



Dialogue, Horizon and Chronotope: Using Bakhtin's and Gadamer's Ideas to Frame Online Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The information explosion and digital modes of learning often combine to inform the quest for the best ways of transforming information in digital form for pedagogical purposes. This quest has become more urgent and pervasive with the 'turn' to online learning in the context of COVID-19. This can result in linear, asynchronous, transmission-based modes of teaching and learning which commodify, package and deliver knowledge for individual 'customers'. The primary concerns in such models are often technical and economic – technology as a cost-effective 'solution' to educational challenges. In this paper I argue for the importance of dialogic learning space in teaching and learning by means of Information and Communication Technologies, whether in the form of fully online learning, blended learning or face-to-face encounters using ICT affordances. Although the 20th Century theorists Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) produced their seminal works before the advent of ICTs, they were both concerned with the quality and authenticity of human engagement with texts and with other persons and contexts. Besides a shared interest in dialogue as an ontological feature of human life and being, they both used spatiotemporal concepts for understanding and interpreting texts. The article draws on Gadamer's notions of dialogue and horizon, and Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and chronotope, to conceptualize dialogic possibilities for online education. Its purpose is to provide a framework, grounded in Bakhtin's and Gadamer's ideas, for a dialogic approach to online teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords Bakhtin · Gadamer · Dialogue · Digital teaching and learning · Horizon · Chronotope

virtual: 4. of, relating to, or being a hypothetical particle whose existence is inferred from indirect evidence (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

"into this other situation we must also bring ourselves" (Gadamer 1975: 271).

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Introduction

Digital learning technologies have the ability to collapse differences of space and time in affording learners access to teaching and learning where and when are most convenient for them. This state of affairs is now almost taken for granted, with various forms of online learning emerging as the ‘new normal’ during and since the COVID-19 epidemic, although access to digital resources such as laptops, smart phones and data are severely constrained among learners from poorer backgrounds and in rural and remote areas, especially but not only in the Global South. While acknowledging these constraints, in historical terms the ‘new normal’ is an astounding leap forward for educational access – temporal and spatial distance need no longer serve as barriers to education, thus creating a ‘new horizon’ for teaching and learning. It accelerates a trend of transforming formal education from the prerogative of a tiny privileged minority – the case for most of recorded human history – to a basic human right and the prerogative of the masses. Learners who are removed from institutional *places* because of geographical and/or social location (or epidemiological lockdowns), and because of childcare, employment or other commitments during face-to-face classes, may nevertheless be present in institutional *spaces* of learning in their own time and place, provided that they have the necessary resources. One of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (2017:9.C) is “Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020” – this is seen as a key to the development of industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9) which, in turn, articulates with the other development goals, including “Quality education” (Goal 4) (United Nations 2015). Indeed, COVID-19 has accelerated an essential connection between quality education and access to online learning.

However, the elimination of spatial and temporal barriers to education through digital technologies entails the danger of assuming that time, place and the social situatedness of participants do not matter for learners and learning. If the priorities of the system are predominantly commercial and technical, there is a danger of “the use of technology as pedagogical replacement” (Hlatshwayo 2022:1) where pedagogical concerns are subordinated to commercial and technical ones. Unless communication and interaction are prioritized in online education (Chametzky 2021), an isolated and disempowered digital learner can become a faceless, atemporal, aspatial cipher, a ‘learner-byte’ paying for and consuming online offerings in virtual space (Rose 2017). This is exacerbated by the neoliberal discourse that has penetrated educational thinking, including online higher education, with its ‘technologies’ of market, management and performance (Ball 2016), exemplified in terms such as productivity, pipeline, throughput, input, output, all of which form part of the ‘knowledge economy’; and with its championing of information technologies to enhance the ‘efficiencies’ of education. I argue that the learner should not become, in the terms of one of the definitions of ‘virtual’ cited in the epitaph, *a hypothetical particle whose existence is inferred from indirect evidence*. As Lieser et al. (2018: 1) argue, best practices in blended learning mean “not simply adding technology to the current teaching, but transforming the interaction of teaching and learning”. This resonates with calls for “more relationally informed modes of engagement” (Davies 2016: 294) and for fostering an “ethic of hospitality” (Heringer 2022) in online education, so that learners are recognized and engaged as active, situated participants and interlocutors rather than as passive receptacles of information (Freire

1972). A relational approach should involve responsibility on the part of lecturers which can evoke reciprocity from learners in the online encounter (Heringer and Piquemal 2022). This requires interrogating, problematizing and transforming the notion of learner presence and engagement, in terms of time, space, agency and 'face', to fit in with an online situation. This article draws on Gadamer's notions of dialogue and horizon, and Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and chronotope to interrogate the ways in which time and space are operationalized in digital teaching and learning environments, and how these notions might contribute to an understanding of the possibilities of digital environments as spaces that enable dialogue. Its purpose is therefore to provide a framework, grounded in Bakhtin's and Gadamer's ideas, for a dialogic approach to online teaching and learning in higher education.

By discussing and comparing some of Gadamer's and Bakhtin's key ideas, I make an argument for the relevance and application of these ideas to online teaching and learning. I begin by exploring the commonalities and differences between Bakhtin and Gadamer regarding their biographies and intellectual projects. Given that I draw on their spatiotemporal concepts, it is important to situate them and their work in space and time, developing an appropriate 'horizon' for understanding and applying their ideas. I go on to examine their understandings of dialogue, horizon (Gadamer) and chronotope (Bakhtin), and to explore the relevance of 'horizon' and 'chronotope' for digital teaching and learning. I argue that these spatiotemporal concepts can help to illuminate and enhance our understandings of learners' engagement in online learning.

