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2014

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Understanding I/We positions in a blended university course: Polyphony and chronotopes as dialogical features

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Abstract

This paper uses Dialogical Self Theory to explore university students' I/We positions before and after participating in a blended course with both individual and collaborative learning activities. Two focus group discussions were held; one at the beginning and the other one at the end (18 students in total; 3 M, 15F; average age 24 years old). The focus groups were analyzed through discursive analysis by referring to the Bakhtinian concepts of chronotope and polyphony, as dialogical features of positioning. Results show that at the end of the course the polyphony became richer, including also technology. This was initially "suppressed" and became later a voice supporting both We-position and collaborative learning. A shift from initial I-positions rooted in a broad chronotope (including past, present and future) toward We-positions placed in the specific and situated chronotope of the course occurred. This result poses the question of sustainability and transferability of innovation.

Keywords: dialogical self, polyphony, chronotope, blended learning

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Identity as dialogical-technology-mediated Self

According to theories sharing a cultural, socio-historical and constructivist approach (Cole, 1996; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006;), we consider learning as a process where not only the knowledge undergoes a change, but the identities of participants are transformed as well. Within this framework, one important way to gauge the learning process is to focus on how learners take up new positions as students. The development of the identity positions can be viewed as a process of experimentation through which learners incorporate new ways of being and interacting (Vågan, 2011), leading ultimately to new I-positions, as defined by Hermans' (2004) Dialogical Self Theory (DST).

DST considers the Self as a set of I-positions that is dynamic (Hermans, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Indeed, the Self is in a state of continuous innovation because it is generated through constant dialogue with the so-called internal I-positions (positions the person attributes to her/himself in different time and contexts), as well as with the external positions in relation to both people and tools. In this way, the Self is a dialogical construction across extended spaces and times following Bakhtin's (1981) conceptualization of chronotope.

Chronotopes and the metaphor of polyphony represent crucial sources of inspiration for Hermans' (2004) dialogical approach to the Self. According to Bakhtin (1981), chronotopes are built through discourse at the nexus between images of space and time, which have an inseparable relationship. The Self would be impossible without the space/time coordinates (Holquist, 1990), since "the image of a man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 16). Indeed, as the Self develops and expands, so too, in a sense, do *its* chronotopes (Brown & Renshaw, 2006).

At the same time, Hermans (2004) claims that I-positions are created by 'voices' that give account of their own perspective, of what they 'see' from the particular position they occupy within the mindscape. In this way, the Self can be understood as a polyphony of 'voices' involved in a dialogic process. Positions interact with each other creating polyphonic processes and they are rooted in space-time dimensions. Such polyphonic processes can be conceptualized by analyzing how people

use language to carry out their social interaction. Thus, the structure of the dialogical Self cannot be grasped without observing polyphony occurring among the voices, and situating it in its chronotopes. Indeed, the polyphony can only be understood when it is rooted in defined chronotopes that is specific spatio-temporal coordinates of events emerging within interaction. Chronotopes can be found in discourses giving accounts of actions and verbal reports through which people construct the meaning of activities (Ligorio & Ritella, 2010).

We use these concepts of chronotopes and polyphony to define the particular relationship between identity and learning processes. A strong line of research exists on the dialogical components of learning and on the use of chronotopes as conceptual categories for understanding learning and Self-development. For instance, Brown and Renshaw (2006) argue that the concept of chronotope provides a way of understanding the students' participation in educational contexts. Its dynamic nature implies interactions among past experiences, ongoing involvement, and future goals as well. Therefore, chronotopes are used to explore how identities shift in association with time-space zones. The present, in this sense, is held in the balance between references to the past and anticipations (or projections) into the future. Ligorio and Ritella (2010) suggest that the concept of chronotope is helpful to analyze the co-construction of spatial and temporal frameworks as an indicator of collaborative interactions and of the dialogicality of such experiences. Many authors (Koschmann, 2001; Linell, 1998; Renshaw, 2004; Wegerif, 2007) point out that the concept of dialogicality allows us to capture the relational nature of the learning environments. Ligorio and Ritella (2010) propose a bridge between Dialogical Self Theory and learning, since learning contexts represent the source for eliciting and defining Self-innovation processes.

