Promoting Dialogic Teaching
Among Higher Education Faculty in South Africa

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How can educators best be guided to adopt and implement a teaching approach that diverges considerably from their existing practice? This is the challenge we have been grappling with at the University of Johannesburg in a teaching methodology course that is being presented to two multi-cultural groups of adult learners. The one group consists of educators within the context of adult and higher education and the other group consists of nursing students. Both these groups enroll for the teaching methodology course as part of a formal qualification in their respective fields. Our aim in the course is to guide and assist the learners to adopt a learning-centered dialogic teaching approach. The majority of learners who enroll for the course are used to and/or implement a predominantly transmission or delivery mode of teaching. In contrast the conception of teaching as dialogue that we espouse, advocate, and model has been inspired and informed by the views of many scholars, in particular those of Paulo Freire (1971), Ira Shor (1992, 1996), Nicolas Burbules (1993), and Jane Vella (1994, 2000). We conceptualize dialogic teaching as a reciprocal communicative educational relationship, with participants (educators and learners) exploring, thinking, inquiring, and reasoning together (Gravett, 2005). The communicative educational relationship is respectful, reciprocal, and learning-centered as it is dominated by neither the educator nor the learners. However, the dialogue is not free-flowing as it is purposefully structured via series of inter-connected learning tasks (Gravett, 2005; Vella, 2000) to enable and foster active inter-subjective meaning making related to the topic or learning content under consideration. The learning tasks involve questioning, responses, comments, reflective observations, redirections, and building of ideas that form a continuous and developmental sequence with a view to breaking through to, articulating, examining, and validating the knowledge that is co-constructed by the educator and learners. Consequently, the educator directs the curriculum, but does so democratically with the participation of learners, constantly "balancing the need for structure with the need for openness" (Shor, 1992, p.16). In doing so, the learning becomes "public and communal" (Shulman, 1993, p.39). As dialogic teachers, we concur with Shulman that "learning is least useful when it is private and hidden; it is most powerful when it becomes public and communal. Learning flourishes when we take what we think we know and offer it as community property among fellow learners so that it can be tested, examined, challenged, and improved before we internalize it …" (p. 39).

Our teaching methodology course is underpinned by the notion that transforming existing ways of thinking and doing requires that learners come to awareness and there is indeed a

need for transformation. Also, the process of transformation often further requires the 'unlearning' of outdated information and ways of doing. This means that old views, knowledge, perceptions, and experience need to be examined in the light of either the present situation or new demands. It can be argued that developmental processes that aim at achieving substantial modification of existing ways of thinking and acting need to focus intentionally on fostering a transformation. This implies that courses or programs aimed at development should not present the new or desired way of thinking and doing as a given, but should involve participants in examining, enhancing, and, if required, converting their current reality. Consequently, teaching development processes that focus solely on acquiring or improving techniques or skills usually culminate in superficial and temporary change. Given the above, our course was grounded on the notion that an intentional focus on the fostering of transformative learning regarding teaching practice would increase the probability of enduring transformation in teaching. Furthermore, our dialogic teaching approach employs strategies "essential to transformative learning such as promoting critical reflection and establishing trusting and authentic relationships with students" (Taylor, 2000, p. 321). Consequently, the type of teaching (and learning) that we promote and model sits very comfortably within transformative learning theory.

The design and implementation of our course took account of the following aspects and processes that shape a transformative experience: (a) a triggering event (disorienting dilemma) that leads to an awareness of inconsistency amongst thoughts, feelings, and actions, or a realization that previous views and approaches no longer seem adequate, resulting in the experience of disequilibrium; (b) identification of prior interpretations or views (assumptions, perceptions, and presuppositions) that are held largely unconsciously; (c) a questioning and examining of held views, including the context that shaped them and the consequences of holding them; (d) an engagement in reflective and constructive dialogue (discourse) in which alternative views are explored and assessed; (e) a revision of views and in some cases broad perspectives to make them more discriminating and justifiable; (f) action arising from revision; and (g) a building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships (Cranton, 2002; Gravett, 2004; Mezirow, 2000).

