

GETTING READY TO CONDUCT A REFLECTIVE SESSION *

Preparando-se para Conduzir uma Sessão Reflexiva

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Abstract

This paper investigates a conversation held by two teachers to prepare questions to conduct a reflective session with a colleague. It discusses the collaborative construction and the critical reflective process of learning and teaching in the classroom that takes place in this conversation. Results indicate changes that need to be implemented in teacher education programs.

Key-words: *teacher education; critical reflection; collaborative construction.*

Resumo

Este artigo investiga uma conversa entre duas professoras para a preparação de perguntas para conduzir uma sessão reflexiva. Discute a construção colaborativa e o processo reflexivo crítico sobre ensino-aprendizagem em sala de aula desenvolvido durante essa conversa. Os resultados indicam algumas mudanças que necessitam ser implementadas em programas de formação de professores.

Palavras-chave: *formação de professores; reflexão crítica; construção colaborativa.*

1. Introduction

This paper aims at discussing how teachers organize their collaborative actions. It focuses on the discussion held by two teachers

* This topic was firstly discussed in the 5th Conference of the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory, *Dealing with diversity*, in 2002, in Amsterdam.

(C and E) in order to question the practice of a third one (T), described in her reflective diary. In this session, teacher dyads, after reading a peer's classroom description, discuss the questions they will use to conduct their colleague's reflective process concerning teaching-learning concepts. The specific purpose of this paper is to investigate the teachers' interchanges in order to understand (a) how teachers collaborate in the construction of knowledge of learning and teaching in the classroom and (b) how they conduct the reflective process. The interpretation of this session will be organized by means of the concept of critical reflection and collaboration (Smyth, 1992 and Freire, 1970).

For a better understanding of the process developed in this event, I will explain two fundamental theoretical concepts: collaboration and argumentative critical reflection. Later, I will describe the context and the activity discussed. I will, then, analyze the discussion held by the two teachers. Finally, I will present some remarks on the implications of the findings for teacher educators development programs.

2. Collaboration

Life in schools is based on diversity, risk and challenge; and how do teachers in their everyday practices find ways to deal with these? According to Fullan & Hargreaves (2000), there is little encouragement for teachers to work together and to learn with each other. Their workload and isolation lead to individualistic practices. After a while, they begin to view teaching as "a solitary profession". This isolation eventually becomes a habit and teachers start to feel insecure about exchanging opinions, discussing ideas and presenting points of view. Besides, there is also the problem of belonging to a group but not presenting differing views for fear of dispute, embarrassment or shame. In that sense, teachers working together have a sense of dealing with the unpredictable and take calculated risks (Celani, 2001).

For professionals used to living on islands, collaboration may sound like a distant territory. After years of working individually to solve problems of day-to-day classroom events, it is hard for teachers to imagine a context where they may work collaboratively. However, research has shown some possibilities.

Collaboration is understood in a Vygotskian sense (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) as a process of participation in the construction of knowledge. The view of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as a region of conflict where the new and the old clash in order to build new concepts highlights the importance of collaboration, for it involves the presence of the other as essential to the construction of new meanings. So, collaboration is directly linked to the idea of creating socially-situated cognitive conflicts. Does that mean interactional/interpersonal conflicts too?

Schön (1987) has discussed two possible ways of analyzing interactional/interpersonal conflicts of professional development: Model 1 and Model 2. In Model 1, people are worried about saving their own faces as well as others', so they avoid eliciting negative feelings. They are also worried about controlling reactions and tasks. Thus, the relationship is basically defensive with low freedom of choice, internal commitment, and risk taking.

On the other hand, in Model 2, the task is jointly controlled, so actions are seen as minimally defensive. In these events, the protection of self is a joint enterprise, oriented towards growth; as a result, frequent testing of actions and theories, freedom of speaking and internal commitment turn out to be essential.

Paiva (2001) also discusses the importance of dialogue among participants with collaborative exchange of information, orientation and support. She discusses how different colleagues share their expertise and can become coaches, providing feedback, orientation and provoking curiosity and reflections. As pointed out by Freire (1970:78), "nobody teaches anybody, nobody teaches oneself, but all human beings teach each other, mediated by the world". And it is through dialogue that human beings get together, mediated by the world.

