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## Combining the dialogic and the dialectic: Putting argumentation into practice in classroom talk



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### ABSTRACT

The compatibility of dialogic and dialectic approaches in education has recently been the object of fierce discussions among representatives of socio-cultural theory of human development. We show that this debate echoes a past controversy among postmodernists on the possibility of educational dialogue. We operationalized the cohabitation between the dialogic and the dialectic through the identification of moments for which issues of infinalisability, creativeness, adult mediation, power relations and differences of ability are at stake. We then report on a yearlong history course in which the cohabitation of the dialogic and the dialectic was checked through the implementation of argumentative practices in a dialogic classroom. We show that while creativity flourished, the teacher often designed activities that conveyed the necessity of conformity. Discussions were deployed in chains of reasoning distributed among discussants, but the teacher often decided to finalize the dialogue on the basis of pedagogical considerations. Several manifestations of power and of differences of ability emerged and harmed discussions. In the majority of activities, though, the dialogic and the dialectic cohabitated and the moments during which this cohabitation was challenged, were successfully handled. We draw theoretical conclusions from this cohabitation on the compatibility of the dialogic and the dialectic.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is about the introduction of the dialogic in classrooms. While intuitively, this introduction seems natural and unproblematic for most educationalists committed to progressive pedagogies, major theorists have questioned its desirability, and others contrast it with what they call the dialectic – an inexorable imposition of rationality. Indeed, several publications have discussed the compatibility or the incompatibility of the dialogic and the dialectic (Daniels, 2012; Matusov, 2011; Wegerif, 2011; White, 2013). The present paper focuses on a long-term case study – a yearlong course in which this compatibility is experimentally checked. This study brings forward two novelties. First, the dialogic and the dialectic are operationalized in classroom interactions. Secondly, we show that the iteration of social argumentative practices and especially those supported by computerized tools, realize the cohabitation of the dialogic and the dialectic. The first step in our adventure is a clear definition of the dialogic and of the dialectic.

The term *dialogue* has become ubiquitous in modern society. In our daily life, it serves to denote a conversational exchange in which relations of power between people (e.g., from different generations, social classes or ethnicities), are not imposed. In politics, it is a pluralising force capable of accommodating the moral disagreement inevitable in human affairs.

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In philosophy, it means a relational approach rather than the autonomous, individualist and rational approaches that dominated the scene for centuries. Kierkegaard, Buber and Levinas are the most famous proponents of *Philosophies of Dialogue*. Michail Bakhtin's remarkable enterprise in *Literary Criticism* was attentive to the voices of all characters in Dostoyevsky and Rabelais' books; it led to the theory of *dialogism* whose strong epistemic, political and rational dimensions are highly relevant to Philosophy. Bakhtin's sensitiveness to, say, the cries in Middle Age markets and fairs in an ambiance of carnival, as described by Rabelais, naturally led his commentators to propose a theory of Human Development: the prose referred to life, Bakhtin referred to prose and the circle was completed as his theory was projected to life. The vital became poetic, and the poetic was revitalized.

However, dialogue has not been seen as a welcome idea only, especially among post-modernists. It is in education that they have made strong and negative claims. For them, the active processes by which we construct and interpret systems of belief or value are infinitely and highly contingent. The only possible non-hierarchical, non-dominating, non-monolithic discursive approach is one that decenters all claims to transcendental justification. Developing universal moral claims is dismissed as anachronistic and totalitarian (Bauman, 1988). Meta-narratives are perceived as synonymous with the hegemony of a social or political order (Foucault, 1972). Post-modernists have argued that there are no sustainable norms of rationality. For them, educational discourse should be political discourse, and should aim at enfranchising certain groups of interest from others. Therefore, teacher authority, even if adopted for beneficial intent, takes significance against an insidious backdrop of relations of domination. Some authors argue that the only option is to abandon all relations of classroom authority and unbiased claims to knowledge (Ellsworth, 1989).

