The Dialogical Perspective in Literacy Practices Research / *A perspectiva dialógica em pesquisa de práticas de letramentos*

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ABSTRACT

This work aims to show some contributions of Bakhtinian dialogism for the conceptualization of reading and writing, as well as for the analysis of literacy events in relation with literacy practices. An example of such contributions is presented on the basis of an applied research about the relation between the axiological component of understanding and speech genres in proximal foreign language reading courses. Two literacy classroom events related to academic texts in a reading course in Portuguese as a foreign language are analyzed. The learners-readers are Spanish-speaking, undergraduates and graduates of a public university in Uruguay. The consideration of the axiological dimension expressed in the utterances of the learners-readers in the events analyzed seeks to show their identity presentation about the academic discourse community, as well as the perception of specific requirements to read as an insider of an academic community.

KEYWORDS: Dialogism; Literacies; Discourse communities

RESUMO

Este trabalho procura mostrar algumas contribuições do dialogismo bakhtiniano para a conceituação da leitura e da escrita, assim como para a análise de eventos de letramento em relação com práticas de letramento. Um exemplo de tais contribuições é apresentado a partir de pesquisa das formas de relacionamento entre o componente axiológico da compreensão e os gêneros discursivos em cursos de leitura em línguas estrangeiras próximas. Analisam-se dois eventos de letramento a respeito de textos acadêmicos em sala de aula de um curso de leitura de português como língua estrangeira. Os aprendizes-leitores são hispano-falantes, alunos de graduação e pós-graduação de uma faculdade pública no Uruguai. O exame da dimensão axiológica expressa nas enunciações desses aprendizes-leitores nos eventos analisados busca mostrar sua apresentação identitária a respeito da comunidade discursiva acadêmica, assim como a percepção dos requerimentos específicos para ler como insider de uma comunidade acadêmica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dialogia; Letramentos; Comunidades discursivas

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Introduction

Applied Linguistics, nowadays, focuses on multiple "linguistic practices" and on the context in which people live and act, in order to understand the sociocultural, political and historical ways of life as they experience them (MOITA LOPES, 2006, p.21). Applied research is strongly interested in processes: the development of language, its use, language teaching, language learning. These processes require different theories and different methods among those associated with static grammatical description (LARSEN-FREEMAN and CAMERON, 2008, p.79). The considerations of applied researchers concerned with linguistic practices and their contexts of production echo other words, more distant and at the same time utterly contemporary: those of Bakhtin and his dialogic theory of discourse.

The Bakhtinian appeal to a 'translinguistics'[1], this is to say, the study of aspects of the life of discourse that "[...] exceed –and completely legitimately- the boundary of linguistics" (BAKHTIN, 1999c, p.181), stems from a conception of language which, early in his reflection, appears as strongly committed with the social phenomenon of social verbal interaction, realized by means of an utterance or utterances: this interaction constitutes "the basic reality of language." "Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication [...]" (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.93 and 95).

1 On dialogism and the evaluative dimension of comprehension

Dialogism is a key aspect of the Bakhtinian reflection on the life of language. As a way of characterizing the dynamics inherent to ideological creation, the Bakhtin Circle's work is based on the metaphor of dialogue, which aptly represents the dynamics of the cultural universe and shows social voices "[…] in an intricate chain of

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[1] In his translation, Todorov (1981, p.24) substitutes the Bakhtinian term 'metalinguistics' for 'translinguistics', not only to avoid confusion but also to show this ability to surpass the limits of linguistics, thus anticipating the concerns of many applied linguists apparent nowadays in the development of applied linguistics. Along these lines, we prefer here the term coined by Todorov.

responsiveness [...]. The universe of culture is intrinsically responsive, it moves as if it were a huge dialogue" (FARACO, 2006, p.57)[2].

Bakhtin, in his production post-1920s, constantly integrates this reflection, the result of an extension of the conception of the dynamics of ideological creation, speaking of the dialogism of every speech act.

> The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogical. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (1999b, p.293; author's italics).

