DIALOGIC READERS

CHILDREN TALKING AND THINKING TOGETHER ABOUT VISUAL TEXTS

FIONA MAINE

ROUTLEDGE

DIALOGIC READERS

Dialogic Readers: Children talking and thinking together about visual texts celebrates the sophisticated and dynamic discussions that primary-aged children can have as they talk together to make meaning from a variety of texts, and it highlights the potential for talk between readers as a tool for critical and creative thinking. It proposes a new dialogic theory of reading comprehension that incorporates multi-modal media and adds further weight to the argument that talk as a tool for learning should form a central part of primary classroom learning and teaching.

The book explores:

- the language of co-construction
- children's critical and creative response to text
- the dialogic transaction between text and readers
- the use of language as a tool for creating a social cohesion between readers

This significant work is aimed at educational lecturers, researchers and students who want to explore an expanded notion of reading comprehension in the twenty-first century, realizing how opportunities for children thinking creatively together might transform the potential for learning in the classroom. It provides a framework for analyzing co-constructive talk with suggestions for promoting children's critical and creative thinking.

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Children talking and thinking together about visual texts

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INTRODUCTION

> An answer is always the stretch of road that's behind you. Only a question can point the way forward.
>
> *(Gaarder, 1997: 31)*

Louis, Josh and *Baboon on the Moon*

Louis and Josh, both aged six, have watched *Baboon on the Moon* (Duriez, 2003). In the film, a baboon is seen living in a house on the moon, going about his everyday business. He gets up, has breakfast, then goes to a shed, where he tips 'moonshine' into a machine which then lights up the moon. The final part of the film shows the baboon sitting down, removing a trumpet from a case and playing it while looking at a far-off Earth. A tear runs down his cheek. The two children have been asked to talk about what the film is 'all about' and ask questions about it, and moments of this exchange have been captured on video. The transcript of these exchanges is as follows:

Josh How did he get on the moon?
Louis I think he might of, on Earth and he got this control which was for his house, then he pressed a wrong button, then his house turned into a space rocket. Then he pressed another button and it went up to the moon.
Josh Maybe he . . .
Louis . . . heard, you know in the film, did you hear a space rocket sound in it?
Josh (nods)
Louis So I might be right.

Josh Yeah we are right! . . . I can't believe we found that out! How does the postman get there every day?
Louis What, to Baboon's house?
Josh Yeah.
Louis I don't know.
Josh But how can the postman deliver the post?
Louis Yeah . . . Oh he might have a letter . . . to shoot the letters up to Earth! Up to it, the moon. Shoot the letters up! In a big bag!
Josh But how can the postman get the letters and put it in his house, on the moon? Maybe he has to get a rocket and some choppers and things.
Louis Yeah, that's what he has!

The children are reading the film, making sense of its moving image through co-constructing a narrative that is plausible to them both. They are able to read the film through constructing a story that not only interprets what they see on the screen but also moves beyond the frame of this visual text to give an explanation for what is presented. They are not bound by the images on screen, but use these as a springboard for meaning-making, drawing on their existing knowledge of the world and particular interests (choppers! rockets!) to understand what they see. Importantly, with this wordless visual narrative, their meaning-making is not hindered by their ability (or otherwise) to decode written text, and their cognitive capacities can be directed entirely to the process of comprehension, rather than the labour of unlocking the alphabetic code first.

The exchanges between Louis and Josh take moments and represent a snapshot of the wider discussions that were happening within the classroom. Yet they can be analyzed from multiple theoretical perspectives, providing layer upon layer of insight into the different processes involved, and building a rich picture of the children's discussion. There are different reflections that can start to uncover the dynamics of this exchange. These include analyzing how the children's language supports their collaborative meaning-making and what the thinking processes that underpin this language might be. In addition, as this is a joint task, the approach that the children take to socially negotiating the task can be considered. Certain linguistic features in the children's discussion can be seen as indicators of collaborative meaning-making. For example, in the following extract, the children ask 'how' questions and suggest ideas using 'might' and 'maybe'. These incidences could be counted to analyze the frequency with which these words are used by the children in fulfilling the task at hand:

Louis Yeah . . . Oh he <u>might</u> have a letter . . . to shoot the letters up to Earth! Up to it, the moon. Shoot the letters up! In a big bag!
Josh But <u>how</u> can the postman get the letters and put it in his house, on the moon? <u>Maybe</u> he has to get a rocket and some choppers and things.

The suggestion of ideas, using language such as 'maybe' and 'might', could also be seen to highlight the social interaction apparent in the discourse. The children

propose ideas to each other so that solutions can be found collaboratively. Additionally, an advantage of asking them to engage in the task together allows access to their thinking, indicated through the language they use, which gives some insight into the specific critical thinking skills they appear to use to comprehend the picture:

Josh How did he get on the moon?
Louis I think he might of, on Earth and he got this control which was for his house, then he pressed a wrong button, then his house turned into a space rocket. Then he pressed another button and it went up to the moon.

