Writing Pedagogy in Online Settings—
A Widening of Dialogic Space?

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1 Introduction

The explicit or underlying assumption for many of the chapters in this interesting and timely book is that technology provides opportunities for joint building of meaning and thus expands the scope for students’ writing development. The key concept in section 1 is ‘feedback’, in section 2 it is ‘collaboration’ and in section 3 and 4 ‘learning’. All of these processes are dependent on students being able to create knowledge in dialogical interaction with the content and with fellow students, teachers and other resource persons. Three of the chapters refer to ‘collaboration’ in the title: Onrubia and Mauri: Online collaborative writing as a learning tool in higher education, Guasch and Espasa: Collaborative writing online: Unravelling the feedback process, Strobl: Learning to think and write together: Collaborative synthesis writing. Other contributions also refer to related concepts, for instance ‘dialogic processes’ (Warnock), ‘interaction’, ‘meaning negotiations’ (Drury and Mort), freewriting as a way to encourage ‘dialogical and dialectical thinking’ (Wilde and Wecker), ‘text-bound dialogue’ (Angelov and Ganobcsik-Williams).

In this afterword I have therefore chosen to take a look at dialogic interaction and learning through the lens of Ruper Wegerif’s theoretical perspectives in his book from 2007, Dialogic Education and Technology. Expanding the Space of Learning. The British author is a nestor in CSCL (Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning) and in this book he provides a theoretical framework that may be useful for writing teachers even though Wegerif does not specifically address the teaching of writing.

In the introduction to his book, Wegerif cites the well-known Spanish sociologist, Manuel Castells, who in his trilogy The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, synthesizes a vast range of data that makes Castells conclude that the new communications technology is leading to a new form of social organization, ‘where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks’ (Castells, 2002). Castells thinks education is the social activity that perhaps is most challenged by the shift
towards a network society, and Wegerif uses his book to take on and respond to this challenge. He warns, however, against thinking that the solution ‘can be understood in a narrow technological sense as an answer to the question “how to do it”. The challenge we face is not only a technological challenge it is also a conceptual challenge.’ (Ibid: 2) We need to develop a new way to understand our new situation. And one place to start according to Wegerif, is to consider the implications of the shift from physical space-time to dialogic space-time.

Several contributions in the OW1 book refer to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (zpd), the space (distance) between learners’ actual developmental level, shown by independent problem solving, and their potential development shown by their ability to solve problems with another more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky 1978: 86). In this zone or space, teacher scaffolding means to provide support to help the learner achieve a goal that they were unable to reach on their own. In the OW1 book this concept of building scaffolds is very much to the fore, for instance in the form of ‘scripts’. (See Strobl, Mauri, and Onrubia)

Wegerif’s point, however, is that Vygotsky’s and his followers’ idea of space is on the model of physical space and needs to be rethought in ways that promotes creativity, reflection and ‘learning to learn’, aspects of education that Wegerif is particular concerned with. More specifically, we need to rethink ZPD as a dialogic space in which learner and teachers engage with each other and learn to see the task through each other's eyes. This is particularly evident in collaborative writing contexts, whether co-production of a text or feedback. ‘Dialogic space opens up when two or more perspectives are held together in tension. ... Dialogic space is intrinsically creative and the more one enters into it the more creativity one experiences.’ (Ibid: 4–5). Wegerif’s dialogic approach to education is thus

a challenge to the dominant metaphor of technology in education which is to see technology as a ‘cognitive tool’ that helps students ‘construct’. The dialogic alternative is to see technology as a tool opening up and resourcing the kind of dialogic spaces that enable people to think, learn and play together.

Ibid: 5

In light of this all who teach writing as part of their job in higher education need to think through their vision as writing teachers and the choice of role to play in students’ development processes as thinkers and writers. Lea and Street (1998) distinguished between a ‘skills approach’ to the teaching of writing and an ‘academic literacy’ approach (Lea, 2004). In the traditional skills approach