In view of the above, the course was designed to create a transformative space that would afford the learners ample opportunity to articulate their experience and existing views about being educators and to bring these into critical awareness through a dialogic process that induces reflection, challenge, and assessment. In our experience, this critical exploration generally triggers a feeling of disequilibrium that makes learners susceptible to new ideas. We then use this initial exploration as "foundational discourse" (Shor, 1996, p.41) for introducing new views via a series of carefully sequenced learning tasks.

Guiding Learners to Adopt and Implement Dialogic Teaching

In presenting the teaching methodology course, we both model and implement the content of the course. In other words, the learners see the curriculum of the teaching methodology course in action. As indicated, learning tasks form the backbone of our version of dialogic teaching. Thus, in the course we use learning tasks as teaching and learning device and ask of learners to engage with learning tasks themselves in-class and out-of class via a learning portfolio, while they learn how to implement dialogic teaching.

Learning Tasks as Teaching and Learning Devices

A learning task is based on an open question and it requires that learners respond to or act on the learning content either individually or in small learning teams. Some learning tasks invite learners to articulate their existing views (inductive tasks) or call for summary or analysis of important sections of the learning content (input tasks). Other tasks require critical analysis, reflection, problem identification, problem solving, explanation, application, and synthesis (implementation, summary, and integration tasks) (Gravett, 2005; Vella, 2000).

Learning tasks are used in the following way: The task with which learners must engage is presented to them in writing. For example, an input task could require that learners listen to a short presentation and then in small learning teams identify and summarize the main ideas in the presentation – with a time limit for completion. The time allocated to work on the task can be anywhere from two minutes to much longer, depending on the type of task, time available and level of complexity. After completing the task, teams have an opportunity to respond, usually through large group discussions. We then summarize the learners' feedback of their engagement with the task by, for example, exploring similarities and differences between the responses of different teams or by synthesizing the different responses. Further elaboration or explanation follows, if necessary. We then move on to the next learning task, ensuring that we maintain the connection between tasks. It is our contention that learning tasks enable reciprocal interaction, exploration, inquiry, and theorizing, which we believe is the type of dialogue that is referred to in transformative learning terms as *reflective* and *constructive discourse*.

Our Teaching Methodology Course

In the previous section, we explained the role of learning tasks as teaching and learning device in our approach to dialogic teaching. In this section, we provide an overview of our teaching methodology course, which consists of four broad phases. In the discussion of each phase, we explain the underlying purpose, provide examples of learning tasks, and describe how these help to shape transformative learning experiences. In the first phase, we assist learners to describe and examine their existing knowledge, perceptions, experience, and feelings regarding teaching, knowledge, and learning, as well as how they have arrived at these. For example, we start by setting inductive tasks which aim at inviting students to

articulate their existing views on learning, teaching, and knowledge. Such tasks are phrased as follows:

<u>Personal beliefs about learning</u>
With a learning partner briefly discuss (approximately 10 minutes): (1) What you believe learning is and how you know when you have learned something; (2) How you came to this belief about learning; and (3) Discuss the process you follow when you have to learn something (e.g., new academic material).

<u>Personal beliefs about knowledge</u>
With a learning partner discuss (approximately 10 minutes): (1) What you believe knowledge is; (2) What it means to be knowledgeable; (3) How you came to this belief about knowledge

<u>Personal beliefs about teaching</u>
With a learning partner discuss: "My beliefs about teaching" (approximately 10 minutes). Consider such things as: (1) A description of what you think teaching is; (2) How you know whether teaching was successful; (3) How you came to this belief.

We elicit responses from a few groups and through questioning, contrasting, and hypothesizing, we help learners to analyze their responses carefully. We view this intentional exploration of learners' assumptions, perceptions, presuppositions, and feelings in their own language, prior to the introduction of the academic discourse, as essential. The use of inductive tasks, such as the examples provided above, serve as catalysts for the launching of (critical) dialogue between the learners and the educator, a dialogue which is carefully nurtured throughout the course. We hope that the process of critical reflection and discussion that begins here, which learners engage in thereafter in the course, will enable them to become aware of their beliefs and feelings, open them to revision, and ultimately help them integrate newly appropriated meanings into an informed and conscious theory of practice (Jarvis, 1999). The use of learning tasks such as these (and particularly the interactive discussion during the larger group-sharing that follows such tasks) in this phase, also serve as a triggering event for learners. It is in this process that learners come to a heightened awareness that their previously-held ideas and views may no longer be adequate. Within the first phase learners are afforded the opportunity to make explicit (identify) the assumptions, perceptions, and presuppositions underpinning their existing views about learning, teaching, and knowledge, ideas which are largely unconscious and thus most often unexamined. This is a crucial step in helping learners transform their ideas about teaching and learning in the course.

