

On the Construction and Significance of "I-Thou" Dialogic Relationship between Teachers and Students

Jianjian Zhao

Department of History, Beijing Institute of Education, TengZhou, Shandong, China

Abstract

This paper mainly discusses the application of the theory of dialogue education put forward by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in educational practice. Martin Buber believes that the relationship formed by people in communication has ontological significance. The human value can be fully displayed only in relationships. However, education can truly achieve its purpose of promoting the development of students and thereby inheriting civilization only in equal dialogue. To build a "I-Thou" dialogic relationship between teachers and students, the two sides must meet the following three basic requirements: respect for the other, mutual trust and co-presence. The "I-It" relationship and the "I-Thou" relationship, which are clearly distinguished by Martin Buber, are of positive significance to help us distinguish and understand the two different ways of thinking of human beings, restore the original essence of education, prevent the alienation of education and cultivate students' dialogue thinking. Nonetheless, we must also pay attention to eliminate some limitations in his educational thoughts.

Keywords: *Teacher-student relationship, martin buber, "I-thou" relationship, dialogue*

I. Introduction

Human Beings are highly socialized animals. In the complicated social environment, the communication between people becomes increasingly important. Some western philosophers even put forward a hypothesis that communication is actually a kind of essence of human nature. Communication is endowed with ontological significance. Of course, communication in the true sense is not only superficial interaction, but relates to the two-way understanding and generation of meaning, the essential existence state of human beings and the creation of intersubjectivity. In this sense, communication is essentially equivalent to education in a broad sense, and education is essentially a communication activity.

As far as the current reality is concerned, education is mainly realized through the communication between teachers and students. Then, how to build a good teacher-student relationship has become a hot issue that every teacher should pay attention to first. In this regard, the author thinks that the dialogic philosophy advocated by the famous Jewish theologian, philosopher and educator Martin Buber is of great significance for reference.

II. Martin Buber's Theory of "I-Thou" Relationship

Martin Buber (1876-1965) is a famous Jewish theologian, philosopher and existentialist. Born in Vienna, Austria, he devoted his whole life to the collation and research of Jewish mysticism. He once engaged in Zionist movement, and settled in Israel in his later years. He put forward far-reaching dialogic philosophy, and devoted himself to promoting dialogue and reconciliation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. His major philosophical works I-Thou and Between Man and Man have been translated into Chinese [1]. According to his dialogic philosophy, he has also formed his own unique thought of dialogue education.

There are two sources of dialogue philosophy advocated by Martin Buber: First, it comes from the theological concepts of Judaism and Christianity. In the theological understanding of Christian religion, dialogue covers a positive relationship, and itself is a relationship. Based on the understanding of "Trinity" theology, the core of Trinity

is the relationship among the three divinities, and the doctrine of Trinity is the doctrine of "relationship". This "trinity" relationship is an appropriate relationship. By understanding the relationship between man and man from the God's personality, we can experience the equality, mutual composition and co-existence among God's personalities, and thus achieve a brand-new understanding of the relationship between God and man and between man and man. This kind of relationship is a kind of open and sincere dialogue with each other. The theory of "dialogic relationship" has a long tradition in Christianity and Judaism, and also has its modern interpretation. Martin Buber's modern interpretation of this theory in *I and You* and *Between Man and Man* has the most profound influence. Secondly, the theory comes from the philosophical discussion of modernity consciousness by German philosophers such as Hegel, Fichte and Feuerbach. In ancient philosophy, people always used to regard the existence of "I" as species-being of "I". As long as the existence of "I" can be distinguished from other beings except animals or people, the existence of "I" can be realized. Only with the emergence and development of modern industrial society and the emergence of modernity consciousness, people began to realize that human beings, as different subjects, also have individuality, particularity and difference in addition to the wholeness, commonality and consistency as a whole. In *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel wrote: "Spirit is such an absolute entity that it exists as their unity in the full freedom and independence of its opposites, that is, in the self-consciousnesses different from each other and existing independently: I am us and we are me. Consciousness only finds its turning point for the first time in self-consciousness, that is, in the concept of spirit. At this stage, it comes out from the colorful illusion of the perceptual world and the empty night of the super-sensory world on the other side, and enters the broad daylight of the spirit of the present world". And you and I are meaningful only as different individuals with qualitative differences. Therefore, Feuerbach emphasized that there is no me where there is no you. The "I-Thou" dialectics eventually led to a new understanding of human beings, which is completely different from the ancient world outlook. From this point of view, the distinction between I-Thou has become a philosophical perspective, which empower the subject to seek the particularity of existence with a fundamental meaning, and everything can be legalized only from this absolute principle [2,3].

