

# The exotopy (surplus of seeing) as a value in effective dialogical transactions between schools and communities<sup>1</sup>

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This commentary aims to discuss the notion of dialogical transactions derived from transactional theory's Rosenblatt about writing and reading, considering the role of the exotopy in this process. It is not a case of the text on one side and the reader on the other, but what the process of interpretation is according to what happens between them, the "whole situation" or transaction—where the meanings are constructed in dialog. The motivation is to discuss, metaphorically, the surplus of seeing as a value in effective dialogical transactions between schools and communities. From my perspective, dialogical transactions imply a consideration of the value that one has compared with another because one can exist only if the other can see him and this is possible due to the property that everyone has of seeing beyond themselves. What I can see in my position is not what another can see in others' positions owing to semiotic, spatial, and time conditions in life of each one. Schools and communities will experience more profitable meetings to produce novelty and development if they have the attitude of valuing the world that the other sees.

In general, master narratives dichotomize schools and communities because there is the assumption that schools have more knowledge and a higher position compared with the community. As per this traditional vision, only it is the community that would have to learn what the school has to teach. Nevertheless, everyone can see beyond than another since one "I" can never occupy the place of another "I". This ability of seeing beyond the other can bring about novelty (new meanings) through the interactions produced in dialogical transactions.

According to Rosenblatt (1988), every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular configuration of marks on a page occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Certain organismic states, ranges of feeling, and verbal or symbolic linkages are stirred up in the linguistic reservoir. From these activated areas, selective attention occurs conditioned by multiple personal and social factors that synthesize or blend into what constitutes "meaning." The "meaning" does not reside ready-made in the text or the reader's mind, but is developed *during the transaction between the reader and the text*.

For Fecho and Lysaker (2019), schools then are like texts in transactional spaces that are constructed daily with multiple other texts that lead to constant and countless transactions. They are spaces wherein people are "reading" all the time, making sense of environments, faces, sounds, languages, and printed texts created by others with, within, and for the school community. In their opinion, schools and

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of exotopy from Bakhtin (1997) was elaborated in my thesis (Gomes, 2018) as an intrinsic characteristic (exteriority position) of the dialogic dynamic among I-positions related to surplus of seeing of any I-position.

communities have more possibilities to improve their perspectives through the dialogical transactions between them. The space between schools and communities should be seen as a window of possibilities and development for everyone. This space allows the necessary openness to create proximity, with both time and space playing key roles in how the people involved transact with each other in ways that create new texts.

As far as Rosenblatt (1988) is concerned, when we see a set of marks on a page that we believe can be made into verbal signs (i.e., can be seen as a text), we assume that it should give rise to some kind of a more or less coherent meaning. Multiple inner alternatives resonate with the words as they fall into phrases and sentences. From the very beginning, and often even before, an expectation or a tentative feeling, principle, or purpose, no matter how vague it appears at first, guides selection and synthesis. As the eyes encounter the unfolding text, one seeks cues on which, in the light of past syntactic and semantic experience, to base expectations about what is forthcoming.

These expectations are due to whole semiotic mediation guarantees the person's psychological distancing from the here-and-now setting. This distancing creates dialogicality within the self-system, within which dynamic re-organization takes place. Semiotic mediation is the process that allows human beings to synthesize new meanings, both in the reflexive (i.e., through generalizations from the meaning of words) and affective domains. (Valsiner, 2004)

A metaphorical example of "texts" which we build in daily life in the process of reading (interpretation) and writing (vociferation) can be presented. For instance, a person who has just been promoted to a desirable position overhears a myriad of voices as she anticipates how she will reveal the news to her co-workers, imagines their individual responses, recalls what her deceased uncle used to say as he belittled her achievements, replays the conversation that just took place at the board meeting, and wonders what her supervisors might have told the board behind closed doors (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). It shows how a person can create several responses in a specific kind of situation between herself and another person or others. In this border, between "she" and "other" there will be many semiotic meanings, because she can see more things than any "other" about the past, present, as well as future, because of the semiotic mediation.

Like readers (interpreters) approaching a text, writers (speakers) facing a blank page have only their individual linguistic capital to draw on. For the writer, too, the residue of past experiences of language, spoken and written, in life situations provide the material from which the text will be constructed. As with the reader, any new "meanings" that grow out of the text are restructurings or extensions of the stock of experiences which the writer brings to the task (Rosenblatt, 1988). In general, people construct a self-narrative, that is, a self-told life story by which the singular events which are narrated come to be articulated. Moreover, self-narrative orients the person toward the immediate potential future, reducing its uncertainty and unpredictability and mediating the relation with the surrounding world (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). In my view, a person who has to deal with some problem or situation in his life needs to read (interpret) the signs around him and afterwards

respond to them. So, reading and writing can be thought of metaphorically as human tasks to understand and find answers to texts (facts, discussions, disruptive events and so on) in human life.

