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Dialogue as Game and Play – On problem-based learning

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1 Dialogue as game and play

> *'Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved'.*
> (Freire, 1972, p. 92 – my underline)

Since Aalborg University's inauguration in the 1970es the problem-based learning pedagogical model has been the backbone of the teachings at the university. Each semester the students work in groups of two to seven students where they work on a specific project. A semester is usually organized with half the time in projects and half the time in lectures. The project is documented in a semester report of approximately forty to ninety pages, depending on number of students. The ideas behind the projects are that the students should be the active part in the learning process and learn how to conduct an academic investigation in the field of study. The subjects studied can be decided by the teachers (called supervisors) or in later semesters be decided by the students themselves. Always within the auspices of the study program.

One of the main features of the work in the groups are the discussions among the students where they analyse the problem in question, come up with ideas and hopefully reach a solution to the problem in question. These discussions should hopefully unfold as a dialogue, in the same manner as Freire said in the quote above. Dialogues hold special features that makes them the place for developing the concepts and language games necessary for conceptualising the problems and the desired solutions. That is, the work in the groups is – or should be – centred around the dialogues. One group of students wanted to investigate the use of AI in the world of art. Another group worked on a sustainability project, and a third group was engaged in a project concerning the rewilding of nature. All groups analysing the relationship between human beings and technology, mainly IT. The first group interviewed artists who used AI and artists who did not want to use AI. The other groups engaged in similar activities – field work, interviews, observations – all with the purpose of investigating the human-technology relationship.
In all this they all performed dialogues. Dialogues with people in their fields of interest, dialogues with their university supervisors, and dialogues both within and between student groups.

The students very soon realised that concepts such as 'art', 'sustainability' and 'nature' are complex concepts that defy simple definition. Therefore, they all engaged in lengthy discussions about these concepts; and, through their dialogues they all reached some kind of agreements that could allow them to finalise the projects, hand in a bachelor project report, and grant them the title, Bachelor of Science. The question addressed here is how they performed these dialogues with each other? How did they create the concepts and language necessary for completing their tasks? In answering these questions, we need to take a closer look at the conditions for a fruitful dialogue that Freire outlined above. How can we address the processive character of the dialogue? Or we could ask, what kind of game were the students playing in order to solve their problems?
Freire argues for a dialogical approach to teaching and learning. In the quote above he emphasises this dialogical approach as a process, as something temporal. In this paper it is this processive character of the dialogue that I take a closer look at. Based on ideas of pragmatic constructivism (Henriksen et al, 2004; Nørreklit, 2017 & 2020), especially

the concepts *dialogue* (Henriksen, 2019 & 2023) and *conceptualisation* (Henriksen et al, 2004, pp. 24; Nørreklit, 1978). That is, I will argue that the concept 'play' and 'dialogue as a game' can shed light on this process and equip dialogue with the kind of temporal element Freire was asking for above. I do so by presenting the concept of play as it is found in the hermeneutics of Gadamer (1960/1992) and Wittgenstein (1953).

> *'What I needed to do was go back to my concept of game once again and place it within an ontological perspective that had been broadened by the universal element of linguisticality. In other words, I needed to unite the game of language more closely with the game art plays, which I had designated as the model for hermeneutics. It was certainly obvious that one could think the universality of linguistic world-experience under the modes of playing a game. Indeed, already in the foreword to the second edition of Truth and Method (1965), as well as in the closing pages of my 1963 essay, 'The Phenomenological Movement', I referred to the convergence of my concept of game with the concept of language-game in the later Wittgenstein.'*
> (Gadamer, 1997, p. 42)

Both Wittgenstein and Gadamer each elaborated on the concept of play and made it a pivotal concept in each of their analyses of language and understanding. I draw on their analyses here as tools for my own analysis of the dialogical learning situation taking place in a problem-based learning (PBL) setting and illustrate this with some examples from interviews with students.

2 Language games

In Philosophical Investigations language is described as a game – language game (Wittgenstein, 1953, §7 & §23). Wittgenstein does this in several paragraphs and most often in dialogue with an imagined interlocutor who defends a conception of language as referring to an inner image or mental processes. That is, there should be some kind of correspondence between words and an image in the mind of the language user; this image in the mind being the result of words corresponding to objects in the world. So, every word corresponds to things or images of things. The word 'cat' corresponds to the furry animal we all know. Language, and the meaning of language and words, can then be traced back to such correspondence.

This is, however, problematic. Problematic because not all words correspond to an image (Nørreklit, 2017, pp. 23). Words like love, justice, freedom, etc., not only defy definition, but are also difficult to connect to a special image. This was what the students found out in their projects when investigating the concepts 'art', 'nature' or 'sustainability'. The concept art could refer to several different images (literally). Similar for sustainability and nature, they can be subject to discussions, even controversy and conflict, depending on the context where they are found, and the kind of actors involved.