Although so many philosophers are aware of the great impact of the arrival of modern society on the outlook and epistemology of human beings, Martin Buber is undoubtedly the great thinker who has the deepest insight into this new perspective. In the poetic booklet *I and You*, he first put forward the distinction between "I-Thou" and "I-It". Buber said: "Once 'you' are spoken, the 'I' in 'I-Thou' will also be brought out. Once 'it' is spoken, 'I' in 'I-It' will also be brought out. The original word 'I-Thou' can only be uttered with the pure and complete existence, while the original word 'I-It' must not be uttered with the pure and complete existence". Thus we can see that that Martin Buber attaches great importance to the position of "relationship" in his philosophy. From the ontological perspective of anthropology, Buber claimed that "there was a relationship since the absolute beginning", and human beings were essentially human dialogues. Dialogue is a spiritual meeting, and the focus of dialogue is the meeting between two independent men, who don't want to impress each other or use it. "Relationship" is the noumenon of Buber's philosophy. Relationship precedes entity, and entity emerges from relationship. He pointed out that it is in the field of relationship that talents exist as human beings and are not rigidly defined. The field of relationship is the original category of human reality. There are two basic ways for human beings to have relations with other beings in the world, namely "I-It" relationship and "I-Thou" relationship. In the "I-It" relationship, "it" is only the object of the cognition, experience and utilization of "I". The "I-It" relationship belongs to a "subject-object" relationship. Because "it" is objectified, "I" gradually loses the characteristics of the subject and is slowly alienated into the object. Both of them are lost in the huge gap between subject and object, and become tools to achieve a certain purpose. The "I-Thou" relationship, however, is a kind of dialogic relationship constructed with an equal attitude based on the deep respect for each other as unique and complete special individuals. The two subjects release all their individuality and vitality with honesty and trust. From "meeting" to "tolerance", they experience things in the world together, improve themselves and achieve the communication of souls. However, Buber does not think that these two kinds of relations are absolutely opposite. Both of them are necessary for the development of human culture, and they can complement each other. Therefore, Martin Buber said, "men cannot survive without 'It', but survivors will no longer be man only by 'it'" [4].

III. How to Build a Brand-New "I-Thou" Relationship in the Field of Education

In the traditional teacher-student relationship, due to the influence of educational system, cultural model, theoretical research and social concept, teachers are often in an unequal position in the process of interacting with students. They are used to thinking and dealing with problems from their own roles, but often regard students as objects for study and education, and they often treat students as containers of knowledge or collections of specific abilities and organs. As a result, the teacher-student relationship actually becomes a kind of "I-It" relationship. Students are the objects of being spoken, studied and utilized, and teachers seem to have mastered the initiative of teacher-student communication. The whole educational context is full of teachers' monologue-style speech, and students become silencers deprived of right to speak. Nevertheless, because teachers are actually entrusted by the society to transform social laws into students' internal laws through the education system and make external moral laws permeate into students' personalities and become their attitudes and behaviors, they will objectify and materialize students due to ignorance of rights of students as unique individual in education. Furthermore, they also consciously or unconsciously objectify, instrumentalize and alienate themselves into means and tools to achieve a certain educational goal, and become "educational animals" [5].

