

Training in Learning Communities

UNIT 7



DIALOGIC LITERARY GATHERINGS (DLGs)

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UNIT 7

DIALOGIC LITERARY GATHERINGS

Dialogic gatherings are one of the Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) developed in Learning Communities. They involve the collective construction of meaning and knowledge based on dialogue with the whole student body or people participating at the gatherings. Dialogic gatherings are based on Dialogic Reading (Serrano, Mirceva & Larena, 2010) and on the seven principles of dialogic learning (Flecha, 1997). Furthermore, they focus on the most valuable creations of humanity in various fields from literature through to art and music. Through dialogic gatherings there is direct contact with timeless masterpieces and scientific knowledge which humanity has accumulated over the centuries. This contact is fostered in the gatherings and available to all, regardless of age, gender, culture or ability.

In this unit, the main characteristics of dialogic gatherings are presented. The first section is focused on those that draw upon a greater range and experience in time: the Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs). In the second section, alternative dialogic gatherings are considered which are focused on specific areas of culture and science, such as art dialogic gatherings, mathematics dialogic gatherings, scientific dialogic gatherings or pedagogic dialogic gatherings.

7.1. Dialogic Literary Gatherings

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) originated in the eighties at Escuela de Personas Adultas La Verneda-Sant Martí in Barcelona and comprised meetings about literature in which participants read and discussed masterpieces of universal literature. Ramón Flecha, in his book *Sharing Words* (2000), explains dialogic learning and its principles: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creation of meaning, solidarity and equality in difference. He does so through the experiences and transformations of people who have become literate or have read a book for the first time as a result of DLGs and who have become passionate fans of Lorca, Cervantes, Joyce and Sappho.

As a result of such outcomes, Dialogic Literary Gatherings spread to other centres and entities, initially within the framework of adult education. In fact, the *Confederación de Federaciones y Asociaciones Culturales y Educativas* for adult democratic education (CONFAPEA), played a key role in the dissemination and promotion of DLGs. Using the motto '1001 Dialogic Literary Gatherings' hundreds of people fostered exchanges and established meetings and projects of Dialogic

Literary Gatherings. These people wanted to share their experience even further and dreamt of classic literature also being accessible to children everywhere. So, from adult education, Dialogic Literary Gatherings have now also become part of many early years and primary education classrooms, thereby becoming one of the most common Successful Educational Actions implemented by education centres who belong to the Learning Communities network. Outside classrooms, Dialogic Literary Gatherings also take place in Family Education and community centres, libraries, outdoor spaces and in prisons, among others (Flecha & García, 2013; Garcia, Gairal, Munté, Plaja, 2017).

Dialogic Literary Gatherings have elicited the interest of the academic and scientific community across the planet. Saramago, Jose Luis Sampedro, Jose Antonio Labordeta and many others have referred to their admiration of the values of DLGs. In a very moving letter to CONFAPEA, Saramago said:

"I am delighted to learn that a Literary Gathering is of so much interest and has achieved such great success. I would have loved to attend the conference, since your working plan is so extraordinary and so necessary to stress the importance of each individual in a society which aims to be more and more supportive".

Two requirements: Classic Universal Literature and for everybody

Dialogic Literary Gatherings have two foundations. The initial principle is that a masterpiece of classic literature is read. The second principle is that children, young people and adults without formal education and with very little reading experience are able to attend the gatherings. In Dialogic Literary Gatherings only the masterpieces of classic universal literature are read. These are works on which there is a universal consensus which acknowledges their excellence and their contribution to humanity's cultural heritage, regardless of culture and era. They are model pieces. They show in depth and with great quality the universal topics which concern humanity as a whole so that reading them facilitates a better understanding of culture and society and encourages thinking about the world and its heritage. Universal literature can never go out of fashion. It is of interest to everyone across generations in spite of the fact it was sometimes written hundreds or, in cases such as the *Iliad* or *the Odyssey* by Homer, thousands of years ago. Classic works connect readers with global cultural models, an experience enhanced by creating shared knowledge in DLGs which adds to the arguments contained within the texts. Participants connect the messages of the masterpieces with current issues, thereby fostering a critical reflection on today's society.

The other core principle of Dialogic Literary Gatherings is that classic universal literature is made accessible to people who have limited formal education and who have traditionally been encouraged, if at all, to focus on literature considered 'easier' or popular bestsellers.

