BEWARE OF THE OPTIMISM OF THE INTERNET AGE: IN RESPONSE TO RUPERT WEGERIF'S 'APPLYING DIALOGIC THEORY TO ILLUMINATE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERACY EDUCATION AND TEACHING THINKING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERNET AGE'

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Abstract

The present article is written in response to Rupert Wegerif's recent discussion of the dialogic affordances of the Internet. While not trying to negate this dialogic potential, this contribution takes a rather more critical look at the multiplicity of voices present on the web, and argues that this multiplicity alone will not guarantee that our thinking becomes more dialogic. Rather, in order for this potential to be fulfilled, it is necessary to help users develop communicative and critical skills that will allow them to engage and interact effectively with the vast amount of knowledge made accessible on the Internet.

Keywords: dialogic thinking, Internet, communication strategies, critical literacy

In his recent article "Applying dialogic theory to illuminate the relationship between literacy education and teaching thinking in the context of the Internet Age", Rupert Wegerif (2016) invites his readers not "to agree to my claims through the overwhelming force of my argument, but rather to open a creative space of new possibilities through juxtaposing different perspectives such that new insights might emerge" (pp. 2-3). It is not just as a result of this explicit invitation that I write the following paragraphs, but also as a spontaneous response to his analysis of the opportunities offered by the Internet, whose force immediately set me thinking. As in the original article, my aim is to contribute to a dialogue that will help us better understand the affordances and difficulties associated with the availability of information through the medium of the Internet.

One of the main tenets of Wegerif's analysis of the potentialities of the Internet lies in the fact that, while the invention of print led to a monolithic, monologic understanding of knowledge that suggests that "there is only one correct version of reality and one correct method of thinking" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 10), the abundance of information on the Internet allows for a more dialogic understanding of reality (Holt, 2004). This dialogic understanding is characterized by the fact that it allows for "creative reasoning in which there are always multiple perspectives at play" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 4). Thus, according to Wegerif, our age is able to return to a more dialogic mode of understanding, a mode that through the challenge it poses to received and accepted ideas has the potential to move beyond them and allow for a co-construction of new insights which will hopefully allow us to better understand the world around us, i.e. advance scientific enquiry, although this latter objective is never mentioned by Wegerif himself.

However, while challenging received knowledge and thinking beyond what seems to be accepted by everyone, not least by the educational systems, is without doubt a requisite for new understandings to emerge, the multiplicity of voices in itself is probably not enough to guarantee this happening (UNESCO, 2005). First of all, as Pariser (2011) points out, the multiplicity of voices and viewpoints the Internet provides us with may not be such. In fact, his analysis of the results of web searches or of the services offered by the Internet providers to different users show that these are tailored to the users' assumed preferences, needs and points of view, thus creating what Pariser calls *filter bubbles* for users that limit the information they are actually exposed to.

Even assuming that the access to a variety of information is guaranteed by the multiplicity of voices present on the net, when we analyse the kind of dialogue that is fostered, we quickly become aware of certain limitations. Thus, contrary to what Wegerif seems to imply when talking about the Internet as dialogic, most of what is published online goes uncontested. Of course, there are discussion groups and forums, but more often than not their users play the role of *lurkers* (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 175), and while it is certainly true that the immediacy of the communication does generate greater levels of participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013), it remains to be seen what the quality of this involvement is. When writing this response to Wegerif's article, the editors gave me the option of doing so on the

journal's Facebook page. I have no doubt that, had I chosen this medium, my answer would have been a completely different one. The very immediacy of the communication, coupled with the fact that the Internet and its users give preference to shorter texts imply that, in all likelihood, texts published online, especially when created directly for publication on the web, will have taken less time (and thought?) in their production, and are probably more direct and to the point (Baron, 2011). Both these characteristics will certainly have an impact on the content of the communication, and thus on the potential of these texts to trigger the dialogic thinking Wegerif claims is typical of interaction on the web. Thus, neither the—assumed—multiplicity of information nor the immediacy of the exchange of this information or the sharing of various points of view guarantee in themselves that thinking in the Internet age becomes automatically more dialogic.

Going back to the idea that much of what is published on the web is not contested, when there are responses to Internet publications, as is the case of blog entries and the like, most of the times the responses stand side by side, with only the author of the original post responding, if at all.[1] Thus, although there may be a multiplicity of voices, we can hardly talk about there being a dialogue, if understood in Bakhtinian terms:

> The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*. Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice, that is, in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voices-consciousnesses the idea is born and lives. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 88, quoted in Wegerif 2016, p. 10)

In those cases when there is an exchange, there is more of an accumulation of ideas and points of view, rather than an exchange and an interaction between them. This is what Wegerif, in his own work in collaboration with Neil Mercer, calls *cumulative talk* (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, & Sams, 2004), a kind of talk that is not conducive to knowledge construction or sharing of understandings and thinking (Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 16). Thus, although the Internet does guarantee the possibility for multiple voices to be heard, the simple accumulation of voices will not amount to a dialogic interaction between them.

