Productive classroom dialogue as an activity of shared thinking and communicating

This chapter is based on:
Abstract
How do we teach children to talk together? To think in a critical, agentive, creative, collaborative, and reflective manner? These are complex questions that are at the heart of the articles within this special issue in general and in Eva Marsal’s contribution in particular. In our commentary, we will not discuss what philosophizing with children is (or should be), but instead we will draw upon the notion of productive classroom dialogue, which is an elaboration of Sarah Michaels’ and Cathy O’Connor’s work on productive talk, to reflect on both these general questions and Marsal’s ideas on philosophizing and dialoguing with children in primary school classrooms.

2.1 Introduction

In Eva Marsal’s article, a model is presented that teaches children to philosophize by acquiring a set of skills in step-by-step exercises. In the classroom examples that Marsal provides, however, it remains unclear how teachers support the kinds of thinking and philosophizing that her Five Finger Model aims to promote. This is why, in response to Eva Marsal’s article, we argue that productive classroom dialogue can be seen as a complementary approach that supports teachers in bringing dialogue into their classrooms. As its aim is to promote children’s “meaningful learning and cultural development in an emancipatory way” (van Oers, 2012a, p. 59), it enables them to do more than appropriate or reconstruct conventional cultural meanings. Through productive classroom dialogue, children learn how to collaboratively progress in communicating, thinking, and understanding. As such, we believe it to be a suitable context for philosophizing with children that goes beyond step-by-step exercises. In this commentary, we will subsequently elaborate the notion of productive classroom dialogue and discuss how it interanimates with Marsal’s Five Finger Model.
2.2 Classroom dialogue: Talking to learn, learning to talk

In the past four decades, research on classroom dialogue has received a considerable amount of attention in the educational sciences (see, e.g., Howe & Abedin, 2013; Resnick, Asterhan, & Clarke, 2015). Classroom dialogue can both be seen as a tool or medium to support children to learn new things (i.e., talking to learn) and as a means to learn to talk and communicate (i.e., learning to talk). Learning to talk and to use language in socially appropriate and functional ways (van der Veen & Poland, 2012) is essential for the development of thinking. Vygotsky (1987) already argued that learning to think is based on the appropriation of language. According to Vygotsky, language can be seen a sign system that mediates our thinking. In fact, thinking follows from the interiorization of language that was first used to communicate on an interpersonal level (thinking together). Thus, we might argue that children’s thinking and learning are highly dependent on the quality and organization of classroom dialogue. A better understanding of productive modes of classroom talk might help educators to support children’s shared thinking and communicating.

2.3 What is productive classroom dialogue?

But what then is productive classroom dialogue? In the following we will clarify productive classroom dialogue is and why it is important for classroom practice. Obviously, not all classroom dialogue is productive, just as not all classroom teaching is productive. It depends a great deal on the ability of a teacher to understand “what is to be learned and how it is to be taught” (Shulman, 1987, p. 7). This applies to teaching in general, as well as to orchestrating productive classroom dialogues in particular. In productive classroom dialogue, teachers aim to break away from interaction patterns that are predominantly teacher steered and based on recitation. Instead, they facilitate classroom dialogues in which children take each other
seriously, think together, and cross the boundaries of their own understandings. According to Bereiter (1994), for classroom dialogue to be productive - or as Bereiter called it, progressive discourse - participants should be willing to understand each other, revise their own understandings in light of new evidence, question each other’s arguments, and collaboratively progress in thinking. So the adjective productive is not a postmodern qualification for effective or efficient classroom dialogue, but rather it provides a characterization of dialogue that aims for shared thinking and understanding. Although practices of nonproductive classroom dialogues remain dominant, several studies have already shown that productively organized classroom dialogues are related to student’s learning and motivation (i.e., Kiemer, Gröchner, Pehmer, & Seidel, 2015; Nystand & Gamaron, 1991).

