

# Critical Education

Volume 4 Number 8

August 25, 2013

ISSN 1920-4125

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## *Constructing a Bakhtinian/Freirean Dialogic Pedagogy for the College Composition Classroom*

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Citation: McAuley, S. (2013). Constructing a Bakhtinian/Freirean dialogic pedagogy for the college composition classroom. *Critical Education*, 4(8). Retrieved [date] from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/182446>

### **Abstract**

*Author discusses the perception of dialog in the field of Education and argues for a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the term. The discussion identifies two camps of dialogic pedagogy based upon the theories of either Mikhail Bakhtin or Paulo Freire and teases out the differences and commonalties between the two theorists' understanding of dialog. In particular, the article contrasts Bakhtin's socio-psychological aspects of dialog with Freire's socio-political ones. The discussion then moves to a review of practitioner research based in Bakhtin, Freire or a combination of the two in order to show how the theories can work in concert within a dialogic pedagogical stance. The discussion concludes with a consideration that a dialogic pedagogy based in both theorists clarifies the discussion and mutually edifies both educators and student through a more comprehensive understanding of dialogic pedagogy.*



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In our modern world, the common understanding of dialog is that of parties coming together to talk and listen to rather than fight with each other. Consider, for instance, the basic premise of the UN, the perennial Israeli-Arab peace talks, or any of the myriad international summits; each of these holds this common understanding of dialog. However, when we speak of dialog in the modern Composition classroom, we have to move into a more complex understanding of the term. Although this paper does not abandon the common definition, the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Freire (1970) complicate the picture as they offer important nuances within their works that create a richer composite for the basis of a dialogic stance in teaching.

The discussion of dialog here locates Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Freire (1970) as distinct point-sources because they are the seminal authors from whom next-generation discussions of dialog are drawn. However, to find one or the other as the sole source of many of these discussions is common and an understanding of their comparative foundations rare. Although these separate branches are not unfounded, they do muddy the understanding of dialog. Thus, my intent here is to bring the two into conversation in order to clarify the discussion of dialog in pedagogy, and, ultimately, to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of dialog in the classroom.

Freire's (1970) concept of dialog is first and foremost a conscious, social act, in which people make the choice to listen to, learn from and edify each other. As a seminal proponent of Critical Pedagogy, Freire (1970) is focused on social reform, viewing the Capitalist system as a source of oppression. He argues that in education, and elsewhere, dialog is an act of freedom through which oppressed individuals become aware of, evaluate and act on their realities. Critical Pedagogy assumes that people are being oppressed, and it uses dialog to raise questions about and challenges to the oppressive status quo.

In addition, Freire's (1970) understanding of dialog contains the element of the common one in which people come together with respect for one another in order to come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Yet, Freire also argues that those who would strive for dialog must first strive to understand each other. The stranger must become subsumed within the foreign culture in order to truly hear and learn from that culture. Thus, as a teacher taking a dialogic stance in a classroom of multiple cultures, I need to gain an informed perspective on the movements between culture, language and understandings that are occurring in the classroom.

The Bakhtinian understanding of dialog offers us the opportunity to gain this informed perspective by defining it not as an action to be undertaken or a goal to be reached but as a process that occurs constantly between and within human beings. Though it can work in concert with the socially-g geared, Freirean dialogic, the Bakhtinian dialogic is not Critical, i.e. it is not assuming or working to uncover oppression. Instead, Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) offers psychological and sociolinguistic insights into the communicative exchange between the individuals in the classroom. As Nystrand (1997) argues, Bakhtinian "dialogism...offers insights into human interaction as a foundation of comprehension" (p. 10). In other words, Bakhtin necessarily complicates the picture of dialog, reminding us that human beings are complex and that the meaning making in a classroom can and will occur over many different subjects rather than the single subject of oppression. As teachers, we can use this insight to understand how meaning is being constructed as we strive for and engage in Freirean dialog.

## Freire's Theory of Dialog

As we will see with Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), Freire (1970) views dialog as the location of meaning. Specifically, Freire (1970) believes that “to exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it,” and “dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 88). For Freire (1970), human reality is constructed through dialog, thus it is an “existential necessity” (p. 88).

What we will find in contrast to Bakhtin, however, is that Freire views dialog as a specific act determined by the parties involved. Freire's dialog is never incidental, as is possible with the resistant-dialogs that can occur between Bakhtin's (1984) monologues. For Freire (1970), dialog is the “encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized” (pp. 88-9). Both Freire and Bakhtin (1981) identify societies stratified along lines of power and privilege, but Freire rejects the possibility of dialog happening within an oppressor/oppressed exchange.

In fact, the aspect of oppression is perhaps the most well-known feature of Freire's theory. The Freirean dialog is a Critical theory because it assumes that people are being oppressed. Drawing from Marx, Freire (1970) locates the oppression in the materialism inherent in Capitalism, arguing that “in their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power” (p. 58). Yet, the oppressors “do not perceive their monopoly on *having more* as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves” (Freire, 1970 p. 59). Thus, the goal of the dialogic classroom is to unveil, challenge and change the Capitalist-driven, social hierarchy that perpetuates oppression in all facets of our societies.