It is worth keeping in mind that the expression "unfinished dialogue" aims, fundamentally, to the infinite possibilities, the openness, of the live word. The speaker is not a mythical Adam that names, for the first time, discursive objects until that "virginal" moment: in fact, every utterance responds, one way or another, to previous utterances (BAKHTIN, 1998a, p.279; BAKHTIN, 1999a, p.93-94). Thus the object of discourse of each speaker "[...] becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners (in a conversation or dispute about some everyday event) or other viewpoints, world views, trends, theories, and so forth (in the sphere of cultural communication)" (BAKHTIN, 1999a, p.94).

The utterance, this link in the chain of discursive communication, is inseparable from those that precede and succeed it, that generate in it direct dialogic resonances and responsive attitudes. The temporal interplay of the double direction between the past (what has been said) and the future (the reply) takes place within the utterance, responsively directed not only to its proper object but also to the speech of others about it. The key issue with regards to "the speech of others" is the way that the relation between "speaker" and "listener (recipient of discourse)" is reconfigured, opposing the mechanistic presentation of this relation done by general linguistics of that time. A

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[2] In the original: "[...] numa intrincada cadeia de responsividade [...]. O universo da cultura é intrinsecamente responsivo, ele se move como se fosse um grande diálogo".

profile of the recipient emerges clearly, from an "active responsive understanding." "Any understanding is imbued with response" (BAKHTIN, 1999a, p.68).

Responsiveness is a constitutive aspect of Bakhtin's philosophical framework, according to which the world of life is the real whole of existence of unique historical beings that perform unique and unrepeatable acts[3]. Subjects cannot attenuate their responsibility for the performance of an act[4] by invoking an alibi, this is to say, by claiming to have been elsewhere, in a different place from that in which the act was performed (BAKHTIN, 2010). In each act, one lives acting in relation to everything that is not *I*, in relation to an *other* and, at the same time, assuming in every moment an evaluative position.

The evaluative dimension of the relationship between *I* and the *other* expresses itself constantly in the living word: we speak about and listen to truths or lies, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant things (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.70, p.103). In the life of daily speech, expressive intonation, in a constant dialectic movement, nourishes the social accent, shared by certain social group, and the social group nourishes in its turn the expressive intonation (BAKHTIN, 1998a, p.290-294). Language is 'saturated' with intentions and social and collectively significant accents. Even though we could think that this interplay of saturations might lead to a state of permanent incommunicability within a language, the case is that among these variously saturated spaces of language there always exists the possibility of dialogic confrontation or the perception of such situations as points of view on the world.

The analysis of the life of discourse pays attention to the participants involved in concrete, individual, and always social acts: dialogism denies an individual subjectivism, showing the individual in a double interplay of social articulations, between situations (situated interactions) and traditions (sociocultural praxis). The participants in situated interactions contribute with the passing of time to the sustenance

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[3] The individual as someone responsible for her feelings and desires, as a semiotic being, is understood by Bakhtin and other members of the Circle as a purely socio-ideological phenomenon (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.34).

[4] *Postupok*, the term for 'act' of Slavic origin, refers to a concrete, contingent event, that someone performs deliberately, according to Liapunov (BAKHTIN, 2010, p.81, note 10). It is interesting to notice that Hispanic criticism translates this term as 'ethical act', thus emphasizing the philosophical ethical bias above the singularity and concreteness of the action in itself (MANCUSO, 2005). Ponzio (2008, p.29) translates *postupok* into Italian as 'azione responsabile'.

– or the change—or practices that transcend the situation. Practices are dynamic and can be altered, usually as a result of the cumulative effect of multiple minimal adjustments (and, in exceptional cases, due to abrupt changes). Highlighting cultural articulations and social-historical and situational interdependence of the individual is central to this approach (LINELL, 2009, p.51-3; cf. FAIRCLOUGH, 2003; GIDDENS, 1986).

Responsiveness, the evaluative dimension of understanding and articulation within situations and traditions of an individual without an alibi are the features of the Bakhtinian dialogic perspective that I will refer to in the following analysis.

2 Reading and writing from a dialogic perspective

The utterance, that is to say, the product-link within the larger chain of the discursive process, can be written or spoken, given the actively responsive nature of comprehension, be it immediate or delayed (the latter related to most cases of genres of complex cultural communication, usually written). In developing this notion, Bakhtin (1999a, p.69) explains: "Everything we have said here also pertains to written and read speech, with the appropriate adjustments and additions."

