

Dialogue in Teacher Training at the University Level

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In addition to my studies, I work as a language teacher in a school in a group with four, fourth-grade children (two boys and two girls) who are learning German as a second language. In one of my lessons a conflict arose between a boy and a girl during the break. I will call them Ahmed and Fatma. Ahmed's parents work all day and he is on his own a lot. Fatma is an only child and grows up protected by her parents. Ahmed is often late to or absent from my language classes. He frequently uses Turkish swear words and is quick to insult. Fatma blames Ahmed for his behaviour. During a break, a conflict had developed between the two which they carried into my classroom.

I sat down with the four children at our group table to talk about the conflict. I asked them not to interrupt one another and to try to speak calmly. Since they were not used to dialogue, this did not work right away. I then asked Fatma and Ahmed to take a moment to think about how the other one felt. At first Fatma said: "I cannot imagine how Ahmed feels, I just want him to no longer offend me".

However, this sentence got the thoughts of the two rolling. Ahmed replied that he wanted to quit insulting Fatma, but that he just didn't know how to get Fatma to stop telling on him. He also said that he has to cook food for himself at noon and therefore just doesn't come out of the house on time. One could read in Fatma's face that she was dismayed and at the same time she was thinking. Then she apologised and even suggested she could call Ahmed from now on so that he is on time for language class. In return, however, she wanted him to stop insulting her and show her more respect. Ahmed was very surprised by Fatma's reaction and made a high and holy promise to improve.

At some point I completely took myself out of this dialogue and just listened. At the beginning, however, it was essential to explain the rules and give impulses.

—Laura Giese, student of primary school education, summer term 2020

The aim of dialogic conversations, in the sense of David Bohm's practice, is to let the emphasis be put on the process (rather than outcomes) so that the implicit and initially unspeakable can surface in a mutual conversation (Bohm 2005, p. 36). This is exactly what the student-teacher

and the children succeeded in doing in the small dialogue described above. The student-teacher broke the pattern of judgement and contradiction established between Ahmed and Fatma, and gave the children the opportunity to understand the conflict together.

This does not happen on its own. In the case above, the student-teacher created a framework by giving the children two rules: do not interrupt each other, and try to speak calmly. When that alone was not enough to calm the heated moods, she decelerated the conversation by asking Ahmed and Fatma to consider how the other one felt. In this way, she succeeded in creating a space in which Ahmed could make explicit something that had hitherto remained implicit. He dared to say something very personal, without knowing for sure how Fatma, the other children or the student-teacher would react. Fatma succeeded in changing her perspective. She responded to Ahmed's situation with understanding and offered a surprising solution for Ahmed – and in turn demanded more respect from him.

We have been reflecting together on scenes like this in our dialogue seminars in the current summer semester 2020. For example, even if the student-teacher writes that at some point she “*completely took herself out*”, the seminar group points out that she has done a lot more than this in this situation. She has, as a facilitator, succeeded in creating a ‘container’, establishing trust and, with a basic attitude that is based on mutual understanding, opened the space for the development of something new. The container in turn enables Ahmed to explain his family context by way of productive pleading. Thus he reaches the heart of Fatma: she feels empathy, she is touched by Ahmed's narration and she wants to find a solution to the situation with him in exchange for more respect from him. Such a situation, as the students agree, is a collective experience that contributes to common understanding and is an example of lived dialogue practice.

This small case study by Fatma and Ahmed illustrates what dialogue can shift at school and how great the chance is to develop common understanding and joint meaning-making in a classroom with dialogical elements. As a prerequisite for students to be able to hold dialogic conversations with others (be they children *or* adults) in the Bohmian sense of dialogue, it is essential that students get to know this form of conversation and gain experience with it. These conversations are geared towards mutual understanding, connecting with others' contributions and opening conversation spaces in which new things can arise. Against this background, this paper focuses on conceptual considerations for dialogue work in teacher training and our first very concrete experiences with it.

