

A Proposal for a New Schooling: Reciprocity and Authentic Dialogue

Learning Relations: Impure Education, Deschooled Schools, and Dialogue with Evil, by
Alexander M. Sidorkin, New York: Peter Lang, 2002, 212 pp., \$29.95 (paper).

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In *Learning Relations*, Alexander Sidorkin makes the apparently outrageous claim that education is the most wasteful industry. Caravans of trash trucks come to collect the useless products of students' labor each night. Because the products of students' school activity are simply thrown away, he argues, schools have serious trouble motivating students. Sidorkin argues against Dewey, Vygotsky, and other advocates of progressive education who claim that it is possible to make school learning systematically meaningful. Intrinsic motivation in school "is possible only for a few moments, when children forget where the results of their learning are going"—that is, to the wastebasket (p. 17). In this wastebasket economy of mass schooling, learning is not a "social glue" that can hold a school together. Instead, Sidorkin recommends a "pedagogy of relation" that will more successfully motivate students. The students "need *something else* besides [academic] learning from school" (p. 39).

Sidorkin's critique of the purposes and goals of schooling is unusual because it is based on a theoretical account of schooling as another industry of the economy. Sidorkin fruitfully amends the Marxist definition of labor as a productive activity. He argues that schooling is an example of "non-productive labor." In the conventional economy, Sidorkin claims, a product is the major goal of labor, and changes in workers, associated with learning, are accidental (but often appreciated) by-products. In contrast, in the economy of education, changes in students are the major goal of labor, whereas the use value of the students' work is an accidental (and often unexpected) by-product.

As students produce schoolwork that ends up in the wastebasket, they engage in a form of labor that is appreciated by the broader society. Unlike in many other industries, the outcomes of learning activity are not separated from the students (workers) themselves and have hidden surplus value that has important consequences for *students' future labor power* (e.g., skills, attitudes, orientations, experiences in certain practices and relationships). For example, the value of a doctor having written a princess story in second grade lies in the *doctor herself*, a value that is finally transferred (in a very different form) when the doctor is practicing and others pay for her services.

Further applying this economic perspective, Sidorkin argues that learning in school is not an innocent endeavor but rather is fundamentally coercive and exploitative. He explains why students' labor necessarily involves exploitation by the students' future employers:

Even poorly motivated students work for free for many years, and as a result their labor power accumulates enormous value. However, when the time comes for workers to sell their labor power on the market, what they sell is their actual labor power, that is, their capacity for work, *not their past labor as students*. The labor of learning and the value created by it do not count when labor power is sold. (p. 32)

This view may be questioned by rational economists and functional sociologists, however; because labor requiring a lot of schooling sells at a higher price in modern capitalist society, the employer pays for past nonproductive labor as well. Furthermore, many employees are paid not solely according to the work they do but also according to the school credentials they accumulate. We suspect, however, that both Sidorkin and rational economists are right: Sidorkin is right that comprehensive schooling is not completely paid for through future wages, and rational economists are right that specialized and professionalized education is, at least in aggregate, more highly paid in labor compensation.

Sidorkin takes his argument even further, seeing schooling as an institution that resurrects the political and social relations of Feudalism, particularly in its reliance on direct violence to maintain order. Because students' attendance in school is compulsory, student labor is essentially based on Feudalistic exploitative relations that use violence to motivate the labor of disinterested students. These coercive "extra-economic" stimuli have been historically the most used mechanisms of maintaining order in the classroom (e.g., "classroom management," "behavioral modification," "zero tolerance policies," corporal punishment, and the use of medication). Whereas many middle-class children are promised high returns on their labor investment and thus may not perceive this violence, there is little doubt that many working-class students who perform poorly in school do. Sidorkin's analysis here could have benefited from the voices of students who both experience the worthlessness of their labor and the exploitation used to "motivate" them to do it.

Because of the history of this violence, Sidorkin argues, educators should be aware of and attempt to mitigate the amount of coercion used against their students. Of interest, Sidorkin claims that many educators may be faced with little choice but to confront the issue of coercion in schooling, because historical trends in the last half century have dramatically weakened the traditional authority of the teacher. These changes are evident, he argues, as teachers are less and less able to control their classroom through physical and symbolic violence or through exclusion. He claims that the difficulty teachers face in resorting to control is due to the "massification" of schooling (which made school attendance mandatory rather than privileged) and the end of corporal punishment.

