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Dialogic Inquiry and Active Learning

Dialogic inquiry is a tool for stimulating collaboration among learners to discuss complex ideas and build on basic concepts, or "the tool-kit of discourse in the activity of learning" (Wells, 1999, p. vii). It is built on the concept that students develop understanding through discussion. The dialogic inquiry model has been defined by several behaviors and attributes including shared authority among group members, open questions for new understandings, meaningful feedback from facilitators, group reflection among students to connect ideas, elaborate explanations from students, and co-construction of knowledge (Alexander, 2010; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Lyle, 2008; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Reznitskaya, 2012). Dialogic inquiry is often utilized within the active learning paradigm, which is a student-centered pedagogy characterized by learning through experience.

Active learning includes a broad range of pedagogies, such as problem-based learning, experiential learning, and collaborative learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In the early 20th century, Lewin, Piaget, and Dewey (as cited in Brame, 2016) pioneered research that became the basis of active learning. According to Kolb (2014), their ideas shared common values that learning is not an outcome but rather "a continuous process grounded in experience" (p. 9). Learners are experientially involved rather than receiving a transfer of information (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). An important potential element in this process is student discourse.

As students engage in the active learning process, they are challenged to think about the meaning of their experience, and dialogic inquiry is a useful tool at this juncture (Alexander, Hardman, Hardman, Rajab, & Longmore, 2017). Discussion stimulates critical thinking skills and forms one of the foundational elements of experiential learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

When discourse is used to construct knowledge, it empowers students to question, predict, and summarize what they are learning (Kolb, 2014). The dialogic inquiry tool provides for inductive learning that moves students from experience to knowledge construction.

In his seminal work, Barnes (1989) reported on active learning for the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) in the UK and described the model as purposive, situation-driven, engaged, reflective, negotiated, critical, and complex. Purposive learning is similar to Dewey's (1902) concept that tasks should be relevant to students. Learning is situation-driven when "the learning tasks arise out of the needs of the situation" (Kyriacou & Marshall, 1989, p. 311). Engaged learning means that the tasks contain real-life components (Barnes, 1989), such as lab experiments in the sciences and published writing in the humanities. The last four elements of the active learning pedagogy benefit from dialogic inquiry and thus demonstrate the utility of discourse within this paradigm. Reflective learning encourages students to think about the meaning of what they have learned, and this element in particular benefits from dialogic inquiry (Alles, Seidel, & Gröschner, 2018). Negotiated learning requires teachers and students to work together to determine methods and goals (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), and this negotiation is also characterized by discussion. The critical aspect in active learning challenges the students to seek different ways of interpreting knowledge, which is effectively accomplished through discourse (Garcia-Carrion, Gomez, Molina, & Ionescu, 2017). Finally, the complexity within the active learning model means that students make connections to the complexity of the real world, which is a process that can benefit from discussion.

A qualitative study of active learning and dialogic inquiry in the context of secondary Shakespeare education became the basis of the concepts for this paper. Within the active learning model, educators use dialogic inquiry to help students find meaning (Lyle, 2008), and "teachers

and students act as coinquirers, collaboratively engaging in a generation and evaluation of new interpretations of texts" (Reznitskaya, 2012, p. 446). Important observations from the Shakespeare study included the value of collaboration among diverse abilities and viewpoints, the need for training facilitators, the efficacy of explaining the process to students, the function of dialogic bids, and the ethos of involvement and respect.

The value of collaboration among diverse abilities and viewpoints

Skidmore (2006) described dialogic inquiry as a tool that "stresses the potential of collaborative group work and peer assistance to promote mutually responsive learning in the zone of proximal development" (p. 203). Vygotsky (1978) developed the concept of the zone of proximal development, in which students interact with others who have a diversity of abilities and viewpoints as a means to learn through the ensuing discourse and interactions. Students have unique observations and different levels of understanding so that dialogue encourages sharing and building on the ideas of others, whereas monologue stifles these processes.

The observation of collaboration in the midst of diversity was one of the original stimuli for the Shakespeare study. The population comprised 90 students aged from 11 to 19 who attended a one-week Shakespeare camp, and the researcher's 15 years of experience with this population resulted in observations regarding the impact of students negotiating with one another as they created their characters and scenes. The camp was built on the active learning paradigm, which allowed students to study the play by performing it. Instead of coaches lecturing on the meaning of each scene, students were challenged to work together to find meaning. The efficacy of the process for student engagement with the text led to a deeper investigation of the role of dialogic inquiry.

The need for training for facilitators

In an attempt to focus on dialogic inquiry in the Shakespeare study, the researcher created

a control group that used the established active learning approach and an intervention group that

added 30 minutes of dialogic inquiry each day. The sample comprised the two groups

performing comedy plays, and the coaches for the intervention group were trained in dialogic

inquiry. McElroy (2017) researched the understanding of dialogic inquiry among in-service and

pre-service English teachers and discovered that none of his participants were taught this

approach in college. He wrote:

> The challenge facing educators is to move beyond the typical teacher-centered initiate-
> respond-evaluate approach and adopt a more generative approach to discussion that not
> only allows students to develop a voice but also one that builds content knowledge and
> critical thinking. (McElroy, 2017, p. 10)

After reviewing data from his participants, McElroy (2017) proposed that teachers need training

so that they can grow in dialogic discourse skills.

Reznitskaya (2012) developed a dialogic inquiry tool that illustrated elements that

facilitators should learn. The tool functioned like a rubric with six indicators that were rated on a

scale from one to six, reflecting the spectrum from monologic inquiry to full dialogic inquiry.

