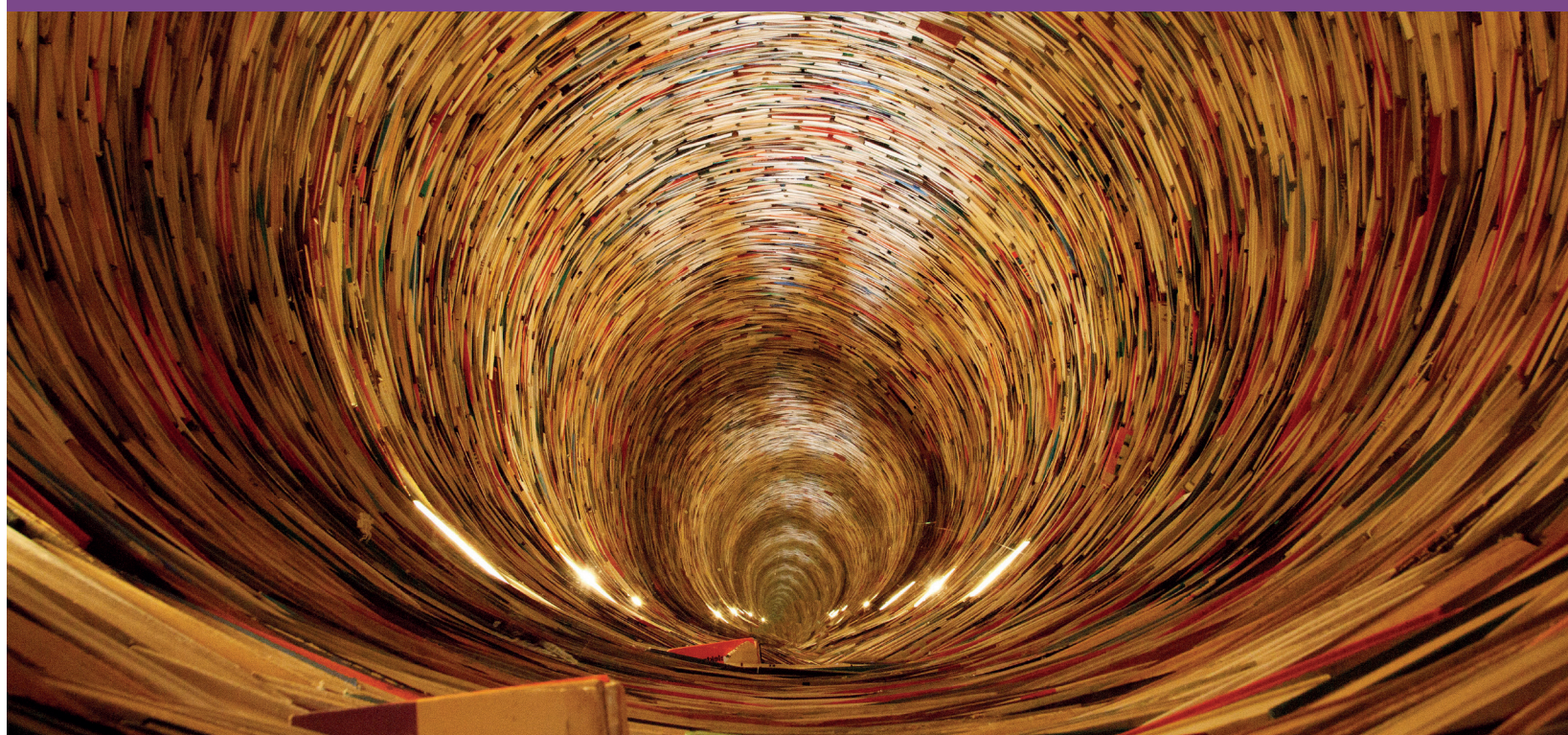


Training in Learning Communities

UNIT 2



DIALOGIC LEARNING IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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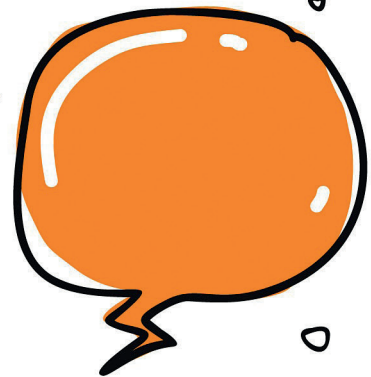
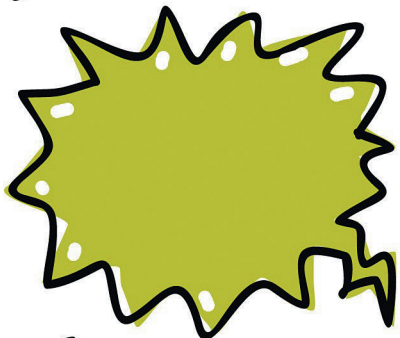
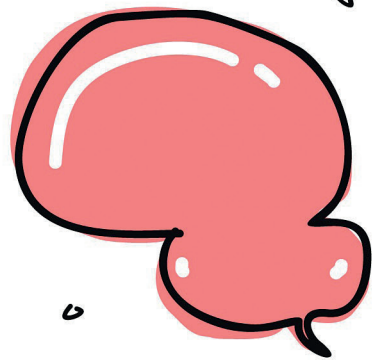
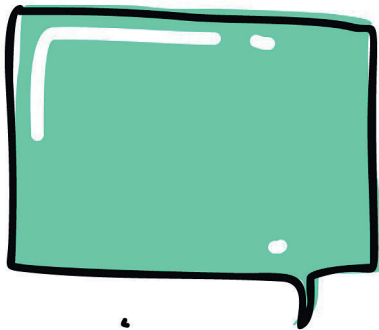
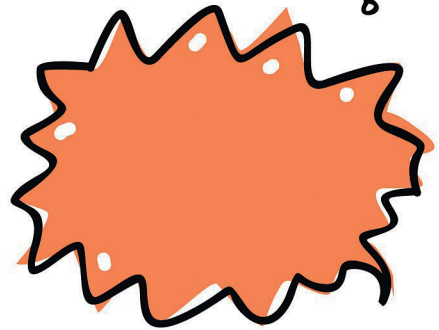
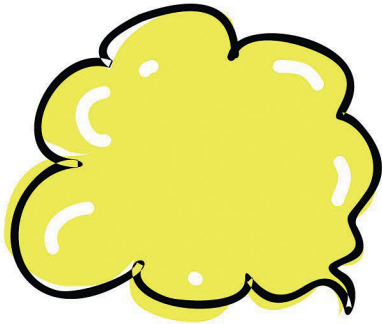
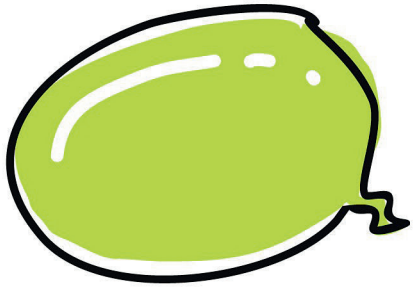
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UNIT 2

DIALOGIC LEARNING IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

This unit presents dialogic learning (Flecha 1997, 2000) as a communicative concept which has a place in the social sciences as a whole.

In classrooms nowadays, concepts of learning are under review, but the resulting approaches still do not respond to the dialogic and information needs of current society. We focus on the communicative learning concept that is characterised by placing importance on all the interactions which all pupils, boys or girls, have with others. Reference is then made to the key individuals and their theories in the field of communicative and dialogic learning. Finally, the seven principles of dialogic learning are outlined: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning, solidarity and the equality of differences.

2.1. From the individual approach to the community: the dialogic turn in learning theories

Theories of what a learning process is have evolved throughout history. In all cases, theories have been the result of wider perspectives of reality, from the perspective of individuals and their inner opinions to more group-orientated perspectives.

The following chart shows the evolution of theories of social reality (objectivist, constructivist and communicative) and their resulting approaches to learning in an information society.

CONCEPTION	OBJECTIVIST	CONSTRUCTIVIST	COMMUNICATIVE
