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GUIDED DIDACTIC CONVERSATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Education is based on communication between educans and educandus and, in most cases, on peer-group interaction. This communication can take the form of conversation face to face. It is my contention that even when such real conversations cannot take place it is the spirit and atmosphere of conversation that should - and largely do - characterise educational endeavours.

Thinking aloud is a frequently occurring form of text elaboration which has been studied in different contexts (cf. Ericsson & Simon 1980, Chafe 1979 and 1980, Graff 1980 p.149) . Elaborative processing of text, i.e. the interaction of the text content with the prior knowledge of the reader, has, in fact, proved conducive to retention (Weinstein, Underwood, Wicker & Cubberly 1979, Mayer 1980, Ballstaedt & Mandl 1982) . Whereas a student who does very little elaborating does not secure the new learning matter sufficiently, those who do a lot of broad elaborating seem to risk difficulties in retracing the text information in the multitude of connections they have established. Thus moderate use of text elaboration seems profitable (Mandl & Ballstaedt 1982; cf. Ballstaedt & Mandl 1982 p.5).

Text elaboration has something of a conversational character also when it does not literally mean thinking aloud. Cf. Lewis, who rejects any contrasting of 'conversational activity with more solitary activities such as private reasoning and silent reading' , which he characterises as 'internalised conversations' . 'As we mull things over quietly and in solitude, we are actually holding a conversation with ourselves' (Lewis 1975 p.69).

If we accept that this elaborative text processing and 'internalised conversation' represents a useful learning strategy it is logical to draw conclusions from this to a teaching strategy. In its simplest form this would imply causing students to apply an appropriate extent of text elaboration to their learning. This leads to what I have called a style of guided -didactic conversation likely to influence students' attitudes and achievements favourably. The more a student is dependent on guidance, support and encouragement, the likelier is the favourable influence of the guided didactic conversation. It is the author's contention, however, that most learners, also among the most mature and autonomous students, benefit from teaching presentations based on the style of guided didactic conversation and thus conducive to appropriate text elaboration.

The gist of the concept of guided didactic conversation in distance education

Distance education can - and to some extent does - provide an application of this thinking. My theory implies that the character of good distance education resembles that of a guided conversation aiming at learning and that the presence of the typical traits of such a conversation facilitates learning. The distance-study course and the non-contiguous communication typical of distance education are seen as the instruments of a conversation-like interaction between the student on the one hand and the tutor counsellor of the supporting organisation administering the study on the other. There is constant interaction ('conversation') between the supporting organisation (authors, tutors, counsellors) , simulated through the students' interaction with the pre-produced courses and real through the written and/or Telephone interaction with their tutors and counsellors.

I first introduced my view of distance education as a form of guided didactic conversation in 1960. Since then the conversation concept has become important in other considerations of education. A remarkable contribution has been offered by Gordon Pask in his interpretations of learning under controlled conditions (Pask 1976, Entwistle 1978). Other applications of the concept of conversation are, for instance, found in Lewis 1975, Moran & Croker 1981, Thomas & Harri-Augstein 1977. The last-mentioned authors state:

Effective internalization of the complete learning conversation produces the self-organized learner and the fully functioning man or woman. Such people learn from experience and continue to learn from life. Frozen internal conversations disable us as learners, and it is only when the external conversation is re-established that the frozen process can be revived. Living then becomes an ongoing opportunity for learning (p.102).

Although these approaches have some similarities with mine, they serve other purposes.

The basis

My approach is originally based on seven postulates. They are

1. that feelings of personal relation between the teaching and learning parties promote study pleasure and motivation;

2. that such feelings can be fostered by well-developed self-instructional material and two-way. communication at a distance;

3. that intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favourable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods;

4. that the atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favour feelings of personal relation according to postulate 1;

5. that messages given and received in conversational forms are comparatively easily understood and remembered;

6. that the conversation concept can be successfully translated for use by the media available to distance education;

7. that planning and guiding the work, whether provided by the teaching organization or the student, are necessary for organized study, which is characterized by explicit or implicit goal conceptions.

