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A Dialogic Pedagogy: Looking to Mikhail Bakhtin for Alternatives to Standards Period Teaching Practices

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Abstract

Instructional practices in American schools have become increasingly standardized over the last quarter century. This increase in standardization has resulted in a decrease in opportunities for teachers to engage in student-centered instructional practices. This article discusses how the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin can serve as the foundation for educators who are seeking alternatives to standards period teaching practices. A Bakhtinian view of language can be the basis for the creation of a dialogic pedagogy, which can help teachers and students navigate the complexities of teaching and learning. More importantly, perhaps, Bakhtin's theories can serve as a framework on which educators might build their arguments supporting the implementation of alternatives to standards period skill and drill instructional activities.



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2 CRITICAL EDUCATION

Language is a fundamental element of teaching and learning. In recent years, unfortunately, opportunities for teachers and students to engage in instructional activities based on dialogue have become scarce. Mandated high stakes assessments and standardized curricula have exerted such a dominant influence on American schools that we will most likely come to label the last quarter century the “standards period” (Marshall, 2009, p. 113). Instructional activities that are enriched by discussion are being ignored as classrooms focus on preparing students to achieve high scores on standardized tests. The increased import assigned to high stakes testing has resulted in the development of a narrow concept of what counts as teaching and learning in the U.S. schools (Schultz & Fecho, 2005). Increasingly, teachers are feeling the demands to design instruction around activities focused on preparation for standardized tests instead of activities designed to foster critical thinking through dialogue. In his work discussing the ways that test-driven, standards-based reforms have influenced teachers since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law in 2002, Cuban (2009) pointed out that teachers have reported an increase in the time they spend preparing students to succeed on state tests through lecture and other teacher-centered instructional practices.

The need for teachers, students, and schools to produce results on high stakes tests has resulted in a narrowing of curricula, a silencing of classroom dialogue, and a reduced focus on building students’ abilities to think critically (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Kohn, 2000; Luke, 2004; Luke & Woods, 2009; Nichols & Berliner 2007; Schultz & Fecho, 2005). Ravitch (2010) recently argued that test-driven focus of NCLB has “produced fear and obedience among educators” resulting instructional activities that can produce higher test scores but have little to do with actually educating students (p. 16). I argue that eschewing classroom dialogue and critical thinking skills for a narrowed focus on content that will be assessed through high stakes assessments reduces opportunities for students to engage in learning about topics of organic interest. The increasing standardization of lessons that has occurred over the last quarter century also inhibits the ability of teachers and students to use the dynamic, contextual nature of language to facilitate learning.

Despite recurring calls for educational reform, banking model teaching (Freire, 1970) practices, which position students as passive receivers of knowledge, continue to dominate instruction in U.S. public schools (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Costigan, 2008; Cuban, 1993; Hillocks, 1982; Lagemann, 2000; Nystrand, 1997; Smagorinsky, 2008). As a campus supervisor for preservice English teachers and a researcher currently studying secondary English teachers’ instructional practices, I have seen how solidly entrenched banking model teaching practices continue to be in the classroom. These instructional practices are problematic because they create situations where “classroom discourse is largely disconnected and serves mainly to let teachers know if students know bits and pieces of isolated information about whatever is being studied” (Hillocks, 2002, p. 7). Instead of creating opportunities for authentic questions to drive instruction, many classrooms continue to be dominated by teacher talk that has little or no connection to the contexts of students’ lives (Applebee, 1996). When instruction is divorced from the contexts of students’ lives, classrooms become places where the love of learning comes to die (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007).

However, teachers can foster the love of learning by making classrooms centers of authentic learning. Authentic learning is active and “involves organic assimilation

starting from within” (Dewey, 1902, p. 9). Drawing on students’ contexts affords teachers the ability to guide students toward the exploration of topics of personal (organic) interest. A pedagogy grounded in dialogue and attending to the nuances of language can help teachers draw upon students’ interests and experiences to engage them in learning that fosters the critical thinking skills students need to be successful.

Exploring the role of dialogue in instructional activities is an important step towards creating a theoretical framework that supports a pedagogy in which students are active participants in the classroom instead of passive receivers of knowledge. Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) argued that “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (1981, p. 259). Bakhtin’s theories about literature provide a useful way to think about the complex social nuances of language and the role of language in education. A Bakhtinian view of language can serve as a sound foundation for a dialogic pedagogy that can help teachers and students navigate the complexities of teaching and learning. More importantly, perhaps, Bakhtin’s theories can assist teachers who are searching for an alternative to standards period skill and drill instructional activities.