The same argument can be presented for the concept 'game' – language game. It can have several meanings, and it even becomes more complicated when we try to translate 'game' and 'play' into other languages (Henriksen, 2014). Game is in Danish and German spil/Spiel and can be both a verb and a noun. One can play a game ('spille et spil' in Danish, 'spiele ein Spiel' in German). So, we have both a game (noun) and we can play a game (verb). Nørreklit (2020) therefore introduce the concept language play. That is, language might be a game, but a game only exists as long as it is played. Therefore, a language needs to be played, be used, and in that, the game is changed to better serve its purpose. Old phrases and old rules are exchanged for new ones. This is also here Freire gets the kind of temporality, the processive character, he was asking for in the quote above. In the case of game and play we see that the game, play, spil, Spiel can have several meanings, and this is exactly why context and use are important if we want to understand language.

In several paragraphs Wittgenstein (1953, §§65, 66 and 67) elaborates on the meaning of the word 'game' and finds that there are many activities we could call game – be it card games, football, peek-a-boo etc., – and they are all called games, but there is nothing that is common to all games that make them games. There is no essence. They are games because we call them so. The meaning of words is not decided by correspondence to objects, but by their use, which is why context is so important. And that points to yet another problem with this image or meaning theory, the missing context. Instead, Wittgenstein use the concept 'family resemblance':

> *'In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the*

> *many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.'*
> (Wittgenstein, 1953, §66)

> *'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: 'games' form a family.'*
> (Wittgenstein, 1953, §67).

Words tend to have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. The meaning of language is found in its use. Language games are always part of a community or as a form of life (*Lebensformen*). We can now say that these PBL students, working on their projects, seek to develop new language games, they co-author as this process is called in pragmatic constructivism (Nørreklit, 2011, pp. 14; Nørreklit, 2017, pp. 26). They investigate life worlds and existing language games and through their dialogues they then develop concepts that allow them to better understand the problems they are investigating (Nørreklit, 1978; Henriksen, 2016 & 2022). In this sense, it appears that the students did precisely what Freire was asking for above – at least in part.

3 Dialogue, language game and rule following

While Wittgenstein described language games and found that the concept 'game' defies definition, we can add to this picture of the concept game if we visit Gadamer's description of 'game' as it is found in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1960/1992, pp. 101).

> *'The concept of play, which I wrested decades ago from the subjective sphere of the 'play impulse' (Schiller) and which I employed to critique 'aesthetic differentiation', involves an ontological problem. For this concept unites event and understanding in their interplay, and also the language games of our world experience in general, as Wittgenstein has thematized them in order to criticize metaphysics'*
> (Gadamer, 1960/1992, p. 557)

Gadamer's entry into an analysis of the concept 'game' is slightly different to Wittgenstein's. Gadamer used the game metaphor to describe interpretation and understanding in general and he used the interpretation of art as an example. How to interpret a work of art? Gadamer starts out with the dialogue and uses that as a metaphor for the experience of art. That is, we, when exposed to a work of art, engage in a dialogue with the artwork. This dialogue is then described through the play metaphor.

Even if he did not know of Wittgenstein's analysis of language games at the time of writing *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1997, p. 19), he later referred to Wittgenstein's analyses. In a note in the 1992 edition of Truth and Method, Gadamer writes:

> *'Wittgenstein's concept of 'language game' seemed quite natural to me when I came across it. See my 'The Phenomenological Movement.'*
> (Gadamer, 1960/1992, p. xxxvi)

The text Gadamer is referring to is an essay on the phenomenological movement in which Wittgenstein is also included. In the essay he first criticises Wittgenstein's description of language as it is found in *Tractatus*, but again acknowledges the language games found in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953). This, however, is also criticised for lacking historical consciousness and for not emphasising the importance of tradition (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 173).

The concept of play is dealt with in the following way. In games there are rules. Any game will have rules, without rules there is no game. You can always throw a ball, but without rules you cannot score a goal or get a penalty – without rules you cannot play handball, there would be no game. The same goes for language games and dialogues – there has got to be rules if we want to say something meaningful. Both Gadamer and Wittgenstein elaborated intensively on this problem of rules:

> *'The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. This is true universally, whenever there is a game.'*
> (Gadamer, 1960/1992, p. 107)

> *'To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions)'.*
> (Wittgenstein, 1953, §198)

> *'And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.'*
> (Wittgenstein, 1953, §202.)