In this paper, we describe an explorative study to track-down the change of learners' identity positions of students participating in a blended (combination of online and offline activities) university course. Blended educational activities are interesting occasions for dialogical learning because of the multiplicity of communication formats available (Bonk & Graham, 2005). By using technologies, the space and time for dialogue is expanded and the dialogical dimensions of communication

are supported and amplified (Ligorio & Ritella, 2010; Renshaw, 2004; Wegerif, 2007)

In other studies (Ligorio *et al.*, 2013), we reported a method to explore changes of I-positioning during the course. Here we propose an integration to it based on self-positioning before and after the course, by taking into account how technology introduces new spatio-temporal dimensions that complement and intertwine with the time and space of face-to-face communication.

The research

The context

This research concerns a blended university course, held at the University of Bari (Italy) by following the so-called Blended Constructive and Collaborative Participation model (BCCP) (Ligorio *et al.*, 2011; 2013). Namely, the online activities were delivered on a free online platform (Synergeia, bscl.fit.fraunhofer.de) and the offline activities were held in a university lecture room.

The course, 'Psychology of Education and E-Learning', lasted 12 weeks and involved 13 students (average age, 24 years old; 2 M, 11 F). All were encouraged to participate in two focus group discussions about their learning experiences. One group discussion was held at the start of the course; the other one was held at the end. All participated in the discussion at the beginning of the course, but only eight participants attended the final discussion.

The course is at a master level, offered in the Work and Organizational Psychology Program. The course was organized in five modules and was conceived as a thoughtful mix of individual and collaborative activities, learning strategies, and a variety of final products students were asked to build (Ligorio & Sansone, 2009).

Research questions

Our research questions are:

– How do I- and We- positions emerge in what we can call a polyphonic dialogue characterized by many expressed voices?
– How these positions are placed in relation to chronotope references?
– What are the differences in identity positions as expressed during the first focus group discussion, at the start of the course, compared to the second one held at the end of the course?

Data collection

We designed two focus group discussions to evoke reflections on the collective construction of the learning experience (Ligorio *et al.*, 2013). The first group discussion was held at the beginning of the course and the second group discussion occurred at the end. Both took place in the same university lecture room where lessons were usually organized, in order to anchor the discussion to the context of the course. The same researcher led the two discussions, both of which were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The method of analysis

Data were analyzed through a discourse analysis from a dialogical perspective (Ligorio *et al.*, 2013). Attention was focused on students' utterances, analyzed by using a qualitative interpretation. The whole set of data was read by two researchers looking for excerpts where polyphony and chronotopes could be retrieved by using a set of theoretically-based concepts. Specifically, we looked for I and We positions to define the polyphony and the chronotopes for the space-time of learning. Data were re-read through the emerging chronotope and polyphony components, considered as tools leading both the interpretation and description of the students' Self positions. Two sets of indicators – one for the polyphony and one for the chronotope – were defined through negotiation between two researchers and with constant reference to the theoretical framework of our research (see Table 1).

Table 1. Analytic aspects indicating polyphony and chronotope.

	Indicators
Polyphony	– Personal markers (I, me, my, we, us, our, etc.), considered as indicators of how positions are "voiced"; – Explicit or implicit reference to what was said by others; – Explicit references to learning materials such as books, computer and/or specific online platforms.
Chronotope	– Reference to spaces and time where learning occurs

Two researchers independently analyzed the whole set of data, by using the indicators to single out voices and space-time references in the discourse. After this step, the researchers compared the categorization and 85% inter-rater agreement of the cases was found. The controversial cases concerned both the voiced and the chronotopes assigned. These cases were discussed with a third researcher until a total convergence on the interpretation was reached.

A comparison between the initial focus group and the final focus group was made, in order to explore changes in identity positions.

As follows, the main and most representative extracts are reported to describe the results; however, they are just a small part of the whole amount of extracts analyzed. The selection started from a larger set that each of the three researchers independently proposed. These initial sets were compared and finally the excerpts selected by all the three researchers were proposed for a deep analysis. In fact, since they attracted the attention of the three researchers, we consider them as the most representative.

