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Commentary: Analyzing classroom dialogue to create changes in school

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, the articles of the special issue will be discussed in relation to how they address classroom dialogue to promote new forms of education. The articles present possibilities to rethink learning and education through the analysis of classroom dialogue. The commentary will address how the outcomes of the included papers lead to reflections about how practitioners and researchers may rethink school and society in a more emancipating, revolutionary, and transformative way.

The world has made a turn to a more conservative perspective in recent years. Examples of this can be seen in Brexit, in Trump's election in the US and in the presidential debatable impeachment in Brazil, just in 2016. New forms of centralized, controlled and technocratic dialogues are spreading a "one truth only" perspective (cf., Santos, 2008) throughout societies across the world. There is a demand for new educational designs in which classroom dialogues are developed in ways which allow students to develop possibilities to deal with otherness, diversity, hope and possibilities (Van der Veen, Dobber, & van Oers, in press). There is a real challenge for democratic schools to set new patterns for how to design more emancipating, more revolutionary, more transformative ways of educating.

This special issue focuses on the relation between classroom dialogue and children's learning and development. It addresses the matter in a way that may lead teachers and policy makers to view the quality of classroom dialogue for the development of educational outcomes, and, possibly, the creation of new possibilities of being and acting in the world for all those involved in it. In this commentary, some essential topics about the role of language in 'designing education', which may lead towards new transformed realities, will be pointed out through the interpretation of the assumptions behind the type of discourse analysis conducted and the outcomes presented in the different articles. The way certain modes of classroom dialogue contribute to students' learning outcomes seem to be essential to understand how people engage in history, in its movement of development (Blommaert, 2010). Engaging in dialogue is not simply a way of reproducing history. It may signify a chance to create a new history in which students develop opportunities "to broaden their horizon, enter new worlds, become acquainted with a vast range of ideas and perspectives and reflect on their own perspectives" (Van der Veen et al., in press, p. 2).

If dialogues are constitutive of human activities, that is, if they embody them, so understanding dialogue (and, in this instance, classroom dialogue specifically) seems to help grasp time filled with human activity, as suggested by Marx and Engels (1845–46/2006) and reinforced by Vygotsky (1934/1998). One essential tool for the analysis of these human activities, and, in this case, the educational ones, is language, as an eminently social and political object (Blommaert, 2010). So the analysis of classroom dialogue, as developed in this special issue, provides us with powerful means to understand the activities that take place in school. Why is that so?

Bakhtin and Voloshinov (1986) attested that a person's utterances, as part of multivoiced dialogues, are infused with other people's words but still create their own unity. This is so because they combine words in a very special way which make the development of culture through time and space possible. The authors point out that:

> 'everything vital in the evaluative reception of another's utterance, everything of any ideological value, is expressed in the material inner speech. After all, it is not a mute, wordless creature that receives such an utterance, but a human being full of inner words' (Bakhtin & Voloshinov, 1986, p. 118).

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Furthermore, they argue that:

> 'a change in meaning is always a reevaluation or the transposition of some particular word form from one evaluative context to another (Bakhtin & Voloshinov', 1986, p. 105).

Following Bakhtin and Voloshinov (1986), I will argue that there is a need for the interpretation of the utterance both in the here-and-now and in relation to its historicity, as stated by Bakhtin/Voloshinov (1986). From this perspective, meaning making is viewed as an active process. What one may understand or produce now depends on prior lived experiences with what it meant before.

Bakhtin (1981) also states that diverse voices struggle in dialogues. These struggles are both permeated by authoritarian discourse and internally persuasive discourse. The authoritarian discourse imposes and demands unconditional recognition and complete assimilation of the speaker's words. On the other hand, the internally persuasive discourse involves the tense and conflicting arena where different voices are constitutively articulated. It comprises the ideological transformations that are expressed in the struggle among differing points of view. So, in my view, in a more democratic world, classroom dialogue should involve internally persuasive discourses with maximum interaction among voices, dialogical reciprocal influence, free development, border crossing, incompleteness of sense, possibility of continuity, and creativity."

In order to apprehend how voices become interwoven in classroom dialogue, human action must be understood as "constituted and shaped within a rich multimodal ecology of sign systems" (Goodwin, 2002, p. 1). Besides, focus should rely on the way teachers and students use these multiple forms in order to structure time in the world and to provide interlocutors with resources for planning future events in the current and future interactions with the juxtaposition of different semiotic resources (Goodwin, 2000).

