

Review of *A Dialogic Teaching Companion* by Robin Alexander

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1. The Author

Robin Alexander is a British educationist and academic, born in 1941. Alexander mainly focused on primary education and his research orbited around education policies, culture, writing curricula, comparative education, and dialogic teaching. Alexander taught at Leeds, Warwick, and Cambridge Universities. He has also taken several public roles. He worked in the Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (1989-94), in the Board of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (1997–2002), as a president of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (2008–09) and in the Board of Trustees, Children and the Arts (2014–21).

2. The Companion

A Dialogic Teaching Companion (*The Companion*, from now on) is built on Alexander's landmark *Towards Dialogic Teaching* published in 2008. Alexander in this book, as in his other publications, *Education in Spite of Policy* (2022) and *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk* (2017) attempts to democratise education; the teaching process is a give-and-take equation, where the teacher is a maestro tuning the music/knowledge to let the musicians/students deliver the right tone. *The Companion* works on stimulating students to be more engaged in the learning process, broadening their understanding to the maximum possible, so they can build on their ideas, and raise arguments and counterarguments. In the end, students reach the quest of any education policy: to attain independently a lifelong learning methodology. Alexander states in his book that dialogue between the teacher and the students and students among themselves should be taken "as an essential tool of education whose exploitation and development

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require understanding and skill” (Alexander, 2020, p. 9). Moreover, *The Companion* explores the different schools of education with regard to dialogic teaching. It also deals with students’ voices and how they are reflected in classroom talk. Oracy and literacy in the classroom are also investigated. *The Companion* proves by evidence the importance of dialogue in any classroom to reach the expected outcome in the teaching process. These are the main concepts raised by the author in the first six chapters. In Chapter 7, Alexander discusses his framework of dialogic teaching.

3. The Framework

In Chapter 7, Alexander introduces his framework of dialogue, which as we already mentioned, is built on the 2008 publication *Towards Dialogic Teaching*. For him, classroom education is a matter of debate rather than an authoritative argument, mainly held from one side: the teacher or instructor. Knowledge, in this case, is negotiated and recreated, in addition to being transmittable. Knowledge is now impersonal and rather collective. Students in the new framework are given the leash to self-guide themselves and shoulder accountability with regard to the education process itself as active members and not passive recipients. The student is now in a social relationship with “other people, other minds, other places and other times” (Alexander, 2020, p. 129). Talking in dialogic teaching is meant for thinking, learning, mastery of knowledge, communication, relating incidents, acculturation, and democratic arguments. For teachers, it is to diagnose the needs of the students and to cope with the challenges they encounter. In other words, dialogic teaching is a collective act where learning and inquiry come together. Dialogic teaching is also supportive as students express themselves freely in a reciprocal atmosphere where deliberative discussions are held but in a cumulative and purposeful manner; each student builds on their peer’s contribution where discussions, though open-ended, are charted with specific learning goals (Alexander, 2020, p. 131).

Alexander in *The Companion* changes the classroom culture to be solely built on reciprocity and deliberation. He asserts that the main purpose of educational dialogue is not the everyday talk people enjoy, it is rather informative. Students are now committed to lifelong learning. Knowledge is built on the previous, covers the current and forecasts the future. Teachers also learn how to critique the elements they deliver, and not to take them for granted. The teacher and the student reach what is known as “accountable talk” (Alexander, 2020, p. 132). Talk or dialogue is built on facts provided by evidence. If the discussed fact lacks explanatory supportive evidence, then counterarguments are raised to either support or refute the talk (Alexander, 2020, p. 132).

Alexander believes that teaching is not simply a formula, if applied the results are definite and clear. As a result, there is nothing called the “best practice” in teaching (Alexander, 2020, p. 133). Alexander adds that teachers’ interactions with each class they teach are unique, and choices and judgements change according to the taught class and its action and reaction. The teacher of the classroom is the only physical arbiter deciding how to run the classroom to reach the aspired ultimatum: letting the students learn and reflect. Teaching is a common ground for the repertoire of the teacher and the student to come together. Teaching is framed within space, time, and the student.