Although it really occurs, it does not mean that he/she can find “true” answers about unknown aspects of the “other.” It is not within the scope of this article. From my perspective, the most important thing is the ability the person has to produce so many possible responses in dialogical transactions to solve the problem of uncertainty. Considering every relationship can create tension, people and institutions can sometimes behave in a way that can remove the possibility of conflict. This conception hinders dialogical transactions since openness can be so limiting when expressing feelings, thoughts, and positions.

In this case, the dialogical processes are restricted and the master discourse is used many times to produce a planned monological trend in interactions; for instance, a teacher says to his student: “I know more than you, so you have to accept what I say to you.” This description shows two positions on very different levels: the teacher is more powerful than the student (master narrative) and the student is placed in a weakened position (lower hierarchy). It is a simple situation where it is possible to find the master narrative working and hindering a dialogical transaction between people from different institutions. But how does a person or an institution become more willing to be involved in dialogical transactions?

The process of education requires interactions between humans, in relation to bodies of culturally constructed knowledge and skills, mediated by semiotic means and artifacts, in specific social settings. It is expected that, through such interactions, a person (usually the learner, but sometimes many people) will expand her capacity to think and act within or outside the educational setting, in the present or later in life (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008). Although this expansion of the capacity to think happens between these interactions, schools do not always promote a relationship with communities in a dialogical transaction.

First of all, it seems relevant to consider that in order for this kind of open relationship to work, it is necessary to think about how the person or institution will have to position himself/herself/itself in front of the other so that it is possible for each one to positively evaluate the ability of the other to see beyond him/herself/itself. This positioning has to see this ability as a value and a relevant characteristic of the other. So schools need to value the fact that communities have the ability to see more of the reality of the school and they need to understand that schools have the ability to see more of the reality of the communities than the communities themselves. This kind of interaction without hierarchy enables the exchange of several kinds of perspectives and many possibilities to respond to them regarding the past, present and future.

### **DIALOGICAL SELF, POSITIONING, AND EXOTOPY**

First of all, self or identity is conceptualized as a multiplicity of different and even opposed I-positions that are able to move from one spatial position to another influenced by changes in time and situation (Hermans, 2003). Dialogical self-theory

can be conceived as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the society of mind. As a “mini-society,” the self emerges from an intense interconnection with the (social) environment and is intrinsically bound to particular positions in time and space (Hermans, 2002). I-positions are created in relation to others with whom we have interactions where feelings, behaviors, and attitudes come into play. According to Hermans (2001) the “I” in a position, can agree, disagree, understand, oppose, contradict, question, challenge, or even ridicule an “I” that is in another position. According to Salgado and Clegg (2011) dialogism argues that the social forces of one’s context are not the agents driving the construction of identity; they are the matter rather than the form of the self. Self is an event, an agency, and thus fundamentally unique as well as embedded in a symbolic, material, and socio-cultural world.

The concept of “positioning” is a relatively new ontological paradigm within the social sciences, which was originally used as a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of “role” in the analysis of interpersonal encounters (Davies & Harre, 1990). Reflexive positioning is a process by which one intentionally or unintentionally positions oneself in unfolding personal stories told to oneself through internal voices. Reflexive positions are always emerging, changing, and shifting based in part on how a person’s utterances are audible to oneself as a speaker (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995) in a dialogical form. This conception has lately given some direction to the idea about I-positions as inner voices in negotiation.

Internal positions are positions that are perceived by individuals as part of themselves and external positions are positions that are perceived by individuals as part of the environment. External positions refer to other people and objects in the environment that the individuals perceive as relevant from the perspective of some of their internal positions, and they are usually considered as “mine” (Hermans, 2003). In this perspective the self is conceived as a matter of dialogue between different I-positions (Salgado & Clegg, 2011). For instance, “I feel like a mother because I have children”; internal position: “I feel like a mother”, and external position: “I have children.” This difference between I and Me can be found in James (1892/1963 cited by McAdams, 2013) originally argued. The *Me* is equated with the self-as-known and is composed of the empirical elements considered as belonging to oneself.

According to Hermans (2003) we need to stress that I-positions are both internal and external positions and from a dialogical self-standpoint the traditional identity question of “who am I?” should be rephrased as “Who am I in relation to the other?” and “Who is the other in relation to me?”. On that matter, Bakhtin argues several times the notion that the most basic constitution of any human experience is intrinsically relational. In his words, “the interrelationship I-other is particularly irreversible.” (Bakhtin, 1997, p .44) Bakhtin and his Circle are seen as one of the most important theoretical influences to build the dialogical self-theory in which the self is conceived as a matter of dialog between different I-positions. Every sign, in order to have meaning, implies social articulation between, at the very least, two different social agents. At each and every moment the person is confronting the world using words coming from and directed to others, always in a potentially polemic situation (Salgado & Clegg, 2011).

