Effectiveness in dialogic language use despite deviations

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Abstract:

In the new learning economy “ways of doing and being” have to come under scrutiny, especially in the context of teacher education. The instructor of the course in question here, namely a French as a second language teacher preparation course for the secondary level, used group interactions to develop students’ awareness of professional experience as linked to theoretical readings. We report here the results of an analysis of group notes following these discussions around the weekly assigned readings. These show overall effectiveness in getting students to gain improved professional judgment.

1. Introduction

Damen (1987) insightfully noted that “cultures and cultural patterns change. It is more important to learn how to learn a culture or adapt to these changes than to learn the ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ of the moment” (p. 88). She continues to describe how reducing cultural content in the classroom makes space for important culture-general issues, such as the need for empathy and understanding the nature of culture (Damen). Recognizing these significant limitations associated with the transmission of culture as fact, supports the theory of cross-cultural awareness. “The reality that culture as content or product cannot ever be adequately ‘covered’ is important to recognize; acceptance of that reality can free educators to focus on fostering understanding of the cultural dimension of thought, values, and communication” (Knutson, 1996, p. 12). Other learning content can come under scrutiny within the same line of thinking.

Cultures of organizational learning are embedded in complex systems. It boils down to meeting the challenge of finding ways to create the desired results which today consists of enabling our students to cope in unanticipated unpredictable future situations. Thus, in our increasingly complex world, ways of learning have to be re-visited. In order to initiate both large and small changes to realize a new vision, often people from very diverse backgrounds and a wide spread of skills are brought together. The question of change management becomes crucial if change is meant to be sustaining and transformational and for this to happen, learning is required.

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In the past it was believed that people had to come together, that the pressures applied caused a streamlining ending-up in a consensus and problem solving was the result, much along the lines of evolution. Some researchers, in particular Deacon (1997), tend to believe that divergent thinking may have aided in our evolutionary process. The author suggests that a very generalized kind of relaxed selection might have occurred when a move into a new environment free of competitors took place and caused a process of dedifferentiation which allowed behavioural complexity. When people of very diverse backgrounds are placed together we might assume that that type of behavioural complexity is present. In such contexts new learning both at personal and emotional levels has to take place.

“Distributed knowledge” is becoming an important concept in education today. In our increasingly complex world, ways of learning have to be re-visited. To communicate serious ideas in learning contexts, one needs to be ready to deal with ‘new truths’ and new possibilities within the globalizing of the learning economy. Cultures of organizational learning are embedded in complex systems. It boils down to meeting the challenge of finding ways to create the desired results, however today this notion has to be re-examined as there are many cross-cultural dialogues taking place with different people holding different perspectives and diverse ways at looking at “truths” be it different ways of solving mathematical problems, or looking at philosophical problems from the perspectives of different relied upon learned persons and wise people. It is important to realize that there will be new learning with new ‘kinds of people’ and according to Gee (2002) people will have to see themselves as a flexibly rearrange-able portfolio of the skills, experiences and achievements they have acquired through ‘project space’ (p.47).

In North America group work has been emphasized in schools in the past and still prevails in many contexts. However, new directions, as for instance those stemming from the Conference Board of Canada, a decision making body entrusted in giving direction for the future of Canadians, point to the importance of developing individual responsibility. To support this decision there is a parallel emphasis on the importance of increasing intra-personal intelligence, one of several intelligences listed by Gardner in his multiple intelligences model. Needless to say that this increased strength in personal responsibility will serve people well when engaging in cross-cultural dialogue. The question that needs to be examined is how interaction works when people with more individualized ways of thinking and various discipline specialty backgrounds come together in problem solving, when in addition they come from different cultural and language backgrounds.

In light of these views important decisions have to be made by teachers when communicating with the ‘new kinds of persons’, future students in schools will be. An emphasis on intra-personal intelligence enhancement appears to be able to serve education well in light of the push for more autonomous learning and lifelong learning, two important aspects on education agendas across the globe.

