

## TEACHING AS DIALOGIC CONCEPTUAL ART

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**ABSTRACT.** We describe an approach to teaching as a dialogic conceptual art. This is not a metaphor. Conceptual art teaching is eventful, ontological, paradoxical, unpredictable, and surprising for all participants including the teacher. Conceptualist teachers expect to be surprised by their students. The educational process is seen as not being limited by the time and space of the lesson but continues long after the lesson and outside of the classroom walls among different participants looking for their ideas and surprises, searching for confirmation and disputations, sharing excitement and disgust, engaging in never-ending dialogues where truths are tested and forever testable. The aesthetic beauty of this process is in the nerve-racking, dramatic, elusive, and captivating flip-flops of (de)constructions that open new vistas, ready to be destroyed. Genuine education is seen as carnivalesque, involving spoilsports, tricksters, upside-down flip-flops, dethroning and so on. Educational outcomes of dialogic conceptual art teaching are emergent, diverse, unpredictable, and subject to future change.

**Keywords:** critical dialogic pedagogy; conceptual art; educational provocation; deconstruction

### **Dialogic Provocation#1<sup>1</sup>: 2+2=4**

I<sup>2</sup> was always interested in learning disabilities. When two of my undergraduate university education students, future teachers, invited me to visit their teaching practicum classroom to observe a first-grade boy with “math disability,” I immediately accepted their invitation. Math disability! What was it about? My students told me that the boy had “a math logic disability” as he could not understand the simplest arithmetic calculation operations like addition and subtraction even with single digits, despite repetitious exhaustive instruction. I was intrigued.

I arrived at the school around 10:30 am and after some brief security procedures of signing up as a visitor from the university, I was directed to the first-grade classroom. My students were already there waiting for me and the teacher nodded

first-grade in acknowledgement. The classroom was full of sunlight. It was a rather spacious room for 19 students, who were sitting in clusters of four at individual desks facing each other. The children did not pay much attention to me, perhaps being accustomed to visits by adult strangers. They were busy working on math worksheets that the teacher had given to them. The teacher was sitting next to one of the cluster groups, discussing something with one of the children there. My undergraduate students pointed at a boy sitting at one of the desks in a cluster. I moved to stay in close proximity to his cluster to observe and hear the children's work and conversations.

The children of his cluster – two boys and two girls – worked silently and independently on their math problems on their worksheets at their own pace. The boy selected the next problem “ $1+4=$ ”, turned to the girl, sitting next to him and working on her problems, and silently showed her the problem with his two fingers. The girl briefly glanced at the written problem and replied, “Five.” The boy nodded in appreciation, turned back to his desk, and carefully drew the correct number on his worksheet. He picked up the next problem in a column, “ $3+2=$ ” with his fingers and turned again to the girl. She glanced again and said, “The same.” The boy nodded in appreciation, turned back to this desk, and drew the number five. The next problem was “ $2+2=$ ”.

I waited until the girl replied “four” and asked her, “How do you know that? How do you know *for sure* that two plus two equals four?” The other two kids looked at me with an interest and so did the boy. The girl smiled self-assured and with anticipation of a triumph, as apparently, she heard this question before and was ready to shine with the correct answer expected by adults. She drew two lines on her own worksheet below the math problems she had to solve and then other two lines, slowly counted them, and declared almost with triumph, “Four! Two and two is four.” I glanced at the boy – he looked perplexed. His perplexed look guided me to push forward. I replied to the girl, “Yes, two lines plus two lines is four lines. But, I didn't ask you about the lines. I asked you about two plus two.” The boy turned to the girl as if it was him who was asking this question and not me. My question did not perplex the girl in any way. She picked two pencils from her pencil case and then two more and counted the pencils, “Four.” She smiled at me. But, the boy was not moved by her pencil reply. Again, I pursued my investigation, “Yes, four pencils. Two pencils plus two pencils is four pencils. I can see it. But I asked you about numbers, not pencils.” She stopped smiling and replied without any doubts, “It doesn't matter. Two plus two is always four. It does not matter what to count.” The other two kids in the cluster were attentively listening to our conversation. The boy turned to me. It seemed to me that he was not satisfied with the girl's answer but did not know how to challenge her.