Alexander discusses also an interesting concept related to routine and rules. Routine is the mainstream culture prevailing in a classroom. Directions are given to normalise the class and let the students work in accordance with the rules set by the teacher, management, society and/or the mainstream culture itself. Rules are a direct expression of the regulations, directions, and requirements to hold the ceremony of

using methodology x to enable the student(s) learn y . The five categories of this routine or aspects of classroom life are temporal, procedural, behavioural, interactive, linguistic and curricular (Alexander, 2020, p. 137). As for the classroom itself, Alexander believes that its discourse depends on three different norms: communicative, deliberative and epistemic. Communication is built on mutual careful listening among the students themselves and between the students and their teachers. Deliberation is built on distinguishing between fact and opinion, while the epistemology of class is built on the content of discussion.

As for grouping students during teaching within the context of a classroom, Alexander speaks about four types of groups: seating, working, cooperative and collaborative. In the seating one, each student is working alone, while in the working group, all students execute the same work but independently. In the cooperative, on the other hand, students undertake separate but related tasks. In the collaborative, students work together on the same task.

Time plays a significant role for Alexander. A lesson should be balanced in its length and pace. Length depends on the topic raised. Pace refers to the time students need to receive y and digest it. Organizational space makes the lesson well-charted but never known if efficient or not. On the other hand, a cognitive learning pace should be applied as it is context-related.

As for the functions of talk, Alexander believes that it should be:

- Transactional in managing situations,
- Expository by narrating and explaining the argument,
- Interrogatory, raising different questions depending on the varying contexts,
- Exploratory in nature,
- Deliberative based on argument and reason,
- Imaginative in a way that helps to contemplate,
- Expressive as thoughts are put into words,
- Evaluative in delivering opinions and articulating judgement (Alexander, 2020, p. 134).

Regarding managing the questions raised in the classroom, Alexander discusses several methods such as:

- *Bidding* where the question is open to everyone to answer.
- *Nomination*, where a student raises a question to have their answer in comparison to another answer asked to a different student.
- *Time*: Thinking of an answer and its response
- *Rotation*: All students participate in the question-answer debate to guarantee everyone is in.
- *Extension*: The Teacher accumulates the answers to reach a comprehensive response covering the needed information which is built on the give-and-takes of the students (Alexander, 2020, p. 147).

When it comes to question types, Alexander refers to two types: *test* and *authentic*. Test questions are the ones which hold a single correct answer. Authentic questions are open to different probabilities. However, before raising a question, the teacher should look for its purpose, which usually falls under one of the following categories:

1. Initiate:

- a. *Recalling or reviewing* what has been already discussed.
 - b. *Eliciting facts* or information depending on what some or all the students know.
 - c. *Eliciting reasons* by asking why.
 - d. *Eliciting observation or opinion*.
 - e. *Eliciting deduction*, especially in science classes.
 - f. *Inviting reflection or speculation* by changing one part of the equation and raising an *if* clause.
 - g. *Inviting affective or emphatic response* by asking how do you feel about....?
2. Probe:
- a. *Test* the thinking behind the response by asking how do you know that....?
 - b. *Clarify* the thinking behind the response by asking do you mean that....?
 - c. *Invite evaluation* by asking about what do you think about x ...?
3. Expand:
- a. *Expand* the initial exchange by asking can you give me another example?
 - b. *Sustain or develop* a line of thinking by asking connected questions.
4. The structure of the questions
- a. *Open*, allowing various responses,
 - b. *Closed*, requiring definite answers,
 - c. *Leading* to elicitations,
 - d. *Narrow*: context-specific requiring distinct answers,
 - e. *Discursive* questions which are broad in nature and general in answer (Alexander, 2020, p. 148-9).

Alexander also talks about the “feed-forward” concept where the teacher does not close the gate of answers by his counter response of feedback but moves to the “third turn” (Alexander, 2020, p. 150). The teacher in the third turn seizes the moment of answer by elaborating, revoicing, reformulating the response and helping the student predict the next moment of knowledge. The aim of the third turn is not to turn feedback into something phatic, repetitive, monotonous or quite expected. Thus, feedback should come from the students themselves. It should be live while they are in the process of learning and acquiring knowledge. Moreover, Alexander refers to an interesting fact that students from high economic status receive facilitative feedback. This helps them to know where their mistakes are and how to build on their strength. Encouraging their self-regulation develops their metacognition and self-reliant literacy skills.

