WEB-BASED DIALOGUE IN TEACHING

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Introduction

Modern concepts of learning include ideas of relevance, communication and dialogue. These ideas are present both in traditional classroom teaching, tutoring and web-based teaching. Independent working and thinking are still important parts of learning processes but, at the same time, the aim of creating new knowledge demands a great deal of participation with others – other students, tutors, teachers, and working life, to name but a few.

Teachers’ communication competencies consist of skills such as meeting different kinds of people in an equal way, dealing with conflicts, caring of other people’s learning, creating communality, and networking. One important qualification is the skill of dialogue.

Dialogue differs from conversations. The aim of dialogue is to create common understanding, but it is not merely a technical method. A successful dialogue is based on dialogical attitude, which means active participation, commitment, reciprocal reaction, respect, openness, and discussion without me-centricity.

A teacher who works in web-based learning environments needs skills for successful dialogue. These skills are related to responding, asking meaningful questions and opening new paths for students. These skills can be practised, and this practice should be an essential part of teacher education.

Communality in Teaching and Learning

Learning is fundamentally interhuman action. Without other people we cannot reflect on our development, we do not receive feedback when making mistakes, and thus, can neither maintain our motivation nor develop our professional pride. Without other people we are totally alone when studying. (Lehto - Terva 2002.) It is very important that students are working in groups also when studying in web-based learning environments. Compared to traditional classroom studies the risk to be left alone is bigger when studying alone by means of electronic networks. Dialogue is essential in supporting co-operation and communality in student groups.

In blended studies, face-to-face situations can be used for facilitating communality and esprit de corps. However, it is also possible and important to provide this support in web-based teaching. When planning an online course, teachers should also plan the kind of social and educational interaction and co-operation they wish to accomplish on the web. Efforts should be made to create a learning environment whose contents, tasks, exercises, and methods support the emergence of co-operative educational community (Kiviniemi 2002). To enhance social networking and the feeling of community the activities of the course should be so designed that they require collaboration. Students can communicate with each other and the
teacher in various ways. Group activities in the course are not there for the mere fancy effect, but each task must be relevant and tightly connected with the topics of the course. (Torp-Manni 2006.)

Learning is not only assimilating factual contents but also individual constructing of knowledge. Therefore, the organiser of the training has to offer to the students a possibility to communicate on the web. In web-based teaching a typical way of collaborative working is online discussion. In online discussion it is important to be aware of the fact that also contradictory views and opinions can help to understand the topic under discussion, and potentially different ways of thinking can be an important part of mutual interaction. This kind of studies can become collaborative construction of knowledge. (Kiviniemi 2002.)

The web-based environment has increasingly become a means of sharing and analysing experiences. This can be called collaborative learning. Knowledge is not only delivered to students but knowledge is developed through mutual dialogue. When dialogue takes the central position, it can be discovered that the learning environment is actually composed of mutual dialogue, not, for instance, of the physical circumstances or network tools. (Kiviniemi 2002.)

When studying collaboratively, students support and tutor each other’s studies. They work according to the idea of shared expertise, which is necessary in modern working life, where expertise of different specialised areas is required in problem solving. (Kiviniemi 2002.)

The communality of students and teachers or tutors in a web-based learning environment is not a static condition but a developing process. Lehto and Terva (2002) describe the development of communality in five steps:

- **Step 1:** No communality, no communication, the web-based learning environment is only a store for material
- **Step 2:** Communication between a teacher and a student, not between students
- **Step 3:** Spontaneous communication between students
- **Step 4:** Independent learning; students plan and impact actively on the objectives of the course, also without a teacher, students have good skills for independent learning
- **Step 5:** Ideal communality, self-directive learning of the group working on the web

A group working on the web as self-directively as possible is an example of an ideal of communality and collaborative learning (the 5th step above). The objectives for the studies are planned collectively in the framework of the given study programme. Small groups are formed as students learn to know each other and communicate with each other. Students can find friends and look for study material independently on the web. They can also create material and make it available for other students to see in the web-based learning environment. The task of the tutor is to motivate, facilitate learning and evaluate to the extent that is needed, in addition to self-evaluation. (Lehto - Terva 2002.)

