The Dialogic Validation

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Introduction

The title of this working paper is a paraphrase on Bakhtin's (1981) "The Dialogic Imagination". The paper investigates how dialogism[1] can inform the process of validating inquiry-based qualitative research. The working paper stems from a case study on the role of recognition (Anerkennung) in apprenticeship learning run by Bent Exner, a renown Danish goldsmith artisan (Musaeus, 2005)[2].

Inquiry-based research can be defined as an ongoing process during the iterative phases of qualitative research where theory, methods and findings are mutually constituted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 299). Validation in narrative or inquiry-based qualitative research typically refers to the process of establishing the trustworthiness of a study. This is done by pondering the question not only whether the findings of a given study are persuasive but also to what extent they are trustworthy? These questions or issues are raised by a researcher/author residing both outside and inside a text or research study. Interview persons, researchers or entire research communities are summoned to validate inquiry-based qualitative research through everyday activities like interviewing (posing questions using particular wordings), writing (using particular theories or voices to analyse qualitative research), peer reviewing, commenting, auditing etc. Not only are there several activities that serve to validate qualitative research, there are also several agents.

Dialogism refers to the sense in which humans constantly engage in dialogic relations. Dialogue refers to something outside a strict linguistic sense of language (Bakhtin, 1984: 181) namely to an unfolding conversation about the meaning of utterances (Bakhtin, 1986). An utterance refers not to

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[1]   Though Bakhtin only occasionally used the term dialogism (see for instance Bakhtin, 1986: 119) in connection with his conception of dialogue, after his life-time it has become the term used to designate his philosophy (see Holquist, 2002).

[2]   The case study builds on document analysis and 13 inquiry-based qualitative interviews with Bent Exner's former apprentices and Bent Exner.

the words exclaimed by the participants, but something "constructed between two socially organized persons, and in the absence of a real addressee, an addressee is presupposed in the person" (Volosinov, 1986: 85). An utterance is given shape by the activities in which participants engage; it encompasses all the dialogic relations of the participants. An utterance is not closed or put in motion by the voices of self or other merely for decoding, rather it links earlier utterances with future ones (Bakhtin, 1986: 94). The crux of dialogism is that the person cannot escape the voices or perspectives of the others; he or she has to answer/act. The person engages with words, signs, body gestures etc. in dialogue since persons' utterances, words and bodily gestures are ideological and require a response and since utterances are all linked as responses to each other and thus they carry the meaning of earlier statements (Bakhtin, 1984; Bakhtin, 1986: 86-95).

Validating

A dialogic approach to validating might start out by looking for utterances as answers to utterances made in the past but directed towards the future. In the above-mentioned case study (Musaeus, 2005), there were several open and concealed dialogues: Opinions and wordings of (former) goldsmith apprentices would echo the words and intonations of their (former) goldsmith master. The word "former" is bracketed because, as the examples show, the apprentices were marked for life by the master's voice.

Example 1: The master leaving his stamp

More than 30 years ago, Bent Exner apprenticed Benedicte. She recalls the following:

> **Interviewer:** "Tell me some more about Exner's world – why was it exciting?"
> **Benedikte:** "It is a different way of thinking. I was influenced [in terms of] form and shape. When you have to choose some things, also privately, you come to think in a different way."
> **Interviewer:** "For instance…?"
> **Benedikte:** "Like a house, [my] summerhouse should lay by the fierce ocean. I did not think that way before. He left his stamp, particularly in the beginning. Well it is actually still the case. It has been more than 30 years, yet some things stick"

To become an apprentice meant stepping into a different world that you never really left. The quote suggests – what was generally confirmed by all apprentices - that a former apprentice would respond to (some of) the master's utterances. In the example above Benedicte refers to the master's preferences about living close to the ocean. The quote suggests that the master left his marks on the apprentice, and guided her decision to buy a house by the ocean. This should be compared with Exner's utterances about nature, specifically the affinity between the vast ocean and goldsmith craft:

> "At my home in Vendsyssel, North Jutland, there are great impressions: "The Great Moor" with its immortal character. The endless expanses and low horizon […] The same goes for the sea. Man has done nothing to it – there are no human artists here" (Exner, 1984: 7).

The moor, the sea are not made by humans, yet they become part of a dialogue about artisan activity (see Musaeus, 2005 for examples).