I asked the girl, “How do you know that it doesn't matter what to count? What about Russian pencils? You know, I'm from another country that is called Russia. What about two Russian pencils and two Russian pencils?” The girl smiled and replied, “Four!” She moved her fingers in the air as if counting the invisible

Russian pencils. I continued, "But how do you know that? You haven't seen Russian pencils!" She giggled as if we played a funny game, "It doesn't matter! It's four. Four Russian pencils." I asked, "What about Martian pencils?" The group exploded. The other girl started clapping, laughing, and exclaiming, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter! It's four! It's four! It's four!" The first girl also joined her with joy. The two boys started talking about a battle between Superheroes and Martian Aliens. I waited for a while and asked the girls, "How do you know that it's four? I bet you both have never seen Martian pencils! What if Martian pencils are round like balls?!" The girls were giggling with joy, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!" The first girl counted imaginary round ball-like Martian pencils in the air with her hands, "Two and two: one, two, three, FOUR!" The noise in our group attracted attention of the rest of the class but when I looked at the teacher, she smiled in apparent appreciation that the kids in my group enjoyed a discussion of math. Two of my university students who stayed behind me and observed attentively our conversation were smiling as well. I lowered my voice and asked the girl, "But what if Martian pencils are liquid?" The girls became almost hysterical with laugh, "Liquid pencils! It doesn't matter!" The first girl counted imaginary four pools of liquid Martian pencils, while the boys were in the mid of their imaginary battle between the Superheroes and Martian Aliens gesticulating with their hands.

I lowered my voice even more, almost to whisper, and asked all kids, "Ok, kids. What is two hundred plus two hundred?" The boys stopped immediately their imaginary battle. The first boy, who, according to my university students had math logic disability, asked me to repeat the question. I did. The first girl replied with perplexity, "We didn't study such big numbers yet." I asked, "But you didn't study Russian and Martian pencils either, but you were eager to provide answers. What stops you now?" She looked at me with surprise. There was some silence as the kids were apparently thinking and then the first girl broke the silence by saying without enthusiasm, "Ah, I remember now. It's three hundred. My mom told me." I did not reply but kept waiting for the other kids to comment.

Suddenly the boy, who was initially suspected to have "a math disability," said calmly, "It's four hundred." I asked him, "How do you know that?" Like the girl before, he drew two and two lines on his worksheet and counted them, "One hundred, two hundred, three hundred – four hundred." When he counted the last line, he circled all four lines with his pen in the air. The girl objected, "No! You can't draw one hundred with one line! One hundred has many-many lines! It's difficult to draw them and count them. We didn't study such big numbers!" The boy calmly replied, "It doesn't matter." The girl grabbed his worksheet, on which the boy drew his lines representing hundreds and started rapidly, almost violently, drawing many-many lines without counting under each of his lines. She yelled with frustration when she finished, "These are hundreds. It's difficult to count them! See, how many of them there are!" The boy replied calmly, "It doesn't matter!" He circled her chaotic lines with circles and counted them, "One hundred, two

hundred, three hundred, four hundred. It's four hundred." "No!" – yelled the girl, – "You can't do it! You must count all these..." She was pointing at her chaotically drawn lines within the boy's four circles. The other boy joined the discussion, "No, you mustn't!" The other girl kept silence, but she was perplexed...

At this moment, the teacher started clapping loudly gaining all kids' attention. The lesson was over, and the kids were supposed to form a line to go for a lunch. In the line, the discussion about adding two hundreds and two hundreds spread rapidly. The kids' opinions split. I could hear, "It doesn't matter!" "No, it does!" "Too big numbers," "Martian pencils," "Superheroes..."

When my two university students and I left the classroom, one student exclaimed, "The boy is just a genius! I thought he had a math disability, but he was just a deep thinker. I thought that the girl was a very advanced learner, but she was just a shallow learner! We can't teach math through worksheet drills. We need to have deep math discussions with our students!" The other student asked me, "What the hell just happened?! Can somebody explain it to me, please?" I apologized to both of them as I had to run back to my office for a meeting, but I asked them to bring this event for our class discussion the next day and they both promised to do that.

I went back to my office being rather satisfied with my improvisational teaching and my students' reflections. I liked that I grabbed the kids' attention by creating an interesting and deep math discussion. I liked the fact that I apparently managed to recognize the boy's struggle with the mathematical idea of the universality of numbers: it does not matter what one counts: lines, pencils, Russian pencils, Martian pencils, or hundreds. I liked that the kids left the classroom while discussing math. I liked the flip in of my students' assessment of the kids' learning: the advanced kid turned to be a shallow learner and the kid with math disabilities turned to be "a math genius." "Many great scientists were "slow learners" in school, like, for example, Albert Einstein.<sup>3</sup> Their slowness was a sign of their deliberateness, their thoughtfulness of not to follow, not to conform to the procedural teaching imposed on them by their conventional teachers," – I thought. I also liked that my students saw a link between teaching procedures of calculation – common in many schools – and students' shallow learning. Finally, I liked pedagogical perplexity of my second student.

## **Dialogic Provocation#2: When 2+2 Is Not Equal 4 and Dialogic Pedagogy**

Yet, the more time passed since the event during the day, the more a sense of some kind of dissatisfaction with my teaching was growing in me. I sensed that something was wrong, but it took me a few hours before I could realize what the problem was. The girl's voice that you cannot easily add big numbers penetrated me (cf. the notion of "penetrating discourse" in Bakhtin, 1999a). I was always interested in math and these types of issues have always grabbed my attention firing into action a swarm of many math thoughts in me. For example, two

infinities plus two infinities is one infinity and not four infinities:  $2+2=1!$  Well, infinity is not a number. But is it? Can you circle infinity like the first-grade boy circled a hundred?