Alexander sees that “talk deployment” can never be merely mechanical. A student should be encouraged to deliver a contributory statement, upon which their peers would listen and build. The argument or discussion should not be superficial; rather, it should be built on reasoning, which is part of critical thinking. Students should have time to think, say more, and have a reflection on what they raise, with their classmates listening carefully. Students’ reasoning will, consequently, leave shallowness to move to deeper reasoning, especially when they ask each other for evidence, examples, and counterexamples. Students, in this case, will show their agreement or disagreement; they will start adding to the talk by explaining what they mean and what their friends mean (Alexander, 2020, p. 153).

Alexander encourages inquiry dialogue, where participants work together to formulate a reasonable judgment concerning complex questions. To achieve the inquiry talk, the discussion should be diverse, clear, armed with acceptable reasons and, above all, logical. The talk itself should be accountable to the

learning community, to the standards of reasoning and to knowledge. In other words, the talk should be built on the talks of others, emphasizing logical connections that lead to reasonable conclusions. All in all, talk should be based on facts accessible to the public.

Discussions in the classroom are aimed at learning; they start with interrogatory remarks, and end with evaluative remarks. The culture of the class is deliberative and argumentative. It helps the students initiate, probe, and expand the raised questions, which are open, yet narrow and discursive. The ultimatum is to clarify meaning, connect ideas, and track the development of the question to an answer open to evaluation and articulated reasoning. To guarantee the success of this process, the teacher should have a clear model of how the lesson moves and where the students are to be encouraged to elaborate; thus, clear rules of talk are to be established. The questions raised during the class are contestable, where students share their responsibilities and are open to alternative arguments other than theirs.

At the end of his framework, Alexander gives indicators that let the observer distinguish a dialogic class from none.

- Respect is paid to the right of students to discuss, especially in communities where their members find it difficult to express themselves.
- Speaking, listening and discussion have clear norms.
- Being prepared to attend a talk and connect it to reading and writing.
- Encouraging interactions for students to participate.
- Flexible teaching strategies.
- Open questions that need more than a simplistic response, whether on the side of the teacher or the student.
- Answers result from inferred rather than received arguments.
- Feedback is given by both the teacher and the student.
- Ideas are exchanged coherently forming a chain of knowledge.
- Argumentation tests and builds evidence.
- The patterns of organisation in the classroom are conductive.
- The classroom culture is dynamic, collective, supportive and collective.
- Teachers hold a dialogic stance towards learning, knowledge and human relationships (Alexander, 2020, p. 164).

At the end, Robin Alexander provides a sketched plan representing his framework. The last few pages outline the program of dialogic teaching through seven orientations, detailing through clear steps the framework presented in Chapter 7. The orientations are then followed by what Alexander calls cycles (Alexander, 2020, p. 181). The goal of these cycles is to follow up on the results of the orientations given. To apply any dialogic teaching project, one needs to focus on the theoretical argument raised in Chapter 7 and then the practical application of the theory in Chapter 8.

4. Final Word

In the epilogue of *The Companion*, Alexander refers again to the concept of the democratisation of education, where both the teacher and the student play an important role in the education process. However, Alexander emphasises that the teacher alone is the one capable of deciding the actual needs of

their student as there are many aspects to delve in, such as cultural differences, class distinctions, governmental policies, poverty, and social disadvantages, let alone wars and their consequences.

The Companion is a piece of art in the field of education; it provides both theory and practice of applying educational dialogue for all classes and levels of education. Probably, the most important parts that I highly recommend reading are Chapter 7 and 8. In these two chapters the reader finds all the needed details to apply the concept of educating through talk. Chapter 7, which is covered in detail in this review, represents the theoretical premises of the work, while Chapter 8 shows fully and in obvious practical steps how to run educational dialogue in any educational institution from A to Z. Consequently, *The Companion* summarises in about 250 pages the experiences of many pedagogists, including the write himself; the magnanimous work of years or application and test on different schools is summarised in this thin book. It is a treasure for anyone interested in developing and upgrading the education system in their pedagogical institutions and nations.

5. Statements

5.1. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study

REFERENCES

Alexander, R. (2020). *A Dialogic Teaching Companion* (1st ed.). Routledge.

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