Bakhtin and Gadamer: Commonalities and Differences

Why consider Bakhtin and Gadamer's ideas together? First, as I argue below, they share interesting commonalities in their philosophical backgrounds, particularly regarding Greek philosophy and Neo-Kantianism. Second, the concept and praxis of dialogue are central to the thinking of both; notwithstanding their differences in understanding dialogue, they both view it as ontologically significant for human being, doing and becoming. They both place emphasis on spatiotemporal frames in understanding texts and their readings as historically and culturally situated. In addition, they did not engage directly with each other's work and there is not much literature that develops a dialogue between them, especially in relation to education, and to online education in particular – a hiatus which I address here. Both Gadamer and Bakhtin vigorously pursued dialogical exchanges with other thinkers during their lifetimes (for example, Gadamer with Derrida and Habermas (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989; Harrington 2001); Bakhtin with members of the 'Bakhtin Circle' (and subsequent 'circles' (see Brandist 2022)). This article thus draws on the spirit of dialogue as an open-ended and unfinalizable process that characterizes the work of both authors and the belief that such a dialogue can be generative.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), the Russian literary theorist, and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), the German philosopher of hermeneutics, were contemporaries who lived through some of the most harrowing events of the 20th century – two World Wars, the rise of Nazism and its aftermath (Gadamer), the Russian Revolution and Stalinism (Bakhtin). Bakhtin was arrested and charged for counter-revolutionary activities in 1929 and exiled to Kazakhstan. Gadamer, on the other hand, kept a low profile as a Classics professor during the Nazi era in Germany. Unlike his supervisor, Martin Heidegger, he never joined the Nazi

party. During the reconstruction after the war, he was appointed professor at Leipzig University because he was not seen as having been pro-Nazi.

Despite their different intellectual interests and trajectories, Bakhtin and Gadamer had important commonalities. They were both interested in Ancient Greek philosophy. Gadamer wrote his thesis on ‘The Essence of Pleasure in Plato’s Dialogues’ under Paul Natorp and his habilitation on ‘Plato’s dialectical ethics’ under Heidegger, and frequently revisited the Presocratic philosophers, as well as Plato and Aristotle, in his later work (Gadamer 1980, 1998, 2002). As Zuckert (2002: 201) argues, he “continued to find the first and perhaps purest expression of the character and grounds of his own work in Plato.” Bakhtin, who had a German governess as a child, began reading the Greek classics (in German translation) while still at school (Holquist 1990). Like Gadamer, Bakhtin analysed the Socratic dialogue; however, this was not to investigate “the beginning of philosophy” like Gadamer (1998) but as part of his work on the origins of European literary prose and the novel (Bakhtin 1981). Both were deeply interested in and influenced by Socrates and the Socratic dialogue as a reference point in their own understanding of dialogue and conversation.

A second commonality lies in their relation to Neo-Kantianism. Both were connected to Marburg University, an important centre of Neo-Kantianism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Neo-Kantian thinkers had a formative influence on their intellectual development. Gadamer’s connection was direct: he studied and worked at Marburg in the 1920s and was supervised by the Neo-Kantian, Paul Natorp. Gadamer saw himself as part of a post-war generation that was reacting against Neo-Kantianism’s “unlimited” belief in progress and the pre-eminence of science in cultural life: “The young generation returning to the universities after the war could no longer be convinced of these values” (Gadamer 1991a: 14). Even in his rejection of Neo-Kantianism – a philosophical rebellion influenced by Kierkegaard’s existentialism¹, Husserl’s phenomenology, and, above all, Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics – Gadamer was deeply influenced by Kantian ideas about time, space and consciousness.

Bakhtin was indirectly linked to Marburg and described himself in an interview as “partial to the Marburg School” (Grantchev and Marinova 2019: 39). Bakhtin remembered having read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in German as a boy! He encountered the work of Hermann Cohen in his first year of university in Odessa and describes him as “an outstanding philosopher, who left an enormous impression on me” (Grantchev and Marinova 2019: 36). His interest in the Neo-Kantians was further developed by the philosopher Matvei Kagan, who had studied at Marburg and was also supervised by Natorp and influenced by the Marburg Neo-Kantianism of Cohen. Kagan brought the discussion of Neo-Kantian ideas into Bakhtin’s circle in the Russian provincial town of Nevel in 1918 through a ‘Kantian seminar’ (Sandler 2015). Such ideas included the a priori structures of consciousness, such as space and time, which, according to Kant, made cognition possible. Like Gadamer, Bakhtin adopted, modified and rejected various aspects of Kant’s thought (Sandler 2015; Dostal 2016). I argue that Kantian ideas were important in influencing Gadamer’s spatio-temporal concept of ‘horizon’ and Bakhtin’s concept of ‘chronotope’ which I consider in more detail below.

¹ Interestingly, Kierkegaard, with his emphasis on putting “the human individual’s position in, and engagement with, the world above objective givenness and impersonal truth” (Sandler 2012: 3), was also an influence on Bakhtin. Bakhtin acknowledges Kierkegaard’s importance as a “giant of modern thought” in an interview with Duvakin towards the end of his life (Grantchev and Marinova 2019: 37).

Although Bakhtin and Gadamer shared some historical and philosophical commonalities as 20th Century thinkers, there is no evidence that they engaged with each other's work. There is surprisingly little scholarship that brings the two thinkers into dialogue, although Gardiner (1992) provides an insightful comparison between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Bakhtin's dialogism, Sidorkin (1999) briefly compares them philosophically and Bialostosky (2016) discusses them in the context of rhetorical criticism. There is a small body of scholarship that fruitfully draws them together in relation to education, much of it recent – perhaps reflecting a 'dialogic turn' (Markova 2016) in education (Lam 2007; Bingham and Sidorkin 2001; Keller 2011; Jons 2014; Hoff 2014; Miyazaki 2017; Yagata 2017; Aliko et al. 2020). There is a relative paucity in this discussion on the relation of their ideas to the emerging world of digital teaching and learning in higher education, which this article seeks to address. Although Bakhtin and Gadamer produced their major works before the advent of ICTs, I argue that their ideas about dialogue, space, time and understanding can shed new light on the spatiotemporal affordances of digital teaching and learning.