I started thinking, but is it really true that two plus two always equals four regardless what one counts? Does what one count matter for the result? Rather quickly, I came to the following five paradoxical examples:

1. Two drops of water plus two drops of water equal one drop of water and not four:  $2+2=1$  for water drops:



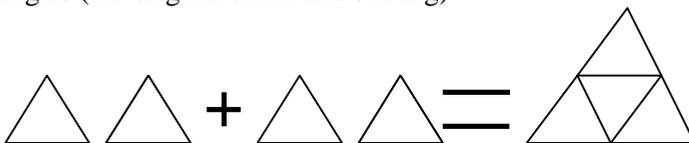
2. Two animals (hungry cats) plus two animals (fat mice) equals two animals (two filled up, satisfied cats):  $2+2=2$  for these animals:



3. Two molecules (of hydrogen) plus two molecules (of oxygen) equals three molecules (two molecules of water and one molecule of oxygen),  $2+2=3$  for this chemical reaction of molecules:



4. Two triangles plus two triangles can be five triangles,  $2+2=5$  for the following triangles (the original small and one big):



5. Finally, two friends plus two friends equals uncertainty as there can be four friends, three friends, two friends, or even zero friends as a result.

I wish I could share these new ideas and puzzling examples with the first-grade children!

With all these examples, I started thinking that maybe the girl was not such a shallow learner and the boy was not such a mathematical genius after all. This was another flip for me on the same day. It is not true that the result of addition does not depend on what objects are being added. Two and two big numbers do not always add to four. What might be great was not necessarily the individual mind of a child but all their minds in the deep and critical mathematical discussions in which they were authentically involved. Thus, I decided to focus my upcoming

discussion of the event with my university students not so much on mathematical geniuses and shallow learners but on organizing deep pedagogical discussions of children around deep mathematical issues as the most desirable way of teaching. I decided to share my five examples above with my university education students, future teachers, so they could appreciate the depth of math and how it could have been possible to continue the deep discussion that I started with the four kids in the first-grade classroom. After the excitement of my two students, I expected that the rest of my students would become excited to hear about how little children could be involved in deep discussions about math.

However, my class did not go exactly as I had expected. After my two students presented the event described above, some of the students became perplexed and some excited. Although I noticed the difference, I did not explore it at the time. Rather, I raised the question for the class about who of the two children were more mathematically advanced learners: a) the boy who was constantly asking the girl for the answer to his arithmetic problems or b) the girl who asked her mom about the result of adding  $200+200$ ? Initially the discussion went in an interesting but predictable direction for me. Most of my students agreed that the boy became more sophisticated than the girl, when he was able to understand that a hundred can be united as one and that it does not matter what you count: Martian pencils or hundreds.

I problematized this pedagogical issue even further by asking my students, future teachers, “Is it better to reject a mathematical rule that you don’t understand but the teacher imposes on you like apparently the boy before I had engaged him in my lesson did OR to conform to the adults’ math rule without deep understanding of it, as the girl seemed to do?” The class erupted in discussions: many students were speaking at once creating small discussion groups or trying to address the whole class in vain as it was too noisy and chaotic. When the initial chaos subsided, I asked my students of what kind of students they would prefer in their future classrooms: ones who would follow math rules and procedures regardless of how well they understood them (like the girl) or ones who would refuse to follow math rules and procedures until they deeply understood them (like the boy). I suggested voting on this choice, but one student raised her hand and said that it was a false choice. She insisted that good teachers should not throw kids in this situation at all by teaching them deep conceptual math and not procedures.

To my surprise, some other students disagreed saying that if we did not teach our students math procedures and rules, they would fail their math standardized tests based on testing students’ procedural math knowledge. Some students suggested a compromise of teaching both: procedural math knowledge and deep conceptual knowledge. A student asked why standardized tests could not focus on testing deep conceptual knowledge. And at this moment, I decided to make another flip and introduce my students to my paradoxical examples when two plus two is not necessarily four.

I told my students that I suspect that a genuine standardized test on deep conceptual understanding might be impossible, ever. My students became quiet listening carefully to my words. I said that deep conceptual understanding unfolds only in dialogue. It never stops. It is bottomless (Bakhtin, 1986). It belongs to all its participants. I saw that my words made my students interested, mystified and yet not quite understanding what I meant.

I said, “Let’s consider the boy and the girl one more time. We all agree that at the end the boy was more mathematically sophisticated than the girl because he could see the universality of numbers. He could add hundreds while the girl couldn’t. He could probably add thousands and millions while the girl couldn’t. The boy understood that it doesn’t matter what you add: imaginary Martian pencils or hundreds – the result is the same:  $2+2$  is always four regardless of what you add. In contrast, the girl doubted that one could add big numbers so easily, arranging them in units. She agreed that one could easily count imaginary Martian pencils but not necessarily big numbers. We sided with the boy. But are we really correct in doing that?” And then I shared my addition examples of infinity, drops, hungry cats and fat mice, triangles, and friends.