In fact, the guiding principles of Bakhtinian dialogism do not exclude the worlds of reading and writing. Written discursive performance is a constitutive element of verbal communication: "[...] the printed verbal performance[5] engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on" (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.95).

Therefore, nothing prevents us from assuming, in the duality reading-writing, what has already been said about comprehension as part of the live word: in every discursive act (spoken or written, heard or read) the recognition of the signal is absorbed by the apprehension of its orientation in a specific context and situation. "The problem

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[5] It is possible to understand this passage in a broader sense, as 'written discourse', not limited to the printed sphere.

of otherness and dialogue implies, necessarily, that of verbal language (*spoken and written*) and of the sign in general"[6] (PONZIO, 2008, p.203; my italics).

When, in the last decades of the 20th century, some trends within language studies made explicit their commitment to the analysis of the spoken language, there was a special concern about establishing the differences between spoken and written language, both with regards to modality or material support and structure: the forms, conventions and grammar of each one. There are certainly differences between them, but this does not mean that they must be understood in terms of dichotomies, but rather as continuous multiples or dimensions of speech and writing, which are themselves different dimensions (BARTON, 1994, p.81-94). Taking into account the numerous juxtapositions between speech and writing, it seems much more attractive and productive to focus on those discursive genres which constitute the foundations of the communicative activities of individuals than on their material support (LINELL, 2005, p.18-29, 191-2; cf. CHARAUDEAU and MAINGUENEAU, 2005, p.223-6).

2.1 Literacies. Practices and events

Whereas "alphabetization" refers to the process of learning to read and write as acquisition of a technology of encoding and decoding (SOARES, 2006, p.22, 58, 68-9), "literacy" alludes to the "[...] state or condition acquired by a social group or an individual as a consequence of having appropriated writing and its social practices"[7] (SOARES, 2006, p.39). The literate individual is defined not only as someone who can read or write, but also as someone who makes social use of reading and writing: he/she practices them as ways of social functioning within her community[8].

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[6] In the original: "O problema da alteridade e do diálogo implica, necessariamente, o da linguagem verbal *(oral e escrita)* e do signo em geral".
[7] In the original: "[...] estado ou condição que adquire um grupo social ou um indivíduo como consequência de ter-se apropriado da escrita e de suas práticas sociais".
[8] From this perspective, categories such as 'illiterate' and 'literate' are problematized: "When an 'illiterate' person listens to a reading of a newspaper article performed by someone 'literate', or when he asks someone 'literate' to write down a letter for him, isn't he making use of writing?" [In the original: "Quando um 'analfabeto' ouve a leitura de uma notícia de jornal feita por um 'alfabetizado', ou quando pede a um 'alfabetizado' que escreva, por ele, uma carta, não está fazendo uso da escrita? E esse fazer uso da língua escrita não é uma das propriedades ou atributos da alfabetização?"] (SOARES, 2007, p.51).

Reading and writing are two phenomena involved in literacy, each of them made up of a set of skills, behaviour and knowledge that constitute long and complex continua: reading a ticket, a cartoon, a romance, a journal article; writing one's name, a letter, an essay on a certain subject or a Ph.D. dissertation are some of the activities that make up these continua (SOARES, 2006, p. 48-9; SOARES, 2007, p.51). Therefore, there are not only multiple literacies, different from each other depending on time, space or contexts, but also individuals that possess different literacies (BARTON, 1994, p.34).

The notion of multiple literacies, in particular in the perspective of the New Studies on Literacy (NSL), is becoming, more or less explicitly, more or less consciously, depending on the authors, a dialogic approximation to the activities of reading and writing: outside discourses, according to Gee (1996, p. 190), "[...] language and literacy are meaningless." Along these lines, these activities are understood as social and cultural events around written language (STREET, 2003, p.77). The emphasis on the multiplicity and diversity of literacies characteristic of NSL is a movement along the lines of not conceiving practices of reading and writing as monolithic categories: there is not a SINGLE writing, as there is not a SINGLE reading.