3. Critical reflection

When knowledge is produced in a non-reflective way, it forms sediments and becomes part of the common sense, which masks "fixed truths" and "existing facts" about the ever changing social world, which

is infused with relations of power and interests (McLaren, 1997/2000). My intent in this section is to express my way of dealing with a discourse of critical reflection that does not aim at uncovering the truths about pedagogical or reflective practices, but that both disputes the view of predetermined technical solutions for practical problems (technical reflection), and rejects the individualistic, self-centered proposal that a subjective understanding of one's action may lead to solving problems of everyday practice. I defend a critical perspective of reflection (Zeichner & Liston, 1987 and Smyth, 1992), which involves the generalization of one's actions (*describing*) through theories (*informing*) that will be questioned (*confronting*) in order to trigger a process of *reconstruction* of one's pedagogical practices. I will also point out a linguistic perspective for these critical reflective actions (Liberali, 2000 a & b; Magalhães, 2000; Magalhães & Celani, 2001) in order to unfold the development and analyses of reflective events.

In this sense, critical reflection is concerned with understanding events and behavior that occur in social formations (De Lauretis, 1987: 42 apud McLaren, 1997/2000). This understanding postulates the practice of reading and writing that we use to reach reality and to say it out loud. However, there must be an understanding that there is no reality in itself but the languages that we use to describe it. Our descriptions are all vulnerable, and may be re-described, modified and/or rewritten (McLaren, 1997/2000). However, they serve our first understanding of practice because from this point on, we get hold of our own action as a historical reality and we can transform it (Freire, 1970).

When we understand the *description* of actions as a non-reflective act, we deny the participation of the actor and his/her perception of his/her own deeds and actions. As pointed out by Freire (1970:74), we depart from our here and now that constitute the situation we are immersed or inserted in, and it is from this situation, which we can perceive, that we can move on.

Departing from this act of disclosure of reality, of immersion in conscience, we can reach the emergence of conscience for a critical insertion because the perceived reality becomes object for admiration, that is, understanding and evaluation (Freire, 1970).

It is the moment for interpreting reality based on the general knowledge already gathered by history in theoretical terms (*informing*). These theories that may have become naturalized in practices can, then, be recognized and understood. According to Romero (1998), this unmasking of the theories that regulate or organize practices allows the historical contextualization of these actions.

In this sense, theoretical knowledge needs to be understood “within teachers’ professional lives and within the settings and circumstances in which they work” (Johnson & Freeman, 2001). With this opportunity to interpret and situate knowledge in their work, they can “justify their practices in the theories that they understand and can act upon in their own classroom” (Johnson, 1996)

In Vygotskian terms (Vygotsky, 1934/1987), we could say that while the description of actions allows teachers to perceive the everyday knowledge that the practitioner has developed along his/her life, the interpretation opens the door for the scientific/cultural knowledge to connect and explain these actions in a more generalized manner. This may create a chance for criticism and reorganization of one’s actions.

This criticism (*confronting*) is a means for understanding the results and concerns of our actions in a situated perspective, that is, it is a way of turning what is familiar into strange in order to recognize and evaluate the identities, political values that lie on the basis of actions. In this sense, it creates a chance for the negotiation and critical translation of our own experience and form of knowledge as subordinate to cultural and political contexts (McLaren, 1997/2000); while, at the same time, it advocates the engagement in experiences of an affirmative and critical pedagogy concerned with socially and culturally subordinate groups, such as economically deprived groups, women and minorities. Besides, through this criticism, we will be able to challenge the presuppositions and reasons hidden in our system of cultural values of day-to-day life (McLaren, 1997/2000).

Criticism takes into consideration social, political and cultural contexts in teaching: why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them (Smyth, 1992). In this sense, it tries to untangle the

complex ideology that surrounds them in teaching and that, in turn, helps them collaborate in the development of more critical students. Students who are engaged in debates for the reform of education can recognize the ideological, economic, political and social forces involved in the production of knowledge.

From this critical evaluation we move to the *reconstruction* of our actions. We turn to think about new possibilities and new understandings of the world and of ourselves. We search for ways of reshaping knowledge, values, and beliefs that participants bring with them into teaching so that they can work effectively within classrooms and schools as social contexts or communities.