My students were in shock. My paradoxical examples and the additional flip were shocking for them. However, they were shocked about many different things: some of what they were shocked by was contradictory to what other students were shocked by. Here is a list of their shocks and objections that I remember:

1. Infinity is not a number because you cannot count it. Numbers are countable but infinities are not. My counter-argument was that we can add uncountable quantities (e.g., water) that we represent with regular numbers (e.g., with pounds of mass or liters of volume). So why can’t we add infinities and represent them with numbers?

2. Some of my students charged me with tricking them. They said that two plus two is always four but I tricked them. They claimed that I was tacitly adding “apples and oranges” and not the same objects. Only the same objects can be countable. But I added different things: not small drops of water but counted a big drop of water; not cats and mice but counted “animals”; not small triangles but counted both big and small triangles; and not hydrogen and oxygen but counted molecules (they could not find my “trick” about friends but kept exploring it). My counter-argument that we always count different things by abstracting some “same” ideal was not convincing for them, as they could not come to terms with the idea that two plus two may indeed not be four for some objects.

Many years after the class was over and these students became teachers themselves, one of them sent me an email with the subject, “ $2+2$  is always 4! 😊”, when he wanted to remind me of our class or asked a question. There was something deeply personal in their rejection of my paradoxical examples, as if a rug was violently taken from under their feet.

3. Some of my students became very excited about my examples both about the new math horizon that they opened for them and about new dialogic pedagogy that

can open this new horizon. Thus, I remember that one of these students was able to make  $2+2=9$  by adding two and two equal small rectangles to create one big rectangle carrying 8 diverse smaller rectangles inside. Another student tried to make  $2+2=-1$  (a negative number) or  $2+2=0.5$  (a fraction) but she was not able to do that (at least at that time). Some of them asked what might be a next “flip” and how to achieve it. My response to that was that future mathematical “flips” (i.e., unexpected new mathematical vistas) probably required our moving deeper and deeper into math practice and critical math discourse with people who are interested in it. We discussed the difference between learning about math and doing math and tentatively came to a conclusion that there might not be a clear boundary between these two activities.

4. Yet, some other of my students became pedagogically upset with my paradoxical examples with “ $2+2$  is not always 4.” They said that before the examples they had been leaning toward dialogic pedagogy<sup>4</sup> that I demonstrated in the first-grade classroom. However, after my examples and discussion, they firmly decided to teach mostly procedures and rules. It was because teaching for deep understanding would be very confusing for little children and for the teachers themselves. Also, the children’s parents might get upset that their children became too philosophical while not demonstrating mastery of simple math. Also, those children might not do well on standardized tests, which might reflect poorly on the teachers and the school. Finally, employers might be upset that their employees – the past students of deep math understanding – refuse to follow rules because they could not fully understand them. This criticism of my dialogic pedagogy provoked very interesting and important discussions about the purpose of math and general education.

5. Lastly, one student shared her realization that she probably struggled with algebra because algebra mostly studied non-linear relations among objects. But because she learned that  $2+2$  is always four, it was very difficult for her to understand non-linear math relations, for which  $2+2$  is not 4 (see the discussion of this math and pedagogical phenomenon by Russian mathematician and educator Konstantinov in Matusov, 2017). Her comment provoked the class to discuss the features of the objects, for which  $2+2$  is always four. We came to a conclusion that these objects should be indifferent to and not interact with each other. Some students became excited to find exceptions from this rule but some wanted to know what “indifferent” or “not interact” meant.

Like the first-grade class on Russian and Martian pencils, this undergraduate class for future teachers was very memorable and eventful. During the semester, the students and I returned to the themes of this discussion again and again. As I mentioned before this discussion colored our class as such for many of the students.

## Reflection on Teaching as Dialogic Conceptual Art

### What is conceptual art?

We argue that teaching is a conceptual art – dialogic conceptual art to be exact. Teaching as conceptual art is not a metaphor but rather an exact description of good teaching. We define conceptual art per se as deliberate critical deconstruction of the given: culturally given, socially given, politically given, economically given, educationally given, scientifically given, morally given, aesthetically given, and so on. Conceptual art involves many flip-flops of contexts, hierarchies, and values. It is very carnivalistic but uncomfortable. In arts, conceptual art may serve aesthetic, therapeutic, political and other functions. In education, the focus of conceptual art is on pure critical deconstruction. We call critical deconstruction a process of critical examination of a given issue, to bring many different possible frames, points of views, alternative explanations, values, implications and contrary arguments for the purpose of finding limits of truth.

