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## Review symposium: Symbolic Resources in Dialogue, Dialogical Symbolic Resources

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**Abstract** Uses of symbolic resources can be seen as dialogical processes: they take place in a cultural world constituted by semiotic exchanges; they can lead people to interact; and as artefacts, they contain echoes of many other voices. The article proposes to consider traditional Talmudic study as a paradigmatic dialogical situation, in which scholars learn to use traditional texts as resources to address problematic issues. The article then examines secular literature or philosophy classes, in which students learn to reason about texts as well. An analogical reading enables reflection on the institutional, interpersonal and psychological conditions that would enable students to turn literature or philosophy into symbolic resources to address issues they face in their everyday life. A methodology for studying such issues is finally sketched.

**Key Words** case studies, dialogism, learning, literature, symbolic resources, Talmud

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## Symbolic Resources in Dialogue, Dialogical Symbolic Resources

*Joshua son of Perahia said: 'Give yourself a master, acquire a companion, and judge rightly every man.' Rambam comments: "'Give yourself a master", even if he is not apt to be your master, do it, so that you can discuss with it, to allow the knowledge you acquire through study to become solid and lasting. Because that which a man learns on his own does not resemble that which he learns from another: what he learns from another is always more lasting and clearer for him. . . . But speaking of a "companion", it is the verb "to acquire" that is used, and it is neither said "give yourself a companion", . . . nor "associate with others" . . . . That means that one has to acquire a companion whatever it might cost, so as to benefit from him in all circumstances.'* (Fathers, I. 6)

The other's perspective always has a surplus on us (Gillespie, 2003), and so has the reader of any text. Readers always have a different perspective, and thus see the work of the author in a new way. In research, collaboration is an important means to address each other's blind-spots (Cornish, Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2007), to challenge each other, and to generate new ideas. In this sense, it is a pleasure to read the comments of two careful readers of *Transitions*, and to be offered a

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chance to engage with their reading of my text. The articles of Marie-Cécile Bertau (2007) and Xiao Wen Li (2007) capture the two main themes of this book, namely young people's development through transition processes and accession to symbolic responsibility, and their use of novels, music, books and films as symbolic resources to support this development. The surplus added by them concerns the contextual specificity of some phenomenon described in *Transitions*, and their radical dialogicality. My reply elaborates upon these insights.

The notion of dialogicality encompasses both the inherent plurivocity of what constitutes the social and the symbolic streams which circulate and animate it (Marková, 2003), and the actual dialogues taking place between agents or entities as these are co-present or absent (as when a bereaved person dialogues with a dead person: Josephs, 1998). The dialogicality of uses of symbolic resources can thus be said to be threefold. Firstly, people can have a dialogue about a cultural element—a film, a novel, a piece of art, or a song—as when friends discuss a film they have seen. In the present case I am engaged in an imaginary dialogue with Marie-Cécile Bertau and Xiao Wen Li, neither of whom I have met, but both of whom have read *Transitions*. Secondly, an interaction with a text, a song or a painting follows the inherent dialogicality of the cultural object, which is always full of the echoes of other voices and discourses, as Marie-Cécile Bertau emphasizes. Thirdly, all this takes place in a dialogical social and cultural field. For example, Xiao Wen Li shows how 'youth' as a cultural phenomenon is created by the researcher's words. If social scientists, inspired by identity work carried out in the US in the 1960s in problematic suburbs, are looking for youth problems in China, where they do not exist, eventually these will emerge (as, for example, they did in the UK: Griffin, 1993). This suggests the strange power of dialogues between symbolic devices and the socially shared reality. Symbolic resources lead us to see reality differently; they modify our possible actions, our communication, and, via communication, even other people's perspectives. In a deep sense, they reconstitute social reality. With these three forms of dialogicality in mind, let us now go back to the study of young people's uses of symbolic resources.