The indicators were authority, questions, feedback, connecting student ideas, explanation, and

collaboration (Reznitskaya, 2012). The authority indicator measured whether authority rested

with the teacher or students. In a fully dialogic mode, students would ask questions, respond to

each other's ideas, and manage shifts in the topic (Reznitskaya, 2012). The questions indicator

measured the openness of questions. Simple recall of facts rated a one while higher order

questions that stimulated analysis and evaluation rated a six (Reznitskaya, 2012). The feedback

indicator evaluated how often the teacher used feedback to stimulate deeper thinking and

encouraged a focus on the reasoning process rather than a specific answer (Reznitskaya, 2012). The indicator for connecting student ideas measured how often the teacher connected the student responses to one another and challenged students to comment on other students' statements (Reznitskaya, 2012). The explanation indicator measured how often students made statements of personal opinion and supported their reasoning with detailed explanations (Reznitskaya, 2012). Finally, the collaboration indicator measured how often students chained their ideas to one another and experienced coconstruction of ideas (Reznitskaya, 2012). These concepts provided objective goals for training the facilitators in the Shakespeare study.

In the Shakespeare study, the coaches of the intervention group were trained as facilitators. After using the dialogic inquiry tools with the students for a week, they observed growth in the skill of discussion among the students. This phenomenon aligned with research that indicated that dialogic inquiry is a learned skill for students (Alexander et al., 2017; Garcia-Carrion et al., 2017). The students began to understand that they were expected to have individual ideas that could be shared and negotiated. The facilitators also identified the value of explaining the process to the students.

The efficacy of explaining the process to students

The Shakespeare facilitators discovered that they needed to be transparent about the process as they initiated discussions. If facilitators did not explicitly state the value of responding to their co-learners' ideas, students were reluctant to share. In her research, Reznitskaya (2012) concluded that the dialogic inquiry process required continually reminding the students that they should respond to one another. The facilitator needed to explain that the group was not looking for one correct answer; instead, they wanted to explore ideas and build on the insights that other

students shared. Wilkinson et al. (2017) studied elementary school teachers in a 30-hour professional development program. After a year of training, teachers increased the use of the dialogic inquiry tool by focusing on the use of "contestable, big questions" (Wilkinson et al., 2017, p. 66). The facilitator helped students understand that their goal was to find a diversity of ideas surrounding the big question so that they could explain the basis for their differing views (Wilkinson et al., 2017). The Shakespeare facilitators also observed that to help students progressively take control of the discussion, they needed to ask whether there were questions that students would like to ask the group. These findings were consistent with the research into dialogic inquiry, in which facilitators needed to express the goals of the discussion to the students.

The function of dialogic bids

One useful idea to the Shakespeare facilitators was the concept of the dialogic bid. Dialogic bids are responses such as reacting to student statements with authentic questions or taking up student ideas and observations to encourage student responses. Nystrand et al. (2003) used dialogic bids as an effective strategy to transition from monologic discourse to dialogic discourse. Monologic discourse is exemplified by teacher lectures, while dialogic discourse draws two or more people into a conversation of discovery. Implementation of dialogic bids correlated with productive discourse (Nystrand et al., 2003) and increased critical thinking (Soter et al., 2008). Soter et al. (2008) found that productive dialogue included several characteristics: students talking for extended periods, teachers prompting with open-ended questions, and students taking up ideas from each other. In the Shakespeare study, dialogic bids led to higher level reasoning, which were identified with reasoning words such as because, agree, disagree,

why, and think. The Shakespeare facilitators used open-ended questions to ask students to explain why they thought the way they did. The ability to use dialogic bids in the midst of a student conversation became an important strategy.

The ethos of involvement and respect

Christoph and Nystrand (2001) experimented with a dialogic process in a ninth grade English class in a Midwestern inner-city school with a large Hispanic population. They discovered that this pedagogy engendered an "ethos of involvement and respect" (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001, p. 249). The teacher encouraged discussion by phrasing questions that challenged students to explore ideas for themselves. An interesting outcome of the dialogic process was the quality of interpersonal relationships developed among students. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) concluded that "this study shows that dialogic discourse can happen when teachers are adept at linking and at enabling links between academic objectives and student concerns that often originate beyond both the classroom and the school" (p. 249). The Shakespeare facilitators observed a similar phenomenon. The dialogic process revealed the potential for emotional and cognitive engagement that students developed through the discourse included in active learning. An unexpected finding from the study was that the control and intervention groups initiated spontaneous dialogic inquiry without the intervention of the facilitators. Further research is needed to understand whether dialogic inquiry is a natural outcome from the active learning paradigm. Nevertheless, the observation of the development of an ethos of involvement and respect was an important element of the dialogic inquiry process, whether it was spontaneous or initiated by facilitators.

Conclusion

Neelands (2009) worked with Shakespeare in UK schools and confirmed the foundational significance of dialogic inquiry in active learning. He considered the process of social and artistic engagement to be more valuable than the theatre performance. He described the active learning pedagogy as pro-social, while traditional approaches to Shakespeare's texts are pro-technical. Pro-technical approaches limit knowledge to information about literature, history, and plays, while pro-social pedagogy promotes a model of democracy that challenges students to discuss ideas to find meaning (Neelands, 2009). Dialogic discourse teaches students that knowledge is attainable when it is socially constructed and negotiated (Neelands, 2009). In the same way, our Shakespeare facilitators observed that when students participated in the dialogic process, they learned and grew in their understanding of the text and the value of democratic discourse. Within the active learning paradigm, dialogic inquiry is a valuable tool that furthers the goals of learning being reflective, negotiated, critical, and complex.

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