Learning, identity and classroom dialogue

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Abstract

The classroom can be understood as the site of various forms of dialogical interaction. Taken together, engagement in such dialogues results in experiences for students that can impact positively or negatively on their personal and social identities. While the research literature acknowledges this in various ways, there is potential for a research programme more explicitly focused on how different learners respond differentially to classroom situations in terms of their developing identities in the broadest sense. Such a programme could complement life history-based approaches to understanding educational and career trajectories and evaluations of effective teaching based on narrow measures of performativity, by providing micro-level data in the context of a conceptual framework drawn from developmental and/or discursive psychology.

Keywords: research, identity, dialogue, teaching-and-learning

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In this paper I explore the relationship between learning through classroom dialogue and identity development, as a move towards a re-evaluation of effective classroom teaching that associates deep learning with positive identity development, while acknowledging dialogism in all its dimensions. My aim is to encourage research that focuses on the role of classroom interaction, as it is variously defined, in identity development. Such research has the potential both to critique and to complement views of effective teaching as defined performatively, in terms of output measures such as test results. Several commentators have made the case for such a counter-move (such as Blake et al 1998; Pollard 1999).

The key question to be explored is, 'How can classroom learning, via the forms of dialogue possible in classrooms, impact on identity development?' This

raises the second-order question: 'What forms of dialogue are possible within classrooms?'

In the concluding section, I shall speculate on a research agenda for coming to a very different understanding of effective classroom teaching to that envisaged in the current quest for evidence-based practice.

Teaching as dialogue[1]

Teaching involves communication; whether its purpose is to enable students to gain access to inalienable truths, or to promote intellectual or social exploration for its own sake. Nevertheless, within the literature and professional practice, there is considerable variation in the degree to which teaching is explicitly seen as dialogical. Much of the policy and professional literature stresses the need both for active student participation (often including collaborative work) and for clearly defined aims and objectives relating to curriculum and syllabus demands which do not appear open to interpretation.

Perhaps it is inevitable that the conflicting demands of teaching as transmission and as empowerment should lead to some ambivalence in this respect. It could be argued that, precisely because human beings are unpredictable, a degree of uniformity needs to be imposed on formal education. To follow this line implies acceptance that all forms of regulation relating to teaching will inevitably valorise the attainment of pre-defined learning outcomes and the development of learner autonomy. Such regulation becomes counter-productive, however, where only one of these is effectively promoted, or where there is no evidence of potential symbiosis between the two. Certainly, the National Curriculum regulations for England and Wales (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2000), while promoting practical and collaborative work in a number of areas, tend not to express Levels of Attainment with reference to characteristics of effective dialogue.

Various models of teaching as dialogical process already exist in the literature, though such models seem only to have had a minor influence on (for example) National Curriculum guidelines in England. These models can all be seen as indebted to the developmental psychology of Lev Vygotsky (published in English in 1962, 1978), with many also influenced by the later Wittgenstein (1953), and perhaps the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1966), among others.

Vygotsky showed how learning was undertaken through largely linguistic interaction, with learner understanding depending on dialogue with a more learned other in a 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1978). Jerome Bruner specifically adapted this insight for teaching by developing the concept of 'scaffolding' (Bruner 1966), whereby teachers generate activities through which students can learn apparently unaided. Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical investigations*, showed how concepts such as truth and meaning are contextualised within 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1953). An acceptance of this leads to an acknowledgement of the need for particular approaches to dialogue within the different areas of the curriculum (eg Driver 1994; Solomon 1998). Wittgenstein can be seen as a key influence on, for example, Paul Hirst and Richard Peters, in their development of the

influential 'areas of experience' model of the curriculum (eg Hirst 1974), and later on the theories of situated learning particularly associated with Lave and Wenger (1991).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) showed how any contact with other perspectives enables individuals to understand the fluidity of structures and institutions, and thus gives them the potential to rework their own subjectivities in increasingly empowering ways. Berger and Luckmann's work can be used in support of arguments for group work and in defence of mixed ability or mixed gender groupings in classrooms.

