

Triggering dialogic activities across networks

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Abstract

Our study originates in exploratory interventions aimed at engaging students with relevant practices to support learning both in and about digital environments. Our students come from a wide range of professional contexts all over the world. Most are involved in teaching or supporting teaching. What they learn on our programme is carried into their practice – and *vice versa*. Their introductory course explores a range of environments along with critical literature, with a strong theoretical emphasis. The authors both have an interest in dialogic approaches to education, and we share findings on activities designed and tutored by each of us. A webquest and an online text augmentation exercise were both found to promote student creativity, dialogue and learning. While we had respectable pedagogical reasons for these activities, our subsequent reflections and conversations about them suggested that they were worthy of further theoretical analysis. Our students demonstrated considerable use of existing networks while at the same time apparently generating new networks that would sustain them throughout a programme of study and beyond. Drawing on Wegerif's (2013) notion of dialogic and its Bakhtinian influences, we attempt to distinguish and name features of networks likely to trigger dialogic exchanges that foster learning. We have isolated examples from each practice of particularly 'interanimating' sections of dialogue and created a thick description of them, including their antecedents and consequences. Our examples illustrate that both practices raised questions about purpose, offered opportunities for showcasing knowledge and connections, led to sharing and making practices visible, and were taken forward to new contexts. The findings are not all positive; we have also identified concerns about exclusion or inadequacy from those who feel unable to participate fully, but even then there is potential to turn around difficult situations. This study might have practical application for learning designers but should also be of theoretical interest for research into newer forms of academic literacy.

Keywords

webquest, augmentation, genre, Bakhtin, interanimation, nodes, flows of knowledge

Introduction: the potential of the dialogic

Our starting point for this investigation has been our own dialogues about interventions we have individually made at different stages of the same course. These activities – a webquest and a text augmentation exercise, terms which we explain shortly – seemed to activate student enthusiasm and knowledge generation, inferred by us from dialogues in online discussion forums. We noticed our students drew on their pre-existing networks as resources for their dialogues. The new dialogues, themselves enticing intellectual challenge, could also be seen as operating within a network, creating opportunities for students' other professional networks – a process Wegerif and De Laat (2011) describe as 'participation in flows of knowledge'. Conceptualising our two online activities as a node or a hub where existing and new networks meet offers a useful framework for analysis.

By dialogues, we mean more than discussion or interaction, although of course these are involved. We adopt Wegerif's (2013) notion of the interplay between different voices and the 'dialogical space' that is necessarily created as these voices are held in tension, allowing interlocutors to make their own meanings. Our understanding is an acknowledgement of Bakhtin's view of dialogism as 'the condition of all verbal interaction and therefore of all conceptual, social and ideological activity' (Renfrew, 2015). This is never stable and finalized, despite attempts to monologise, particularly noticeable in the era of the printed text. Wegerif (2013) sees the Internet era as an opportunity to return to the idea of the broader dialogic context, but one unbounded by space and time. However, there are still bounded contexts in which individual dialogues occur. Although this is paradoxical, we hope to show that while we can point to interesting dialogues bounded by context, they ultimately belong to the broader unbounded dialogic space. The idea of networked learning might be helpful in

framing this. We highlight here the quality of dialogues rather than individual turn-taking, although in our examples some individuals may seem to stand out.

The two sets of examples presented here were gathered from Week 0 (induction) and Week 10 of two different runs of an introductory course on the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh. *An introduction to digital environments for learning* explores a range of digital environments for implications for teaching and learning. Neither of our activities was specifically for credit; the webquest was an additional ice-breaking exercise at the end of induction with a digital ‘badge’ as a prize; the text augmentation exercise was directed towards preparing students for a later assessed activity.

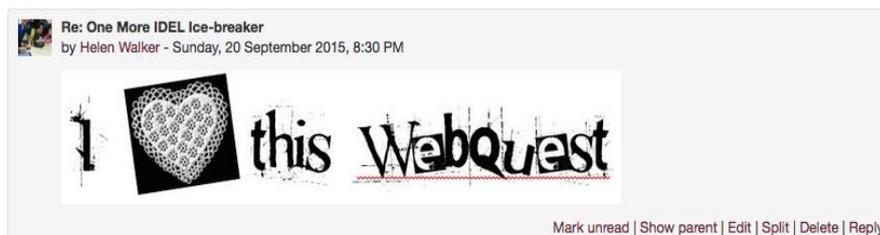
Method – analysis of moments of interanimation

This was a small-scale opportunistic study where we revisited sites of intense student activity with a view to informing ourselves about the flows of knowledge that intersected there. In revisiting the forums where the activities took place, we sought out examples where it seemed that there were moments of dialogue where ‘interanimating relationships’ (Bakhtin, 1981, pp.345-346) might be observed – that is, where it was clear that the words were going to be taken forward into new contexts. We then explored this section of the dialogue further, and looked at how the ‘dialogic space’ was being used to mutual benefit. Many of our students are teachers or learning technologists, and some clearly showed an interest in adopting the emerging practices in their own contexts.

