

Intrapersonal Dialogue as a Research Method – my Findings

Introduction

The starting point of my research project was the idea that I can shape my self and the impression I make on others by consciously choosing the role I perform. In an initial artistic role play in the context of Tango, I discovered that playfully taking on roles helped me process challenging social situations. Through role play, certain patterns of behavior became explicit and therefore influenceable.

From these experiences, I realized that performing the self becomes particularly important in interpersonal situations that require deeper engagement with others rather than short, random encounters. One form of such interaction is dialogue. For me, dialogue does not only mean spoken exchange between two people. I understand it more broadly: it can also take place between more than two people, between different roles of one person, or nonverbally, for example in dance. The essential condition is that at least two entities step in relation and communicate.

Hubert J. M. Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka, authors of a book on dialogical self theory, describe several features of “good dialogue” that relate to my own experiences. Among these, fields of awareness, misunderstandings, “speech genres”, and power structures particularly relate to my approach of meeting on equal terms in dialogue (see Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 10f). In connection with dance as dialogue, I use the term “balance” for this state. My first research question therefore is: How can I consciously perform in a dialogue to create balance between the participants?

To explore this question, I entered into dialogue with different roles of myself. The result was a written dialogue between “me as a student in Art Education,” “me quoting theorists,” “me as a video creator,” “me as a Tango dancer,” and “me quoting NeoTango lyrics.” Through this variety of perspectives, I brought together

several ideas and developed possible answers to my first research question. You can find the written dialogue with its insights after this paper.

For me, the most meaningful outcome of the written dialogue was the use of dialogue as a research method. This paper therefore focuses on my second research question: What potential do intrapersonal dialogues offer as a research method? I reflect on my experiences of using dialogue between different roles of myself to conduct research, drawing on dialogical self theory as the basis of my argumentation. The first part therefore includes a short summary of dialogical self theory.

As you may have noticed, my research project develops both about and through dialogue, which in didactic discourse is referred to as a “didaktischer Doppeldecker.” For this reason, content-related and methodical findings are not always clearly distinguishable but rather support each other. Both aspects therefore appear throughout this text, together with reflections on working with the “didaktische Doppeldecker”. To illustrate this approach, I will describe and analyze several key moments from the written intrapersonal dialogue.

Dialogical Self Theory and Comparison with my Dialogue

From the perspective of dialogical self theory, the self consists of many different I-positions. The aim is to merge the concepts of the self and dialogue in order to better understand of the relationship between self and society. A central idea is the extension of the self in space and time. The boundaries between the self and society are therefore seen as permeable, meaning that the self has no fixed contour. Furthermore, dialogues do not only take place between different people, but also between collective voices of communities and cultures and between different positions within the self. This creates a continuous process of positioning and repositioning in relation to others and to oneself. (vgl. Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 1-7). Hubert J. M. Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka write:

[Dialogue] implies a learning process that confirms, innovates, or further develops existing positions on the basis of the preceding exchange. As a learning process it has the capacity to move the self to higher levels of awareness and integration. As such, it is more specific than the broader concept of “communication.” (Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 6)

This idea encouraged me to explore the potential of intrapersonal dialogues as a research method. In my project, dialogue is more than a method, since the research topic itself also deals with dialogues and roles. Dialogical self theory therefore provides both content-related and methodological points of reference, which are both useful for analyzing my intrapersonal dialogue.

Content-related points of contact

One content-related point is the similarity between my terms “role” and “micro-performance” and the concept of “I-position” in dialogical self theory. In the text, they compare roles and positions:

Positioning theory is often contrasted with the older framework of role theory. Whereas roles are relatively fixed, long-lasting and formally defined, positioning theory is interested in conventions of speech and action that are unstable, contestable, and ephemeral. (see Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 11)

I think that my “roles” correspond with this definition of roles and the aspect of performing them, the “micro-performances”, corresponds with the concept of positioning. I do not see them as independent units. A micro-performance is based on the chosen role and shaped through acting in the very moment in relation to others. At this point, improvisation and its training become important.

