Dialogic Imagination in Literacy Development

Imaginación dialógica en el desarrollo de la alfabetización

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Abstract: This article focuses on a specific best practice in the teaching of language and literature: Dialogic Literary Gatherings. These gatherings involve adults, people without academic degrees, and usually in literacy programmes, who read and discuss the classics of universal literature: from Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* to Joyce's *Ulysses*. Through an egalitarian dialogue, the participants in these gatherings develop new and deeper interpretations of the classic texts, something they could not do alone. This experience transforms their learning process and their personal lives, and even their socio-cultural context. To show why and how these gatherings help them acquire instrumental knowledge and increase the meaning they give to reading, the article analyses both their theoretical basis and their didactic components.

Key words: literary gatherings, dialogue, dialogic imagination, transformation.

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Resumen: Este artículo presenta una actuación concreta de éxito en el ámbito de la didáctica de la lengua y la literatura: las tertulias literarias dialógicas. Las tertulias literarias dialógicas se llevan a cabo con personas adultas, participantes sin titulación universitaria y a menudo en niveles iniciales de lecto-escritura que leen y debaten clásicos de la literatura universal, desde el *Romancero Gitano* de Lorca hasta el *Ulyses* de Joyce. En un proceso mediado por el diálogo igualitario, las y los participantes de la tertulia imaginan y crean nuevas y profundas interpretaciones de los textos clásicos que hubieran sido imposibles en solitario y que transforman su proceso de aprendizaje, sus vidas personales y el contexto socio-cultural. Para entender por qué y cómo las tertulias literarias dialógicas aumentan el aprendizaje instrumental y el sentido por la lectura, el artículo profundiza tanto en sus bases teóricas como en sus componentes didácticos.

Palabras clave: tertulias literarias, diálogo, imaginación dialógica, transformación.

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DIALOGIC IMAGINATION IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

> My name is Saida[1] I am learning to read and write at the school for adults and I attend literary gatherings because one can learn a lot of things, amazingly enough... You learn to listen to the people when they talk and, most important, to know what they talk about.

Saida said this during the International Congress of Dialogic Literary and Musical Gatherings, held in the Polígono Sur neighborhood in Seville, Spain in November 2008. This meeting brought together more than 300 people: teachers, faculty members, and also students, their relatives, and people involved in adult education. In the congress all participants could reflect on how dialogic literary gatherings[2] are helping to increase people's instrumental learning and the meaning they give to reading, and also the strong impact that this kind of learning has on their own lives and their families and communities.

Current research on reading emphasizes that to understand how we learn to read and write, that is, how we become literate, we must move beyond the cognitive perspective which was the focus of nearly all psychological studies of reading from the later nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth (Venezky, 2002). More authors including Paulo Freire (1983, 1993, 1997), Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984) Marta Soler (Searle & Soler, 2004), and Donaldo Macedo (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003) stress that becoming a literate person is a social process. Reading is not simply the ability to recognize various connected signs, which researchers like James McKeen Cattel (1886) or Edmund Huey (1908) described; instead, it is a process in which readers assign meanings to these signs, generally meanings linked to their experiences of daily life, as Freire showed.

Dialogic reading builds largely on Freire's studies. It combines method and theory, through dialogue with the participants. As Freire (1983, 1993, 1997) wrote, we people are not isolated from the world around us, but are a part of it. Thus, reading the world means developing a critical spirit through a praxis; in the case of dialogic reading it is established through egalitarian dialogue. Dialogic literary gatherings are an example of this, and they are succeeding in many countries, recognized by intellectuals around the world as an approach that can overcome social inequalities. Professors at well-known universities, such as Harvard University, University of Wisconsin- Madison or University of California, see these gatherings as a practical implementation of the most important theories on society and education. As a result, this methodology of discussion and reflection has even been used in courses at Harvard, for graduate students in education and health. In addition, cultural and literary celebrities, including the Nobel prize winner José Saramago, the writer José Luis Sampedro,

and the singer-songwriter José Antonio Labordeta, recognize the value of this approach.

