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What is This?

Dialogue as a Requiem for Analysis[1]

Ryan Evely Gildersleeve[1] and Aaron M. Kuntz[2]

Abstract

In this article, we offer dialogue as a means to avoid the objectification of data and the procedurization of analysis that so permeates traditional visions of educational inquiry. For our work, dialogue operates simultaneously as a means of inquiry, an engaging form of data, and an entwined means of analysis that disrupts normative formations of research as progressively linear. In this way, dialogue brings about the productive death of data-as-object for analysis. Functionally, our article is a dialogue, one that serves as a requiem for conceptions of analysis as outside data while simultaneously foregrounding data as dialogue. We present our dialogue asynchronously so as to exacerbate our resistance to synthesis and our commitment to a constant rebuilding of understanding. Our asynchronous representation underscores our commitment to dialogic contact, wherein texts live in contact with other texts, joining these texts to our dialogue.

Ryan Gildersleeve: I've been thinking through something that's been puzzling me lately, but I think I've come to a conclusion. I don't believe that data exist. Your thoughts?

Aaron Kuntz: Interesting . . . I suppose it all depends on what you mean by "exist." Certainly, data do not exist as some independent objective entity.

RG: And yet, they are discussed as preordinate in the research process. For example, in just a cursory glance at a few typical qualitative research textbooks in education, "data" as concept, are not even discussed. Rather, discussion usually *begins* with data collection, providing a de facto understanding of data as these bits of information expressed through interview, observation, or artifact, and usually language/text-based.

AK: You're right. When I look through the indices of qualitative textbooks in education they rarely list an entry for "data"—yet there are loads of page numbers for "data analysis," "data collecting," and "data management." It's as though there were no data, only acts surrounding data.

RG: Acts surrounding data. Now *that* I get and understand. These *acts* or *practices*, I hope, are generative.

AK: Well, I suppose they are generative—in the sense that practices are inevitably productive—however, I don't know that I find them strikingly hopeful. For instance, it seems that many of the acts surrounding data connect with the question of what data "counts" in relation to a project; what is in and what out? This stems from, it seems, linking data with a closed sense of the research project. As a counter to this, Ian Stronach (2010) offers a humorous sketch of the inevitable failure that extends from such thinking: Imagine an apple. Inside the apple is a worm. The worm is in the apple; the apple is outside the worm. Now the worm eats the apple. The apple is both inside and outside the worm. The worm excretes and there is really no more inside or outside (of the apple, of the worm). Someone picks up the apple for lunch . . . well you can see where this is going. So I wonder how killing off data as a fixed thing, perhaps makes room for a more dynamic sensibility when it comes to methodological approaches to education.

RG: The closed project is not research I'm interested in. I'm still fixating on the "data as information expressed through interview, observation, or artifact" bit. Because then, rather than rhetorically calling it data, we really are calling data information that gains an expression. So . . . in this sense, I fall back to the generative allure of data acts. Not simply because practices are inherently inevitably productive—to which you will get no argument from me (but maybe you could provide a citation for our readers). But I do find *data acts* hopeful. Could we consider that these data

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acts generate information in a simultaneous moment of expression?

AK: This notion of productive practices extends from Foucault's (1991, 1979) writings as well as Deleuze (1990) who seeks to move away from thinking through activities as constraining possibility (precluding other activities). Instead, these activities inevitably make available other activities even as they reannounce the logic or rationale that allows them to "make sense." There's a great interview with Foucault (1991) where he asserts that the target of his analysis was practices that

possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence, and "reason" . . . . Practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect. (p. 75)

AK: Instead, data are created. I like how our friends at the Oxford English Dictionary define "datum"— "Something given or granted; something known or assumed as fact, and made the basis of reasoning; an assumption or premise from which inferences are drawn."

RG: In the *data acts* sense then, the creation of data is inexorably linked to the expression—in one pluralistic, multidimensional moment.

