CONVERSIVE RELATIONALITY IN BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP:
CENTERING THE SACRED AND DECENTERING THE SELF

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As an important first step in creating a new paradigm for Bahá’í scholarship, Susan B. Brill recommends greater collaboration in research: “Perhaps Bahá’ís could begin to provide new models that cross the divide between academia and the rest of the world. Through collaborative projects between academics and nonacademics, the work of scholars would be more responsive and comprehensible . . .” (5). One can also argue that there should be more interdisciplinary scholarship as well, so that the findings of different fields inform both specific projects and the general process of theory building. However, the idea of collaborative learning is hardly new. The groundbreaking work of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner has demonstrated that it is through communication that people help each other to develop their knowledge and understanding. This view has dominated educational pedagogy for the past two decades and has given rise to the powerful collaborative learning paradigm. Here, students work in groups to complete interactive learning tasks, thereby moving the classroom away from the traditional, linear, teacher-centered format with its unidirectional knowledge flow. In fact, the collaborative learning participation pattern is also key pedagogy underlying the Bahá’í Institute Process, where learners and facilitators negotiate meaning to obtain a deeper understanding of the Bahá’í sacred writings, the nature of spiritual development, and methods of capacity building.

Implicit in the collaborative learning paradigm is a psycholinguistic view of knowledge as a continuing process of psychological construction rather than a fixed product. In her work, the author draws on Wittgenstein’s perspective of meaning as language-games, which take place against a background of human activity, thereby deriving their significance from the context in which they are embedded (13, 15). Brill briefly mentions the work of Bakhtin (8), interpreting the dialogic process as a polarizing activity. However, Brill’s considerations should be informed by one of the most influential views of the socially constructed nature of knowledge current in educational theory: the work of the Russian educational psychologist Vygotsky. It should also be recognized that Bakhtin’s work is complementary to Brill’s position, not antagonistic.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was an educational psychologist who studied mental development in infants and very young children, including the handicapped. He found that for children to develop cognitively, they had to construct meaning interactively with their interlocutors. Language-based social interaction was critical in establishing the child’s organization of reality. Vygotsky concluded that thought is shaped by language through interaction, and, therefore, knowledge must be constructed collaboratively. Furthermore, Vygotsky suggested that meaning remains mutable throughout life; it is not a preformed module in the cognitive system, but is actively and continually constructed at the point of interaction through discourse. Even in the adult, language continues to have two functions: communication and the interpretation of experience by organizing it into meaning.

Vygotskian analysis can be applied to many types of interaction, and it certainly enables appreciation of the sound psychological basis for Bahá’í consultation. In her article, Brill notes that “a conversive and consultative strategy emphasizes the creative force of language rather than the more negative paradigms evident in much contemporary scholarship” (7). Many of the Bahá’í writings dealing with social behavior are based on this type of collective creation of knowledge through negotiation of meaning—the spark of truth emerging from the clash of differing ideas and the Bahá’í emphasis on consultation as the major decision-making tool seem natural and necessary within a Vygotskian framework. Consultative interaction serves as a bridge between what individuals can accomplish by themselves and what they can accomplish in cooperation with others. Consultation, discussion, and feedback can create meaning for the participants and extend their own capacity for achievement. This view is completely in accord with what we are told about the consultative process by Bahá’u’lláh:

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. . . . The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.4

Vygotsky also studied “inner speech,” self-directed conversations in children and adults, and this will be discussed in the section below in relation to the theory of Bakhtin.

The work of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) has been used in literary theory for several decades as a rebuttal of the postmodern school of deconstructionism. Whereas deconstructionists argue that text has multiple meanings, many of which are contradictory, Bakhtin argues for a developmental

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approach to discourse, particularly for the interaction of the writer and reader. His basic idea is that the child internalizes the voices of those around her during her early years and then reexternalizes these voices for the rest of her life. In other words, when we speak, we speak with heteroglossia, the voice of our mother, our father, our teachers. True thought, he suggests, is not found in the isolated minds of the individuals, but emerges from discourse, through multiple voices. This is the dialogic of Bakhtin; it is not a polarizing force, as Brill suggests (8), but rather refers to language-based cognition—verbal thought.

Vygotsky also addressed the idea of dialogia in his extensive work on private or “inner speech,” the self-directed conversations one has with oneself, either internal or externalized, while performing tasks. The developmental role of egocentric speech in child psychology is widely recognized and in the field of second-language learning, studies show that learners often use “private speech” (an adult version of inner speech) in their first language while performing tasks in the second. (For linguistic research in the Vygotskian tradition, see the 1994 theme issue of *The Modern Language Journal* 87.4.)