Whereas postulates 1, 3, 4 and 7 are of a somewhat axiomatic character in agreement with generally accepted beliefs, numbers 2 and 6 are supported by a wealth of more or less systematized observations made by practitioners. Postulate 5 has to some extent been empirically validated.
A basic general assumption is that real learning is primarily an individual activity and is attained only through an internalizing process. This is, in my view, to be regarded as a Background

theory on which distance education is based. It leads us to a study of how this individual learning can be supported and facilitated.

As indicated in the postulates both the presentation of learning matter in a printed or otherwise pre-produced course and the two-way communication brought about by assignments (or otherwise) serve the purposes of didactic conversation. Whereas the former can pave the way for profitable interaction with the study material and thus represents a kind of *simulated* communication, the communication between student and tutor or counsellor in writing, on the telephone or by other means represents real communication. The two together constitute the kind of didactic conversation possible in distance education. It is the simulated communication that is above all studied in this presentation of the guided didactic conversation in distance education.

On real, non-contiguous two-way communication see Baath 1980, Holmberg 1981a, Chapter 4, and Holmberg 1981b.

So-called self-checking exercises, review questions with model answers, inserted questions and similar components often stand out as important elements of simulated communication. They are not always necessary, however useful they are in many contexts. If a problem-learning approach is applied in the sense that the whole learning is based not on what we now know but on the problems asked by scholars of earlier times and by any serious student, then the discussion of how to put the questions, what paths to go and what procedures to use to come to a conclusion may include the conversational elements. Cf. Weingartz 1980 and 1981.

The characteristics of guided didactic conversation may be said to be:

- Easily accessible presentations of study matter; clear, somewhat colloquial language, in writing easily readable; moderate density of information.

- Explicit advice and suggestions to the student as to what to do and what to avoid, what to pay particular attention to and consider, with reasons provided.

- Invitations to an exchange of views, to questions, to judgements of what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected.

- Attempts to involve the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems.

- Personal style including the use of the personal and possessive pronouns.

- Demarcation of changes of themes through explicit statements, typographical means or, in recorded, spoken communication, through a change of speakers, e.g. male followed by female, or through pauses. (This is a characteristic of the guidance rather than of the conversation).

This can - and should - be seen as an attempt to describe essential traits of good distance education and thus represent an understanding of its basic character. However, it is also a prescriptive theory in that it suggests procedures effective in facilitating learning.

The theory

A course presentation following the principles of guided didactic conversation in the sense described is assumed to be attractive to students, support study motivation and facilitate learning. This is expected to apply to most learners at all levels, but particularly to those with little or modest experience of study and limited independence. As exceptions are foreseen (a minority of students are expected to be indifferent or, in extreme cases, even negative to the style of guided didactic conversation this is not a nomological theory.

If, as is usually assumed, children and adolescents rely more on guidance and a style of presentation adapted to estimated learning difficulties than mature adults, then the didactic conversation must be expected to appeal less to and be less effective with a target group consisting of mature adults than one consisting of less mature young people. Further, learning at an elementary stage is usually assumed to need more personal approaches and references to knowledge already acquired than highly advanced study. The didactic conversation would thus seem to suit elementary learning better than advanced study. It would also seem to suit the presentation of new learning matter where the learner is aware that he or she is covering new ground and thus needs personal guidance rather than presentations of learning matter that the student has already worked with on earlier occasions.

With these reservations I assume that if a distance-study course consistently represents a communication process felt to have the character of a conversation, then the students will be more motivated and more successful than if the course studied has an impersonal textbook character.

This also concerns the use of assignments for submission: if used as a means to stimulate and facilitate conversation type communication they are assumed to contribute considerably more to motivation and success than if used as a means to examine and evaluate students. My main formal hypotheses based on the general postulates and the assumptions about what constitutes guided didactic conversation can therefore be summarised as follows:

- The stronger the characteristics of guided didactic conversation, the stronger the students' feelings of personal relationship between them and the supporting organisation.