So, dealing with the diversities of classroom life becomes a process of creating new acting possibilities that can lead students to a better informed and critical approach for making decisions. According to Giroux (1988), this search involves a profound belief in the struggle for giving voice to students during their learning experiences, for discussing what forms of authority, moral regulations, versions of past and future will be legitimate, and for overcoming the unfair conditions of different social groups, as well as for joining the language of criticism to the language of possibilities, in order to promote genuine changes.

4. The context of the research

This paper is part of a large research project which studies a reflective teaching programme involving three institutions: a large non-profit language teaching organization (Associação Brasileira de Cultura Inglesa – São Paulo), a university (Catholic University of São Paulo) and the state of São Paulo's public school system, where English teachers, who take part in the project, work. The specific research context for this paper is a discussion (*preparation session*) held by two teachers to prepare a *reflective session* in one class, which is part of the module *The role of the multiplier in the reflective process*, taught at the end of the course *Reflection on and in action: the English teacher learning and teaching*.

Studying the discussion held by teacher dyads conducted in the same module of the course, Magalhães & Celani (2001) defined them as *reflective sessions*, i.e., as “a locus of collaborative investigation of the conflicting ways the participants evaluate and represent their own ways of acting, their intentions and motives to act and those of others, within a specific school context. It should make it possible for them to understand each participant’s representations about: teaching concepts, classroom discursive practice organisation, classroom discursive practice questioning and new forms of knowing, of acting and of negotiating”.

These sessions were thought to be a strategy (Zeichner & Liston, 1987) for the teachers to develop critical reflection in a context of collaboration. In other words, they would “develop a collaborative action with a peer” (Magalhães & Celani, 2001) to discuss the events of their practices, using the knowledge constructed through the various modules of the course. In their paper, Magalhães and Celani present the importance of rethinking these reflective sessions and of searching for alternative ways to work with teachers to organize their discourse in order to be able to work as an “other”. In other words, to help them learn to question their colleagues’ classroom practices based on scientific teaching-learning concepts, as well as on concepts of forms to create a collaborative set up.

This claim led me, the teacher of this module, to organize an activity that would create a chance for teachers to discuss and get prepared for the reflective sessions. In this activity, two teachers were supposed to discuss a third teacher’s lesson described in a reflective diary. Each teacher had previously read and prepared some questions about the lesson. In pairs, they were supposed to discuss ways of talking to the third one about her class. They were supposed to prepare questions that would lead to critical reflection and that would be developed within a context of collaboration. To do so, they had to attend to the four actions of critical reflection (describing, informing, confronting and reconstructing), previously discussed in the module, and to the idea of collaboration.

The analysis of one of the discussions to prepare a reflective session will focus on how the two teachers (C and E) prepared their

discourse to talk to the third one (T); that is, how the knowledge of the context of production (Bronckart, 1997/1999) was taken into account when teachers chose the topics, types of questions and words to be used in the *reflective sessions*. I understand context of production as the attention directed to the objective, the participants, the content, the place and the time of the communicative event, in this case, the *reflective session*. In the discussion that follows I will present direct and explicit references made by the teachers in order to conduct a critical reflection in a collaborative mood.

5. Discussion of the results

During their preparation session, C and E showed great concern with the context of the session they were going to be engaged in. First of all, they referred to T all the time, to the things she had already said, to her feelings, to what they already knew about her. They also discussed the objective of the questions they were going to ask in relation to the characteristics of the reflective actions: description (e.g.: *She played the dialogue and kept asking different questions*), inform (they mention the concept - *inform*) and the impact on the social context (*social role*). At the same time they structured the content according to the objectives, and discussed the use of questions in relation to the needs expressed by the objectives they had developed.

The way they prepared the discussion was concerned with the place and time of the event. They knew they were going to have a session with T in the following class and that they had to get ready for the conversation. They also knew that during the course they had discussed some aspects of reflection that should be included in the discussion so as to help T talk and critically reflect about her class. These aspects can be visualized by the way they selected what to say, how to say it and why.

When preparing the questions, teachers showed great concern with the discursive and linguistic organization of the session. They had objectives that guided the order and choice of words for their questioning. The discussion of three central themes developed in the session (the aim of the lesson, students' participation and the role of the teacher) exemplifies this concern.