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	Structural/Systemic perspective	Subjectivity perspective	Dual perspective (communicative)
BASIS	Reality is independent of the individuals who know and use it.	Reality is a social construction that depends on meanings given by people.	Reality is a human construction. Its meanings depend on human interactions.
EXAMPLE	A pencil is a pencil irrespective of how people see or use it.	A pencil is a pencil because we see it as a suitable object to write or to draw with.	A pencil is a pencil because we agree to use it to write or to draw with.
LEARNING	TRADITIONAL LEARNING It is learnt through the message sent out by the staff.	MEANINGFUL LEARNING It is learnt through the connection between new knowledge and existing knowledge in a cognitive structure.	DIALOGIC LEARNING It is learnt through interactions amongst equals, staff, friendships which produce an egalitarian dialogue.
LEARNING KEY ELEMENT	Staff	Student body	Everybody in the community the pupil has contact with
TRAINING	OF THE STAFF Contents to be transmitted and relevant methodology.	OF THE STAFF Learning processes knowledge of the actors and their way of building its meanings.	OF THE STAFF, RELATIVES AND THE COMMUNITY Learning processes knowledge of the individuals and groups through the construction of interactive meanings
CURRICULAR APPROACH	Pedagogic orientation not duly taking into account psychological and sociological aspects.	Psychological orientation not duly taking into account pedagogic and sociological aspects.	Interdisciplinary orientation: pedagogical, psychological and sociological.
RESULTS	The imposition of a uniform culture generates and reproduces inequalities.	Adaptation to diversity without taking into account the inequalities in the context increases inequalities.	With context transformation, respect towards differences is included as one of the dimensions of an egalitarian education.

