

## 5.2 Perceived Impact of Educational Dialogue on Transversal Skills: Analysis of a Teachers' and Researchers' Online Forum

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### Introduction

Educators today face challenging circumstances globally, with highly demanding and sometimes contradictory expectations. They seek to support learners to navigate challenges of an increasingly uncertain global era (Aly et al., 2022), while also needing to respond to the tightened pedagogical expectations from education systems (Sahlberg, 2023). These pressures may result in teachers narrowing what and how they teach – focusing on 'core' subject content and avoiding pedagogical risk-taking and innovation (Sahlberg, 2023). Yet there is also a growing emphasis on fostering transversal competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and teamwork (World Economic Forum, 2015). The time and effort required to develop these competencies may conflict with educators' needs to meet subject-specific goals. In this complex landscape, we ask how teachers manage these professional pressures. What pedagogical approaches do they consider viable to equip students with the necessary knowledge and abilities to live and work in potentially unstable contexts?

This article seeks to address these questions by exploring the role of educational dialogue in the development of learners' transversal skills. Drawing upon the perspectives of an international group of practitioners and scholars, this study captures insights shared and elaborated through a forum facilitated within a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) (Brugha et al., 2024). It explores the following research question:

*What benefits do teachers identify as outcomes from dialogic practices, with reference to the development of transversal skills?*

The literature highlights significant benefits of dialogic practices, but with limited research on the ways in which educators perceive and prioritise them. The specific contribution of this article lies in analysing the perceptions of educators and scholars regarding the benefits of dialogic practices related to transversal competencies. The study suggests that the perceived value of educational dialogue extends beyond the development of individual skills, fostering a more holistic growth that encompasses broader personal and relational dimensions.

### Literature Review

#### Theories of educational dialogue

Dialogic learning draws on Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory (1978), emphasising social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development through educative interactions between oneself, peers and teachers (Cole, 1996; Fernández et al., 2001; Howe, 2010; Rogoff, 1990). Language can act as an instrument of thought and a mediator of activity (Mercer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), involving individual social and cultural values, respective experiences and backgrounds, prior knowledge, and assumptions (Wertsch, 1991). Internal lived experience (Kershner et al., 2020) may contribute to dialogue alongside external speech in an 'in-between space' (Buber, 1970) where different voices participate equally

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and respectfully (Fielding, 2007). Rojas-Drummond et al. (2006) provide evidence of students adapting 'exploratory conversations' to the nature of tasks, positioning them as active participants in interactions. Freire (1970) argues that educational dialogue favours democratic, active classroom relationships in which learners engage critically with the world.

High-quality dialogic teaching is characterised as being collaborative, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (Alexander, 2008). Mercer further emphasises 'interthinking' (2000) and 'exploratory talk' (2008) for learners to jointly solve problems and co-construct understanding through constructive engagement with each other's ideas. Howe et al. (2019) note that knowledge co-construction requires high levels of dialogic participation, elaboration and challenging of ideas, which positively correlates with improved standardised test scores. Recent research (e.g. Hennessy, 2011) additionally considers the use of digital tools in dialogic education. The internet can act as a dialogic peer-to-peer learning tool, breaking down barriers involving time and space. Wegerif (2013) posits that it can foster trust and openness to think asynchronously, collectively and creatively, interweaving perspectives and allowing previous views to be amended.

Alexander (2001) identifies how different cultural views on the role of education and communication may influence the quality of classroom dialogue. Indeed, other studies suggest participation in dialogic interactions can be challenging due to systemic and cultural factors (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Nystrand et al., 2003; Tao & Chen, 2022).

### Transversal skills

Transversal competencies encompass critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication and collaboration to navigate social contexts (WEF, 2015). As technological advancements and globalisation continue, the demand for such competencies grows (Noack, 2021), with employers seeking both technical and transversal skills (Looney & Santibañez, 2021).

Given the prevailing global context (Aly et al., 2022) and narrowing educational trends (Sahlberg, 2023), incorporating transversal skills alongside core content may support learners to succeed in contemporary society.

This paper explores how teachers connect educational dialogue and transversal skills.

## Methodology

Data was collected from a six-week MOOC<sup>1</sup> on dialogic learning, open to educators from around the world in February 2022. As part of the course, participants used an online forum to discuss concepts, philosophies and practices of educational dialogue, responding to prompts and to one another's posts. A rich intercultural discussion emerged amongst 51 participants. All participants gave informed consent for their forum contributions to be analysed and quoted in subsequent research.<sup>2</sup>

A subgroup of the course participants and the two course moderators decided to reflect deeper on the way in which dialogue was being perceived, which resulted in a global, diverse, and collaborative research team. This group set out to explore the themes and concepts that course participants focused on in their forum contributions, carrying out multi-stage thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Thematic Analysis framework (2006).