People who have previously never read a book such as some children in depressed areas with a high level of poverty who are traditionally marginalised, or perhaps, for example, people in prison, discover questions, answers and universal thoughts in classic literature which they can directly link to their own lives. Such concepts include honesty, love, the value of friendship, injustice, violence and immigration. Here, such traditionally marginalised individuals participate in discussions as equals under the same conditions. They discuss topics which have previously often been 'reserved' for those with a specific family and cultural background due to the idea that others 'could never enjoy it'. The reading of classic literature for children of cultural minorities, for instance, not only improves their cultural awareness and learning levels, but it also transforms others' expectations of their academic potential, thus opening the doors to academic success.

Below is a short excerpt from the first story in the book *Aprendiendo Contigo [Learning Together]*, devoted to egalitarian dialogue. The described transformation which has taken place in Andrei's classroom allows us to understand the educational and liberating potential of Dialogic Literary Gatherings:

'On one occasion, a former president of his province visited the school. The politician walked in Andrei's classroom and started to talk to the students, most of whom came from North Africa, Romania, South America... His questions demonstrated the stereotyped image given in the non-specialist press about these groups. But this image did a u-turn when he realised that the pupils were reading such an important book as The Odyssey. He was delighted to hear the students telling stories of Ulysses, Calypso, and Circes as well as other characters and he even took part in the debates in an egalitarian way.' (Racionero, Ortega, García, & Flecha, 2012, p.20)

These two requirements, including literary masterpieces of the intangible heritage of humanity and the participation of people without an academic background, are fundamental and essential. There are alternative approaches to reading which include other forms of literature or which favour the participation of people with high academic levels. However, to enable us to talk about Successful Actions in Dialogic Literary Gatherings, it is necessary to use classic literature and encourage the egalitarian participation of people without an academic background and/or new readers. It is only by doing so that '**cultural elitism**' can be removed as it has traditionally only allowed a minority of people access to exemplary models of arts and culture thereby perpetuating social and cultural inequalities. Just as Flecha (2000, p.62) states: '*... academic authorities build walls between people with less education and certain literature types because it is believed that the people excluded from the 'select minority' provide incorrect interpretations of the texts, forgetting that elites link reading with their particular contexts*'.

Dialogic Literary Gatherings work effectively as a result of an egalitarian dialogue occurring between everyone which acknowledges the background, the contributions, the intelligence and the sensitivity of all participants as explained below.

From expert interpretation to egalitarian dialogue

The following paragraph details the experience of a non-academic mother in a Dialogic Literary Gathering based on egalitarian dialogue interactions rather than the expert explanations that occur in other literary activities:

I really encourage other mothers to take part in these circles. I tell them not to throw away an opportunity. Reading the classics of world literature isn't difficult. Everybody can read them. The themes which these books deal with are profound but we connect them with our everyday experience. It's very easy: Everybody chooses a paragraph which they have read at home and says why they have chosen it. Sharing our paragraphs with each other gets us into a debate. The classic themes of world literature help the whole of humanity to move forward whatever our country or religion might be. The themes are common to all.

(De Botton, Girbes, Ruiz, & Tellado, 2014, p. 245)

Dialogic Literary Gatherings: Methodology - How are they organised?

The methodology of the gatherings is based on some fundamental but simple considerations. The number of people, duration and frequency of the Gatherings will depend on the circumstances of the group where they are going to be implemented. Likewise, it is the group itself who decides which book to read as long as the choice of a classic book is respected.

People who take part in the Gathering attend having read previously agreed pages and, once in the gathering, when it is their turn, they talk about the contents of the text and the ideas they have derived from it. Participants explain paragraphs or excerpts which they selected because, for example, their attention was drawn to them or because they particularly enjoyed them or because they brought back memories. The Gathering is about sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings which participants experience when reading the text with the rest of the group.

One person takes on the role of Gathering moderator. This could be the teacher, a relative, a volunteer or anyone. The moderator is equal in status to everyone else and so cannot impose his/her own opinion or viewpoint. Their role consists of ensuring that everyone contributes and respects turn-taking as well as the opinions of others. Priority is placed on those who are less participative or who experience more difficulties so that participation is as egalitarian and diversified as possible.

