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Exploring the ontological dimension of dialogic education through an evaluation of the impact of Internet mediated dialogue across cultural difference

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ABSTRACT

It has been claimed that dialogic education implies a direction of change upon an ontological dimension from monologic closed identities in the direction of more dialogic identifications characterised by greater openness to the other and greater identification with the process of dialogue. This paper recapitulates that theory and then provides an empirical illustration of what it looks like in practice. In order to do this a methodology for researching the impact of dialogic education is outlined and applied to the evaluation of the impact of a programme designed to promote greater dialogic open-mindedness: the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change's Generation Global Project (GG) supports schools in over twenty different countries to engage in dialogue with each other through videos and blogs. The methodology put forward argues that the understanding sought by educational research is dialogic in that it emerges from the dialogue between inside and outside perspectives. The findings offer some clear evidence of a shift in identifications resulting from dialogue through the analysis of changes in online language use supported by interview evidence. This study suggests that a pedagogical intervention can produce identity change in the direction of becoming more dialogic and shows that it is possible to evaluate this change.

1. Introduction

This paper begins with a summary of a dialogic theory of education that lays stress on drawing learners into dialogue and on the dimension of identity-change from monologic to dialogic. It goes on to describe how the relevance of this theory of education was explored through an evaluation study that measured progress in becoming more dialogic or 'open to the other' as a result of dialogue across cultural differences. A particular version of a 'dialogic' methodology is outlined that enables not only the measurement of change in the direction of becoming more dialogic but also understanding the causal processes behind this change. Evidence is provided that internet-mediated inter-cultural dialogue can promote growth in the direction of dialogic open-mindedness and that it is possible to some extent, to measure this change as well as to understand the processes behind this change.

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1.1. A dialogic account of the vertical in education

A dialogic theory of education has to combine a vision of the aims of education with an understanding of the processes of teaching and learning which includes a theory of learning. Wegerif (2011, 2013) proposes that dialogic education should aim, amongst other things, at dialogue as an end in itself. Dialogic education, on this theory, proceeds through drawing students into dialogue. This includes not only dialogues with specific others (e.g. teachers) but also, dialogues with cultural others (personified communities) and dialogue with 'the Infinite Other', the unbounded horizon that goes beyond and questions every fixed position conceptualised as an outside voice that can prompt thinking. The main causal mechanism of dialogic learning is claimed to be the dialogic switch whereby a student is drawn, through relationship, to see or feel things from a new perspective. In dialogic learning theory new perspectives do not replace previous perspectives but augment them leading to an expanded repertoire. A key component of the dialogic switch is the dialogic gap or the gap between voices in dialogue. According to Bakhtin it is because of this gap that dialogue is possible. For participants in dialogue the gap opens up into an experienced dialogic space within which various voices are in relationship and able to inter-animate each other. The direction of education towards dialogue as an end in itself can be understood as an expansion of this dialogic space to bring more voices into dialogue (including background 'things' that currently are treated as dead things that have no voice).

This particular theory of dialogic education implies an ontological vertical dimension of growth in education from a monologic ontology at one extreme and towards a dialogic ontology at the other extreme. A monologic ontology assumes identities with locations and boundaries. A dialogic ontology, on the other hand, asserts that every apparent identity is in dialogue with every other apparent identity. In a sense the idea of a dialogic 'identity' is a paradox as dialogic is defined by non-identity. However the useful point of the dimension is to articulate the fact that not all identities are at the same level, some are more closed and located than others. One challenge raised by this educational theory is how to assess positive change. While it is relatively easy to measure an increase in knowledge or skills it is harder to measure an increase in dialogicity. This paper directly addresses that challenge proposing methods to measure an increase in dialogicity and showing that they work.

For most educators the ideal of 'openness to the other' has limits. A common and understandable response to extremist views on the Internet is to try to shut down the web-sites and to ban people from accessing them. Can students be allowed to engage with fascist ideology or extremist Islamic ideology? The point of the monologic to dialogic ontological dimension outlined above is that it is not the views that are the danger so much as holding any one view narrowly to the exclusion of other views. A dialogic student holds many views together and learns from the creative tension between them. It would not be possible for such a student to become an extremist because to do so implies shutting down the dialogue. Seeking to understand what it might mean to be, for example, a fascist or, for example, an Islamic extremist, through engaging in dialogue with these positions holds the potential for creative learning, moving students higher along the vertical dimension of becoming more dialogic. The more divergent and 'different' the voices that one is able to allow to speak within the dialogic space that one identifies with, the greater the progress in becoming dialogic and the more one is, in fact, protected from the danger of extremism since all forms of extremism can be defined through their monologism (Savage, 2011).

1.2. Developing the concept of dialogic open-mindedness

The Tony Blair Change Institute's 'Generation Global' project <http://generation.global/> (formerly the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Face to Faith project) claims to promote open-mindedness with the aim of preventing violent extremism. The kind of pedagogy it uses to achieve this end is explicitly dialogic and our evaluation of this programme offers the opportunity to exemplify aspects of how the dialogic theory of educational growth outlined above works in practice. However, before we can go on to describe our evaluation of GG, we need to clarify our use of the term 'open mindedness'. The concept of open-mindedness found in the psychology literature proved inadequate as the basis of an evaluation of the impact of the programme and so needed to be developed into the new concept of dialogic open-mindedness. Literature searches on the database of psychology journals (PsychInfo) using 'open-mindedness' mostly pull up studies using open-mindedness as a variable in characterising identity. Berzonsky (1989) characterised an 'information' identity style in terms of open-mindedness towards new information and active processing of this information into a coherent identity. According to a study by Soenens, Duriez, and Goossens (2005), identity styles can all be related to two basic dimensions: 'active vs. superficial processing of information and adherence to traditional opinions vs. open-mindedness'. While claiming to be empirical science this work is limited by the philosophical assumptions implicit in information-processing models of the mind. Open-mindedness in this literature is treated in purely cognitive terms as being open to new information and new interpretations. The conclusion that 'open-mindedness' is the opposite pole to 'adherence to traditional opinions' follows from this assumption rather than from any empirical findings.

Dialogic theory, increasingly present as a strand within social psychology (Fernyhough, 2009), begins with different philosophical assumptions to information processing models of mind. The fundamental difference can be summed up as the difference between an ontology of relations, assumed by dialogic theory, as opposed to an ontology of identity assumed by information processing models of mind (Gergen, 2009). Dialogism assumes that identities are formed out of and within relationships, not the other way around. The social relationships come first and not the identities. It follows from this that cultural traditions are not a limit to openness but a pre-condition for openness.

Bakhtin, one important source of dialogism, points out that we can only be 'open to the other' because we are always culturally and historically situated. Every word we speak has been spoken already by others and so has a history and inheres in a tradition. Meaning, according to Bakhtin, only arises because there is a difference between voices in a dialogue so if we were to overcome this

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