The objectivist view: traditional education

The form of education referred to as 'traditional', which is still widely practiced, is typical of the past industrial society and an objectivist approach to learning. With this in mind, the staff are the protagonists in the teaching and learning process. The teacher is considered the source of knowledge and the expert who establishes and ensures the conveyance of said knowledge. This knowledge is independent of the students just as an objective reality is external and independent of the people who take part in it. The staff must have knowledge of the subjects they teach and sufficient skills with which to design programmes which are constrained in time. They must therefore establish the pace of teaching activities so that each and every pupil will learn the knowledge. The role of students is based on comprehension, accumulation and repetition of knowledge and they are assessed on their capacity to memorise and reproduce the knowledge as passed on by the staff. Pupils who struggle to do this are regarded as having learning difficulties and, in such cases, special remedial measures must be taken. Many studies have shown that these compensatory approaches generate and reproduce inequalities afflicting the most vulnerable students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes, 2005).

Psychological models in traditional teaching are based on behaviourism. Concepts such as programmed teaching or instruction (in the case of no planning) or the notion of persistence and effort in learning are valid contributions to the field of learning but the objectivist concept does not allow for how students in an information and dialogical society actually do learn. For example, in an information society, the aforementioned experts in all fields have been questioned regarding people's capacity to find and evaluate information. Traditional teaching approaches were developed in the context of an industrial society and were therefore devised and designed for classrooms which no longer exist in the education centres of today.

The constructivist view: meaningful learning

In contrast to the objectivist concept and the primary role of the teacher, a new approach to learning arose in the second half of the twentieth century which was based on a constructivist idea of reality, one which is generated by people rather than a given situation.

The constructivist concept can be considered in learning terms as placing emphasis on the student and their mental activity. Cognition is introduced and the student, boy or girl, is no longer receiving, accumulating and memorising in a passive role but actively building their own knowledge. In order to do this, the student must be able to become aware of gaps in their knowledge by interacting meaningfully with knowledge they already possess.

Thus, whereas in traditional approaches the teacher is the key player in the learning process, in approaches based on constructivist theories, it is the personal learning systems of each of the students which are most important. The teacher no longer needs to provide only knowledge but also ensures that the student links new knowledge with old in a meaningful manner. From this perspective each student creates their own, different meaning. For improvement in classroom learning, teaching should incorporate the results of research on the many ways in which meanings are generated. In this approach, teacher training is directed towards developing an awareness of internal learning processes and how the construction of knowledge takes place, where the psychological aspect of cognition is prioritised.

The constructivist approach to learning is considered by several prominent researchers and, though varying in other aspects, their theories share one common feature, that of the importance of involvement of the mind in the learning process. For example, Piaget (1964) took a geneticist perspective on passing through and reaching particular stages of development and Vygotsky (1962, 1978) took a social developmental perspective on the developmental stages a child may reach with the support of others.

In Spain, the LOGSE education reforms adopted, as a theoretical base, Ausubel's constructivist and meaningful learning approach (Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978) which was developed in the 1960s. According to this approach, learning is an individual process of meaning construction which arises in a different way in every pupil as each boy or girl will start with their own set of previous knowledge and will follow a different internal path during the learning process which will vary in every situation. The approach correlates the new information being conveyed with previous student knowledge. The teacher must be able to assess the varying learning strategies of their students and also their current knowledge base and then use this awareness as a tool for increasing their knowledge. An emphasis is placed on discovering what the student body already knows and where it is desired to be, thereby devising a teaching plan which can be adapted to the specific requirements of the students. According to Ausubel: *If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would state that the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Once you find this out, you can teach accordingly (Ausubel et al., 1978, p.1).*

A misinterpretation occurred, however, when an attempt was made to incorporate some theories of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) with the approaches of Ausubel. Two key contributions of Vygotsky are an emphasis on the relationship between cognitive development and the sociocultural environment and how changing the sociocultural environment may stimulate cognitive progress. Education reforms in the nineties embraced the first element, but the latter was misinterpreted. Instead of changing contexts to promote egalitarian cognitive growth, reform efforts ultimately involved adapting curricula to the existing contexts of schools.