The Gathering starts when the moderator asks a participant to read a paragraph out loud and explain to the rest of the group why they chose that part and which items they wish to highlight in said text. Once they have stated their opinions to the rest of the participants, the moderator opens up the discussion to all participants so they may share their opinions and reflections on that paragraph. Once all opinions on that particular excerpt have been considered, someone else stands to read another paragraph and so on. Thus, new meaning is created in a dialogic way. The aim is not to arrive at a particular conclusion or one opinion on each reading, but to create room for dialogue and joint reflection. An inter-subjective dialogue is put into practice helping everyone to examine remarkable topics in more depth together and, at the same time, connect their practice with forms of instrumental learning.

The methodology and the process followed in DLGs are summarised in the following chart and elaborated on in the *Manual de Tertulia Literaria Dialógica* by CONFAPPA (2012):

1. A work of classic universal literature is chosen. To do this, several texts are proposed to participants for them to decide between. Each person chooses to propose a book to the others, explaining the reasons why they would like to read it.
2. Once the book has been chosen, an agreement is made with participants as to how many pages will be read by the next gathering. Again, at the end of the next session the process is repeated.
3. Participants will read the agreed pages at home, identifying the paragraph they enjoyed the most or which particularly drew their attention.
4. During the gathering, the reading is discussed focussing particularly on chosen paragraphs. The participants who have chosen those paragraphs ask to interject.
5. The moderator grants speaking turns to each participant who reads out loud their chosen paragraph and provides reasons as to why they chose it.
6. The moderator opens discussion up to everyone so that other participants may comment on each paragraph.
7. The process repeats for each paragraph, following the chapter/section order of the text, until the book is finished.

An example of experience with dialogic gatherings:

The following extract quotes Kaoutar El Bina, a pupil from the 5th grade in primary school, and illustrates the development of values such as coexistence, respect and tolerance as in DLGs:

'A very important thing that I have learnt in the Gatherings is what my classmates think and the way they think. I could not have imagined they were thinking the things they say in the gatherings. For example, when we are debating, I think one thing and someone else thinks differently about the same thing. At first I had the impression that all of us thought in the same manner. And I think now that everyone has their own way of thinking. We never get annoyed with each other in the gatherings not even when we have different opinions. At times my mind has changed on an idea that I originally did not agree with but the reasoning of my friends has convinced me. Sometimes I did not understand why they said something and by listening in the gathering I eventually understood it. For example that is what happened with loyalty, I did not understand what it meant but after listening in the gatherings, I finally understood it.'

El Bina, K. (2012). Las tertulias literarias son fantásticas porque salen debates de los grandes. *Suplemento Escuela*, 4, 3-4

Learning and transformation

Dialogic Literary Gatherings are not simply an opportunity to access classic literature. Shared knowledge is constructed by fostering dialogue and an exchange of interpretations which evolve from reading the work. Critical reading skills are also strengthened and reading comprehension improves cognitive skills.

This improvement in reading comprehension and global learning combine together with various 'technical' knowledge and skills development such as vocabulary, and spelling development, awareness of history and narration skills. Dialogue also greatly increases communicative skills, in respect of both turn-taking and giving opinions to the rest of the group; it also improves the expression of personal reflections and the power of reasoning.

Furthermore, through the various interactions which take place in the Gatherings and active participation in the shared construction of knowledge, an environment in which all contributions are appreciated and respected is created. It is a place where everyone can assist each other and practise values such as respect, tolerance, solidarity, coexistence and so on.

Summaries or dialogues

The following extract from the book *Aprendiendo Contigo*, gives an example how in reading *La Peste* by Albert Camus, shared knowledge is built and transformation processes are triggered. The chains of interaction and dialogue established in the Gatherings transform into a chain of mutual help and solidarity.

'One afternoon, Lourdes, teacher and Gathering coordinator, was surprised to hear Kepa saying to his mates that one of the books that he liked the most was La Peste of Albert Camus. 'It was difficult to understand it, but when I listened to my classmates one by one, things became clearer.' ... 'I also liked it a lot and what happens is when I go home I take the Gathering with me, in my thoughts. I often think about all the reflections and dialogues that we have share. The truth is that I remember those topics we have talked about and then I remember the story. It is as if all my classmates were inside me.' ... Somehow, between Luis Alberto and Kepa the established chain of dialogue ... turned into chain of solidarity and mutual help. Lourdes learnt that it was not necessary to provide summaries of the literary texts and actually it was not very useful to do so! By sharing the readings she ensured that her pupils would read universal classic literature books fully.' (Racionero et al., 2012, p.120).