The results

First Focus Group Discussion at the Beginning of the Course

In the first focus group, students were required to talk about themselves as students, that is their learning methods and themselves in relation to

their learning experiences. Initially, they differentiated learning contexts, referring to several spatio-temporal situations – some in the remote past, some in the recent past. For example, in excerpt 1, we will see how Student1 refers to university courses attended at different times. Learning methods appears to be anchored to specific contexts and the situatedness of learning can be highlighted.

Excerpt 1

1 **Student1**[1]: Well, I think that also the way we study varies slightly
2 from one course to another also within the university context for ex-
3 ample, one course may require more summing up or perhaps it de-
4 pends on how the books are written even within the same course
5 there can be two books written by different authors. The approach
6 can be different and perhaps one book is incomprehensible: in-
7 comprehensible in inverted commas and perhaps it requires doing
8 more outlines, but then there are others where I can just underline
9 the text I don't know or perhaps from one topic to another if one
10 topic has more … that is if it's let's say more discursive or with math
11 formulae; I'm thinking about statistics.

Student1 suggests that certain courses (lines 1 and 2), or type of educational materials (lines 3 and 4), require specific learning styles and learning strategies. Studying is described as a student-book interaction, where the student tries to understand the nature of the book ("incomprehensible" – line 6, "discursive" – lines 9, 10) and adjust the strategy according to that. The space and time emerging is about the "university context" (line 2) which includes the courses already completed. In terms of polyphony, there is an individual voice speaking from many I-positions (lines 1, 8, 10). The only dialogue recognizable is that between the student and the book, when Student1 refers to "how the books are written" (lines 3, 4). In excerpt 2, Student2 introduces issues like personal variations and preferences:

[1] The original excerpts were in Italian; they have been translated by the third author of the paper, checked by the other three authors, one of which being a native English speaker.

Excerpt 2

1 **Student2**: Actually, I think it depends on the person, for instance in
2 high school I was used to studying out loud even math, repeating it
3 out loud rather than writing, repeating everything out loud because
4 out loud means let's say creating a mental flow and if I don't say it
5 out loud I can't say: the Pythagorean theorem as an example, apart
6 from the subject I used to write statistics topics but I repeated it out
7 loud anyway and that's why this is an entirely personal thing for me
8 at least for …at least in my opinion

9 **Student1**: Me too, I always repeat out loud and for me it's not pos-
10 sible not to repeat but I was referring to the approach itself that is
11 while repeating when it comes to articles I read the text I underlined
12 and in Statistics I didn't underline the book I made some outlines
13 for statistics I don't underline but rather make my own summaries:
14 which is something that I … I very seldom do in other cases

In this excerpt, we can see dialogic layering of I-positions simultaneous-ly with a recruitment of past high school experiences (lines 1, 2). The polyphonic ("Me too" – line 9) and spatio-temporal qualities of this talk emerge in the process of displaying a I-position as learner connected to the instructional materials ("I read the text I underlined and in Statistics I didn't underline" – lines 11, 12).

The discussion on learning strategies is a movement back in time and to different spaces. Student1's strategy of reading out loud in order to create "a mental flow" is a self-evaluation in terms of learning style, one developed back in high school. Student1 adopts Student2's voice ("Me too"), but quickly adds a comment about how the educational ma-terials (and not only the learning situation) may require different strate-gies.

So far, the I-positions predominate over a weakly present We-posi-tion, which operates mostly as a way of aligning the individual positions within a mixed university and high-school chronotope. As the re-searcher attempts to focus the discussion on the present experience, there emerges a contrast between "traditional" learning and a (still de-

veloping) new way of learning, within the hybrid nature of the course and its emphasis on group work:

Excerpt 3

1 **Student 3**: in the more traditional sense certainly but I must say that
2 we are becoming less used to studying this way.

3 **Researcher**: eh eh that's Synergeia's fault?

4 **Student3**: No no no because last semester we did a lot of group proj-
5 ects so that's also changing a bit

The discussion about learning strategies reflects changes in study habits due to "group project" experiences in a previous university course (line 4), leading to new study methods and new ways of being students. The reference to "traditional" learning contexts allows students to relate to learning spaces that are familiar. The narrative thus interweaves traditional learning (lines 1 and 2) with a sense of innovation connected to the idea of working in hybrid group projects (line 4).

