

CHAPTER 65

Dialogic Learning: A Communicative Approach to Teaching and Learning

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Dialogic learning is the result of the interactions produced in an egalitarian dialogue that is oriented to the creation and acquisition of new knowledge, which is the fruit of consensus. Dialogic learning depends basically on the interactions with others and it requires the maximization of the use of communicative abilities in any context—from home to the community, work, etc., and a more active, reflexive, and critical participation in society. In experiences grounded in dialogic learning, people are cognitive subjects of acting on the basis of a dialectic relation between thought and action. In this sense, dialogic learning is not another theoretical conception of learning but it implies a series of organizational and participative measures that favor learning, especially in contexts where other conceptions have only brought partial solutions.

Dialogic learning depends much more on the interrelation of the interactions that each individual has beyond those that take place in the educational context (the neighborhood, home, store, at work) or with the teachers. Dialogic learning is useful not only in educational centers, but also in the many spaces in which students relate, learn, and develop with others. In fact, dialogic learning does not refer exclusively to the instrumental teaching–learning relationship, but also occurs in the relations among educational agents in the school and the community.

Dialogic learning does not occur in power relations. It takes place in dialogic relations in which people contribute their knowledge from their experience and skills, on an egalitarian basis, with the intention of understanding, based on shared agreements, collectively creating learning through solidarist interactions, which would not have been possible in solitude. The result is learning with a deeper instrumental dimension and steeped in meaning as a result of the characteristics of the very interactive learning process.

This chapter explains dialogic learning on the basis of the communicative conception of teaching and learning, its theoretical bases and principles. First, we discuss the differences between dialogic learning and other learning conceptions: traditional and significative. Second, we present the seven principles of dialogic learning: *egalitarian dialogue*, *cultural intelligence*, *transformation*, *instrumental dimension*, *creation of meaning*, *solidarity*, and *the equality of differences*.

FROM SUBJECTIVITY TO INTERSUBJECTIVITY

From the industrial society until today, the understanding of learning has been enlivened integrating every time more aspects that surrounds it. The development of different understandings of learning is parallel to the series of changes that have affected all of the social spheres as a result of the shift from the industrial society to the information society. The technological revolution has permeated the very core of companies and we have gone from an industry-based economy to a globalized one based on information. The forms of work are changing: new labor sectors, an increase in the options available, and communication goes beyond the traditional boundaries of space and time. These changes have also transformed the educational and psychological sciences, which are currently evolving toward new perspectives in coherence with the centrality of information and dialogue in today's societies.

Teaching and learning processes are not maintained at the margins of these profound changes. In the information society, learning transcends the individual, as universal communicative skills become essential. From the earlier conceptions of teaching and learning, the focus in developmental psychology and education has moved from looking at the individual in isolation to looking at the subject in relation to their social and cultural context, where "the others," but especially the communicative interaction with "the others," is the main object of interest. In this context, within the psychology perspectives with a dialogic orientation, the communicative conception of teaching and learning emphasizes the importance of coordinating interactions among different educational agents and the learning contexts with the objective of obtaining the maximum results. This process has also determined the disciplines that have been integrated in the study of learning: from pedagogy to psychology and sociology, ending up with the need to recognize all of them. In the process of different understandings of learning, we could identify three basic conceptions in learning: the objectivist conception, the constructivist conception, and the communicative/dialogic conception.

Objectivist Conception

Learning in the objective conception was based on the idea that the students are passive subjects who receive information from a subject agent, the teacher, who possesses expert knowledge on the topic and transmits it. This learning is in consonance with the objectivist conception in psychology, for which reality exists independently of people's perception of it.

Learning is conceived of as the transmission of knowledge, in which the girl or boy's role is to assimilate the information. The teacher possesses the knowledge the student must grasp, the objective reality that must be assimilated by rote. Pedagogy, in this case, places the focus on the teacher as the fundamental element in teaching and learning, given that it is the teacher who has the knowledge to transmit. On the other hand, the psychology of traditional teaching emphasized the importance of the individual characteristics, such as memory, in order to favor an increase of learning, given that this was measured by the quantity of knowledge accumulated. This implies a learning that is fundamentally based on memory, largely absent of meaning, and highly dependent on the message relayed by the teacher.