Rules, we could say today, are socially constructed. Wittgenstein says that we obey rules because it is a custom. We are part of a life world where following this or that particular rule is a custom ('skik' in Danish, 'Gepflogenheit' in German) and therefore also social. Even if Gadamer (1977, pp. 173) criticises Wittgenstein for neglecting the historical dimension of language games and rule following, with the remarks on customs in the paragraphs 197 to 202 and in 241 and 242, Wittgenstein comes very close to Gadamer's idea of tradition. Following a rule means to participate in an event of tradition in a particular lifeworld.

The rules are necessary, but the rules are not the game, and these rules are always subject to change. As rules are interpretated, there has got to be some leeway in order to make the game work as intended.

> *'Gadamer asked me if I rode a bicycle. I said I did. Then he asked me about the front wheel, the axel, and the nuts. He remarked that I probably knew that it was important not to tighten the nuts too tightly; else the wheel could not turn. "It has to have some play!" he announced pedagogically and a little exultantly, I thought. And then he added, ' . . . and not too much play, or the wheel will fall off.' 'You know, he said, 'Spielraum'. Spielraum could be translated into English as leeway"*
> (Galloway, 2003).

When students engage in dialogue, they abide by certain rules. There are official rules of the university – study regulations, rules for exams, rules for giving grades, etc. But more importantly, there are unofficial rules such as the demand for engaging in group work – being hardworking, being able to come up with good ideas, being able to engage meaningfully in a dialogue. Breaking any of these rules can have severe consequences for those not following the rules – be it official or unofficial. Some of the student rules are written down in what is called a 'semester contract'. One such written rule could be, 'if you are late, bring cake'. But in some instances, this does not work, because you just need to bring cake, and then it is OK to be late. But, as noted, the written rules are not necessarily the most important ones. The informal rules are much more important and not bothering to follow them can have severe consequences such as being expelled from the group or not being able to join any group the following semester. Because one's reputation is ruined by not following the implicit rules of group work – being hard working and trustworthy. This is also why the university and those teachers responsible for each study program spend a lot of time – at least the first semester of the first year, on teaching new students about group- and project work – this is a PBL setting. Many students are accustomed to traditional teacher-centred teaching with trivial repetition of curricula. For these students the student-centred project work is a new world with completely new experiences – with new rules, new customs. As they are not used to this, and sometimes not even aware of this as teaching and learning, they will first have to learn – getting accustomed to the tradition of problem-based learning.

One of these unwritten rules is about the attitude to the game - in order to play one must be serious, one cannot be a spoilsport. A game is a serious thing.

> *Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport.*
> (Gadamer, 1960/1992, p. 102)

As an avid handballer I know that it is much more fun to win a hard game with a narrow margin of victory, than winning big against another team that does not take the game seriously. Or even worse, if your own teammates do not take the game seriously. This is also evident in students' group work. One of the most common reasons for conflict is the lack of engagement and commitment to the work in the group. If group members do not comply with agreements, are always late, not handing in workpapers on time etc., then this can have serious consequences. As noted above the villain may in this way ruin his or her reputation, one who is not serious about the game of group work, and who will have a difficult time in this particular study program's lifeworld.

Playing the game of group work is serious business. For the dialogues in the group this also means that they must be taken seriously. And as with any sport, it is much more fun if taken seriously. This also means that if played

seriously, then will the player lose her- or himself in the game, meaning that one forgets anything else other than playing. That also counts for the dialogue. When the dialogue is successful, we are committed to the conversation, and we are focused on the subject matter. If not, it is not a dialogue.

Freire asked for a dynamic process and that is precisely what we get when the dialogue is described through the game and play metaphors. The dialogue, like a game, is a back-and-forth movement. A dynamic process. This back-and-forth movement is also found in the student's dialogues, that is where the students co-author and develop their language games and their concepts.

> *'If someone looked at things in the same way as oneself does, something would simply be repeated. This would not contribute anything new at all'.*
> (Gadamer, 1997, p. 95.)

Or as one of the students put it:

> *If three of us (in the group) say: 'it should be like this'. And we're okay with that. In relation to that (my idea). At least I'm okay with that. Many of my ideas have been changed. So, it's really nice. It can also be changed for the better, yes. Yes exactly. That's it.*

Even if the students strive to agree and reach a compromise that everyone in the group can understand and accept, the goal is not necessarily to reach full agreement on everything. Less will do, as long as there is a mutual understanding of the compromises.