In summary, during this first focus group discussion, students refer to chronotopes based on past learning experiences and to a future dimension anchored to the course they have just started. Past experiences are populated by individual voices sharing a range of traditional learning strategies assumed as commonly known, although personalized. I-positions are used to channel collective assumptions about learning strategies and, when aligned and reciprocally helpful, as starting points for We-positioning.

Second Focus Group, end of the course

From this discussion, a course-specific chronotope can be seen to have emerged. I and We-positions are related to the specific learning strategies and the tools adopted during the course, within the space and time of the course itself. An example can be found in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 4

1   **Student1**: yes sure also because in any case that is the course: it's in
2   front of a computer, instead: that is we, at the end study books: and
3   then at the end the method remains the same anyway therefore
4   reading and underlining and then taking it from the top in the book
5   and: repeating out loud – because I repeat out loud

Student1 is talking with a collective voice recognizable by the use of the "we" (line 2). This feeling of a collective subject acting in the learning context is closely related to the methods and tools students use (line 1 and 2). To define the course, this student refers to shared learning strategies such as underlining, reading or staying in front of a computer. The novelty of the course is recognized and the computer is perceived as a tool for learning. Nevertheless, old learning strategies remain (line 3) and are applied within this blended course when needed (lines 3 and 4). The blended course implies specific and innovative learning strategies and tools, not always recognized as really learning because of their novelty, as Student3 remarks in the following excerpt (line 2). Old and new methods coexist (line 1), but the new one does not replace the old one. Rather, the new one is perceived as sustaining a new type of learning, not meant for rote learning for reproducing knowledge to the teacher with the aim of receiving a good score (lines 8 and 9). Similarly, in terms of positioning, this student is not simply replacing one position as learner with another, rather she is adding a new position, namely that of a-student-in-front-of-the-computer to that of a student-in-front-of–the-book.
    By participating in this course, students construct new situated competencies, methods of learning, new I and We positions as learners. This is also clearly marked in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 5

1   **Student1**: there are two different modes
2   **Student3**: but it wasn't a real study that is, reading and analyzing, a
3   critical one
4   **Student2**: it was very critical

5   **Student3**: eh that is…
6   **Student2**: a critical analysis
7   **Student3**: that is! I haven't learned in the sense … it's not that I
8   haven't learned but I didn't learn in the sense of reporting to some-
9   one or something for a mark

Here, students try to figure out more specific characteristics of the different kinds of learning contexts and strategies (line 2 and 3). Student1 refers to two different learning strategies (line 1) and the other two students give more details about these strategies. Student3 refers of traditional learning way from books, aimed at "reporting to someone for a mark" (lines 8 and 9), and a new one, reported by Student2, based on critical thinking and analysis (lines 2, 3, 4 and 5). The two positions are here placed in a tense relationship where learning encompasses both strategies (lines 7 and 8).

    The opposition between what is meant by 'real' study and by studying on the computer with critical 'analysis' is developed in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 6

1   **Student2**: however at the end I think I understood how it worked
2   we acquired competencies more or less on the tools how to move
3   on the platform: we interacted much less at first we interacted about
4   anything but not at the end and that was the difference for me also
5   in the style of interaction: and also (in my opinion) numerically
6   amount of interventions also because (as it happened) we became
7   more aware of it but also in my opinion there was no difference at
8   the end between one group and another
9   **Student1**: so with the experience we
10   **Student2**: we became more independent

A new definition of the course emerges, hinging on the acquisition of new technical competencies (line 1 and 2), interaction strategies (lines 2 and 3) and self-regulated learning (line 6). In this excerpt, the students identify the new skills acquired by participating in this course and they

highlight the differences between the start and the end of this experience. The decreasing of the number of intervention on the platform is interpreted as an increase of the quality and efficacy of the online interaction (line 5 and 6). This is a learning strategy that the students assumed as acquired by the all the groups participating in the course (lines 7 and 8); therefore it connotes the We-as-learners emerging from the course.