Dialogic Literary Gatherings foster reading knowledge beyond the classroom. Aside from the conversations which children take home with them and into different contexts after participating, many centres have also made DLGs available to students' relatives, teaching staff, and other adults in the community. Gatherings with relatives contribute to generating new educational experiences which transform their own expectations as well as the learning atmosphere in the family. Participation of non-academic families of various cultural origins in Gatherings improves debates and learning for children.

For example, in one particular Learning Community the primary sixth grade group and a group of mothers read and shared *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare; this allowed them to jointly discuss love, wants, family and so on. In another Learning Community, a particular Dialogic Gathering about *Animal Farm* by Orwell, equally shared by students and relatives, could not be finished because everyone had further items to be commented on, discussed, asked and contributed.

The table below summarises exactly what Dialogic Literary Gathering are and what they are not:

DIALOGIC LITERARY GATHERINGS	
WHAT THEY ARE	WHAT THEY ARE NOT
1. DLGs are based on dialogic reading which involves a reading and collective interpretation which takes place in a process where reasoning is valued over assumptions of status or power. Through this dialogic process each person and the group as a whole add new dimensions of meaning to the reading of classic authors. A level of deep, critical thinking and comprehension are achieved together which would not happen if reading alone.	1. If book reading is not carried out or if there is a meeting about an interesting topic in which an expert transfers knowledge then it is not a DLG.
2. Books are masterpieces of literature of the intangible heritage of humanity.	2. If books are not masterpieces of literature of the intangible heritage of humanity, it is not a DLG.
3. The collective comprehension of text is generated through a process of collective interpretation which is mediated by egalitarian dialogue between all participants.	3. If dialogue is in accordance with pretensions of power where people with higher academic status monopolise the debate or impose their interpretations and not on the validity of reasoning, it is not a DLG.
4. Egalitarian dialogue fosters the development of values such as coexistence, respect and solidarity.	
5. DLGs can be carried out with relatives, community members, staff, volunteers and students from kindergarten, primary, secondary and A-level school.	

Source: Learning Communities website [checked on December 2017].

Evidences about the impact of the Dialogic Literary Gatherings

Currently, a lot of research has recorded the positive impact generated by the Dialogic Literary Gatherings in the different contexts in which they have been implemented (Soler, 2015). Below, we provide some of the results obtained by

the ChiPe project¹, research that has been carried out in six primary schools in the United Kingdom and Spain that implement this Successful Educational Action. These schools are located in very diverse neighbourhoods and serve students belonging to cultural minorities. Among the benefits obtained by the Dialogic Literary Gatherings in relation to the improvement of student outcomes are:

- Increase of academic achievement in relation to previous academic years.
- Enrichment of vocabulary, increase in the use of long sentences (more than 20 words) and complex linguistic constructions.
- Creation of dialogical learning environments.
- Changes in the intervention time of the teachers in the classroom, and an increase in the time in which the students intervene. More than 80% of the conversations recorded in the classroom during the Dialogic Literary Gatherings involve the students, with a participation of 75% of the students present in the classroom.
- Children ask questions and listen to each other. They provide arguments to justify their agreement or disagreement. They use their cultural baggage in their reasoning.
- High levels of attention during the session (50 to 60 minutes).
- The issues that arise in the Gatherings include moral, ethics or social justice issues, taboos or topics that students consider difficult to address.
- The majority of teachers affirm that they are surprised by the commitment, topics and enthusiasm that the students show in the Gatherings.
- Improvement of social relations.
- Very positive parental support.

7.2. Other Dialogic Gatherings

As detailed previously, the enthusiasm and results of participants who have taken part in Dialogic Literary Gatherings have resulted in its expansion to working with other great creations of humanity such as art, music and science.

¹ Website of the ChiPe Project, *Children's personal epistemologies: capitalizing on children's and families' knowledge in schools towards effective teaching and learning*, funded by the European Commission. Project directed by Rocio Garcia-Carrion and Linda Hargreaves, University of Cambridge: <https://chipeproject.eu/research-phases/> [checked on December 2017]

Dialogic Musical Gatherings: The communicative and expressive capacity of music is different from words. It is, for example, common to say that something cannot be expressed with words. The depth of music provides a great adventure. Classical music is listened to and talked about in Dialogic Musical Gatherings. Everyone enjoys, learns, discovers and shares through classical music. Mozart and Verdi Operas; Bach cantatas, Beethoven quartets and Mahler symphonies are a few examples of pieces used. For instance, in the Congress of Dialogic Literary and Musical Gatherings which took place in “3,000 dwellings” in the Seville district in 2009, children and adults listened to, were moved by and talked about some of the most beautiful arias of the Magic Flute by Mozart. The choir *Va, pensiero* of Nabucco by Giuseppe Verdi which was composed over one hundred and fifty years ago echoes present-day situations, leading to heated debates about crisis, people, racism and injustice.