Two examples: activity, artefacts and dialogue

1 Webquest

Webquests are activities that encourage students to inquire (rather than simply search), using resources found entirely online. They have been found to be particularly effective in promoting online discussion and cognitive presence (Kanuka et al 2007). This particular version of the genre was a puzzle or mystery, where students had to follow various clues that led to the identification of a particular character – Ada Lovelace, the British mathematician who worked with Charles Babbage on the Analytical Engine, regarded by some as the first computer. The clues were designed to provide partial answers and involved wordplay, and reference to facts and relationships. The task description encouraged participants to collaborate, and to help each other with additional clues without revealing the answer. One student’s additional clue including a heart made of lace (pictured below) was much admired, as was (later) her Prezi illustrating how she had correctly reached the solution.



Looking at the dialogue in and around this thread brings out the point that Helen has already been trying to help Lisa with clues – and Lisa is delighted when she understands this one and ‘the penny drops’. In

another thread, Lisa says that she is now planning to use a webquest in her own teaching. A librarian who works for a hospitality school in Switzerland she reports: ‘I have to give a session on academic writing to a bunch of chefs next week and I am seriously considering giving them a webquest after this experience’. In Helen’s detailed Prezi presentation which brings her thinking to the surface, she records how others’ conversation about the various clues helped her to find the answer. In the process, she finds a link to a University of Edinburgh event that interests her and has prompted a conversation with another of the students on an activity happening on Ada Lovelace Day. Helen is bringing in her previous professional communication tools (Prezi) for her professional networks and also reflects on dialogues from her undergraduate degree; she is drawing on dialogues from her current new network of MSc students, and simultaneously extending Lisa’s repertoire as is the tutor, Hamish.

This activity had been introduced late and playfully to highlight Ada Lovelace Day, rather than being expressly designed to encourage collaborative activity. The activity works well as an ice-breaker, though, bringing social opportunities to the course. Several students comment on fun and they have clearly enjoyed supporting each other. Students’ observations reveal other more deeply educational benefits; for example, Sai comments:

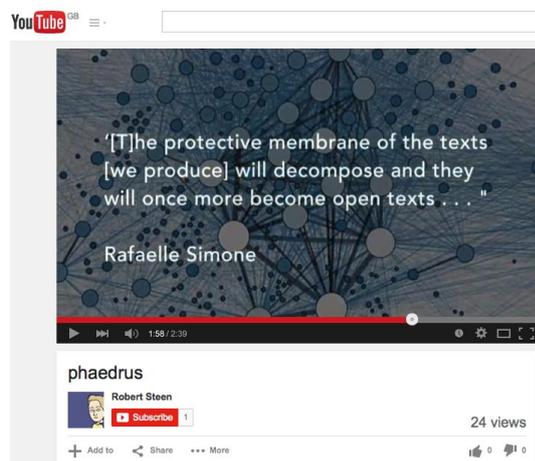
‘Once I got to know the person and read a little bit about that person, what caught my eye was that this person was a pioneer in human computer interaction (HCI). This person was interested in understanding how individuals and society relate to technology, which is one of the main premises of this course.’

Sai’s comment was prompted by a question from Hamish: ‘Why this target?’ and the other students’ answers also point to activities relating not only to Ada Lovelace day but also to the bicentenary of her birth. The dialogue around the activity itself, including students’ challenges to a couple of the clues (bringing another opportunity to showcase and share knowledge), provides a good focal point for the students to think about the use of digital environments in general. The purposes, structure and conduct of the inquiry are all a relevant part of the dialogue. The responses are not all enthusiastic; one student raises an issue about potential cultural barriers to engaging in such an exercise, thus beginning another dialogue and point of reference for future discussions. We also want to point out that some of the ‘wrong’ answers to the webquest stimulated good learning conversations. Anne’s solution, provided in a stunning visual, was not the correct answer, but was a starting point for Helen and others to provide visual clues and additional information.