2. Context

Young people who are at university today when they were in secondary institutions built relationships, with people and with knowledge, in new ways, and different ways of being have emerged, which require new alignments for interactions. These interactions as mentioned earlier are not contained within given groups but happen with internet connections across very different people with diverse ways of “thinking and doing”. There is a belief among professionals that we need to look at the products of such interactions because they may contain different views and new avenues for thinking.

Gee (2002: 43) talks about networks and networking ‘distributed systems’. Social class works to create characteristic ‘kinds of people’ in characteristic ‘worlds’. The issue here is to make people cross-functional in translational sort of ways. This was attempted in a course in education for future teachers. The need is felt to change the shape of Higher Education by setting up a new logic which is an endeavour by the instructor in the course under scrutiny.

In the past teaching activities were devised in courses, even within the discovery approach to teaching, to direct to a certain result of group think, for the students to uncover the “truth” held by the educator, or more specifically what the educator was aiming to have students learn.

In the perspective adopted here the idea is to change students’ mindsets and beliefs in the hope that they will learn to make better professional judgments when they teach. By doing so, we also aim at shaping the notion of globalization to a more humane understanding. Moving away from the business oriented understanding corresponding to, power domination (whereas freedom would be equated
to how much power one has gained), uncertain harmony (that is not pre-planned in terms of a system designed to achieve it but rather becoming a possible result of what planning was carried out, in other words not guaranteed), and denial of personal attention (people becoming “objects” in the system). We believe in directing attention to the globalizing learning economy with at the centre, innovation or creativity (with the main emphasis on transforming new ideas or turning ideas on their heads), feelings and sensibility (with attention paid to everyone) and the importance of community (where diversity and inclusiveness are practiced for the embitterment of all concerned) (Archibugi & Lundvall, 2006).

In contexts of contacts among intercultural diverse persons with also different backgrounds, as secondary teachers in Ontario, Canada need to be specialized in two subject disciplines, we were in a unique situation in this study that allowed people to learn from each other through different subject matter perspectives and ways of problem solving and through their diverse cultural and linguistic ways as well as through their respective personal lenses. It has to be acknowledged that people fit differently because of the way they orient themselves to and in the world. Therefore the ability to judge takes on major importance in meaning making processes.

From system’s theory (Luhmann, 1984) we retain important notions around communication and meaning-making, especially its operation through the selection of a limited amount of information for the purpose of reducing complexity. However keeping in mind Luhmann’s (1984) research on social systems we can feel assured that new systems can be created if need be without anything being lost. We also need to keep in mind that each group in our study functions like a system with a distinctive identity that is constantly reproduced in its communication and depends on what is considered meaningful and what is not.

Along the same line of thinking we considered the “system” to emerge from an over-complex environment and using and relying on resources from that environment, in our case students in a given group came from various subject specialties (their environment) and used in the new group situation resources they were familiar with from that environment.

Additional considerations that constituted underlying threads are mentioned below.

For the sake of an economy of means the control of internal energy is required if one is to expect significant results. A widening of vision requires getting rid of mind-sets and old habits of mind. In addition, one person’s views can no longer be accepted as a dominant one as for a group to fully subscribe to change, everyone present has to feel that his or her views are also represented. This entails making dialogue transformational and yet enabling all the members of a given group to be included, aware of personal positioning as well as possibilities for re-alignment keeping in mind the global perspective of all facets, facing “new truths” and new possibilities.

Change will be noted at the level of aptitudes developed, new capacities or abilities, new awareness raising and more sensitivity. All that will bring about new attitudes and beliefs. The author also suggests to measure change by persons’ abilities to carry out new things they were unable to do before. A greater sensitivity and a wider openness to things or deeper abilities for understanding, will all allow for more original questioning to take place and added perspectives. Everything that will stem from this is intended to foster a confident attitude to the future, a new look on the environment and ways of living.