In the second phase, learners begin to inquire into and assess an alternative approach to teaching. This is accomplished by introducing them to constructivist views of knowledge

and learning (Candy, 1991; Phillips; 1995; Garrison & Archer, 2000) that informs dialogic teaching. Learners have the opportunity to examine the newly introduced ideas and explore alternate views of learning and teaching, albeit largely on a more abstract level. Learning in this phase is also structured via a sequence of learning tasks, which ask learners to interact with the academic content. In this process, learners are once again prompted to question their deeply held views, to examine how they have come to form these views, and reflect on the consequences of holding onto them. Learners are thus provided with the opportunity to compare their existing ideas about learning and teaching with those that they are being exposed to in the course. As educators, careful sequencing of the learning tasks in this phase allows us to capitalize on the possibilities for extending learners' experience of disequilibrium triggered in the first phase. This provides the ideal space for learners to begin a reflective and constructive dialogue with us, in which we can explore together the newly-introduced, alternate views. An example of a task used in this phase to structure this dialogue is as follows:

Promoting a social constructivist perspective on learning for teaching
1. Listen to a presentation on a social constructivist perspective on learning.
2. Having listened to the presentation, individually write down what you view as the core ideas of this perspective. Share these views with your learning team. We will share some of your responses in the larger group.
3. In your learning teams, describe four ways the presentation inform your teaching. We will share some of your responses in the larger group.

In the third phase, the educator and learners investigate the fundamentals of a dialogic approach to teaching drawing on the content of the previous phase. Here learners, together with the educator, identify and describe the defining features of dialogic teaching and discuss the actions of a dialogic teacher. Learners also have the opportunity to use selected strategies and techniques associated with dialogic teaching. Once again, we use a variety of learning tasks to structure this communication and interaction with students. These learning tasks range from those that ask learners to explain simply the fundamentals of dialogic teaching to those learning tasks that encourage learners to use these in new creative ways in their own working contexts. An example of the type of learning tasks would be:

A graphic depiction of dialogic teaching
Design a graphic representation to illustrate dialogic teaching as you see it in your context. Prepare notes in which you explain the graphic representation. Pay particular attention to the interrelationship of different concepts encapsulated in the graphic representation.

<u>A dialogic learning event</u>
Think of a theme which you would typically explore with learners in your context. Write the theme as a heading for your learning event. Now design the learning event. Prepare brief notes in which you explain the rationale for your design.

The latter task is helpful for encouraging students to revise their views on teaching and learning so as to make them more discriminating and justifiable. First, in designing a learning event, learners get to put into practice the alternative views of teaching they have been exposed to and learn how to contextualize it for their own teaching contexts. However, it is in having to provide good reasons for their design, that learners' understanding and ability to discern the nuances and subtleties of the new approaches to teaching are tested. This type of task is thus useful for the students to judge their ability to differentiate between their old practices and the new approaches and to validate the adoption of new ways of doing.

This process culminates in the fourth phase, which is designed to facilitate considered action, in that students are invited to pull together and implement all that they have learned. Learning tasks in this phase require that learners design a plan for integrating the various elements of the course (stemming from a revised view of learning, with dialogic teaching as a basis, and using specific teaching devices and strategies in novel and creative ways) within a context of their choice. They are also expected to clarify and discuss the interplay between the various elements of their plan and to infuse the theory studied in the course in the explanation of their design. This is followed by practical demonstration of the plan in action, accompanied by feedback from peers and the educator. We have found that in this phase, educator and co-learner support is crucial to helping learners to start developing the competence and self-confidence in the new roles and relationships they are assuming.