On the other hand, as one of the arguments to prove that the wealth of information does indeed generate an interaction with the information provided, Wegerif claims that "anyone using Wikipedia needs to learn how to check sources and therefore how to participate, if only in a modest way, in producing knowledge for themselves as well as passively consuming the knowledge that has already been produced and written down by others" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 10). However, looking at

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[1] *According to the statistics provided by Wordpress, one of the most important providers of blog hosting, "its users produce 39.3 million new posts and 42.7 million new comments each month" (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013, p. 1107), which means that there is an average of little more than one comment for each blog post.*

the way my students use sources such as Wikipedia I get the impression that they read these text in exactly the same way as if it was print. What appears in Wikipedia must be correct and accurate, as in fact it has been proven to be, so the space for dialogic interaction that the medium of the Internet could, in principle, afford, is not made use of. Rather, the information is consumed as it was when the medium was written print. I would argue that the reason for this probably lies in the fact that not enough has changed in educational systems around the world to turn the monologic thinking predominant in schools (Wegerif 2016, p. 10) into a more dialogic one. Additionally, as Wegerif points out in the quote above, Wikipedia users will have "to *learn* how to check sources and therefore how to participate …" (emphasis added; see also EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012). Yet, when we look at the impact this new need has had on curricular planning or education in general, we find that we still lack approaches to develop the new skills required (UNESCO, 2005), hence the behaviour displayed by many of my students. As always, there will be those who develop the necessary skills spontaneously, as they would probably develop the ability of reading in any kind of context, but our focus needs to stay with those that don't master these skills without appropriate guidance, and quite probably constitute the majority of the population (Menchen-Trevino & Hargittai, 2011, p. 29).

Interestingly, and counter to reason, not even the wealth of often contradictory information available on the web will automatically generate the skills necessary to engage in dialogue to then construct "knowledge for oneself". Often students reflect these opposing views without any degree of awareness of the contradictions expressed, since they lack the necessary ability to analyse and synthesize these differing views. To engage with the large amount of information, and make it productive for oneself, we need skills that cannot necessarily be expected to develop spontaneously. Thus, unless this specific training is made available, the dialogic potential of Internet communication will not be realised to its full (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 23).

Of course, as is the case with the example of Sam's learning to program with Scratch through interaction with other users provided in Wegerif's article, there are environments that foster this kind of engagement with and use of other people's ideas typical of dialogic thinking. However, the "peer-to-peer education" afforded by the Internet minimally requires a critical ability to identify a problem, in itself an ability that is more typical of an educated expert than of a novice (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), and the communication strategies necessary to "listen" to another voice and relate the new ideas to one's own. As Mercer (2000) makes clear in his work, we cannot take the latter ability for granted.

The same happens with a further potential of the Internet as an educational tool, that of offering an audience that would help students learn to decentre and take somebody else's perspective on an issue. As Brown (1984) proved a long time ago, this process of decentring is one that characterizes the speech production of the academically successful, and in their cases normally occurs through engaging in spontaneous interaction such as storytelling, often in the context of the home.

However, contrary to what Wegerif seems to imply (2016, p. 13), in the case of children from less educationally privileged backgrounds this decentring does often not occur as part of a normal maturation process, but needs to be specifically addressed. If the process of decentring can in itself not always be taken for granted, it is doubtful that a medium in which the "horizon to which one speaks" is "absent" (Wegerif 2016, p. 12) would prove helpful. After all we learn to decentre precisely through the immediate interaction with others who bring a different point of view to the exchange, and who may ask for clarification if the speaker hasn't decentred enough to be able to provide the information that the listener requires to understand the message.

This is also my interpretation of what happens in the example provided by Wegerif in the article, where the student Angelina, through oral interaction with her peers, finally understands the nature of data representation through a graph. Wegerif seems to assume that it is the understanding of the function of the graph to display information to an assumed audience that brings about the change in Angelina's understanding. In my reading of the description provided by Wegerif, however, it becomes quite clear that Angelina comes round to understanding the nature of the graph precisely because her peers make it clear to her through immediate oral interaction. After all, her change in understanding comes as a result of "listening intently" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 14) to her classmates. Here the audience is not remote or abstract but rather immediate and tangible; it is an audience that responds to Angelina's views, and by so doing contributes to changing them. It is thus, in Bakhtin's words, the "living contact" that makes the dialogue, and thus the change of mind, possible, and the understanding that a graph serves to represent data for an audience would be the outcome of this contact. What this indicates is the crucial importance of talking about understandings, of "languaging" (Swain, 2006) them.