The Ebb and Flow of Theory

The ability to clearly articulate the theories that guide our actions in the world helps us build stronger arguments. Teachers who wish to deviate from the scripted instructional plans administrators often mandate must be prepared to offer solid arguments that support the instructional decisions they are making. Exploring the paradigms that have governed educational practices provides an important justification for clarifying the role that theory plays in defining educational practice. The concept of child-centered instruction has been ebbing and flowing in the minds of educators since the days of Socrates. Despite consistently recurring attempts to create a school model that is not based on the transmission of information from teachers to students, moving away from banking model instruction has proven to be a difficult task for U.S. schools (Alvermann, Phelps, & Ridgeway, 2007; Cuban, 1993). The default school model has consistently been a model that positions students as receptacles to be filled with knowledge by their teachers. Researchers and teachers advocating a shift away from transmission model instruction are unlikely to influence the decisions of educational policymakers unless they can clearly articulate the theoretical frameworks supporting their pedagogical choices.

The merits of child-centered instruction and inquiry teaching have been explored at length in literature advocating for school reform. However, the current climate of educational politics makes a renewed call for student-centered approaches to teaching particularly important. Educators and educational policymakers are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the assessment-driven policies of NCLB. Even staunch advocates of high stakes testing like Diane Ravitch have begun to see how standards period policies have undermined U.S. schools. In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch (2010) pointed out the need “to create a renaissance in education, one that goes well beyond the basic skills that have recently been the singular focus of federal activity” (p. 224). Critiques of NCLB and other

4 CRITICAL EDUCATION

standards period policies are creating new opportunities for school reform; therefore, it makes sense to consider alternatives to transmission model teaching practices.

Transmission model approaches to instruction offer a sharp contrast to child-centered approaches to instruction such as critical inquiry or dialogic teaching, which require teachers and students to take an active role in the learning process. Matusov (2007) argued “critical pedagogy is not just a curriculum for students, but it has to be practiced by instructors with the support of their institutions” (p. 223). Garnering this support has proven to be a challenging task. Moving away from teacher-centered modes of instruction towards dialogic or inquiry teaching requires what Cuban (1993) called “fundamental reforms” (p. 3). Unlike “incremental reforms,” which entail making repairs or upgrades to existing instructional frameworks, “fundamental reforms” require wholesale change (p. 3). An entirely new framework for teaching and learning must be adopted for real, lasting change to occur. Any argument for radical change in education must be accompanied by sound theory and research if there is any hope of motivating stakeholders (i.e. teachers, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers) to be willing to forsake the comfort provided by time honored methods of conducting schools.

Cuban’s (1993) work highlighted the reality that reform efforts lose traction when they are adopted at incremental levels instead of fundamental levels (see also Lagemann, 2000). Reform efforts, such as open classrooms or student-centered learning, have passed in and out of favor only to be discarded in favor of transmission model approaches to teaching and learning. Reform efforts succeed and fail, in large part, due to the level of understanding their advocates have of the theories that guide them. In his discussion of the importance of developing a theory of experience in education, Dewey (1938) cautioned that an inadequate elucidation of the theoretical framework supporting a new conception of schools “gives reactionaries a too easy victory” (p. 31). Without a solid understanding of their guiding theories, advocates for change are often unable to craft rhetoric that motivates stakeholders to see the value in enacting the fundamental changes in ideology and practice required to make the reforms they advocate successful.

A Bakhtinian View of Language

In his work as a literacy critic and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin explored the connections between language and culture. Using the work of Russian novelists Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and the French Renaissance author Francois Rabelais, Bakhtin explored the social nature of language and highlighted how the centripetal (centralizing) and centrifugal (decentralizing) forces of language influence the meaning that is made during dialogue. Through his study of literature, Bakhtin developed a theory of language that is invaluable to educators and educational theorists. His theory of language exposed the nuances of the social nature of language and provided a way to articulate the ways that the use of language influences meaning making. By describing his belief that each person enters into dialogue with a speech plan crafted with the intent of eliciting an anticipated response from the addressee, Bakhtin (1986) developed the theory that the context of the utterance shapes its meaning. The concept that culture, context, and experience color our understanding of the words employed in dialogue is a central theme in Bakhtin’s work. In the following sections, I provide a discussion of this concept and articulate how it can be

useful for teachers interested in making dialogue a centerpiece of the instructional activities they employ in their classrooms.

Throughout his work, Bakhtin discussed the ways in which the unifying (centripetal) forces of language work to codify the meanings of words. However, Bakhtin was careful to point out that he believed that words are subject to the heteroglot tensions of the centrifugal forces of language once they enter into live speech. The linkages that exist between language and culture require people to be responsive to each other. Bakhtin argued that the normative forms of language and the denotative meanings of words that guide our ability to communicate represent one of the complex ways that people must learn to respond to one another. The meanings of words that we can glean from dictionaries help ensure that speakers of a given language will understand each other; however, “the use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88). When we communicate with others, we do not select words “from the system of language in their neutral, *dictionary* form” (p. 87, emphasis in original). Instead, we select our words based on our experiences with how those words have been used in the past. Outside of “the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet unqualified world with the first word,” there is no escaping the influences of previous utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 279). Our cultural contexts and previous experiences play a significant role in our understanding of the connotations of the words we choose to use as we seek to communicate.