Ausubel's meaningful learning approach, which was so influential for Spanish education reforms in spite of Ausubel's limited international prominence, presents even clearer potential problems for learning processes in the twenty-first century. The importance of using existing knowledge as a base for any kind of learning is seriously compromised by the fact that new information could be disconnected at least in part from what is already known. Despite what is frequently presented in curricula, from localised and simple to global and complex, there exists a contradiction with the fact that boys and girls have imaginations, have and share their emotions and have a strong taste for stories which goes far beyond their day-to-day experience (Egan, 2005). Also, from a sociological viewpoint, adaptation to the existing knowledge of each individual in its diversity without considering egalitarian principles fails to ensure an egalitarian learning approach for the student body as a whole. If we design a curriculum based on the student body's existing knowledge, we are not assuring equal opportunities for everyone, since this model depends on the contexts in which pupils are growing up. Therefore, students in affluent districts in big cities will not have a curriculum identical to those living in poorer areas. In this way, while some boys and girls learn in accordance with the requirements of an information society, other students are led to social exclusion.

Furthermore, according to the above approach, if the starting point of existing student knowledge is considered to be limited in some disadvantaged socio-cultural contexts, the resulting goals, by definition, will also need to be lowered through curricular adaptation. Under these conditions, meaningful learning and the 'Vygotsky adaptator' only serve to potentially promote the educational exclusion of children who suffer greater disadvantages such as those of an underprivileged social status or of ethnic minority groups.

Both fostering and compensating for diversity serve to strengthen cultural inequality and henceforth alternative approaches must emerge which work more effectively with the increasing complexity of social challenges presented by current changes in society. Transformation is essential because compensation and adaptation lead to the exclusion of certain social sectors and equality is essential because everybody wants and is entitled to receive a useful education in order to live with dignity in today's society and that of the future.

The communicative view: dialogic learning

A communicative conception is positioned within the socio-historical context of the information society. In this society, more important than the accumulation of information is its processing. Again, what is more important than an individual subjective experience is the continual interaction and emerging dialogue with a wide variety of sources and resources. This approach includes features of previous concepts but also introduces interaction as its central idea.

Taking a communicative approach means orientating teaching towards allowing for maximum learning opportunities and viewing the role of teacher as an educational agent. The orientation of learning is not based on adapting to existing knowledge, but on the introduction of new interactions within the classroom in order to achieve the best possible results. Curriculum design here is no longer focused on what the student knows or does not know; what matters now are those results we are aiming for, setting off from an approach of maximum efficiency for every student. Learning is based on interactions amongst equals, teachers, relatives and other agents in an educational context, which relates back to the true diversity of people who have an influence on the learning of all boys and girls.

From a communicative perspective, the teacher must enable opportunities for interactions within environments which students can relate to. Children learn from and with more people than just their teachers, from people with a variety of profiles in situations where the processes of teaching and learning they encounter vary widely. It must be remembered that pupils learn in the street, at home, in their own social or cultural groups, in the library and so on from, for example, grandparents, neighbours, friends and instructors. This leads to the realisation that a pupil's teaching and learning processes are amplified as a result of their interactions being multiplied with different people in many contexts. Orientation from this perspective would be '*to promote educational intervention in all said contexts and foster the interrelations amongst all of them, coordinating the educational actions in each of them so that they achieve a bigger impact*' (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha & Racionero, 2008).

Such inclusion of all education agents in school centres is one of the interventions which is generating greatest student success. This inclusion is highlighted when the management of the education centre involves not only school staff but also other individuals related to the student body's development and when this inclusion is also passed down to the classroom (Gatt, Ojala, & Soler, 2011). In this way, teacher training is considered to be not only for the education professionals, but also for the community as a whole.

The communicative learning concept incorporates contributions from some of the most important writers in the field of education and learning. One such contribution is that of the 'real and transformative' Vygotsky (1962, 1978) which emphasises the importance of socio-cultural development on a child's learning process. Here, every learning element occurs twice for a child, firstly from a social (inter-subjective) angle and then, later, an individual (inner-subjective) angle. This means that everything a child acquires as part of themselves (learns) has been preceded by an interaction. In contrast with the absolute influence of existing knowledge which is the main premise of constructivism, Vygotsky proposed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the distance between real development (the point at which the child is currently) and potential development (the point the child could reach with the collaboration of more advanced peers or guidance from an adult). Interactions with a more experienced peer or the guidance of an

adult contribute to the development and learning of any child, boy or girl. When referring to the guidance of an adult, Vygotsky never stated that the adult must be a teacher. Therefore, the adult may be anyone who the student interacts with in their environment, for example a relative, neighbour, volunteer and so on.