This article focuses on describing how this practice functions in the teaching of language and literature. We first analyze the theoretical changes in reading research since the introduction of the interactionist approach, focusing especially on the concepts of dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) and Soler's notion of dialogic communicative acts (Searle & Soler, 2004); these two concepts are the theoretical basis of this experience. We then describe the experience of dialogic literary gatherings, emphasizing the didactic components that make this experience a best practice. Drawing on statements by gathering participants, we analyze how these gatherings help people improve their reading and generate higher knowledge; we also stress the personal and social impacts that these gatherings have internationally.

The Dialogic Turn and its Impact on Reading Research

Most of the current research in reading proceeds in one of two clear and definable thrusts, or directions. The first aims to understand the basic nature of the reading process; the second searches for better methods of teaching, primarily to improve education and reduce illiteracy (Kamil, 2002). Within the first thrust, a socially-grounded approach is transforming traditional thinking about reading and reading comprehension. In this thinking, dialogue is a key element in understanding why and how people learn to read. As a result, theories that try to explain the reading process are moving away from the idea that reading involves only individual cognitive processes, and towards a more interactive conception that also considers the relationships people engage in when they are learning to read.

Historically, reading research has been strongly conditioned by theories and methodologies from cognitive psychology. Theoreticians such as Wilhelm Wundt (1873-4), James McKeen Cattell (1886) or Edmund Huey (1908), among others, saw the reading process as a convenient vehicle for analysing traditional psychological problems such as the duration of mental processes, attention, memory, and the association of ideas. For instance, in his article called «The times it takes to see and name objects» Cattell (1886), published the results of important reading experiments focused on letter and word recognition, the legibility of letters and print types, and their influence on the reader's span of attention. As he conducted these experiments, Cattell was not interested in the reading process itself but in the different effects that these elements had for different readers. Thus, he aimed to deeply understand aspects of the individuals' psychology in the perceptual processes; he did not intend to contribute to wider knowledge about reading (Venezky, 2002).

This theoretical trend changed with the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's major contribution is his description of the fundamental role that social interaction plays in the development of cognition. Vygotsky's (1978) thinking is the basis of social development theories; like the Russian philologist Mikhail Bakhtin, he focused on the concept of *dialogicality*, which provides a new dimension for reading research, one more oriented towards seeing learning as a result of the interactions that happen among individuals.

Bakhtin's notion of dialogicality provides an alternative way to conceptualize reading and knowledge building based on the changes produced within both the individual and the social environment (Koschmann, 1999). Dialogicality includes the notion of dialogue (the Greek *dia* for through and *logos* for word), which involves or defines people's attempts to communicate with others. However, this dimension of the concept is not new. What Bakhtin (1981, 1984), contributed to reading research is the element of agency in dialogic learning. According to Bakhtin, our choice of words is conditioned by the audience we are addressing. He states that all speech, even internal speech, has an intended audience: the «other» enters into speech not only as an audience and interlocutor, but is also embedded in every word we use to communicate. Thus, every time we initiate a communication, to talk about something we have seen or heard, we reflect the interactions we have had with other people and therefore demonstrate the meanings we have created as a result of these earlier interactions. Therefore, any interpretation of a text reflects the speaker's previous interactions with many people, including the speaker himself. As a result, through the dialogue we establish and the words we use, we make present the other people with whom we have been in contact. Because of this process, the other people cannot be silenced or excluded.

Bakhtin (1986) states that every process of interaction elicits what he calls a «chain of dialogues». That is, every time we interact with other people through any kind of dialogue, we establish a communication process in which the meanings of each part of the dialogue are anchored in a chain of previous dialogues, and we draw on them to give meaning to the current interaction. Whenever we establish a dialogue, it will bring back our previous dialogues; then, in turn, it will become a part of the dialogues we have in the future. This entire chain of dialogues is a part of what Bakhtin (1986) calls the «dialogic imagination»: through it we understand what is being said to us, because we put it into a chain of events, interactions, and dialogues that is already known and that acts as a referent, something like Schütz's (1974) concept of the «life-world».