AK: I like this notion that data are assumptive and that they extend from reasoning. This would mean that data do not exist but are born of the very rationalities that define them.

RG: I can see where this understanding would be much more palatable and attractive in trying to save data. However, I'm still not convinced. My existential question of data is not as perfunctory as you describe, I don't think. For, even in your allure of the assumptive datum extending from reasoning, I have trouble.

AK: Me too. I don't know that I find any more value in thinking that data extend from some type of reasoning/rationality—rather I think that it extends from reasoning/rationality. To me, this means that there is no discernable data that exist outside the production of some logic. I find this troubling. This is why I don't know that I need to term data anymore.

RG: I don't know that all of the understandings I've produced from my fieldwork, reading, analysis, and writing have necessarily been reasonable—at least, I question whether or not they share a reasonable genesis. I might use reasoning to develop my understandings (i.e., "findings"), but . . . I'm not terribly comfortable assigning such reason to the genetics— the units of analysis or the stuff that we generally call data.

AK: Hmmmmm . . . can you give me an example? I wonder how any definition or recognition of data/um could exist outside some production of reason.

RG: Example: I'm studying democracy by way of the opportunity structures that in part produce educational trajectories of Latino immigrant youth. After 7 years of fieldwork with students, I attend the Chicano/Latino graduation of one of the study's contributors. His parents can't be there. I'm sitting at his "family table" with my husband and two good friends who have come to know this student over the years, as they live nearby his college. He thanks me in his student speech as he accepts his diploma. My husband puts his hand on my knee. The student steps down from the stage. I stand up, meet him in the aisle, and we embrace.

From just that simple moment, I learned deeper understanding of a concept in college-going that I wrote about years ago—*confianza* (see Gildersleeve, 2010). But I can't pinpoint the datum or relations of data that generate that understanding, per se. I can create representations and expressions. I can subject my own social experience, and perhaps those of others, to scrutiny as I generate these expressions or follow or trace or try to capture the expressions across the space of interaction in that moment. Can you point me to reason/rationality? In the broader context of the world, it's pretty irrational that I would have any kind of relationship with this student, considering where, when, and under what circumstances we each were born and raised.

As a series or collection of *data acts*, however, I can apply reason/rationale/logic. I can be in conversation with the multiple conversations of the practices, expressions, feelings of that moment. Perhaps, *data* do not exist. But data acts, seem certainly to in my mind. But only meaningfully when in pluralistic conversation. Perhaps that gives some functional purpose to a critical social inquiry: to (dis)entangle the pluralistic conversations of data acts. This, I believe (fear), would require us to recognize the performative imperative (Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2005)—we know as we do.

AK: Yes. This all resonates with me. Karen Barad's (2007) work on intra-action in materiality (intra meaning "within" as opposed to inter, meaning between) also pushes on the performative imperative. Here Barad writes that "the move toward perfomative alternatives to representaitonalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality . . . to matters of practices, doings, and actions" (p. 135). Performative data acts, perhaps then, are always dialogic; always within and never outside.

AK: I guess what I'm saying is that if/when someone claims data/um as some*thing*, they must communicate that attribution according to a logic (if only indirectly).

AK: Of course, you wouldn't be able to tell this from reading the various texts that deal with "data" and "data analysis"—it seems as though data are always already out there, ready to be captured and put to work as evidence. Is this your sense of data existing or not existing?

RG: No. I, too long have been frustrated with how textbooks deal with and define "data." I think we've shared conversation about that in the past. But generally, even those texts that explicitly share that data are not lying in wait for researchers to find and exploit end up treating data as rational, objective, and well-recognized stuff in the world (see, for example, Merriam, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

RG: Here's what I'm working with, I suppose. We agree that data are not objective. You seem to think they are assumptive and flow from reason. I can agree with the first part, but am still skeptical of the second part of that understanding. I want to put forth that, drawing from our previous dialogic work around Bakhtin and Deleuze, data should be understood as merely tropes that we deploy to order the irrational, unreasonable, subjective social worlds that we interlope with as humans. In these senses, all these tropes we deploy as data are constantly in referent relation with other tropes. They are themselves, in dialogue. A datum is always and forever then, data. Your thoughts on data as trope? As dialogic trope?

