

Elizabeth Russo

Brecht's Use of Magistral and Socratic Dialogue as a Model for Progressive Education

Elizabeth Russo here explores the analogies between Brecht's spectator-centred approach to theatre and a student-centred approach to education, comparing the symbiosis achieved in his work between the 'Magistral' approach common to top-down education and the open-ended 'Socratic' dialogue. She suggests that even the *Lehrstücke*, often assumed to be his most dogmatic pieces, in fact offer choices and question the spectator's intellect, and compares Brecht's techniques with the concept of the 'zone of proximal development' in educational theory – the gap distance between a child's actual and potential level of development, and between his/her individual skills and functioning within a social group. Elizabeth Russo has worked with children in Chicago under the volunteer programme of the Inner-City Teaching Corps, and is currently teaching at St Mary of the Angels School in London. She is a history graduate of Villanova University, studied in the Graduate School of Education at Loyola University, Chicago, and has an MA in Theatre Education from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

ONE of the most exciting things about learning something new is the moment of realization when that new knowledge connects with a central element of one's personal life. This realization was what happened to me when I first learned about Bertolt Brecht's approach to theatre and realized that he spoke in a way that was meaningful to my own philosophy and goals for education. Through his work to educate the working classes through their own critical perceptions and discourse, Brecht has become an innovator in progressive teaching and learning. His progressive theories can be seen through his organization of theatre, the *Lehrstücke*, and his texts throughout his career.

Central to this is his spectator-centered focus in theatre, which can be translated to a student-centred approach in education, based on a dialogical methodology. The innovations that arise out of Brecht's work are well supported by various approaches to educational methodology and practice, but are specifically grounded in Lev Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development and its manifestation in Magistral and Socratic Dialogues.

This article begins with a brief analysis of Brecht's organization of theatre. Building on that, I will then analyze how this organization, combined with his texts, worked to achieve a presumably mutually exclusive relationship between Magistral and Socratic Dialogues into a powerful symbiosis, working towards achieving the spectator/student's zone of proximal development.

At the heart of Brecht's work is a constant concern with audience reception.¹ He calls for a dynamic approach to theatre in which the spectator's intellect is used for debate and for questioning:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights, and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself. . . . Such images certainly demand a way of acting which will leave the spectator's intellect free and highly mobile.²

This can be readily applied to the field of education, in which a student's intellect must be 'free and highly mobile'. It is the desire to induce a change, or at least a re-

assessment, in the spectator's attitude that can be used for a model to affect the educational paradigm.

Walter Benjamin explained Brecht's approach as a shift of the organization of a hierarchic structure of theatre *from* author *to* stage *to* audience to Brecht's more fluid and democratic approach *between* author, stage, and audience.³ This 'refunctionalization'⁴ was made manifest in the *lehrstücke*. In fact, Brecht felt that the *lehrstücke* were the most technically perfect texts of all his work.⁵ However, throughout his career, he came to see theatre as a 'collective experiment' rather than as expression or experience.⁶ Through the experiment a utopian collective is created in which dialogue is the means for investigation. Thereby, the allegories and extended metaphors are used to produce the new utopian classless society of an audience of thinking individuals, independent of the stage action and emotion, rather than the mindless mob which he disdainfully accused the traditional, dramatic theatre of serving through a type of intellectual and emotional entrapment.⁷

A Vehicle for Change or the Status Quo?

When considering *who* this audience is, Augusto Boal reminds us that Brecht wanted to search for his spectators in working-class neighbourhoods rather than downtown.⁸ This can be visualized as drawing an audience from, say, Brixton or Rotherhithe in London, the South Side of Chicago, or the Bronx, rather than from Sloane Square, Lincoln Park, or Park Avenue. This is a vitally important point, as it seems that, in the same way, educational practitioners historically appear to have designed curricula and its implementation with a similar homogeneous social set in mind. In spending time and energy questioning who the spectator or student is, a theatre or school shows a spectator-centred or student-centred approach to its work. Furthermore, Brecht maintains that it is only the working class that is truly interested in real, meaningful change.⁹ This is true for the same disenfranchised group of people who have received a watered-down education

designed for a vastly different human experience. Within each context, both theatre and education can be vehicles for change where before they have been vehicles for maintaining the status quo.