I now turn to the perspectives of each thinker on dialogue as a central theme and practice of their thinking, drawing out further similarities and differences.

Gadamer and Dialogue

For both Gadamer and Bakhtin, while they are not overtly educational philosophers, dialogue is a central notion with educational implications. Gadamer's philosophical approach contrasts with those of two German philosophers who profoundly influenced him; he was a "dialogic" thinker as opposed to Heidegger, a "meditative" thinker (Dostal 2002), and Hegel, a "systematic" thinker (Redding 2018). Whereas Heidegger's meditative philosophy was inspired by "the gods" and Hegel's systematic philosophy by the Idea or World Spirit, Gadamer's engagement with the ideas of others, and with his and their "horizons", is profoundly dialogical. Gadamer (2004:23) expressed this in an interview near the end of his life: "What I have gradually developed is not *Mit-sein* [Being-with: Heidegger] but *Miteinander* ('with-one-another')." Thérien (1997) shows how Gadamer's understanding of dialogue developed and deepened from his habilitation thesis on Plato in (Gadamer 1991b) to *Truth and Method* (1960). Here I draw mainly on the latter text as a mature and cumulative representation of his thought. What are the characteristics of his dialogic way of thinking?

Gadamer sees dialogue or "conversation" as central to the project of hermeneutics. He defines the work of hermeneutics as "a conversation with the text" (Gadamer 1975: 331), drawing on the analogy of "original" face-to-face dialogue as a quest for truth (logos) and as "the art of the formation of concepts as the working out of the common meaning" (ibid.). Engaging in hermeneutics means entering into conversation with the text and with the other: "Thus that which is handed down in literary form is brought back out of the alienation in which it finds itself and into the living presence of conversation, whose fundamental procedure is always question and answer" (Gadamer 1975:331).

Gadamer was influenced by Plato's Socratic dialogues in his view that understanding (*Verstehen*) develops not as an isolated subjective activity but through discussion with others – where discussion is understood from its etymological roots (Latin: *dis currere*) as "running through thoughts verbally" (Smith 1991: 35). In the question-answer dyad, Gadamer affords the question priority in hermeneutics. Questioning is central to seeking truth: "To

question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the solidity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person who possesses the ‘art’ of questioning is a person who is able to prevent the suppression of questions by the dominant opinion” (Gadamer 1975: 330).

For Gadamer, authentic questions, i.e., questions to which the questioner does not know the answer, are crucial in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. These exclude rhetorical questions (which are really assertions in disguise) and “pedagogical” questions, to which the teacher asking the question already knows the answer and for which, therefore, according to Gadamer, there is no authentic questioner. They also exclude “distorted” questions which, perhaps because they are poorly formulated or unclear, do not provide adequate directionality and are therefore impossible to answer. Authentic questions include both known and unknown elements. What is known provides the question with its intelligibility and defines its parameters. What is unknown gives the question its indeterminacy, its openness and its directionality. For example, the question, ‘What is the role of dialogue in digital learning?’ assumes that we know what ‘role’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘digital learning’ refer to. ‘What?’ indicates that which we do not know, directing attention towards it and opening a space for its interrogation. However, bringing together ‘dialogue’ and ‘digital learning’ changes our perspective on both, an understanding of which can develop through “an interrogative discursive exchange between speakers” (Smith 1991: 37).

Gadamer’s understanding of “the art of questioning” suggests that questioning is also potentially subversive of “the dominant opinion” – a proposition that Socrates demonstrates in Plato’s dialogues through his unravelling of the claims to knowledge of the “experts”, and their progression through dialogue from confident knowledge claims to confusion and uncertainty (*aporia*). For this, upsetting as it was to the Athenian authorities of his time, Socrates ultimately paid with his life. However, he left a subversive legacy of questioning about knowledge, virtue and the good life that challenges readers through the ages, those who formulate their own answers and questions, to connect *logos* (word) and *ergon* (deed) as he did through his dialogic vocation (Gadamer 1980; Rule 2015).

For Gadamer, the notion of dialectic is closely associated with dialogue. Rather than the interaction of opposites which brings about a synthesis at a higher level, as in Fichte, Hegel and Marx, Gadamer’s dialectic is more concretely understood as an “art” (as opposed to a science): “of conducting a conversation”; “of seeing things in the unity of an aspect”; and “of the formation of concepts as the working out of the common meaning” (Gadamer 1975: 351). This integral and interactive understanding of dialectic points to the creativity, generativity and unfinalizability of dialogue.

Another key feature of conversation for Gadamer is its linguisticity (Jons 2014). Gadamer refers to “the universal linguisticity of man’s (sic.) relation to the world” and “the linguisticity of all human behaviour in the world”, thus pointing to linguisticity as an ontological feature of being human (Gadamer 1975: 78). Language is intrinsic to dialogue; conversation is not possible without a common language or code. Gadamer does not see language in purely instrumental terms as a tool which fosters communication. It is also a matter of community: “To reach an understanding with one’s partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one’s own point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain as we were” (Gadamer 1975: 341); “For language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of

tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world” (Gadamer 1976: 86).

“We are seeking to approach the mystery of language,” Gadamer contends, “from the conversation that we ourselves are” (1975: 340). From these rather cryptic statements, Gadamer suggests an ontological understanding of dialogue (Matusov 2009). It is not merely a means of communication or a way of engaging with subject matters or texts, but a feature of human being (“the conversation that we ourselves are”), and “the medium through which we exist and perceive our world”. This encompasses how we change and who we become through dialogue, which pertains not only to the individual but to the “communion” of interlocutors, of language and of tradition.