In addition, a considerable body of literature concerning dialogue in teaching-and-learning draws on socially critical theories. A notable example is Robert Young who, in *Critical theory and classroom talk* (1992), specifically argues for a model of teaching he terms 'discursive', based on Habermas' Ideal Speech Situation. The adherence to a Marxist or post-Marxist tradition in such writing may, of itself, contribute to some polarisation of opinions regarding the role of dialogue in effective teaching in the educational community as a whole.

Clearly, any view of teaching as dialogue is liable to accentuate one of the above influences, sometimes at the expense of others: for example, proponents of the subject-centred curriculum may be more sympathetic to Wittgenstein; and those supportive of mixed ability teaching to Berger and Luckmann. An acceptance of the importance of dialogue in teaching by no means implies universal agreement on all issues of practice. However, a strong case remains for greater efforts at understanding effective teaching with respect to the effective conduct of dialogue. This invites a consideration of what can be held to constitute effectiveness in this regard.

Recent commentators have addressed this issue from various research or developmental perspectives. Neil Mercer (1995, 2000) has emerged as among the most influential developers of a social-constructivist research tradition focusing on the identification of 'learning talk'. Mercer himself has been greatly influenced by the earlier studies of, among others, Gordon Wells (1986), Douglas Barnes (Barnes 1976; Barnes et al 1969; Barnes & Todd 1995) and, in North America, James Dillon (1994). Such work tends to focus on process measures – for example, in identifying examples of 'exploratory talk' from transcripts – though some recent work claims to show concrete and sustainable improvements in reasoning as a result of training in such techniques (Gillies 2000; Mercer et al 1999).

Alec Webster, Michael Beveridge and Malcolm Reed (Webster et al 1996) are among the writers who stress the importance of classroom interactions for developing competence in aspects of the curriculum (in this case, literacy). Roger Beard, who has also discussed literacy (and is a supporter of the British Government's Literacy Strategy), clearly associates more effective learning with increased classroom interaction (Beard 2000 – eg p 69). Work by Robert Fisher (1995) and others (eg Lipman 1991) stresses the need for the development of certain kinds of thinking processes in children, via various forms of dialogic activity, as a

precursor to improved performance across the curriculum. Thus, several recent commentators have promoted the role of classroom dialogue in enhancing the student learning experience, though none can make very explicit claims concerning the more general effect on learners – such as whether this dialogue can contribute to turning 'surface' into 'deep' learners (Entwistle & Ramsden 1983).

Despite these efforts, contemporary commentators have not tended to radically oppose a policy adherence to fairly narrow outcome measures as indicators of success, perhaps because they seem only able to identify process measures. As Blake et al (1998), among others, have pointed out, Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of 'performativity' (Lyotard, 1986) has embedded itself as the dominant 'value' in an educational climate in which any consensus about more enduring values has been lost. Performativity drives the system.

Andrew Pollard (1999) has argued that movements in sociocultural theory offer the potential for developing a much-needed alternative to the performative paradigm. He stresses the usefulness of the cross-cultural case studies of children's upbringing undertaken by Richards and Light (1986), for example, and of Barton and Hamilton's work on 'local literacies' (Barton & Hamilton 1998). Pollard also quotes Jerome Bruner, who, in *The culture of education* (1996), argued: 'education must help those growing up in a culture to find an identity within that culture' (Bruner 1996, p 38; Pollard 1999, p 58).

Various researchers have pointed up the link between classroom language and identity development, but have either not pursued this in any depth with reference to particular cases, or have dealt with it on a general political level, focusing on group identities and social justice issues rather than personal positioning. For example, Gordon Wells discusses the impact of 'negative experiences' upon the learning orientations of particular individuals, but does not elaborate on this with reference to examples (in Lee & Smagorinsky 2000, p 56). Peter O'Connor exemplifies the latter tendency by stressing how 'standard accounts of literacy fail to see how literacy is integral to gender, cultural and language politics', but does not relate the general insight to particular instances or identities (in Freebody & Welch 1993, p 199).