The tradition of filling up the mind with information is no longer useful in the information society. Today information is available on the Internet, continually updated and much greater in quantity than what the human memory can store. If we want our students to be successful in the information society, we have to focus learning on the development of skills for processing and selecting information. Traditional exams that test the knowledge a person memorized without consulting any resource have lost their utility.

In the objectivist conception, teaching is homogenizing. The same things are taught without taking into account differences in context and culture. It is, therefore, an equality that also produces

inequalities, given that it does not contemplate difference. The theme of multiculturalism would be dealt with from an approach of assimilation. School culture corresponds with the hegemonic culture, making it impossible for girls and boys from minority cultures to feel identified with the school if they do not abandon their ethnic and cultural identity in order to take on the dominant culture interpreted as superior. From this relationship of superiority–inferiority, the rest of the cultures are considered to be inferior, worse, and underdeveloped.

Constructivist Conception

In the eighties, there was a shift from the hegemony of the objectivist conception to the constructivist conception. The idea behind constructivism is that people construct social reality, and this construction is different because the meanings that each person gives to this construction are different. The constructivist conception sees learning as a cognitive process of construction and creation of meaning that takes place between two individuals. This occurs when a student is capable of relating what they already know, their prior knowledge, with what they are taught, the new forms of knowledge. When this happens, it is referred to as significant learning.

According to the constructivist conception, each process of knowledge construction is different for each person. Therefore, degrees in learning are referred to, and processes of learning or “not learning.” Prior knowledge is the factor on which these degrees of learning depend. In this way, maximum learning is made to depend on the quantity and quality of prior knowledge of the student. The different learning results are justified by the level with which the student begins. The constructivist conception of teaching and learning, in consonance with Ausubel’s significant learning does not highlight the objectives that must be attained at each level, the point each girl and boy must reach in learning within a given educational area or stage, but instead it stresses what they already know at the onset of learning. In the constructivist conception, the most decisive element in the teaching program is to know these different points of departure and to attend to them in a diversified way. That is to say, they teach different contents: a higher level for girls and boys who have more prior knowledge, and lower level for those with less prior knowledge.

Therefore, prior knowledge and how the girl or boy has this knowledge structured on a cognitive level, the knowledge schema, are the most important factors in learning. Further on, we will see how Vygotsky explains that teaching directed to levels of cognitive development that have already been reached (prior knowledge) is inefficient from the learning point of view. Teaching that is adapted to the deficits, to a low entry level, is not a form of teaching that provokes an improvement in learning and positively challenges the learner to move forward. The constructivist conception, by centering on the subject who learns, implies a step forward from the oversight in the traditional objectivist conception of learning, which is focused on the teacher as the unique agent of the process. The constructivist conception of teaching and learning recognizes the contribution of the student in the teaching–learning process, but they are seen as individual processes that do not take sufficiently the pedagogical and sociological aspects into account.

Communicative Conception

The communicative conception is grounded in everyone’s capacity for dialogue. It is through dialogue and interaction with others that learning happens. It implies a form of learning that is based on the egalitarian dialogue of girls and boys with the teachers families, all equal, the community, etc., with *validity claims*. That is to say, everyone that interacts with the students has the same objectives of fostering learning; their claims are for truth. In all of these interactions, the aim of the people who relate to the girls and boys is for them to learn and there are no other personal interests whatsoever, such as gaining protagonism, involved in their relationships. From this conception, reality is seen as created by people, who depend on the meanings that they have constructed through interaction. Object reality is reached through the intersubjective process.