At the same time, these theoretical visions propose ways of working that incorporate the methodological steps of Bakhtinian "translinguistics": (1) an analysis of forms and kinds of verbal interaction in connection with their specific conditions of production; (2) a view of concrete utterances and particular discursive performances as elements of a chained interaction; (3) their further re-examination (VOLOŠÍNOV, 1986, p.95-6).

Literacy events (every time a fragment of writing forms part of the nature of interactions between participants and their interpretive processes) configure a key element for the study of multiple literacies, since it is from the starting point of events that analysts try to understand "literacy practices," which individuals perform when they use reading and writing (BARTON, 1994, p.36-7; cf. STREET, 1995; GEE, 1996; BARTON and HAMILTON, 2000). These practices refer to social and cultural behaviours and conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing (STREET, 1995, p.134). According to this definition, literacy events and practices are indeed types of events and social practices which surround reading and writing activities. The analysis of events and practices of literacy, therefore, is the

analysis of the articulation of individuals between situations (situated interactions) and traditions (sociocultural praxis).

3 On events and practices of literacy: the evaluative dimension with regards to academic texts

Literacy practices circulate. They are created and recreated in the midst of "discourse communities," that is to say, groups of people that share texts and practices: for instance, a group of scholars, a group of teenagers' magazines, readers etc. "Discourse community" can refer to multiple groups, interconnected and overlapping, of individuals: every discourse community is defined by a group of common interests, values and purposes (BARTON, 1994, p.57) so that diverse and multiple literacy practices are constructed, which in turn summons Bakhtinian reflections on the social groups that ideologically saturate the common language by means of accents particular to each group.

Let us examine an example, taking as a starting point an analysis developed in the course of a research (ORLANDO, 2012) that revises the evaluative dimension of understanding with respect to academic texts in a course in a reading classroom in the context of a course of Portuguese as a foreign language in a public university in Uruguay. The participants are Spanish speakers, undergraduate and graduate students of a public university in Uruguay. Throughout the first part of the reading course in Portuguese as a foreign language journalistic texts are presented, whereas in the last part of the term academic texts are used. This is an attempt to conciliate the community "imagined"[9] by the institution (readers of academic texts in the foreign language) and the community emphasized by the teacher (readers of texts in a foreign language). However, this "conciliation" of communities of practice cannot be achieved unless along the way conflicting signals are provided. In order to interpret these signals I

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[9] 'Imagined community' (cf. ANDERSON, 2012) is here a metaphor for the institutional vision that characterizes the community of learners in the reading courses in foreign languages as a homogeneous space in terms of expectations (to read academic texts) regarding these courses.

transcribe an event that took place during the last month of classes, in which the focus was reading academic texts.[10]

EVENT 1: "¡ESTAMOS EN JAPONÉS!" ['WE ARE IN JAPANESE!']
1.   T- (...) well listen. so. let's move to the next text which was
2.   easy and you must have read. I imagine..
(...)
3.   α – we are in Japanese!
4.   T – huh?
5.   α- you're teaching Japanese!
6.   T – we are in Japanese?
7.   γ- yesss.. quite, because (---) (...)
8.   ζ – of course what happens is that. for me for me it was
9.   difficult..not just the.. (experience) of the grammatical..
10.   but..some words.. I didn't understand. so it's kind
11.   of like I lost part of the thread (--)
12.   γ- besides of. what the (text) says
13.   T- yes what happens is that... you must understand.. it's a
14.   publication. right. an academic publication .
(...)

Portuguese reading class, 21/6/06

This interchange belongs to the beginning of a reading of the text 'Primeiros habitantes' [Early inhabitants][11]. The teacher (T)'s comments assess it as an "easy text" (lines 1 and 2), an evaluation with which some participants (α, γ, and ζ) express their agreement, omitted in the transcription of the event presented above. The exchange (omitted from the transcription) continues with the introduction of a comparison between the text "Primeiros habitantes" [Early inhabitants] and the text "Descobrindo línguas africanas" [Discovering African languages][12] after which the teacher reminds the class that they are close to the end of the term, which seems to explain the greater difficulty of this other text. It is then that the voice of another student adds: "*we are in Japanese!*" (line 3). The class, in her view, is no longer of Portuguese but of Japanese. If the teacher seems not to understand this comment at first (lines 4 and 6), other students pick up α's contribution, adding that they perceive not only grammatical but

also lexical ("*some words.. I didn't understand.. so it's kind of like I lost part of the thread,*" lines 8 to 11) and thematic ("*what the text says,*" line 12) difficulties. T tries to explain that what happens is that this is an academic publication (lines 13 and 14).