In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht speaks of this group 'who are in danger and misery [and] have no idea what the causes of that danger and misery may be'.¹⁰ Yet, there is a minority who are aware and who can teach about the 'persecutors' methods',¹¹ since the persecutors are those who maintain the status quo. Even fewer know how to eliminate the persecutors, since it is only through understanding the causes and their functions that one may discover how to do so. Therefore, we must share this understanding and knowledge with as many people as possible.

The power of Brecht's work is that it shows some of us that we function as those persecutors ourselves. We have so little self-knowledge that we are unable to see that the world is the way it is for a reason. Through a discourse on these issues, a spectator/student begins a process of formulating self-knowledge to help recognize that which we find offensive in ourselves, individually, and as a society. Because it is not nature, fate, or even God that manipulates our lives as on a chessboard; the circumstances of our lives are created and can be changed by humanity.¹² Consequently, for members of the human race, 'more opportunities should be given to the generation of ideas; looking at the world in different ways, and playing with different possibilities and alternative solutions'.¹³

It is this lesson, and *how* to effect change, that is not only central to Brecht's objectives in the epic theatre, but central to the task of educators of society. The work of the theatre or school is to help the spectator/student reach the developmental level at which this processing can occur.

Augusto Boal explains Brecht's objective to change the spectator by 'awakening [his or her] critical consciousness'. In this desire to engage the audience, it is they who become the central focus of the play.¹⁴ In this shift of focus to the spectator, Brecht concentrates specifically on the instructive potential of theatre, believing that education is in itself

theatrical.¹⁵ Claiming that children are taught in a theatrical manner, with logical explanations following thereafter, he recognizes that children learn through copying adults. Moreover, this learning behaviour never ends, even into adulthood. He thus concludes that theatre is vital to learning because it presents models of behaviour which children may copy.¹⁶ The criticism of that behaviour at more developmentally mature stages promotes the questioning and reflective process.

From Dialectic to Dialogical Learning

This movement from simple imitation into a higher cognitive process is the connection made by research in the field of educational psychology. Vygotsky maintains that imitation is central to the learning process. While imitation and learning have traditionally been assumed to be mutually exclusive, Vygotsky cites research which suggests that one can only independently imitate that which is at his or her developmental level. However, his research shows that children are able to imitate various actions *beyond* their developmental levels with the support of a collaborative group or under direct adult guidance: 'This fact . . . is of fundamental importance in that it demands a radical alteration of the entire doctrine concerning the relation between learning and development in children.'¹⁷

It is this validation of imitation which leads us to conclude that Brecht is theoretically sound in his notions of the role of imitation in learning and of the potential for extending one's developmental level through a discursive model. Though it may seem tangential, this point is key to understanding the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving [i.e., without guidance] and the level of *potential* development as determined through problem-solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers.¹⁸

It is the difference between what a person is able to do independently and what s/he is

able to do with others. Thus, the ostensibly didactic (intended to instruct) use of imitation, or any other overtly didactic activity, becomes one of a deeper dialectical (dialogical) activity when engaging in true dialogue with others. Vygotsky goes on to state that interaction is necessary for initiating internal developmental processes. Once internalized, these processes become part of the learner's actual developmental achievement, thereby increasing the ZPD.¹⁹

We must conclude that dialogue-based education, in which a person is actively involved, promotes interaction. Brecht frames his plays doing just that; he presents a socio-economic 'truth', and then invites the spectator openly to question it. This is actually a combination of two disparate genres of pedagogical dialogue: Magistral Dialogue and Socratic Dialogue.