Bakhtin and Dialogue

For Bakhtin, like Gadamer, dialogue is a central concept in his thinking about language and literature, and about human being – a study which he called ‘translinguistics’ or ‘metalinguistics’. Bakhtin understood dialogue as operating at multiple levels, not only in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels (Bakhtin 1984) but also within and between persons and their consciousnesses, and within and between languages, genres and discourses. Like Gadamer, he understood dialogue not just as a conversation between or among interlocutors, literary or otherwise, but as a central feature of what it means to be human:

The dialogic nature of consciousness, the dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. 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 (sic.) 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 (Bakhtin 1984: 293). [italics in original]

Bakhtin’s ontological understanding of human life as dialogic resonates strongly with Gadamer’s view. His “world symposium” resonates with Gadamer’s notion of “the conversation which we ourselves are”. We contribute to this symposium as socially situated and embodied participants. In educational parlance, one might say that Bakhtin understands dialogue as lifelong (“a person participates ... throughout his whole life”), life-wide (“participates wholly ... enters into the dialogic fabric of human life”) and life-deep (“with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit”). He also gestures towards Gadamer’s understanding of dialogue as both word (logos) and deed (ergon): (“with his whole body and deeds”).

Like Gadamer, Bakhtin emphasises the open-endedness of dialogue. The “open-ended dialogue” refers not only to the openness of interlocutors to each other (Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ relation) and to the object of their discussion, but also the openness of the dialogue to time-past and time-to-come. In this sense dialogue is endless and unfinalizable: “My word remains in the continuing dialogue, where it will be heard, answered, and reinterpreted” (Bakhtin 1984: 300). Here Bakhtin alludes to the generative relation between the unique,

specific, situated utterance within dialogue and the “world symposium” which it both reflects and reinvents.

This open-endedness of dialogue is linked to the idea of questioning. Interestingly, Bakhtin foregrounds “to ask questions” in exemplifying what it means to participate in dialogue. This resonates with Gadamer’s insistence on the priority of questions and questioning in hermeneutics. In analysing the Socratic dialogue, Bakhtin refers to “anacrisis”, as “the provocation of the word by the word” (Bakhtin 1984: 111) to get one’s interlocutor to speak and articulate their opinions. In the dialogues, Socrates often uses questions to provoke his interlocutors into thought and to bring their opinions out into the openness of dialogic exchange.

For Bakhtin, this openness is not just a characteristic of dialogue as a form of interaction but also an ethical imperative: “The dialogic relationship is the only form of relationship toward the human being-personality preserving its freedom and open-endedness” (Bakhtin 1984: 29). So, for both Bakhtin and Gadamer, dialogue has ontological and ethical dimensions, in addition to its relations to the aesthetics of the novel or historical text. Among the values that both prize are openness, freedom and resistance to totalizing systems, which Gadamer associates with dominant opinions (*doxa*) that suppress questions, and Bakhtin with monologism: “a denial of the equal rights of consciousnesses vis-à-vis truth” (Bakhtin 1984: 285). For both Bakhtin and Gadamer, dialogue is tied up with being an ethical human being.

Differences Between Bakhtin and Gadamer

Despite these commonalities, Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogue differs in significant respects from that of Gadamer. The first concerns the purpose of dialogue. For Gadamer, one engages in dialogue in order to come to an understanding with one’s partner, leading to agreement or consensus – “transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain as we were”. This is also evident in his notion of “fusing of horizons” which I discuss below. In contrast to Gadamer’s emphasis on unity, agreement and communion, Bakhtin insists on difference, distinctiveness and struggle: “Not merging with one another, but preserving one’s own position” (Bakhtin 1984: 299).

This does not mean that Bakhtin precludes the possibility that dialogue can bring about mutual understanding and agreement. Like Gadamer, he points to the importance of listening to the other and being open to change:

The person who understands must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions. In the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment (Bakhtin 1986: 142).

Such understanding comes about through “struggle” – conflict, testing, grappling dialogically with oneself, the other, and the other within oneself, and with the object of one’s thinking. Whether interlocutors agree or disagree, or continue a mutual engagement where they hold different views but are open to each other’s views – what Nikulin (2006) calls “*allosensus*” as opposed to consensus or dissensus – they remain distinct, unmerged con-

sciousnesses: “The clear demarcation of two consciousnesses, their counterposition and their interrelations” (Bakhtin 1986: 142).

This relates to a second difference between them concerning dialectic. Gadamer understands dialectic as a feature within dialogue, seeing it as “the art of constructing a conversation”. Dialectic generates, through the structure of question and answer, the movement of thought which develops understanding. Bakhtin (1986: 147), on the other hand, is deeply suspicious of dialectic as an abstraction that removes all the specifics of dialogue (participants’ voices, intonation, living words and responses) and “carves out” from them concepts and judgements which are “crammed” into a single abstract consciousness (Rule 2011).

One might argue that this difference relates to a broader contrast between Gadamer’s centripetal orientation (carried in concepts such as agreement, fusion of horizons, tradition) and Bakhtin’s centrifugal tendency towards the unique, particular and unrepeatable (utterance, deed). While Gadamer tends towards the “common” (common sense, consensus), Bakhtin moves away from the centre towards the many and the distinct. This is reflected in his creation of terms such as “polyphony”, “multi-accentuality”, “double-voicedness”, “multi-tony”. In one of his later writings, he confessed to a “love for variations and for diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses” (Bakhtin 1986: 155). This difference is one of tendency rather than doxa, because for both Bakhtin and Gadamer the centre and the boundary, the general and the specific, the horizon of tradition and the individual text, are in constant dialogic tension and development. The difference is perhaps a matter of temperament as much as outlook and intellectual orientation.