In our conceptualization of productive classroom dialogue, we use three interrelated parameters to characterize productive classroom dialogue and distinguish it from nonproductive modes of classroom dialogue. These parameters should be seen as neither static nor complete, but as a heuristic that can be used by educators to think about modes of organizing classroom dialogue that can (or might) be beneficial for children’s meaningful learning. A first characteristic of productive classroom dialogue is that there is always an object or, following Doblaev (1984; van Oers, 2012b), a topic that has the group’s temporary focus of attention and that gives direction, purpose, and duration to the dialogue. It is not just dialoguing (or philosophizing) for the sake of dialoguing. The topic determines what predicates or utterances are accepted and/or negotiated, for the time being, by the participants. Or in other words, a strategically selected ‘discussable’ topic determines what can be said about this topic within the context of a specific classroom dialogue. Following Vygotsky (1987) and Doblaev (1984), we argue that the process of producing new predicates and linking them to a topic that is collaboratively developed supports the group’s progress in shared thinking.

Second, for classroom dialogues to be productive, the notion of space is important - more specifically, creating spaces of creative reflection (Wegerif, 2008) in...
which participants reflect on meanings or predicates that are collaboratively linked to
the topic that has the group’s focus of attention. These spaces of creative reflection
can point out different meaning positions and can create an intersubjective
orientation in which a person is stimulated to cross the boundaries of his own
thinking. Following the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, we argue that
these spaces of creative reflection can enhance a person’s understanding about the
topic. According to Gadamer (2004), understanding is a complex process in which
one’s own situated prejudgments and cultural-historical background about the topic
are negotiated in a dialogue that is linguistically mediated. In this process, one seeks
not only to reflect upon one’s own prejudgments, but also to “understand the meaning
of another” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 271). In this respect, teachers have an important role
that can best be conceptualized as animator (Goffman, 1981). As animator, teachers
orchestrate classroom dialogues by temporarily positioning the children’s predicates
in relation to the topic that is developed. By using productive talk moves (Michaels &
O’Connor, 2012), teachers can intentionally create these creative spaces of reflection.
In productive classroom dialogue, these talk moves can be used to create spaces (a) to
reflect on initial predicates and to clarify or expand these predicates (Can you say more
about it? Why do you think that? So, you are saying…?), (b) for deep listening and
taking other’s ideas seriously (Who thinks they understood what X said and can put it
into their own words?), (c) to build on each other’s thinking (Can you add onto his
idea?), and (d) in which differences can be negotiated (Do you agree/disagree? Why?).

Together, these talk moves are tools that can be used to support the group’s
progress in shared thinking about the topic they develop. According to Wegerif
(2008), using language to create these reflective spaces “can open up a space between
people allowing creativity to occur” (p. 283) as different perspectives or meaning
positions ask for the creation of new words for understanding (see also Bakhtin, 1981).
Furthermore, our studies show that creating spaces, also in the most literal sense of
giving children more time or space to talk, improves not only children’s shared
thinking, but also their oral communicative competence (van der Veen, van Oers, & Michaels, 2014).

Finally, productive classroom dialogue contains both elements of a dialogue between persons that are physically present in the classroom and a polylogue with knowledgeable cultural-historical others outside the physical space of the classroom. In classrooms, “polylogue is essential for evaluating local dialogical agreements in a wider cultural perspective” (Dobber & van Oers, 2015, p. 230). However, many conceptions of classroom talk are dialogic in nature, but fail to move beyond the mere construction or reconstruction of ideas or knowledge and often tend to neglect the cultural and historical dimensions of these ideas. From a cultural-historical perspective, we argue that classroom dialogue necessarily contains elements of a polylogue in which relevant cultural-historical voices become part of the dialogue. In education, these voices are most often introduced through information books, artifacts, or persons. For example, when a group of 4- to 6-year-old children in one of our studies was engaged in a classroom dialogue on the topic ‘electricity’, one of the children argued that he had seen blue electricity on television. At some moment within the space and time of this dialogue, a commitment to polylogue should create an opportunity to engage with the group’s construction of ideas on electricity that are invalid (or incomplete) within a wider cultural-historical context. When we connect the idea of a polylogue to Gadamer’s conception of understanding, introducing relevant cultural-historical voices into a dialogue can enhance a person’s and a group’s understanding as these voices may interact with one’s own situated and cultural-historical prejudgments about the topic.