People construct a self-narrative, that is, a self-told life story by which the narrated singular events are articulated. Moreover, self-narrative orients the person toward the immediate potential future, reducing its uncertainty and unpredictability and mediating the relation with the surrounding world (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). As an I-position has autonomy to tell its history and some I-positions are dominant in one self, it is possible that someone has a repetitive way to produce narratives in his/her life. This repetition becomes a problem if self-told life story content is “unhelpful, unsatisfying, and dead-ended” and if “these stories do not sufficiently encapsulate the person’s lived experience” (White & Epston, 1990, p.14). Very dominant positions (for instance: master narrative) can put up much resistance to change and tend to find ways of avoiding it. It is why many times, for instance, schools impose rigid and serious borders with regard to allowing the community to be involved in school-related questions.

According to Pessoa (1999), the voice never speaks alone. It is dialogical with both polemics and consensus included. The dialog of the voice is not confined to the narrow framework of face-to-face dialog. On the contrary, there is an internal dialog of the word, which is always related to the other’s word; it is always and inevitably also the other’s word. When the voice is read, spoken orally, written, or expressed through image, it is loaded with others’ words. Thus, the meaning of the voice for Bakhtin is more of a metaphorical order, because it is not a matter of vocal sound emission, but of the semantic-social memory deposited by the word.

The examples raised by Bakhtin point to the prominence of relational imperative in daily human life seem to be presented, at first, only to contribute to his proposition that “my individuality would have no existence if the other did not create.” (p. 55). In this sense, Bakhtin in “The author and the hero” highlights the function of the author as a key for another composition (hero), which would not exist without the creative work of the author. Although his perspective afterwards has changed regarding the asymmetry between author and character, it is interesting to conceive metaphorically the working of creation about unknown things and people. Each I-position can generate a very particular way of creating a world (objects, person, stories, and so on). Dialogic processes therefore control the entire response of people facing challenging situations, through interaction with others, constructed positions, and the consequences for the self within one’s own social spheres.

Once the affordable discursive positions and vantage points are dynamic and constantly in flux, changing and shifting in relation to an evolving storyline, meaning of what one has said to oneself can also modulate and change with the evolving narrative and one’s shifting discursive positions. (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995). This “between” is related to some kind of border that allows an exchange of voices in order to produce synthesis through the encounter of several perspectives. For Salgado and Clegg (2011), every sign, in order to have meaning, implies social articulation between, at the very least, two different social agents. Therefore, within dialogical thought, the social conditions of linguistic expression and meaning-making are paramount.

So it would be interesting to make an analogy between Bakhtin's notion of exotopy, I-positions and dialogical transactions. For Gomes e Dazzani (2018), each positioning needs to make reference to at least one other. If there is not one other (character or person), there will not be a positioning. One I-position as a kind of author has its own voice and can create its own perspective about events and social others telling stories about them. According to Gomes (2018), exotopy can be understood as a property of the I-position of seeing beyond the borders among the I-positions. One very dominant I-position can tell its history in order to minimize the others' voices.

But a person, as the author in a "whole experience," has the property of the surplus of seeing that allows him/her to fill its shadow zone, unknown, seeing beyond the available signs, through an external position with regard to the other; it happens because "now" is the place where "I am the one to take the world: in this place, at this very moment, a set of given circumstances - all others are outside of me." (Bakhtin, 1997). For example: one teacher can have a meeting with a student and listen to him. The teacher can understand the reasons, feelings, and thoughts told by him and change her idea about him. But after that she must come back to herself, even if she is now a little bit different than before for knowing him better.

### **THE SURPLUS OF SEEING AS A VALUE IN DIALOGICAL TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

Institutions, traditions, and cultures are not understood as "boxes" but as frames from which specific semiotic webs are crossing and constituting the fabric of the thinking space. Traditions produce semiotic webs which are long lasting, and affect many people who have little power to change them. In contrast, a given interpersonal relation is shaped by semiotic exchanges which concern a few persons who can constantly negotiate them (Zittoun, 2008). This negotiation is the main constitutive aspect of the dialogical interactions, including when our I-positions encounter difficulties in remaining the same.