In summary: Bakhtin and Gadamer share an understanding of dialogue as a situated activity that pertains to what it means to be human. It is based on values of openness, freedom, respect for the other (an I-Thou relationship, in Buber’s terms) and a quest for truth. It depends on a common language and is impossible without it. Dialogue can help participants to generate new understandings which can lead to change and enrichment of their views. For Bakhtin especially, this might or might not lead to agreement and often entails a struggle. The structure of question and answer is central to dialogue and questions can serve as dialogic provocations to open up spaces for thinking. Dialogue, in both its interior and exterior forms, and in the relation between them, is thus an important dimension of the open-ended processes of learning, thinking, coming to know and becoming a person.

Spatiotemporal Concepts in Gadamer and Bakhtin

What are the implications of this understanding of dialogue for digital teaching and learning where there may be no face-to-face contact? To understand this question, it is necessary to consider the spatiotemporal characteristics of online dialogue and learning. Whereas in the face-to-face classroom, participants occupy the same place (syntopic) and time (synchronous), and their “I’s” register their physically embodied presence, digital learning usually occurs when they are in different places (asyntopic). They might also be learning at different times to each other (asynchronous), and their “I’s” within the digital learning space register a disembodied virtual presence. “Presence” therefore signifies very different states in the face-to-face classroom and in the di-topic, di-chronic and disembodied virtual classroom. However, while participants are virtually present in the digital classroom, they remain

embodied and embedded in other contexts of time and space that inform and affect their learning.

Spatiotemporal concepts are prominent in Gadamer (horizon, fusion of horizons) and Bakhtin (chronotope, boundary), perhaps because they emphasised the situatedness of texts in time and space and the situatedness of the event of engaging with texts. Here I examine the concepts of horizon and chronotope before proceeding to discuss them in relation to digital teaching and learning.

Gadamer and Horizon

Gadamer's notion of horizon is strongly connected to his sense of what it means to understand someone or something in the world. A horizon of understanding is always situated within what he terms the "life-world", which is "the whole in which we live as historical creatures". This is always both a communal world and a personal world, "and in the natural attitude the validity of this personal world is always assumed" (Gadamer 1975: 219). Within this life-world, the horizon is "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (Gadamer 1975: 269). Thus the notion of horizon includes seeing (and being seen) from a particular, situated perspective and seeing something or someone in relation to those elements, both proximal, intermediate and distant, which constitute their horizon. When we encounter another person in dialogue, they, of course, see us in relation to our horizon, of which we "in the natural attitude" are never fully aware.

Gadamer understands horizon as something that is dynamic and fluid. "A horizon is not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (Gadamer 1975: 217). As I engage with another in dialogue, each of our horizons shifts as we "see" and come to understand what the other says. Gadamer terms this movement towards a common understanding the "fusion of horizons". Bakhtin would have reservations about such "fusion of horizons" as entailing the danger of abstraction into a single, monological, unified consciousness. For him, agreement and understanding might be possible as a fleeting inter-cognition (Rule 2015) in the continuing dialogue of difference between unique, unmerged consciousnesses.

Gadamer uses the notion of horizon primarily in relation to the project of hermeneutics – understanding texts from contexts other than our own: "The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring the particular historical horizon, so that what we are seeking to understand can be seen in its true dimensions" (Gadamer 1975: 270). One can see this process at work in Gadamer's own hermeneutical practice, for example, in his discussion of Plato's Socratic dialogues (Gadamer 1980). However, the task involves not only acquiring the historical horizon: "into this other situation we must also bring ourselves" (Gadamer 1975:271). As one 'moves' in one's understanding of a text (or another person), so one's horizon changes. This points to the irreducible dialogicality and relationality of the notion of horizon compared with concepts such as 'context' and 'situation'.

Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer uses the phrase "fusion of horizons" to describe the process of understanding the horizon of the past (tradition) from the horizon of the present: "Understanding....is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves" (Gadamer

1975: 273). This fusion of horizons that occurs in my act of understanding the text, or of understanding the other, always changes my own horizon. When I enter into a new act of understanding, I do so with a horizon that bears these changes, and continues to change as I “move” and “see” anew.

Interestingly, Bakhtin also uses the notion of horizon, particularly in his early ‘philosophical’ work in the essays written in the early 1920’s and collected in *Art and Answerability* (Bakhtin 1990). The Russian term *krugozory* literally means ‘the circle of one’s vision’ and figuratively, one’s ‘conceptual horizon’ (Bakhtin 1981: 425). Whereas Gadamer develops the notion of horizon in relation to understanding a text, Bakhtin uses it in relation to aesthetics (producing art) and ethics (responding to the other). Gadamer talks about ‘fusion of horizons’ whereas Bakhtin talks about ‘consummation’: internalizing the horizon of the other, *returning to one’s own position* (for him an essential step) and then drawing on one’s new understanding aesthetically, ethically or cognitively. What they have in common is an understanding that dialogue with the other involves not only an exchange of words but an interaction between horizons that lie within and behind these words, and of which interlocutors cannot be fully aware.

The ‘fusing of horizons’ involves a tension of otherness: “The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation but consciously bringing it out” (Gadamer 1975:273).

Horizon and Digital Teaching and Learning

Online horizons are paradoxically both limitless and highly circumscribed. The Internet offers an inexhaustible panorama, a multitude of views and viewpoints. Simultaneously, cookies track viewer activity to predict and influence what they will do next, resulting in customized views offered often narrowly to serve not only personalized preferences but also commercial (and political) interests, and to ‘frame’ users’ views accordingly, invisibly framing what is visible to the viewer.

The notion of horizon is useful in considering digital teaching and learning because it draws attention to that which is not necessarily ‘visible’ in a digital environment. What horizon informs the student’s interaction with an online course? What are the relevant elements within this horizon? For example, if a student is studying online for a professional diploma, their professional position, expertise and experience may be relevant elements of their horizon. If the course recognizes and engages these relevant elements, students are more likely to be able to understand, interpret and apply what they learn from the course.