Student2 expresses her opinion using the first person ("I understood" – line 1; "for me" – line 4; "in my opinion" – lines 5 and 6, 7), but her opinions always concern the group ("we acquired" – line 1; "we interacted" – line 3; "we became" lines 6 and 10). Student1 and Student2 seem to talk in a full harmony, one completing the sentence of the other: I and We-positions seem to blend and a new sense of the group can be seen emerging. Students reclaim their voices in order to express their personal positions, although all of them seem to talk for the group.

Furthermore, this excerpt highlights the interweaving of two paths: the interiorization of the interactional structure of the course and the meta-reflection about this process. The dialogical dimension of the course as a whole seems now to be extended to the specific interactional attributes, and becomes a main component in the group learning strategies. The meta-cognitive process here observed shows the emergence of a new positioning: through the participation in interactive experiences, students became more "independent" (line 10) and self-regulated learners. The 'We' is no longer a group assumed on the basis of the supposed common experiences, rather it concerns a collective position constituted within this course, united by the new learning strategies acquired. This could be regarded as a specific effect of the collaborative nature of the course.

Conclusions

By comparing the two focus group discussions, we can characterize changes in the students as reflected in their dialogic interactions within the context of the course. Across the focus group discussions, we found I positions and We positions change in their nature and these changes show the presence of the online-offline structure of the course in their polyphonic and chronotopic characteristics.

In the initial discussion, students define themselves through individualized voices, recalling their habitual practices of private study. At the same time, a generic We-as-university-students or We-as-high-school-students in the past appears.

At the end of the course, in contrast, the initially easily distinguishable individual and collective voices are blurred and blended. I and We feed each other and often individual voices express collective positions and, conversely, the group is sometimes recruited into reports of individual experiences. In particular, the We voice morphs from expressing a strategic coalition viz-à-viz upcoming challenges, to one expressing that the group has become a place for learning. The new We-positions are now composed by different I-positions (re)negotiated, whose boundaries are defined by the new learning strategies acquired through the course. At the end of the course, the students also reclaim contradictory individual voices: as a learner who has not changed as well as a learner changed through participation in the course. These contradictory positions are possible because, from the students' point of view, the interactive innovations experienced within the course are perceived as supporting the learning process situated in this specific context, but not elsewhere.

The voice of technology follows an interesting path through these polyphonic processes. Initially, it seems an inactive character in the students' discourse. At the end of the course, however, technology enters the polyphony of the discourse. Indeed, it is depicted as a tool mediating the students' interactional processes and supporting their collaborative learning activities, that is to say, in their clearest course-specific We-position.

The chronotopic dimension changes across the focus groups as well. In the beginning of the course, several learning experiences placed in the past, present, and future are interwoven to shape an expansive chronotope wherein the students define generic I-positions. This blend of temporal references allows students to situate themselves "tentatively", and with a general non-specificity, as learners in a blended course they do not yet know very much about. At the end of the course, students' chronotopes can be seen to have expanded in space, rather than over time. Indeed, they do not longer refer to their past and future self-

positioning, but speak about theirselves as learners located in the present, within the context of the blended course. Both the space-time of the course and other university courses appear in dialogical tension with one another. This tension is expressed through the simultaneous existence of contradictory I-positions. Those specific to the blended course are framed as critical and collaborative learners, whereas when referring to other learning contexts, they express positions as traditional learners.

In our interpretation, three main points emerge from these results:

a) The students' positioning repertoire is enriched by the formation of new I and We positions, which are qualitatively different from those occurring at the beginning of the course;

b) Students interiorize the interactive nature of the activities and the new learning strategies, which point to the creation of new mediating ways of being as learners;

c) I and We positions emerge from and move with specific learning systems. Thus, the situatedness of the new positions would be related to the uniqueness of the blended course within the Italian University system.

These claims call for further analysis, since the study involves a few students and the number of participants in the discussions changes at the end of the course (8 instead of 13). Furthermore, the questions are framed in more specific terms in the second focus group discussion, in order to explore the situated students' experience. These circumstances may influence the participants' answers that could be more desirable. However, we believe the integration of the method here presented, focused on the comparison between the start and the conclusion of a course, with a method able to track down positioning during the course – presented elsewhere (Ligorio *et al.*, 2013) will allow a more complete and exhaustive understanding of the students positioning development. Studies based on such integrated method would be able to answers to many research questions and to offer practical hints for effective blended and online courses.

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