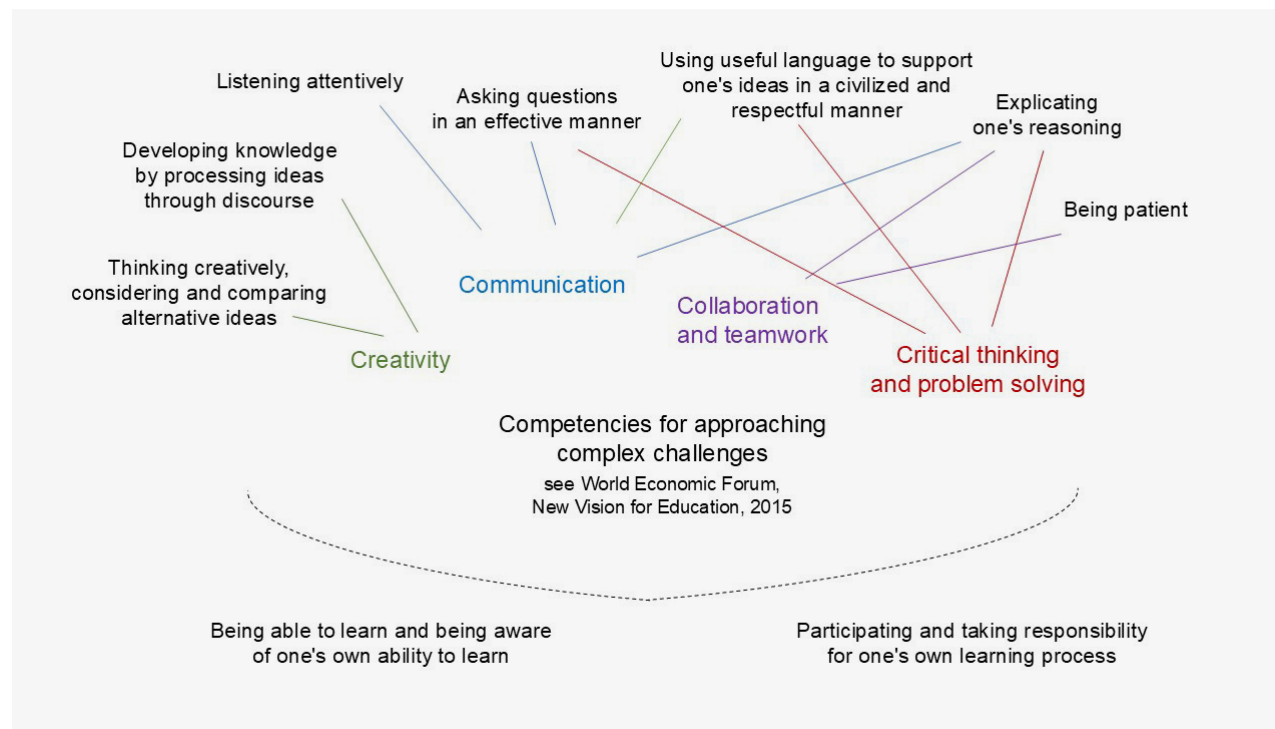
All data was anonymised by the course moderator and coded inductively. Initial codes were discussed and refined by the research team. Multiple themes were identified, but this paper focuses on the perceived benefits of dialogic practices with noticeable references to transversal competencies. This theme was further investigated through deductive

**1** — The MOOC, entitled 'The Fundamentals of Educational Dialogue', is available at the time of writing at: <https://tinyurl.com/mv29kjc6>

**2** — The data collected for this research falls under two separate projects led by Farah Ahmed and Meaghan Brughá at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. More information regarding these projects can be accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/mr32wc32>

coding using the World Economic Forum framework for transversal competencies (WEF, 2015). A separate working group analysed these extracts, reflecting on the data both individually and collectively, exploring overlaps and interesting divergences to formulate the findings.

Throughout the process, all groups worked non-hierarchically, changing and adapting roles and involvement depending on other commitments and navigating geographical and language barriers. Whilst this process had challenges, it also resulted in diverse contributions, creativity and collective reflection, embodying the dialogic principles that we were studying.



## Findings

Data analysis revealed a widespread perception of the importance of dialogue for the development of students' transversal skills alongside disciplinary knowledge. Participants identified benefits aligning with the four WEF transversal competencies.

Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the relationships identified between the data and transversal skills, as identified by WEF (2015). This data indicates that the practice of educational dialogue goes beyond the development of individual transversal skills and offers additional holistic and transformative values.

## Creativity

When responding to prompts about creativity, participants emphasised that educational dialogue enables the growth and sharing of different perspectives; stressing the exploratory nature of dialogic talk and its capacity to encourage interthinking. The possibility of pushing beyond rote learning was often described as a benefit of dialogic approaches and was seen as a precondition for enabling creativity in learning settings. As one participant suggested, dialogue fosters creativity by leading people to see alternatives, to arrive at something new and different: "In this day and age, learners need to be able to think outside the box so that they become insightful, critical, inquisitive and innovative, so using educational dialogue in the classroom allows the teacher to bring out these qualities in the learner".