When considering a group from across different scientific and other contexts in an interdisciplinary sense and hoping to create a culture of learning, it is necessary to have all involved reflect upon the ideas they held that are stemming from their beliefs, pre-ordained group notions and group values. In cultural studies researchers would allude to one’s history and putting on new lenses and in addition looking at what would also otherwise be possible. All these factors could also come into play in cross-disciplinary dialogue and interactions in the disciplines’ sub-cultures. Only an idea new to all involved will act as a catalyst for the flow of energies. However such a group would not necessarily be most effective unless they are provided with theories, methods and tools that are available to them in the public domain. This way the required time to arrive at results will be reduced according to Senge (1994).

Based on the efficiency of research and information sharing networks, in addition innovative infrastructures also have to be found. This is because structures impact energy, the time factor, financial considerations, concentration and attention span as well as other necessary resources.

The domain of change allows a deep learning cycle. The changes that emerge can be found at the level of aptitudes and capacities, connected to new awareness-raising, to increased sensitivity and will bring about new attitudes and beliefs.

All these notions provide an understanding of the elements at work in our observational study.
3. Description

The participants were fifth year university students in an education course in Ontario, Canada, for future teachers of French as a second language in secondary schools during the 2008/2009 academic year. In addition to courses at the Faculty of Education these students also participate in a number of practical school placements to develop their professional experience.

Canada is a bilingual country officially and this course was given in French, the language of instruction for these future teachers who were native speakers of English.

The problem is that fixing goals is easy but redefining goals in light of different people’s needs requires more basic social changes.

The cumulative work conducted throughout the course was around improving communication, looking at a variety of aspects in formative ways, first through individual reaction papers then followed by a group compendium of essential aspects. Altogether there were one hundred participations and 17 group products were analyzed. These ranged from one to two pages of summary notes per group session.

The idea is to create an environment that is appealing to people so that they participate, if one intends to create changes that will last. Collaborative work was introduced in the university course under scrutiny in an attempt to uncover what the learning organization framework could bring to students with a specialized background in many different disciplines.

Not only did the students come from diverse disciplines but also from multilingual multicultural contexts.

The students were assigned weekly theoretical readings in French ranging between 20 and 30 pages, and were required to bring to class their reading notes so as to continue examining the readings during group discussions in class. Students were grouped randomly in groups of five to seven persons. Students were expected to further refine their thinking when contrasted with the thinking of the other group members, the results of which they were asked to present in a compounded form for the group’s written summary. After a 20 minute discussion they were to write down the main thoughts arrived at, stemming from their discussion as a “group product”. These group products were analyzed. The objective was to measure if complex dialogue, based on the interplay of theoretical readings, professional field experiences and specialized subject matter cultures, enhances group outcomes in professional learning.

Group participation varied over time as students were free to join whatever group they wanted to. No names were placed on the group summary papers so as to maintain participants’ anonymity.

4. Analysis

Papers were numbered and each line was numbered as well, so for example P12, 1-3 refers to Paper 12 lines 1 to 3. Emerging themes were colour coded.

We identified a number of different ways knowledge was treated in different group settings.

1. In the most unusual examples, text from the theoretical book was directly transferred onto the final group summary. This was observed in five papers, P2, 7-8 Intonation and pronunciation cannot really be learned unless one is totally immersed in the language; P5, 9-10 One needs to understand how syllables are detached. It is necessary to anticipate how to articulate the vowel sound; P9, 1-2 It is of utmost importance to make learners like the language and to make them want to learn the language; P11, 13-17 If corrections are made in a positive climate with systematic repetition, the corrections might entail some improvement; P12, 1-3 Learners can engage in functional communicative activities and in social interactions (my translation).

Students were clearly not able to express these sentences in their own words or found the wording in the text to better correspond to the meanings to be conveyed. They might also have copied sentences they had jotted down in their personal reaction papers.

