

Revisiting Martin Buber and Adult Education

An Important Educator and Moral Leader

It is a mistake to assume that because someone was once famous, they and their work continue to be known and valued. This, unfortunately, may be so with the Jewish philosopher and educator Martin Buber (1878–1965), at least as regards a general educated readership.

Yet, Buber is claimed as one of the twentieth century's most important scholars of the philosophy of religion and of Jewish



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life and thought, especially Hasidism (Guilherme/Morgan 2016). He was also a philosopher of education, with most commentaries focussing on formal education and the education of the child (Rosenblat 1971). The historical record of Buber's contribution to adult education, under the extreme conditions of National Socialist Germany and subsequently in Palestine and Israel, has been considered previously: in German notably by Friedenthal-Haase (1990; 1991) and Friedenthal-Haase and Korrenz (2005); and in English by Morgan and Guilherme (2014). Our purpose is to revisit Martin Buber's contribution to adult education for a readership that may not be familiar with his work and to consider its continuing relevance. By adult education, we mean non-formal education and informal learning at its many levels; and not just basic education.

Who was Martin Buber?

Buber was born in Vienna to an Orthodox Jewish family and brought up at Lviv (now in Ukraine). He studied philosophy at the University of Vienna from 1896 and in 1904 completed a doctorate at the University of Berlin with a thesis on Christian mysticism during the Renaissance and Reformation. Buber supported the early Zionist movement; and in 1901 Theodor Herzl appointed him editor of „Die Welt“, the organ of the Zionist Congress. However, Buber disagreed with the objective of a „secular Israel“ and focussed on academic work and on the publishing house „Der Jüdische Verlag“. The end of the First World War saw Buber's re-engagement

with Zionism. He joined the socialist group Hashomer Hatzir (The Young Guard) that aspired to live in peace with the Arabs. In 1925 Buber joined the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) which advocated a bi-national state in Palestine.

Between 1924 and 1933 Buber was professor of the History of Jewish Religion and Ethics at the University of Frankfurt. In 1933 when the National Socialists came to power, he was forced from the university becoming a leader of Jewish non-formal education, Jews being excluded from the public education system. In 1938 Buber left Germany for the Hebrew University, Jerusalem where he persisted in trying to achieve understanding and reconciliation between Jew and Arab. Later he was to be an advocate of dialogue between Jew and German following the Holocaust. In 1949 the novelist Herman Hesse, himself a Nobel Laureate, recommended Buber for the Nobel Prize in Literature, while in 1959 Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, proposed him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Neither were awarded. Buber died on 13 June 1965.

A philosopher of dialogue

Martin Buber's educational philosophy was based on dialogue and the distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations (Buber 2004). The aim was to enhance capacity for inquiry and dialogue towards an understanding of the Other and the resolution of conflict (Morgan 2007). This is shown in Buber's „Address on Education“ (1925) and in „The Education of Character“ (1939) republished in „Between Man and Man“ (1947). He explained that there were no blueprints

for life, as people mature and beliefs change according to education, formal and non-formal, and informal learning through experience. Dialogue is crucial to achieving maturity and this is true for both communities and individuals. In „Tales of the Hasidim“ (1947) Buber identified three kinds of dialogue.

- First, genuine dialogue where each of the participants has in mind the Other or others and turns to them in the hope of an authentic mutual relationship. It is here that I-Thou relations are found and enhanced through education.
- Secondly, technical dialogue prompted by the need for objective understanding. It is here that I-It relations are found, for example in vocational training.
- Finally, there is a monologue, perhaps disguised as dialogue, in which each speaks to the Other, but without authentic engagement or understanding.

It is realized that individuals oscillate between these situations which often overlap. The implications for the theory and practice of non-formal adult education and informal learning are considerable.

Adult education in situations of crisis

This philosophy was enhanced by Buber’s personal experience of adult education of which there are two major examples: Jewish adult education in National Socialist Germany; and in Palestine and in the newly established State of Israel, about which Buber held serious reservations. He considered it a moral responsibility when in social crisis (Friedenthal-Haase 1990; Friedenthal-Haase and Korrenz 2005; Zank 2006). As we have noted, from 1933 Buber was concerned with the educational condition of Jews in Hitler’s Germany. He had long been active, with Franz Rosenzweig, in the „Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus“, a cultural and educational organization based in Frankfurt; influenced by the Lutheran pastor N.F. Grundtvig, a pioneer of the Danish Folk High School.