Sidorkin urges us to consider the "pedagogy of relation" as the only way to rescue the authority of the teacher from continued deterioration. He argues that teacher authority must be voluntarily accepted by students rather than based on coercion. Such teacher authority, he insists, must be based on a *hybrid* of mutuality and reciprocity of authority, an authority that connects people as autonomous voices and agents. In this type of relation, students will cooperate with the teacher either because they might find common interests with the teacher and other students or because they learn they can benefit from each other through an "exchange of favors" (Matusov, St. Julien, & Hayes, 2005). In the latter case, teachers would do something the students need and want;

in turn, students would do something that the teachers want from them. The type of schooling Sidorkin envisions is “a hybrid social institution, something between a regular school [modeled after coach-player relations in sports teams] and a voluntary youth association based on shared interests of its members, commitment, and voluntary acceptance of authority” (p. 134). Sidorkin claims that such a shared (but not equal!) authority is the only form of teacher authority with noncoercive legitimacy.

Sidorkin argues that exceptionally good teachers model their authority in this way even now—that is what makes them successful and what all mainstream schools should support and value. According to Sidorkin, good teachers

do not hold a monopoly on motivational power. . . . In fact, all good teachers *give* something to kids in return for sometimes-boring schoolwork. Some do it through other extracurricular activities; some simply find a way to give the students the respect, recognition, and companionship they need. This is an economic mechanism oiled by interpersonal relation but powered by mutual interest. (p. 105)

For example, Sidorkin sees the well-regarded teacher Vivian Paley (1991) as a model teacher who creates hybrid reciprocal-mutual teacher authority:

Paley does two things: she encourages kids to write their stories and provides an opportunity for these stories to meet each other. Thus she shifts the center of gravity from the student-teacher relationship to the student-student relationship. She relinquishes her monological authorial voice in favor of the polyphonic multiple voices of the novel. . . . The essence of her teaching is making dialogue possible. (p. 146)

Sidorkin claims that Bakhtin would call the relations Paley accomplishes “polyphony, the principle of engaged co-existence of multiple yet unmerged voices” (p. 145). Sidorkin argues that Paley has not relinquished her authority and become an equal to her students (as many progressive educators are wont to do), but she nonetheless develops close relations that allow for students’ free participation. Paley’s authority thus depends on the polyphonic relations she establishes both with students and among students. The problem of teachers’ power over students can be overcome through artful Dostoevskian polyphony that works to expand students’ freedoms:

The polyphonic authority *creates* mutuality [and reciprocity], and only this kind of authority should be used in education. . . . It is the teacher’s responsibility to make sure that authoritative statements are presented as cues of a larger dialogue—forceful and passionate, but never finalized or unanswered. (p. 146)

According to Sidorkin, a teacher’s polyphonic authority—a reason for the students to do something that they may not want to do on their own—is based on trust in and expectation for future collaboration with the teacher (genuine dialogue) or on expected exchange of favors. Specifically, he notes that Paley’s “authority is based on her usefulness to children—she is the only one who can write, and she can give their story-telling some time and space” (p. 146).

Unfortunately, Sidorkin does not spell out *how* the process of transition from today’s schools to a new hybrid relational schooling could happen. We also found Sidorkin’s notion of “improvisational, emergent, non-manipulative, and interactive” dialogue romantic and Platonic. Any so-called improvisational dialogue has a certain degree of purposefulness, design, and scriptedness. Some authentic activities, like certain types of art, are completely predefined, manipulative, noninteractive (with regard to the audience), and highly scripted (like in many successful

art galleries, novels, movies, TV shows); these activities nevertheless support participants' motivation without using violence. So we conclude that the problem of conventional mass schooling is not in teacher manipulation (or design) of interaction per se but a *type* of manipulation that is used. We do not find an analysis of this important issue of *teachers' manipulative/design authority* in Sidorkin's book. What is lacking in Sidorkin's proposal, in our view, is an attention to the curriculum as the "social glue" of the classroom community. The curriculum can be a negotiation among the societal, communal, and personal needs and interests of the participants of the classroom community and beyond.

Through Sidorkin's lens, educators can begin to understand how a dialogic teacher understands his or her students, assesses learning, and expands knowledge. Borrowing from Bakhtin's insight that truth exists only in dialogue, Sidorkin argues that

a teacher cannot know or describe her relation with students using her consistent monological voice; there can be no truth in such knowledge. However, the teacher can present a dialogue between the students and herself, which presents different but engaged and dynamic opinions about the relations. The polyphonic knowledge is one where the other is made present. (pp. 98–99)

In essence, Sidorkin argues that a good teacher is an expert in human relations who tries to understand her or his students as a step toward encouraging a social activism that transforms their relations and experiences in the world. Vivian Paley, Sidorkin claims, has developed from her experiences with children an

ability to hear what has not been said, to formulate what his students are not able to articulate, to engage in a dialogue when the other party may not be willing or ready to engage. The ability to understand human relations relies heavily on the heightened ability to hear and respond without preconceived notions of truth. (p. 100)

This book can help both researchers and teachers to analyze education critically and to envision a new relational pedagogy based on mutuality and reciprocity. In this respect Sidorkin makes an important contribution to the theory of teacher authority.

REFERENCES

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