Why Dialogue for Teacher Training Is Important

There is a great deal of interest in dialogic forms of conversation in the classroom. *The Routledge International Handbook of Dialogic Education* (Mercer/Wegerif/Major), published in 2019, provides an overview of research on this topic. International research on school talk reveals that communication in the classroom is rarely dialogic. As stated in the handbook, “classrooms are arenas of rapid-fire and complicated patterns of talk consisting of systems of

direction and compliance, usually in some form of routine question-and-answer sequences” (Edwards-Groves/Davidson 2019: 126). The common interaction in the classroom is thus still characterised by the teacher setting a topic by asking a question (initiation) and a student usually offering a short answer (response), which is then evaluated by the teacher (evaluation). This *initiation-response-evaluation* scheme was already empirically documented in the seventies (Mehan 1979) and is still the common practice today. Classroom conversations are often characterised by a question-developing conversation style in which short-answer questions from the teacher dominate. This type of classroom conversation is also known as a ‘recitation script’; that is, the teacher directs, and the demand on the students is “to report someone else’s thinking rather than thinking for themselves and to be evaluated on their compliance in doing so” (Hardman 2019: 153).

At the same time, there are a number of intervention studies that show that teacher-student interaction can be improved through a dialogic pedagogy in the classroom (cf. the research overview by Howe/Abedin 2013). And although research increasingly shows that “dialogic pedagogy can improve student learning outcomes and social-emotional well-being” (Hardman 2019: 152), it also shows that teachers find it difficult to implement (ibid.; cf. also Edwards-Groves/Davidson 2019: 127).

Pupils and thus also students as future teachers lack the experience of a dialogue-based exchange at school. In most cases, they have been socialised at school in such a way that they have sought ‘right’ answers in results-oriented discussions. They lack the experience to be able to (cf. de Boer 2018):

- express unfinished thoughts,
- allow longer breaks and waiting times,
- suspend their own evaluations,
- trust in the process,
- unfold the ‘new’ in the joint meaning-making, and
- think together.

Even in university seminars this experience is too rarely enabled. Although students and lecturers take different perspectives on subject-related, didactic and pedagogically relevant content, they usually do so in discussions that aim at making one’s point and convincing others of one’s own point of view. Often these discussions are conducted by the same people, take place within a framework of self-presentation and are observed by a silent audience. Similar to school, many students at university-level classes are afraid to speak – they fear that they will be embarrassed or make a fool of themselves.

This makes it all the more important for students to become acquainted with dialogical forms of conversation within the framework of university teacher training. This is an important foundation for being able to conduct dialogic conversations geared towards mutual understanding and

joint meaning-making with children or adults at school. We also can assume that the experience of dialogue contributes to professionalising one's own conversational behaviour.

Online Seminar: Dialogue as the Basis for Professional Communication Skills

In the summer semester 2020, due to Covid 19 precautions, our dialogue seminar with student-teachers had to take place under completely new conditions. Our earlier seminars were characterised by dialogues in the university setting with the student group and school dialogues with primary school children (de Boer 2019; de Boer 2018; de Boer 2015, Merklinger 2019; Merklinger 2020). However, the University of Koblenz and the Ludwigsburg School of Education (near Stuttgart), our institutions in Germany, offered for the first time a pure online semester without any in-person attendance. The schools in Germany were also faced with great challenges and were closed for a long time, so there was no opportunity to work together with in-room school classes.

Against this background we developed for students at our respective locations a seminar concept in which we balanced the opportunity to gain dialogue experience with primary school children with a higher proportion of tasks for self- and peer-reflection.

The situation with Fatma and Ahmed at the beginning of this article was written by a student-teacher in this context in a reflection task.

As shown below, the seminar concept was based on five building blocks that are all interconnected:

