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Discursive mentoring strategies and interactional dynamics in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we are interested in how teacher educators help and guide prospective teachers' learning in triadic mentoring conversations. These conversations are considered as boundary activities allowing to establish a stronger link between the practicums and academic coursework and to bridge the so-called gap between theory and practice. We explore the interactional dynamics during these conversations focusing on both the content and the discursive processes at play. Content refers to 'what' prospective teachers and educators talk about, and processes refers to 'how' they talk about it – in our case the practicum experience.

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1. Introduction

From around 1990, both in Europe and the USA, teacher education has come to include five components (Tardif & Borges, 2009): academic coursework providing subject-matter knowledge (Shulman, 1986); provision of academic knowledge related to education (psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics of education); provision of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986); provision of educational knowledge, such as classroom management, motivating students, assessing students; and lastly, field experience, which is acquired during practicums (Ottesen, 2007; Wang & Odell, 2002). Practicums allow prospective teachers to progressively integrate the professional field while they are still part of the academic world. During their first steps in the profession, they are supervised by the educators (mentors or university supervisors); thus, research has frequently focused on their role in the professional development of the trainees (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2008). They intervene essentially through conversations – both spontaneous and formal – aimed at the evaluation of the practicums.

We consider – as do others (Carroll, 2005; Crasborn, Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2010; Orland-Barak, 2006) – these conversations to be moments which can help to highlight processes of professional learning.

Formal conversations can be triadic and involve a prospective teacher, a mentor¹ and a university supervisor. Under certain conditions, these triadic mentoring conversations can be considered as boundary activities (Ottesen, 2007), i.e. they help establish a stronger link between practicums and academic coursework, and bridge the so-called gap between theory and practice. During these activities, prospective teachers produce discourses that mobilise resources originating from the academic and professional world. Discursive processes are recognised to have a significant impact on cognitive processes and actions (Balslev, Filliettaz, Ciavaldini-Cartaut, & Vinatier, 2015; Balslev, Vanhulle, & Pellanda Dieci, 2015; Kramer-Dahl, Teo, & Chia, 2007; Sharpe, 2008; Vanhulle, Perréard Vité, Balslev, & Dobrowolska, 2016). In other words, by talking about their practicum experience with a mentor and a university representative and integrating various forms of knowledge in their discourse, prospective teachers should be able to construct

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¹ By « mentor » we refer to teachers who host pre-service teachers in their classes and train them.

professional knowledge. A large number of studies analyse mentoring conversations because they carry a great potential for the professional development of pre-service teachers (Bullough, 2005; Crasborn et al., 2010; Hennissen et al., 2008; Orland-Barak, 2006). In this research paper, we are interested in how teacher educators assist and guide prospective teachers' learning through these conversations, thus, we explore both the content and the discursive processes at play. Content refers to 'what' prospective teachers and educators talk about, and processes refer to 'how' they talk about the practicum experience (Orland-Barak, 2006).

At the University of Geneva,² prospective teachers in their final year of teacher education participate in three training practicums – lasting from 3 to 8 weeks – during which they temporarily take over their mentor's role and responsibilities. Each practicum includes two formal conversations. During the first one, the trainees and their educators engage in a formative evaluation of the practicum and resolve any problems arising. During the second one, the trainees need to present problematic issues³ of their choice related to the aims of the practicum and to mobilise theoretical elements to analyse them. Three actors take part in these conversations: a prospective teacher (PT); a teacher overseeing the prospective teacher's learning, named the mentor (M); and a university supervisor (S). In this paper, we investigate the link between the educators' discursive strategies and the various topics introduced by PTs during these mentoring conversations. Subsequently, we explore how these topics are transformed into professional knowledge. We examine the mentors' strategies through the analysis of verbal interventions of conversation partners to identify different types of dynamics within the interaction. We use two excerpts to discuss how the types of interactional dynamics are linked to the problematic issues raised by PTs and how they influence the professional knowledge development. Our research aims to answer three questions:

- a) What are the discursive mentoring strategies and the interactional dynamics at play within the conversations?
- b) How are they linked to the discussed topics?
- c) How do they impact knowledge construction?