For example, in the middle of the Cold War in 1975, dissident Soviet conceptualist artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid sent a letter from Moscow, USSR, to the Prime Minister of Greece Kostas Karamanlis asking him to provide a site in Greece for a Blue Smoke Production Factory that would constantly produce pure air of smoke “unpolluted with the ideas of utilitarianism” (see below). In our interpretation this art has several flip-flops of deconstruction of the given: smoke of pure air, fabrication of the purity and naturalness, production as destruction and destruction as production, the cradle of civilization as a tombstone monument of the past idyllic life, unknown renown artists from a totalitarian country addressing the Prime Minister of another country as equal to equal, juxtaposition of the Communist USSR and Capitalist USA, Leninski Prospect, Moscow, USSR and 33 East 74th Street, New York, USA, representation of Soviet dissident marginalized artists by a respectful American art gallery, and so on. Although all conceptualist art has a strong intellectual aspect, it is rather difficult to perceive this, and, for this matter, any, conceptualist artwork as purely intellectual and not ontological, political, ideological, emotional, relational, and so on. It engages ontologically, evokes many roles and positions, and, thus, makes people co-participants breaking the artist-audience boundary. It is also unfinalizable – resisting any finalizing, ready to make a new flip-flop with any final interpretation (Nikulin, 2010). There is no message but a stream of provoking messages that invite co-participants into deepening the concept.

Not all conceptual art fits our model. In our version of conceptual art, the participants have no less right to be a spoilsport than the author of the conceptual provocation. Some conceptual artists (e.g., Marina Abramovic<sup>5</sup>) allow legitimate deconstructions of the given only to themselves and not their participatory audience, creating a strong boundary between the artist and the audience. The participation of the audience is prescribed and limited to certain given repertoires, within which improvisation is allowed.

Conceptual art teaching is eventful, ontological, paradoxical, unpredictable, and surprising for all participants including the teacher. As a preparation for a lesson – a lesson for the students and the teacher, – we, conceptualist teachers, often say to ourselves, “Let’s see how my students are going to surprise me this time.” We hope that our students develop similar expectations for us, their peers, and themselves. The educational process is not limited by the time and space of the lesson (i.e., educational chronotope) but continues long after the lesson and outside of the classroom walls among different participants (e.g., families, friends, colleagues, professionals) looking for their ideas and surprises, searching for confirmation and disputations, sharing excitement and disgust, engaging in never-ending dialogues where truths are tested and forever testable (Morson, 2004). The aesthetic beauty of this process is in the nerve-racking, dramatic, elusive, and captivating flip-flops of (de)constructions that open new vistas, which are ready to be destroyed.

Like conceptual art, genuine education is carnivalesque in its nature involving spoilsports, tricksters, upside-down flip-flops, dethroning and so on (Bakhtin, 1984; Garrison, 2009; Sullivan, Smith, & Matusov, 2009). “Tricksters celebrate contingency, chance, and accident while using them to their advantage. They are creators, and re-creators, of interdependent, imperfect, unfinished, and ever-evolving worlds. For them, the age of revelation never passes” (Garrison, 2009, p. 67). Genuine education breaks the locks of the given culture as being normal, natural, necessary, logical, coherent, non-contradictional, consensual, unopposed, essential, permanent, impersonal, and total to make it arbitrary, contested, alternative, contradictory, incoherent, relative, historical, temporary, power-driven, heterodiscursive, heteroglossic, authorial, and non-hegemonic.

The conceptualist art provocations of our teaching have both an ontological and a dialogic nature. They are ontological because they actively, if not violently, grab attention, engagement, and commitment of a participant about the issues that the participant cannot remain indifferent to. Ontological provocations throw the participants into their biases, commitments, attention, and engagements. Thus, in our own conceptual art teaching, we often ask our students to vote on issues important in the field. Just by raising a hand, a student commits him or herself to a particular position that now begs its defense. To avoid manipulation associated with this psychologically powerful action, we often add an option “I don’t care” along with other diverse possible positions that we and our students design together. Those students who choose the “I don’t care” option become audience and judges for other positions directed at them, “Why do I care while you don’t about this issue?” Thus, the commitment to an issue emerges as a collective dialogic process of addressing and replying about whatever position a student chose to commit to (and they can change their mind and commitments in the dialogue).



Figure 1. "Blue Smoke Factory Production" by V. Komar and A. Melamid, 1975, Moscow, USSR;  
<http://michaeljhorne.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/FactoryForTheProductionOfBlueSmoke.jpg>

The Renowned Artists of the End of the 2 Millennium A.D. Komar/Melamid Moscow

The Prime Minister of Greece Mr. Karamanlis, Athens

Honorable Mr. Karamanlis!

You are the head of the government of a country which, being the cradle of European civilization, has always evoked the deepest feelings in the heart of every civilized man.