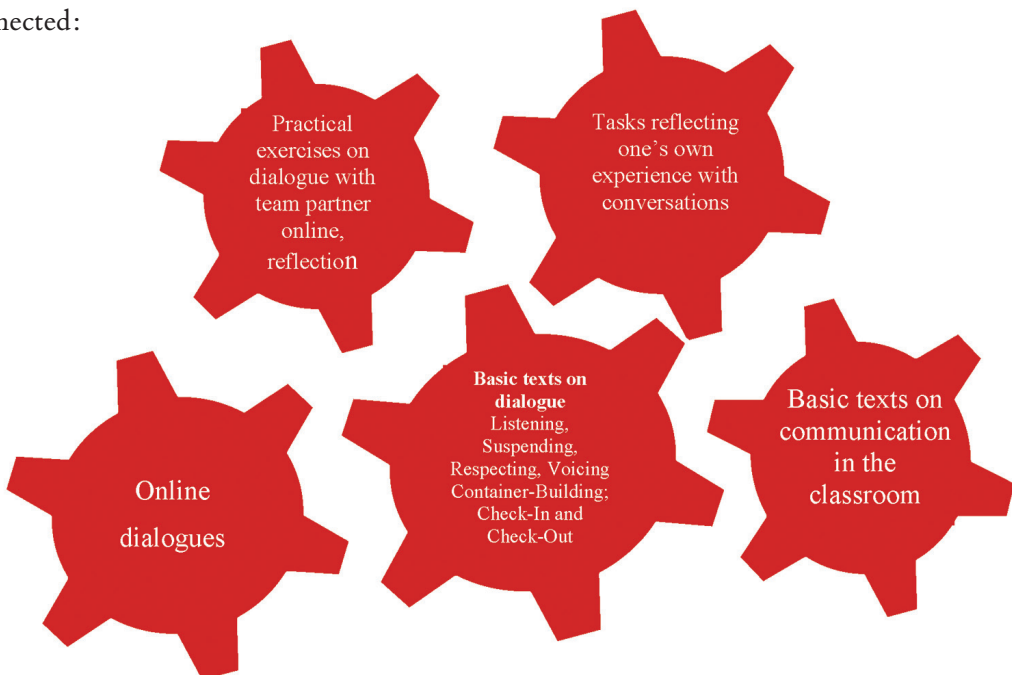


Fig. 1: Components of the online seminar concept, summer semester 2020

Questioning Common Patterns: Students Reflect on their Dialogue Experiences

The experience of online rather than in-person dialogues in the university-seminar environment and with children in their school setting – completely online without personal encounters and conversations – was unfamiliar both for the students and for us lecturers. At first this approach felt quite ‘undialogical’. In the following sections we will use original quotations of transcribed excerpts from an online dialogue conducted at the end of the semester to illustrate the student-teachers’ experiences and insights. The online dialogue’s topic – *What about dialogue has become important to you?* – was particularly revealing.

We describe the students’ experiences as ‘pattern breaks’, moments of realisation or reflection on a long-standing pattern of thought or action. We have divided these patterns into six different forms, each illustrated by student-teacher quotations. During the online seminar students became aware of (and were sometimes confused by) their own existing routines and patterns in their thinking and speaking, as shown by their statements. As a result, they had the opportunity not only to question their conversational behaviour in everyday life, but also their conversational experiences at school and at college or university.

These pattern breaks provide personal insights into the thinking of the students involved, which in this form is unusual for university contexts. We have learned together with and from the students in this dialogue!

Pattern Break One: Process Orientation and Openness to Results

“I have the feeling that this [dialogue] takes a lot of pressure off me in many conversations, so that there is no need for a result”.

Before the seminar, this student-teacher had the idea that discussions must lead to results. She reports that she learned through the seminar that things “*can be totally sufficient in the first moment if you just express your thoughts and clarify your ideas behind them*”. From her remarks, we could see that she has also changed her idea of conversations to the effect that “*it is perfectly okay if I don’t bring any results into the conversation, but only open questions or thoughts that have begun*”. It is not surprising that this student-teacher came to the conclusion that the open-endedness of results in a conversation “*takes a lot of pressure off*” of her.

“. . . Because I have always waited for the right and perfect answer for myself”.

Another student-teacher describes very impressively how the search for the perfect answer led to the fact that it “*always took her a relatively long time*” to speak in seminars. In the first

dialogue during the online seminar, she experienced this differently: *“In the first conversation with Christine*, when we were divided into groups . . . it showed me that it can really be enough to insert a fraction of your thoughts or a question or something like that, and yes – somehow I learned to dare more . . . This was a very important step for me”*.

[I found] “that you really do have the time to think about the topic and not to try to produce an answer quickly”.

A third student-teacher makes it clear through her statement that the pauses in the dialogue were very unusual for her. She refers to her experience with dialogues using picture books, which she had conducted with primary school children in the previous semester in primary school: *“At the beginning, after three seconds, you thought: ‘Okay, now you can have an answer!’”* She realised that the waiting is not only worthwhile for the children, it also makes a difference in the online dialogues in the seminar, where *“we have now taken a minute or two to really think about it”*. The phrase *‘don’t try to produce any answers quickly’* is a contrast to the way she usually experienced conversations in seminars: *“The point is to find quick answers – in case of doubt maybe even ‘any answer’ seems to serve the purpose”*

Pattern Break Two: Engaging with the Opinions of Others

“that one . . . does not always try so hard to convince others of one’s own opinion . . . , but rather to engage with other opinions . . .”.