The idea that people speak with different voices is particularly meaningful in the field of mental health, and Bakhtinian analysis has become a therapeutic tool for the treatment of the mentally ill, particularly those with multiple personalities or schizophrenia. In the field of applied linguistics, a Bakhtinian approach has determined the frequent use of polyvocal syntax and semantics during speech acts and written discourse. Religious texts are particularly rich sources of heteroglossia. In the Bahá’í writings, Bahá’u’lláh speaks sometimes with the voice of humanity, sometimes with the Voice of the Manifestation, and sometimes with the Voice of God. The Fire Tablet is an example of this and would be understood more clearly through a Bakhtinian approach. Furthermore, the Bahá’í writings recommend self-appraisal through private speech or verbal thought as a critical step in determining whether spiritual goals have been achieved. Bahá’u’lláh admonishes humankind to

bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.

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The complementary analytical frameworks of Vygotsky and Bakhtin are in accord with the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith on both the importance of childhood education and the continued significance of consultative forms of social interaction for the creation of knowledge throughout the individual’s life. The views of these two Russian researchers support the new scholarly paradigm suggested by Brill, a paradigm that is based on collaboration rather than competition.

The field of second- and foreign-language education is a blend of researchers and practitioners, and several professional journals offer a collaborative mentoring process to help classroom teachers author research findings with necessary academic rigor. For example, TESOL Journal has a mentoring program where experienced writers work with authors whose manuscripts have come back from review with suggestions for revision. Modeled after this program, a refereed applied linguistics journal in Asia also put a mentoring program in place several years ago. Two areas were identified as needing a collaborative approach: the actual reviewing of manuscripts by editorial board members and additional readers, and the revision of promising manuscripts according to the reviewers’ comments. Following the procedures of another journal, the TESOL Quarterly, the editorial board decided to meet yearly, requesting beforehand that each reviewer comment on the same manuscript. These reviews were copied and distributed so that the readers could examine the responses of their colleagues to the same paper. Reviewers were given the option of receiving copies of the other readers’ reviews of manuscripts they had also read. Awareness that one’s reviews would be read by colleagues resulted in an improvement in the helpfulness of the review process.

Mentoring of manuscripts for rewriting has also been positive, with over half of mentored manuscripts accepted, compared with a lower rate for unmentored rewrites. Finally, the editor in charge of publishing book reviews also took an active role by assisting authors to reframe questionable material and to construct helpful and objective reviews. In this case, the decision on the part of the journal’s editorial board to promote positive forms of scholarship and to focus strongly on the goal of assisting professional development led to greater use of collaborative resources and resulted in a superior product.

Regarding new scholarly paradigms, it is useful to consider the sciences of chaos and complexity theory, used to explain the behavior of nonlinear complex systems. Such systems range from the pattern of water drops falling from a faucet to global weather, the stock market, and the operation of the human brain, and have been found to share a particular feature: They are often sensitive to very small variations in initial conditions. The classic example of such sensitivity is the “butterfly effect,” in which the flapping of a butterfly’s wings

at one location, over many iterations, produces a thunderstorm elsewhere. Although one may assume that the results of a particular action are of minor significance—a normal assumption for events in linear systems—in a nonlinear system, the resulting effects may be quite disproportionate to the cause. Increasingly, social-scientists are turning to chaos/complexity theory to shed light on problems that should be foregrounded, to inform construction of theories that go beyond mere cause–effect relationships, and to appreciate the importance of detail. Brill’s article has identified a number of complex deconstructing and restructuring trends in academia and has linked these to the coming World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. She writes: “The turbulence of our times directly reflects the extent to which lives, worlds, and words increasingly struggle with innumerable transitory centers . . .” (11), and this seems to describe a chaotic system.

Traditional views of scholarship as isolated activities characterized by linear methodology and done by the few must give way to new paradigms of interactive knowledge creation. Increasingly, this is happening through scientific collaboration, interdisciplinary research projects, and increasing acknowledgment of the validity of traditional knowledge systems. The Associations for Bahá’í Studies worldwide are in a critical position to support the development of important new forms of scholarship, for in nonlinear complex systems, small and local events are capable of producing truly astonishing outcomes. The promotion of diverse and collaborative forms of scholarship through conferences, Special Interest Group meetings, newsletters, and limited circulation publications—regardless of their small scale—can result in significant changes in the perception of what constitutes Bahá’í scholarship. The words of Shoghi Effendi effectively identify this chaotic nonlinear view of cause and results: “Though small in numbers, and circumscribed as yet in your experiences, powers, and resources, yet the Force which energizes your mission is limitless in its range and incalculable in its potency.”

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