A Bakhtinian perspective on language and culture can serve as the foundation for the formation of a dialogic pedagogy. Making authentic dialogue the centerpiece of instruction creates spaces for teaching and learning to become a multi-voiced activity that offers both teachers and students the opportunity to be active participants in meaning making. Authentic dialogue can be defined as dialogue that leads to what Bakhtin (1986) called “active responsive understanding” (p. 71). Active responsive understanding allows teachers and students to construct knowledge together as they attempt to come to understand the unique worldviews that individuals bring with them to the classroom each day. Engaging in authentic dialogue allows teachers to “strive constantly to imagine how things look from the child’s point of view” (Kohn, 2000, p. 131). When the perspectives of teachers *and* students are active participants in instructional dialogue, active responsive understanding can work in concert with inquiry to facilitate learning.

The role that culture plays in the way we understand and use language is central to this discussion. Each person’s unique cultural contexts result in the development of unique understandings of the words they come into contact with. “Someone else’s words introduced into our own speech,” argued Bakhtin (1984), “inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them, that is, they become double voiced” (p. 195, parenthesis in original). Examining the individual cultural frames of reference that influence the words people choose as they seek to communicate with one another cannot occur without allowing multiple voices to be present in classroom dialogue.

Culture Influences Language

The cultural models that guide our understanding of the world are not universal. We can construct definitions to assist our attempts at communication, but we must recognize that “words are connected more to knowledge and beliefs, encapsulated in stories or theories that constitute cultural models, than they are to definitions” (Gee, 2008, p. 9). For example, a person who has never traveled away from his or her home in rural Montana may conjure the image of a pristine trout stream when talking about rivers. On the other hand, an individual who has never left his or her home in the Mississippi Delta is likely to summon a very different image when telling stories about days spent on a river. The striking differences between these two images of such a foundational element of life—water—demonstrate the power of context to influence the meaning of words in live speech. The implications of those differences are formidable when you extend that idea to complex “words like ‘honor,’ ‘love,’ or ‘democracy’” (Gee, 2008, p. 9). If we attempt to limit our usage to denotative meaning (and what a futile attempt that would be), we stifle the communicative power of words. To engage in authentic dialogue and avoid stifling the voices of individual students, one must be open to exploring the meanings that are implicit in the words of others.

At the center of my understanding of the relationship between culture, language, and literacy instruction is Rosenblatt’s (1995) conception of the term transaction. Rosenblatt positioned past experience and language “as the raw materials” that shape new experiences (p. 25). The transactions that occur between individuals and between cultures create opportunities for language and understanding to evolve. Words come alive when diverse cultural contexts come together because they are “harmonizing with some elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 277). The harmony and dissonance that exist in classroom dialogue demand our attention. If we, as teachers, wish to create authentic learning experiences with students from varying cultural contexts, we must be aware of the myriad factors that shape students’ experiences and Discourses (Gee, 2008). Gee argued that “Discourses are ways of being” that shape and are shaped by the ways of speaking, actions, or thoughts of particular groups of people (p. 3). Discourses, then, are “socially situated identities” that are omnipresent in the classroom (p. 3). Being attentive to the Discourses of people from varying contexts complicates and enhances the use of language and the teaching of reading and writing.

The Dynamic Nature of Language

The dynamic nature of language complicates communication in the classroom. In order for communication to be possible, we must be able to make sense of the meanings that emerge from divergent contexts. The homogeneity of standards period instructional practices makes it difficult for teachers and students to develop common understandings about the meanings inherent in the heteroglot Discourses present in the classroom. The dynamic nature of language makes communication across diverse contexts a complex process that requires time for teachers and students to engage in dialogue. Bakhtin (1986) argued that each person has his or her own “inalienable right to the word” (p. 121-122). Bakhtin consistently made the case that no one has the right to definitively define words.

Words take on their dynamic power because they exist “in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts serving other peoples intentions” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). When the realities of daily life and unique cultures transact with language, the dynamic nature of language becomes evident. Words become imbued with the meaning through the ways in which others have used them.

Words are meaningful because they have history—just as the people who give voice to those words have histories. Opportunities for learning are enhanced when teachers have the ability to create situations for students’ unique histories and cultural contexts to contribute to classroom dialogue. Volosinov (1986) built upon Bakhtin’s theory to argue that dialogue is *the* essential element of making meaning. Essentially, “meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding” (p. 102). In order to harness the power of the unique histories and contexts of an utterance, one privileged Discourse or cultural context cannot dominate the learning environment. Unfortunately, the banking model of education that has been the norm in schools in the United States makes creating cultural contact zones (Fecho, 2004) that are free of a dominant Discourse or cultural worldview nearly impossible.