Relexification on academic texts (in other words, the meaning expressed by the words uttered by different students to refer to these texts[13]) can be understood as forms of the axiological dimension with regards to the texts. We find a great expressive force suggested in α's utterance when she exclaims: "we are in Japanese!" This comment metaphorizes much more that "the text *x* seems more complex than the text *y*." For a Spanish speaker, "to be in Japanese" involves the distant, the different, that which suggests a greater complexity in looking for deciphering keys. "To be in Japanese" metaphorizes several questions perceived by the learners-readers and expressed through the axiological dimension of their utterances:

1. A "change of phase" or increasing complexity of the tasks in terms of the community of users of a foreign language[14].

2. The identitarian presentation of the "newcomers" to the academic discursive community. This issue is doubly complicated because the participants in these foreign language reading courses are students whose trajectory within the discursive community is very recent and, at the same time, diverse. In other words, from a disciplinary perspective, the members of a group may belong, or rather may be in a process of incorporation, to different academic communities.

3. The perception that there are specific, "rigorously monitored," requirements to read as an insider within an academic discipline.

To examine in greater depth items 2 and 3, I present a second event, which takes place while the class is working with the text "Descobrindo línguas africanas" [Discovering African languages].

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[13] In the relation between words and meaning, there are movements in both directions: on the one hand, words have several meanings; on the other, these meanings are continuously 'lexicalized' in different ways (hence my preference for the term 'relexification'). This two-fold movement, including the choices of the author-producer and the decisions of the interpreter, is not purely individual: "the meanings of words and the wording of meanings are matters which are socially variable and socially contested, and facets of wider social and cultural processes" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992, p.186).

[14] On this question, which is not explored in depth here, see Orlando (2012).

EVENT 2: "NO ENTENDIMOS NADA!" ['WE DIDN'T GET A THING!']
β- you know something worse happened. it's not that we did NOT read the text..
δ- it's that we didn't get a thing! ((she laughs while she speaks and several others laugh as well))
ρ- we read it yesterday..
T- ok. here you have a guide or sorts..((she laughs))
β- (---) reading comprehension

Portuguese reading class, 26/6/06

In this case, β, δ, and ρ explain, with successive contributions that weave a single explanation, that what happened to them was "worse" than not reading (since they had actually read in advance): "they didn't get a thing." This micro-narrative woven with those three voices includes laughter, accompanied by T who explains that they could use the questions as a reading guide. As it happens in other events not included here, these students' joke can be understood as a manifestation of the evaluative dimension of their responsive comprehension. The way in which they axiologically handle the resources of the community of users of the language shows them as "newcomers" to the community of practices in foreign language literacies.

Nevertheless, this is not the only aspect that this discursive event highlights. Given the inclusion of academic texts in the subject of Portuguese reading, we could conjecture a search for conciliation in terms of the community of readers of academic texts and the community of readers of texts in a foreign language.

The jokes are parodic, two-fold forms, and "disrespect" a contradictory reality (BAKHTIN, 1998b, p. 59-60). In the case of Event 2, we have a conflict of these students, "newcomer" readers to the academic world: when β, δ, and ρ joke about "reading and not getting a thing," they do so from quite a different identity position: that of readers of academic texts in a foreign language.