The immediacy and tangibility of interlocutors may be especially relevant in an age like ours that affords incredible opportunities for communication, but a communication characterized by remoteness (Wessels, 2010, p. 49). Thus, while there have never been as many possibilities to communicate as nowadays, there have also never been as many problems to establish real, personal communication as in our days. If, furthermore, it is true that, as Goodwin (2011, quoted in Wegerif 2016, p. 11) says, "[p]eople do not just communicate, they are motivated to speak and express themselves through relationships. Relationship is the medium of meaning where meanings are not to be understood on the model of things but on the model of differences within a flow", then we need to make sure these relationships are established in the concrete world of the here and now first, so that the interlocutors can then transfer the experience of true communication to other, more remote, contexts such as technology-mediated communication (see Christakis, Gilkerson, Richards, Zimmerman, Garrison, Xu, Gray, & Yapanel 2009 for a study comparing the effect of direct interaction and TV-mediated interaction). After all, as we know since Piaget's studies, the sensorimotor phase precedes any more abstract learning.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

The Internet has made visible that the assumption that "there is only one correct version of reality and one correct method of thinking" (Wegerif, 2016, p. 10) is an illusion, if ever there was such a belief. This has the potential of creating a space where more dialogic thinking, and thus the more rapid and collaborative creation of new understandings of the world become possible, as Wegerif rightly points out in the article discussed here. However, it is my fear that his analysis of the situation may fall into the trap of the "the optimism of the Internet age" (Wheeler, 2011, pp. 188-89) and assume that the simple presence of information will bring about profound changes in the ways this information is used, made productive and brought into dialogue. This, unfortunately, is not likely to happen. Rather, in order to live up to this potential, we need to make sure that the users of this powerful means are up to the task. To my mind, this will require two fundamental kinds of training: the development of communication skills that allow for real dialogue, and the development of critical thinking skills, tied to critical literacy skills that will allow users to engage in dialogue with the ideas and create a synthesis of existing understandings, separating what is reliable from what isn't. The development of neither of these two can be taken for granted.

As for the first set of skills, communication skills, their development will surely benefit from the immediacy provided by oracy, rather than be developed through the written medium of the Internet. It is the immediacy of the oral communication that allows for instant feedback, change and, generally, negotiation of meaning and understanding. It is therefore this context where productive communication strategies are likely to be developed. The written word, be it in print or through the medium of the Internet, creates the illusion of a stable truth and relegates the interlocutor to an abstract, removed entity, and is therefore not very likely to foster the development of these communication skills. Anybody who has had to revise a text written by him or herself knows how much more difficult the task is if compared to modulating a view expressed in speaking. It is also in this immediate, concrete context where the basic openness "to all that is other" (Wegerif 2016, p. 18) that lies at the heart of "dialogic literacy education for the Internet Age" (ibid) will most easily be learnt (Prekop 2002).

What this would call for is a focus in education on developing skills for successful communication of thinking, such as shown by the "Thinking Together" approach, developed, among others, by Wegerif himself. Looking at education in many parts of the world, however, we need to add another (obvious) element to the development of appropriate communication skills: increasing students' opportunities to talk about their emerging understandings, to *language* understanding (Ritchhart & Perkins 2008). Much of the teaching in our classrooms is still teacher- and/or text-guided, offering students few opportunities for engaging with the new contents and the concepts they are beginning to understand. Unless this space is granted, and students get opportunities to contrast their understandings with that of their peers, the teaching-learning process will not have moved on much from the

monologic view of knowledge Wegerif attributes to the emergence of print, and sees challenged by the multiplicity of voices that become accessible by the click of the mouse through the appearance of the Internet.

The second kind of training that becomes necessary is more related to the development of

> higher-order problem solving skills. Reading print on paper and reading online share many core characteristics, but reading online demands a greater ability to evaluate information critically within the context of a seemingly infinite universe of available options. Likewise, there is an increasing need for the ability to extract and use knowledge from an ever growing number of online resources. (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 23)

A great number of proposals are being put forward, all aiming to develop students' critical engagement with information and text, as is witnessed by the great number of publications with terms like "thinking" or "inquiry" in their titles. Whether or not the approaches, techniques and models proposed really contribute to developing the necessary skills in the younger generations remains to be seen, but at least they constitute attempts to answer this need for increased critical thinking and literacy skills required by the immediate availability of often contradictory information, and thus reflect an awareness of its existence. Let us hope that they provide viable models whose use can then be extended to make sure that the largest number of individuals possible can benefit from the opportunities to develop more dialogic mindsets that the Internet affords.

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