The transactions that occur between speakers or between readers and texts are an essential part of meaning making. Bakhtin (1981) artfully addressed the way meaning is negotiated as he argued that “one cannot excise the rejoinder from this combined context” created as speakers engage in dialogue with one another “without losing its sense and tone. It is an organic part of a heteroglot unity” (p. 284). Without these transactions, words lay fallow—speech plans cannot be realized, communication does not occur. Without paying careful attention to the transactions that occur as words come into contact with one another, it is difficult for teachers and students to truly understand one another. Standardized instruction designed to prepare students for success on high stakes tests tends to focus solely on the denotative meanings of the words we use. As a result, teachers and students are left with only “the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life” (Bakhtin, 1981 p. 292). Therefore, it is important to create instructional activities that remain attentive to the transactions that occur as words are used in live speech.

Teachers and students will benefit when they seek ways to explore the nuances of language in the classroom. The creation of spaces to explore cultural and linguistic differences allows a healthy tension between the centripetal (unifying) and centrifugal forces of language to exist. As a result of that tension, teachers and students can learn to interpret the tacit understandings of the world that are present in the classroom. Those tacit understandings can help teachers and their students use those differences to begin to learn from each other about topics that are of organic interest. More importantly, these understandings can be used to help students develop the critical thinking skills they will need to be successful in the classroom and beyond the walls of our schools.

Creating Contact Zones in the Classroom

Developing an understanding of the ways in which culture and language transact in the classroom can help teachers create classroom environments based on authentic verbal interaction between teachers and students instead of the authoritative discourse

(Bakhtin, 1981) of banking model practices that inhibit learning. The concept of authoritative discourse introduced by Bakhtin can be interpreted in multiple ways; therefore, it is important to unpack my understanding of this term. In my view, the authoritative word is, at its essence, monologic. The term monologue typically invokes images of a one-sided utterance. Within the traditional classroom paradigm, lecture activities tend to be monologic and based on authoritative discourse. The authoritative word can be problematic because it “is located in a distanced zone” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Framing classroom discourse in this way creates a disconnect between members of the classroom community; it does not allow dialogue to shape learning.

In fact, Bakhtin (1981) argued that that the authoritative word “demands unconditional allegiance” (p. 343). It is this demand that convinces me that the authoritative word does little to facilitate learning. Framing an utterance in this way distances it from the interlocutor—preventing dialogue and inhibiting understanding. Demanding wholesale acceptance or rejection of an utterance leaves no room for authentic dialogue. When authoritative discourse dominates classroom dialogue, the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language ceases to be healthy. As a result, the heteroglot cultures and Discourses that exist in the classroom are unable to transact with one another.

It is not my intent to set up a false dichotomy between lecture-based instructional activities and a dialogic pedagogy. There are times when a short lecture can be the most efficient means of sharing information with students. For example, a history teacher might be preparing his or her students for a unit on the Vietnam War. Without the necessary background knowledge to begin studying the time period, a discussion-based lesson is likely to flounder. Clearly, students need the opportunity to develop context. Our imagined history teacher might not have the luxury of having enough instructional time for students to engage in activities, such as a webquest (see <http://www.potosisd.k12.wi.us/staff/bisbach/Vietnam%20webquest.htm> for an example). Therefore, a lecture providing students with access to the historical background of the time period would be an appropriate and valuable use of instructional time. This lecture would become even more effective if it were combined with an activity designed to offer students the opportunity to discuss what they have learned and add to that knowledge sharing their knowledge about current military conflicts. Providing students with time to discuss their experiences with having family members or friends serve in Iraq or Afghanistan in recent years would be a way to bring the students’ individual contexts and experiences into the lesson. Doing so would be an excellent way to help students see the relevance of this lecture to their lives.

The Dialogic Nature of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Classrooms are both enriched and complicated when dialogic teaching occurs. Moving away from the monologic classroom discourse of the banking model and creating spaces for heteroglot voices to enliven teaching and learning mean that instructional dialogue will be refracted by the diverse cultural contexts that teachers and students bring to the classroom. As Nystrand (1997) pointed out, the success of dialogic instruction depends “on what students bring to class” (p. 89). If students’ Discourses or “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) are to be active participants in a dialogic

pedagogy, teachers will have to navigate the complexities of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2000) conceptualized culturally responsive teaching “as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 29). Teachers cannot engage in this sort of teaching without creating spaces for dialogue; classrooms must become places where heteroglot voices (Bakhtin, 1981) are represented. Standardized lessons focused on preparing students to take high stakes tests offer little in way of engaging students in dialogue that can build on the contextual nature of language to foster critical thinking.