Psychologists like Vygotsky, Bruner, and Mead have stressed this idea from the sociocultural perspective and from symbolic interactionism. Freire says that people are dialogic by nature, and tend toward dialogue and relating with others. Chomsky explains how people are gifted with a cognitive structure for language. Habermas, in his theory of communicative action, develops the conception of communicative competency, with which he demonstrates that we are all subjects capable of language and action. Dialogism is part of the very nature of the person, they dialogue with others, with the norms, with themselves, with their emotions, norms and memories. Learning cannot be limited to a mechanism of grasping reality and its assimilation in line with Piaget; instead, it is a process that is much more complex, which includes an ongoing intersubjective dialogue that is later internalized and taken ownership of. In accordance with symbolic interactionism and sociocultural psychology, everything that is individual was first social.

The meanings that are created and the meaning that is produced with respect to school learning depend on the interactions that students have with other persons in different spaces. The most influential factor in learning is the interactions. Therefore, learning from the communicative or dialogic conception is the product of a process of collective construction of meaning through interaction. The interactions are aimed at reaching higher levels of learning. These higher levels of development are the focus of dialogic learning.

In dialogic learning, teachers, families and other adults facilitate dialogue, overcoming the limits of their own cultural borders that only allow them to see others through the lens of their own culture. From the communicative perspective, teachers have to know how to develop interactions with the context and processes of meaning construction that take place within them, emphasizing the egalitarian and the communitarian, in a series of actions in which education is not restricted to the teacher–student relationship but, instead, includes the entire social context in a global and unified activity. If the students learn in the interactions with a variety of adults besides the teacher, their education will have positive benefits with a greater richness of adult–student interactions from the learning point of view. Dialogic learning is valid on any educational level; it can be applied from early childhood education till adult education.

Conception	Objectivist	Constructivist	Communicative
Bases	Reality is independent of the individuals that know it and use it.	Reality is a social construction that depends on the meanings that individuals attribute to it.	Reality is a human construction. Meanings depend on the human interactions.
Example	The paper is paper regardless of how we see it.	The paper is a paper because we see it as an object that is appropriate for writing on.	The paper is paper because we agree to use it to write on.
Learning	Traditional Teaching One learns from the message that is emitted by the teacher.	Significative One learns through relating new knowledge that is incorporated in the cognitive structure on the basis of prior knowledge.	Dialogic One learns through interactions between equals, teachers, family members, friends, etc. who produce egalitarian dialogue.

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Conception	Objectivist	Constructivist	Communicative
			of Teachers, Family Members, and Community
Education	of Teachers The contents transmitted and methodologies used to do it	of Teachers Knowledge of the learning processes of the actors and their form of constructing meanings	Knowledge of the learning processes of individuals and groups through the interactive construction of meanings.
Discipline	Pedagogical orientation that does not sufficiently take psychological and sociological aspects into account	Psychological orientation that does not sufficiently take pedagogical and sociological aspects into account	Interdisciplinary orientation: pedagogical, psychological, sociological, and epistemological
Consequences	The imposition of a homogenous culture generates and reproduces inequalities.	The adaptation of diversity without taking into account the inequality of the context generates an increase of inequalities.	With the transformation of the context, respect for differences is included as one of the dimensions of egalitarian education.

PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGIC LEARNING

In the following, we present seven basic principles that aim to provide a guide for reflection and implementation of the practice of dialogic learning. The principles of dialogic learning are expressed in different ways in each situation. All of them take into account psychological, educational, and social theories, as well as cultural knowledge, feelings, and academic aspects.

Egalitarian Dialogue

Dialogue is egalitarian when the different contributions are considered in terms of the validity of the arguments, instead of being valued on the basis of the position of power of the speaker, or on criteria like the imposition of culturally hegemonic knowledge. The educational process can be understood as a dialogic act. Through egalitarian dialogue students, teachers, family members, and others learn, given that they all construct their interpretations on the basis of arguments made by the others. Each person makes his or her own contributions to the dialogue; this equality approaches the ideal speech act of Habermas. Their relation is, at once, real and ideal. Real because the greater influence of certain voices is a reminder that the conversation is taking place in an unequal context, and ideal because they are on the road toward overcoming these inequalities. Dialogue becomes an instrument for learning. Everyone is capable of language and action as affirmed by Habermas; there is a universal capacity for language as Chomsky contends; and for Vygotsky, mind and society are inseparable—these contributions indicate to us that everyone can participate in dialogue on egalitarian terms, in which each person contributes his or her knowledge and experience to a process in which reaching the best agreement is sought.