Teachers often indulge in trivial educational behaviors, struggle in endless specific educational affairs, and are busy and painstaking. However, they rarely get rid of their social role as teachers from a macro perspective for a moment to reflect on the true meaning of education and to think about the purpose of education. Education was originally a career aimed at promoting people's sound and perfect development. But in reality, human nature is often absent. The respect for people is ignored and the humanistic care is also lost. In this regard, Martin Buber put forward his own profound insights. He said, "Education worthy of the name is essentially character education. Because true educators don't take into account of the individual functions of students only, and they are not the educators who only intend to teach students to learn certain things or do certain things; instead, they are always concerned about the whole student, that is, the reality of his/her life that can be seen at present, and the possibilities of what kind of person he/she can be". "What plays the role of education is not the intention of education, but is the mutual contact between teachers and students".

It goes without saying that the above-mentioned "I-It" teacher-student relationship must be changed, and certainly can be changed. If both teachers and students strive to build a brand-new "I-Thou" relationship, then the whole education will be rejuvenated.

To build this new type of teacher-student relationship, we must do the following:

First of all, it is necessary to learn to "affirm the other".

On the premise of affirming the characteristics of human existence, we must attach great importance to the particularity of human as an individual. Only when teachers are fully aware of the different personalities and characteristics of students, will teachers pay attention to the development of each student's value and potential, and will they face each student's communication behavior with a modest attitude.

Martin Buber believes that human behavior is characterized by both "being" and "seeming". Therefore, the authenticity of interpersonal relationship may be destroyed because of being blinded by "seeming". However, "affirming the other" can break through the control of "seeming", make the individual's potential of seeking truth take the initiative, and finally complete the potential of seeking goodness existing in human beings. The act of "affirming the other" is based on a deep respect for the value and potential of the other, and on a willpower to discover what the other can become and insist on fulfilling such potential. The action of "affirming the other" includes "the individual presenting himself/herself to the other truly"; recognizing the potential, wishes, thoughts or feelings of the other;

being able to distinguish the real and unreal presentation of the other, and being prepared to resist the "seeming" trend existing in the other.

Thus, if we want to "affirm the other", we must show our true self frankly and sincerely, and we can't have any hypocritical words and deeds. Teacher-student interaction first means that two people full of personality are in communication, and then the two sides in two different social roles, namely teacher and student, are in communication. However, in the educational reality, we neglect or even forget the former because we emphasize the latter too much. As a matter of fact, a teacher can have a real influence on the whole student with his/her whole person and all his spontaneity only. Because when cultivating character, you are not necessarily a moral genius, but must be someone who is full of vitality and can talk frankly with peers. Even if you do not mean to influence the students, your vigorous vitality will affect them in an extremely powerful and thorough manner [2].

Secondly, teachers and students should trust each other.

Dialogue requires the existence of interactivity, and the key to ensure the realization of interactivity is trust. In Buber's view, trust between teachers and students is the prerequisite of dialogue teaching and the most important feature of teacher-student relationship. It is on the basis of honesty and mutual respect between teachers and students that the two sides have a sense of trust and equal dialogue is possible. Otherwise, without trust in each other, dialogue will inevitably degenerate into a farce of paternalistic manipulation.

The educational context is not specified by anyone in advance, but defined by educators and the educated on the basis of equal participation in the educational process. Teachers and students have a common intersection between words and thoughts, which is a prerequisite for dialogue. This can only be achieved on the basis of mutual trust between the two sides. Teachers must realize that "there is only one way to approach students in the field of character and education of the whole person: that is their trust. For teenagers who are afraid and disappointed because of an unreliable world, trust means that people can suddenly understand the truth of life and the truth of human existence. When the educator wins the trust of the students, the students' aversion to receiving education will be overcome and give way to a strange situation: the students will regard the educator as a close person. They feel that they can trust this person. This person does not embarrass them, but is participating in their lives and can be close to them before he/she intends to influence them". Therefore, real education can be carried out. Otherwise, students' right to speak will become subservient to teachers' right to speak, and students' behavior will be subordinate to teachers' behavior. The educational dialogue will become a mere formality and re-transform into "I-It" relationship.

