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La Tertulia: A Dialogic Model of Adult Basic Education in the New Information Age

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Abstract: *In the new information age dialogue and dialogic projects are increasingly becoming a social requirement. La Tertulia Literaria is a learning experience in which adults with non-academic background read Joyce, among other classics, crossing cultural barriers and transforming the horizons of their lives and environments.*

Participants' Experience in *La Tertulia*

"I was illiterate until I turned 40. Then, when winds of change came for the common people, I was eager to learn to read and write, to be able to read all the authors I had heard people talking about. Then, I became so keen on reading that I have already read all the Spanish poets and many foreign ones, and I am very proud of this reading, because I have come to read the Quixote, by Cervantes, who I consider to be the master of masters."

These words were spoken by Juan, a participant in *La Tertulia Literaria*,¹ which is a type of reading circle held in several schools for adults in Spain. These reading circles target adult literacy learners with no academic background (that is, those who attend adult basic education) and they focus on reading classic literature. Through this experience, adults who have never read a book come to read, discuss, and enjoy classic books by authors such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Émile Zola, and Federico García Lorca.

La Tertulia Literaria promotes an exceptional learning process for adult literacy learners. Usually, low literate, working-class people have been excluded from the great written works, although many of these works actually talk about the lives of common people. In *La Tertulia*, however, many participants have had the opportunity to demonstrate that they not only can read the classics, but they also like to do it. Thus, adult learners like Juan have learned to read and write motivated by reading the classics and participating in the discussions with the group, rather than reading with more traditional materials and activities adapted to low literate adult learners.

A woman who takes part in *La Tertulia* told us

that the first time her son her reading a book he said, "Mama, how come you are reading *this* book?". She had just started attending the literary circle and that book was *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. People with a college degree do not think that popular people can participate of the "high culture" they have access to, and that is why this mother had never dreamed she would be able to reach such literature works until she met people like her in this literary circle.

La Tertulia Literaria is defined by three main characteristics: a) the program targets adult learners with low literacy skills, b) the readings are universal literature classics, and c) the process is based on dialogic learning. In this way, *La Tertulia Literaria* and its approach to learning challenges many assumptions held in the field of adult literacy.

La Tertulia Literaria is an example of a program in which adults who begin with limited reading skills demonstrate that they do not have limited knowledge or intellectual capacity for learning, reflection, and discussion. In this program adults also demonstrate they are highly motivated to accessing domains often considered to be "for the educated" or "for the elite." By participating in this reading circle, many adult learners have become literate and voracious readers of the classics. In addition, some participants told us that they started voicing their opinions and becoming more active in domains of their lives other than education, thus experiencing a wider transformation.

Dialogic learning transform the relationships among people and between them and their environments (Flecha, 2000). Many depart from excluding situations, as working class, low schooled and/or women, and many end up doing profound

changes in their family, work, and personal relationships. In *La Tertulia*, they do not subscribe to the idea that “we live in a oppressing system that determines our lives”, an idea that do not allow to dream in the possibility of changing their lives. Instead, they find new meanings through sharing words. Today, some participants have even become leaders in community organizations or in social movements. In this sense, a member of FACEPA, the Spanish federation of participants’ associations, told us:

“Some of us who learned to read in La Tertulia are now involved in cultural organizations, struggling for an education based on democratic and egalitarian values. The concern about social and educational issues has increased in our lives because we have recognized the role of education and the importance in the process of personal and social development.”

Dialogic Learning Model in a Changing Society

La Tertulia represents a clear example of a dialogic learning model. Dialogic learning is not a new concept but it is newly more important for the field of adult education. Recent societal changes are increasing the presence and need for dialogue and, as a result, dialogic pedagogies are becoming key in the learning experience of those adults who have been historically excluded from education and culture.