**Figure 1**

Transversal competencies described by MOOC participants as benefits of educational dialogue in addition to learning outcomes.

## **Communication**

Participants referred to communicative abilities cultivated by educational dialogue such as listening skills, and the ability to respectfully challenge the opinions of others. As one participant said, through dialogic teaching “the person is able to exercise values such as patience, while actively listening to the other”. Dialogic communication was perceived to be distinct from communicative contexts that teachers and students frequently encounter. They focused on dialogue as an attitude, rather than a technique; “many young people feel that because of social media they have a right to only worry about themselves and not take into account the feelings, beliefs, ideas, comments...of other people”. Elsewhere, participants highlighted dialogue as “[...] a deeply relational endeavour and therefore trains us to be human”.

## **Collaboration and teamwork**

Participants highlighted the relationship between educational dialogue and the development of collaborative skills. Educational dialogue enables students to “listen to each other, share ideas with each other, change each other’s minds or appreciate the other person’s point of view”. It also educates learners to “pose arguments and provide their evidence”. These benefits suggest that sustained use of educational dialogue can support collaboration and teamwork. Participants also emphasised the value of dialogue in exploring different perspectives and nurturing empathy, particularly within intercultural contexts. They argued that these qualities promote positive and respectful group relationships. One participant’s reflection illustrates this point in detail: “by having dialogue with the ‘different person’ they observe that the ‘different person’ has feelings just like them, has likes and dislikes just like them, agrees on some topics and disagrees on others just like them”. Learning to “talk together better” helps to develop the ability to “listen to each other, share ideas with each other, change each other’s minds or appreciate the other person’s point of view” – skills essential for successful collaboration.

## **Critical thinking and problem solving**

Participants also linked dialogue with critical thinking, focusing especially on the exchange of opinions and ideas. Excerpts discussed how using a dialogic approach can “cultivate an educational culture that builds critical skills, helping students weigh their opinions and think critically”. Learners are required to reflect on what they are told and cannot be passive listeners. They must “interrogate knowledge, fostering critical and creative minds”.

Participants also noted that when teachers adopt a dialogical approach, they deliberately and purposefully promote reflection (“There is an element of metacognition here, i.e., how did I think about that? How did I arrive at this new learning? How do I understand it differently than before?”), fostering a critical attitude and awareness toward the learning process.

In addition, it was emphasised how educational dialogue can “connect new information to prior knowledge and real-life applications essential for learners’ growth”. Contributions explained how dialogic approaches can prepare students to give reasons and justify arguments even in contexts other than learning.

## Discussion

The findings present holistic and transformative implications of dialogic teaching in integrating transversal competencies into curricula.

Firstly, in dialogic pedagogy, transversal competencies are not taught through activities aimed exclusively at their development, but rather through making curricular teaching dialogic. A forum participant described this point as “implicit curriculum, hidden curriculum”. Participants repeatedly emphasised that both the methods and the goals of teaching, i.e. the dialogic process to be followed and the reasons for doing so, are intertwined. The process and product of dialogic activities are systematically reflected upon at different stages of the lesson or learning journey, facilitating awareness (Dawes & Sams, 2004). As learners practise skills and attitudes, they also develop an awareness of their value, enabling the transfer of competence from one task to another and from learning settings to real-life contexts.

Secondly, participants remarked that through the development of educational dialogue, we cultivate what it means to be human. This recurring observation suggests that educational dialogue offers a broader, more holistic contribution to the personal and interpersonal growth of learners and teachers. Forum participants perceived this growth to be particularly related to the promotion of empathy and understanding, as people are exposed to different perspectives and learn to appreciate the experiences and viewpoints of others. One participant stated, “through dialogue we come into existence as humans-together.” Communication and collaboration skills may be enhanced through educational dialogue, leading to cooperative attitudes and promoting positive relationships. This offers significant benefits that will likely outlive the acquisition of techniques. This approach can support learners to contribute positively professionally and civically (Mercer et al, 2019), with transversal skills essential for the 21st century (Koul et al., 2021, Chapter 4; Teo, 2019).

These insights highlight the multifaceted role of dialogic teaching in equipping learners with skills and capacities for lifelong learning and personal growth. We argue that educational dialogue bridges the gap between disciplinary and transversal learning, making it a powerful pedagogical approach for addressing contemporary educational challenges.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study demonstrate the role that dialogic approaches can play, as perceived by educators, in promoting the transversal skills of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. These skills are important for learners and educators alike, given the complexity of circumstances globally. Further research is needed that particularly considers how these perceived benefits translate into practice.



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