However, teachers should not forget the limits of education; even when they win trust, they can't always expect harmony between teachers and students. Trust means breaking the limit and breaking the shackles that bind an uneasy heart. But trust does not mean unconditional coordination. Teachers should never forget that once all kinds of conflicts can be solved in a healthy atmosphere, they will also have educational value. The conflict with students is the biggest test for teachers. They must make full use of their own knowledge; the teachers should not clip the wings of knowledge. However, they must be prepared to apply knife wound ointment to the heart stabbed by knowledge. For a moment, they are not allowed to use a sophistry technique to replace the real argument for truth. But if they are winners, they must help the defeated endure defeat; the victory of winning hearts is not easy. If they fail to win the hearts of the stubborn they face, they must seek words of love. Only this kind of words can help to get rid of such a difficult predicament.

So, what is the basis for teachers to love students? Professor Gu Mingyuan of Beijing Normal University argues, "What is the basis of loving students? It is trust and understanding. Education is based on the trust in every child. Because we believe every child has the potential to develop and become a talent, we educate them. In addition to trust, we also should understand the needs of children. Understanding is the foundation of trust. If you understand their inner world, you will trust them. Only when they know that you understand them will they actively understand and

trust you. Therefore, the teacher-student relationship is an interactive relationship, not the love unilaterally imposed by teachers, but the mutual love between teachers and students. "

Third, it must be ensured that teachers and students are present together.

The so-called "co-presence" means that the subjects in the communication relationship participate in the construction of interactive relationship as a complete person who has personal will and can make independent choices. Students take part in educational activities not as an aggregate of certain things, but as a dynamic subject fully showing personality characteristics. When anything is embedded in a dialogic relationship, that is, it is embedded in interactivity or "entering interactivity": "relationships are mutual, and the power of the meaning of relationships must not be eroded by ignoring this point". The "I-Thou" relationship is established through the interactive relationship, in which the subject is no longer the only component in the relationship. Buber called this state "inclusion". "Inclusion" means that both parties in the relationship enter into each other's dynamic structure and essence, but inclusion does not reflect the principle of master-slave, and does not enter each other by self-omission and self-deletion activities based on weakening self-subjectivity. On the contrary, inclusion is the extension of the self of both sides, and it is the relationship between subjects participating in it in an interactive way. Because of the negation of the master-slave principle by the principle of interaction, the traditional opposing categories, such as domination and subordination, cause and result, origin and derivation, initiative and passive, composition and being, entity and attribute, all lost their functions, and finally lead to the promotion of a so-called "betweenness" category which is the pure relationship itself and dispels the substantive existence of both sides of the relationship.

Nevertheless, as minors, students are still unable to fully understand their true self and explore their full potential to enhance their inner knowledge, and they also lack dialogue awareness and ability. Therefore, teachers should first experience the students' world with full trust, selflessly help students to know their unique personality as friends, discover their full potential, and strive to cultivate students' dialogue awareness and dialogue ability in communication relations. Teachers must learn to listen to students. Buber said, "We must repeatedly point out that the human spirit is like a polyphonic music in essence, in which no sound can be attributed to another sound. This unity cannot be grasped separately, but can only be listened to in the present harmony". Educators must fully realize that children's nature is by no means purely natural, but has profound sociality and historicity. Any potential of children can only be developed in the relationship with other potentials, the close relationship between people, and the relationship between people and the surrounding environment, religion, culture and art, in which teaching plays a particularly important role. Only when teachers are fully aware that teachers are the only determined and conscious force among all things affecting students' character, can they have a sense of humility, self-consciousness and responsibility. Only by being fully aware of the sanctity of their profession may teachers devote themselves to education and truly seek for the development of students with selfless spirit, thereby realizing their personal life value.