At the doors of the twenty-first century, most industrialized countries are witnessing many changes in how society is organized and how people function in it. Theories and analyses about these changes are suggesting that the former organization of the industrial society, highly bureaucratized and controlled by traditional authorities, is disappearing and giving rise to an information society, with increased pluralism, flexibility, and risk (Beck, 1992; Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1994; Habermas, 1998). Within the framework of this new society, dialogue is increasingly part of many people’s reality, as we need to discuss issues and come to decisions with the people with whom we share our lives or our communities. For example, in the personal arena, it is no longer clear “whether one should get married or live together, whether one should raise a child inside or outside the family, . . . or whether one should do any of those things before, after or while concentrating on one’s career” (Beck & Beck-

Gernsheim, 1995, p.15). These decisions require true communication among people who come to agreements in their relationships through dialogue. Moreover, within the communities, citizens are demanding to see their voices represented in decision-making bodies. Consider, for example, members of a parents’ association running for the first time in school board elections in central Harlem, NY, or an adult learners’ federation presenting a participants’ Bill of Rights for discussion at a national parliament in Spain.

In the new information society we are experiencing many changes that affect education, and it is necessary to address these changes with new solutions. In this paper we argue that new solutions are possible only through a process which disallows the imposition of already held beliefs and which allows for open, equal dialogue between all the participants in a given social situation. One of the consequences of the current dialogic tendency in society is a dialogic turn within social and educational sciences (Beck, 1992; Freire, 1997, 1998; Habermas, 1984), which are increasingly proposing transformative solutions grounded in communication and intersubjectivity. The latest theoretical developments go beyond former approaches that are no longer viable to struggle against current social and cultural inequality in the new information age.

Education in the New Information Age

The information age is characterized by the technological revolution of communication and media in a historical moment in which capitalism is restructured by means of globalization and increased flexibility of society. The process of social dualization is becoming more polarized, with a widening gap between those who have access and control over the networks (i.e. the wealthier minority) and those excluded from them (i.e. the poorer majority). Within this framework, education is becoming a key as it provides knowledge and tools that help to access these networks and flows of information (Flecha, 1999). Thus, adult education is increasingly a key for many people to tear down walls that exclude them from social participation.

Although the information age provokes new marginalization and exclusion at the global level, the rise of a *network society* opens new possibilities for dialogue between people and for social transformation. Castells (1996) contends that this society is “increasingly structured around a bipolar opposi-

tion between the Net and the Self” (p. 3) because, with the new technology and communication means, individuals can contact each other and construct alternative projects outside the control and mediation of the institutions. Thus, social networks are rising and overcoming former social hierarchies.

Globalization, detraditionalization, and increased flexibility of society have created situations and spaces in which individuals and groups need to make decisions in their lifeworlds and/or with the systems. While society pushes us to individually become autonomous, it also allows us to go through this process in communication with others, on the basis of social solidarity, orienting our actions towards equality and democracy. The new information age comes along with new challenges and requirements that can only ensure a transformative and egalitarian process if they are addressed dialogically. In fact, current social analyses are showing that people are already choosing dialogue in many spheres of our social lives. People are demanding and choosing dialogic procedures in the political arena, in personal life, within social movements and civic organizations, and even within the organizational structure of large corporations. New social solutions, then, are attending to be dialogic.

As part of the growing dialogic tendency, the field of adult education is also witnessing a growing demand for participatory approaches, not just from practitioners but also from participants (Sánchez Aroca, 1999). As a result of this demand, more schools have student councils and student representatives on their boards; more schools include former students and people from the community as tutors and volunteers who collaboratively teach their peers; communication and association between diverse participants’ movements has increased; and members of cultural centers and civic organizations search for grants to create their own educational programs in order to address the needs of the people in their communities. Dialogue, therefore, and its implications for both educational politics and the teaching-learning process, is a fact to be taken very seriously today.