Such challenges are extremely serious not only for conventional educational activities but for scholars who developed progressive educational theory and practice: since committing themselves to a political meta-narrative is out of question, they did not posit clear alternatives (Rorty, 1989). This confusing situation is well described by Burbules and Rice (1991) who distinguished between *postmodernism* and *antimodernism*: Postmodernism proposes moving beyond but also continuity. For example, Giroux (1994) attempted to appropriate and expand modernist concepts such as democracy, liberty, rights, citizenship, and so forth, to express justified criticism on these concepts. In contrast, the antimodernist position is concerned with deconstructing modern values and rejecting them. A benchmark between the antimodernist and post-modernist approaches is the issue of *difference*. Differences cannot be described through practical elements of interpretation and judgment based on a formal analysis. Extended into the domain of social theories, this concept of difference denies the purely external and formal assignment of persons to membership in the social structure by virtue of some characteristic they possess. It pertains as well to what Derrida (1973) described as *différance* – the active, subjective process of identification with one's group, and non-identification with other groups. For Derrida, there are differences that we choose and differences we don't. However, the active/passive tension in Derrida's has been lost in the appropriations of *différance* by antimodernists. For them, all differences are considered as constructions, and values such as diversity and heterogeneity are pushed to the extreme. The celebration of difference becomes a presumption of incommensurability, a presumption that becomes untenable, especially in education.

The harsh controversy between post-modernists and antimodernists and about the status of dialogue was philosophical. We claim here that the controversy was taken over by psychologists and educationalists through considerations on dialogue in the educational system. For Wertsch, dialogue emerges in the context of mediation: He combines Vygotskian and Bakhtinian ideas to see learning in the zone of proximal development as a sequence of changes in which learners actively reconstruct and transform the cultural and the historical through mediation processes that can be articulated in terms of Bakhtin's categories, such as appropriation, ventriloquation and echoing. In *Voices of the Mind*, Wertsch incorporates Bakhtin's key ideas of *voice*, and *dialogue* to expand Vygotsky's arguments about the mediation of human activity by signs (Wertsch, 1991). Dialogue emerges in the context of mediation, which triggers social and psychological insights (Wertsch & Kazak, 2011).

Wertsch's position, however, is contested, since (as antimodernists would claim), dialogue cannot be imposed on learners. In a review on this disagreement, Thompson (2012) showed that Wegerif has recently challenged Wertsch's alleged compatibility between what he has called Vygotsky's 'dialectic' and Bakhtin's 'dialogic' perspectives (Wegerif, 2007, 2011). For Wegerif, dialectic and dialogic methods are based on different assumptions: Bakhtin's dialogic method refers to the intertwining of real voices not necessarily with any 'overcoming' or 'synthesis'; Vygotsky's dialectic relates to dialogue, but in a very different sense from Bakhtin, as it integrates dialogues into an inexorable rational and logical development (Wegerif, 2011). Wegerif tends to follow Bakhtin in considering dialectic argumentation as an artificial entity in which the other is fictitious. Wegerif sees in this dialectic a totalizing system of western rationalism, an inheritance of philosophical Hegelian tradition, according to which differences are inexorably unified through a dialectic process. He considers the mediation (by teachers) leading to fluency in the use of cultural tools as putting limits to children's imaginations and to their creativity. His alternative account of 'education into dialogue' aims at liberating learners beyond mediation (Wegerif, 2011). He seeks to "challenge the idea that dialogues in education can be adequately studied through a focus on mediation" (Wegerif, 2011, p. 201, cited from Thompson, 2012). The dialogue is capable of opening up an infinite space of potential meaning and it is this, according to Wegerif, which constitutes the ground of creative emergence. For him, there is no unification but the maintenance of a difference that continues indefinitely (as Derrida would claim). For him the Vygotskian learning is dialectic, dialogue is Bakhtinian. The power of the dialogic space comes from tensions between differences. It is a kind of reactor in which ideas collide until fission gives birth to new energy.

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