Egalitarian dialogue transported to the educational center implies a profound change in the school culture, which is traditionally based in hierarchical relations where teachers determine

what must be learned, how, and when. To reach egalitarian dialogue in the school, educational professionals should overcome certain conceptions of the families and especially those who are nonacademic. Furthermore, families should also be open in relation to the teachers, who have an image of them that distances them from a dialogic relation, an image that reflects institutionalized relations of power between them. Egalitarian dialogue in school is made possible when the community and school interact from bases they share: the maximum learning for girls and boys, and work jointly to reach it. In some schools this is manifested with mixed work commissions (family members, adults from the community, teachers, students) who are dedicated exclusively to working together to attain specific educational, social, and cultural objectives expressed by all of the agents for improving the school.

Cultural Intelligence

In the educational context, theories based on deficit have generated many low expectations with respect to students' capacities, as well as compensatory policies that have not been able to respond to the demand for quality education for all. Dialogic learning is contrary to the idea of "compensation" of deficits. It is about parting from the capacities of the students, their families, the teachers, and all of the people who interact with the boy and girl in order to accelerate his or her learning, especially those boys and girls from disadvantaged contexts.

Certain conceptions of intelligence tend to focus on certain abilities but to ignore others. Academic intelligence has been the most valued by privileged groups, designing standardized intelligence tests in which these groups turned up as intelligent and those who did not belong to them as deficient. An illustrative example is the Weschler intelligence scale, which places a high percentage of girls and boys "below the median," which leads them to receive an education of the minimum and very low results, which is fruit of this label.

Today we know that intelligence is not defined only by the concept of academic intelligence, and many studies (Cattel's fluid and crystallized intelligence, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Sternberg's Triarquic Theory) have presented evidence of it. The concept of cultural intelligence includes academic intelligence and other types of it. The three subareas of cultural intelligence are the following:

- *Academic intelligence*: Which we develop in academic settings and which is not alone in defining the intelligence of a person. In relation to the tests mentioned earlier, these are simply based on measuring what the boy or girl is able to do, but, considering Vygotsky, does not measure what he or she is able to do with the help of others.
- *Practical intelligence*: The differentiation between practical (which is used, and learning in the daily context) and academic intelligence is fruit of more recent research, thanks to the recuperation of the works of Vygotsky and Luria in the field of cultural psychology. One of the most important works about practical intelligence is by Silvia Scribner, who explains how we develop the same mental schema when we work with our minds, a theory that questions Piaget's homogeneity in the description of intellectual evolution.
- *Communicative intelligence*: This intelligence refers to the communicative and other skills that are useful for resolving situations to which a person in solitude would not be able to find a solution only with academic or practical intelligence. With communicative intelligence, strategies for shared resolution are proposed, which are based on communicative action taken on by participants in the learning processes. People can understand each other and act by using our communicative skills for everyone's success. On the basis of the idea that we all have capacities for language, as Chomsky defends, we are gifted with communication and through this the capacity to resolve any kind of situation on a day-to-day basis, and in the case of education, concrete learning situations. In a dialogic relation, a girl might have greater explicative strategies than a teacher to explain to her peers the process of resolving a problem, while she too is consolidating what she already knows or has just learned.

Dialogic learning is based on the recognition of the three types of intelligences in everyone, and the same capacities for participating in an egalitarian dialogue. Academic intelligence is only a consequence of school experience. In today's information society, increasingly, cultural and communicative intelligence take precedence over the academic. Dialogic learning promotes the development of these three types of intelligence, but, by parting from the recognition of the three, it does not obstruct anyone's participation in the teaching and learning processes in school.