This student-teacher has learned through the seminar *“to realise . . . and make [myself] aware”* that in dialogues she found it difficult to engage with the thoughts of others at the beginning. But *“the longer you were part of it”*, she discovered, the more she tried to think along with others and the better she could *“simply take back her own opinion”*. Before, she had thought conversations were mostly about *“convincing others of your own opinion . . . or simply presenting it”*. To *“be open for other opinions”* and knowing *“that we could continue thinking together in this way helped me a lot”*, she said. This also showed her that *“you simply have to listen better”*. Another student-teacher states that it’s not so easy to suspend one’s own opinion in a conversation: *“And it has often happened to me that you want to express your own opinion immediately without holding back at first”*. This has become *“extremely important”* to her; she associates this thought with the *“aspect of suspension”*, which she has *“not really dealt with before”*.

* Christine was a tutor in the online-dialogue seminar. She had taken part in the dialogue seminar the semester before, where she also carried out dialogues with children.

As another student-teacher points out, *“When I talk to someone in this way, I make sure that I really hear what they say and that I’m not . . . thinking about something else”*. For her, this also includes letting the person finish what they are saying. She notices that *“I was sometimes so stuck in my convictions . . . It’s important that you really get involved with other people and look at things from their point of view . . .”*.

Pattern Break Three: Suspension Instead of Immediate Evaluation

“It has become very important to me in the dialogue . . . to suspend. Because I think we evaluate very often, especially in a school context”.

Suspension is an important topic for all students. During the seminar, they got to know Chris Argyris's ladder of inference, which demonstrates how we selectively draw conclusions from data, and applied it to conversational situations from the past that they found challenging. In the online dialogue, one student-teacher points out that she knows the 'ladder experience' well: *“. . . I have often observed . . . how quickly I have practically climbed up the ladder of inference within fractions of a second”*. She goes on to say that it is important to her that she tries to *“be aware that I . . . am interpreting and evaluating a situation myself”*. But then she also tries *“to consciously oppose it”*. This thought is taken up by another student-teacher later in the conversation. She says that she has become *“more sensitive to it”* and that she *“notices it more quickly if I’m already at the top of the ladder”*. She has not yet managed to *“immediately stop forming an opinion”*. At the same time, she asks herself *“whether it is really possible to turn it off completely”*. For her, it is more a matter of holding back, not speaking immediately. Then she reports that she does have *“another preconceived opinion, but I am prepared to reconsider it . . . before I express it”*.

“Well, I ask myself . . . whether you have to stop [judging] totally, whether you have to be practically neutral”.

Another student-teacher takes up the question of whether the goal realistically can be to stop judging in one's own thoughts. She believes that judging happens *“because it is simply human”*. She understands the process of suspension as follows: *“You just have a fine feeling, and can be so self-reflected that you realise what you are doing and can consciously hold it back”*. She compares suspending with meditation. Some people say, she points out, that *“when you meditate, your head is free, there are no thoughts”*. Others say that thoughts are *“as natural as our heartbeat. And we cannot stop that”*. The question to her, then, is how to deal with the thoughts: *“I can also just*

allow the thoughts to come in and then say: 'Yes, okay. But I will also let them go again'. And I ask myself whether this is comparable to suspension. And then then you can use your mind and say: 'Yes, but now I'm going to let it go again'. And you free yourself from these thoughts again, and I think that's already . . . a great expression of self-reflexivity".

“[Regarding] the core capability of slowing down . . . I have seen how extremely important it is . . . through the different experiences we have had”.

Many of the students' statements reflect the practices of slowing down and listening. For example, one student-teacher compares his experience in two online dialogues that took different paths: “*We also compared the [process of a] dialogue on friendship and the [process of a] dialogue on the topic of failure*”. He remembers that many “*did not get the chance to speak simply because of the . . . speeding up in the second dialogue . . . including me. I noticed that I didn't get a chance at all*”. Even though a pause of 20 seconds feels “*terribly long*” to him, he finds it “*extremely important that you include everyone*”. This helps, says the student-teacher, “*that you can look at your own mental and emotional patterns again . . . and those of others.*” Pauses in the conversation are also indispensable for this, because they enable reflection, which can take place at a later time than speaking, says another: “*If you want to give room to thinking . . . then you need . . . the pauses*”.

We also emphasise listening as part of the process of deceleration in conversation. “*A very important realisation for me was this real listening. So what does real listening mean? That I actually have an open ear and do not spend the whole time thinking, but really listening and then being able to promote the flow of thoughts*”.