In *Transitions*, voice is given to young people who speak about cultural experiences they have had. The dialogicality of their experience has been inferred from a parallel reading of their discourse and the books, films or songs they mentioned. The reconstructive methodology brought me to formulate a hypothesis about the conditions in which people turn books, songs or films into symbolic resources. An alternative method would be to observe actual dialogues about, or

with cultural elements. Yet such an observation needs to be prepared by a theoretical reflection on situations in which uses of symbolic resources might emerge. In this article I propose to examine the possible condition of turning a film or a book in a symbolic resource. In order to do so, I will take seriously the suggestion made by my readers: there is something deeply dialogical in the traditional study of Talmud, yet this is possible only in a very specific institutional setting. I will thus consider the Talmudic study situation as a paradigmatic dialogical situation (see also Zittoun, 2007). The structure of that situation will enable me to question young people's encounters with books in school settings. This will finally lead me to sketch a methodology for the actual study of the ability to use books, songs or films as symbolic resources.

### **The Talmudic Study Situation**

The study of religious texts is a core value of the Jewish tradition. The God of the Jews is not knowable through direct means. For the tradition, the very alliance between God and the Jews has been actualized through the gift of the Torah (which corresponds to the Old Testament) and the Talmud (the legal corpus organizing Jewish life). The texts mediate the human–God relationship. Learning to understand the texts is to learn to know God, and improve oneself. The study of the texts can, however, never bring final knowledge—the illusion of 'knowing' the divine would be idolatry—there can only be an 'infinite reading' (Banon, 1987). The tradition is thus based on the idea of a constitutive, ongoing dialogue between humans and their God. This core idea is promoted through values and rules organizing the whole social group, through space and history. For example, from this principle follows the imperative of studying the religious texts and teaching them to the next generation, which is repeated twice in daily prayers and on various holidays. It is written in the texts itself, and actualized through prescriptions about how to organize teaching.

As Marie-Cécile Bertau suggests, the religious text itself is dialogical, both in its historical composition and in its visual appearance. The tradition considers that God gave Moses the Torah in both written (the texts) and oral form. Over the centuries the commentaries have become essential to the text, have been transcribed, and are now necessary for understanding the written tradition. The text of the Torah contains both narratives and legal texts. In the 2nd century, a rabbinic school identified the basic 613 rules contained in the Torah, and proposed a first group of commentaries, called the Mishnah. Comments on the

Mishnah were also written down by another school of rabbis in the 5th century, and these secondary comments are called the Gemara. The Mishnah and the Gemara constitute the Talmud. In other words, the Talmud contains the legal aspects of the Torah and their comments. A page of a volume of the Talmud today represents this dialogue of rabbis through the ages: at its centre is the proposition of the Mishnah; around and below it takes place the related Gemara, as well as some more recent comments. In each of these, the name of the rabbi who brought an idea is reported. Thus, the text itself is presented as a dialogue between rabbis through history.

A dialogue has to take place between reader and text. Firstly, the Torah is written in a language not spoken anymore, and is full of apparent contradictions and mistakes. Yet it is supposed to be of divine origin, and from this follows an epistemological principle: everything in the text has a meaning to be found. Secondly, the Torah and the Talmud mostly address situations which are no longer relevant. Yet these legal texts are the basis of the Halakhah, the body of rules actually guiding everyday life for orthodox Jews. For example, there was no television in biblical time. How does one decide whether watching TV is considered as a form of work, and thus cannot be done on Shabbat, or whether it is a form of leisure? In other words, any new rule must be produced on the basis of ancient rules, through complex procedures of argumentation. Reading the texts requires active interpretation and questioning.

The paradigmatic situation for studying the texts is also dialogical. In the educational system prescribed by the text itself, young children (aged 4 or 5) are taught the texts. They progressively learn to read and to study the Torah and the Talmud. Yet the study of the Talmud takes place neither in a class in which the teacher dispenses knowledge to passive students, nor via individual learning. In the tradition, but still in every *yeshiva* (rabbinic school) in the world, a scholar studies the Talmud with a '*haver*' (a friend). Both students examine one difficulty of the text (e.g. a contradiction between two passages, a problem of application, etc.) and each of them has to find an explanation. The explanation is always made in mode of the quotation of some rabbi's position to be found in the text and usually already known, the answer by another rabbi, and the position of a third one, etc. Reasoning is a dialogue between previous rabbis' positions, yet the way in which these are used to make an argument is always new. The role of the *haver* is to give a counter-argument in the same mode. Traditionally, it is also said that the role of the teacher is to examine the two students' positions, and then to bring in another perspective, so as to keep the

discussion ever open. This dialogical study can also become a public game, for example when scholars display their interpretative skills in front of the whole community.