Transformation

All of the educational projects that pursue transformation need utopia. Dialogic learning requires high expectations from all those involved in the interactive learning processes, trust in all of the students, and an orientation toward maximum results because without all these elements it is impossible to have teaching that is directed toward transformation of the entry levels. The transformative content that is proposed by this learning conception, in coherence with the rest of the principles, advocates for transformation of reality instead of adaptation to it. We are beings of transformation and not accommodation as Freire said.

In dialogic learning transformation transcends the classroom and the school, reaching the very context. The schools have to be another space in which students increase their interactions; that is why schools should open their doors to the whole community so that this transformation can be extendable. At the same time, the learning experience is extended for all participants; education for family members becomes a key element. In that moment family members and boys and girls share a learning space in the home that until then did not exist, transforming the boys' and girls' reference points.

Instrumental Dimension

Too often curricular contents have been adapted to the boys' and girls' context, parting from the idea of the importance of prior knowledge, instead of offering the necessary learning contents for them to move beyond their initial points. This curricular adaptation has been manifested in placing boys and girls from underprivileged contexts in groups, on levels, where the instrumental learning required for the information society is not guaranteed. This ends up making these schools parts of a system that instead of breaking down social exclusion contributes to reproduce it.

Dialogic learning is contrary to any reduction of learning, as many times is wrongly understood. Dialogue serves to increase and improve instrumental knowledge acquisition. The instrumental dimension ensures that dialogue is used for learning everything that is needed to live with dignity in the information society. In this way, prioritizing the learning of values to the detriment of instrumental learning is avoided, which was the fruit of proposals from decades past like the "pedagogy of happiness."

The effects on boys' and girls' academic self-concept when working in inclusionary situations, where the maximum learning is offered, is to increase their expectations in their capacities. School education must promote the instrumental dimension of learning for all boys and girls. There are many activities and initiatives that schools can adopt to guarantee this. One way is by opening learning spaces in the school beyond the school hours for its use and management by the community, where adults interact with boys and girls for learning comprehension (tutored libraries), for improving the use of ICTs (authorized digital rooms), etc. Dialogic learning is also produced in these spaces. Similarly, education of family members has an important influence on improving the instrumental learning of boys and girls.

Creation of Meaning

The danger of the absence of creation of meaning is extended to many spheres of our lives, beyond the school, and related with the risk and the plurality of options that characterizes our societies. Meaning resurges when people become protagonists of their own existence, or when they participate in joint projects through which they can transform their lives and society. The educational projects that generate the most motivation in today's information society are those that are promoting the creation of meaning. Meaning arises when interaction between people is guided by them, and when they are directly involved in the resolution of concrete problems or situations.

We must take into account that meaning is created in family members and students when the educational center offers learning that will make possible for them to be successful. In this sense, educational projects based on dialogic learning foster the creation of meaning in all educational agents. In terms of teaching-learning processes in the classroom, the student creates meaning in learning when he or she feels like they are learning something that is socially valued. The creation of meaning is related with motivation, but does not depend on it. The creation of meaning also increases motivation. In any case, motivation to bring meaning to learning does not depend on intraindividual factors, but instead it is a fundamentally social process. Motivation, just like meaning, is created in social interaction. This perspective dismisses the conceptions that attribute a lack of motivation in learning to the student, and justify low learning, pointing to little motivation and interest.

Solidarity

Dialogic learning is inclusionary and solidarist. Any educational project that aims to be egalitarian and to offer quality education must be based on solidarity. This solidarity does not only have to be present between boys and girls, but, especially between teachers toward boys and girls. Solidarity is based on offering the same learning and results to all students, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background. The objective of maximum learning for all girls and boys, just like we would want for our own children or loved ones, means solidarity. This objective will not be attained in solitude, but in solidarity with the other agents that interact with the boys and girls. For this it is necessary to be grounded in the idea of not excluding any boy or girl from the classroom, or placing them in groups by level. Solidarity signifies work with all boys and girls within the classroom, attaining successful learning for all.