In short, according to Vygotsky, learning and teaching processes cannot be separated from the sociocultural environment and a child's learning development occurs as a result of interactions. At school, the student creates knowledge through interaction with others in their context and through interactions with all cultural elements within their environment.

It is important to note that Jerome Bruner, one of the most internationally renowned writers in the field of educational psychology, has moved from a cognitivist theory position to one based on dialogic theory over the course of his research. For him, interaction is a key element in the learning process (Bruner, 1983) and interactive contexts strengthen learning contexts. In his book *The Culture of Education* (1996), Bruner affirms that psychology has no future away from work with inter-subjectivity. In fact, Bruner (1996) suggests turning classrooms into *sub-communities of mutual learners*, where the teacher does not have a monopoly over learning and its framework but, instead, empowers students to help one another. This implies the transformation of educational areas to foster the generation of interactions and dialogues amongst the students and the creation of forums where students may express their own ideas to others and discuss them.

Upholding Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, Barbara Rogoff (1990) believes that a child's learning occurs as a result of interactions with adults who support their development, guiding their participation in what she terms '*guided participation*' in outstanding activities, in the comprehension of new situations and problem solving.

Gordon Wells (1999) also contends that learning environments at school must consist of collaborative activities and interactive situations where the teaching staff needs to alter their traditional role in order to allow for dialogic cooperation with people in the community. Wells describes the '*dialogic investigation*' where he puts forward a deeper investigation by the student body into its own learning environment as all areas of the school are reorganised and every available resource within the school community is properly employed. Investigation refers to an '*inclination and growing interest in things, to set out questions and to try to understand, cooperating with others, with the aim of finding answers*' (Wells, 1999, p. 136). This is an educational approach which recognises the dialectics between the individual and the environment produced through communicative interaction.

One of the most prominent writers within the field of education in the twentieth century, Paulo Freire, developed in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2003) the concept of dialogic action as opposed to banking learning and of dialogue

being the foundational process for learning and for changing reality. Dialogue does not occur within a specific methodological format; only within an open attitude to dialogue that fosters epistemological curiosity and cultural recreation (Freire, 1997).

Using the above theories and others besides as a starting point, CREA has developed a line of research around interactions and their effects on learning and on the experiences of others. In dialogic learning, a differentiation is made between dialogic interactions with increased dialogue to aim for mutual understanding, interventions whose value is based on the validity of arguments and power interactions in which there is a powerful, weighty presence of an unequal social structure within which these interactions take place (Aubert et al., 2008; Searle & Soler, 2004). Dialogic interactions are those which transform people and contexts and which increase learning and also a meaning for learning. They are the ones that create positive images of the students from whom we usually expect poor results. They also change expectations of the environment and the relationships established with family members and other agents of the community.

2.2. Dialogic learning

The theory of dialogic learning was created by Ramón Flecha (1997). This paradigm is placed within a theoretical framework which emphasises the roles of inter-subjectivity, interactions and dialogue as learning generators and includes theoretical contributions from various disciplines (Aubert et al., 2008).

We now introduce dialogic learning as the seven principles which define it: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning, solidarity, and equality in differences.

*'Dialogic learning takes place in **egalitarian dialogues**, in interactions in which **cultural intelligence** is recognised in everybody and is orientated to the **transformation** of previous levels of knowledge and the sociocultural context to progress towards the success of everyone. Dialogic learning takes place in interactions that increase **instrumental learning**, favouring the personal and social **creation of meaning**, being guided by the **solidarity principles** in which **equality** and **difference** are compatible and mutually rewarding values.'* (Aubert et al., 2008, p. 167)

2.2.1. Egalitarian dialogue

It is understood that dialogue is egalitarian when all contributions and interventions are considered based on the validity of the argument, not on relationships of position or power. That is, all contributions are valid and it is irrelevant who puts them forward, if and when they are based on argument.

The above principle is shown in the reflection and decision-making processes about educational topics in which all points of view, regardless of the people who hold or propose them, are included with the intention of achieving consensus or resolving conflict: *'Dialogue is egalitarian when the contributions of each participant are valued based on their argument (validity aspiration) and not on who is giving any such opinion (power aspiration).'*' (Elboj, Puigdellívol, Soler, & Valls, 2002, p. 62)

Egalitarian dialogue contributes to democratising the organisation of the education centre, as long as it allows for the participation of all community members under equal conditions as Racionero, Ortega, García and Flecha (2012) explain:

'I have seen José addressing an enthusiastic audience for five hours and I could have done so myself. I have seen the way he hits the target because his assertions are not assumptions but predictions based on scientific analysis of our reality. In the course of a chat to relatives in a school, there were only white and European people in the first rows and only two African women in the last ones, leaning on the wall and asleep. One of the coaches winked thus expressing the opinion in most writing about this topic in Spain: Immigrants are not motivated by education. José started to speak in English, suddenly both women woke up and one of them replied in better English than his. He carried on in French and the other woman replied in even better French than his ... As a result of this, families and relatives of the school got a class in English and another one in French (Racionero et al., 2012, p. 26).'

