

A Dialogic Approach to Supervision in the Practicum

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Abstract

The term “dialogue” in research on classroom talk between student(s)-teacher is frequently referenced in teaching and teacher education. Yet, there is considerable difference in how the concept is understood. Moreover, scholarship within this area rarely addresses classroom talk between another student-teacher dyad – that of practicum student and a supervising instructor (Waite 1995 is a notable exception). This paper seeks to explore the notion of dialogue as it applies to this dyadic relationship, considering the ways in which incorporating a specifically Bakhtinian approach to dialogue highlights unique aspects of talk and interaction within practicum supervision.

Keywords: Dialogism, Bakhtin, Practicum Supervision, Observation

An Introduction to the Dialogic Approach

“Dialogue” in Teaching and Teacher Education

Much of the scholarship surrounding the concept of dialogue in the area of teaching and classroom talk has centered on interactions between classroom teachers and their students. This work can be found under the labels dialogic teaching (Alexander 2006; Boyd and Markarian 2011; Boyd and Rubin 2002), dialogic pedagogy (Matusov 2009), dialogic inquiry (Wells 1999) and dialogic instruction (Nystrand et al. 1997). Such work typically reference the seminal writings of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Mehan (1979) and the set patterns of discourse elicitation (IRF/IRE) that their scholarship uncovers mark traditional teacher-student talk. Through these various interpretations of dialogue, scholars attempt to provide research-based strategies for moving beyond these set elicitation patterns to encourage classroom talk that is authentic, builds true knowledge (rather than merely passes on “ready-made truths”), gives voice to students and their individual differences of thought, and encourages more active and transformative participation in the learning process.

In adopting the notion of dialogue to pedagogy, a number of these pedagogical approaches to dialogue reference the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986). In drawing upon Bakhtinian dialogue, these scholars often highlight the tensions that exist in talk due to perceived and actual differences between languages (heteroglossia). Additionally, they may emphasize the struggles that arise among speakers due to attitudes or stances towards these differences and the ideological perspectives they represent. Occasionally, these scholars address the conflict that can arise in talk as a result of pedagogical approaches that treat knowledge and meaning as finalizable (that is, absolute and / or complete).

Yet, there are aspects of Bakhtinian dialogue that are not readily taken up by these pedagogically-oriented works. For example, less frequently referenced is Bakhtin's stance that dialogue is an inherent feature of communication, such that all talk -- even forms of speech that could be categorized as "monologic" -- is dialogic (1981, 1984). There is also Bakhtin's emphasis on meaning in talk as context-dependent (situated) and arrived at jointly through interaction (1981, 1986). Furthermore, there are Bakhtin's writings on addressivity and answerability which deal with the ways in which talk responds to, engages with, addresses, and answers other talk (especially talk that represents authoritative discourses) with "a side-long glance at someone else's hostile world" (Bakhtin 1994, 108). As such, talk is always with the anticipation of an audience (real or imagined) -- an ever-present reminder that "the impossibility of being neutral is one of the founding assumptions of dialogism" (Holquist 2002, xi).

The Inherent Dialogism of the Practicum Field Experience

These less often discussed aspects of Bakhtin's writings hold much relevance for understanding the impact of talk and interaction on supervision within the teaching practicum. As one of the primary field experiences available in teacher education programs, the practicum is a hybrid space of classroom learning, pedagogical engagement, and observation of pedagogical practice. It is thus a space for refinement, reflection, and feedback on pedagogical content knowledge. Given the nature of the practicum, supervision in this setting should be designed to allow room for talk that supports inquiry, exploration and the demonstration that knowledge (learning) is indeed unfinalizable -- that it is impossible to know everything completely or absolutely (Bakhtin 1984, 107), as there are always new ways to mean, more to be said, and the ever-present potential for surprise in talk and interaction.

Yet the classroom observations conducted of practicum students are not reflective of a neutral process, nor is learning approached as unfinalizable. Rather, with the reliance

on preset protocols and rubrics aligned to state and national professional standards, supervisory observations of practicum students tend to emphasize evaluation (often under the guise of “feedback”) rather than interactive engagement with knowledge and pedagogical practice. Although these protocols and rubrics provide more consistency in measurement, they also reinforce the authoritative discourses of the school and of schooling. In response to these discourses, teaching and learning during a supervisory observation can take on the appearance of a theatrical performance, as teachers and students struggle to direct the outcomes of teaching to correspond to the discourses and outcomes expected by their supervisory audience. Such “performances” can generate internal and external tensions within the observational space, influencing language use by and interaction between the teacher and students -- making the space less neutral, though still dialogic.

Adopting a Dialogic Approach to the Practicum Observation

Therefore, adopting a more comprehensive understanding of dialogue holds much potential for positively shaping the supervisory practices within the practicum field experience. It is the basis upon which I approach supervision in the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practicums I oversee within my Department of Curriculum and Teaching.

First, I work to “talk-down” the evaluative aspect of the supervisory observation and instead emphasize feedback through the use of an informal observation protocol designed without a rating scale. Using the informal protocol emphasizes the unfinalizability of the observational event, as it is designed with the expectation that students will have the opportunity to demonstrate more at a later point. However, I am still required to conduct a summative evaluation (one based on a 1-4 ranking) -- which I base, not on a single observational event, but in conjunction with previous observations and responses to classroom tasks assigned over the course of the semester.

Secondly, I have begun requesting that – in addition to our face-to-face observations -- students self-record their own teaching and submit these for feedback and self-evaluation. These recordings provide a shared point of departure from which discussions can occur and the implicit contexts of teaching and learning can be made explicit and discussed. It also allows students to provide assessments of their own teaching, reflect on student learning, and raise points of discussion about specific instructional interactions that occur during the observation. To facilitate discussion of the self-recordings, I have begun piloting Edthena in one of my classes (a project initiated and supported by my Department Chair). Edthena is an online platform which allows

students to upload a variety of video formats to a shared space where supervisors and students can provide scene-specific comments, questions, and feedback on the teaching demonstrations.

Finally, I attempt to keep my post-observation feedback open-ended and open to dialogue, in that folk sense of the word. This is not to suggest that I do not actively address pertinent issues of pedagogy or student learning. Instead, unless there is a specific issue that needs to be addressed with a particular teacher, I provide feedback to the entire class as a follow up discussion/task in which the entire practicum class can engage in discussion. My goal in providing feedback in this less personalized manner is that it becomes less an issue of authoritative administrative discourse being imposed upon students, and instead a source of new, deeper and shared learning dialogically uncovered.

Conclusion

I conclude this paper by restating that my aim is to revisit the complex philosophical notion of dialogue from a specifically Bakhtinian perspective. Though dialogue is often drawn upon in theoretical discussions in teaching and teacher education, discussions often fail to ground and make distinctions in the use of this term as it is expounded by different scholars and traditions. My position in this work is to advocate for a Bakhtinian take on dialogue – with its focus on addressivity, answerability, unfinalizability -- as a guiding approach to supervision and supervisory observations in teacher education practicums.

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