Thus, Freirean dialog can occur only when all parties are committed to the freedom of all. A monologic action is an act of domination, which “reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated” (p. 89). Dialog is an act of love in which the powerful humbly relinquish their power in the hope that the oppressed might realize and define their own humanity. An important nuance to recognize here is that power is being relinquished rather than bestowed. The necessary reality that Freire (1970) recognizes is that education is a political relationship infused with unequal power relationships. That is, the teacher has power over the students. Such a position enacted is a pedagogy of violence (Freire 1970). Thus, the teacher has power that needs to be relinquished in order for the students' inherent power to step forward. The teacher does not give the students this power, merely the space in which to exercise it and to question the power of the institution and teacher. As such, dialog requires faith in people and communion with the oppressed.

Also differentiating from Bakhtin (1981, 1984) is Freire's (1970) requirement that dialog is an external, social activity. This definition departs from Bakhtin's (1984) hidden discourses. Dialogue can not be an internalized act between self and society but is always a social act between people with a specific intention: to name and thus own the world in order to “achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity” (Freire, p. 88). To be an active voice in a world of voices is to be an agent of change within and upon that world. Rather than being a natural process-reaction of language interchange, Freirean dialog is a conscious act toward human emancipation from domination

Thus, a dialogic classroom rejects the teacher as the source of knowledge and the students as recipients. Instead, “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-

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teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with student-teachers” (Freire 1970 p. 80). The dialogic classroom is a place of negotiated meaning, where everyone is “jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). Each person listens to and learns from the other as the self- and group-determined problems of reality are brought to the forefront and grappled with for the goal of clearer understandings and self-determination.

### **Bakhtin’s Theory of Dialog**

Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic is centered in the idea that language does not belong to the individual or the group, but neither and both. He argues that language is “populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others,” (p. 294) and when one speaks in order to make meaning of an object, that meaning is complicated by others’ statements about the same object. Furthermore, meaning is a constant push and pull toward and away from the group’s meaning. The dialogic, then, is the meaning-making push and pull of language.

Central to Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic is the notion of heteroglossia, or many languages. In heteroglossia, a separate language is not necessarily a foreign tongue. Instead, languages can be broken down within themselves. For, according to Bakhtin (1981), “language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between...different socio-ideological groups..., between tendencies, schools, [and] circles” (p. 291). Moreover, each of these heteroglot pieces of language are on a hierarchy, stratified as “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (pp. 291-292). So, heteroglossia can occur within a single language, and my college composition class of only English speakers can yet be labeled heteroglossic. Moreover, this heteroglossia contains the meaning-making push and pull of language.

For example, in my classroom one might find working class, rural and suburbanite language composing the heteroglossia and moving in dialog with one another. Within such a context, consider a word such as ‘education.’ For each of these groups, one might find generally similar ideas about education. In studying one of my Composition classes, for example, I found that the older working class students who had come back to school due to job outsourcing viewed education as a job seeking, skill acquiring venture. This view was also common among those who self-identified as lower socioeconomic status. Conversely, the younger middle class students, many of whom were moving on to four year universities, tended to view education as a mind-expanding, philosophical venture. Neither of these is wrong, but the assignments, the grading, the evaluation and the ultimate meaning taken from the course will push and pull between two such definitions and the teacher’s, especially if the teacher allows dialog to occur in order to find the middle ground.

Shor’s (1996) work in his urban community college classroom gives us a look at such work in action. Importantly, Shor (1996) stresses the power relationships inherent in such push and pull. In particular, groups who have less sense of power are typically less assertive, and vice versa. The students in my own classroom reflected this to a degree, as the middle-class students tended to speak more and with confidence, the working class/rural with more hesitance. Not surprisingly, the middle-class tended to see education as something to contribute to while the working class/rural saw it more as something they received. In order to revise such understandings, Shor (1996) argues with Freire (1970) that dialog must occur between all parties. Yet, this dialog is a conscious act, the nuances of which Bakhtin (1984) can illuminate.

In opposition to such an understanding of dialog, Bakhtin (1984) argues that dialog often happens regardless of speaker intent to alienate and to silence others. The monologue, as a command or some sort of directive, can enter into dialog with other monologues that are focused on the same object. In fact, Bakhtin (1984) argues, “two discourses equally and directly oriented toward a referential object cannot exist side by side without intersecting dialogically” (pp. 188-189). In the classroom for example, the object might be the student. The teacher’s monologue might be that the student has no valuable knowledge, that the student’s understanding of education, for example, is of little import. In such a case, the student’s answering yet unsolicited monologue might be an opposing rebuttal. According to Bakhtin (1984), each of these utterances enters into dialog, even though both are monologic. Thus, for Bakhtin (1984), dialog is a condition of language rather than an attitude of people. Similar to energy being produced when electrons are brought in close contact, meaning is being generated when people are sharing an experience together. Whether we choose to harness the energy or let it disperse, it exists because people cannot share a meaning making experience such as a Composition class without speaking to each other in some way, whether overtly or covertly. Dialogic pedagogy based in a Bakhtinian understanding of dialog recognizes that this tension is first of all occurring and second of all important to address.