This is only one example which shows how egalitarian dialogue democratises the functioning of a centre and allows for the inclusion and participation of everybody.

2.2.2. Cultural intelligence

For a long time, a reductionist concept of intelligence has been commonly used. Intelligence has traditionally been measured through the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) which only assesses academic intelligence. Thus, this traditional concept of intelligence has created a culture of labelling among student groups, leading many people to achieve only a minimum level of knowledge. No-one, however, can be regarded as being a less capable person based on achieving a low score in standardised tests which measure IQ, for not studying at an education centre and for not having succeeded in some school subjects, for being nervous in the tests or due to the fact that they live in a disadvantaged situation compared with other cultural groups.

The concept of cultural intelligence goes beyond the limitations of academic intelligence and encompasses the comprehension of multiple dimensions of human interaction which include academic intelligence, practical intelligence as

well as communicative intelligence (Flecha, 2000). Practical skills are those which are applied when managing situations which occur in day-to-day life. Practical skills can be learnt by watching other people, or learnt through a person's own actions. Communication skills do not exclude academic or practical ones, they are simply the skills that a person applies to solve problems which they find they cannot do alone in the first instance. Through communication and with the support of others, the person cooperates in order to successfully solve a problem in a specific context.

For decades, it has been acknowledged in studies that various types of intelligence exist which are connected with experience and with sociocultural contexts so that a person may be considered very intelligent in one context but less so in another. According to this principle, if someone has developed a particular type of intelligence due to the demands of their own context, they also have the capacity to do the same in another context. They can learn the new skills which are required and perhaps assessed within a new context and become equally competent in them (Aubert et al., 2008).

Everybody has cultural intelligence regardless of their educational level, their language, their socio-economic level or the features of their cultural identity (Flecha, 2000). Recognition of cultural intelligence allows for going beyond approaches which focus on 'deficits' and moves towards maximum possible learning. This concept entails students and their relatives, especially in non-academic families, recognising that skills are transferable to the school context, thereby strengthening teaching and learning processes.

Everyone in a child's environment, whether or not they demonstrate any kind of academic intelligence, can make, if willing, a valuable contribution to enhancing a child's interest in and attentiveness to connecting an academic world to their own social reality in their own context. For this reason, a diverse group of adults may participate in activities in all areas of an education centre, enabling children to access alternative ways of viewing the world and ways which can enhance and foster their development and learning. To work with cultural intelligence involves finishing with measurements which promote concepts of deficit often born of prejudice and opening the door to new opportunities.

To find out more:

Flecha, R. (2000). *Sharing words: Theory and practice of dialogic learning*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Siles, B. (2012). Cultural intelligence: inclusion of all opinions. *Suplemento Escuela*, 3, 3-4.

2.2.3. Transformation

Learning Communities are focused on an educational transformation which goes beyond the centre itself and spreads into the centre's environment. If the focus in learning is placed on interactions, this means that by transforming these interactions, both learning and development can be improved. Instead of adopting an adaptive vision, that is adapting learning to context and existing interactions, dialogic learning is a vision of context and interaction transformation for promoting better learning.

The aforementioned adoption of the misinterpretation of Vygotsky's learning theory meant a proliferation in educational plans and curricula which adapted to context, and to the existing knowledge of individuals and groups too. It promoted dividing the student body into ability levels and encouraged the practice of removing pupils who had the most difficulties. However, children who were and are in such 'low ability' sub-groups also end up with poor results, almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ladson-Billings, a pedagogue renowned for her contributions to overcoming racism in education, asserts that the likelihood of struggling pupils to develop the required skills for improving performance and to reach a higher level is affected because they receive less attention, thus repeating and perpetuating poor academic performance (Ladson Billings, 1994). Hence, the adaptive approach has led to reproducing social inequalities in educational inequalities, thereby promoting exclusion for those most in need, instead of increasing the availability of help for those who need additional support.

Freire agrees that, '*we are transformation not adaptation entities*' (Freire, 1997). This transformation is feasible through an egalitarian dialogic process amongst those people who wish to change a situation of inequality. So a transformative learning action is one which transforms difficulties into opportunities when, by contrast, an adaptive learning action responds to difficulties by reproducing and increasing them, thereby reducing the possibility of achieving at higher levels.