In our century, the problem of preserving harmony between man and the environment is attracting the anxious attention of worldwide public opinion. Who, if not you and your country, could become the pioneers in the matter of resurrecting the idyllic landscape of the long gone Golden Age.

We do not suggest the elimination of the colossal machinery of modern industrial production. However, it is within our power to direct this machinery along the path of eternal and ideal aesthetics. Therefore, we appeal to you, Mr. Prime Minister, and also, in other letters, to the large-scale capitalists of our time, with the request to support the construction of the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke. We ask you to offer the land of ancient Hellas as an honored site for this factory.

Clean, unpolluted with the ideas of utilitarianism, blue smoke, constantly diffused, will produce monuments to the genuinely beauty of human sensibility and intelligence.

We are attaching to this letter a photograph of the design for the Factory for the Production of Blue Smoke.

We hope to receive your reply as soon as possible. Would you please send your reply to our home address: Leninski Prospect 70/11, Apt. 404, Moscow, USSR, or to the Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street, New York, New York 10021.

The coordination of organizations which are financing the project and the purchase of the land is to be handled through the Roland Feldman Gallery.

The second ontological aspect of our conceptual art teaching provocations is rooted in “the internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin, 1991; Matusov & von Duyke, 2010) where our students are forced to reply to the contradiction inside their own self. For example, when an education student, who was initially committed to behaviorism as her discipline approach to autistic children, was faced with the “magic wand” provocation, “Would you use a magic wand to make your students act always in the way you want them to act?”, she suddenly found herself in a tension between her behaviorism and her humanism of respecting other people’s agency (Marjanovic-Shane, 2016). This dialogic tension – the student’s need to reply and resolve the contradiction – is internal to both dialogue and the student herself. It is internal to dialogue because it is embedded in a never-ending dialogue with all possible alternative positions of the past, present, and the future. It is internal to the student because the most important for the student becomes how she would reply to herself rather than to others.

Genuine education is essentially autodidactic (Sidorkin, 2009). The teacher, when and only when a student invites him or her to facilitate this autodidactic process, brings dialogic ontological provocations, provides students with exposure to a rich learning environment, exposes the student to alternative ideas, and engages the student in a critical dialogue. Dialogic conceptual art teaching is always impositional for the students but it is an invited and an inviting imposition (Matusov, 2015). It is invited by the student as the student expects pedagogical and epistemological authority from the teacher and expects teaching to be interesting, provocative, relevant, stimulating, and useful for the student. The teacher invites the student by implicitly saying, “Follow me into the rabbit hole of ontological pedagogical provocations and see if you find yourself in new disturbingly exciting places.” When the teacher delivers the promise, the credibility of his or her pedagogical authority rises. When the teacher does not deliver the promise, it drops. When the credibility of the teacher’s pedagogical authority drops to zero or below, it is time for the student to move away from this teacher (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2015).

Critical dialogue is not aimed at arriving at a consensus as a proxy of the truth (Bakhtin, 1999b; Matusov, 2009). The focus is on disagreements and dissensus as a permanent moving force of the dialogue. All participants are viewed as spoilsports, who are ready to destroy each other’s dear perspectives, values, worldviews, activities, norms, consensuses, socializations, and attitudes.

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a “spoil-sport.” The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion – a

pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. ... The spoil-sport breaks the magic world, therefore he is a coward and must be ejected. In the world of high seriousness, too, the cheat and the hypocrite have always had an easier time of it than the spoil-sports, here called apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc. (Huizinga, 1955, pp. 11–12).

In conceptualist art education, spoilsports – the teacher and the students – are welcome (Marjanovic-Shane, 2016).

### **Why should teaching be a kind of dialogic conceptual art?**

After Socrates/Plato, we view education as critical examination of the life, self, world and society, “An unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, 1997). From this perspective, our teaching goal is to promote informed authorial judgments in our students, who will take responsibility for their authorial judgments in a critical dialogue with alternative positions. It starts with ontological dialogue provocations and deepens through testing the participants’ ideas in a critical dialogue. The second part – critical dialogue – is dialogic addition to conceptual art. Traditional conceptual art may stop at ontological provocations – a cascade of deconstructing flip-flops. However, dialogic conceptual art teaching moves this cascade further by creating “the internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin, 1991) – critical dialogue by the teacher bringing diverse alternative positions, worldviews, values, ideas, and perceptions that promote testing the participants’ past and emerging ideas.

This approach contrasts with the traditional view of education (and teaching) where the students’ competent and even creative socialization into an existing practice and discourse is recognized by other relevant participants (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). In contrast, we argue for education as anti-socialization in any given practice. Of course, socialization always occurs, but it occurs on the periphery of deconstruction. Similarly, construction of a new given also occurs on the periphery of deconstruction. This new given will be tested in the future. “Truth [a newly constructed given] becomes dialogically tested and forever testable” (Morson, 2004, p. 319).