Buber repeatedly stressed: "It is not the creative instinct but the communication instinct that teaches us to say 'You'". Therefore, teaching is not to release and develop children's potential, but to cultivate their ability to meet, communicate and talk with others and the world, so that they can get rid of the "I-It" relationship and enter the "I-Thou" relationship. Only when students are "present together" with teachers as equal subjects, can teachers and students form a "I-Thou" dialogic relationship.

Once teachers and students are "present together" in the relationship, on the premise of mutual respect, trust and understanding, there will be "ideal communication without internal and external pressure and restriction" between teachers and students, thus forming intersubjectivity in the "I-Thou" relationship. Man is not only the existence of subjectivity, but also the existence of "intersubjectivity". The intersubjectivity is formed in the communication between people. "Intersubjectivity" is the category of "Betweenness" mentioned by Martin Buber. "Betweenness" is a way to overcome the contradiction between subject and object in modern subjective philosophy, because it can't be

found in "I", intentionality, immanence of subject, or objectiveness of the world "I" understand, but can only be established in the relationship between "I" and the other. That is, "the spirit is not in 'I', but stands between 'I' and 'You' ". This shows that the "I-Thou" dialogic relationship is essentially "Exchange" from the dynamic point of view. The two sides in the relationship step into the field of "Betweenness", that is, meeting. Meeting makes the subject get rid of egoism and creates conditions for dialogue. Through meeting, the individual accepts what he/she meets in life, thus forming infinite relationship worlds. Buber even believes that "where real life, are all met".

"Meeting" is the core principle of Buber's educational thought, and "exchange" triggers interactive "Dialogue" between students and teachers, through which teachers control, guide and support the development of children's potential. Therefore, Buber said; "The decisive influence is not attributed to the release of instinct, but to the force that meets with the released instinct, that is, the educational force". By meeting with the educational force, students' growth is more direct and effective. It is this meeting enables "I" and "You" to have a true feeling for self and provide the possibility to experience each other and observe from the other side's standpoint. Once an individual "is aware of the experience on the other side", Buber thinks that the "inclusion" relationship has come into being.

Buber emphasized that "inclusion" between teachers and students is the extension of self, the completion of the situation in which teachers and students participate together, the simultaneous understanding of the two positions, namely self and the other, and the complete existence in a separate reality. This kind of inclusion means that both teachers and students exert influence on each other and understand the common teaching actions from each other's perspective. When they face themselves, they seem to stand on the opposite side, as if they exist in the soul of the other side, and in the reality of the other person sharing common teaching and learning activities.

The above three points are important conditions for building a "I-Thou" dialogic relationship between teachers and students in the process of education. The formation of "I-Thou" dialogue between teachers and students is not only possible, but also the basic requirement of the current democratic society, and it should be the basic strategy of the current education sector to meet the challenges of the information age. The construction of the "I-Thou" dialogue between teachers and students will certainly promote the development of educational reform, which is also conducive to the real realization of the educational purpose in China, and further promotes the social progress and national development of China.

However, we must be soberly aware that since the purpose of education itself is to transform social laws into students' internal laws and make external moral laws permeate into students' personalities and make them their attitudes and behaviors. Then, there are limitations in the "I-Thou" dialogue between teachers and students. Due to the influence of the whole educational situation, it can be said that the "I-Thou" dialogue between teachers and students is both equal and unequal. Equality refers to the fact that teachers and students are talking as two complete and unique human individuals in the "I-Thou" relationship, which is a mutual and dynamic "teaching and learning" relationship, and the two sides are equal as an abstract life existence. The so-called inequality means that teachers and students are not equal in terms of social role. After all, education is a process in which teachers influence students' immature minds with their mature minds. Therefore, Buber pointed out that teachers and students have different interactive abilities of dialogue. Teachers can feel and understand students' learning, while their teaching can't be fully understood by students. He said: "Inclusion in this case cannot be mutual. The educator can experience students' education, but students cannot experience the educators' education. Educators stand at both ends of the common situation, while students stand at only one end. When students can go to 'there' and get experience from 'there', the relationship of education will break down or turn into friendship." Educational relationship includes mutual awareness between teachers and students and one-sided inclusive relationship. Reciprocity makes educational relationship possible, because it makes students trust teachers and get close to them; unilateralism maintains an educational relationship because it keeps distance between participants. Finally, distance ensures the continuity of one-sided inclusion, and thus prevents the breakdown of educational relations and the transformation into friendship relations. Buber pointed out that it is this duality of distance and intimacy existing at the same time that expresses the authenticity of teacher-student relationship. Therefore, we must regard the "I-Thou" dialogic