2.2.4. Instrumental dimension

According to longstanding approaches which focus on deficit, school centres have frequently opted for practicing a 'happiness curriculum' instead of offering the official instrumental curriculum for children with social and other problems. Due to social exclusion, it is common to hear statements such as, '*These children firstly need to learn skills for managing their basic needs such as hygiene. They firstly need care and affection and we need to help them improve their behaviour and only then can we deal with mathematics.*' In such situations, the school has decided to devote their energies totally to the above areas and leave aside key objectives. This frequently results in actually reducing access to education instead of providing more opportunities for access to those in particular need, thereby achieving a less egalitarian environment.

Through dialogic learning, conflict between humanist and instrumental dimensions of approaches in education are overcome due to the fostering of a curriculum in which all effort and resources are directed towards the student body, especially to disadvantaged learners. The scientific community has emphasised the importance of the instrumental side of what a school does to overcome educational and social inequalities (Apple & Beane, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Therefore both humanist and instrumental dimensions should be considered and managed simultaneously promoting mutual reinforcement.

In Learning Communities this principle amounts to fostering, in every possible area, working under the motto, *'The learning that we would want for our own children must be available for every boy and girl.'* As suggested by Apple (1995), the author of *Democratic Schools*, a democratic curriculum must include teaching of the official curriculum so that students have the possibility of moving up in their socio-economic level. The approach is that of fostering and facilitating learning without second guessing results or accepting an imagined set of poor results. Thus the emphasis is on fostering, from the elementary years and throughout all educational levels, reading skills, mathematics, languages, history, science without accepting poor results as inevitable, without mixing values and solidarity work with a neglect or scorn of instrumental learning and academic results, but offering excellence for everybody.

If the above description of principles is examined again, it can be seen that key factors such as egalitarian dialogue and an increase and diversification in interactions (providing cultural intelligence) are the necessary elements for instrumental learning: children create new meanings through dialogue and include contributions from various adults into their cultural experience as well. As highlighted below in an account by Racionero et al. (2012) of a conversation with a group of children in a Learning Community about their activities, every reply is linked to instrumental learning:

'We believe you like interactive groups. Is that true?'

'Yes!!'

'Come on! Tell me why you like them so much.'

A big list of arguments came up spontaneously and visitors were impressed: 'Because we do maths, tables, additions, everything, so that I learn it and I can explain it to my brother.'; 'We work harder and harder and learn more.' 'We do three or four non-stop tasks.', 'This way we will go to university.' (Racionero et al., 2012, p.75)

The Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) described in these materials, achieve the best results in instrumental learning AND values AND emotions AND feelings. SEAs overcome having to choose between giving priority to instrumental learning OR values OR emotions OR feelings.

To find our more:

Vázquez, T., Cidoncha, P., Avilés, J. (2013). Inteligencia instrumental visto y comprobado. *Suplemento Escuela*, 5, 4-6.

2.2.5. Creation of meaning

'You know that previously there was no one who got him out of bed. It is eight o'clock and he is up already.' (Racionero et al., 2012, p.60)

One of the biggest problems that existing education centres face is a lack of motivation in a high proportion of students who see little reason for attending class. For many of these students, the school experience is detached from their own reality. Sometimes students may experience a hostile atmosphere in class or there could be a myriad of reasons for poor learning motivation which adults are unable to see or appreciate. Boys and girls have no creation of meaning as what happens in their school (organisation, contents or human relations) does not fit with their own daily experience, their culture, the way they speak and behave, etc. Often, teachers direct much effort towards creating curricular adaptations to attract the attention of these students with poor results; they try to motivate them by minimising the curriculum, but they do not find the solution. How can we recover or find meaning?

Meaning is created when all contributions are treated equally whether or not there are individual, cultural, linguistic or communicative differences and when students feel that the school recognises and supports their personal identities and their projects for the future. When instrumental knowledge is fostered, students are confident that what they are learning is socially valuable. In such situations, meaning is created and reflected back in interaction. Here, meaning is detected in verbal and non-verbal communication, both overt and subtle, between young students and adults and throughout the centre as a whole.

Racionero et al. (2012) describe many cases similar to that of Anabel, a student from a Learning Community:

'Marta and Esther also remembered her a lot. The act of thinking about children gives them a reason to find time out of their daily obligations, work and family, and go and cooperate with other Learning Communities projects. They remember Anabel, who at first was a miserable, anxious, daydreaming girl with some learning difficulties. She did not have many friends and she used to be one of those girls that staff would talk about because of her 'dysfunctional' family situation. She lived with her grandma. Her mother had a permanent residence abroad and she did not know her father ... Even so, Anabel wished to go to school daily as she felt she was valued and considered. She met people who were concerned

about her personal and family situation, she was supported by them, and she managed to succeed academically more and more as she progressed through the school years.' (Racionero et al., 2012, p. 92).