Magistral Dialogue can basically be understood as a dialogue between a Magistral (authoritative) first voice and a novice (ignorant) second voice. Within this paradigm there is required a third voice, the 'authoritative and institutional third party' upon which the Magistral interlocutor bases his or her authority and information. For the second voice to achieve the ZPD, s/he must have the guidance of the first voice to determine what must be learned and discussed. An example of this might be the relationship between a teacher (first voice), student (second voice), and the educational system (third voice). All dialogue is based upon the assumption that the novice student has a void which the magistral teacher must fill with knowledge dictated by the system.²⁰

While a dialogue of some kind exists with the first and second voice as interlocutors, a Magistral dialogue must consist of convergent questioning: the first voice/teacher only validates the singular, correct answer according to the third voice/institution. So, all information is presented as either right or wrong, by virtue of its origin in the third voice.

Applied to Brecht's work, it is easy to see how most people assume that his plays, and specifically the *lehrstücke*, fall into this category of preachy didactics. One might

argue that the actor fills the void of the spectator with the 'truths' of society being dictated by a Marxist third voice. However, it is at this point that Brecht shows his ingenuity. Once the Magistral Dialogue is established, he moves the audience into the realm of the Socratic Dialogue.

Combining the Magistral and the Socratic

Understood as an alternative to the Magistral genre, the divergent questioning encouraged by Socratic Dialogue is a function of the positioning of each of the voices. As Cheyne and Tarulli point out, the two defining characteristics of this genre are that it is 'forever suspicious of consensus' and frequently 'escapes the third voice'.²¹ In other words, the success of the dialogue is not contingent on correct answers. Rather, the Socratic Dialogue aims to debate various possible conclusions and assumptions. There is a new assumption – that the second voice has his or her own experiences, opinions, and knowledge which can only enrich a dialogue in which s/he is able to offer these to question that which the first voice presents. Regardless of what is dictated by the third voice, the first voice is free to explore with the second, rather than impose finite answers.

Clearly, this presents a new, balanced view through which we can see Brecht's approach. Alistair Muir's discussion of Pelagea's literacy lesson in *Die Mutter*²² can also be used to show Brecht's acute manipulation of the two dialogues. When her teacher uses random, disconnected vocabulary to teach reading, Pelagea questions him with her own words and traps him into writing 'exploitation' on the chalkboard. She then observes out loud that 'W' appears in both the words 'class war' and 'worker,' forcing all to see the connections beyond spelling.²³ In this scene, Brecht poses a multi-levelled Magistral and Socratic Dialogue.

From within the story, the dialogue is obviously Magistral, in that the first voice is the teacher, who is given authority by the third voice which is the educational (and therefore socio-political) institution. Pelagea, Sostakovitch, and the other workers are in

the role of the second voice. When they bring up the concept of class war, the teacher summarily fills their intellectual void with the necessary information provided by the third voice: 'There is no such thing as class war.'²⁴ When Pelagea attempts to argue her case for the existence of class war, the teacher warns them to 'defend [them]selves against knowledge'²⁵ and attempts to dismiss the subject. Here, the teacher serves as a mouthpiece for the institution, a function of his role in first voice being dictated by the ultimate authority of the third voice.

Yet what makes this scene so exciting is the fact that Pelagea is able to engage in a Socratic Dialogue *within* the Magistral Dialogue. It is undeniable that the teacher is willingly taking part in the dialogue, which he perceives as being uncomfortable but safely convergent. But Pelagea has something else in mind. She uses the teacher's skills to present a question for all to consider: how are 'exploitation' and 'class war' and 'worker' connected? She is questioning the third voice institution. The answer is multi-layered, and there is no single correct conclusion, as this is dependent on the interlocutor and his/her opinions and experiences. This is the embodiment of the Socratic Dialogue.