Buber became Director of the Office for Jewish Adult Education in Germany, responsible for training volunteer teachers, Jews being excluded from public educational institutions by the Nuremberg Laws (1935). In the „First Circular Letter of the Centre for Jewish Adult Education“, May 1934, he wrote: „The issue is no longer equipment with knowledge but mobi-

lization for existence...Because our concern is for the spark, we work for ‘education’. What we seek to do through the educating of individuals is the building of a community that will stand firm, that will prevail, that will preserve the spark“ (cited in Morgan/Guilherme 2014, pp. 74–75 and 113). Buber’s reputation as an educator and moral leader was now considerable. Hannah Arendt, writing in „Le Journal Juif“ on 16 April 1935, said of him: „Martin Buber is German Judaism’s incontestable guide. He is the official and actual head of all educational and cultural institutions. His personality is recognized by all parties and all groups. And furthermore, he is the true leader of the youth“ (cited in Morgan/Guilherme 2014, p. 2).

After leaving Germany in 1938 Buber continued to be active in adult education. In 1949 the Israeli Ministry of Education asked for his help in establishing an Institute for Adult Education in Jerusalem. Its practical purpose was to train teachers of immigrants, both survivors of the Holocaust in Europe and Jewish refugees from Arab countries. Its educational mission was the development of individual confidence and capacity; and the fostering of a sense of community and now also of Israeli national identity among people from many social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The experiment of the kibbutz provides an example of dialogical education for citizenship. For Buber, kibbutz life had the possibility of I-Thou relations as it relied on mutuality to sustain community life. It was not, however, to prove a dominant feature of contemporary Israel. Nevertheless, Buber’s work in Israel is an example of adult education practised during crisis and fracture, and aggravated by the Palestinian refugee problem and hostilities between Israeli and Arab that persist to this day.

Buber and adult education today

The foundational texts of Buber’s philosophy of dialogical education were published nearly a century ago, yet his thinking continues to resonate with contemporary goals in adult education. Buber saw adult education as differing from that of children. In the former, the relationship is more symmetrically reciprocal, and this makes it easier for the I-Thou relation to arise. There are at least three aspects of adult education today where this is important: in overcoming suspicion

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in conflict resolution (Morgan 2007); in developing active citizenship; and in addressing educational inequalities.

Formal education still fails to include many individuals and communities. This may be due to insufficient resources and to discrimination. It is a problem in developing countries, although developed countries are not without barriers to full participation. This limits the individual's ability to become a full member of society. Excluded groups are less aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and are unable to develop their communities and themselves on an equal basis with others. Active citizenship may be encouraged through a non-formal education based on dialogue (Guilherme/Morgan 2016). It enables individuals to identify and review problems through discussion in local and informal spaces. These are less intimidating than formal education settings and create favourable conditions for genuine dialogue.

Respect for other points of view

Buber applied his philosophy in situations of which he had direct experience. These were highly demanding efforts at understanding and reconciliation, but his approach is relevant to less extreme circumstances. For instance, divisive politics have arisen in recent years in countries which seem to be stable democracies, with growing mistrust among citizens. Genuine dialogue is replaced by accusations of deception and unfairness. According to a 2018 survey, three-quarters of people globally say their country's society is divided, with the majority believing this has become worse over the past ten years (Ipsos MORI 2018). Again, a journalist reflecting on the 2016 presidential election in the United States commented that Buber provides a potential antidote to „...people talking in warring monologues past each other“ (Brooks 2016). There is also a need to develop the individual capacity for discernment, for the evaluation of evidence, for rational judgement, and for respect for other points of view. These have always been the core of education, other than when perverted through indoctrination and propaganda. However, such educational aims must be renewed given the ubiquitous use of an Internet

that is in danger of degenerating into a contemporary Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) in which confusion of superficial „noise“ and „fake news“ obscures accurate information and prevents meaningful learning and understanding.

Non-formal education and informal learning based on dialogue and offered through the self-activating clubs, associations, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of civil society are crucial to individual flourishing and to community development. They provide opportunities for people to meet, as individuals and as groups, to reflect on both their own circumstances and those of the Other; and to consider the mutual failure to understand that leads to commonly damaging attitudes. It is key to conflict resolution, peaceful co-existence for the possibilities of communitarianism, in overcoming social alienation; and grows organically from voluntary commitments that are in turn multipliers. There are also the social psychological benefits of sharing activities through humane encounters by which the Other becomes Thou.

Conclusion

Much has been written on Martin Buber's life and work. Here we can only indicate his contribution to adult education which should not be considered an unimportant appendage to formal education. The latter at whatever level carries with it issues of power relations between teacher and student; and between provider and recipient at an institutional level, whether the former be the state or a private body, profit-making or non-profit making. Again, the financing of formal education is problematic in developed countries and even more so in developing ones. Non-formal education and informal learning have the potential to redress inequalities of educational opportunity. This is important as learning becomes a lifelong activity. Martin Buber's philosophy of education is not a panacea as dialogue is not always possible or effective. It does, however, offer an active philosophy of hope through dialogical education instead of passive resignation to circumstances.