To summarize, for classroom dialogue to be productive we argue that three conditions should be met: (a) There is an object or topic that gives direction, purpose, and duration to the dialogue and supports children’s shared thinking; (b) teachers purposefully create spaces of reflection in which children are stimulated to reflect on their own predicates, listen to one another, build on each other, and negotiate meanings; and (c) the dialogue contains elements of a polylogue in which possible
cultural-historical voices become part of the conversation and interact with the dialogical understandings that thus far have been reached or are still in the process of negotiation.

### 2.4 Discussion

In this commentary, we argued that productive classroom dialogue is an activity of shared thinking and communicating. It aims for participants to clarify and critique ideas, take other’s ideas seriously, understand both one’s own as well as the ideas of another, and progress in shared thinking. Using our conceptualization of productive classroom dialogue, there are several ways in which our ideas may speak to and interanimate with Marsal’s contribution to philosophizing with children and the Fiver Finger Model.

Eva Marsal’s Five Finger Model has many similarities with productive classroom dialogue: It aims for philosophizing with children as a “nonhierarchical dialogue” (Marsal, 2015, p. 304) in which children “evaluate their opinions and imaginations in a corporate process of thinking” (p. 304). However, its practical application in a schoolbook in which five different methods of philosophizing are “understood as reflection operations [emphasis added] which are learned in an elementary way and practiced step by step” (p. 305) seems to suggest a more fragmented process. According to Leont’ev (1980), operations are actions that are automated and uniform, whereas actions are tentative and directed towards an object in order to intentionally change this object. Can or should philosophizing with children be something operational and automated? Does this not run the risk of becoming static and nonreflective? Furthermore, in Marsal’s article, philosophizing with children is something that is learned step by step, using a schoolbook with several exercises (i.e., phenomenological, hermeneutical, analytical, dialectical, and speculative exercises) that are conceptually related, but separated at the level of
practical exercises. One might wonder if separating these exercises or, following Marsal, reflection operations actually teaches children to philosophize and think together. Finally, one might ask what is, in Marsal’s conception of philosophizing with children, the role of the teacher in supporting children to philosophize and how does (s)he follow up on children’s contributions? It would be helpful to know more about how teachers support the kinds of thinking and dialoguing that her Five Finger Model aims to promote. In productive classroom dialogue, for example, the teacher uses several talk moves within the same dialogue to support children’s thinking, reasoning, listening, and understanding. Therefore, we believe it might be worthwhile to combine productive classroom dialogue and Marsal’s Five Finger Model. Productive classroom dialogue can incorporate the five tools (i.e., phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc.) of the model to support children’s shared thinking in a more systematic manner. Furthermore, Marsal’s model could benefit from our work on productive classroom dialogue as a context in which the different tools and exercises can be combined in one activity of philosophizing with children.

To conclude, our conception of productive classroom dialogue can be a suitable context for stimulating children to think or philosophize in a critical, agentive, creative, collaborative, and reflective manner. It is an activity, a practice in which children and teacher(s) collaboratively try to understand both their own meanings as well as the meanings of another, to think together, and to practice specific skills and appropriate attitudes in a meaningfully integrated way. It is doubtful whether this is something that can be learned step by step through separated exercises. Learning to collaboratively progress in thinking is a complex competency that can be developed only through induction into productive classroom dialogues, with the guidance of teachers who are supported to try out new discursive moves and become skillful in orchestrating productive talk.
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References