As indicated, the process described above is not limited to the classroom. To nurture and sustain the dialogue outside of the classroom, we structure a sequence of learning tasks that accompany the in-class activities. Through the duration of the course, learners are called on to respond individually, in writing, to a series of learning tasks, on the same themes dealt with in class, thereby compiling a portfolio of their learning. The learning portfolio provides a formal record of students' learning for the benefit of both the learners and the educator. It, therefore, serves a dual purpose: it extends the critical dialogue between the educator and the learners outside the classroom and it helps to reinforce learning. The out-of-class tasks build on the in-class deliberations, but require, in our view, even deeper analysis, because students are required to reflect carefully through writing. Used in this way learning tasks provide learners with "learning experiences that are direct, personally engaging and stimulate reflection upon experience" (Taylor, 2007, p.182).

Lessons Learned

What lessons have we learned through the offering of this course about the fostering of transformative learning in general and enabling change in teaching practice specifically? First, the notion of a "learning edge" is very important in facilitating transformative learning (Wlodlowski, 1999, p. 28). Wlodkowski explains that learners are most susceptible to new learning when they are on the edge of their comfort zones – their "learning edge." To facilitate transformative learning, educators need to create the conditions under which learners are pushed towards their learning edge, where they are challenged and encouraged towards critical reflection. However, in our experience educators should be aware that if learners are pushed too far they can become defensive, resist the new learning and withdraw in order to keep safe. Our reflections on this course over a number of years have taught us the value of initiating and sustaining a caring and collaborative context characterized by trust and respect in the process of pushing learners to their "learning edge." Educators working towards transformative learning, therefore, need to maintain a careful balance between challenge and comfort in their interactions with learners. In our view, this is in line with the ideal conditions for participants in discourse as expressed by Mezirow (1995).

Secondly, the main focus of this course is to enable revised action, which implies that learners themselves have to implement a new teaching methodology. Based on our own reflection and learners' feedback, we have realized the importance of consistently serving as a role model for learners by explicitly modeling what is expected from them when they have to enact the teaching methodology in their own teaching settings. Coupled with this is the importance of creating space for learners to reflect on: (a) the theoretical underpinning of the course, (b) what they see being modeled to them about implementing dialogic teaching, and (c) their experiences as learners in a course using a dialogic teaching approach. We have found that this multi-layered reflection is crucial for helping learners to move from espousing the new methodology toward implementing it in a reflective manner. Learners have repeatedly indicated that the interaction between theory, modeling (practice), and reflection that they experience in the course serves as a powerful resource on which to draw when implementing the dialogic teaching.

Third, as transformative learning experiences are often unsettling and threatening for learners, we have found that structure is essential as it provides a sense of psychological safety for learners. However, transformative learning also requires the opportunity for free exploration and expression. In designing and implementing transformative learning experiences, we have found learning tasks most useful for maintaining an optimum balance between structure and flexibility. Each task, which is based on an open question, requires a thoughtful and original response of learners, thereby enabling their free participation in the ensuing transformative dialogue; yet, the dialogue remains structured, as the tasks are purposefully designed and sequenced to encapsulate the core ideas of the course.

Fourth, the learning portfolio helps discipline learners to work consistently throughout the course. This is important for fostering transformation because the learning tasks that learners respond to in the portfolio are sequenced to build understanding incrementally, while simultaneously helping learners to develop a reflective stance, which is viewed as essential in transformative learning. We concur with the research reported in Taylor, (2007) that "the written format potentially strengthens the analytic capability of transformative learning" (p. 82). In addition, as educators we use the learning portfolio partway through the course to inform our understanding of the learners' levels of reflection, their developing understanding of the new methodology, and possible gaps in understanding that require addressing. By the end of the course, the learning portfolios provide learners and us (as educators) with a map of the milestones and turning points of learners' engagement with a new teaching methodology. Learners indicate that the learning portfolio serves as a rich resource from which they can draw throughout the course.

Last, even though we are convinced of the benefits of employing learning tasks to foster transformative learning, we continually grapple with (a) how to design learning tasks that will enable fruitful and appropriate engagement and reflection for all learners, and (b) how to arrange the tasks to enable a continual and developmental sequence. Despite the learners telling us that the course indeed impacts on their thinking and doing about teaching significantly, we constantly revisit the design and implementation of the course. The course demands that we function continually on our own "learning edge." The result is that the course changes each year, based on our own reflections, feedback from learners and what we learn from the learners' responses in the learning portfolios. Thus, offering this course implies to us constantly and intentionally engaging in transformative learning with a view to refining our theory of practice so as to make it more discriminating and justifiable.

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