As Bezemer and Kress indicated, in a multimodal world, it is essential to account for

> 'what the social relations with an audience are, what resources there are for making the text, what media are going to be used, and how these fit with what is to be communicated and with a clear understanding of the characteristics of the audience' (Bezemer & Kress, 2010, p. 11).

These authors advocate that people can change their way of using resources once they achieve new awareness of the personal meanings and of the interests they project onto current cultural practices. (for instance: curriculum planners, textbook designers, teachers, students, parents, principals).

Thus, analyzing classroom dialogue opens opportunities to move from present to past, from product to process in an understanding that every language act connects it all. When observing how students and teachers interact, it is possible to understand the views of teaching, learning, development, society and culture that underline their actions. Their actions become historically situated, that is, they acquire social meaning and represent a community. They become politically infused with power. When people understand the meaning of their multimodal choices, they can create new forms of being and acting collectively and this is the transformative power of understanding classroom dialogue and the resources used to materialize it. They understand how voices are imposed or negotiated, how the world is materialized and how power relations are constructed, perpetuated or transformed.

In the articles presented in the special issue, these ideas are seriously addressed. Essentially, the articles gear towards the understanding of the complexities and intricacies of learning and classroom dialogue. This interest recovers the idea that people are powerful meaning makers. Their utterances for contributing to classroom dialogue are infused with ideological values that are recreated every time an exchange occurs. In a sense, the careful analyses of the classroom discourses as conducted by the authors of the articles in this special issue emphasize the relationship between language resources and the social, cultural and material creation of learning environments. They reinforce the idea that the way verbal and nonverbal language is used will shape the type of learning, development and outcomes created.

Mercer et al.'s perspective on monitoring and assessing oracy skills as well as the proposal for analyzing silent versus vocal students' engagement in whole-class discussion studied by O'Connor et al. and the innovative Group Thinking Measure by Wegerif et al. seem to reflect a similar interest. They discuss the development of semiotic resources to open opportunities and to evaluate possibilities towards a new view of learning and new interests in education that may lead to think of more democratic forms of participation.

Mercer, Warwick and Ahmed address the need for practical ways of monitoring and assessing oracy skills. The study focused on the development of a set of research-informed resources for assessing the spoken language skills (oracy) of students aged 11–12. This toolkit, differently from previous approaches, does not rely on performance criteria related to specific situations. It centers on a more general framework with a range of skills available/accessible in any situation. The toolkit created combined research-based validity with a practical ease of use for teachers.

The authors suggest that this type of analysis may lead to a better understanding of the development of children's spoken language. For instance, they exemplify that the analysis of the Talking Points, which were considered not controversial enough for a lively debate, could help teachers and experts to think about new ways of organizing instruction and classroom interaction that are more beneficial to students.

In the article by O'Connor, Michaels, Chapin and Harbaugh, the difference between silent versus vocal students' *engagement* in whole-class discussion in relation to learning outcomes was questioned. In their study, they compared *academically productive talk* (or accountable talk) to "direct instruction" in order to evaluate if there was a significant relationship between what an individual student learns from a discussion and how much that student verbally contributes to that specific discussion. They conclude that children in the productive talk condition outperformed children in the direct instruction condition on a standardized Mathematics test. Interestingly, no differences between silent or vocal children were found. This suggests that it is essential to further investigate the meanings of silence and the types of silent engagement.

O'Connor's et al.'s findings question results from earlier studies and demand for a more specific and careful observation of the resources for meaning making and their relevance for active participation. Many times, students' simple, monosyllabic or reproductive responses are regarded as participation while an attentive or speculative look may be disregarded. However, true participation involves presenting different positions, negotiating, opposing and finding common grounds. It is not simply a question of the number or the size of turns.

The article by Wegerif, Fujita, Doney, Perez Linares, Richards and van Rhyn presents an important thinking measure, in combination with interpretative discourse analysis to explore its impact on group thinking. The authors point out that this Group Thinking Measure seemed to reveal some of the key features of successful group interaction and to inform decisions that may lead to effective pedagogy for group thinking. In a way, it also creates a basis for the

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