Each of the writers cited in this section has made a significant contribution to the understanding of learning as a dialogical process. None, however, have either attempted to map all the forms of classroom dialogue (see below), or explored – with much degree of specificity – how the learning and processes and outcomes they desire or identify relate to the emerging identities of young people.

There is particularly a dearth of research illuminating this latter, broader concern via micro-level analysis of classroom interaction, taking full account of personal perspectives. Methodologically, perhaps the most sophisticated model yet made available is that posited by Putney, Green, Dixon, Duran and Yeager, who attempt to understand learning (rather than identity development more specifically) by 'bringing interactional ethnography together with sociocultural theory and critical

discourse analysis' (in Lee & Smagorinsky 2000, p 121). Arguably, even this approach takes insufficient regard of actors' interpretations.

Putney et al acknowledge the importance of 'close examination of the lived experiences of students' (2000, p 121). Lemke, writing about science and science education as communities of practice, goes a step beyond this in noting that 'social activities … are definite only in retrospect' (Lemke 1990, p 4), while 'It is the sense we make of what we see, the meaning for us of what we see, that matters' (1990, p 146). My argument here is principally concerned with the lack of empirical research acknowledging these insights in the areas detailed below.

Learning as identity development

As the concern here is with teaching-and-learning as dialogic, there is a *prima facie* case for devoting particular consideration to the discursive psychologists whose work, building on both social interactionism and more traditional developmental psychology, is predicated on the assumption that human life is best understood as a kind of conversation: a series of social acts and actions that are essentially communicative (Edwards & Potter,1992; Harré, 1998; Harré & Gillett 1994). As there is now widespread acceptance that learning entails the social construction of meaning (variously interpreted), discursive psychology has the potential to provide conceptual frameworks for understanding development through sequences of dialogical interactions. Such frameworks, of course, assume an understanding of learning as psychological change.

A tentative start to such an approach was, in effect, made by Malcolm Ross and his colleagues at the University of Exeter during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in their application of Rom Harré's 'social reality matrix' (Harré, 1983) to the assessment of achievement in the creative arts (Ross 1993). More recently, a team based at the Universities of Bath and Swansea has suggested that Harré's work might be applied more broadly across the school curriculum (Stables et al 1999). In *Personal being*, Harré effectively construed learning as the undertaking of a series of 'Identity Projects' enacted through a 'social reality matrix' comprising cycles of activity involving Conventionalisation, Appropriation, Transformation and Publication (Harre 1983). Such cycles might profitably be applied to lesson and course planning across a wide range (perhaps the complete range) of disciplines.

The effective linking of learning to identity change by Harré and the other discursive psychologists invites, in its turn, closer attention to the ways in which classroom processes might contribute to identity change as configured by more traditional developmental psychology. We might, for example, draw on the work of James Marcia, who identifies four types of Identity Status (Marcia, 1994):

- Foreclosure – a narrow conventionality;

- Moratorium – an active exploration;

- Identity Achievement – a strong sense of relatively fixed identity; and

- Identity Diffusion – characterised by disaffection.

As Marcia clearly describes, two states can be seen as generally desirable, at least in educational terms (Moratorium and Identity Achievement), and two as less desirable. The question arises as to how classroom processes can contribute to the development of the former two, rather than the latter.

In terms of an holistic understanding of identity change, there is currently a surprising dearth of literature on the role of classroom teaching, despite the wealth of work undertaken regarding wider influences on the development of personal identity – with schooling acknowledged as one such influence, but only in the broadest sense. Classroom organisation at the policy level (mixed-ability vs setting) has of course been considered. However, in terms of the specifics of classroom interaction, there is little that moves beyond Bernstein's influential work on framing and classification (1975), or the essentially socially critical assumption that small-group collaborative work is empowering (eg Young 1992).