Pattern Break Five: Thinking Together vs. Self-Presentation as Knowledge Expert

“I found this more interesting than factual knowledge, which is what seminars are often about . . . You learn more about the people”.

One student-teacher describes experiencing dialogues in a way that is different than seminar discussions, because it is not about “*some kind of self-presentation or that I have to show myself as a knowledge expert . . .*”. As a result, he reported that he “*opened up a*

lot more” and found what the others were thinking “*much more interesting*”, “*even if their thoughts were unfinished*”. He enjoyed noticing “*experiences, observations, evaluations – simply meanings they attribute to things.*” Two aspects are interesting here: First, the student-teacher speaks of “*attributing*”, i.e., things do not have meaning per se, but the meaning arises in the mind of the observer. He also realises that not having to show himself as a knowledge expert lets him open himself up more in the conversation.

Later in the dialogue, when the students talk about the meaning of “*honest questions*” for a dialogue that is open for results, one student-teacher describes how she experiences questions in the university context: “*We are sitting in the seminar, the lecturer has just given us a lecture and then asks practically what he has just said. Almost no one answers . . . because we know that the lecturer knows, which means it’s not an honest question. But if the lecturer asks us what we think, then that’s something he doesn’t know yet and it’s an honest question*”. We should not deny that seminars at the university are also about knowledge transfer. But the question of what students think about lecture content, and how they understand it, does not exclude this level. Rather, many questions cannot be answered without referring to lecture content. The important difference is that everyone – including the lecturer – can potentially learn something new, and an important aspect is *how* the students think about the content presented. In the words of the student-teacher above: “*If you open your eyes and ears to it, you can take a lot with you. You learn more about people*”.

Pattern Break Six: Dialogue, Knowledge Transfer and Performance Assessment: Conflicting Ideas

“Oha [OMG] what have I gotten myself into, this system school, . . . which demands these performance assessments from me . . .”.

The idea of dialogue and dialogic conversations at school leads students to become aware of and reflect on the fact that joint reflection – the kind that is open to results and to jointly developing meaning in ways that even the initially unspeakable can come to the surface – does not naturally have a place in most educational institutions. For one student-teacher, even as the system demands performance assessments from her, she has the “*wish and interest to work on topics with the children in an experimental, research-based manner, which of course implies completely . . . other forms of questioning*”. This also runs counter to experiences she had had in the context of her internship in school: “*Basically it’s all about what goal you formulated in your lesson plan; did you reach the goal? Sometimes [it’s] a little bit ‘how did you reach it?’ but actually it’s about looking at what didn’t work out. Where is there room for such a conversation, where is*

there room for such a dialogue, where is there room for such an exploratory talk? How can that be formulated as a goal [in a lesson plan]?"

"We as teachers are too quick to look for the right answer. I actually believe that this is somehow [causing] a tense relationship".

Another student-teacher also questions a procedure she knows from her school internship, where she was told, *"When you ask a question, think about which answer you want to get – think carefully about the aim of the question. It's best to formulate an answer in your head"*. Against the backdrop of dialogue, the student-teacher considers this to be *"nonsense"* and *"completely counterproductive"*, which she explains like this: *"I'm already pushing all students into the same fairway and I don't allow any opinions left or right of that, because I have exactly one correctly formulated answer in my head . . . I don't allow anything left and right from that"*. She believes that *"it is incredibly important . . . that we allow students to . . . give answers that are not perfect [and the] same for us. . . . [Students also should be] allowed to express unfinished thoughts"*. She thinks that *"pupils have to learn this first"*, because she believes that through the conversational modelling that adults show *"especially at school"*, *"even children are trained . . . to provide . . . finished answers"*. She concludes her statement with the following thought, followed by 25 seconds of silence: *"I believe that this is something where . . . both the students and we as teachers . . . have a lot to learn and a lot of reflection is needed to take the pressure off"*.

Final Thoughts

The pattern breaks make it clear that the students' experiences in dealing with dialogue texts, tasks for self-reflection, peer reflections and online dialogues are very complex. In almost all cases, they process their ideas about what they have considered to be 'normal' in conversations they have had in the context of school and university. These experiences are part of their socialisation into conversations, so they take certain practices in conversations for granted. With dialogic practice, they begin to confront these 'old' experiences shaped by their socialisation with their 'new' dialogue experiences, and from this juxtaposition they formulate fresh insights – which leads to a process of transformation. *Transformation*, in this sense, means that these student-teachers:

- question conversational practices that they have hitherto considered 'normal';
- confront these old practices with new dialogic knowledge and experiences; and
- modify their previously held ideas of 'good' conversations against this new background.