2. We observed a difference in treatment in the contents, with some groups focusing more on practical aspects while others were reflective in a theoretical sense. Students understood the importance of social context in communication (Austin, 1962). This is reported in twelve papers. It appeared in most papers as a direct statement for directing behaviour as in the following example, P17, 1-2 Let’s observe! It is important to observe the first language
in its social context, or was presented in a contextualized approach to language learning, example P1, 4-5

Knowledge about the given culture is as important as knowing the language (my translation).

3. The ability to contextualize skills and knowledge with experience of the world was considered as necessary in nine papers. In some cases emphasis was placed on prior knowledge, for example in P14, 5-10 The reader has to have sufficient knowledge of the world or of the topic covered before being able to decode a text. In addition in two papers mention is made of the need of authentic contexts for language use. For example in P16, 11-12 The practiced activities have to be used in real life contexts (my translation).

4. That the integration of knowledge has to be experienced is a theme that appeared in seven papers. The participants believe in the integration of different contents. It is interesting that they would have internalized just what the purpose of the activity was, i.e. working on a coming together of minds or “joined intentionality” (Olson, 2003) to arrive at a solution acceptable by all. Yet the different examples show different perspectives coming into play.

P1, 11-13 Show the integrated lessons…find a way to put everything together (meaning including listening, speaking, reading and writing) in this case the students acknowledge that it is desirable and that effort is required. The following example, P16, 1-3 Place a lot of importance on developing listening comprehension, refers more specifically to one’s ability to make sense of things which needs to be developed in order to be able to integrate knowledge. The next example specifically refers to the need to practice skills, P16, 9-12 There exists a close tie between the communication process and the capacity to handle communicative items. (my translation). Coming from a slightly different perspective, in four papers specific advice is given as how to achieve this integration of knowledge. In the two following examples students are saying that mostly separate practice is needed until the knowledge becomes internalized, P2, 17-18 The text has to be worked on repeatedly until students remember the correct forms used, and from a slightly different perspective, P4, 2 Practice can lead to automaticity (my translation).

5. Having access to outside knowledge (besides contents tied to the course) is mentioned as a way to allow for differentiation in seven papers. Mention is made of dictionaries (P4, 6), a variety of books to read (P14, 4.) and interacting with real specialists in their environment (P13, 1-7).

6. Ability to self-correct or take time to be reflexive and recheck data comes up in five papers. In the example that follows mention is made of a lack of vocabulary to make sense of explanations and the suggestion is to try to mediate using one’s mother-tongue, P11, 1-4 Second language learners do not have enough vocabulary to be functional in many situations, so they use their first language for support. (my translation) An example on how to mediate through review and repetition is given next, P11, 14-17 If corrections are made in a positive climate with systematic repetition, the corrections might entail some improvement. (my translation) Another suggested solution is to encourage people to be reflective and self-correct, P3, 17 Encourage self-correction. (my translation).

7. Although the intent was to arrive at meaning making through collaboration, this theme only came up in three papers. However we have to point out that the design of the activity was ‘collaborative work’, therefore this notion was somewhat ‘embodied’ in the participants, among who only three groups showed a distance from the actual involvement within the group. The examples however show that students understand that meaning-making is a collaborative act among the speakers involved, P14, 11-14 Comprehension corresponds to interlocutor’s collaboration (my translation).