Perhaps the most extensive work available to date is that of Pollard and Filer (1996, 1999), who explore the development of an individual's self-identity as a learner with a series of longitudinal case studies. Pollard and Filer (1999) define four 'dimensions of strategic action' that parallel Marcia's more broadly defined states of ego identity. These are:

1. Conformity – cf Marcia's Foreclosure;

2. Re-definition – cf Marcia's Moratorium;

3. Non-conformity – cf Marcia's Identity Achievement, in that independence is marked out with confidence; and

4. Anti-conformity – cf Marcia's Identity Diffusion, though implying a more active form of disaffection in the classroom context.

Pollard and Filer's work shows how a variety of contextual factors, within and beyond the school, impact on students' classroom identities. These factors include relationships with teachers, but not specific teaching-and-learning events. In terms of scope, their focus on identity is somewhat narrower than that attempted in this paper.

Nevertheless, there is much in Pollard and Filer's work to indicate that effective teaching must be more than the decontextualised transfer of 'good practice'. Set against this, the UK's recent *Teaching and learning initiative* (Economic and Social Research Council 1999) actively seeks an evidence base for effective practice, but its specifications pay little heed to the dialogic and psychologically saturated nature of teaching-and-learning, according to which it must be impossible to generate guidelines for good practice that take little account of the contextual. This notwithstanding, certain projects funded under the scheme have acknowledged the contextual, notably one by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000),

and the 'Home School' project (unpublished). Neither of these, however, attempts any microanalysis of classroom interaction.

Contexts of dialogue for effective teaching

It has been argued that any sustainable definition of effective teaching should acknowledge outcome measures – in terms of learning results that cannot apparently be interpreted – and the development of creative individuals, capable of working flexibly alongside others. Unfortunately, most existing definitions strongly valorise one of these two criteria over the other. Most existing conceptions of Added Value in relation to schooling tend to focus principally on improvement in examination results, while critical theorists such as Young (above) take no account whatsoever of such measurable outcomes. In both cases, a limited view of teaching is presented.

One well-respected view of quality in teaching that does acknowledge both elements is that of Edwards and Mercer, who regard effective teaching as aiming for cognitive socialisation, undertaken via language (Edwards & Mercer 1987). This view acknowledges the work of the Vygotsky school, Wittgensteinian language games and the importance of seeing schoolwork in the context of broader interaction. The model has informed many pieces of later work, much of it by the two originators, yet has not effectively been superseded. Indeed, if anything, its emphasis on the distinctive nature of discourse in each curriculum area has become increasingly recognised during the last 15 years.

What has been added to the canon during this period is a much better comparative understanding, relating classroom discourse events in Britain to those in other parts of the world. Robin Alexander (2000), in the most comprehensive of such studies, shows how national and regional contexts impact on classroom dialogue, with a much greater emphasis in France than in England on '*les disciplines*' at primary level, and a much greater preponderance of informal teacher-pupil talk in England and the USA than in France, India or Russia.

As Westgate and Hughes (1997) acknowledge, there remain no firm criteria for assessing quality in classroom (or other forms of teacher-learner) talk. However, Edwards and Mercer continue to provide a useful basis for the development of such criteria, despite the intercultural differences noted by Alexander and others.

There is a significant gap in research knowledge, however, between the conceptualisation of teaching as (something like) cognitive socialisation through language, and understanding how patterns of classroom discourse build towards conceptual understanding and, by extension, psychological change. Alexander (2000) offers tantalising leads here but does not pursue this line in any great depth. Edwards and Mercer's advocacy of the development of common knowledge within shared contextual assumptions is far from comprehensive in this respect.

Bearing in mind that contextual assumptions can, at best, be only partly shared – so that the same classroom interchange can never mean quite the same for any two people or at any two different moments – it may be impossible to move to any greater level of specificity in terms of prescribing good practice in the sense of

'practice that can be copied'. However, it is at least possible to identify the various kinds of contexts in which classroom dialogue occurs, as a precursor to investigating what seem to be, or have been, rich learning experiences in the classroom. This is addressed under the following four headings.