In the extract above, Josh decides on a problem to be solved; that is, how the baboon came to be on the moon. Then Louis tries to find a solution, using the skill of rationalizing possibilities that help him to make sense of the problem. The critical skill of problem-solving is extended by Louis' creative thinking when he makes a suggestion that exists outside the existing world of the film. There is no evidence to suggest that the house is, in fact, a space rocket that has landed on the moon, so he must have created the idea based on his own experience or mental model of the world (Wells, 2009). His interpretation possibly demonstrates specific cultural influences that enable him to link *rockets* and the *moon*. To comprehend meaning, the children raise questions and then predict possible answers, drawing on their existing knowledge of stories and films. The children, at six years old, already have a wealth of cultural experience that can lead them to quickly classify information into difference categories of understanding, to assimilate the information into their existing schema. The knowledge they have is dependent on the cultural context in which they have lived so far (Rogoff, 2003), as had they been born into a different cultural context, they may not have experienced the same phenomena to lead to this connection.

Taking a more philosophical approach that is less concerned with cognitive processes and more focused on the quality of the talk allows us to consider if the children are engaged in 'good thinking' (Moseley et al., 2005: 19), their awareness of their thinking process, and how they are engaging in the task. Josh says, 'Yeah we are right! . . . I can't believe we found that out!' in response to Louis' suggestion that there might be a rocket. He shows pleasure at Louis' suggestion, deciding that the problem has been solved, but his language can also be seen to imply that this was a meaning hidden in the text, suggesting he feels that they have been engaged in 'good thinking' to have worked this out. The comment also suggests an awareness of the context of the conversation. The children have a task to complete, assigned to them by a teacher, and Josh is commenting on the successful undertaking of that task by showing that he is able to monitor his own thinking and make judgements about it.

The short samples above demonstrate that these different viewpoints can bring additional depth to the analysis that is possible from one short communication, and they help us unravel what is happening when children co-construct

meaning. It is from this position that the enquiry in this book began. The question was whether taking a multi-layered analytical approach could offer a broader and more holistic view of children's meaning-making processes, particularly in relation to visual texts. Would this approach illuminate what the actual process of co-constructing meaning from text can be extended to include? Exploring thinking and language together opens up the consideration of the inter-mental (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer and Littleton, 2007) processes in action, or talk as a 'social mode of thinking' (Mercer, 1995: 4), and combining theories about language and comprehension leads to a dialogic perspective on reading. Setting models of comprehension against models of thinking places the importance of critical and creative thinking at the centre of making meaning from text.

This book introduces the idea of a dialogic perspective on reading, which will be explored fully in later chapters. However, a brief consideration of the notion of the *dialogic* is appropriate here. The term stems from the original work of Bakhtin (1981), and describes the nature of the linguistic exchanges that happen within a discussion. The essence of *dialogue* and *dialogic* (as pertaining to *dialogue*) is that of 'implied response' and it can be argued that 'all language is dialogic' (Lyle, 2008: 224) if there is always the possibility of response from a listener to an utterance by a speaker. Dialogue then, is concerned with communication, and in particular, the transaction of meaning between speakers. There is a wealth of research that concentrates on classroom dialogue (for example, Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Nystrand et al., 1997), and more recently this focus on the importance of language for learning has been embraced within models of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2003, 2008). This book is a study of children's talk, yet it does not focus on teacher dialogue, only talk between peers, or pupil–pupil dialogue. However, it does centralize the importance of talk as 'an object of learning in its own right' (Alexander, 2003: 6) by focusing on the dialogue of pairs of children reading visual texts together. In addition, the principles underpinning a dialogic classroom (Alexander, 2008) are a prerequisite to this type of pupil engagement as they mean that the children are confident and competent in sharing their views, and are able to do so without the direct input of the teacher.

While other sociocultural studies (for example Lyle, 1993; Barnes and Todd, 1995; Mercer, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2004; Mercer et al., 1999; Mercer and Littleton, 2007; Littleton and Mercer, 2013) have explored different modes of talk, this study develops an analytical framework that illuminates the dialogic and co-constructive functions of the language the children use as they make meaning from visual texts together. Reznitskaya et al. (2009) highlight the importance of empirical research that develops and applies analytical frameworks of this kind, as they argue that it provides an opportunity to move beyond idealized notions of dialogue. While the research can be broadly located within the field of 'sociocultural discourse analysis' (Mercer, 2004), the different approach it offers is the specific consideration of the dialogic processes that are evidenced in co-constructive talk when children inquire together to make sense of visual texts. If to inquire is to question, and to ask questions leads to an active engagement with the world (Donaldson, 1978), then this is