Presented in this way, the Jewish tradition can be seen as a paradigmatic dialogical proposition.<sup>1</sup> The tradition is constructed around the axis of the human–divine dialogue mediated by a text. These values are reflected through the whole system of belief, daily prayers and the organization of the community. More specifically, the actual interactive modalities of examining are meant to keep a dialogue open. Finally, the text itself is necessary dialogical. Additionally, the tradition teaches that in each human is a fragment of ‘God’s laughter’, or ‘a letter of the Torah’ that God spread out in the world. Consequently, each person has to find his or own ‘letter’ or uniqueness (Ouaknin, 1986, 1994). Practically, this means that in this dialogical system, each person is asked to find his or her own and unique place and voice.

## **The Talmud and Symbolic Resources**

The traditional way of approaching religious texts can be seen as an extreme situation of turning a text into a symbolic resource. A person has to address a problem. She has to find in the available stock of knowledge some narrative or some explanation which might be related or relevant. She then has to use it so as to elaborate sense or guide a possible course of action (e.g. whether to watch television on Shabbat or not). From that perspective, turning fragments of the text into symbolic resources is a widely acknowledged and validated process in the Talmudic traditional setting. The *haver*, the master, sometimes the whole group, and the divine presence are there to approve such uses. The Talmudic study situation thus appears to be based on a significant structure of recognition, organized around a text, and guided by a related system of values. I will now use the paradigmatic situation of interaction around the Talmud to examine an everyday school situation.

## **Different Sorts of Knowledge and Meanings in Education**

In *Transitions* I argued that the slow turning of a cultural element into a symbolic resource is a fluctuant process, occurring through evolving semiotic configurations, which might be very difficult to observe as they take place. Yet one can examine what happens at school: after all, children and young people spend a great amount of time there interacting with cultural elements. Some of these, such as literary texts,

philosophical texts and poems, are good candidates for becoming symbolic resources. Researchers who have examined the relationship between everyday knowledge and school knowledge have mostly focused on the way in which the former could determine, facilitate or become an obstacle for the latter (Chaiklin & Hedegaard, 2005; de Abreu, 2005; Delcroix, 2000; Hedegaard, 2003). Yet the idea of using symbolic resources suggests exactly the opposite movement, that is, that cultural elements belonging to school knowledge might facilitate young people's development and understanding of their life experience. Can we therefore make some hypothesis about the sort of situations that might lead a young person to turn a novel, a historical book or a poem encountered in the classroom into a symbolic resource?

Case analyses presented in *Transitions* suggest that a cultural element can become a symbolic resource for a person only if she can establish some correspondence between the element and her lived experience or personal culture. With some minimal cultural expertise a person can understand a cultural element and establish its shared meaning (what it is about, what the plot is, etc.). Yet for this cultural element to start to become more personal, links need to be established between the newly seen or read cultural elements and one's existing understanding. On the one hand, this correspondence can be emotional, or due to similarities between the structure of experiences met by characters and one's own, or due to places described in the novel that the person might have known, or just because the colours, rhythm or atmosphere created by the cultural element somehow resonate with some more or less conscious emotional state of the person. On the other hand, it might be because the cultural element has some similarity with another one, already internalized by the person. For example, the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might make sense to a person because she has previously seen a reality television series in which people are under constant camera surveillance. Linking the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the previously internalized series will lead the person to have a personal interpretation of the novel and might transform her previous understanding of the series. Once internalized, the novel can be mobilized later on, in new situations, which would turn it into a symbolic resource.