Learning From, Not in Spite of, Dissonance

Culturally responsive teaching as a key element of student-centered education is a rich topic with an extensive body of literature that teachers might explore to further strengthen their arguments for making dialogue a centerpiece of the pedagogies they enact (Althen, 1994; Bolgatz, 2005; Castaneda, 2004; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Jones, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2002; Solomon, 2003). Engaging students in instructional activities that attend to the tensions that exist between disparate perspectives requires teachers to create spaces for dialogue between students’ cultural identities or Discourses to occur, which is no facile task. Although it is quite often much more comfortable to focus on similarities when we encounter people whose cultural contexts differ from ours, “it is in experiencing the differences that we discover ourselves” as individuals (Freire, 2005, p. 127). Often more can be learned from dissonance than harmony.

The diverse students who are present in every classroom make teaching and learning a multifaceted act of navigating implicit cultural differences. Reflecting upon my experiences teaching Cherokee students in the Appalachian mountains of Western North Carolina has helped me to see the importance of exploring cultural differences, instead of simply searching for similarities. I found that I had much to learn about the cultural contexts of my students if I wanted to be able to connect with them on a personal level that created relationships with them that fostered learning. While working with Cherokee students, I noticed that many of these students were reticent to make eye contact with me during our conversations. I had always viewed making eye contact while speaking with someone as a sign of respect. This, however, was not the case for many of the Cherokee students I taught. In fact, quite the opposite was true. In their cultural contexts, making eye contact was disrespectful. I had difficulty understanding why this was the case and initially took their refusal to look me in the eye as a form of disrespect. I was unable to understand why the students would not look me in the eye the way I looked at them while we talked, and this made it difficult for us communicate. After an experienced colleague of mine explained this nuance of my students’ cultural contexts to me, I was able to understand this difference. The understanding I gained from this dialogue allowed me to adjust my interpretation of my students’ actions and learn from their cultural contexts.

This example highlights the importance of learning about students’ diverse cultural contexts. Gee (2008) pointed out that students will reject “teachers and schools that they perceive as hostile, alien, or oppressive to their home-based identities” (p. 39). If I had not been willing to develop an understanding of my students’ cultural contexts

and had sought to force my own culture upon them, I would have alienated those students. Instead of allowing our differing cultural contexts to transact with one another to facilitate making meaning, I would have created barriers to the generation of authentic dialogue. Learning about my students' cultural identities made it possible for our cultural differences to enrich dialogue and facilitate learning.

What Does a Dialogic Classroom Look Like?

Teachers must seek ways to allow alien intentions, tones, meanings, and contexts to become lenses, which refract meaning in various ways and encourage meaningful transactions to occur amongst the members of the class. The prototypical prose writer Bakhtin (1981) imagined does not “purge words of intentions and tones that are alien” (p. 299). Instead, the writer seeks to welcome those intentions and tones into his or her work. Teachers can fashion instruction and instructional dialogue in this way. Bakhtin (1981) argued that “the novel becomes subject to an artistic reworking” when heteroglossia is present (p. 300). When heteroglot voices and viewpoints are welcomed into the classroom, schools can become places where artistic reworking occurs. Opportunities for embracing and learning from alien experiences become plentiful when teaching is viewed as “a process of enabling students to learn,” instead of “a way to impose a code or way of life” on them (Greene, 1965, p. 81). When teachers teach in ways that allow heteroglossia to flourish in the classroom, dialogue enriches learning.

Perhaps one of problems with enacting a dialogic pedagogy is that it's hard to describe exactly what it looks like. The ideas that play a role in the creation of a dialogic classroom are not that far removed from the spirit of the Progressive Movement and Informal Education (Cuban, 1993). These reform movements were accepted with varying degrees of success from the 1940s through the 1970s. These movements favored elements of what I would call a dialogic pedagogy, such as parental and student involvement in classroom decisions, being attentive to out of school literacies, and the development of student-centered curricula. These are outstanding concepts that can build the foundation for authentic learning. However, it is difficult to describe what these concepts look like in the process of day-to-day instruction.

It is important to realize that it is the assumptions about teaching and learning—not the pedagogical tools—that truly underpin any pedagogy a teacher seeks to enact. The theories that guide teachers and policymakers shape the decisions they make—even when those theories are not overtly recognized. Guiding theories influence the choices teachers make when they are selecting pedagogical tools. Similarly, theory also plays, or should play, a role in the selection of pedagogical tools that policymakers make available to teachers. Marshall (2009) argued that the majority of policy decisions that have come to drive education in American schools are based upon “unexamined assumptions” about how students learn and why teachers teach (p. 114). If the theories that underpin the decisions made by policymakers and teachers are not clearly articulated and examined, it is unlikely that reform efforts will be effective. Therefore, it is vital for educational stakeholders to examine the theories that inform the decisions they make.

