

Dialogue and Reflection

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Overview

On the ProDAIT website, there are many activities that employ talking as a tool for learning. This is no accident, and the approach is supported by important learning theory. Interaction with others in social contexts can be linked with learning at all ages. In most circumstances, we learn from others, either by talking to other people or by using written materials and resources made by others.

The Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) suggested that children learn from more competent others. He gave examples of children learning from adults who support their development. Bruner (1986) called this 'scaffolding' learning. Think of the example of an adult and child doing a jigsaw puzzle. The adult may suggest 'find the corner pieces; find all the straight edge pieces', working at a level just above the child's level of competence but not doing the puzzle for them. Vygotsky called this the child's Zone of Proximal Development. What the child does with help today they do independently tomorrow. Use of language is an important element in this and the idea translates well into all forms of learning, including for students and staff in university. Staff in universities can use talking with others to progress their own continuing professional development.

Thinking together

More recent developments of Vygotsky's ideas suggest that we learn from others, not necessarily because they are more competent, but because they think differently. Neil Mercer (2000) refers to 'interthinking' occurring when people talk and develop ideas together. He proposes an Intermental Development Zone which we can imagine as the area between us when we talk together and combine our ideas. New knowledge is created.

Often, we can clarify our ideas and thinking by expressing them verbally. Spoken language is one of the forms of expression of thought and it is often difficult to imagine thinking without language. Hearing what others make of our ideas can help to change and shape them. Mercer analysed discussions taking place in learning contexts and identified evidence of changes in thinking and ideas. He takes the term 'exploratory talk', coined by Barnes (1977), for dialogue 'in which differences are treated explicitly, as matters for mutual exploration, reasoned evaluation and resolution' (p173). If you want to know more about interthinking and exploratory talk, go to Neil Mercer's book, *Words and Minds*.

Practical translation of these ideas leads us to consider many forms of teaching and learning where 'talk' is the tool for learning. At a simple level, lectures employ talk, although there may not be very much interaction to modify and develop ideas. Other forms of interaction also rely on talk as the tool for development of thinking. Mentoring, counselling, coaching and learning sets in Exploratory Practice are among the activities we suggest on the ProDAIT website where talking together can be an approach to development. It makes sense to find someone to talk with in continuing professional development.

One of the important techniques we can use to develop talk and thinking is to use existing ideas to move on and shape new ones. Mercer has observed consistencies in the way conversation is used as a tool to develop thinking. He observes that teachers often use the following techniques, which could easily be developed for our own dialogues with colleagues:

- 'recap', that is, reviewing what the other person has already experienced and then setting the scene for further development
- 'elicitation', or questioning and prompting the other person to remember what they already know and perhaps to reflect on this
- 'reformulate' and 'repeat', often by paraphrasing something that has been said, as a way of clarifying and emphasising the idea.

What is interesting is that, through these techniques, ideas can be drawn out, rather than imposing one's own ideas on another person. They encourage ideas and allow people to think their thoughts aloud and develop conceptual understanding using a form of linguistic scaffolding.

Discourse communities

Mercer also discusses specialised language or discourses which characterise particular professions and subject areas. Within a short time of beginning to study a new topic or participate in a new activity, people learn new vocabulary items and ways of talking. This can be beneficial to the members of the 'subject community' who will be able to communicate more quickly and easily with each other, but it can exclude people unfamiliar with the 'discourse' who may be confused by the 'jargon'. Think of the time when you first joined the staff of a university. Your vocabulary probably increased considerably.

Ground rules

If we are to use talking as a tool for our own learning, perhaps by pairing up with a colleague or joining a discussion group, it will be important to be explicit about how this is to operate. Participants need to know that talking is permitted and expected. The talking will need to be purposeful, and participants will have to be clear about their roles and how talking is to be used.

It can be helpful to establish ground rules for activities where exploratory talk is used to achieve learning. If these are made early on, good listening practice and turn-taking can be established in discussions. The ground rules can be referred to if things threaten to become disorganised or someone tries to 'hog' the conversation.

References

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