The students' very personal statements sometimes point to painful experiences. These reveal that some of the conversational practices they have perceived as normal have hindered their own thinking and speaking – for example, the search for the 'perfect' answer or fast, uninterrupted action in conversation. It also becomes clear that the process of understanding often is hindered because of a bias toward self-presentation, demonstrating factual expertise or hasty evaluation and positioning; these have all restricted the process of mutual understanding.

In the students' written reflections (which are not discussed at length here), through which they studied and processed their experiences in the context of the dialogic practices of voicing, listening, respecting and suspending as documented by David Bohm and William Isaacs, we found many examples in which the experience or observation of being embarrassed or humiliated was addressed, as well as the experience of not being heard and ignored in conversation, or the lack of courage to express one's thoughts aloud.

As a first step toward becoming open to new and dialogue-oriented conversational practices, it is obviously necessary to process the conversational patterns one was socialised into, including the negative experiences and role assignments stored in them; for example, being the quiet, reserved person or the quick, loud, argumentative one.

In order to be able to understand that all roles are important in every conversation, it is important to be aware of one's own practices, and to understand them as changeable. It is necessary to experience and reflect on these as they are prerequisites which can be more or less conducive to dialogue.

Thus, it becomes clear that the tasks for individual self-reflection, in the first place born out of the necessities of the 'Coronavirus conditions', were significant in order to draw out implicit experiences of and ideas for good conversations for the student-teachers. The tasks in the online semester made it possible for students to become conscious of, express and process their formerly implicit experiences and ideas, forming the ground for transformational processes.

Student-Teacher Perspectives on Dialogue in Schools

As a second step, reflecting on one's experience of past conversations in contrast to new experiences in the online dialogues also changes the way students look at school conversations. In this way the dialogue at hand not only reveals pattern breaks, it also lets our students see opportunities to integrate dialogue into their school work, even (as a student says) "*without discussing dialogue as a major concept in its own right*", but rather "*starting in small areas at first*". They recall individual positive examples they have experienced at school; for example, when 'philosophising with children' led children who were previously silent in class to suddenly start speaking more during other lessons.

On the basis of their own reflections and new discoveries, the students formulate an important realisation: "*a culture of dialogue*" from their point of view signals to the children that what they say is important. After all, many children are not at all used to being asked

what they think: “*Many children just come into the world with announcements*”. From the students’ point of view, this also implies open forms of questions “*designed to ask what children think*”. In the students’ words, it is important to ask “*honest*” questions and not ones where the children “*basically know, I know that myself. Why should they answer me?*”

Students look at their experiences with conversations at school anew against the background of their experiences with dialogue. These insights can be important and also necessary building blocks for change processes, as international research on conversations at school continues to show that the proportion of teachers speaking is too high, short-answer questions are the rule and students rarely get the opportunity to develop their own thoughts (in joint exchange with other students) (cf. the research overview in de Boer 2018; cf. Edwards-Groves/Davidson 2019: 126).

Reflecting on One’s Experiences and Making them Fruitful for Dialogue Practice

Even though individual empirical research has shown how the teacher’s conversational behaviour can be influenced by targeted intervention training toward dialogue-based conversation (Hardman 2019: 142), too little attention is still paid to the importance of reflection and self-reflection in the context of conversation.

To summarise, at least three different steps are necessary here:

1. reflection on one’s own socialisation and biographically shaped conversational practices and roles;
2. engaging in the concrete experience of dialogues; and
3. reflecting on one’s own conversational behaviour to see the contrast between self-perception and the perception of others, with the associated opportunity to recognise the ‘blind spots’ in one’s own way of conducting a conversation.

The first step, as presented in this contribution, can be achieved (for example) by studying literature on dialogue and, against that background, reflecting on one’s own conversational experiences; the core of the second step lies in experiencing joint dialogues. The third step, however, is more complex to achieve. It is more complex because the desire and the goal of wanting to conduct a dialogue alone does not lead to success. Often the conversation practices acquired over many years are persistently anchored in one’s own routines and elude self-perception. Research shows, for example, that the share of the conversation of teachers remains dominant even if it is their explicit aim to open up more space for participation of pupils (compare, for example, Edwards-Groves/Davidson 2019: 127; de Boer 2006). Thus,

what is *intended* in terms of dialogue does not automatically lead to *good practice* in dialogue.

