

The Fundamentals of Educational Dialogue – Week 5 video transcript

Introduction:

Welcome to Week 5 of the course where we will look at the work of Professor Rupert Wegerif and opening up a dialogic space for reflection and agency. We will explore the ideas of Dialogic Space, reflection and agency and discuss why they are important. In exploring these ideas we will talk about how we might use our classrooms to 'widen' and 'deepen' dialogue. We will also consider inter-cultural dialogue and our role as educators in promoting it.

Part 1: Dialogic Space

"Dialogic Space is when two or more voices are held together in the tension of a dialogue, this opens up a space of possible responses. In dialogic space children and teachers can co-construct new ideas together or stimulate each other to provoke creative and unexpected responses." (Rupert Wegerif)

First of all, dialogue needs difference, there needs to be at least two perspectives as this creates the 'tension' for dialogue to happen. The word tension here is being used in a positive sense. For Wegerif, "Talk can be more or less dialogic. The more dialogic it is, the more it is characterized by active listening and the creative emergence of new ideas." Wegerif refers to the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin who makes a useful distinction between dialogue and conversation. He defines dialogue as a shared enquiry in which each answer produces a further question in a chain of questions and answers. This Bakhtinian idea may help us generate a very different understanding of education. You may wish to think about how it might do that and make some notes in your reflective journal.

Wegerif identifies two kinds of difference; ordinary difference and constitutive difference. Ordinary difference is the difference between two fixed identities, like the difference between a red cup and a blue cup. These two entities don't affect each other. However, constitutive difference is where the difference between two identities helps to define the identities of the two things from within. So, for example, the difference between me and you in a dialogue is at least partly constitutive, because I can't have a 'me' without a 'you' and you also can't have a 'you' without a 'me' so it is the difference between us that helps to define us. This is also the case for many concepts that we teach, for example, light and dark, west and east, right and wrong. Learners' awareness of how concepts need each other will help them appreciate the dialogic nature of our existence.

For learners to actively think, they need to be able to consider possibilities. A Dialogic Space appears when the classroom ethos allows and encourages a range of possible responses to the same question or talking point. Here there aren't binary oppositions, rather there is room for nuance and new possibilities. Such a space also encourages and generates creativity. All ideas will be respected and learners will be given time to explain and justify their idea, no matter how unrelated it may at first seem to the topic. Learners may make connections that a teacher has not considered to 'widen' or 'deepen' the dialogue.

Part 2: Reflection, agency and intercultural dialogue

In many cultures, knowledge is not just gained through rational inquiry, it also appears through reflection. There are forms of knowledge and learning that require wider skills than those prioritised in most schools and educational systems. Dialogue also allows for more sustained deliberation and reflection on a topic. This enables learners to make connections and develop more holistic understandings.

For a Dialogic Space to exist, participants have to feel a sense of agency as they participate in the dialogue. They need to develop the skills to exercise that agency in engaging others respectfully and sincerely. This is true of all Dialogic Spaces but especially those where there is greater potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding such as in inter-cultural dialogue.

In your resources list for this week, there are links to the DIALLS and Generation Global websites. DIALLS stands for 'Dialogue and Argumentation for Literacy and Intercultural Learning in Schools'. It offers a bank of teacher resources for learners aged 5-14 years. They are designed to teach children to be tolerant, empathetic and inclusive through talking together. This is done through engaging with picture books and wordless films, which allow for engaging with other cultures because they bypass spoken language. DIALLS also offers professional development resources to support teachers in achieving high quality intercultural dialogue in their classrooms.

Generation Global is a project that facilitates educators and learners from different countries to engage each other in dialogue through video conferences. Teacher resources and professional development are also available. This project is designed for learners aged 13-17 years. We recommend that you explore these resources.

As we have seen, 'Dialogic Space' is a complex concept. This is especially true for

intercultural spaces. Some people may argue that these kinds of intercultural projects centre a 'western' perspective on the world and they question whether they really allow for critical thinking about global power structures. This opens up debates that we will explore more fully in next week's session on 'Transformative, Holistic and Decolonial Approaches to Dialogue' when we look at the work of Paulo Friere and Ramon Flecha.