The notion of dialogic communicative acts, which Soler (Searle & Soler, 2004; CREA, 2006-2008) has developed, draws deeply on Bakhtin's

ideas of dialogicality and dialogic imagination. Such notion is based on the «speech acts» concept (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1995), which tries to explain how words play a key role not only in communication, but also in our construction of social reality. That is, in looking at each speech act, we must also consider the speaker's social context as a structure that includes the social inequalities typical of our societies. This is because power relations, based on prejudices and discriminatory stereotypes, can be transmitted through an established social structure. These power relations are present in many daily communicative acts; for example, we may become aware of inequalities when we talk about illiterate adults or adults in the process of becoming literate.

In our society, academic knowledge is valued above any other knowledge, although people without academic knowledge also have many strategies for coping with daily life, including mental arithmetic, photographic memory, and understandings of complex mathematical operations. However, their disadvantage with respect to academic knowledge conditions them to accept, first, that they need to go to school, and then, that they can have a positive attitude towards learning once they decide to take the step of starting the literacy process.

According to Soler's notion (Searle & Soler, 2004, p. 14), dialogic communicative acts must be based on validity claims: efforts to reach a consensus based on the reasonable arguments that participants are contributing and not on the position of power from which they make these arguments. Therefore, these acts are attempts to overcome the situations of inequality among people that result from the established social structures. To make this possible, communications must be based on egalitarian dialogue: «a dialogue is egalitarian when it takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions» (Flecha, 2000, p. 2). Egalitarian dialogue addresses, and overcomes the potential for inequality amongst the people involved in the communication. What it is important is how the point being made contributes to the dialogue, rather than the origins of the person making the point. No one is underestimated because of her or his social condition. This way, communicative acts foster the creation of more egalitarian social structures, which in turn encourage learning.

The conception of dialogic learning develops the interactionist theories, mentioned above, within the fields of education and pedagogy. To Flecha (2000), it is essential that all members of the community—teachers and students, but also relatives, educators, other adults—participate in order to overcome social inequalities and exclusion.

Dialogic literary gatherings (Flecha, 2000) are a concrete example of the interactive and dialogic interpretation mentioned by Vygotsky (1978),

Bakhtin (1981), Soler (Searle & Soler, 2004) and Flecha (2000). They are part of the second direction or thrust in reading research, as a successful approach that aims to improve education and reduce illiteracy. These gatherings demonstrate that in order to better interpret the texts we read, we need to interact with other people; in them, people gain more cultural knowledge through their dialogic interactions and use of language. Thus linguistic development and the production of thoughtful and critical speech, result from most of the dialogic communicative acts at these gatherings.

HOW THE GATHERINGS CONTRIBUTE TO READING RESEARCH

These gatherings are cultural and educational opportunity to share reading: people without academic degrees, most of them involved in becoming literate, read and discuss classic works of literature. They consolidate their newly-acquired skills in reading and comprehension by discussing such classic books as Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. What sets these gatherings apart from other literary gatherings is the emphasis on communicative speech acts (Searle & Soler, 2004); that is, all the participants can contribute their interpretations, which are judged by how well they contribute to the discussion. Several phenomena in these gatherings have been analyzed in reading research. For example, interactions among different people enable them to acquire knowledge, egalitarian dialogue works as a mechanism to address the inequalities in the social structure, and the group has high expectations about the potential of every member to make valuable contributions. These are all key factors that explain why people succeed, or fail, in learning to read and in fully understanding the literary works they discuss.

