this painful process but...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...That's kind of like, sometimes I have fears that we are on a breaking point of the whole economy, how we live, or how the ability to be distributed...

Eugene Matusov: ...My suspicion, again, I'm not an economist, it's nice to check that with economists. It's actually interesting, the more and more people seem to get involved in economy on the globe... rather than less people involved... but I think you're right about... that the process is very painful. The process is painful for many different reasons. One reason it is painful is that schooling, and many other institutions and practices are trying to break human agency and creativity with all its neoliberal reforms focusing on standardization, accountability, testing, but at the same time, there seems to be growing demand for it.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: It's a contradiction.

Eugene Matusov: It's a huge contradictory situation, that's one thing. I think that current neoliberal reforms are last kicks of dying horse. Very painful kicks, if not deadly at times, indeed. I hope they won't last long enough but it depends on our efforts as well. And all these contradictory transitions painfully disrupt people's way of being, for many people. There's a lot of exploitation going on, and uh, and it is still heavily based on the exploitation of the people – of each other. Plus, again, this trend, although it's there in my view, it's just beginning, but it's not there yet, so we cannot fully rely on an agency-based economy yet... This is my claim, that there is a growing new agency-based trend in economy, and not only in economy – it's bigger than an economy. We are shifting from the knowledge-based and skill-based society to an agency-based society – post-knowledge [society]. And a lot of people right now think that it's fashionable to talk about a knowledge-based society as a new thing. But, it is already old-new thing, in my view. We are in a transition to agency-based society. I suspect many contradictory processes are going on in our global society at the same time.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: Best teaching practices are... evidence-based teaching, research-based teaching.

Eugene Matusov: Yes, ugh — all that nonsense; which is based on the knowledge evidence, — this is a technological trend of knowledge-based economy. This trend is probably even getting stronger as we speak. But, I think there is more future in an agency-based tendency. Knowledge-based is the past, the present and [the] past, rather than the future. One reason for that is that knowledge has become more available on internet... As educational philosopher Alexander Sidorkin says, educated person is not one who knows and can do things, but one who can find things and can learn them on the Internet, and I would add, who desires finding them and dialoguing about

them in a critical manner. Here you see the shift to authorial agency. Becoming smart used to be associated with becoming knowledgeable — now, being smart is associated with creative and critical authorship. I heard that knowing about how to take care of a plant was considered to be smart. Well now, people can look on the internet for that. Smartness has been redefined as being a unique, irreplaceable, creative, specialized...

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: ...Available.

Eugene Matusov: And become very available, on demand. Because internet is at the fingers of more and more people. Knowledge becomes more and more available and less and less valuable.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: So...

Eugene Matusov: ...So, agency becomes valuable. There is another issue if you are interested in authorial agency: not only do you think about future, but also, it's about... defining education. In my view, education is not so much about authorial socialization in a socially valuable practice, even creative socialization in that practice. It is a *critical* socialization in practice, in which people not only creatively transform the cultural practice, but also critically evaluate the practice itself, including practice of education. Which means that the people, actually students, have to decide for themselves what good education is for them, or even if they want it... — the terrible question, for an educator [*laughs*]: whether you need education at all, in *any* way it is defined. Socrates said that unexamined life is not worth living. But, as a political philosopher Kukathas convincingly argued, some unexamined life may be worth living while some examined life might not. I wonder if genuine education should include debates about that as well. If my conceptualization of history is correct, currently schooling is more about putting brakes on authorial agency in the name of knowledge and skills – i.e., production of machine-like people. Definitely, we should move away from that. What a waste of humanity! People are people, full of authorial agency – they are not standard predictable machines, and we, educators, should not try to make them as such.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane: I have many more questions to ask about your vision of education and schooling in agency-based society, about painful transitions, agency-based teaching, critical dialogue, and so on but our interview time is, unfortunately, up.

Eugene Matusov: Thanks a lot, Ana, Vlad, and Europe's Journal of Psychology for giving me this opportunity! I have learned from your questions a lot. I have also many questions as well about agency-based schooling and agency-based research — I hope to discuss in my upcoming book on DDEFFAA. I'm also interested what readers think....

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