**What is dialogue?**

All discussion is not dialogue in the strict sense of the word. Dialogue is communication between two or more participants. It is active, committed, mutual, respectful, open, and sincere (Aarnio - Enqvist).
Dialogue can be defined as thinking together based on people’s equal participation in trying to understand a matter of action (Aarnio - Enqvist 2004). Dialogue is different from discussion, because discussion is not necessarily objective-oriented. It is also different from debate, because in debate one tries to convince to the others that one’s point of view is correct. Dialogue is not a set of monologues, either, because monologues are well thought-out opinions, not discussion or dialogue. As a method of collaborative thinking and problem solving, dialogue is superior compared, for instance, to debate or discussion (Slotte).

In dialogue one brings out semi-finished thoughts and opinions. One also listens to and tries to understand the others’ views. In dialogue one tries to evaluate critically both own and others’ opinions. The purpose is to understand the topic better. The objective of dialogue is to produce new common understanding. In true dialogue one is concerned about others, not oneself only, trusting others, respecting their views, and appreciating the uniqueness of others. (Mällinen 2007.)

Dialogue is not easy. The communicative skills needed in dialogue can and must be learned by practising. The tutor can act as an example and support students in dialogue. Dialogue promotes communicative learning and, on the other hand, communicative learning promotes dialogue.

**Basic elements of pedagogical dialogue**

The basic elements of pedagogical dialogue include issues such as active involvement, participation and commitment. It means that you are ready to continue discussion even when the topic or situation is not comfortable for you, and you care for others and respect them. In dialogue it is important that everyone can participate and the roles (e.g. teacher, student and visitor) are not crucial. What is crucial is that every opinion is as valuable. Dialogue cannot succeed without dialogical attitude, which Aarnio and Enqvist (2001) have divided as follows:

- active participation
- commitment to conversation
- reciprocal reaction and communication
- open, sincere expression
- respecting attitude and
- conversation and listening without me-centricity.

It is also possible to define dialogue by the skills required. Aarnio and Enqvist (2001) list skills which are all fundamental in a successful dialogue, and which are all also skills that can be learned. E-learning processes enable learning these skills, because in a web-based environment teachers can see what their intervention is and stop and read (or ‘listen’) carefully what the others have to say. These skills for dialogue are skills of:

- expressing oneself
- listening
- receiving the real meaning of message
- focused continuing and building on others’ messages
- making enquiries for better understanding
- bounding the messages and
- positive wondering.
For a traditional teacher these skills can be a real challenge. A teacher’s role in dialogue is not to know better but to make the right kind of interventions and openings of discussions. A teacher has to make dialogical transmissions, but it has to be done with the elements students have created for discussion.

**Responsiveness in dialogue**

In addition to skills for dialogue, an essential viewpoint in dialogue is responsiveness. It means being responsive enough in order to hear and see the message and stopping and considering what the key-word or key-sentence is in a student’s comment. It is possible to give support for student’s thinking by asking meaningful, open questions. Open questions help to create new shared knowledge and they also promote learning in the framework of responsiveness. Openness in questions means that there is no preconception behind the question; teachers do not ask questions for which they already know the answer and, therefore the answers are not foreseeable. So-called closed questions seek for expected answers and give the student a possibility to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

An open question starts with an interrogative word and questions are simple and short. Good ways of starting questions are beginnings like:

- How do you think..?
- What does it mean..?
- How do you feel..?
- What, if..?
- What is this a result of..?
- How do you explain..?
- What are the consequences if..?

In sum: Dialogue means thinking together and understanding everyone’s value in a knowledge creating process.

**References**