The first step in developing a dialogic literary gathering is to select a classic book that the group will read and discuss for several sessions. Everyone at the gathering participates in selecting the text. Each person can propose a book, explaining to the group what s/he knows about it or why s/he would like to read it, in order to develop some selection criteria. Once the proposals are presented, participants come to agreement about which book to read. One of the most important criteria in these gatherings is that the works to be discussed must be universal literary classics, for two reasons. First, the classics are about timeless topics: love, women's role in society, coexistence among cultures, the impact of war, the consequences of authoritarian regimes, etc. These are but a few of the topics that can be found in Shakespeare, Plato, García Lorca, Kafka, Tolstoy, or Orwell. These universal ideas reflect ongoing social realities that everyone, regardless of their position within the social

structure, can identify with and think about. When they read these classics, people identify with the themes in them and project those themes into their own experience.

But perhaps the second reason is of most interest. Dialogic literary gatherings prove that reading and understanding classic literature is something that everyone can experience, not only those involved in «high culture». As we mentioned earlier in discussing speech acts, society tends to value the knowledge of people with higher education degrees, and of higher social status, above the contributions about the same work provided by people at more basic educational levels. That is, more attention would usually be paid to the opinion of an academic than to a similar opinion of a person without a degree. Habermas (1981) and Flecha (2000) break down with this conception that links ability in language and critical discourse only to certain social groups. Moreover, interactionist theories (Bakhtin, 1981; Searle & Soler, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978) show that people can acquire knowledge, and transform their existing knowledge, through these dialogic interactions and the new ways they use language.

As each participant reads the chosen book, at home, they select paragraphs that interest them. Passages could be interesting for different reasons; for example, they could evoke memories from childhood, raise doubts about the meaning of a word in the context of the text, or facilitate reflection about feminism or the enrichment of cultural exchange. The exercise of selecting the most interesting paragraphs requires that readers engage in several tasks. First, they must summarize the idea they will contribute to the next discussion. Second, they must comprehend the reading. And finally, they must exercise relationship: they must search for, and find, an example in their immediate experience that relates to the topic in the text. In this way each reader establishes a link between the theory (topic) present in the book and the practice (dialogic interpretation based on life experience) of the individual. The combination of theory with practice is also an idea that Freire consistently advocated as a mechanism to develop critical reasoning, especially among those who are most often excluded. To select a paragraph involves a series of actions in which they must apply their learning skills in ways that are much more interesting and motivating than a mere exercise in a calligraphy notebook. At the same time, this practice of reflection forces them to develop their critical ability.

When the participants come to the session, they read and explain their selected paragraphs. When one person has presented his or her paragraph, others who have chosen the same paragraph, or who want to contribute, discuss various ways to interpret this paragraph. As they share their personal readings of the same paragraph, they construct collective knowledge, operating on the principle of egalitarian dialogue. The richness of the gathering lies in

this particular way of looking into texts. Through this collective act of reflection and exchange, participants in the gathering create new and deeper interpretations that would not be available to either an isolated reader, or an academic. One participant told us this:

> One of the books I liked the most was *The Plague*, by Albert Camus. It was difficult to understand but listening to one person and another, it became clear to me. Some people said that rats were only rats, and that the «plague» contaminating the city was a disease that they passed on. I and other people thought that it was a sort of allegory, that rats symbolized the ideas of intolerance, racism, and the «plague» was the contamination that these ideas spread among the people in the city.

Working on the principle of egalitarian dialogue based on reasoning, the participants in these gatherings understand the true meaning and use of the words and concepts in the context of the work. For example, in this case, the participants started thinking about the literal meaning of «rats» and «plague»; after they considered the others' reasoned opinions, they eventually discovered the allegorical interpretation that Camus gave to these concepts. If we read literary analyses that explain Camus' work, we find that the interpretation these people achieved coincides with that of people considered to be experts in literary analysis.