Socialization in a given practice is often referred as “training,” rather than as “education.” We argue that in contrast to training, the primary function of education is not *utilitarian*. In its primary, intrinsic function, education must not serve any other practice: economy, citizenship, equality, social justice, patriotism, babysitting, social coherence, peace, social upward mobility, healthcare, survival, socialization, democratic participation, embetterment of the society – although all of these functions may (or may not) be legitimate by-products of education. Serving other practices is a secondary function of education and as such it should not interfere with the primary function of education (unless in some extreme cases). Like art, love, and science, education has its own intrinsic sphere that fulfills and actualizes the life of a person. We see this intrinsic sphere as a critical

deconstructive examination and we see dialogic conceptual art teaching as a way of promoting this intrinsic sphere of education (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2018, in press).

### **Teaching as Art: Three Approaches**

We argue here that teaching, any teaching, is primarily art, in addition (secondary) to being technology or science. We have known at least three major artistic approaches to teaching. The first approach is *teaching as an art of scripted performance*. In teaching as scripted performance, a teacher enacts a scripted lesson to make the students predictably arrive at the curricular endpoints setup by society (e.g., the teacher, testing agency, national educational standards). Teaching as scripted performance, often called instructionalism, is characterized by three major elements: 1) scripted-lesson, 2) following the script during teaching, and 3) preset curricular endpoints (Hunter, 1982). Teaching as scripted performance is a technological approach to teaching, viewing teaching as a technology – instructional techniques – that can predictably lead any student to predictable learning outcomes. Recently, this teaching has been characterized as “research-based teaching” and “best practices” where educational positivist research of pre-test and post-test verifies particular teaching scripts for their learning outcome efficiency.

The second approach is *teaching as improvisational performance*. In teaching as improvisational performance, a teacher improvises to help a student discover and construct the curricular endpoint preset by the society. Thus, a leader of the American Progressive Education movement, John Dewey argued for double psychologizing the targeted preset curriculum. The first psychologizing is revealing psychological and social historical needs that led humanity to arrive at the targeted curriculum. The second psychologizing is to engage the student in an activity that authentically requires the student to learn the targeted curriculum (Dewey, 1956). The student’s learning pathway to the preset targeted curriculum as well as any teaching facilitating this pathway can be unique. However, the curricular endpoint remains the same for all students similar to teaching as scripted performance. Thus, teaching as improvisational performance also involves three major elements: 1) learning activity for the students’ discovery and construction, 2) the teacher’s facilitation of the students’ engagement, discovery, and construction, and 3) preset curricular endpoints. The third element remains the same for teaching as performing art.

The third approach is teaching as *dialogic conceptual art*. In teaching as dialogic conceptual art, a teacher throws students in provocations that force the students to develop their own authorial views, judgments and ideas in their response to these provocations. Then the teacher engages the students in a critical dialogue about their own authorial opinions by juxtaposing them with alternative existing authorial opinions and testing them against each other. As a result of this

testing, the students' authorial opinions, which may or may not undergo a change and transformation, become informed, critical, and deepened, while always remaining provisional and susceptible to future testing forever. Teaching as dialogic conceptual art also involves 3 major elements: 1) dialogic ontological provocations, 2) testing students' emergent authorial ideas in a critical dialogue, and 3) developing students' voices and authorial informed and critical ideas.

In contrast to the two teaching as performing art approaches, the educational outcomes of dialogic conceptual art teaching are emergent, diverse, unpredictable, and subject to future change. It views students as persons of culture (Bibler, 2009). In teaching as dialogic conceptual art, education is viewed as culture making, culture production and not as culture reproduction, as it is in performing art teaching or improvisational teaching. Students and teachers are expected to deeply and critically engage in the given culture to transcend it rather than acquire, competently master, or socialize in it. Socialization in the given culture occurs in the background and as a byproduct of teaching as dialogic conceptual art and it is not the major focus of education.

We argue that a dialogic conceptual art teaching is not instrumental or functional. Paraphrasing a famous quote about romantic relations by famous comedian and film director Woody Allen,<sup>6</sup> when teaching as dialogic conceptual art stops evolving creatively, eventfully, and ontologically, it dies. The same probably applies to art of conceptualism in general. Conceptualism is not a method but a spirit of constantly moving out-of-box, provoking, transcending, and deconstructing the given, including challenging and deconstructing the conceptualism itself when it becomes the given (i.e., a method). Similarly, teaching as dialogic conceptual art is not a pedagogical method, it is an educational philosophy. Once the hard work (and play) of mind and heart stops – conceptualism in art and in pedagogy stops and dies. In our view, the phrase “a method of conceptualism” is an oxymoron. It is impossible to develop a technique of transcending the given culture, which is the essence of conceptualism.