At this point, it must also be emphasized that Brecht shows keen awareness not only of spectator-centred learning but also student-centred learning. Within the Magistral Dialogue Brecht deliberately shows a teacher-focused lesson rather than a student-focused one, which initiates the discussion. The use of 'Hat, Dog, Fish' is indicative of words which were comfortable for the teacher and part of the information deemed appropriate by the institution.

Also exemplary of this concept of Magistral and Socratic Dialogues is *Die Massnahme*, usually regarded as a controversial, overtly didactic play on the virtues of self-sacrifice for the sake of a greater cause. However, Reiner Steinweg proposed that the control chorus's songs were more than just political theories to be swallowed as gospel truth. Rather, they were political theories to be examined and reflected upon by the spectator.²⁶ The entire play is filled with questions

directly challenging the spectator. Following the scene in which the agitators use 'the street scene' technique to act out the young comrade's shortsightedness, the chorus asks:

But is it not correct to take the side of the
weaker
To help him wherever he may be –
The exploited one – in his daily sufferings?²⁷

This is no simple question that one may have difficulty answering given the context, but the spectator is able to explore possible answers and alternatives through the rest of the play. At a deeper level, the spectator is posed a range of more profound, divergent questions:

Whom would the just man fail to greet,
if it helped him to stop an injustice?
What medicine tastes too nasty to save
A dying man?
How much meanness would you not commit
if the aim was to stamp out meanness?
If you'd found out how the world could
be altered, what would you
Refuse to do?
What would you refuse to do?
Sink deep in the mire
Shake hands with the butcher: yes, but
Alter the world, it needs it!
Who are you?²⁸

These lines embody the essence of Socratic Dialogue, with the chorus in first voice asking questions which its members answer themselves. In relation to Vygotsky's sense of helping a learner achieve the ZPD, Cheyne and Tarulli posit that the first voice must not only be open to the second voice's questions and opinions but also examine 'otherwise previously unquestioned prejudices guiding the Magistral Dialogue'.²⁹ That is to say, the first voice/actor questions the third voice/society that guides the dialogue, in this case the performance. In this way, s/he questions reality and society, demanding greater self-understanding.

'Unity of Theory and Practice'

This is clearly something Brecht achieves in his design of the *lehrstücke*, in which the actor must also be the learner. Theatrically, a

student may well have the chance to be the actor in first voice, while educationally s/he is the spectator in second voice. To enrich this Brecht calls for a rotation of the actors in and out of roles, which Steinweg praised as 'unity of theory and practice'.³⁰ For example, an actor/learner may play an Agitator in one scene and the Young Comrade in another. Calling for a plethora of rehearsals, the 'multidimensionality'³¹ initiates discussions, revisions, alternatives, and debates. Though it may not seem practical, this implies that the rehearsals themselves implement Socratic Dialogue, so that throughout the process the ZPD is realized. With the actual performance being secondary, Brecht's work again is learner-centred.

It is significant, then, that the editorial notes for *Die Massnahme* cite a letter to Paul Patera of 21 April 1956, in which Brecht specifically stated that he forbade its performance in public venues. He pointed out that it was written for instructive purposes and that it could only induce 'moral qualms, usually of the cheapest sort'.³² One can only assume that Brecht was frustrated by his audience's reticence to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the play. This may be due to the fact that they were unaware of its invitation to think it through rather than to take it at face value. Conversely, Mueller hails Brecht's innovations in the *lehrstücke* not only for breaking down the barriers between the actor and the spectator, but for implementing the element of the dialectic:

[These plays] should not be scrutinized for 'proposition or counterproposition' arguments for or against certain opinions, pleadings, or indictments that represent a personal point of view, but only physical exercises meant for the kind of athletics of the mind that good dialectics should be. [They are not] recipes for action.³³

The *lehrstücke*, are, however, a method of thinking.