As the participants continuously exchange their knowledge, the reading becomes richer, because they generate new interpretations. These interpretations, based on contributions from several people, lead to a discussion after the reading of each paragraph. Without these different contributions and interpretations, they would not be able to understand the text as fully, as it goes beyond what one person individually can read, think and reflect on.

The need for a collective interpretation to enrich literary interpretations is an idea that Bakhtin (1981) included in his concept of *dialogicality*. These gatherings build on that idea: when people speak at one of these gatherings, their contributions include their own earlier dialogues and reflections with themselves and with others about that same topic long before the gathering. Thus their present speech is one more link in the chain of dialogues (Bakhtin, 1986) into which the person is inserted. The dialogic imagination that comes into play when people interact and communicate with other people, whether or not they are present at the gathering, is what makes it possible to generate more knowledge.

In addition, thanks to their presence at the gathering and their engagement in the process of selecting paragraphs, participants acquire more vocabulary and deepen their understanding of words. Reading researchers agree that acquiring vocabulary is a key component of understanding read-

ing. By sharing their contributions, the participants gradually learn the meaning of new words. Many classic works of literature use words from popular language to designate objects, places, animals, etc. For example, the Spanish word *milana* appears in *Los santos inocentes* (The Holy Innocents) by Miguel Delibes. Milana is the name that Azarías, one of the main characters in the book, uses for his pet bird. In one of the many discussions about a passage in which this bird plays a special role, one participant asked the others if they knew what kind of bird this was. He had already made the effort to search for the term in a dictionary and an encyclopedia, but found nothing. Faced with this doubt, another person there raised her hand. She began by saying that she was born and lived part of her childhood in Castile, in the same region as Delibes. She remembered from childhood that they used this word to designate rooks, birds very similar to crows. The shared reading through egalitarian dialogue was crucial for all the participants in that gathering as they ended up learning the meaning of the word *milana*, and could incorporate it into their cultural knowledge.

When a dialogic literary gathering begins, many people ask about the meaning and interpretation of words. But as the gatherings continue, such specific questions occur less and less often, largely because people not only incorporate these new words into their spoken vocabularies, but also learn to search for them in dictionaries or to interpret them within the context of the book. So they not only learn new vocabulary; they also use it. The richer a person's vocabulary, the greater their command of the language. Vocabulary is a necessary tool when we elaborate our thinking, when we are engaged in a conversation—in short, whenever we communicate. Some studies (Kamil, 2002; Venezky, 2002) link the acquisition of vocabulary to the ability to reason: the richer one's vocabulary is, the greater their ability to reason. The same is true of reasoning: it can be used to quantify an individual's reading comprehension. At these gatherings we observe that, over time, people less often ask about the meanings of single words, but they more often make contributions based on reasoning—as they become more skilled in structuring and presenting their thinking.

Everyone is welcome to attend and participate in a dialogic literary gathering: immigrants, cultural minorities, women, disabled people, etc. When immigrants participate, they generate benefits at both the individual and the collective level. At the individual level, their participation allows them to improve their knowledge of the language; they also learn more about the host culture and become more included in the community. At a collective level, they add one more perspective to those available, facilitating a multicultural approach that enriches the others' knowledge and helps break down any stereotypes. Thus, the more diverse the gathering, the more, and more diverse, the perspectives everyone gains.

This is the case for Tarik and the gathering he attends. Tarik came to Barcelona in 2009, less than a year before we met him. He comes from a sub-Saharan African country, where he had access to basic education that allowed him to learn to speak, read, and write some French. His knowledge of French helped him to learn Spanish easily. After just a few months in Spain he decided to attend the school for adults in order to improve his Spanish and also learn to speak Catalan. Invited to the gatherings by some other participants, Tarik decided to combine his Spanish and Catalan lessons with participation in literary gatherings. Through the gatherings, in less than three months, he has improved his Spanish and now understands and has begun to speak some sentences in Catalan. The people at the gathering encourage him to read his paragraphs and share his opinions; by doing so, he also improves his knowledge of language. But Tarik does more than speak in the language he is learning: he contributes his own knowledge to the gathering, discovering that anecdotes from his country or religion can change the opinions of other participants. Thanks to Tarik, to his contributions and the subsequent dialogue, in the gatherings it has been possible to tackle and overcome some of the racist and xenophobic attitudes that are often the product of ignorance about other cultures.