- The stronger the students' feelings that the supporting organisation is interested in making the study matter personally relevant to them, the greater their personal involvement.

- The stronger the students' feelings of personal relations to the supporting organisation and of being personally involved with the study matter, the stronger the motivation and the more effective the learning.

- The more independent and scholarly experienced the students, the less relevant the characteristics of guided didactic conversation

Testing the theory

It would be tempting to try to test the influence of each of the characteristics of the guided didactic conversation as listed above. However, it does not seem possible to explore if each of them separately constitutes a sufficient means to bring about a type of communication which creates feelings of personal involvement. The different characteristics evidently overlap too

much to make this possible. It is the united influence of the characteristics as a composite characterising quality that is tested.

The validity of the theory is tested in a way inspired by Popper, i.e. through falsification rather than verification attempts.

1. A unit of a German post-graduate course on educational planning was modified in such a way that the first part was developed according to the principles of guided didactic conversation whereas the second part was retained in the original form, which was in the style of traditional German scholarly writings. The students' attitudes to the two types of presentation were investigated by a questionnaire study (Holmberg & Schuemer 1980).

2. A post-graduate distance-study course on 'Essentials of distance education' in a British and a German version was written in the style of didactic conversation and was tried out as a training course for distance educators (from a number of different countries). Their opinions about the value, if any, of guided didactic conversation in distance education were collected (Holmberg & Schuemer 1982).

3. An English-language course on English grammar for Swedish students reviewing their school knowledge as a preparation for university study of English was re-written in the style of guided didactic conversation. On the basis of a randomised selection an experimental group of students were given the revised version whereas a control group were given the original version. The attitudes and the attainments of the two groups were analysed and compared (Holmberg, Schuemerf & Obermeier 1982).

Results

The empirical investigations gave no conclusive evidence. However, the tendency apparent in all the three studies favours the theory although no consistent, statistically, significant corroboration has emerged. The students taking part in the investigation state that they feel personally involved by the conversational presentations, their attitudes are favourable to them and in the third study they do marginally better than the students taking the original course in their assignment attainments.
These results are statistically less supportive of the theory than expected. Nevertheless the tendential outcome does support the theory. Statistically it has not been proved wrong (has not been falsified) and is considered valid as an ad-hoc theory until one with more explanatory power has been developed and tested with more favourable results.

These conclusions are the more reasonable on account of the testing procedures used.

To test the applicability of the theory of guided didactic conversation the falsification attempts have caused particular attention to the circumstances (frame factors) which appear to weaken the predictive value of the theory. Students' attitudes to the style of didactic conversation as well as their achievements on studying a handbook presentation in relation to those following the study of a conversation-style presentation were, in consequence, analysed under circumstances as unfavourable as possible to the theory:

1. The courses used for the empirical investigations concerned the university stage, where the independence of the form of presentation and of guidance is assumed to be considerably greater than at lower stages.

2. The students concerned in the investigations were adults and therefore presumably somewhat independent in their study.

3. The course chosen for the first study (limited to research on students' attitudes) was an advanced course (on educational planning) mainly studied as a post-graduate course by teachers and others who had acquired a university degree before they enrolled for this course, by students of other universities supplementing their degree programme and by external students with particular interest in the subject.

4. The course on which the second study was based was a professional course for distance educators at postgraduate level.

5. The third study, which included an analysis of the students' achievements, was concerned with a distance-study course meant for and used as a deepening revision of a subject area (English grammar) that at lower levels the students had gone over on several earlier occasions. They could thus be expected to benefit from and be attracted to a survey of a handbook format rather than learn more effectively from and enjoy a conversation-like presentation.

If the theoretical universe of the study is taken to consist of distance study in general, these falsification attempts lead to a deviation from isomorphism between the cases tested and all relevant cases, but in such a way that the validity of the theory is strengthened through the statistical failure of the falsification. This is due to the logical certainty that non-disproved applicability of the theory of guided didactic conversation to the cases studied must be interpreted as a clear indication that it applies as much to cases of distance study at more elementary level and with less mature or advanced students than in the cases studied.

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