Broken Windows in Online Public Spaces: A Challenge to Literacy Educators

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Abstract: Public spaces for online discussion (e.g., comments on YouTube) are often plagued by aggressive or irrelevant contributors. At the same time, these spaces do provide opportunities for exploring and practicing dialogic literacy, which is a key competence for active participation to the knowledge society. This study suggests an approach to dialogic literacy based on active participation in public debate, negotiated within a knowledge building classroom, where formal learning acts as a bridge towards fair participation in online spaces.

Keywords: dialogic literacy, online environments, agonistic/antagonistic discourse, secondary school

Introduction and background assumptions

According to the so-called “broken glass theory”, inspired by an experiment carried out by psychologist Philip Zimbardo about the signaling effect of urban disorder on anti-social behavior, “vandalism can occur anywhere once communal barriers – the sense of mutual regard and the obligations of civility – are lowered by actions that seem to signal that ‘no one cares’.” (Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

Highly frequented online public spaces in Italy – e.g., readers’ comments on the websites of national newspapers or on YouTube videos – indeed resemble a vandalized landscape, marred by hate speech, aggression, self-expression and lack of dialogue. This scenario is not unique to Italy: also in countries with a tradition of democratic debate ‘antagonistic discourse’ (Mouffe, 1999) – that is, discourse portraying the other as an enemy to be destroyed – can prevail on controversial issue (e.g., Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2011).

In this scenario, educators are in a difficult position, since they recognize the potential of the internet as a resource for developing competences in language and communication, but feel uncomfortable with the tone of public online debate. They thus have to succeed in a double challenge: helping young people prevent these antagonistic behaviors and offering them cultural, linguistic and social tools to participate in meaningful dialogues. Online public spaces offer therefore a huge, chaotic repository of attempts to communicate values, fears, expectations that do play a role in the word outside the classroom. Indeed, dialogue, debate, and participation can be fostered within the classroom, but breaking the virtual wall to engage in participatory practices in the world outside could be a more comprehensive approach towards the development of online communicative competences or – with a more ambitious term – ‘dialogic literacy’.

Our approach is inspired by studies on participatory culture and the challenge it poses both to young people and literacy educators (Jenkins et al., 2009; boyd, 2014), and builds on the notion of ‘dialogic literacy’ developed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (2005). The authors suggest that dialogue underlies all the knowledge-creating disciplines and professions, while “modern information technology […] affords means by which dialogue can become more dynamic, democratic, and creative.” (p. 750)

This poster presents the design principles of one area of intervention within a study on fostering dialogic competences through observation and participation in the public space.

Goals, context, design principles

The authors’ current research about fostering dialogic literacy is organized in three interconnected areas of intervention, whose goals are:

- defining prerequisites for dialogic literacy, with primary focus on how discourse constructs identities and relationships (Gee, 1996), but also with attention to competences that go beyond communication, such as understanding how value systems can differ (Haidt, 2012), how collaborative decision-making requires and builds social capital (Innes & Booher, 2010), and how certain types of digital interaction may actually erode it (Antoci, Sabatini & Sodini, 2012);
- defining criteria for vetting examples of more or less dialogic communication, with focus on identifying conditions and strategies that make dialogue possible, as well as behavioral patterns that preclude dialogue and discourage participation; in the process, producing worked examples for use in educational setting;
• identifying places and designing learning activities for engaging students in practices of participation and reflection.

The first two areas are currently the subjects of a parallel thread of interdisciplinary investigation. This poster focuses instead on the third one, whose concern is the design of reflective collaborative practices in a classroom-based learning setting, in which computer-supported collaboration is deeply integrated with in-presence activities.

The first iteration of educational intervention is currently being designed for a classroom of Italian lower secondary school pupils (grades 6th to 8th), in which practices of in-presence and computer-supported collaborative learning are routinely integrated in learning activities across disciplines. All the pupils have access to individual Google accounts through the Google Apps for Schools service and use a Wiki as a both collective and individual log-book and forum, as well as shared repository for learning material (Delfino, 2013).

Dialogue in classroom and gradual transfer of responsibility to the pupils for a range of activities is well-established practice in the experimental school in which this study takes place. The new focus on dialogic literacy builds therefore on existing practices with the goal of fostering awareness about attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, competences and tools that make it possible for a group to share cognitive and organizational responsibility for achieving a common goal. At this stage, the pupils learn the vocabulary and conceptual tools for reflecting on their own collaboration practices in the classroom.

When the pupils start using the online space on their own initiative for informal collaboration and discussion – a process that usually takes 3-4 months for 6th graders – they are ready for teacher-initiated online activities, based on tasks or problems that require the student to negotiate solutions, rather than expressing opinions or demonstrating the acquisition of given information. These online negotiations and discussions will in turn become an object for analysis in the classroom, with the goal of highlighting effective and less effective communicative strategies, unconscious bias, power conflicts, and especially moments of advancement in understanding problems and designing solutions.

At this stage, towards the end of 6th grade, the class moves towards observation of dialogue in the public space through assignments that require a group to analyze examples of online interactions and give a principled answer whether and how it is advisable to add a contribution. The analysis will be carried out by annotating discussion threads or specific comments (e.g., on YouTube videos) through a web-annotation service (e.g., Diigo) or simply by copying portions of discussion threads into shared GoogleDrive documents open to annotations; in the case of video-contributions to discussion, the same analysis will be performed through collective annotation of video (e.g., with VideoAnt). Prospective contributions to discussion by the students will be discussed and reviewed in the classroom before posting.

References