In everyday life, we commonly have several situations where our I-positions are destabilized. These are not necessarily disruptive moments. For example, if a son calls his mother to talk to her alone and tell her reasons why he has been missing her, it can be a mobilizing situation for her. The son can do that because he has the ability to see much more about the mother, in his position I-son-miss-my-mother, than the mother could do by herself. But probably the son could relate his thoughts to the his mother because he could perceive that she had the surplus of seeing as a value in her familiar relationship.

The "other" can see the situation in a different way and has the ability to make different value judgments than me because he/she is in other time/space. This can contribute to the production of knowledge through the entry of new elements of discourse that instigate, interrogate, and deepen meaning (Coelho, Liberatori, Campaña & Sicchieri, 2009). However, it is a kind of experience in which it is necessary to open a position to promote this specific interaction in dialogical ways. People only do that if they value the other as being qualified with the surplus of seeing.

From Bakhtin's perspective, I can only constitute myself as a hero in other's discourse, in his creation. The "other" is outside of me but he can give me a finishing that is a kind of talent of an artist for his portrayed. Finishing is no imprisonment, instead it is a generous act in which one gives of oneself, gives of his position, something that only his position can see and understand (Amorim, 2014). The act of finishing is a type of interpretation in which one can complete the idea about some aspect of another through the ability of seeing beyond. Bakhtin explains that I stand outside the "other" and the last word, the finishing word, belongs to me (Bakhtin, 1997). That is, any person is completed and interpreted from my voice.

*"When I contemplate a man standing outside me and in front of me, my concrete horizons, such as they are actually lived by us, they do not coincide. As close as I can be to this other, I will always see and know something that he cannot do by himself [...]: the parts of his body inaccessible to his own look - the head, the face, the expression of the face - the world to which he turns his back, a whole series of objects and relationships that, depending on the respective relationship in which we can situate myself, they are accessible to me and inaccessible to him"* (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 44; loose translation).

According to Bakhtin, thanks to this exotopic position (surplus of seeing), it becomes possible to validate values, to accept all the data of the inner existence of the other in its actuality. What the other has the right to deny in himself is what I have the right to validate and to safeguard in him; therefore, I am the cause of the generation of his soul in a new plane of values of existence. The center of values in another's view of his own life does not coincide with mine (Bakhtin, 1997). It is because the value of seeing beyond is the most important aspect in allowing the relationship to live in a true dialogical transaction among people. As the values are not the same, the people can see beyond each other.

Therefore there is no possibility of having a dialogical transaction without understanding the value in others' capacity to see more than one can do by himself. In projects to promote the relationship between schools and communities it is important to develop positive attitudes in their participants about the ability of the "other" to see much more than "I" am able to, many times in several aspects even though the people may have different levels of knowledge or may come from a different social or professional classes. For Salgado & Clegg (2011) every relationship brings to being at least two contrasting and mutually defining elements. Dialogical theories of human life, then, always include dual (or multiple) properties, each one irreducible to the other but unavoidably interdependent.

In dialogical transactions, everyone can bring all their "texts" (thoughts, feelings, experiences, beliefs, and so on) to interact with each other. It is a special moment to create possibilities to produce many responses related to each other. It incites several positionings that through the voices can bring synthesis and emergence of novelty between them. Therefore, the surplus of seeing has to be understood in dialogical transactions between schools and communities as a value by the people involved in this interaction or in any other.

## CONCLUSION

Although several times, people in institutions such as schools and communities try to avoid conflicts, “the urge for certainty cannot be satisfied in dialogue” (Shotter, 1992, p. 18). The dialogical transactions between people necessarily produce various responses and it has no end, because people are capable of elaborating signs to solve their daily life problems. While we are alive and conscious of ourselves this process will not have an end.

It is necessary to consider that in our relationships everyone has to be at least a little open to listen to the other. This openness is related to the ability to empathize but also, mostly, of valuing what the other has to tell. The value of listening to the other is associated with the other’s surplus seeing value. We can only conceive the possibility of listening to others’ perspectives in an equal relationship if we value the other’s vision as different (and bigger in some aspects) from our own.

Therefore, from my perspective, dialogical transactions consider the value that one has in it is loaded with others’ words relation to the other because one can exist only if another can see him and this is possible due to the property everyone has of seeing beyond what another can’t see in his position. What I can see in my position is not what another can see in others’ positions owing to semiotic, spatial, and time conditions in life of each one. Schools and communities will experience more profitable meetings to produce novelty and development if they have the attitude of valuing the world that the other sees and not just seeing one side.

The border between the other and me is the main condition of my existence. This border is not the other and it is not me. It is the space between us that allows the surplus of seeing what happens and creating different perspectives in encounters. It is a prime situation to appear the novelty in an effective dialogical transaction in which one can “read” texts produced by another and through his own texts (voices) give value to the world that only the “other” can see and to show me from his unique position.

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