Context 1: teacher-student/teacher-class dialogue

Much of the earliest work on classroom interaction has a strong focus on the teacher-student/teacher-class condition. Edwards and Mercer (1987) present key findings from this set of studies. They particularly draw our attention to the effects of asymmetrical power relations on classroom discourse in schools, whereby most teacher-pupil interactions are controlled, typically following a pattern often defined as an Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) or Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF). This pattern tends to dominate teacher-student interaction even when teachers espouse non-didactic models, and seems to be an inevitable result of the institutional constraints of schooling, which require teachers to control, as well as teach, large numbers of potentially disruptive pupils. More recent work confirms this general pattern, showing that classrooms are still dominated by teacher talk, which is itself dominated by teacher control of questioning (eg Bearne 1999) – though there is now stronger evidence of intercultural variation than previously (Alexander 2000; Mercer 1995).

Such research has failed to convince British policy makers that whole-class teaching is of limited value, to the extent that it is given prominence (albeit in conjunction with collaborative group work, and not merely as 'transmission') in the British government's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999). Perhaps such scepticism towards research is not without justification, as there may well be compensating factors that researchers have not considered. In this case, the evident success of whole-class teaching methods in other countries was not so assiduously studied for a considerable period by researchers in the West and Australasia, for example. Also, the various and skilful ways in which some teachers use even the limited IRE or IRF pattern is arguably still not fully recognised (Sahin et al 2002), while the UK's National Oracy Strategy paid scant attention to whole-class teaching (Norman 1992).

Nevertheless, research does serve to develop a body of understanding that can inform, if never fully prescribe, future practice. In this case, the research has repeatedly revealed similar patterns of interaction, with various interpretations of what constitutes good practice espoused in relation to these: for example, good teachers build on 'Common Knowledge' between themselves and their students, and focus on principled rather than procedural knowledge (Edwards & Mercer 1987); good teachers tell stories and find alternative methods, thus reducing their reliance on questioning (Cortazzi 1993; Wood, in Norman 1992); and good teachers give clear instructions, set appropriate tasks, keep good classroom order and so on.

On the other hand, social and cultural differences determine that students will respond differentially to the same teaching approaches (Bernstein 1975; Corson 1993); Maybin, in Norman 1992). This implies a relationship between teacher-class/teacher-student talk and student identity development, though few research

studies have considered this explicitly. Nevertheless, there is at least plenty of material to draw upon to begin more sophisticated investigation into this first context for classroom dialogue.

Context 2: between-student dialogue

A common response to the findings concerning the teacher-centredness of much classroom practice has been to promote increased collaborative work among students. While some of this work has been in part politically motivated, a strong corpus seeks to determine the cognitive (as opposed to the purely social) benefits of forms of collaborative pupil talk (for example, Barnes et al 1969; Barnes & Todd, 1995; Mercer et al 1999; Norman 1992). Despite occasional naivety both in the interpretation and the implementation of such work (Stables 1993, 1995), considerable progress has been made in this field; recent studies systematically evaluated teaching approaches based, at least in part, on the results of earlier work, and claimed evidence for more than short-term effects (Gillies 2000; Mercer et al 1999).

While an openness has to be preserved about what constitutes effective learning in small-group contexts, where negotiation rather than completion of the task can become paramount (Yonge & Stables 1998) – and while considerable difficulties therefore remain with the formal assessment of collaborative work (Stables 1992) – we are now moving towards a much more explicit understanding of the kinds of discursive activity students engage in under this condition of dialogue. However, beyond a vague exhortation towards 'balance' or 'mixed methods', research evidence remains limited on how whole-class and small-group teaching interact, or on how (to focus on the student) issues of personal identity are negotiated in the semi-public arena of the collaborative work group *vis-à-vis* the rather more public arena of the 'whole class'.[2]

Context 3: within-student dialogue – student and text

In referring to 'within-student' dialogue, there is an acceptance of the validity of both Vygotsky's conception of 'inner speech' (Vygotsky 1962) and Bakhtin's work on the heterogeneity of voices (eg Todorov 1984). Even educators little versed in either set of theories may grant that it is hardly controversial to assert that learners are often required to 'engage' with a text, or with some other external stimulus physically divorced from the teacher. This condition and the next relate to what Andrew Wilkinson (1986) referred to as A-A communication: ie the student talking to her/himself.