The aim of the lesson

When discussing aspects of how to organize the questions, C and E showed understanding of the importance of practice as the starting point to get hold of one's own action as a historical reality and as a way of transforming it (Freire, 1970). For this reason, they pointed out the need to start discussing the aim and subject of the lesson (*italics*).

C1: Yeah, she said she was looking at time, numbers. So I thought it might be interesting to ask her about *the aim of the lesson*, that I think is *the first thing*, isn't it?

E2: I think so, because it's no use asking how many students were there, unless you know the objective. Yes, the first question is about the aim of the lesson, *then, the subject*, right?

[inaudible]

C2: Yeah, the objective and the subject...

E3: ... yes, the subject is afterwards.

Besides their concern with the topic for starting the subject, they were also worried about the understanding of actions in a social view. In this sense, they got involved with questions of criticism of the class in a broader perspective (*italics*).

E12: So, *if she thought of her lesson as having a social role*, before starting it. She didn't. She asked questions...

C12: ... isn't it linked to the aims of the lesson?

E13: Yes, it is linked to the aims.

C and E disagreed with T about some of the actions taken to present the objectives to the group (underlined). For this reason, they carefully planned to discuss the questions to be asked. They knew this conflicting topic could elicit a defensive attitude from T and they hesitated (*italics*) about the way they could question her actions (**bold**). In this sense, they plan their questions bearing in mind the possibility of building a relationship that is minimally defensive.

- E6:** **If the subject is linked to the previous lesson or if she prepared that specific lesson for that particular day, right?**
- C6:** Because she went straight to that, didn't she?
- E7:** *Er, er, yeah.* Just to give it a start, *let's see now*, after she, *er... (hesitating)* She used different things several times. She played the dialogue and kept asking different questions...[E7 and C7: ...about time] [inaudible], discussed the persons of speech...
- C8:** The names given to the persons of speech [they speak at the same time – unintelligible – then they go back to questions]
- E8:** “How is the subject presented?”
- C9:** ...we saw it..
- E9:** yes, we saw it [inaudible] ... listening comprehension ... **“How did you present the subject in class?”** She got there and didn't say anything, didn't actually say something like “Look, today, we are going to learn the numbers.” She got there and went straight to the point.
- C10:** **How did you link the lessons, the previous lesson with your lesson?**

Students' participation

C and E wanted to question T about the way students acted in class, that is, how they participated in the activities. But they were very concerned with the type of question they were going to use for they did not want simple opinion answers. They expected T to describe what happened so as to make her go further in the analysis of her actions. They feared that some questions could lead to the presentation of points of view without any real support. So while preparing the questions, they moved from one way of questioning to the other (bold), presenting reasons (italics) based on the objective of the questions.

E20: ...yes, **what was the participation of students like?** *Let's set the question well*, because "**what was the participation of students like?**" "*Ah! It was good, bad*", *you know that...*

(...)

E22: we can change to ... "**Do you think that students participated? How so?**"

C22: yes...

E23: *then she'll have to exemplify better, because the "how so" requests examples.*

C23: it is, but the "think" is...

E24: ...yes, "think" is a problem

C24: ... "**was there participation?**"

E25: ... that's right. "**Was there student participation? How so?**"

Because they had already discussed the implications of opinion questions and of non-assertive answers in previous classes, they chose different questions dialogically (Bakhtin, 1952/1979), predicting what the audience (T) would say. The responsive characteristic of language is stressed since C and E were aware of the context they were involved in and of the reflective objective of their roles as multipliers and conductors of critical reflection. Their concern with the type of relationship was then very emphatically determined.

When talking about students' participation, C and E showed great concern with not making judgment (*italics*), but helping T understand what was happening in her actions.

C18: ... student's role... "**how did students participate?**", ok? *Not in the sense of of making judgement.*

E18: *Ah! Nooo!!* **How did students perform? Did they ask this? Did they participate?**

C and E also presented their opposing opinion about the action taken by T. Once again, they did not say that explicitly, but planned a question to lead T to see what they thought. In this case, they wanted T to get to a conclusion, by guiding her through the reflective process.

Although they did not agree with T's actions and felt insecure about their roles as conductors of the reflective process, they do not pretend they did not see the action with which they disagree. Nor are they too quick to prepare questions to criticise their colleague. On the contrary, they want T to visualize the action and question herself about this attitude (bold).