2 Text augmentation

The text augmentation exercise took place in a week where new academic literacies was the main theme, particularly around a reading by Fitzpatrick (2011) who highlights a move away from closed and ‘finished’ printed texts with their associations of power and authority. The text selected for augmentation was from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where Socrates is presented as challenging the new technology of writing, claiming it detracts from ‘the living word’ (a construct subsequently also used by Bakhtin). Some additional inspiration for the exercise came from the idea of helping students to write by changing the genre – giving students ‘the opportunity to make visible the processes and practices through which academic knowledge is made’ (English, 2011, p. 9).

There were many excellent responses to the activity: a comic strip version, poem, image, presentations, re-interpretation, definitions, newspaper headline, voice transcription, textual analysis, wordcloud, mindmap, videos, cartoon film, parodies, tweets. The focus is here is on a video that involves a re-presentation of texts combined with images and music. This was the first attempt by one student – Bob – to make a video. There was a great deal of dialogue around this video, including observations from students who have professional expertise in video production. One student – Gemma – offered advice on creative commons licensing and remixing in YouTube. She also offered to try out a remix, with some trepidation in case Bob was offended.



The remix was well received and the dialogue associated with it could be seen as instructive for all the students and tutors in what seemed an authentic exercise – showing how a change could be made to a colleague’s work.

As in the example of the webquest, there were some notes of concern as well as enthusiasm for the activity. One arose from about the complexity of remixing – the student felt that they would need technical guidance if such an idea would be taken forward. Again, concerns were elicited in part through Christine (one of the tutors) asking what students thought the purpose of the exercise was. Some felt that there had been a greater emphasis on use of tools rather than content; others, however, did display a strong connection with the main reading for the week looking at what is happening to

academic texts. These conversations served to diagnose, and thus potentially address, some epistemological confusion for some students and some task design issues for the tutor. Subsequent conversations with students revealed that at least one was planning to try out a similar exercise with his own online students.

Discussion

It is tempting perhaps to regard certain strong participants in these activities as nodes in a network – points where different connections intersect. Wegerif (2013) cautions us not to view people in this way, or at least not

to take a purely external view – ‘unlike machines they also have an inside perspective which enables them to transcend the network and to rethink the network’ (E-book, Loc 164). The network, though, is the place where the dialogues come from, and which subsequently gives resources to other dialogues (Wegerif and de Laat, 2011). We think it is fruitful to see these activities themselves as (temporary) nodes; places in which previous connections can converge and create opportunities for new ones. Students who work together in this way set up dialogues that can be continued throughout their overall study programme, educational dialogues that go beyond the supportive conversations they might also be having. At the same time, they are taking the products of these dialogues into their professional networks, transforming them in turn.

The two examples highlight both practical and theoretical implications of dialogic activities. The first point we note is students’ willingness to work creatively on tasks that seem relevant to their learning, and, especially to engaging in dialogue about them. It is important that the purpose of the activity is included in the dialogues, something that we both instigated in our practice. It may be necessary to anticipate students’ concerns about their ability to engage because of cultural reasons or technological competence. We took care to point out the merits of the less technologically sophisticated contributions and to summarise and point out practices and maxims that would have relevance for their future engagement with their subsequent studies with us. We also engaged students in further dialogue about their concerns, and this will also feed into our own future teaching.

From a more theoretical perspective, we particularly want to draw attention to the way the main flows of knowledge into, through, and out of each activity can be rendered visible because of the persistence of the online dialogues. Although they persist, they do not conclude – as Bakhtin (1986) points out, the dialogic context is boundless. At the point of entry into a dialogic space, resources from other networks make a contribution to the students’ activity but are also reformed themselves in the process. As dialogically driven creative work is taken beyond the dialogic space of the educational activity, it feeds into new dialogues and is again itself transformed.

Conclusion

Activities and artefacts may provide useful triggering events for opening up dialogues that draw from networks, contribute to networks, and are taken forward to new networks. The teachers’ role in such dialogues cannot be completely anticipated, but may include:

- seeding opportunities for students to question and augment
- explaining the purpose and function of the learning experiences they have created
- pointing out where previously invisible processes have been made apparent.

These activities might support the quest to reconsider higher order thinking for the network society, identified by Wegerif and De Laat (2011).

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