A careful look at the history of educational reform reveals how tenuous reform efforts can be. For example, the demise of the Informal Education movement was

hastened by the development of “checklists, diagrams, and ways of assessing a classroom’s degree of openness” (Cuban, 1993, p. 154). Desks clustered in groups, learning centers, small groups, and student choice may be indicators that a teacher’s pedagogy is underpinned by the tenets of Informal Education; however, “these outward signs of openness reveal nothing substantial about teacher’s views of learning and children’s development, or about their concern for improving students skills” (p. 155). The same holds true for someone interested in exploring the dialogic pedagogy a teacher is attempting to enact. Checklists and classroom diagrams will not reveal the goals or the effectiveness of a teacher’s pedagogy. The assumptions and epistemologies of the teacher must be examined. The lesson to be learned from the failure of earlier reform movements to gain and hold traction is that we cannot reduce a reform movement to “prescriptions to be administered in classrooms” (p. 154). When a theory is reduced to discrete lists of practices to be enacted, teachers lose the freedom they need to respond to the individual needs of their students. Moreover, reform movements flounder under the weight of the monologic, authoritative discourse employed by policymakers who seek to mandate the use of prescriptive instructional practices that inhibit authentic classroom dialogue.

Dialogic Teaching Builds on Transactions

The theories of Louise Rosenblatt and Mikhail Bakhtin work in concert with one another despite the cultural differences that informed their thinking. Rosenblatt’s view of transactions dovetails nicely with Bakhtin’s view of language. Bakhtin pointed out that understanding and response “mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). The idea of mutual shaping is an important concept to consider in the context of the secondary English classroom—or any context where communication is to take place. Fecho’s (2004) work demonstrated the role that mutual shaping plays in inquiry teaching. Fecho argued that teachers must be willing to call their own stances in to question and be willing to allow the roles of teacher and student to be refined—instead of reified. When teachers are not willing or able to lay down the authoritative discourse of transmission model instruction, classroom discourse cannot be truly dialogic. By ceding the role of expert, teachers can create environments where classroom dialogue can be what Bakhtin (1981, 1986) called internally persuasive.

Authentic learning flourishes when mutual shaping guides classroom instruction and dialogue. Bakhtin’s theories form a solid foundation for considering how creating spaces where multiple voices hold equal sway can lead to the construction of knowledge. Mahiri (2004) argued that a Bakhtinian view of meaning making “implies and requires community” (p. 223). For community to exist, heteroglossia, or the presence of multiple voices, is necessary. Authoritative discourse leaves no room for authentic dialogue. Internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, draws participants into contact zones that allow transactions to occur because more than one perspective is available for consideration by the larger group. These transactions allow us to take classroom discourse “into new contexts, attach it to new material, put in a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it” and make new meaning from it (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346). These heteroglot voices can be crucial in the planning of day-to-day instruction. When the voices of all members of a class are represented, it is more likely that individual student’s interests can play a role in instructional planning and learning activities.

Key Elements of Dialogic Teaching

If we view language in a way where understanding is dependent upon a response, we must think about what that means for our teaching. We must, therefore, consider the importance of crafting authentic questions (Nystrand, 1997) instead of questions with prescribed answers that do not allow dialogue and response to drive the process of making meaning. Positioning “education as inquiry provides an opportunity for learners to explore collaboratively topics of personal and social interest using the perspectives offered by others” (Harste, 2001). The importance of allowing students to follow their interests and explore topics that are meaningful to them resonates throughout the literature discussing inquiry teaching (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Graves, 1999; Heath, 1983; Hillocks, 1982; Lensimire, 2001; Kohn, 2000; Short & Burke, 2001). Maxine Greene (1978) provided one of the most compelling discussions of this crucial element of dialogic teaching in *Landscapes of Learning* as she pointed out:

Students must be enabled, at whatever stages they find themselves to be, to encounter curriculum as a possibility. By that I mean curriculum ought to provide a series of occasions for individuals to articulate the themes of their existence and to reflect on those themes until they know themselves to be in the world and can name what has been up then obscure.” (pp. 18-19)

This model of teaching and learning requires that we conceptualize the work being done in the secondary English classroom as something more than just teaching students to read, write, and answer questions on standardized tests. Enacting an inquiry pedagogy means that teaching and learning can and should result in the creation of change in students, teachers, and the world around them (Lalik & Oliver, 2007). The changes that can occur from engaging in inquiry work, however, need the support of a pedagogy designed specifically to make students’ voices active participants in instructional dialogue.