8. Time should not be limited for meaning-making, either when reading, for example, P16, 6-8 Do not limit the time to carry out a reading comprehension activity or during interaction, P17, 12-14 Pauses are useful to get one’s mind organized, to reflect. (my translation). These two examples point to the recognition of different levels of ability and background knowledge, thus acknowledging differences in levels of knowledge and also give an indication of the willingness to be patient.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Overall the students demonstrated surprising effectiveness at pulling together main elements for discussion, evidence that the desired changes in the students’ beliefs towards more openness and understanding had taken place in all cases although in varying degrees. Results also show a “coming together of minds” (Olson, 2003) over time and increases in levels of ability to make sound professional judgments. It appears that there was a gain in understanding of how different cultures across academic subjects equip them with new ways to make meaning.
However we wondered if some of the students who did not use their own words for the group product were experiencing a lack of clear deep understanding, because of having to work in a language other than their mother-tongue. As is often the case in second language use, students remain at surface levels of understanding. In addition, as was the case of a number of other students it appeared that they tried to cover-up their inability to synthesize. To draw meaningful conclusions based on discussions of theoretical readings requires a good understanding of the concepts presented plus a good grasp of the language to be used to convey the thinking arrived at in simple comprehensible terms. This result showing a lack of translational strategy was unexpected of students who supposedly had taken between three and five university courses in French with a prior exposure to the language during their secondary studies.

This would lead to caution people against decision making among people will lesser abilities to conceptualize and verbalize in a second/foreign language. Having mastered discursive complexity in the other language is necessary. This also has implications for the selection of students aspiring at becoming second language teachers in schools.

The need to assess the functional level in the language is obvious with particular attention to be paid to the clarity of expression as indeed someone might sound fluent in the language and only possess a muddled level of operation in language use.

Another question has to be raised regarding the practice in summarizing ideas. This is indeed a complex exercise in any language and needs to be practiced, especially in Higher Education. Educated persons need to gain practice in economy of words showing full understanding of a reading or a listening activity and be able to make clear summaries, not just selecting a few key sentences to quote, which is no guarantee that full understanding took place.

These are indeed questions to be examined when educating future teachers.

Another important observation was made regarding persons lacking ability in terms of self-assuredness in group discussions. Was this due to a need for intra-personal intelligence development, or for leadership training? All in all, student ability to work in groups showed open personalities and willingness to negotiate. One could in addition recommend selecting future teachers, not based necessarily on task-success but by measuring different criteria to recognize desirable features in these persons by observing them during problem solving, for example, to identify an orientation towards recognizing a re-alignment of knowledge.

Lundvall (2002) believes that people in the new knowledge economy will be more learning oriented and the market will become change-oriented. In addition it is believed that there will be further accelerated innovation and change.

Fowler (2006, p.129) believes that “the aims of knowledge have to do with understanding and interpretation - and not with issues of control or the balance of power between those in dialogue”.

Gadamer states that no hermeneutic narrative model is ideal, no model is free from challenges, and no model should be used as a sort of panacea to achieving greater understanding in intercultural learning environments. However, if we are willing to acknowledge that we live in a pluralistic society that is inherently subject to re-interpretation and the potential for misunderstanding, we may be better equipped to achieve a higher degree of learning where intercultural hermeneutic enterprise is concerned.

Despite the many attempts to improve current workplace and as well learning situations to come to a better understanding, one should keep in mind some basic considerations about language as expressed by Lacan (in Miller, 1975 [1929]). He saw two levels of communication in human speech, the one having to do with recognition of the other in which words tie speakers to a pact that transforms them and makes them communicating human subjects, that is, as part of a given group of two or more. The other level has to do with the content of what has been communicated, level at which there exist different steps, the first call, the discussion, the knowledge, the information given and received, but whose ultimate goal aims at reaching an agreement about an object which is external to the conversation. (our translation, Lacan in Miller’s 1975, Séminaire 1, page 126, lines 23-30) Lacan added that this object is not unconnected to speech. It was already partially present in the objectifying or objectivation system, where one has to take into account the sum of the prejudices that constitute a cultural community, up to and including the hypotheses made, even psychological prejudices starting from the most elaborate ones stemming from scientific work to the most naïve and most spontaneous, which are certainly not impermeable to scientific references, to the point of impacting them. (our translation, Lacan in Miller’s 1975, Séminaire 1, page 126, lines 31-37).
References


