

# Dialogue and learning

The impact of Martin Buber on modern education



- What is the best way to teach?
- Should teachers expect students to learn by rote or teach them to think for themselves?
- American educator, Dr Stephanie Schneider of the State University of New York, looks at the influence of philosopher Martin Buber on modern educational practice.
- She finds that Buber's work on dialogue continues to inspire educators and students alike.

**W**hat is the best way to teach? Is it to tell a student what they need to know and expect them to learn it by rote? Or is it to engage with students around a topic and encourage them to think for themselves?

Modern educational theorists tend to favour a student-centric theory of education or 'pedagogy', which puts the teacher-student relationship at the heart of the learning process. In this way, teachers no longer

impart knowledge to passive students but rather open up a dialogue and actively engage with them.

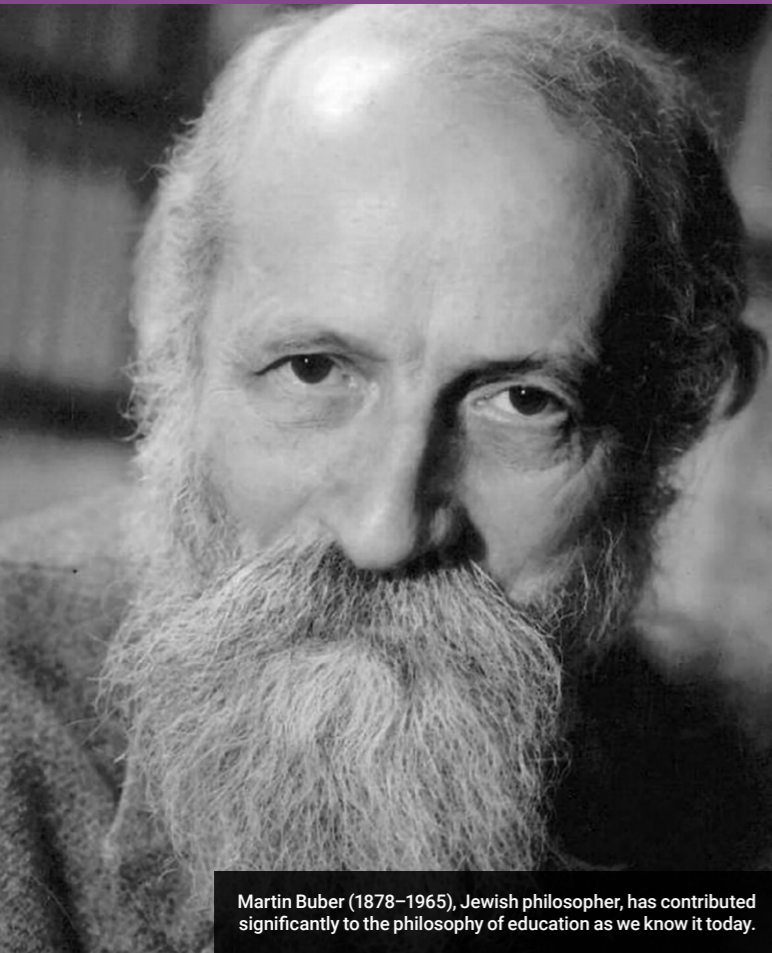
**'I-Thou' relationships are engaged, direct experiences that enhance and give deep meaning to our lives.**

In a new paper, American educator Dr Stephanie Schneider, of the State University of New York at Old Westbury, argues that this kind of relationship-based teaching and learning owes much to the work of the philosopher Martin Buber.

#### 'I and Thou' theory

Born in Austria in 1878, Buber was influenced by his Jewish heritage, particularly Jewish mysticism. He was also attracted to European thinkers such as Immanuel Kant,





Martin Buber (1878–1965), Jewish philosopher, has contributed significantly to the philosophy of education as we know it today.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Søren Kierkegaard, and Carl Jung. They were concerned with the nature of human existence and the individual's relationship with the world around them.

Buber proposed that dialogue lies at the heart of human existence. He outlined his views in the book for which he is best known, *Ich und Du*, published in 1923. The title translates into English as 'I and Thou' – 'thou' being an archaic form of 'you'.

Buber held that we have two kinds of relationships with the people and things we encounter and experience. 'I–Thou' relationships are engaged, direct experiences that enhance and give deep meaning to our lives. In contrast, 'I–It' relationships are detached, objective, and indirect experiences that we utilise but are purely factual. While 'I–It' relationships are one-sided and 'monological', 'I–Thou' relationships are two-sided and 'dialogical'.

### Dialogue

Buber's distinction between 'I–Thou' and 'I–It' relationships helps us to understand the difference, for example, between students rote-learning from a text or a teacher, and a more critical and social learning experience facilitated by a teacher who opens up a discussion about what lies behind the text.

According to Schneider, the dialogue that Buber advocated was a 'monumental moment for the philosophy of education'. This kind

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of dialogue involves the teacher and student 'turning' to each other without pre-conceived ideas, and 'addressing' each other acceptingly. It also involves 'listening' attentively, and 'responding' appropriately.

This may require both teacher and student to move out of their comfort zones. There is also the risk that teacher and student are not authentic in their exchanges, in which case dialogue can become a disguised monologue. In contrast, as Schneider explains, genuine dialogue is about conversing on equal grounds and 'relearning one's identity through reciprocity'.

### Intellectual virtues

Schneider argues that the teacher who engages in authentic dialogue lets go of total classroom control to create a dynamic learning environment in which intellectual virtues thrive. These are the virtues that, according to some theories of knowledge or 'epistemology', are the main purpose of education.