> *Then we fight. Ha, ha. Then you fight. Yes, it's like if there's someone in the group, maybe there's someone who sits with an idea and demands it to be decided.*
> *But there is no such thing as, 'okay, I disagree with what you say'. If someone says, 'can it be (written) like that?' Then we're like, 'well, maybe it can'. And then you might have seen that maybe it's better up here. And so, well, it might as well be.*

The game is a closed world, where the game itself is the subject – each participant in the game loses herself in the game. You cannot tell the dancer from the dance or the player from the game (Henriksen, 2014; Yeats, 1956). The game is also a world with its own roles (Gadamer, 1960/1992, pp. 101; Henriksen, 2014). In the dialogue the roles are taken by the interlocuters. This is quite clear in the students' groupwork. Each has their individual role in the group, just like those participating in a game. Sometimes these roles are decided at a meeting and could even be written into the semester contract as a formal agreement. That could be the role as moderator or referent and these roles could then be rotated between the group members. Other groups do not make that kind of agreement but would let the roles and the work tasks develop as they go on. In any case, in group work and in the dialogues, there are roles. The game is not a subjective act, and that goes for the dialogue as well:

> *Play is more than the consciousness of the player, and so it is more than a subjective act. Language is more than the consciousness of the speaker; so also it is more than a subjective act.*
> (Gadamer 1960/1992, p. xxxvi)

> *This means that the subject of the dialogue is not the individual, but the case in question – sachverstehen*
> (Gadamer, 1960/1992, pp. 95).

Or as a student puts it in a conversation:

> *I think what we are trying to do is that we are not discussing our own positions, but we are discussing the positions that are in the project and pitting them against each other. And then it may well be that we disagree, perhaps, how one concept has an impact on the bigger picture, but not that we necessarily disagree with each other… No, so we can say that when someone has this concept, it is almost stupid compared to ... There must also be room for different opinions. If you have this concept, then there must be room for everyone's opinion. In other words, we can discuss whether we think it's smart that they have the different points of view'.*
> *I think we have been very conscious and looking at the subject matter from the outside. And then in that way make some decisions about what we understand by people's understanding of the subject. And what is paramount when they talk about the subject. This means that, for one thing, we cannot define it.*

What the student is saying here could be seen as a case of fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 1960/1992, pp. 291); both in their analyses of field work and in the internal dialogues in the group. This argument could be stretched to Wittgenstein's private language argument (1953, §§ 243). This is also why one loses oneself in the game - the game is transsubjective.

This is evident if one is observing or even participating in student's dialogues, e.g., in connection with supervision sessions. When the dialogue works as intended, students truly forget themselves and engage fully in the dialogue and the subject matter. Just like the student mentioned above, who said that his ideas had a chance to be improved in the dialogue. This is then not an argument, where one wants to be right, but an honest attempt to analyse the subject matter and jointly improve the many ideas brought to the table and thereby trying to come nearer to a solution to the problems in question.

> *And so, it is like that we are a unit. Yes. So, luckily, we have very different approaches to things. But it's more like we make different points. Sharing different points of view.*

Playing a game is both a presentation *of* and a presentation *for*. For students this means that when they engage in the dialogue, they present themselves and their questions, their ideas and their attempts to solve problems by developing language games and concepts (this is problem-based learning). While doing this it is also a presentation *for* someone. First the other members of the group, who are also their first partners in dialogue. Secondly it could be their supervisor or for an external partner during field work and finally a presentation of the entire project at an exam. In all cases roles can shift, e.g., a supervisor can be both a partner in dialogue as well as an evaluator at an exam. Lines are not sharp here, as any dialogue partners can also evaluate, and if successful, the conversation can take the form of a dialogue.

Now we could ask what is the outcome then, of all these dialogues? First, it is a written report that, together with an oral exam, can grand the students the title of Bachelor of Science. The written report should then document the results. Above it was briefly mentioned that the students developed concepts and language games. Here we could return to the Pragmatic constructivism's idea of co-authoring (Nørreklit, 2011, pp. 14; Nørreklit, 2016, pp. 26). That means what the students did was to create a new narrative, describing the process and solving the problem. Co-authoring means exactly that – creating a language game and concepts that can function as intended and the process for doing that is the dialogue.

4 Dialogue as game and play – What to make of it?

By now it should hopefully be clear, following from the idea that the dialogue can be described through the game and play metaphors, that the temporal element that Freire was asking for above can be found here. The dialogue is happening in a process, within a certain life world, in a specific language game, and with certain roles and rules. The dialogue is also a place where a certain subject matter is conceptualised. Through the dialogues students develop language games, concepts and if very successful, on very rare occasions also new life worlds. There is a presentation *of* and a presentation *for* and within conversations one observes a back-and-forth movement of arguments and points of views. Throughout this process the play and game metaphors can bring in the kind of dynamics that Freire was asking for and, in this way, we might then gain a better understanding of the dialogue and student learning in a PBL setting.

> *'Wittgenstein, the master of metaphor, showed us in his reflections on language games how language, with all its infinite variations, makes a world accessible to us.'*
> (Gadamer, 1976)

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