On the other hand, what is the horizon of the course itself? What are the *codes* (media of instruction, disciplinary discourses, course icons), *canons* (authoritative texts), *concepts* (main ideas and frameworks), *contexts* (common situations of theory, practice and/or research) and *conventions* (ways of reading, writing and being) that make up the horizon of the course? To these we may add the digital *constructs* that make up the interface with the student, including the platform, genres, communication channels, and various digital technologies that underpin them. How can these be communicated and made accessible to students so that they can engage with the course optimally? These elements are often implicit in course outlines, outcomes and materials but making them explicit and accessible can help students to locate the course in relation to an appropriate horizon, which otherwise may remain more or less obscure or even opaque.

Some e-resources, among the many possibilities, that could assist to make course and student horizons visible could be:

- a tutorial which guides the student step-by-step through the course interface and how to use it;
- an online glossary that sets out and explains key terms, and so helps to give students access to the discursive horizon of the course;
- a ‘map’ of the course that shows students the route of progression through the course, including key milestones such as assignments, projects, events and exams;
- a ‘visual tour’ that gives students a sense of where the course presenters are situated institutionally and geographically;
- short video clips in which course presenters and support persons introduce themselves, thus affording a ‘face’ or ‘faces’ to the course presentation and providing a sense of the ‘peopled’ horizon from which the course emerges;
- similarly, students’ self-created online profiles on the course platform, including elements such as a photo or symbol that represents them, and a short bio-sketch that provides a sense of where they come from;
- e-assignments, forums and/or blogs that allow students to relate the course content and resources to their own contexts and problems, and to receive formative feedback from tutors as they do so.
- affordances that allow students to connect with each other, chat informally and develop a community of learning.

These ideas could contribute to an *engagement of horizons* (see Fig. 1) between the course presenters and the students, as they develop an understanding of each other’s horizons in relation to the course, and so experience a shift in their own horizons. Here I understand engagement of horizons not as a permanent achieved state of ‘fusion’ but as a continuing dynamic interaction that can produce generative moments of mutuality. Such engagement of horizons is not a once-off event but a continuing process that spans the duration of the course, and even extends beyond it as students apply and reflect on their learning.

A course that does not facilitate such an engagement might result in a *confusion* of horizons, where participants do not come to understand, or rather come to misunderstand, the horizons of the course. This might occur when course presenters’ assumptions about the students (e.g. their prior knowledge, interests, identities, contexts) are unfounded, or, similarly, students’ assumptions about the course. A confusion of horizons can also eventuate from a *diffusion* of horizons, in the sense of horizons that are presented in a vague, weak or convoluted way. Horizons that are diffuse would lack sufficient content and form, and so fail to provide a useful backdrop for students and course presenters to understand each other’s texts. It also might result, at the other extreme, in a *transfusion* of horizons (in the Latin sense of to pour (*fundere*) across (*trans*)), where the course horizon is imposed monologically on the students without allowing them to engage with it dialogically in relation to their own horizons. Such a transfusion of horizons might take the form of propositions to be mastered (‘*You must know x, y, z*’) rather than questions to be explored (‘*What does this mean for me? How does it relate to my context?*’) – following Gadamer’s insight that understanding always involves interpretation and application.

The notion of engagement of horizons is also relevant to those involved in developing and delivering the online course. This is indicated in the two-way arrows between content experts, designers and e-tutors in Fig. 1. Typically, different role players with distinct sets of expertise combine in these processes. Here I draw on insights from Shulman's work on teacher knowledge (Shulman 1987) and Mishra and Koehler's (2006) Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) model. In a higher education context, lecturers as experts in the field might contribute the content knowledge, designers the technological knowledge to transform this content knowledge in an effective online format, and e-tutors the pedagogical knowledge to facilitate the online course. For the course delivery to be effective, these role players need to engage in dialogue in order to understand the horizons of knowledge and expertise that each one brings, and 'cross boundaries' (engage horizons) to develop appropriate new knowledge which might be needed; for example, tutors developing their understanding of the content knowledge and combining it with their own pedagogical expertise as pedagogical content knowledge in order to teach the content effectively. They might also need to understand the design features of the course and master relevant technological knowledge, at least at a basic functional level, in order to facilitate the online course optimally and assist students in their own engagement of horizons. In a face-to-face environment, these various knowledges might be embodied in one person (the teacher) whereas in an online higher education learning environment which combines a number of complex sub-systems, they are typically disaggregated. Dialogic engagement between and among the role player groups is essential to avoid a 'confusion' of horizons (where horizons comprise knowledge, perspectives, roles and responsibilities). On the positive side, it can enable the learning of all role players involved in the course and the improvement of the course itself. As Taboada and Alvarez (2022: 149) argue, "dialogic education does not end in classroom work, but also involves work among colleagues".

Figure 1 presents a framework for understanding horizon in relation to an online course. Participants bring multiple horizons to the course that may or may not be 'visible' to other participants. The two-way arrows indicate the possibilities for dialogic exchange among participants, and so for an engagement of their horizons which enables their learning and the development of the course as a whole. The broken arrows indicate the possibilities of confusion, diffusion and transfusion of horizons which might result in barriers to engagement and learning.

