

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi

Full length article

The Three Domains for Dialogue: A framework for analysing dialogic approaches to teaching and learning

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Classroom dialogue
Dialogic teaching
Dialogic pedagogy
Exploratory talk
Accountable Talk
Educational approach

ABSTRACT

This theoretical article focuses on the dialogic teaching literature in an effort to build an integrative framework. We deem this necessary amidst an expanding field that still lacks a common vocabulary and means for integrating and comparing available approaches. In the framework, three domains that are key in dialogic teaching are outlined: Teaching-learning, Instruments and Assumptions. These general domains comprise eleven more specific components that reflect key elements considered to play a role in underpinning, supporting and enacting dialogic teaching. We take the framework's components to analyse and compare Thinking Together and Accountable Talk, two well-developed approaches with extensive publications. We highlight the underlying aspects and key features of each approach, such as participant arrangement, talk tools and classroom norms. Finally, we speculate prospective uses of our framework in the field.

1. Introduction

The field of dialogic teaching has expanded greatly in the past three decades, both theoretically and empirically. Amidst this expansion, there have been some attempts to develop overarching accounts of the field. Different perspectives on the relationship between dialogue and education have emerged, including cultural-historical activity theory and linguistics (Wells, 1999), dialogic theory (Matusov, 2009; Phillipson & Wegerif, 2017; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016) and argumentation theory (Schwarz & Baker, 2016). Some authors have highlighted the diversity in the field (Higham, Brindley, & Van de Pol, 2014; Howe & Abedin, 2013), whereas Khong, Saito and Gillies (2017, p. 8) call for the development of “a general framework for dialogic interactions among students and between students and teachers across disciplines”. In our view, previous efforts have provided relevant theoretical and empirical accounts without developing more comprehensive conceptual structures.

In this article, we tackle these concerns by proposing a framework that outlines key domains and components of dialogic educational approaches. Hence, we hope to offer an analytic perspective and abstract categories that allow bridging across approaches in the literature. The nature of our framework might be considered taxonomic because it can be used to understand and classify different stances on classroom dialogue found in the literature. In the first section, we briefly present the field of dialogic teaching and pinpoint issues related to its expansion. The second section introduces our framework to analyse dialogic educational approaches. We then move on to test its applicability by analysing two dialogic approaches: Thinking Together and Accountable Talk. Finally, we comment on the potential of the framework for future applications.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2018.03.001>

Received 6 December 2017; Received in revised form 3 March 2018; Accepted 5 March 2018

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1.1. The importance of language in education

Language plays a special role in human existence, not only as a medium for communication, but also as a means of thinking or orienting ourselves towards any situation (Holquist, 1990; Mercer, 2000; Roth, 2005). This current understanding is grounded in Vygotsky's (1987) ideas, key ones being mediation of thinking and action by cultural artefacts, and the interdependent relationship between thought and language. Vygotsky's thinking is currently enshrined in sociocultural theory, that asserts that language is a semiotic system for both joint participation and individual development (Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2017).

In the educational world, the acknowledgment of language's key role has led to a focus on the modes of classroom interaction. In this article, we will distinguish between “talk”, which refers to any verbal exchange, and “dialogue”, meaning talk that has particular features and educational value.

Studies in the field have shown that the most common feature of classroom talk is a triadic sequence: initiation, response, and follow-up or evaluation (IRF or IRE – Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Wells (1993) estimates that this mode of exchange accounts for up to 70% of all talk between teachers and students. This kind of classroom interaction usually takes the form of a “recitation script” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) in which the purpose of the teacher's initiation and evaluation is to direct students' responses towards a pre-established answer (Alexander, 2005; Smith, Hardman, Wall, & Mroz, 2004). In this whole-class scenario, teachers use predominantly closed or factual questions that invite predefined and short answers. Open or speculative questions inviting opinions, hypotheses or articulation of understanding are rare (Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). Regarding talk among peers, research has shown that even when arranged in small groups, students frequently just continue to work in parallel by themselves (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2003; Galton, 1987).

Partly in reaction to these findings, other lines of research have focused on the role of language in the knowledge-building process (Howe & Mercer, 2007; Mercer & Dawes, 2014). Here, the main conclusion is that the forms of talking have profound implications for educational outcomes (Kelly, 2014; Lemke, 2001), such that ‘the quality of student learning is closely linked to the quality of classroom talk’ (Nystrand et al., 1997, p. 29). Consequently, researchers have sought to identify effective discursive practices to promote student learning.

1.2. Dialogic teaching and learning

Research relating to these goals has increased substantially over the last two decades. A variety of research groups have developed their own models, often referring to – and departing from – the umbrella term “dialogic teaching” coined by Alexander (2001). In the field, dialogue and dialogic teaching are not understood as the mere implementation of interactive lessons. Rather, the focus is on improving students' understanding, developing their thinking and raising their participation and engagement, usually under democratic values. This involves a shift from a metaphor of learning as “transmission” to one that emphasises “participation” and “understanding” (Biesta, 2004; Galton, 2007; Sford, 1998).

Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) writings have been influential in the dialogue literature, especially in proposing that utterances are inherently dialogic because they always contain responses to preceding and anticipated utterances. Dialogue has thus been framed as a collective and collaborative inquiry in which answers give rise to new questions forming an endless string of utterances (Alexander, 2001). In this sense, classroom talk becomes more dialogic when teachers listen to and engage with students' developing ideas, using extended sequences and helping move the ideas forward (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Scott, Ametler, Mercer, Staarman, & Dawes, 2007). Nystrand et al. (1997) call this teaching context “dialogically organised instruction” where knowledge is considered to emerge from the interaction between voices and the transformation of understanding.

Different approaches in the literature have proposed their own terminology and definitions of dialogue, emphasising different aspects of talk. Evidence already exists that dialogic modes of interaction are productive in promoting student participation, developing reasoning and creativity, and enhancing conceptual disciplinary growth (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer & Sams, 2006; Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2017; Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003; Webb & Treagust, 2006; Wegerif, 2010; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999). Large-scale studies relating dialogue and attainment are still needed (Howe & Abedin, 2013).

1.3. Emerging issues in a diverse field

In a context of proliferating research conducted in numerous countries, there is a diversity of proposals (Khong et al., 2017). Some scholars have proposed theoretical and philosophical discussions about dialogue and education (Kazepides, 2010; Linell, 2004; Matusov, 2009; Skidmore, 2006; Wegerif, 2007). Others, in turn, have developed applied approaches, especially in the English-speaking world. Some well-known terms in the US are “dialogic inquiry” (Wells, 1999), “dialogic instruction” (Nystrand et al., 1997), “accountable talk” (Michaels & O'Connor, 2015; Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008) and “collaborative reasoning” (Reznitskaya et al., 2009). Similarly, relevant representatives can be found in the UK under the terms “dialogic teaching” (Alexander, 2008) and “exploratory talk” (Mercer, 1995, 2000). Many other scholars have not proposed such specific terminology in their work, while still focusing on what we have termed “dialogue” (Gillies, 2014; Hardman, Smith, & Wall, 2003; Lefstein & Snell, 2014; Mortimer & Scott, 2003; Moyles, Hargreaves, Merry, Paterson, & Esarte-Sarries, 2003; Myhill et al., 2006). More recently, in the edited book ‘Socializing intelligence through academic talk and dialogue’ (Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015), the different authors across chapters employ terms like “talk”, “dialogue” and “discourse” to refer to desirable verbal exchanges.

Although there appears to be convergence in the field regarding the importance of promoting dialogue, the current diversity brings with it some theoretical and practical problems. A key issue to address is the absence of a shared vocabulary, resulting from

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