Perhaps because such internal dialogue cannot be overheard, its value is often overlooked in discussions about classroom discourse (Stables 1995). Indirectly, such engagement is promoted through a variety of teaching strategies and measured, *post hoc*, through assessments of students' written and other more public communications. Directly, such assessments often rely on a largely intuitive feeling about classroom 'atmosphere'; about whether or not there is a 'good air of concentration'. We know little about the silent processes in which students engage in given contexts, nor about between-student differences in relation to this, though

taxonomies of higher-order reading skills (for example) do exist that might prove helpful in providing some kind of starting point in the development of analytical frameworks here. There is also very little research on how the quality of this form of dialogue is promoted through the use of other forms.

Context 4: within-student dialogue – reflection and problem solving

Similarly, while most teachers may wish their students to become reflective problem-solvers, little systematic work has been done on how to promote or evaluate this within the context of the lesson or wider teaching programme. The work of Robert Fisher (1995) and of other proponents of 'philosophy for children' (eg Lipman 1991), while generally respected, has had limited policy impact to date. The work of Richard Andrews and his colleagues on the nature of argument (Andrews 1995) has similarly been little exploited so far, despite revealing significant gaps in awareness, even among able and advanced students.

Teachers are often more *aware* that certain students are reflective and take initiative, without having much understanding of *how* or *why*. Similarly, readers of this paper who have engaged in teaching may be all too aware of the conscientious and successful student who plays no part at all in the spoken life of the classroom, yet whose levels of reflection and argumentation remain extremely high.

Cultural differences seem to be significant here, too. While the received wisdom of Western education is that verbal interchange promotes learning, there is plenty of evidence from around the world that this assumption is by no means universally shared. The reflective condition of inner dialogue also deserves, therefore, to be valued for its contribution to learning, and the oscillation of inner and outer speech can be promoted and utilised in a variety of ways that have not yet been clearly documented or evaluated.

Identification of four discrete but potentially symbiotic general 'conditions' of classroom dialogue might form the first step in the formulation of guidelines for effective teaching that fully acknowledge its essentially dialogic nature. However, such an identification would still fall short of an account of effective teaching on two fronts: it would not define quality, and it would not consider peculiarities of classroom, personal and social contexts.

Teaching-and-learning as dialogic identity development: towards a research agenda

Quality

Qualitative analysis requires two things above all: qualitative methods and a clear conceptual framework. It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse the arguments for and against competing forms of qualitative research, except to stress that qualitative research can make use of quantitative data, just as positivist research can make use of, for example, in-depth interviews. The key point in this context is that numerical output does not directly measure quality of input (in this case, of

teaching), since contextual factors beyond the classroom also influence tested performance. The issue is not whether this is so, but how.

There is a strong case for looking to developmental and discursive psychology for the conceptual frame. Harré's Identity Projects serve as one example; Marcia's ego-identity types might serve as another. By working in depth with small numbers of students over significant periods of time, there is much that could be done to generate a rich qualitative data set around students' communicative and behavioural changes in terms of conceptions of personal and social identity, and the degree to which particular sets of classroom events seem to have influenced these.

Particularities of context

Consideration of situational context raises a different, though related, set of issues. These issues can be grouped as follows:

1. Issues of simple sequence: Given the heterogeneous nature of student readiness for the teaching event, how far is it possible to make universally valid statements about the most effective ways to start and end lessons? Similarly, are there forms of lesson transition that can be taken as universally preferable to others?