Dialogic Art Gatherings: In these Gatherings, people create dialogue about works of art such as paintings by Picasso or Van Gogh and discuss related topics. For example debates about Frida Kahlo’s paintings once led to discussion on the history of Mexico, feminism, motherhood, and the history of painting.

Dialogic Mathematics Gatherings: What enigmas can be found in the most famous literary works? How can some mathematical problems be found? In these types of gatherings the idea is to discuss mathematics and its problems.

Dialogic Scientific Gatherings: Advances in certain fields such as nanoscience and nanotechnology that are changing the future of humanity, are often beyond reach of people with less of an academic background. Dialogic Scientific Gatherings strengthen the dialogue between science and society, make relationships closer and reinforce the ability of everybody to question, look for information and discuss the great mysteries to be solved.

Dialogic Pedagogic Gatherings: In these Gatherings, both teaching staff, relatives and others, read and discuss key original works in the field of education such as Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Paulo Freire and so on. These gatherings are described in detail in another unit.

A direct link to original literary, artistic and scientific works is fostered in all cases rather than using material which contains versions interpreted by others. In all cases, participants provide their interpretations of the item which is being considered in the Gathering (a literary text, a musical piece, a mathematical contribution and so on) and the activity is based on dialogic learning.

Although learning principles (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha & Racionero, 2008) have been explained previously, they are also listed as follows:

- **Egalitarian dialogue:** All contributions and opinions in the Gathering are respected in an egalitarian manner. Nobody can impose their opinion on

others as if it were the only one or the only valid one because they consider themselves an expert, because they are more highly trained in that particular subject or because they are the group moderator. Every contribution is accepted and valid, thus everything said is respected and it is possible to learn from one another.

- **Cultural intelligence:** Everyone has cultural intelligence, knowledge and experience acquired throughout their lives which enables them to offer valuable interpretations from a variety of viewpoints of the cultural works or scientific items under discussion. Egalitarian dialogue, by respecting the diversity of opinions, values the cultural intelligence of everyone.
- **Transformation:** This form of learning through dialogue and objective consideration of all opinions occurs throughout life, demonstrates the transformative capacity of people and is a continuous process. Knowledge acquired in the Gatherings changes personal lives and relationships with others. Participating in Gatherings is an opportunity to read, engage in dialogue and realise the dream of overcoming social stereotypes and accompanying barriers.
- **Instrumental dimension:** Participants can acquire academic and key knowledge and skills of every kind at the Gatherings: history, vocabulary, reading skills, IT skills and so on. Outside of the shared debates, participants often enjoy continuing their own knowledge acquisition on the topic by themselves on the internet or with friends and family and so on. What they learn may be shared later with the group.
- **Creation of meaning:** Connecting debates and knowledge with our own personal experiences, feelings, life lessons, personal and family history and so on, whether explicit or not contributes to the creation of meaning for everyone participating in the Gatherings. Learning and desire to learn go hand in hand so reflecting on the past and creating new expectations for the future enable personal reaffirmation and improvement in social relationships.
- **Solidarity:** Gatherings are open to anyone, there is no barrier. They cost nothing as they are free. There are no academic requirements, since the priority is the participation of people without an academic background. Egalitarian relationships are those which generate further caring relationships. Solidarity involves respect, trust and support always without obligation. Everyone learns from each other and relationships of solidarity are valued above age, ethnicity or religious differences which reach wider than the activity itself.
- **Equality of differences:** Everyone participating in the Gatherings is equal and different from one another. A key principle is the equality of people which is the right of all of them to live differently. Everyone without exclusion has the same right to their differences and to raise the quality of their lives.

To find out more:

De Botton, L., Girbes, S., Ruiz, L., & Tellado, I. (2014) Moroccan mothers' involvement in dialogic literary gatherings in a Catalan urban primary school: Increasing educative interactions and improving learning. *Improving Schools*, 17(3), p. 241-249.

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