Bakhtin and Chronotope

Bakhtin's invention and development of the term 'chronotope' (literally 'time space') arises from his historical poetics (Bakhtin 1981). Whereas Gadamer's 'horizon' brings together elements of space and time in understanding a text, Bakhtin's chronotope concerns the spatial and temporal features internal to a genre, the way that space and time are constructed within the text itself. He is interested in the ways in which time and space are intrinsically connected in different forms of the novelistic genre. For example, the ancient Greek romance combines an "adventure-time" (a series of adventurous episodes in the hiatus between the first meeting of the lovers and the final consummation in marriage) and an abstract (non-specific) expanse of space in which the adventures take place. Bakhtin sees time and space not as separate elements of a text but as interdependent and mutually constitutive, although he does see time as the "dominant principle" in the chronotope (Bakhtin 1981: 86). Furthermore, the chronotope of a particular literary genre

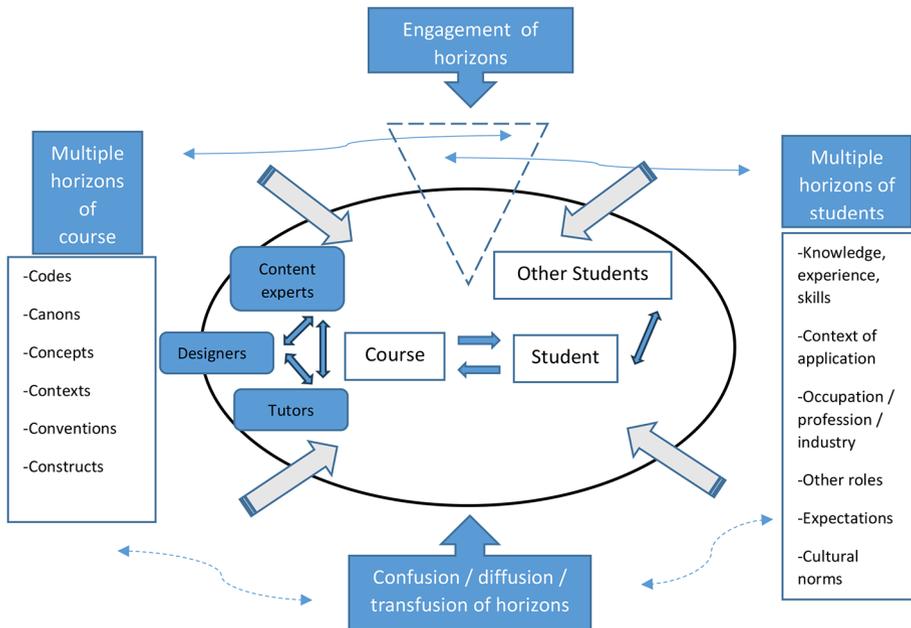


Fig. 1 Digital learning and horizons

provides a lens on society which reveals the “forces at work” within the cultural system that gives rise to the genre (Bakhtin 1981: 425). Thus, like many of Bakhtin’s ideas, chronotope brings together language, literature and society in a generative dialogic articulation of what is intrinsic and extrinsic to art.

Interestingly, Bakhtin includes a note in his essay on the chronotope which both invokes Kant and points to the Neo-Kantianism that informs his thinking about time and space. According to Bakhtin, Kant “defines space and time as indispensable forms of any cognition” (Bakhtin 1981: 85). Bakhtin adopts this understanding but does not accept that these forms are “transcendental”; rather, they are forms “of the most immediate reality” (ibid.). Here again we see Bakhtin’s insistence on the immediate, concrete and specific as opposed to the transcendental, abstract and general. This enables him to dialogize the forms of the novelistic genre as an interaction of the social and the artistic in a particular cultural context.

Bakhtin also sees chronotopes as associated with particular values and emotions. For example, a novel of village life might associate unchanging space and repetitive time with stagnation and oppression, whereas the chronotope of the idyllic pastoral novel, with its cyclical, seasonal time and continuity of spatial arrangements, connotes values of community, connectedness and renewal. Bakhtin shows how Dostoevsky’s novels often use the chronotope of *threshold* – linked spatially to settings such as doorways, stairs and entrance halls, and temporally to the heightened, value-charged moment of crisis, break(through) or in/decision (Bakhtin 1981, 1984).

Chronotope and Digital Learning

The idea of chronotope has proved generative in many scholarly contexts, including education, although the plasticity of the term means that it is used variously. For example, Varpanen et al. (2022), in a recent article in *Studies in Philosophy of Education* on self-cultivation, employ the notion very broadly to refer to the current global situation of ecological crisis. For them, it is a chronotope “from which our actions draw their orientation” (Varpanen et al. 2022: 354). More specifically, Matusov (2015), applies Bakhtin’s notion to “philosophically diverse” classrooms, on a continuum from a teacher-centred and teacher-dominated classroom (“assignment chronotope”) which is characterized by monologic pedagogy and preset curricular outcomes; to a “dialogic provocation chronotope” where the teacher adopts dialogic pedagogy and initiates “provocations” which can instigate the students’ “responsive critical authorship”; to a “journey chronotope” where the student initiates his or her own self-assignments. In the context of teacher education, along similar lines, Taboada and Álvarez (2022) distinguish between two modalities as chronotopes: habitual face-to-face teaching and exceptional non-face-to-face teaching (including online teaching and learning) due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Interestingly, what they describe as “exceptional” has become “normal” since COVID-19. They thus apply the notion of chronotope to online education. Importantly, they argue that “the educational chronotope cannot be reduced only to the space-time issue but also involves aspects such as axiology, participation, social relations, and agency” (Taboada and Álvarez 2022: 124).

Here I wish to use the term ‘chronotope’ in a way that is closer to Bakhtin’s use in relation to particular text genres. However, rather than looking at literary chronotopes, I select a genre within digital teaching and learning (the webinar) and analyse it chronotopically, in terms of dialogue, space, time and agency, and explore what this means for creating dialogic space in digital teaching and learning. I argue that the chronotope of webinar combines the digital, the social and the pedagogic in a particular spatiotemporal configuration.