It is also noted that role playing “expands the capacity of the child to introduce new positions in the self.” (see Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 12) Although the authors refer to children, I think this idea can apply to people of all ages if role playing in everyday life is understood as a playful social and/or artistic practice. This forms an important basis of my research on balance in dialogue. I

believe that it is an important skill to develop greater awareness of the roles people perform and, through that, the ability to reflect on their behavior in dialogues.

Furthermore, I consider emotions and feelings meaningful for creating balance in dialogues. As bell hooks points out, especially in the role of a teacher, the emotional part of a person is conventionally expected to remain invisible (vgl. Hooks, 1994, p. 191f). From my point of view, this prevents people from making themselves readable, which would be necessary to be trustworthy in a dialogical situation. Dialogical self theorists also recognize the impact of emotions on the self, as well as the influence of the self in shaping emotions (vgl. Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 14). This could be another aspect of awareness and control in relation to behaving and acting in social situations.

methodical points of contact

An obvious parallel between my dialogue and dialogical self theory is the interaction between different roles, or I-positions, of myself. I already mentioned this in the content-related points, since it is relevant from both perspectives. It is one moment where the “didaktische Doppeldecker” allows additional insight. It operates on a meta level, layering the practice of roles or I-positions with writing about them. For me personally, this made it possible to develop a deeper awareness of what it means to see myself as a collection of perspectives rather than a unified being. According to dialogical self theory, “the different I-positions learn from each other in the service of their further development.” This means that practicing dialogue can help to become a so-called “dialogical leader”: a person who is able to act according to their own emotions and positions while taking the emotions and positions of others into account and learning from them (see Hermans & Hermans, 2010, p. 17).

In this context, the mutual influence of the roles, positioning and counter-positioning are particularly interesting. By separating the role from its performance, it becomes clear that both are not stable but constantly developing. This was especially visible in the

initial role-play project: taking on roles in Tango that I usually do not perform, or even refuse, opened my mind to aspects of them and led me to question whether they could become part of my repertoire of roles. I learned to be attentive and sensitive to changes and adjustments in my roles and to recognize that inconsistency can be a sign of quality and development.

Another important insight from dialogical self theory for my research is the connection to society and the permeability of the self. It is interesting to see the participating roles in my dialogue as bridges between myself and the surrounding society. All of them are influenced and shaped by external input. This means that my intrapersonal dialogue is not purely personal, but interwoven with ideas, experiences, and events around me. Some of these inputs I actively sought out, while others were already present. In any case, the dialogue allowed me to draw on a large range of my resources.

Key moments in the dialogue between roles of myself

In this chapter, I highlight parts of the writing process of my dialogue between roles of myself which show how this method supported and enriched my work as a researcher.

Findings through intrapersonal dialogue

First of all, it proved to be a surprisingly suitable way to gain an overview of the research field without the pressure to explore every mentioned topic in detail. This was closely connected to the definitions of the roles at the beginning of the dialogue. By stating that a role is “allowe[d] [...] to be idealistic” (me as a Tango dancer), “give[s] ideas which fields could be relevant” (me quoting theorists), or “allow[s] [it]self freedom in artistic interpretation” (me quoting NeoTango lyrics) (see Looking for Dialogue in Balance, p. 2ff), I was able to focus on the core competence of each role rather than on all my competences at the same time. This allowed me to explore the topic more deeply.

This “separation” of competences also clarified where ideas and information originated. The different roles offered a natural way

to structure the research process while examining the topic from multiple perspectives. Dialogue proved to be a particularly fitting method for maintaining these perspectives. I was not only able to argue in a focused way, but also to track the different voices in the dialogue and ensure that each perspective was heard. This aspect became especially relevant in relation to the concept of “didaktischer Doppeldecker”. In the process of holding my dialogue, the written form allowed me to re-read it and check if the insights I experienced in the dialogue were also implemented into its structure. In other words: Is my dialogue itself in balance? This remains a point for further discussion.