Dialogic Teaching and the Standard Period Classroom

Creating opportunities for multiple perspectives to transact with one another is the heart of dialogic teaching. It is, however, not easy to create spaces where the heteroglot voices that populate the classroom can exist in harmony with one another. Delpit’s (2006) work offers some valuable advice for teachers who are committed to enacting a dialogic pedagogy. She argued that “we must be learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to be turned upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). Teachers must be willing to cede their roles as experts—as dispensers of knowledge. Classrooms must become places where mutual shaping takes place. For mutual shaping to occur, teachers must work to create spaces where students can feel comfortable enough to engage in dialogue and voice their concerns, questions, and opinions. Creating opportunities for students to take an active role in the classroom requires balance. Dialogic teaching depends upon the participants’ willingness to “relinquish the floor to the other or to make room for the other’s active responsive understanding” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 71). Therefore, the tone of instructional dialogue must be open and classroom talk cannot be dominated by a single, authoritative voice.

In his book chronicling the years he spent doing inquiry work with African American high school students in Philadelphia, Fecho (2004) credited the transactions that took place as he read Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* (1995) for helping him examine the assumptions that guided his teaching. Delpit informed Fecho's work as he and his students explored the myriad ways in which language and culture transacted in their lives. Fecho's work with Nora Jenks, a student with strong Caribbean island cultural and linguistic roots, offers some insight into how asking authentic questions can lead to meaningful learning. Nora interrogated the complexities of "what happens when someone tries to adjust to a different form of language" (Fecho, 2004, p. 59). In doing so, Nora found that there are no simple answers. Fecho pointed out that "the insight she [Nora] gained was directional rather than definitive" (p. 60). And that is the touchstone, in my opinion, of dialogic teaching. Unlike transmission model teaching, the dialogic classroom allows teachers and students to ask complex questions that guide inquiry instead of providing simple, shallow answers to complex questions.

Thinking Not Remembering

Transmission model instruction, which relies heavily on recitation literacy (Myers, 1996), positions students as "rememberers" (Nystrand, 1997, p. 91). Dialogic teaching, on the other hand, values critical thinking. The research of Beach and Myers (2001) offers some useful examples of how teachers and students utilized strategies of dialogic teaching to make meaning as they navigated represented and lived social worlds in the secondary English classroom. Drawing upon their experiences with designing and implementing a social worlds inquiry project in a ninth grade classroom, Beach and Myers described how the teachers provided opportunities for students to transact with an anthology of short stories about teen experiences entitled *Coming of Age*. The students had the opportunity to respond to the readings in a variety of ways, including creating a dialogue between characters from different stories in the anthology. In these responses, the students critiqued the values represented in the stories—revealing their own social values and bringing them into classroom dialogue. These kinds of classroom activities go beyond the traditional models of classroom instruction, which privilege the seeking of prescribed answers to questions about a text, and create spaces for students to engage in authentic dialogue that fosters transactions between differing points of view.

The lesson plans teachers create are designed to support specific learning objectives. Teachers in Georgia typically include a section in their lesson plans that list specific elements of the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) that they intend to address in a given lesson. For example, a ninth grade English teacher might design a lesson to address Georgia Performance Standard ELA9RL5, which states:

The student understands and acquires new vocabulary and uses it correctly in reading and writing. The student

- a. Identifies and correctly uses idioms, cognates, words with literal and figurative meanings, and patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or functions.

- b. Uses knowledge of Greek and Latin prefixes, suffixes, and roots to understand the meanings of new words.
- c. Uses general dictionaries, specialized dictionaries, thesauruses, or related references as needed to increase learning.

Designing a lesson around this standard requires a teacher to make a choice. He or she might decide to focus the lesson on having students memorize common words that indicate a certain tone in a poem. This lesson might include having students memorize a list of words that typically indicate that a poet was attempting to give a poem a melancholy tone. This would certainly be useful knowledge for students to have as they prepare to take a standardized test, such as an End-of-Course-Test, which will ask them to identify the tone of a passage from a poem. Alternatively, this teacher might choose to transact with the GPS and shape it in a way that asks students to generate ideas about how specific words might influence the tone of passage. Both activities would address the skills required by the standard. However, each activity requires students to engage in different kinds of thinking.

A lesson designed to offer students to draw upon their own contexts to make associations with literary devices, such as tone, asks students to engage in the process of transacting with language. This sort of lesson would ask students to engage in the transactional process of selecting “concrete details or parts of the text that had struck them most forcibly” and making connections between those details and their personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 2005d). On the other hand, teachers might ask their students to engage in the process of rote memorization in order to support the goal of being able to recall information during a high stakes assessment.

It is tempting for teachers to engage their students in lessons that focus on memorization when they are faced with the pressures of preparing students to succeed on a standardized test. That pressure increases when these tests are structured in ways that will require students to access a large number of definitions, such as literary terms.