Example 2: To gulp everything down

Henrik was apprenticed when he was only 15 years old:

> **Interviewer:** "We have talked about many very interesting things. Is there something we have left out in terms of learning to become a goldsmith? How it shapes one to be at Bent Exner's, how it shaped you?"
> **Henrik:** "[7 seconds pause] Well, being at Bent's was fundamental in my development. It formed me a lot. I cannot say exactly how it formed me because it was very early on [that I became apprenticed] and I just gulped everything down […] He has given me courage to do things that I would otherwise never have done […] And that leap forward to say: 'I will open a goldsmith workshop in Ribe[3]'. I think I would not have made it if I had been educated anywhere else but at Bent's. […] 'Is it right, is it the right place?' And Bent would have said: 'Hell it is, do it!' I think I said the same: 'Hell it is, do it

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[3]   Ribe is a Danish provincial town.

Henrik!' […] I know I bring this with me from Bent. […] It is so much Bent to say: 'Do it! Of course you can!' "

To "gulp everything down" does not seem like an answer but rather a surrender, an internalisation of the master's monologue perhaps. Yet a closer look at the interview shows that Henrik not only attributed a lot of his courage to the master but was involved in an ongoing dialogue with the master even many years after his apprenticeship.

Example 3: What does God say?

The above two examples would suggest that it was the apprentices who responded to the master, however, the opposite was also true. The master seemed sometimes to echo the words of his apprentices. In the following example he recalls a conversation with Trine, his last apprentice, who was very fast at crafting. Once Trine approached the master with a finished piece of work. This led to a discussion about the standards of the craft:

> **Bent Exner:** "I introduced the word 'God' to Trine. I said: 'in this house, the vocation is our God. And God demands the best soldering. And the best sawing is what God demands. The compromise is to cheat'. And she would sometimes come with something [a piece of craft work] that was awry and say: 'It may be a little awry, but no one will see it'. 'No, no one will' I say, 'but what does God say?' 'Bah, that means that I have to redo it!' So once in a while we redid it. Once in a while, not all the time, Trine was told so [to redo it]. Then we laughed. And that is part of it [...] Therefore it is a very exciting life to be a craftsman."

In this example, the master recounts a dialogue about the high standards of the craft. In expressing the ideals of the craft, the master did not tolerate the apprentice cutting corners. But this was not expressed by the master as a monologue, where the apprentice was told what to do, what to think and how to carry out the intentions of the master - as if the apprentice were a mere tool. The master told the apprentice that the standards of the workshop were absolute (judged by "God") and thus implicitly he communicated to the apprentices that he was also responding to the absolute standards of the craft.

Discussion

An inquiry-based approach relies on narratives about important life events that are interwoven with other participants' accounts. Dialogism might inform inquiry-based qualitative research at all stages of inquiry, not only validation since dialogism is not a method of data collection; it permeates the entire research study.

Taking a dialogic approach to validation seems almost self-evident, when considering a number of common strategies used for validation. First membership checks – often thought to provide perhaps the most important source of validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 314) – can be read as a dialogic principle since membership checks imply that the voices of the participants (their comments on the transcripts or analysed results) are included (and answered) in the reported research. Second transparency (using verbatim quotes) allows the reader better to respond to the voice of the interview person. Third prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field of study are two often-quoted ways of achieving validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 328) – since they give the researcher a take on the artefacts used in a given social practice. This could possibly be elaborated in connection with the notion of the chronotope – referring to the interconnectedness of time and space (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). For instance it could be argued that the authors of inquiry-based qualitative research tap into a socially meaningful world – an actual reality – yet move into another space/time when addressing issues of validation and theoretical generalisability.

According to dialogism, utterances – spoken and written - are only meaningful to the extent that they are interpreted within a context. To validate therefore means not to validate one interview, one sentence or the word in isolation but rather the meaning of the utterance in context. Validating therefore can be understood in terms of describing the rich context of the utterances, their embedded meaning. Furthermore, dialogism helps to conceive of validation in terms of the ideal relation between author and hero. Bakhtin (1984: 51) argued that the author of a narrative should allow his hero to obtain free self-consciousness rather than merely be the mouthpiece of the author's convictions. Future studies must elaborate how this ideal of giving voice to various heroes – the participants – might best be achieved in inquiry-based qualitative research.

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