His participation in the gatherings not only helps him learn the languages and culture of his host country and introduce new perspectives about his country of origin; it is also allowing him to overcome some of the obstacles to participating in organizations at his school. Very often, the fact that someone does not have an academic degree excludes them from areas where they could participate, especially in management. But the lack of a degree does not mean that people do not know how they want their education or the society they live in to be.

Participants in the gatherings not only improve their reading abilities; they also learn other knowledge related to the content and historical context of the book they are reading. Thus their instrumental knowledge (Flecha, 2000) intensifies and deepens at these dialogic communicative spaces. By reading and reflecting on the classics, they can take in all the knowledge and skills they need to cope in our current societies. The ability to select and process the information, which they develop through participation in the gatherings, is a key skill in today's knowledge society. In these gatherings, people often decide to create groups to look for more information on certain topics that emerge from the readings, or to carry out a critical analysis of society based on their discussions. Often, their need or interest in learning more about a specific question has led them to start, or continue with, other courses. For instance, someone can enroll in an English course because she is interested in reading Shakespeare in the original language or she can take continuing education courses in order to study the works of Josep Pla in

depth. The result is higher levels of collective knowledge. As a consequence, the methodology and functioning of the gatherings is transferred to other areas of knowledge such as music (musical gatherings), art (art gatherings), and technology (digital literacy).

As we have seen, these gatherings help people make remarkable progress in reading and reading comprehension, but their impact goes farther: they also experience transformation (Flecha, 2000). According to Flecha, when dialogic communicative spaces are established, they open the door to transforming the relationships between people and their environment. When people become better able to reason, they defend the possibility of egalitarian transformation that results from egalitarian dialogue. And this transformation is not limited to the individual, but also has an impact on the person's family and social context. People who are interested in developing a better neighborhood have overcome the barriers to social participation and are now involved in neighborhood associations, arguing for and getting improvements, such as social services in areas without basic services or transport that will facilitate their children's direct access to the university campus. Women who had been keeping their attendance at adult schools a secret from their husbands and children now speak of it at home—and also defend feminist arguments. As they learn to defend valid arguments to support their own perspective, which is common in the gatherings, they can then translate those skills to their private spheres; thus they not only defend their own right to education but also point out the need for dialogue and agreement when making decisions at home. This responds to the Freirian idea of being a person in the world, one with critical reasoning: I am not here individually, but I am in the world, and as such, the praxis leads me to a situation where I can demand my identity in a critical way. A high school teacher, who chairs a gathering that includes young people and their families, explained it this way:

> The dialogic literary gatherings create spaces of dialogue that before were much harder to promote. They generate better relationships among the young people: they ask about the books, about the points of view given in the gathering, they mix with other classmates that they didn't before. They see their classmates in a different way. But, what is more, for the relatives who attend the gatherings, they help them to better understand what is happening in the schools, what happens among students.

As this teacher explains, the gatherings generate spaces for dialogue that did not exist before or were difficult to arrange. For example, Manuel often became involved in conflicts in class and had trouble integrating into the group and the school. Several people in the educational community, among them a psychologist and the school principal, had tried repeatedly to talk

with him to understand his behavior. No one had an answer until the dialogic literary gatherings began in the center. When they began working with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, they tackled the topic of love and the models of attraction in affective-sexual relationships. Stringing together several topics, they tackled the topic of gender violence. It was then that Manuel, in tears, revealed that his father abuses his mother. These gatherings opened the door for others to intercede and address this situation. Manuel's teachers said the gathering transformed him, starting at that moment.