Lessons focused on memorization can, quite often, appear to an efficient means of covering long lists of terms. However, in *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*, Frank Smith (1998) argued that items learned through rote memorization “will be learned slowly and doomed to rapid forgetting unless they are rapidly attached to a framework of knowledge that we already possess” (p. 37). In Smith’s estimation, high stakes tests value memorization, which does not provide opportunities for students to access higher order thinking skills that will allow them think deeply and retain information. Smith’s argument that new information needs to be connected with prior experience resonates with Rosenblatt’s (1995) belief that students’ past experiences function as “the raw materials” that facilitate meaning making (p. 25). Creating spaces for students to enter into dialogue with one another facilitates this process of meaning making.

Dialogic Teaching Pushes Comfort Zones

Engaging in critical inquiry and dialogic teaching requires openness. Teachers and students must be willing to attend to both sides of any argument if they wish to understand the issues at the heart of that inquiry. Gee (2008) argued that teaching is

essentially a moral act. Part of engaging in the moral activity of teaching is that the uncomfortable sides of the issues being interrogated must also be explored. Creating these spaces is, often, no easy task. Doing so requires teachers and students to be willing to engage in dialogue that is not always comfortable. Successful inquiry work requires teachers and students to “trust the process” and be open to exploring uncertain—and sometimes unsettling—territory (Fecho, 2004, p. 50). In order to foster authentic classroom dialogue, teachers must create environments where students can disagree with one another respectfully so that the process of navigating uncomfortable terrain can occur. Admittedly this is hard work. Teachers can lay the foundation for this type of atmosphere by modeling questioning protocols that will lead to authentic dialogue and foster the development of authentic questions, which do not have “prescribed answers” (Nystrand, 1997, p. 7).

In their discussion of leading classroom discussions that will help teachers and students begin to ask authentic questions, Beach et al. (2006) drew upon their experiences working with Susan Eddleston, a high school teacher from Minnesota. Eddleston encouraged her students to ask questions that did not have predetermined answers in order to create spaces for teachers and students to mutually negotiate meaning. Without clear-cut answers to drive a monologic, right or wrong, discussion of a text, alternative perspectives can transact with one another. Beach et al. noted that “when students are bringing a range of different voices and perspectives [to a discussion] they are more likely to disagree with each other, leading to a more lively exchange of ideas than if they all shared the same perspectives” (p. 88). Clearly, enacting a dialogic pedagogy means taking risks.

Encouraging differing points of view to be present in classroom dialogue is a delicate, but important task. Graves (1999) pointed out that “the art of understanding people depends on being able to put aside your own point of view completely and look at the world through their eyes” (p. 31). Risk taking is an integral part of putting your own point of view aside. Both teachers and students must be open to the idea that their points of view might not be the only way to understand something. I think this is one of the more difficult, yet most important pieces of engaging in dialogic teaching. The existence of only one perspective in the classroom does not allow learners to be active in the construction of knowledge. Passive understanding is receptive in nature—as opposed to being transactional—and offers nothing new to the topic being explored in the classroom.

Why Argue for Dialogic Teaching in an Era of High stakes Testing?

In this era of accountability, educational stakeholders are unlikely to embrace a pedagogy that is not supported by sound research. Fortunately, a growing body of research supports the notion that a dialogic pedagogy can be highly effective (Beach et al., 2006; Beach & Myers, 2001; Heath, 1978, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lensmire, 2000; Nystrand, 1997). Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) offer an outstanding example of a large-scale study designed to examine the effectiveness of dialogic instruction. Drawing on a sample that included 19 middle and high schools in urban and suburban areas across 5 states, Applebee et al. found that classes where high academic demands were coupled with dialogic teaching helped “students internalize the

knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own” (p. 723). It should be noted, however, that Applebee et al. also found that dialogic teaching required changes “in the structure of moment-to moment interactions among students and their teachers” and in the look of typical classroom activities and curricula (p. 723). Without foundational changes (Cuban, 1993) in the structure of educational policy, individual teachers cannot receive the support they need to create spaces for authentic dialogue to guide typical classroom activities.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Enacting a dialogic pedagogy can be one of the most valuable elements in the creation of learning environments that can help students develop critical thinking skills. Learning to question language and examine differences are the keys to authentic learning. Authentic learning has the power to engender social and political change instead of simply leading students to shallow, simple answers to questions that they have little interest in answering. However, authentic learning cannot occur if classroom instruction is not based on dialogue and the exploration of questions that are of organic interest to students. The fundamental question that remains unanswered, however, is how to build the momentum needed to foster a shift in the ideologies that form the foundations the pedagogies being enacted in American schools. In order to answer that question, the voices of teachers and researchers who are interested in engaging students in learning that goes beyond the ability to answer questions on high stakes tests must be drawn to the fore. Moreover, policymakers must be willing to engage in dialogue with teachers and researchers about what counts as teaching and learning if there is any hope of creating lasting reform. Recent critiques of the merits of standards era policies that are beginning to surface indicate that some policymakers might be willing to engage in dialogue about what counts as teaching and learning in U.S. schools, and Bakhtin’s theories offer an excellent place to begin this dialogue.

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