What sort of classroom situation do we need for dialogues between students and newly met cultural elements to take place? In the Talmudic situation, a fragment of text is appropriated through (a) the mobilization of another text, and (b) the acknowledgement of the unique contribution of the scholar. We might thus reason analogically. For a student to turn a cultural element into something that can be used, we might expect that (a) the teacher and the student's comrades accept his mention in the

classroom of another cultural element known by him, and (b) the teacher and peers acknowledge the fact that the person has found some personal sense in the cultural element. As in the Talmudic situation, however, such dialogues with a text have to be understood within their socio-cultural and institutional context, which in turn shapes the interpersonal interactions that can take place around the cultural element. If the context of interaction seems congruent with the Talmudic tradition, modern societies are constructed on much wider diversity.

National curricula, educational policies as well as schools determine whether or not some cultural elements can be part of the curriculum. For example, highly heated debates have taken place in France about the status of classical vs street culture at school. One position is that it is of primary importance for adolescents from all social backgrounds to have access at school to classical culture. Another position accepts the fact that some cultural elements available in the media (hip-hop songs, *Harry Potter*, etc.) are more relevant for young people, and therefore should be treated as cultural elements in the classroom. Some cultural elements eventually will be considered as part of the curriculum (e.g. George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) while others will be excluded (e.g. the film *The Matrix*). The respective institutional status of cultural elements is then diffracted at all the levels of the educational setting. Firstly, not all the students are equal when they are confronted with cultural elements in the classroom. In some families, children are exposed to cultural elements and to modes of reasoning and of communicating which are very close to these promoted by the school (Lahire, 1995; Perret-Clermont, 1980). By contrast, other families might consider knowledge transmitted at school as illegitimate (Cesari-Lusso, 1994; de Abreu & Cline, 2003; Rochex, 1999). In addition to these situational effects, young people's meetings with cultural elements are very personal, and specific to their identity and emotional life. Young people also participate in many spheres of experiences in which they meet cultural elements. There is a priori no reason to believe that young people would privilege the cultural elements validated in the classroom. The sense that a young person confers on a cultural element in an educational setting would thus depend on his or her parents' past experiences and school trajectory (Charlot, Bautier, & Rochex, 1992; Delcroix, 2000; Rochex, 1999). Secondly, the sense that a student attributes to a cultural element at school is also constructed through his or her interactions with peers. Children more or less tolerate the sense that their peers confer on cultural elements, and the links between spheres of experience proposed by them in the classroom (Hedegaard, 2003). Thirdly, the teacher's role is also

fundamental. The student's ability to relate to cultural elements will obviously depend on the teacher-student relationship (Espinosa, 2003), and on the sense that the teacher confers on cultural elements on the basis of his or her own trajectory (Genolet, 1984). Teacher-students-cultural elements might finally be mediated by school orientations. A teacher might wonder why to teach a classical author to students who will anyway be working on technical machines all their life, but he or she might want to teach it precisely because this might be the only chance for the students to discover literature. Thus, eventually, sociocultural features of institutions can be reflected at all levels of the learning situation, and play an important role in whether or not a person can mobilize cultural elements in and out of school (Beach, 2003). Finally, of course, not all cultural elements discussed in the classroom are as explicitly dialogical as a page of Talmud. Yet a text is always intrinsically dialogical, and when this is implicit, then debate, discussion, comparison with other texts and theatrical techniques might reanimate it.

### **From Talmudic Debate to the Status of Cultural Elements in the Classroom**

Comparing the typical school situation to the paradigmatic situation of studying the Torah, a number of divergences emerge. In contemporary schools, the values underpinning education are more implicit, and less systematically pursued and consistently diffracted into the whole system, than in the Talmudic setting. For example, one idea widely spread in most occidental educational systems, the idea that education should promote equal chances, contradicts many actual selection practices. The idea of studying for the sake of study contradicts the dominant pressure to get required grades. People's positions are not defined in the same terms either. Very often, peer work is incidental rather than an a priori requirement of the educational program, and the teacher is meant to transmit knowledge, rather than destabilize students' dialogues. Disciplinary constraints often lead the teacher to encourage the student's mastery of the cultural meaning of a text (in its historical and cultural context) and a logical analysis (of the construction of sentence, the plot, etc). Little space is given to personal interpretation. Finally, although every text is inherently dialogical, teachers are more or less open to this dialogicality. The question is thus whether it is possible for students to reflect on cultural elements seen at school, and to create links between the cultural element and their personal experience.