### **Self-spoilsport: Tensions in Dialogic Conceptual Art Teaching**

We want to end our paper by listing tensions in our dialogic conceptual art teaching approach as we see them now. One commonly raised great challenge for our approach is its sustainability across curricular topics, diverse students, institutional settings, teachers, and time. Can dialogic conceptual art educational provocations occur day after day in a classroom for diverse students and curricular topics in diverse institutions with diverse, often oppressive, institutional constraints on a systematic basis? Does it fit our society as it is with its focus on educational credentialism, socialization (training), meritocracy, economic competition, and so on? Can students critically examine the life, self, world, and society when they are forced to engage in education, forced in a particular curriculum designed by others, and so on?

Our brief replies are that eventfulness cannot be guaranteed on a systematic basis. System and life are in opposition. However, possibilities for eventfulness can be promoted by making participation voluntary, democratic decision-making, dialogic ontological provocations, critical dialogue, and so on. Even when events happen, they happen differently for different participants and not necessarily for all of them and not all the time. Events are unique. When events do not happen often or at all, it may be a signal for a participant to move away from the educational practice or to insist on changing it. With new students coming, the old provocation may not work or work differently – it definitely works differently for the teacher him/herself. When it stops working for the teacher – it stops working, period, unless students can guide themselves without the teacher.

When a student disagrees with our definition and goal of education as critical examination of the life, self, world, and society, he or she becomes our spoilsport whom we welcome for the following four reasons. First, because exploration of the goal of education for the student – involving trying and testing alternative definitions and goals for education – is a part of education itself. Second, because the teacher should serve the student and not the other way around. Third, because our dialogic position supports pluralism of educational philosophies. Finally, fourth (for now!), because of the commitment to the conceptual art of deconstructive flip-flops, we cannot fixate on our own current pedagogical position by continuing to critically examine it, a position that leads us to expecting to leave it at some time in a new surprising flip-flop.

Alas, our vision of education does not fit our society. The word “school” was introduced by the ancient Greeks in their democratic polis. It means “leisure”. Our current society is not leisure-based but necessity-based. Genuine education is fully possible only in a leisure-based society. Genuine education is a leisurely pursuit of a critical examination of the life, self, world, and society. In a necessity-based society, other functions colonize education and make it instrumental. Leisure-based education in a necessity-based society is always limited, marginalized, and possible on its periphery as limited and temporary oases. Necessity-based society almost by definition is not in a position to appreciate the timelessness, the eventfulness, the carnivalesque, and the deconstructive nature of the flip-flops of ever testing ideas in the conceptual art teaching. Labor and work are necessary to sustain life but they extinguish conditions for education as we see it. And we know that in Ancient Greece, their leisure-based education and society was founded on slavery and sexism. However, cultures are created not in labor and work but in self-actualizing action (Arendt, 1958) – an authorial activity of creating the self, the world and the society. Thus, without genuine leisure-based education, life and humanity are not fulfilled. Hopefully, with increased automatization of human labor, we can and may liberate ourselves for leisure-based ontology and genuine education.

## Anti-Conclusion – Invitation for a Dialogue: Comments by Our Readers

Justin von Duyke (16 years old)

Justin: “The boy in the Lesson #1 who was really a deep thinker... that was the thing that got me... the whole thing that it takes time, like the slow and deliberate time to actually learn it... That’s what really caught me... actually, that’s exactly how I learn... At first, I didn’t understand what you really meant by  $2+2$ , because I was confused because I know what that math problem equals, but, I never actually questioned if it was true... so that's where I became a little confused, but when I got into it I understood.

I learn to just, like, to understand fully why I need to learn it, not just, to learn it, if that makes any sense? I need to understand why I need to know this, in order to fully learn it... And that takes, that takes a while to get... I need to see the whole picture. So that’s why I’m a slow thinker I guess...”

Kathy von Duyke (Justin’s mother): “In my observation, school administrators and bureaucrats are not reflective people, they are action people, and many teachers, as well. So they have very little patience to reflect on what is happening, or they become angry and frustrated, and turn toward action.”

Justin: “Oh, that’s why... When I was in Middle school, that actually happened. I had a math teacher. When I asked her why are we learning algebra, she got really angry and I was asking why do we need this, what is it used for? And she was like, ‘You don’t need to know that!’”

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### NOTES

1. We see this and next sections as dialogic provocations for the readers as well as the generative examples of dialogic provocations that aim for the reader to experience and observe dialogic conceptualist art teaching. This part was published in our paper (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2018).

2. The first author. Read about this lesson here (Matusov, 2009).

3. [http://www.albert-einstein.org/article\\_handicap.html](http://www.albert-einstein.org/article_handicap.html)

4. This agreement-based dialogic pedagogy can be qualified, probably, as Habermasian (Habermas, 1984).

5. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina\\_Abramovi%C4%87](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87)

6. “A relationship, I think, is like a shark. You know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark” (movie “Annie Hall”, 1977).

7. Greek σύγκλητος means a body council of high-ranking officials (initially religious, church senate).

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