In general, according to the analysis developed in Orlando (2012), literacy events involving academic texts develop in similar ways to literacy events involving journalistic articles, even though we might expect different situations in terms of what the protagonists of the events analysed here express. For instance, we could imagine that students might have been "silenced" since there seems to have been difficulties in relation with other dimensions of understanding (in particular, the comprehension of the meaning of the texts-utterances in their "disciplinary" context). The joint reading in class of academic texts is not modified either in terms of the interactive dynamics that

characterizes the joint reading of journalistic articles or in terms of identity positions (cf. ORLANDO, 2012). This seems to be the most interesting aspect of this question. The interventions of the learner-readers during the joint reading of academic texts are not construed from the position of "expert knowledge" in a certain topic, but rather from the position of foreign language learners, or from more "multi-affiliated" positions (for instance, the position of mother and the position of Portuguese learner).

However, when β, δ, and ρ joke about "reading and not getting a thing" (Event 2), they do so from the identity position of readers of academic texts in a foreign language. As it has already been remarked, this question is doubly complicated since the participants in these foreign language reading courses are students whose trajectory within the discursive community is very recent and, at the same time, diverse. In other words, from a disciplinary perspective, the members of a group may belong to, or rather, may be in a process of incorporation into, different academic communities.

The students' joke calls for the specificities of the academic discourse and, at the same time, raises another issue: that of scientific-academic interpretive communities. The conventions of academic discursive genres are subtle and complex: they respond to epistemic frameworks that are frequently specific of each discipline. In this way, the utterances produced within these genres are divergent, not just in terms of thematic content but also in terms of compositional construction and 'style' according to the different areas of knowledge (cf. HYLAND, 2004, p.145-6 and HYLAND, 1999). The appropriation of "other's words" (BAKHTIN, 1999a) from the spoken and written academic field is a complex process for Uruguayan university students, who incorporate themselves into the Spanish-speaking academic field. Within the university institution in which this research was developed, both the problematization of academic production and the search for forms of "academic socialization" for newcomers to the communities of academic practices are very recent.

In fact, the impression of "being in Japanese," in the case of the learner-readers of the subject of the reading course in Portuguese as a foreign language, goes beyond the status of "other's words" in the new language (i.e., Portuguese) and summons the character of "other's words" of academic discourses in their own language, i.e., Spanish. The expression "to be in Japanese" is a form of responsiveness also with regards to the interpretive keys of "scientific" writing and, consequently, "scientific"

reading, whose interpretive keys were constructed for the "scientific community" through the centuries (ORLANDO, 2012).

"To the outsider then […] to write science is to engage in an impersonal, empirical and cumulative enterprise whose methodological standards are rigorously monitored by the disciplines" (HYLAND, 2004, p.163). And, for the insiders, their own writing is imbued with the importance of appealing to readers within the limits of a disciplinary discourse, thus projecting an "ethos" of insider as a way of exhibiting credibility and adhesion (cf. HYLAND, 2004, p.170).

Final considerations

According to the evaluative dimension articulated in a joke (Event 2) and in the expression "to be in Japanese" (Event 1), the learner-readers seem to position themselves closer to the vision of the "non-initiated" to the scientific-academic community. However, "to be closer" is not the same as "to coincide". Since they have enrolled in one of the disciplinary areas of the University, they have had previous contact, albeit limited to a maximum of four semesters, with the specific disciplines of each academic field. As they do so, they come in contact with the "rigorously monitored" rules not just for writing but also for reading as an insider of the discipline (for example, the instances of evaluation of the different disciplines, or carrying out discipline-specific classroom assignments in the Portuguese class). During part of the term, the reading course in Portuguese as a foreign language "waives" the requirements of the scientific-academic interpretive community, insofar as the texts read in the course are journalistic texts. However, insofar as these texts belong to academic genres in general, those requirements appear. And, in accordance with the evaluative dimension expressed in the learner-reader's utterances analyzed above, they are not yet familiarized with the literacy practices of that community.

In the final section of this paper, an attempt was made to show how the analysis of literacy events (events that involve unique historical beings, performing unique and unrepeatable acts) cannot disregard its connection with certain literacy practices. The double interplay of articulations between situated interactions and sociocultural praxis

characteristic of dialogism makes it possible to cast new light on the activities of writing and reading.

A dialogic approach to multiple literacies offers new interpretive keys that can help us in contemporary applied research, which is concerned with the forms of sociocultural, political and historical ways of life of the participants engaged in discourse.

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