Brecht is also effective in establishing the symbiotic relationship between the Magistral and Socratic Dialogues in the conclusions of his plays. The concept of consensus on finite answers or lack thereof is central to this point. Considering how Brecht chooses to

end his plays, Muir believes that the lack of a clean, finite ending is one which is a key element of Brecht's work,³⁴ as the conclusion of *Die Mutter* illustrates:

Those still alive can't say 'never'.
No certainty can be certain
If it cannot stay as it is.
When the rulers have already spoken
That is when the ruled start speaking.
Who dares to talk of 'never'?
Whose fault is it if oppression still remains?
It's ours.
Whose job will it be to get rid of it? Just ours.
Whoever's been beaten must get to his feet.
He who is lost must give battle.
He who is aware where he stands – how can
anyone stop him moving on?
Those who were losers today will be
triumphant tomorrow
And from never will come today.³⁵

While the story apparently ends with the finite point at which Pelagea becomes a committed activist and takes up the flag against oppression, the spectator is still left with difficult and personal questions. Does he believe himself capable of the commitment Pelagea made? Will he take responsibility for ridding the world of oppression? Is it really his job? Does he 'dare talk of "never"?' Where does he stand?

In a similar way, the ending of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is ostensibly straightforward, with Grusha being validated by Azdak's legal judgment as Michael's true mother and free to marry Simon. However, the spectator is still left with the question: does 'what there is [actually] belong to those who are good for it'?³⁶ Is the spectator good for his fully-lined wool coat when he drives in a warm car past a cold, homeless refugee, perhaps reminiscent of Grusha? Is she good for the literacy classes in which she is blossoming if she refuses to read the news and editorials next to the gossip column?

Beyond the 'Comfort Zones'

It is perhaps in the conclusions of the two *lehrstücke*, *Der Jasager* and *Der Neinsager*, in which Brecht exemplifies the dialectical approach most obviously. After student criticism of the former play in which the boy agrees to

be left dead rather than stop the mission from its goal, Brecht actually rewrote it. He did not compromise his didactic aim of teaching children about the virtue of self-sacrifice for a larger cause. Instead, he chose to create a true dialectic in which the virtue of self-sacrifice is considered alongside the virtue of revision of outmoded or unfair custom. This was done by requiring the earlier play to be performed in tandem with the later, in which the boy refuses to die, basically creating a new 'custom'. It was up to the students to debate and decide how to prioritize these virtues. Offering more than one answer, Brecht provides a theatrical version of the divergent questioning characteristic of Socratic Dialogue.

Developmentally speaking, this enables the spectator-student to move within a zone of proximal development, as s/he might never have asked the question, let alone been able to articulate any type of conclusion, without the activity of an open dialogue. The fact that the entire piece was created with the spectator/student's development, whether it be social or political or intellectual, is exemplary of Brecht's central organization of the theatre – that is, a theatre created with the spectator at its centre, in order to educate him or her through stretching the mind outside comfort zones into new areas of questioning.

To this point, we have seen how Brecht's innovations in theatre with a spectator focus can be validated by Vygotsky's ZPD, and its dialogic implications. However, this spectator/student focus is truly amplified by Brecht's juxtaposition of dramatic theatre and epic theatre. In his tabular comparison between the two types, he provides some parallels which serve also as a paradigm of comparison between nineteenth-century and twenty-first century education, as proposed by my italicized additions in the diagram at the top of the opposite page.