They include curiosity, intellectual humility, and autonomy, as well as attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and thoroughness. They also include open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and tenacity. Owing much to classical philosophers like Aristotle, these virtues are not innate but have to be taught.

Modern educators like Kenneth Kramer argue that intellectual virtues are developed in the kind of classroom experience Buber advocates. Teachers who model these virtues encourage students to think for themselves. In this way, knowledge is not about accepting what a teacher says, but is rather gained by actively engaging in the learning process.

Schneider also cites the work of Michel Croce and Duncan Pritchard. They argue that dialogical intellectual practice is a transferable skill which students can use to learn for themselves and acquire knowledge outside the classroom. By developing inquisitive minds, students are less likely to merely accept what authority figures say.

### Lasting legacy

Buber's work has influenced modern education in other ways too, not least in arguing that students should be given opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth, including the development of spirituality. As Schneider explains, the fact that many schools now promote self-improvement and mindfulness courses, as well as peer-mentoring programmes – much is owed to Buber's ideas. Buber was also ahead of his time in advocating for inclusiveness and accessibility, arguing that learning communities should be diverse and promote equity. Committed to social justice and community, in simple terms, Buber believed that education should help to create a better world.

Schneider also sees evidence of Buber's philosophy in the development of specific educational theories about knowledge, including constructivism and experiential learning. Such theories hold that individuals construct and acquire knowledge through their own experience and interactions, rather than by passive transmission of so-called 'facts'.

### Impact and inspiration

Buber escaped from Nazi Germany before the Second World War and settled in Jerusalem, in modern-day Israel, where he became a university professor and died in 1965. Nominated for Nobel Prizes for both literature and peace, his work was highly respected and wide-ranging, but arguably his influence on the philosophy of education has had the most significant impact. As Schneider concludes, 'Buber's legacy continues to inspire educators and students alike, and his contributions to the field of education will continue to shape its development for years to come.'

## Personal response

**Religion was very important to Buber. How did it inform his concept of dialogue?**

Buber's grandmother was his main entryway into thinking about dialogue. Most of his early education focused on language and languages. Buber spoke German, Polish, Yiddish, Greek, Hebrew, English, French, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and Dutch. Buber attended his grandfather's meetings with other men at the synagogue and listened to discussions about Judaism, the Torah, and the Talmud. The Hebrew term Talmud ('study' or 'learning') commonly refers to a compilation of writings considered sacred and normative by traditional Jews from ancient times to the modern day.

In Buber's most famous work, *I and Thou*, he explores dialogue in two ways. One is from person to person (I–Thou) and person to object/text (I–It). Buber almost single-handedly started Hasidic Judaism. Hasidic Judaism is communal, interpersonal, and mystical. Hasidism requires two kinds of dialogue: first with community members, thus interpersonal; and secondly, a dialogue with the texts of Judaism like the Torah and Talmud. These kinds of dialogues about Judaism informed and inspired his work on dialogue.

**What has been the most significant 'I–Thou' learning experience in your own life?**

I–Thou is the most significant teaching in my life. When I was about 12 years old, I sat on the couch in the den with my dad. He asked what I was up to in school, and I said excitedly that I was learning about George Washington. When I told him the various facts and stories, he said nothing but got up and grabbed a book from the shelf. The book was large and heavy when he gave it to me. He told me to read the book and come back to him for a conversation about what really happened. A week later, my dad and I sat on the couch and talked. During this conversation, I felt my dad treated me like an equal. Questions and answers, quotes, and confusions were shared on both sides. This was my first genuine I–Thou dialogue.

**You say that Buber believed that dialogue is between two people, but that there is a third dimension in the space between them. Please tell us more!**

Essentially, there are two sides to any I–Thou or I–It dialogue. However, I found that there is a space between the sides. In any

dialogue between people, words are left unsaid, misunderstood, and/or are untrue. Some ideas can be misunderstood in any dialogue between a person and an 'It' or a text. The 'I' brings their perspective, socio-historical context, and agenda to that text. The text has a perspective, socio-historical context, and agenda. This is known as hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation. While it is impossible for texts to have endless interpretations, there are variances between people. This is why the Talmud was written by many over centuries!

According to Louise Rosenblatt, this is also known as the 'transactional theory'. She stated, 'Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a totally dynamic situation. The 'meaning' does not reside ready-made 'in' the text or 'in' the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text'. What this means for the I–It dialogue is that there is space for individual interpretations that, by design, cannot know the author's intent or purpose of the text.

**Another of Buber's contributions was his emphasis on adult education. What were his most important achievements in this field?**

Buber made a significant contribution to adult education. His commitment to adult education came out of his ideas about socialism. He was dedicated to creating interpersonal dialogues based on communities. In essence, he wanted to go from I–Thou to I–We. When he emigrated to Israel before the Second World War, he began to set up schools for adults. His educational work focused on the Jewish collective settlements whose members, engaged as they were in agricultural work, wished to maintain contact with the intellectual world.

Unlike children's education, Buber taught that adult education is based on complete mutuality between equal partners. He argued that a genuine educator asks questions but rarely offers solutions. Buber believed that adult education should focus on self-learning, and consequently, the teacher should guide the students in educating themselves. In searching for the truth, the educator contributes his scholastic knowledge while the students bring the collective wisdom gained through life experience to the classroom.

## Details



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### Bio

Dr Stephanie Schneider is the author of *Foundations of Education: Different Perspectives* from Cognella Press and co-editor of *Changing Educational Landscapes* from Chris Meyers Press.

She is an Associate Professor of Education at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, who focuses on the philosophy of education.

### Further reading

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