These gatherings are spaces of transformation. Tarik found ways to break down the prejudices that kept him from getting involved in the decision-making groups at his school. Manuel broke his silence and denounced the violence in his home. And these are only two stories of people who decided to break with their present situation and transform it. But, in fact, all the people participating in the gatherings change at the very moment when they decide to take part in an experience that allows them access to collectively-generated knowledge from the reflection and the dialogue about classic works of universal literature. As one participant in a gathering explained,

> «When you share reading, when you share what you read, you learn much more about the content of classic works of literature».

DISCUSSION

Dialogic literary gatherings are a space for shared reading among people with basic levels of education who dare to read and discuss classic works of literature. Through reading classics and discussing the themes in them (love, power relations, multiculturalism, etc.), these people improve their reading skills, increase their vocabulary and knowledge of language, find new meanings as they interpret words or sentences within the context of the book, and improve their reasoning and arguing skills. In short, they gain what reading researchers have established as the basic elements of reading comprehension. The increase in their reading skills has a positive impact on generating more knowledge. The participants learn a lot from the discussions they generate as they read works such as Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Plato's *Symposyum* or Fernando de Rojas' *Celestina, or the Tragi-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea*.

Thus, these gatherings are a concrete example of people with basic levels of education who read, understand, and engage with knowledge considered to be part of «high culture». Starting from the principle of egalitarian dialogue (Flecha, 2000), these gatherings generate spaces where people can establish dialogic communicative acts (Searle & Soler, 2004), that is, spaces

where they can offer their interpretations and where others will respect those interpretations based on whether they contribute to the discussion. And, in doing so, they overcome the idea that ability in language and critical reasoning is linked only to certain social groups (Bourdieu, 1984).

This change is possible because the people who share the space in these gatherings come from very different backgrounds: people of different ages, cultures, religions, origins, etc. share space and read together. Because of their different backgrounds they contribute different perspectives and opinions, leading to richer interpretations of the works that they could not achieve individually. That we create meanings as a result of the dialogue we establish with others is an idea included in Bakhtin concept of *dialogicality* (1981). When people contribute to a discussion, they draw on all their previous dialogues and reflections with themselves and others on that topic, long before they came to the gathering. The dialogic imagination that comes into play when we interact and communicate with other people, be they present in the gathering or not, is what makes it possible to generate more knowledge, as Bakhtin (1986) suggests.

This is how these gatherings become spaces for creating meaning, spaces that completely and radically transform the condition of illiterate participants. Sharing experiences, and using them as a reference framework through the chains of dialogue, people generate much more motivation and meaning; then they progress quickly in acquiring reading skills and end up being able to read classic books with ease and in depth. People who have learned to discuss and express their opinions in the dialogic literary gatherings are now involved in cultural associations fighting for an education based on democratic and egalitarian values. As Freire (1993) said, to read we must remember that no person is a separate individual, with her back turned against the surrounding world. Instead, that individual is inserted into that world; that is what provides meaning and that is where she turns whenever she must interpret or understand a situation, as when she has to begin reading a book. To read word by word, mechanically, is not a process that has been very productive in adult education; nor has it greatly advanced the perspectives on reading. Instead, when dialogic learning situations are established, and people use them to create their own meanings, using their dialogic imagination, then we see many examples of people who do learn to read, and use these experiences of dialogue as mediators to improve their reading skills and to make contributions even about books that have commonly been considered difficult, like classic works of literature. The dialogue, therefore, represents a transformation in their lives, from the perspective of literacy development.

NOTES

¹ All names this article are pseudonyms, to protect participants' privacy.
² Currently, dialogic literary gatherings are conducted in cultural and educational associations, parents' associations, women groups, prisons, and in schools offering pre-primary through adult education. Some also include family members and children. In total, more than 100 such groups exist around the world, in Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Australia, etc.

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