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Dialogical approaches to learning: from theory to practice and back

Dialogical approaches to learning and teaching can be traced to multiple sources including the notion of Socratic dialogue (Burbules, 1993), Freire's notion of dialogic education (Shor & Freire, 1987), and the Vygotskian-inspired approach to dialogic inquiry (Wells, 2000). These approaches have deployed a set of theoretical concepts – such as chronotopes, polyphony, positioning, and multi-voicedness – which enable a focus on affection, identity, culture and social aspects of learning. Renewed interest in dialogue occurred about a decade ago in the context of new digital and mobile technologies (Ligorio & César, 2013; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Van der Linden & Renshaw, 2004; Wegerif, 2007). Several groups of researchers deployed Bakhtinian concepts to theorise learning and teaching (e.g. Matusov, 2009; Wegerif, 2006) and to develop dialogical theories of the Self (Hermans, 2001). Currently, there is a growing interest in applying these dialogical ideas in different learning contexts such as: argumentation and problem solving (Asterhan & Schwarz, 2007), online and computer mediated learning (Wegerif, 2006), multicultural settings (Kinnvall & Lindén, 2010), integration of students with difficulties, specific content pedagogy (mathematics as well as science or literature or L2) (Flynn, 2011; Machado, César, & Desenvolvimento, 2013), and learning in the workplace (Akkerman, & Eijck, 2013; Syvänen, & Tikkanmäki, 2013).

Researchers embracing a dialogical approach share the agenda to examine learning as a concrete, dynamic form of social action, elaborating the interconnections between aspects of learning previously fragmented and treated separately. In particular, one foundational feature of dialogical approaches is their analytic focus on the social and relational aspects of learning, which corresponds with the scope of this journal. For instance, the papers in this special issue focus on topics such as the interplay between learning practices and the social development of identity; the relevance of space-time for the social construction of contexts of learning; the capability to cross (socio-cultural) boundaries between learning contexts; the centrality of different perspectives shared through social interaction for creativity and novel insights.

In sum, as stated elsewhere (Ligorio, 2013), we consider dialogical approaches as:

- (a) maintaining multiplicity and complexity and, at the same time, enabling on-going communication and agreements;
- (b) looking at the larger socio-cultural picture and simultaneously situating the phenomena;
- (c) maintaining an interplay between opposite perspectives and points of view;
- (d) looking at individuals without downplaying the role of others and social interaction;
- (e) considering material and immaterial elements;
- (f) looking at time and space as coordinates for learning.

We argue that one of the current challenges of dialogical approaches is to show how these theoretical principles and notions can be fruitfully deployed to reveal in detail the relational and dynamic nature of learning. This task, in our view, is crucial for the current development of dialogical approaches. Many dialogical concepts and ideas are complex and difficult to operationalize for empirical analysis. For example, Bakhtin's texts do not provide a sense of how to proceed with a chronotopic analysis of social relations or learning processes (Leander, 2001, p. 652). Even though the literature using this concept is growing (Ritella et al., 2017), we are still struggling to develop a clear understanding of how to examine chronotopes (Ritella

& Ligorio, 2016). In general, then, we need innovative empirical methods to investigate the complex and often interwoven constructs of a dialogical approach, and show how they illuminate contexts of practice. We consider this special issue, therefore, as a venue to confront and discuss empirical contributions deploying dialogical concepts, as well as an occasion to develop new research and understanding of the potentialities and limits of the dialogical approach for learning.

Each article of this special issue provides an example of how dialogical concepts and associated methods can be used to build an empirically grounded, holistic analysis of learning. Even though each article presents a specific deployment of some dialogical concepts, the ideas mentioned above constitute the backbone of the special issue as they frequently appear in many of the articles. As dialogism can be considered as a theory of sense making (Linell, 2009), one common thread in this special issue is the challenge of examining the multiple interpretations through which the participants of the studies make sense of their experiences. This implies an attempt to voice the *emic* perspective of the participants themselves as well as the *etic* perspective of the researchers. Methodologically, this foregrounds local and situated meanings, progressively building knowledge in interaction with informants. Thus, all of the authors in this issue rely on qualitative research methods involving detailed analysis of video/audio records, operationalizing complex dialogical conceptual tools for empirical investigations. This agrees with Sullivan (2012) who argued that dialogical approaches are meant to provide tools for the qualitative analysis of subjectivity. In this way, dialogical approaches are framed as “idiographic” ways of developing scientific knowledge (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2008), where analytical devices explore and reveal the uniqueness of individual lives, social events or particular historical moments (Rosa, 2008).

The analytic frameworks constructed in dialogical research programs based on Bakhtin’s ideas (1981, 1986) are often intertwined with contributions from related theories of learning – in particular those inspired by Vygotsky (1978) – and from neighbouring disciplines – such as literary theory, ethics, clinical psychology and the philosophy of language. Many articles in this special issue develop analytic frameworks that attempt to integrate Bakhtin’s dialogicity with concepts established within Vygotskian socio-cultural approaches. We believe these articles show that a great epistemic potential resides in the combination of these contiguous theoretical perspectives. The challenge is, however, to avoid grounding the analytic devices on potentially conflicting conceptualizations and assumptions. Our hope, in this respect, is that this special issue can raise reflection on the different analytical uses of theoretical concepts that the articles present.

