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“Food for thought”: Blogging about food as dialogical strategy for self-disclosure and otherness

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1. Introduction

Education is still striving to find innovative ways of being effective and tackling the new challenges that society proposes. Students at school often report lack of motivation (Walkey, McClure, Meyer, & Weir, 2013), feelings of frustration (Pardos, Baker, San Pedro, Gowda, & Gowda, 2013), and a negative and stressful classroom climate (Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein-Madry, & Milatz, 2012). Collaborative learning, supported by the diverse technological devices available, seems to offer opportunities for empowering students' commitment in learning via metacognition, self-regulated learning and social processes (Järvelä & Hadwin, 2013). Of course, technology is not a magic stick. To be effective, it should be integrated into meaningful tasks where students can express themselves, work on interesting topics, and be involved in new ways of talking, writing, and discussing. When students can connect school tasks to their daily life, learning seems to me more motivated and effective (Hedegaard, Aronsson, Højholt, & Ulvik, 2018).

In this paper, we present an Italian national project, named ‘Dialoghi IN Corso’ (DINC) – (Ongoing Dialogues) - based on students' team-blogging, designed as a school activity providing students with opportunities to talk about themselves. By doing so, we expected students to discover the value of discussing with peers, comparing different habits and values, and ultimately, better understanding themselves.

The DINC project was enacted in 2016, within the framework of a broader international programme aimed at implementing intercultural and interreligious dialogue, run by a national network of 30 public schools called ‘Rete Dialogues’, initiated and supported by the Italian Ministry of Education with the Generation Global programme in seven Italian regions, widespread along all the national territory.¹ The dialogical dimension – understood as the capability to enter in relationship with others through self-disclosure – has both inspired the tasks and guided the qualitative analysis of the data collected.

Blogging is an interesting educational tool for many reasons. It is a type of asynchronous technology, that implies a time lag between the moment when the message is posted and the moment when it is read. Before posting the message, it is possible to reflect upon it and polish the content, making it more coherent to the thinking behind it. Similarly, before replying to a message the writer can re-read it carefully and make sure the content is correctly exposed. These lags – between thinking, reading and writing – can function as reflective practices, improving dialogue with others and within themselves.

Blogging has some similarities to talking – such as length and style – as well as to writing (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Therefore, blogging can be considered a way to self-express, offering interesting options for disclosure, enhancement, construction and re-construction of positions.

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¹ Rete Dialogues was created in 2011 to implement *Generation Global* (then called *Face to Faith*), a global school dialogue program. The aim of the project is to develop students' critical thinking, open-mindedness and communication between peers from different cultures, through videoconferences or written dialogue. *Generation Global* is run by the Tony Blair Institute (then Tony Blair Faith Foundation), in Italy it is implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MIUR, Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca). The DINC project was developed within the *Generation Global* framework. For a detailed overview see <http://generation.global/> and <http://retedialogues.it>

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Within the Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) framework, blogs have been considered as spaces for reflection through discussion. According to Michailidis and his collaborators (Michailidis, Kapravelos, & Tsiatsos, 2018), blogs do not only “highlight the collaborative dimension of interaction, but may also accommodate metacognitive processes and collaborative construction of knowledge” (p. 37). Kim (2008) reported evidence of the benefits of using blogs; for instance students improved critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills. Critical and analytical thinking is enhanced via blogs because students can experience a broader perspective since their audience is larger than that possible by just discussing in the classroom (Ellison & Wu, 2008). Moreover, the text posted on a blog remains at the disposal of the participants for reflection, becoming a source for new ideas and prompting further discussions (Van den Boom, Paas, Van Merriënboer, & Van Gog, 2004).

One of the most interesting features of blogging is its capability to support self-disclosure (Harper & Harper, 2006; Hewitt, 2005; Stone, 2003). Because of its resemblance to a diary, bloggers feel encouraged to express themselves, to report their thoughts and narrate what they do. Unlikely paper and pencil diaries, the online nature of blogs encourage a reciprocity of self-disclosure and increase the likelihood that the readers will also disclose themselves. The reciprocal exchange will positively influence participation, interaction, social integration, and even subjective well-being (Ko & Kuo, 2009). Therefore, the type of self-disclosure possible through blogging profits from specific elements such as the use of text - instead of face-to-face verbal communication - and the larger audience reached through internet.

In the project here presented, blogging is proposed as an activity for students to narrate about their habits and the values concerning food. This is a pretext to support a new vision of school activities, close to students' daily life, meaningful, involving external people and, at the same time, able to trigger intimate and personal thoughts.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

The vision of learning discussed above is well described by the two theoretical frames adopted in this project: the so-called Triological Learning Approach (TLA) and the Dialogical Self Theory (DST). The first approach clearly addresses innovation in school and inspires the design of the team-blog activities. The DST is able to capture the dialogical dimension of the data and the positions students express while blogging. Team-blogging about food was proposed to allow students to experiment a new way of expressing and reflecting on themselves and on their own daily practices and values. In the following, we will shortly present TLA and DST and how these two approaches were implemented into the project.

2.1. The Triological Learning Approach (TLA)

The TLA emphasises collaborative knowledge building in connection to the knowledge creation metaphor of learning, complemented by acquisition and participation metaphors. The suggestion not to choose one metaphor of learning but, rather, to combine a metaphor that emphasises individual learning (namely the metaphor of ‘container’ or ‘transfer’ of knowledge) with metaphors valuing social participation, was first introduced by Sfard (1998). Within her vision, learning is a combination of individual knowledge acquisition and participation in collective meaningful activities. Building on this idea, Paavola and Hakkarainen (2005) elaborated the ‘knowledge creation metaphor’ to underline that learning is strictly connected to the creation of new knowledge and practices in collaboration with others. The TLA stresses the relevance to direct learning toward the collaborative creation of an object, addressing real users and using modern technology.

Real and useful objects built collaboratively activate a flow of communication where ‘others’ (even outside the class-community) are fully part of the knowledge building process. It is called ‘triological’ because learning is conceived as a dialogue between three elements: the individuals, the community, and the object to be built. In our case through team-blogging we want to foster a dialogue between students at a distance, the community formed into the virtual space of the blogs (the blog sphere) and the text-blog, which is the object students are building.

The crossing of boundaries between education and society, envisioned by the TLA, motivates students because learning becomes closely connected to real life (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014).

2.2. The Dialogical Self Theory

The DST is proposed by Hermans (2013) and it is inspired by both William James (1890) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1973). These two authors share a vision of the self as composed of several elements. James distinguishes the *I* and the *Me*, where the *I* is equated with the self-as-knower and the *Me* is associated with the self-as-known. The encounter of these two elements generates the complexity of self. Bakhtin, starting from the analysis of Dostoyevsky's novels, elaborates the idea that the sense of identity is based on a narrative always populated by characters that act as independent thinkers, each of them with their own view of the world. This implies the rejection of a vision of a multiplicity of characters within a unified world, and considers a plurality of consciousnesses located in different worlds. The multiple-voices compose a polyphony engaged in either opposition, consensus or conflicts (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). As Hermans (2001) claims, the Self is in a perpetual and dynamic dialogue between positions speaking through different voices, having different natures. These positions can be internal (inner voices of the Self, recognizable most of the time because they are marked by the expression “I am ...”) or external (voices initially coming from relevant others but incorporated within the individual landscape marked by the expression “my ...”). In our project, we consider the team-blogging activity as a mean to support the expression of positions. Through self-disclosure, students can “voice” who they are and in what relation they see their positions to other significant people. Reciprocal self-disclosure will allow the appropriation of others' positions resulting with an enlargement of

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