This paradigm shift is supported by the NACCCE,³⁷ an advisory committee established by the Departments of Education and Culture to make recommendations for facilitating learning and raising standards in the compulsory educational system, published in 1999 as *All Our Futures*. Defining one of the

| Dramatic Theatre | Traditional Education | Epic Theatre | Progressive Education |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Suggestion | <i>Didactic</i> | Argument | <i>Dialectical</i> |
| The human being is taken for granted | <i>Teacher-focus; student is taken for granted</i> | The human being is object of inquiry | <i>Student-focus</i> |
| He is unalterable | <i>Student and his knowledge is fixed until teacher gives information; circumstances are fixed</i> | He is alterable and is able to alter [circumstances] | <i>Student and his knowledge are dynamic and can be used to effect change of dialogue</i> |
| Thought determines being | <i>Passive learning through Magistral Dialogue</i> | Social being determines thought | <i>Interactive learning through Socratic Dialogue</i> |

basic characteristics of creativity as originality of thought, it validates the attitude that we must allow for 'dialogue between initial conception and final realization' of original ideas. Learning to engage in creative processes, students begin to practise thinking 'outside the box', or finding a new approach to problem-solving or understanding a situation. Thus, a 'creative education can contribute directly to problem-solving abilities in all disciplines and fields of work'.³⁸

Brecht capitalizes on the fact that there are phases of development, as outlined with dialogues in the zone of proximal development, in the creative process of thought. NACCCE identifies these phases as generative and evaluative thought – which can be seen to parallel Magistral and Socratic Dialogues, respectively.

Though Brecht may not have cited creativity as an objective for his spectators, he did hope to create a new line of thinking for them, in which they are able to examine and question what has been taken for granted. Since this must necessarily produce new and original ideas, one could claim that Brecht facilitates the NACCCE goal of helping students achieve individual creativity, defined as 'original in relation to their own previous work and output'.³⁹ While various dialogues help a spectator/student realize his or her zone of proximal development, ultimately, their usefulness lies in how the higher developmental level is the point at which one creates and formulates one's own thoughts and opinions.

It is this higher developmental level that is the goal of Brecht's work in theatre. He uses a didactic Magistral dialogue to establish an issue or 'truth' which is accepted, but then allows for discursive Socratic dialogue to question it. The resulting deeper knowledge often comes in the form of individual creativity of thought, with new insights and new ideas for action. *All Our Futures* has only recently been published, and it will take years of work to implement its proposals for reform. In the work of such a theatrical practitioner as Brecht, educational practitioners might find a model upon which to build for our children.

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6. See Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 11.
 7. See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 79.
 8. See Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 105.
 9. Ibid.
 10. See Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 31.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Ibid.
 13. See NACCCE Report, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture, and Education* (Sudbury, Suffolk: DfEE, 1999), p. 34.
 14. See Boal, p. 122.
 15. See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 72.
 16. Ibid., p. 152.
 17. See Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 88.
 18. Ibid., p. 86.
 19. Ibid., p. 90.
 20. See Cheyne and Tarulli, *Dialogue, Otherness, and the 'Third Voice' in the Zone of Proximal Development* (www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/ZPD.html).
 21. Ibid.
 22. See Muir *New Beginnings: Knowledge, and Form in the Drama of Bertolt Brecht and Dorothy Heathcote* (Staffordshire: Trentham Books, 1996), p. 10.
 23. See Brecht, *Die Mutter*, Scene 6c, in *Brecht, Collected Plays: Three*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 120.
 24. See Brecht, *Die Mutter*, Scene 6c, p. 119.
 25. Ibid.
 26. See Mueller, in *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, p. 89.
 27. See Brecht, *Die Massnahme*, Scene 3.
 28. Ibid., Scene 5.
 29. See Cheyne and Tarulli, www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/ZPD.html.
 30. See Jameson, p. 63.
 31. Ibid.
 32. See Brecht, *Collected Plays: Three*, p. 347.
 33. See Mueller, *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*.
 34. See Muir, p. 15.
 35. See Brecht, *Die Mutter*, Scene 14, p. 151.
 36. See Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (London: Methuen, 1984), Scene 6, p. 97.
 37. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education.
 38. See NACCCE Report, p. 34.
 39. Ibid., p. 30.

Notes

1. See Mueller, 'Learning for a New Society: the *Lehrstück*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 80.
2. See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), p. 190.
3. Ibid., p. 81.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 82.