In the first article of this issue, Monereo shows how critical incidents reported by a teacher in a novel phase of her career can be examined by means of the Dialogical Self framework (Hermans, 2001). The author claims that such a framework enhances our understanding of the mechanisms that regulate changes in identity positions. To reach this result, he elaborates a complex methodology for collecting and analysing data on critical incidents in order to represent and discuss the identity trajectory of his informant.

Bertau and Tures display a further deployment of Hermans’s Dialogical Self framework, in connection with the Vygotskian cultural-historical approach, with a specific focus on language activity. The method of video-stimulated reflection used by the authors makes visible the I-positions of Early Childhood Education (ECE) students that were enacted by both dialogic partners - the researcher and the ECE student. This method, the authors claim, provokes different voicings and positioning, revealing to be a dialogical instrument for both the ECE students’ training and for its scientific examination.

The third article, by Freire and Branco, also builds on the framework of the Dialogical Self (Hermans, 2001), this time shifting the attention from the identity of teachers to the identity of students. The authors examine the “self-dynamics” allowing a student to change from an initial negative self-qualification to the emergence of a confident voice about himself as an intelligent and capable learner. Their analysis suggests that some teaching practices have the potential to mobilize active participation and generate new self-positions, thus triggering the development of the Self.

Rajala and Akkerman, then, illuminate how a dialogic understanding of the students’ sense-making during a fieldtrip helps to see the dynamic social processes through which the physical sites of learning are framed in multiple and changing ways as the activity unfolds. The authors discuss how the difference between the multiple interpretations of activity, as they are interwoven with the framing of the material context, can provide learning opportunities and allow enriching instructional practices.

Similarly, Ritella, Ligorio and Hakkarainen discuss the social processes that concern the interpretation of the task and the framing of the contexts of learning. In particular, the authors show how the complex concept of chronotope can be operationalized to examine how students discursively frame the space-time of the learning context, which has an impact on how they interpret the task and self-regulate while participating to a media design course.

Also Salmi and Kumpulainen, in their study, look at the interplay between sense-making and its socio-material environment. The authors adopt a visual narrative methodology to access young children’s motives and experiences related to their transition from preschool to first grade. Their results unpack the dialogic nature of experiencing, concluding that part of learning to become a *school child* entails an agentive negotiation between subjective motives and the demands of the socio-material and cultural environment.

The seventh article, by Marjanovic-Shane and her colleagues, presents an auto-ethnographic account of the dialogic circumstances, relationships, and dynamics of testing ideas in classroom. The authors consider especially the circumstances under which students’ voices are not heard, not willing to be expressed, and/or are suppressed, and thus die leading to oppressive, productive, or ambivalent silences. This article shows how dialogically minded scholars consider scientific analysis as a responsive process where the voices of participants, researchers and readers of scientific reports all contribute to define the meaning of the examined processes. The last article, by Wegerif and colleagues, presents a further methodological attempt - the so called ‘dynamic inverted pyramid’ methodology - to show how the dynamic, iterative switch between the lived experience of participants (the *emic* perspective) and the quantitative measurement of the impact of dialogic educational practices (the *etic* perspective) can inform each other, contributing to a deeper understanding of learning and education. The authors of this article argue for an ontological interpretation of the dialogical perspective, where dialogue is considered as an end in itself.

All together, these articles allow us to reflect on the challenges of adopting the dialogical approach to examine learning. These challenges urged us to organize this special issue and we believe the research presented here contributes to our understanding of the potentialities and challenges of the dialogical approach. However, we are also aware that there are other challenges not sufficiently addressed in this special issue, even though we recognize they are as important as the ones discussed here. For example, none of the articles here discusses formal learning outcomes as a dimension to be considered in connection to dialogical approaches. A better understanding of what we may consider a learning outcome and how the dialogical approach may impact the assessment of learning could be an aspect to be further developed. It is important that dialogical approaches will be able to inform educational practices and impact educational changes, as other traditions - such as evidence-based approaches (Hargreaves,

1997) - have been doing. One of the strengths of evidence-based approaches seems to be that their claims are based on measurable learning outcomes, which is in line with current policy trends focusing on teacher accountability and testing (Renshaw, 2014). The question that we think should be answered by dialogically minded scholars, then, is: how can we inform practitioners, policy makers, school heads and other stakeholders so that they can help students to develop their (dialogical) identities, to become “culture makers” that express their “authorial agency”, to create “subversive spaces”, instead of focusing only on the production of measurable outcomes?

Finally, a critical commentary by Peter Renshaw provides analytic reflections on the articles and the main arguments put forward in this special issue, identifying and discussing some crucial themes for the development of the dialogical tradition. We are sure that his reading of the articles will open a further space for building more and more robust and convincing dialogical accounts of learning in the future.

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