Against this background, in past semesters we have worked with student-teachers to empirically examine the dialogues they have conducted in schools (cf. de Boer 2019; de Boer 2018; Merklinger 2020: 67-70). The initial research results of these transcripts show that there is a pronounced difference between self-perception and external perception in conversation: “to the fact that one’s own blind spots in the conduct of the conversation not only become visible within a semester, but are also constructively worked on and changed”. (de Boer 2019: 2; cf. also de Boer 2018). These blind spots can be experienced by students not only by analysing transcripts of their conversations, but also by receiving individual feedback from trained student-teachers working as tutors; in addition, there is the dialogic exchange in the seminar. This form of research-oriented teaching and learning leads to higher-quality dialogues, as summarised as follows: More breaks and waiting times are realised, and the students only carry out dosed interventions to deepen the conversation. They ask more open questions about the children’s experiences and are able to make connections to the children’s statements (cf. de Boer 2019: 3).

Establishing dialogue as a theory, method and attitude in the context of teacher education is complex, multilayered and multifaceted. On the one hand, we would like to use this contribution to further reflect with those interested in teacher education on the steps by which future teachers can professionalise their dialogue practice. At the same time, we also ask ourselves which blind spots or implicit assumptions in current dialogical concepts would have to be further spelled out for this common task of establishing dialogue practice in teacher education and schools.

Finally, we would like to emphasise two aspects which we have become aware of in a special way through our cooperation with the students. These aspects are closely related:

- The patterns of conversation and practices experienced over many years at school and university are linked to painful experiences of students not daring to speak and the feeling that they are not being heard.
- The experience of slowing down in conversation is missing. For most students it is new to have conversations in which breaks are possible, in which common reflection and mutual understanding are the main focus.

Only the experience of a ‘failed’ dialogue without pauses made it clear to the students during the seminar how restrictive conversations, which they had previously considered normal, can be on various levels: few speak, those who think for longer periods have no chance of participating compared to quick speakers, and joint reflection becomes impossible. We did not plan this ‘accelerated dialogue’ in this way, but it has made us aware of the importance of experiencing the difference – a difference that the students might not even have noticed before engaging in dialogue. Those who are socialised at school and university

have generally had no experience of conversations in which there is room for breaks and waiting times in the sense of dialogue.

This observation leads to a special learning realisation: If student-teachers want to have dialogical conversations not only with children at school, but also with colleagues and parents, their own experiences with decelerated dialogues are essential.

We are interested in opening a dialogue with others at the conference.

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Conference Session Extracts

From a conversation with participants considering the paper with Daniela Merklinger

Speaker: The thing that really surfaced in our session was the shift of mindset that the teacher can make, even without a lot of dialogic experience, from being the expert to being curious about the thought processes of those they're teaching. That one little shift can make all the difference. Suddenly the emphasis is off the result and it shifts over to putting attention on listening to the students. Such a simple thing and yet it can make such a profound difference in a classroom environment.

Speaker: We talked about having that right answer in our minds when we're teaching people to memorize and regurgitate. Then we're not teaching critical thinking which would involve more of dialogue. In the Department of Corrections in Virginia we are working on a cognitive change in how inmates are thinking and how they're processing their decisions and how they're going to behave going forward.

Speaker: I spent 20 years in the UK education system, so I had an abundance of education, but I'm not sure I emerged from that with a great deal of skill in any of these behaviours. The education system is very much focused on filling this bucket of knowledge. My question for you, Daniela, is to what extent is this sort of thinking having an impact on the sort of education that children today are getting?

Daniela: There is a big international handbook on dialogic education that was published in 2019. There have been several projects of people working with dialogue and education. If you look at the practices all over the world it is still the same as it was in the 1970s: initiation, response, evaluation. Teachers are trained to act dialogically, but even if they try to act that way, they don't. It's really hard to change these routines that you have been socialised into.

Speaker: I think dialogue could be a vessel to allow the students to start thinking about their thinking, because they are thinking about their behaviours. To be able to express the thinking behind their thinking enables a shift in the pattern of their attitudes and beliefs.

Speaker: One thing that we discussed was the unspoken emotional current in the dialogue. Our group felt that people got more out of an in-person group than online. It just seems to flow better with less interrupting each other and more tracking the unspoken, emotional currents.