relationship between teachers and students as a dynamic relationship in the educational context.

IV. The Practical Significance of Constructing the "I-Thou" Relationship in the Field of Education

Finally, the practical significance of constructing the "I-Thou" dialogic relationship between teachers and students in the field of education, especially in school education, is briefly expounded. First, this teacher-student relationship is conducive to the healthy growth of students' personality. Both sides in the "I-Thou" relationship realize each other's whole with a frank attitude, and strive to achieve mutual blending in the spiritual meeting of each other, so as to sublimate each other's realm. Therefore, the full potential of students can be released and developed in the dialogic relationship; secondly, this teacher-student relationship helps to prevent alienation in the field of education. Some commentators have defined the meaning of educational alienation as follows: "educational alienation" means that in the field of education, education has lost its original meaning as a means for people to cultivate the next generation to better transform nature and society, and in turn manipulated the next generation, making the purpose of education the development of the next generation, while human development has become the means to achieve the purpose of education. People are manipulated by education, and education alienates people. The "I-Thou" relationship can restore the humanistic nature of education, which is conducive to the sublimation of human nature, that is, the cultivation of character as Buber said; thirdly, this teacher-student relationship is helpful to cultivate students' dialogue thinking and awareness. The current world is facing dramatic changes. The values of people are constantly deviating from tradition, and there is a striking generation gap problem all over the world. The future seems to be a vague and unpredictable fog for anyone. In such an era full of disputes and enmity, only by realizing equal dialogue among people from different social groups, countries and even civilizations can we jointly build a fairer, more reasonable and better society with mutual tolerance, mutual trust and mutual understanding. The "I-Thou" relationship advocated by Buber is undoubtedly beneficial for us to form a new way of dialogue thinking different from the traditional dualistic way of thinking in communication, thus promoting seeking common ground while reserving differences, peaceful coexistence and common development of human society.

In the 1998 World Education Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, there is a meaningful saying, "What kind of world we leave for children depends on what kind of children we leave for this world". Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, also earnestly pointed out that "the future must be cultivated in reality, in a society composed of men, women and children, and in every one of us. It is like a child who has been restless in her mother's womb before birth, bearing the nutrition and protection of her mother. People have made full preparations for his future birth. If no preparation is made before the birth of the child, we will be caught off guard in the future. Therefore, as young people have said, the future is now." Only by trying our best to cultivate students' ability to meet, communicate and talk in communication relations from now on and finally help them get rid of the "I-It" relationship and enter the "I-Thou" dialogic relationship, can we better handle the severe challenges met in the present era and create a better future.

Of course, we must realize that Martin Buber's distinction between "I-Thou" relationship and "I-It" relationship is mainly rooted in western religious theology and classical philosophy and principally defined on an idealized premise, and the writing is rather obscure. Therefore, how to construct the "I-Thou" dialogic relationship between teachers and students in combination with various realistic situations faced by Chinese education should be further explored in concrete educational practices under different cultural backgrounds. Only when we are fully aware of the constraints of various objective realities in our specific educational environment, can we better strengthen the communication between teachers and students, thus truly deepening of China's educational reform and further improving China's educational level.

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