We start by providing an overview of mentoring conversations and their link with knowledge construction. We suggest that to understand *how* PTs build professional knowledge, it is necessary to discuss *what* type of knowledge they need to learn, or ought to learn. For this reason, we present several debates on the subject of knowledge in teacher education, and we discuss our understanding of *professional knowledge*. We argue that discourses and knowledge are closely linked; therefore, we rely on theories derived from language sciences. In this respect, we present views from pragmatic and utterer-centred linguistics as well as from a dialogical approach to learning. Before presenting our two case studies, we begin by providing some important methodological elements. Finally, we conclude by discussing the link between the type of discursive interactions and the type of problematic issues raised by PTs in their mentoring conversations. Lastly, we focus on the impact of interactional dynamics on PTs' knowledge building.

² All the courses and practicums in the teacher education program at the University of Geneva are in French. Thus, our collected data in French was translated into English.

³ Problematic issues are prepared in advance and presented at the beginning of the second mentoring conversation by prospective teachers. The presentation of problematic issues is evaluated by the teacher educators. It should contain an analysis of the classroom events and work situations linked to the theoretical concepts by prospective teachers.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Mentoring conversations

"Human beings are bound to speech in a double projective process, as the mind is both cause and effect of language use" (Mininni, Ghiglione, & Sales-Wuillemin, 1995, p. 476).

According to this quote, language and learning are closely linked. This is why we consider mentoring conversations an interesting research topic for the understanding of professional knowledge building. As a language activity, these conversations are internally and externally oriented tools (Ottesen, 2007; Vanhulle, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987) serving both a purpose of communication and learning.

Mentoring conversation is a form of oral speech (even though part of it is prepared and based on written documents) and is interactional. Thus it possesses the characteristics of ordinary conversations, which in turn affect the process of knowledge construction. It is dynamic, and its outcome is unpredictable (Grosjean & Mondada, 2004), which is why the process of knowledge building can take several variable forms. The conversations are made up of mini-disagreements and continuous adjustments (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004) and are the outcome of co-authorship (Rommetveit, 2003). Therefore, the manner in which knowledge is built depends on the partners of the interaction.

However, in an institutional setting, these conversations present a number of specific features. Firstly, they are asymmetrical, especially when their aim is to evaluate the PT. They should, according to the educational setting, allow the PT to exploit multiple resources (Ottesen, 2007) originating from different contexts (academic, professional, personal). Secondly, they lead speakers to adopt several speech roles (teacher, student, intern, etc.). Thirdly, they are aimed at bringing about changes in conceptions, actions, and values. In this context, the interventions of teacher educators are guided by a number of objectives, such as understanding and evaluating PTs; providing them with knowledge, practical tips, and guidance; and finally facilitating the trainees' progress in their professional learning (Baudrit, 2011; Ciavaldini-Cartaut, 2009; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). In addition, mentoring conversations in teacher education programs are based on conceptions of professional knowledge which vary according to different socio-historical contexts. Their features therefore depend on the conception of knowledge that these programs and contexts prioritise. At a later stage of this article, we discuss these various conceptions of knowledge.

Literature on the roles of mentors shows that in dyadic conversations they encounter various dilemmas (Chaliès, Cartaut, Escalié, & Durand, 2009; Hennissen et al., 2008), such as transmitting the profession *versus* reflecting on the profession, or helping prospective teachers to teach *versus* helping them to learn how to teach. Moreover, mentoring conversations are complex: both knowledge construction and enunciative positioning take place in these conversations. By enunciative positioning, we understand the way the speaker commits to his or her utterances. When conversation participants interact, they position themselves and display attitudes towards their sayings (Rabatel & Koren, 2008). Depending on these attitudes and the commitment to their utterances, they can endorse or, rather, distance themselves from the content of their discourses. For example, when a PT introduces a quote in his or her discourse, it can be discussed, reformulated and put into perspective or simply presented with no markers of the trainee's point of view.

In triadic conversations (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Cartaut & Bertone, 2009; Wilson & l'Anson, 2006) – involving a university supervisor, a mentor and a prospective

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