The webinar is a genre that is commonly used in digital learning. The term combines ‘web’ (Internet) and ‘seminar’ to indicate “a seminar over the internet” (Verma and Singh 2010: 132). It allows for a presenter/s to make a digitally transmitted presentation, hosted by a service provider on a web server, on a topic in real or delayed time (synchronous/asynchronous) to students who are in a different place or places (atopic). Typically, the presenter uses his or her voice (oral/aural) and/or other audio-visual modes such as a PowerPoint presentation, video clips or diagrams, to make the presentation. The webinar is interactive: students can respond by posting comments electronically, which are visible on a screen to the presenter and to other students. The presenter may then interact with these responses orally by answering questions, identifying common issues and responding appropriately.

In some ways, the webinar formally resembles Matusov’s “assignment chronotope” because it is teacher (presenter)-centred and teacher (presenter)-initiated. The genre favours the presenter’s embodied voice, which is “present”, “heard” and “seen” by all, whereas the learners are virtually present but spatially absent, and their voices are “silent” and “disembodied” in that they are confined to text messages, which signal their virtual presence; they may or may not post comments, which may or may not be acknowledged by the presenter. The webinar might take the form of a monologic lecture (by other means) with an active presenter and a passive audience, who may or may not be engaged by the presentation.

Ways of optimizing the dialogic potential of the webinar chronotope apply to what happens before, during and after the webinar. Preparation can involve drawing on students’ suggestions

for topics. Nelson (2019) shows how a continuing medical education (CME) webinar for medical practitioners on palliative care for children drew on the learners (through a targeted needs assessment survey), the current literature as well as clinical expertise to generate content. Drawing on multiple sources can bring together the horizons of experience, expertise and research. A “flipped classroom” approach allows students to prepare for the webinar through readings, assignments, and posting questions and concerns beforehand, with which the presenter has a chance to engage with in his or her preparation, and to build into the presentation. In this way the students have an active role in constructing the webinar through a “pre-chronous” activity which potentially dialogizes the presentation.

The skilful presenter will be able to blend the voices of the students into the presentation, giving it a polyvocal quality. This could help to make the students more active as they have thought about the material beforehand and see their own concerns represented in the webinar; they might listen actively for responses to their questions and comments. Their synchronous responses during the webinar might then reflect a deeper level of engagement with the ‘horizons’ of the presentation based on their own preparation and receptivity – the webinar becomes part of a continuing dialogue at multiple levels: with the presenter, with each other, within themselves and with their practices, rather than simply a monologic virtual lecture. Allowing time for reflection through using relevant illustrative cases and building in audience participation can enhance engagement and help the participants to apply what they have learnt (Nelson 2019). Similarly, activities such as chatrooms, forums and assignments after the webinar might give students further ‘post-chronous’ opportunity to engage with the presentation. If they can access a recorded version of the presentation, they might return to it for further engagement where they can ‘re-cognize’ the content through intrapersonal and/or interpersonal dialogue. Such strategies enable participants not only to master, apply and critique relevant content but also to expand “the capacity to participate in dialogue” (Wegerif 2013: 4) in complex and rapidly changing technosocial environments.

Relating Horizon and Chronotope in Digital Teaching and Learning

Time and space in the context of digital learning are not ‘empty containers’ in which objects are located and move, as in a Newtonian universe. Rather, they are technosocial constructs which shape and *in-form* how teaching and learning happen. The notions of horizon and chronotope offer a relational and dialogical perspective for understanding the social-technological-pedagogical nexus of online education. Participants’ horizons will inform what they bring to particular online chronotopes, as well as whether and how they learn from them. For example, if a student has prior experience of the webinar chronotope and digital literacy skills to engage with it, they are more likely to benefit from the webinar as a learning event. If they do not have this experience or if their experiences of the chronotope have been negative, the course presenters might need to provide scaffolding and support that enable them to benefit (for example, icons to access ‘Help’ and online tutorials on using the webinar genre). Their horizon might also include practical issues of access such as data, equipment, connectivity and a conducive remote learning environment (learners with disabilities may require particular accommodation). If these elements are not considered, a participant’s experience of the chronotope might be one of isolation and exclusion. As experiences of digital teaching and learning in higher education during COVID-19 vividly showed, students from poor communities and in many contexts of the Global South and elsewhere were disadvantaged by the ‘turn’ to online learning. Course role players would need

to find ways of familiarising themselves with the participants' horizons to develop strategies that make the course chronotopes accessible and beneficial to their learning. Such strategies might include needs analysis of learners, training in the use of online platforms and genres, provision of digital resources, mechanisms to solicit feedback from participants and spaces for faculty to reflect on and improve the course.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Gadamer's and Bakhtin's notions of dialogue, horizon and chronotope can shed light on understanding and enabling learner engagement in online learning. I did so by explicating their understandings of dialogue, Gadamer's notion of horizon and Bakhtin's of chronotope. I developed Gadamer's notion in online settings using the concepts of *engagement of horizons*, and *confusion*, *diffusion* and *transfusion* of horizons. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of chronotope, I explored the chronotopic features of a key genre in online learning, the webinar, and suggested not only synchronous but also 'prechronous' and 'postchronous' activities that can enhance learners' dialogic engagement. As illustrated through the discussion of webinars, it is important to understand the specific chronotopic features of online learning genres in order to enhance learners' dialogic engagement.

The article indicates that horizon and chronotope are useful concepts for understanding the complex and composite arrangements of time and space in online learning, the particularity of online genres and of their affordances. They help to 'situate' the dialogic spaces of online teaching and learning in ways that may enhance their dialogic efficacy. The article thus contributes to an understanding of both online educators and learners as active, situated participants and interlocutors whose horizons are germane to what, how and why learning occurs. The chronotopic features of online genres should be considered critically and creatively to enhance online education as a dialogic encounter. Recognizing and drawing upon the multiple horizons of an online course, and of educators and learners can enhance the engagement of horizons which is at the heart of dialogic teaching and learning.

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