AK: Love this idea, and I don't think it's too far removed from my earlier thoughts on data and confected rationalities—data in relation to other data, aligned and "made sense of" by a governing logic.

RG: I have to interrupt—this assumption that we need and/or use a governing logic. Is that universal? Must we bring a governing logic to make data data? I'm not disagreeing. This is the heart of my concern, perhaps (I'm very tentative here). I can see how most of the time we *do* apply a governing logic. But must we?

AK: And yet, you seem to want to push a bit further—I point to data in relation, you prompt for data in dialogue.

RG: Yes!

AK: And what of data as tropes? As you might surmise, I'm down with this idea as well. If I follow, data thus become figurative expressions: they always stand-in, but can never be, that which they represent. But this leaves us mired in the myth of representationalism and I'm uncomfortable with that. Is this, perhaps, your move to data-as-dialogic-trope? Does dialogue allow us to exit the limits of representationalism (as

Deleuze and Barad, among others urge us)? If so, what would that look like?

RG: It looks like *this* . . . or it can look like this.

AK: Yes, this enacted dialogue as our data act.

RG: The dialogic trope is effectively a data act pulling away and pushing back in on itself. Like we considered in Bakhtin's body and the body carnival (Kuntz & Gildersleeve, 2012). Ever expanding while under the microscope the expanse is inwardly directing itself to shrink. It's relational, but need not be representational.

AK: In a way, we've killed off data in the objective and representationalist sense . . . might we bring it back according to a dialogic frame? If we understand data in relation to our previous dialogues, what would that look like? For instance, in our 2011 dialogue we make a series of claims—might we read such assertions as, in some way, data for this piece? We note:

we present our dialogue below without demarcation of the temporal ordering of our knowledge construction, although we do indent sections that were not directly in response to its preceding section. This indentation can perhaps create a sense of bewilderment, which we enjoy and invite. Oppositionally, for the benefit of clarity, we assign our names to those sections of the dialogue that we instigated, though most meaning occurs in the interaction, the convergence of dialogue. (p. 18)

RG: That note is one of my favorite moments of our collaboration together. We own up to the non-proprietary-ness of any knowledge we generate through, within, across, betwixt, between us. That sentence itself could not be writ alone. It required the dialogic trope of our dialogue on space. Data as dialogic trope, then, can recognize that data are fiction. Data are generative. Data are expressive. Data are relational. Data are in active (or agentive) relation.

RG: So, what do you think this means?

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. In past published dialogues we have struggled with the need to "frame" our interactions with obligatory remarks that were

more traditionally academic. However, with each published dialogue these academic frames have taken up less and less space. In this instance, we only offer this brief endnote as a break from the otherwise dialogic interactions that are our article. We have, in a sense, relegated the academic frame to the literal margins. Here is how we communicated our distrust of the academic frame in a previous publication (Gildersleeve & Kuntz, 2011):

There is the tendency to want to end this article with a satisfying conclusion, a few paragraphs of space that "wraps up" or otherwise frames our dialogue. Yet dialogue, as process, is never neatly packaged and is often incomplete. We wonder about this desire to contain or otherwise close off the space of our dialogue. (p. 22)

Readers lose a commanding certainty from the text by our choice to abandon this academic frame, and the nonconclusive text requires that readers sacrifice any lingering desire for objectivity or scientist precision. These sacrifices invite readers to engage with the text as productive interlocutors, imagineers, and, dare we suggest, generators of data themselves. Separately, we encourage readers to read through, between, and betwixt our dialogic interactions. The indented spaces represent moments of repair, revision, and response. Text at the same indent generally came about in direct relation to one another. Text at separate indents clearly relate but signify interruptions and revisions in our dialogic thinking.

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