Solidarity ensures shared values, for which discourses on coexistence and pacifism are lived as something coherent with what is lived at home, the street, school and in the classroom. In integrated groups where students with different backgrounds and levels receive the same opportunities and instrumental learning is ensured for all, values like solidarity and respect for diversity, on the one hand, and social skills like teamwork, initiative, self-esteem, and even communicative skills, on the other, are more easily attained.

Equality of Differences

Beyond a homogenizing equality and the defense of diversity without contemplating equity among people, education based on the equality of differences is oriented toward real equality, where everyone has a place on egalitarian terms but from a respect for their differences. For people from the most excluded collectives, and disadvantaged situations with respect to other groups, it is not enough to have the same resources as their peers, or to offer them education "that

compensates” their deficits; they need more than the rest, they need to accelerate their learning in order to be able to attain the same learning their peers with more advantaged personal situations have.

The idea that we are different has always existed and is tied in education to the need for different learning. But the reality that we are fundamentally equal does not mean we need homogenizing education, but instead respect for diversity with the pursuit for the same results. Dialogic learning takes into account diversity and equality. Beyond a homogenizing equality that is based on assimilation of ethnic minorities and cultural groups within the dominant model, and a defense of diversity that does not contemplate equity between people, the egalitarian education considering differences is oriented toward real equality, where everyone has the same right to live in a different way.

DIALOGIC LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Dialogic learning can be found in educational practices for all ages, and academic levels. An example of the ways that dialogic learning is carried out in educational practice is through *interactive groups*, which are reduced and heterogeneous groups of students, dynamized by a volunteer. In these groups the students help each other in the joint resolution of activities parting from the premise that everyone has the capacities for resolving the activity. There are no differences between who knows more or less on that topic. As a result of this intersubjective dialogue the learning results are better, in terms of elaboration and because all of the students learn. Egalitarian and reflexive dialogue develops capacities with more depth than the usual forms of teaching. When a student explains to another how to resolve an activity, he or she reinforces what they know and consolidates it, at the same time as contributing to complex cognitive processes, strategies, and skills, which make understanding possible. The organization of classrooms in interactive groups promotes students to help each other in learning, and specific and individualized follow-up is attained for each learner. *Interactive groups* in the classroom favor instrumental learning in all participants.

In contrast to segregationist measures that separate learners by their levels such as tracking or special education units, it is important to point out the heterogeneity present in this practice. This is an essential factor, since the interactions that improve instrumental learning are the interactions that are produced through heterogeneity. *Interactive groups* augment instrumental learning in an environment of solidarity where everyone learns. All of the entry learning levels benefit from this form of learning.

Dialogic learning can be a way to attend to the new educational demands generated in the information society. Traditional proposals of teaching and learning centered on the boy or girl are no longer useful and do not promote equality of results in today’s classroom. Dialogic learning is a communicative and interactionist alternative to reaching egalitarian education by means of *egalitarian dialogue* between all educational agents, *transformation* of the context and learning, the recognition of *cultural intelligence*, the *creation of meaning* through interaction, by prioritizing the *instrumental dimension* of learning along with *solidarity*, from the *equality of differences*; in this way success is possible regardless of any cultural or socioeconomic difference.

TERMS FOR READERS

Intersubjective dialogue—It refers to interaction oriented to reaching consensus and mutual agreement that takes place among people who, despite being different, agree to the aims and conditions of the interaction that make it possible to consider each other on equal terms.

Maximum learning—It refers to the provision of a high quality of learning that prepares each learner to face the challenges posed by the current society. This means that he or she will be prepared to access higher education or any job that he or she decides. It can be understood as the learning that provides the maximum opportunities to everybody.

Power relations—Those direct or indirect interactions in which, given an existing individual or structural inequality, the person or group holding the privileged position takes advantage of in order to impose their perspective. In power relations, interactions are based on the force of the power attributed to the privileged position, and not the force of the arguments themselves.

Validity claim—A term used by Habermas to refer to the situation of dialogue in which agreements are reached on the basis of the force of the arguments used by the speaker rather than the status of the position they hold.

SUGGESTED READING

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