Specific teachers' interventions are nevertheless likely to lead students to turn cultural elements into symbolic resources. Teachers can show students the potential sense of cultural elements (Feuerstein, Klein, Tannenbaum, & Abraham, 1991), and suggest possible links between spheres of activities (de Abreu, 2005). Teachers might legitimise extra curriculum cultural elements mentioned by students in the classroom (Gajo & Mondada, 2000; Hedegaard, 2003). It has been suggested that the teacher's recognition of stories which are relevant for the children might play an important role in children's commitment to learning (Power & Sparks, 2003). Legitimization might take different forms. For example, if a student mentions the film *Titanic* in class discussions about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the teacher might simply ignore the student's proposition (see, e.g., Grossen & Oberholzer, 2000). He might also explicitly refuse to discuss a popular film in the educational context. Finally, he might question the student about the link she sees between the two stories. Similarly, when reading a story, a student might have a strong reaction reflecting his or her emotional involvement (such as shivering, shouting) and the teacher might ignore such expressions, acknowledge them ('this is really scary, yes!'), or allow room for the children's active symbolization of these reactions through role play, writing or painting (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005; Tisseron, 2000). My hypothesis would be that a teacher who simply acknowledges the student's thoughts related to the cultural element met in the classroom might help the student to grasp and internalize it. In contrast, teachers and peers who reject signs suggesting the personal sense given to the cultural element met in the classroom might lead the student to disinvest it (Zittoun & Grossen, 2006a, 2006b). This does not mean that the student will not develop other symbolic resources, but suggests that the school is not providing the space within which this could occur.

Through the structure highlighted in the case of Talmudic study, I have reflected on the dialogicality of the educational setting, of the actual interactions taking place in the classroom, and of the relation between individuals and cultural elements. On this basis, a research strategy can also be imagined. One might start by collecting information on general institutional beliefs about the status and the purpose of knowledge. One might then observe and document the actual frame of interaction between teacher, students and text. One might further closely examine how teachers react to what a student says about a cultural element when it conforms, or not, to the official curriculum. Then one would question the teacher and students about the role of these cultural elements in their lives, and what they actually use as symbolic resources.

## Symbolic Resources in Dialogue

My reading of the paradigmatic dialogical situation of Talmudic study highlights the correspondence between very abstract, general values—such as the value of questioning a text and its importance in individual and collective development—and the ways in which these values are actually implemented in everyday practices of study. In contrast, contemporary educational systems appear less consistent. Different actors, institutions and ideologies participate in texts' construction and reconstruction. General ideologies are diffracted by individuals who might have different interests, school material designed for other purposes, and actual practices dependent on personal identities. Yet if education is really about offering children and young people the opportunity to participate in shared knowledge and to develop into responsible citizens, then it is important to preserve the space of freedom where one might respectfully question texts, play with them, and see how they relate to one's life.

This being said, the case of Talmudic study interestingly offers a mirror with which to reflect on the practices through which we, researchers, come to new understandings. After all, it is thanks to the frame offered by this journal, which explicitly promotes dialogue, that I could engage in this imaginary exchange with Marie-Cécile Bertau's and Xiao Wen Li's readings of *Transitions*. And it is through this imaginary dialogue that I could develop a new understanding of the dialogicality of using symbolic resources.

### Notes

I would like to thank Jaan Valsiner for inviting me to write the present article. I also thank Alex Gillespie for his useful comments on it.

1. This presentation of the tradition of studying the Talmud is a theoretical reconstruction. In practice, orthodox adherence to the tradition is often less dialogical than presented here. It sometimes leads people to a rigid belief in the texts, or creates difficulties for people when adjusting to the demands of contemporary society (see also Zittoun, 2006).

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