C26: ... What kinds of activities were developed after the listening activity?

E27: that's great...

C27: Because here, *I think they could have worked in pairs , not individually.*

E28: great because... here we can ... **it will all depend on the answer she gives us too.**

C28: ... exactly, we can link the integration of the individual and the group activities.

E29: if they received help to... This is "inform".

C29: ok...

E30: depending on the answer she gives, it is "informing"...

Besides, C and E were aware of the flexibility and unpredictability of the situations and that the questions they were preparing could lead T to talk about different aspects. So, although they had planned what to say in those cases, they knew that other topics could (and should) be brought into the discussion.

Teacher's role

When discussing T's role in the class, C and E got really worried with the results of their linguistic choices. They understood that depending on the type of question (bold), T could develop different possibilities of reflection, or even feel ill at ease, which they really did not want. What they actually wanted was to develop a process of self-discovery and for this reason, they did not want to develop a Model 1 type of relationship (italics).

C33: Let's ask her **how she...what her role was? How she conducted her class?**

E34: Yeah, let's ask this "**what was her role in that moment?**"

C34: How.. "How" is so odd..., isn't it?

E35: Yeah, it IS odd. Let's see another way of asking..."**How did you conduct the class?**"

C35: That is ok.

E36: It is enough, isn't it?

C36: *It is a question of behaviour, isn't it? But what can we do?*

E37: *We can't make the teacher feel ill at ease...*

C37: *It is strange for us to talk about it, isn't it?*

Both were insecure about exchanging opinions, discussing ideas, presenting points of view, and, through this, making T feel embarrassed or ashamed, but they wanted to take risks. What really stands out is their interest in collaborating to help T see herself. They were interested in creating cognitive conflicts that could help T learn with and from her own actions and with their collaboration. In the same way, they showed an understanding that no matter how planned the event could be, the context would always lead the discussion (italics):

E38: Was the lesson teacher centred? Was it student centred?
How was it delivered?

C38: Who was the centre of the class?

E39: Yeah.. Who was the centre of the class?

C39: ... having that question as a starting point. And then, was the class centred on you or on the students?

E40: that's it, great, even better [inaudible] *And some questions will lead to others...*

6. Concluding remarks

In my attempt to understand how teachers organize their collaborative actions, I have sought to illustrate the potential of preparation sessions for the development of the reflective sessions. The attention to discursive and linguistic aspects of critical reflection and collaboration shows teachers' initial concern with developing a process

of reflection that is not simply led by exchanging ideas about activities that worked out well, or by getting new materials for their following class or even, by describing those students who “really spoilt their class”. In other words, it is not simply a concern with pragmatic aspects of school life that matters. In the case studied, teachers were concerned with discussing the reasons for the choices their colleague made, for the connections between events of the class and the world outside. Besides, they were not simply talking about their colleague’s class aimlessly. They had an objective and they tried to pursue it in the organization of the reflective session.

This preparation session also showed how the two teachers learned to collaborate in the construction of knowledge, of working together and discussing a colleague’s class. Teachers, used to acting as islands, started to get closer and to work together. Their talk showed respect, attention, and concern. The teachers never used pejorative evaluative expressions to discuss the class or the students. Besides, they planned a collaborative session collaboratively. The whole conversation was built from suggestions and opinions given and revised by the two, one complementing what the other had to say and, even when they disagreed, they presented their ideas in a calm and honest way, not in fear of the other.

However, a systematized dialogue between the analysis of the preparation sessions and the reflective sessions requires a lot more research. According to Magalhães (2000), the reflective session that was developed as a result of these preparation sessions showed some improvement in relation to previous reflective sessions analyzed (Magalhães & Celani, 2001). However, it still calls for improvement in aspects that could also be observed in the preparation session itself. Both in the preparation session and reflective session, for instance, teachers failed to discuss the social roles of their action more deeply. Despite mentioning such roles, they did not discuss them focusing on theoretical aspects that could elucidate the criticisms made. Besides, their opinions and suggestions were only mentioned, but no supports were presented.

These findings have implications for implementing changes in the teacher development program we are involved in. They also

contribute to discussions about the development of teacher educators in general, for they show the difficulties and the attempts involved in dealing with, preparing and developing teacher educators.

Recebido em: 05/2004. Aceito em: 06/2004.

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