Another positive effect of the dialogue was the ability of using my role as a Tango dancer as a resource for the research. Through dialogical writing, I found a productive way to connect my experiences in Tango with a topic that is not obviously related to dance. For example, the term of “balance” resulted from this connection to dance practices. A similar experience occurred in the role of “me quoting NeoTango lyrics”. This was an unusual role, since song lyrics are not typically used as research sources. However, the freedom of artistic interpretation proved useful. Through song lyrics, I found the term “soul” for the part of a person that consists of imagination and fantasy (see Dialogue in Balance, p. 10). I noticed that feelings and emotions can sometimes be expressed more precisely in poetic texts than in scientific language. In this way, lyrics allowed me to articulate aspects that I could not have expressed in the same way in my own words. This role also helped to create a closer connection to the image and video material I produced.

Finally, re-reading the dialogue helped me identify concepts and structures that became central for the further research process. While writing the dialogue, I was not yet aware of these patterns. They emerged from the interaction between the participants in the dialogue. In a way, the process worked in reverse: first exploring and mentioning a variety of possible connections to ideas, terms or topics, and only afterwards sorting, recognizing patterns, and establishing focal points. This eventually led me to re-write parts of the dialogue and move closer to the concepts that had emerged.

Difficulties

One difficulty at the beginning was defining the characters and setting rules for each participant in the dialogue. I had to ensure that they were not too similar but sufficiently specific: not “me as a researcher”, but “me as a student in Art Education”, since in a way all participants act as researchers. Some characters had to be designed more strongly than they are in reality. For example, the role “me as a Tango dancer” was allowed to be idealistic in Tango, what I am not in real life.

Another important aspect was incorporating the “outside world”, which I did through the characters “me quoting theorists” and “me quoting NeoTango lyrics”. Especially the role of quoting theorists could have been defined more precisely, because the field of theorists is very broad. In future, I would also “educate” this role before the dialogue begins. That means reading the relevant texts and preparing them for use in the dialogue instead of searching for sources when a new topic appears. At the same time, the latter approach also has its own potential, for example in generating new research questions.

Another challenge was keeping the dialogue structured around my topic. When I became deeply immersed in the dialogue, I sometimes moved away from my topic and additional topics emerged. The dialogue developed more in breadth than in depth, which has both advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, it is important to have a character who tracks the process of the dialogue and intervenes when necessary.

Conclusion

From my view, one of the biggest benefits of using intrapersonal dialogue as a research method is the possibility of using a large amount of the researcher’s experience and knowledge and, in doing so, bringing different topics together. The person of the researcher becomes meaningful and visible and shapes and defines the research as its starting point. Or, the other way around: It becomes transparent that the research is strongly dependent on the person

of the researcher, and this dependency is consciously used. This is even more emphasized here through the “didaktische Doppeldecker” about roles and their performance.

Working with “didaktischer Doppeldecker” worked well, but I think it is not mandatory for using intrapersonal dialogue. Crucial, however, are a consciously planned setting and precisely designed participants. It matters which aim is being pursued. It might require more openness for exploring possible dimensions of a topic or more restrictions and preparation, especially material collected in advance, to dive deeply into a topic. In any case, one participant has to be in charge of the structure of the dialogue in order to keep it within the desired frame.

As I have determined through dialogical self theory, intrapersonal dialogue goes beyond the person who is writing it. This dimension is important to be aware of if intrapersonal dialogue is considered as a research method.

Literature

Hermans, Hubert J. M. & Hermans-Konopka, Agnieszka. (2010). *Dialogical Self Theory. Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society*. Cambridge; New York; Melbourne; Madrid; Cape Town; Singapore; São Paulo; Delhi; Dubai; Tokyo: Cambridge University Press.

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