Dialogic Learning in *La Tertulia*

Given that increased dialogue is part of the current social landscape in Western societies, we argue that the field of adult education needs to provide answers to people’s changing lives, and address their

current educational requirements according to this dialogic tendency. In fact, many adult educators are already aware of such a mission. Proposals such as the Freirean pedagogy have promoted dialogic theory and practice for many years, and we could even say that, within the larger field of education, they were the first to link dialogic learning and rigorous teaching with democratic participation and social justice. Answering to new social challenges, it is today’s educators’ ethical duty (Freire, 1998) to continue fostering dialogic pedagogies and to announce that they are not a project from the past but the most updated project, given current societal changes. Furthermore, it is also an educators’ task to counter postmodern discourses that deny the possibility of learning under such dialogic principles and which limit transformative high quality adult learning and spread fatalism in our field (Freire, 1997).

La Tertulia is a pedagogical model that promotes literacy development on the basis of dialogic learning principles. In the book *Sharing Words, Theory and Practice of Dialogic Learning*, Ramón Flecha (2000) explains the dialogic learning process that takes place in this literary circle, drawing from both his personal experience in *La Tertulia* and a communicative critical theory approach. In this way, and by narrating participants’ stories, he explains dialogic learning in seven principles: *egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning, solidarity, and equality of differences*. We could summarize Flecha’s principles of dialogic learning as follows:

1. *Egalitarian dialogue*: All the contributions must be equally listened and considered. No opinion can be imposed as the only possible one, it is not important whether it comes from a person who has been attending *La Tertulia* for a long time or who just joined the group.

2. *Cultural intelligence*: Everybody has cultural intelligence, regardless of their educational or cultural background. All the participants have learned many things in very different ways and their knowledge and abilities can be transferred from one context to another. Everybody is able to participate in an egalitarian dialogue and to expand their learning through communication along their lifespan.

3. *Transformation*: Learning through egalitarian dialogue has led to transformations in the lives of many people. Participants' self esteem has changed and so have their relationships with others. By reading, dialoguing and reflecting together they overcome barriers that have been traditionally excluding them from education and social participation.

4. *Instrumental dimension*: When participants read and comment a book, they also talk about the history and social conditions of that period. Many ask their relatives or look up information in the encyclopedia to share it afterwards with the rest of the group. Unlike common held assumptions, dialogism increases the learning of academic and instrumental knowledge and abilities.

5. *Creation of meaning*: The loss of meaning prognosticated by Weber can be overcome. Although the spread feeling that we live in a system that determines our lives, participants in *La Tertulia* have demonstrated that through dialogic learning, the meaning arises because people relate to each other, decide together what they want to learn, and what they want to research when participants by themselves decide what they want to investigate and to learn.

6. *Solidarity*: *La Tertulia* is open to everybody and there are no economic or academic barriers to be able to participate in it. There are even participants who just learned to read. The group always give priority to the participation of people with the lower educational levels. In this way, a cooperative learning experience among all the participants is reached. If we believe in egalitarian educational practices, they can only be based on solidaritarian relationships that promote solidarity.

7. *Equality of differences*: All the participants in *La Tertulia* are equal and different. One of the most important principles is the equality among all the people, which means that everybody has the right to live differently.

Conclusion

Dialogic learning is increasingly more important in the new information age, and particularly important to promote education to those people traditionally excluded. For this reason, the experience of *La Tertulia Literaria*, is now becoming known and spreading across adult learning and cultural centers. It has demonstrated to be not only a way to promote reading but also, by breaking with cultural barriers

of the elite, a way to open possibilities for adult learners to further their education and transform their lives and their communities.

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ⁱ The Spanish word "tertulia" means a group of people gathering together to have a conversation. Traditionally, every evening, people used to grab a chair from their home and gather with other people in the street. They used to talk about their journeys, about other people, to tell stories, and discuss life. Now, many people do the same but in cafeterias or in the community center. *Tertulias* have always been popular among the common

people. *La Tertulia Literaria* is thus a group of non-academic people gathering around issues of literature, which could be translated by “literary circle”. However, in this paper, we will keep the Spanish term “*tertulia literaria*” because, on the one hand, it refers to the Spanish gathering tradition in popular culture, and on the other hand, unlike many literary circles held by scholars or intellectuals, *La Tertulia Literaria* is a literary circle where common people discuss about literature.