The possibility for children to regain interest in school and find it meaningful is reflected in the above excerpt. Suddenly children want to attend because they feel comfortable and enjoy it. Solidarity, support and instrumental learning are the key factors here.

To find out more:

Hernández, Y., Fernández, P., Aguilera, M.E., Vidal, S., Vicente, J. y Canal, J.M. (2013). Creación de sentido gracias a los grupos interactivos. *Suplemento Escuela*, 6, 6-7.

2.2.6. Solidarity

Egalitarian dialogue between people from the entire education community and from all areas of the education centre contributes to a transformation in established relationships. These transformed relationships are based on increased solidarity and are accepted because they overcome barriers to everyone having opportunities to learn. Work is jointly carried out in the Learning Community towards one aim: that of achieving the best possible education for the whole student body.

The true value of solidarity implies an egalitarian education which offers equal opportunities. Solidarity is based on offering the same learning and results to all students, regardless of their social, economic, or cultural background. The objective of maximum learning for all girls and boys, just like we would want for our own children or loved ones, means solidarity. This implies cooperation rather than competitiveness and mutual consensus rather than enforcement.

Solidarity represents a universal value for day-to-day life at school. Through interventions in interactive groups or family participation, solidarity becomes a general rule, not an anecdote (Aubert et al., 2008, p.182). Solidarity is also transferred to other fields in participants' lives, thereby generating a feeling of solidarity and friendship based on the fact that each and every person works together so that everyone can have the best possible education. A female teacher in one particular Learning Community explains here how her school has been transformed into a structure which people trust:

'They tell me that here at school, in the education centre in general and in us, they see, you know, when they have some problem, when something is wrong,

they do not talk to the next door neighbour but they come here. Why? Because there is hope. We support them by creating new expectations and thinking positively ... My role then, with the families, is to tell them they can do it and if one day they feel depressed, they can come here!' (Racionero et al., 2012: 92).

To find out more:

Peña, C. (2012). Juntos llegaremos más lejos. *Suplemento Escuela*, 7, 6-7.

2.2.7. Equality of differences

The reality of our classrooms and education centres is that they are a reflection of a pluralistic society. However, much of the time, schools do not recognise cultural minorities but, at the same time, simply acknowledging differences is insufficient for actually creating greater equality.

Offering the best possible education implies that everybody, regardless of their origins, culture, beliefs and so on is considered and their voices are taken into account. Thus a move away from homogenised equality and unequal diversity is made and the focus becomes that of offering identical outcomes by utilising cultural differences.

It is necessary to be guided by egalitarian goals in order to achieve democratic education and greater social cohesion. Learning Communities acknowledge differences but offer identical objectives for all and egalitarian dialogue with everyone. This abides by the principle that the validity of a dialogue is based on its arguments, not on the role or social status of participants. Including everyone in the community is key. Here, diversity is a factor of cultural heritage, both on a personal-social and academic level, which benefits everybody who takes part in a Learning Community.

Lucía, director of one particular Learning Community, met a woman in the waiting room at a police station. She worked as an administrator at a haulage company. They talked and Lucía said:

'Look, we do plenty of things at school. People from the district, young people, older people, students' relatives, former pupils, and a huge variety of individuals participate. Many of them have no degree but they give us a hand in the classroom, in Interactive Groups, in the library, in working committees. They help us to cover up books and take the attendance register. In amongst all this help, what's actually happening is that the school children are learning a great deal. In the classroom, we need adults with different backgrounds, people who do other

things and have different lives. All this promotes the learning process. We need someone like you.’ (Racionero et al., 2012, p.60)

The overall conclusion is that learning processes improve tremendously, as captured by the words of a female student in the excerpt from Racionero et al. (2012) as follows:

‘Another example is Izan, a colleague in my class: he would not work. We decided to call his mother up to ask us to give us a hand in the Interactive Groups. When his mother started to help us, Izan also started to work. Why? Because he wanted his mother to be proud of him and he wanted her to see that he could also work with the interactive tasks just like his classmates. He then started to work on achieving excellent results.’ (Racionero et al., 2012, p. 60).

To find out more:

Aubert, A., Flecha, A., García, C., Flecha, R., & Racionero, S. (2008). *Aprendizaje dialógico en la sociedad de la información [Dialogic learning in the Information Society]*. Barcelona: Hipatia.

Racionero, S., Ortega, S., García, R., y Flecha, R. (2012). *Aprendiendo contigo [Learning together]*. Barcelona: Hipatia.

Racionero, S., & Padrós, M. (2010). The dialogic turn in educational psychology. *Journal of Psychodidactics*, 15 (2), 143-162

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