2. Issues of personal difference: How do different students behave under the different contexts for dialogue listed above? Judged by simple output measures, do some learn – effectively – the same things through small-group work that others learn through silent reading? Within a conceptualisation of learning as identity change, how do different students internalise given classroom events? Are students of different identity types differentially affected by immediate factors impacting on the classroom context (eg from the weather outside, to falling out with friends, or experiencing difficulties at home)?

3. Issues of teacher planning and preparation: To what extent can we generalise about 'best practice' in utilising combinations of different kinds of dialogic events? How can aims and objectives be conceptualised for forms of teaching that valorise, promote and make the fullest use of dialogue?

A body of research exists that explores how students make meaning dialogically (eg Barnes & Todd 1995**;** Mercer 2000; Norman 1992; Wegerif et al,1999; Wells 1986). Of the cited work, however, only that by Wegerif and colleagues is focused strongly on teacher planning and preparation for meaningful pupil interaction, and none explicitly addresses the issue of planning whole lessons, schemes of work or courses. Similarly, many models have been produced of cycles of learning, but literature on the application of this to classroom sequences, as opposed to classroom activities, is very limited.

If such an approach has any potential, it raises many questions for further research to explore. One key question concerns learning style and the Identity Project. In recent years Harré has called strongly for a science of positioning (Harré,1998), in order to better understand how individuals construct their personal identities through social interaction. In the classroom, such work could have great benefits in helping us to understand the complex social psychology of the class. Again, research exists here, but it has not been fully applied to pedagogy.

In the 1980s, for example, Andrew Pollard found that the groups of pupils he came to refer to as 'Jokers' (Pollard 1985) were often the most successful in school, for the very reason that they took a more proactive role than other students in negotiating the progress of lessons; in effect, they took greater roles in the discourse of the classroom. There is surely scope for research into the conditions under which students are encouraged into, or discouraged from, becoming Jokers, or moving into other kinds of roles within the broader group dynamics of the class.

Pollard's more recent work with Ann Filer concerns the forms of strategic action available to students as they develop their identities as learners with respect to a key concept of conformity. There is the potential for work to build on this that is less closely wedded to the classroom or the school as the main driver of identity development, but continues to develop fine-grained analyses of classroom events as illustrative of, and instrumental in, the development of broader forms of personal and social identity. Indeed, Pollard and Filer's longitudinal study might provide hypotheses that could guide the development of such work. For example, research informed by Marcia's ego-identity types might explore how different identity types – or strategic actors (in Pollard and Filer's terms) – respond to different sequences of dialogical activity intended for learning, and how different sequences of teaching-and-learning events seem instrumental in effecting changes of identity status, more broadly defined.

Concluding remarks

This paper has been speculative, but is intended to draw attention to the possibilities of developing a study of teaching as dialogical enterprise with the potential to contribute to positive identity development in a more refined sense than has hitherto been acknowledged. Such research would combine fine-grained microanalyses of classroom events and responses to them with a broader understanding of the development of personal trajectories.

For too long, it can be argued, debates about teachers' practice have failed to draw together insights from two concurrent streams of research: one that sees effective teaching as monological cultural transmission, and the other that views it as social empowerment. A view of the classroom (or even the computer, in the case of distance learning) as a site for the communicative transaction of social actions and acts has the potential to bridge the gulf between these two perspectives. An important early step in such a process is the clear identification of the types of dialogical interaction that characterise the teaching-and-learning situation. The

above identification of four contexts of classroom dialogue may prove of use in taking such a step.

Notes

1. Dialogue' is used in this paper in a general and non-technical sense, to refer to all forms of communicative interchange. There are, at the time of writing, more closely defined uses of the term under discussion by educational researchers. It is not my intention here to discuss the possible advantages and disadvantages of such particular conceptions of dialogue, though some 'may find reference to this paper useful in furthering such discussion.

2. See Baxter (1999) for a discussion on the development of gendered 'voices' in the public and private spheres with reference to the classroom; Harré (1979, 1983, 1998) on the issues of balancing personal and social identities; and Stables et al (1999) for an application of some of Harré's ideas in the classroom.

Acknowledgments

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