Speaker: We focused on the experience of silence, and the pauses in dialogue. Most educators are taught to allow a kind of think-time when we are teaching. It reminded me that the pause in a dialogue is good practice. It helps reflection, increases the thinking process and increases participation.

Speaker: I went into our group thinking I was very comfortable with silence. There were two DOC employees, and two of the international folks. I felt myself and the other DOC employee were dominating a little bit, so I had to step back and stop speaking – and then I felt very uncomfortable.

Speaker: How could we work with children in school? And also get them to learn dialogue skills so that they can also use them for themselves? Dialogue skills are life skills. How can we pass on these skills to children or establish them together with children? That was the outstanding thought in our group.

Daniela: How do you implant that idea in schools? We talked about that too. To get it into the school system, you need whole schools and you need a principal who really likes the idea of dialogue and the majority of the teachers working in a system that really want it. If the headmaster doesn't agree, it won't work. The headmaster saying to the colleagues, "We're doing this now" doesn't work either.

Speaker: One way of going about that is to find a language as teachers, right? It's not just about the methods and didactical approaches you have inside the classroom, it's about also how you organise the support for your work. How you work together with colleagues to achieve a mutual goal, to socialise people into becoming aware of the different kinds of conversation there are, what expectations you have of other people and how you look at the world. There is writing about this in the Netherlands, about knowledge learning for qualifications, about socialising people, and then about leaving room for their response and not judging that.

Speaker: I feel that the only way we can progress and make this kind of thinking bigger is to tell the stories and experiences that we have to others, and to try and grow a crowd. I feel that is the central challenge for teachers – to find each other in this reasoning and to strengthen our mutual story.

Speaker: Yeah. And that means taking the time to think about that. So how do you get people involved, given their busy working days where they don't have free time? I mean, I don't know what it is like in the Netherlands, but in Germany,

especially in primary school education, they don't get time out of the working day to do that. So what we see is a lot of times the people that really try to get further knowledge, have to do that in their free time.

Speaker: I don't see a lot of wiggle room other than, at some point, the principal has to make a decision for that. I don't know all the literature in the English language, but there is a wonderful book about reinventing organisations that is examined with some examples. It comes to the same conclusion as many Dutch authors, which is that at some point you still need a hierarchical person at the top to say, "Okay, let's go there in this way". Or, "Let's find some way to give space to this development". But it starts often with people, functional professionals, who give this person at the top the food for thought by engaging them in conversations.

Speaker: I was just thinking about what was said. I definitely think you would need a buy-in from the principal, or the head, but I was also thinking about the parents. And also about the kids. How will it be beneficial and impactful to the children? And at what age will you actually start? It may be easy to do this at high school. But when you start with elementary school – do you start with preschoolers? Would you start with middle schoolers? I think there is a bigger picture, and it's definitely a conversation that should be had.

Postscript

The authors' reflections, written some months after the conference



In our article, 'Dialogue in Teacher Training at the University Level', we identified six 'pattern breaks' emerging from an online dialogue with students.

The small-group dialogue at the conference underlined the importance of dialogue for the education system. And it confirmed that we underestimate the great influence of the conversational routines we were socialised into. We have continued to think about this topic and especially the pattern breaks with our students during the last two semesters. Two of them seem to be especially important to them: The slowing down, and the pauses in the conversation (*pattern break four*). Also, the students continue to confirm how difficult it is for them not to look for a supposedly correct answer before they speak (*pattern break one*).

In a recent dialogue class a new question arose: *Why do we see the blind spots in other people's conversational behaviour? And why don't we see our own blind spots?* Why it is so difficult to become aware of our own blind spots can be explained with Bohm's differentiation between the observer and the observed (Bohm 1996: Chapter 5).

We see a new pattern break here:

Pattern Break Seven: Becoming Aware of One's Own Blind Spots

Bohm uses the distinction between the observer and the observed to make it clear that each of our observations also generates the observed through our assumptions:

In a way, we are looking *through* our assumptions; the assumptions could be said to be an observer in a sense. (Bohm 1996: 71)

Accordingly, each of us sees differently. When we try to track down our own assumptions, again we can only do that through assumptions. One's own assumptions are therefore most difficult to access for the observer because what he or she is looking for is hidden within him- or herself:

Hide them in the looker, and the looker will never find them. (Bohm 1996: 72)

A question we are now exploring: What are the prerequisites for a dialogue (within the process but also within oneself and the participants) that support one in becoming aware of one's own blind spots?