Moving further into Bakhtin (1984), dialog is not merely an act between two people but can be an internalized psychosocial occurrence that responds to preconceived stratification. For instance, he argues that the “self-consciousness of a poor man unfolds against the background of a consciousness about him that is socially alien to him. His affirmation of self sounds like a continuous hidden polemic or hidden dialogue with some other person on the theme of himself” (p. 207). The “internally hidden polemic—the word with a sideward glance at someone else’s hostile word” is a common internal dialog made up of “all words that ‘make digs at others’ and all ‘barbed’ words. But here also belongs all self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance. Such speech literally cringes in the presence or the anticipation of someone else’s word, reply, objection. The individual manner in which a person structures his own speech is determined to a significant degree by his peculiar awareness of another’s words, and by his means for reacting to them.” (p. 196). This internal world is not simply an important aspect of dialog that instructors and students can unfold, it is likely the dominant dialog occurring in the classroom, at least initially. As such, ignorance of internal dialog can hamper more overt dialog, which aims to develop critical perspectives.

When we arrive in new social situations packed with new ideas, we naturally rely on our knowledge and comfortable modes of expression. In the freshman composition classroom, we are brought into contact with other views on life, society, and the world. And, initially we (instructor and student) parrot the cultural knowledge we have been given. Of course, the instructor, having come in contact with many different stances, might have a more developed critical self-awareness, but if the instructor follows the information-dispensing model of education, critical self-awareness might not be present or sought. In the classroom, opinions are not on a level playing field, and we quickly encounter social hierarchy and stratification. We may already be in the polemic, gun-shy or trigger-happy from cultural abuse. If we were not aware of the stratification, upon realization we enter into a hidden polemic, in which we either disparage others’ views or our own. This is the gut reaction. Respectful, critical dialog is a learned, mature behavior.

This internal dialog is Bakhtin’s (1984) theory of “hidden dialogicity,” of which he writes “imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but...the general sense is not. The second speaker is visible, his words are not there, but deep

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traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker...Each present, uttered word responds and reacts with every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.” (p. 197). In a sense, we all hear voices.

We are all engaged in a hidden dialog with our own cultures. When we speak publicly in agreement with them, we hear the voices of our parents, family and friends being reproduced and affirmed. We might even hear them agreeing or adding to our points. If our declarations differentiate from our cultures, we feel the pressure from those voices to conform. If we resist conformity, we enter into a hidden polemic with those cultural voices.

Perhaps this is why students in my composition classroom resist critical engagement with their own and counter arguments. The power of the hidden dialog is greater than the new idea. Moreover, the stronger the idea, the more intense the hidden dialog becomes. In this case, the hidden dialog becomes an exhausting intellectual exercise that can quickly lead to the path of least resistance: rejection of critical engagement.

Though Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986) dialogic is more profound than this short work can cover, the primary aspects for this comparison with Freire (1970) are its conception of dialog as a condition of personal and social language exchange rather than an act of intent.

### **Merging Bakhtinian and Freirean Dialog in Practice**

At this point, the discussion returns to the hierarchical power structures inherent in society (Freire 1970) and represented through language (Bakhtin 1981, 1984, 1986). Within the classroom, one common manifestation of this power structure is rejection, by academy and student, of the knowledge and use of language that students bring to the classroom (Delpit 1995). Sadly, even if students are prolific and creative with language in their personal lives, that language is often devalued in the composition classroom (Fecho, Coombs & McAuley 2012). However, a dialogic stance can alter the student teacher relationship and lead the composition classroom toward an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of language.

### *Equality and Tension*

In concert with an inclusion through a Bakhtinian/Freirean dialog, Nystrand et al (1997) offered dialogic pedagogy as an epistemology that views understandings, i.e. knowledge and meaning, as particular and unique events that are constructed by the individuals who meet in the classroom. Thus, the dialogic starts with and builds upon student knowledge. In Freirean fashion, Nystrand (1997) argued that a dialogic stance expects students “to provide thoughtful answers based on their own experience” (p. 25). With the students as the foundation of knowledge, the dialogic “sanctions their reading and writing and consequently promotes values and expectations essential to literacy” (p. 27). Thus, Nystrand presented, perhaps implicitly, the dialogic stance as a solution to the conflict between home and school discourse (Delpit 1995).

In my study of my own classroom, for example, two students who self-identified as African-American members of lower socioeconomic status also said they wrote poetry and journals regularly, for emotional release and to gain perspective in a difficult world. Unfortunately, these students also refused to share their work with me or the class, citing a school-fostered sense of linguistic inferiority of their home dialect in so-called educated contexts (McAuley 2011). However, their contributions to class discussion, delivered in their non-standard home dialect, were articulate and descriptive. For instance, one student who identified herself as

an African-American of lower socioeconomic class described her struggle with writing, explaining “I...got work then come home and take care of kids and cooking, by that time, settle down, you be tired, you be drained, and then I'm like I'll do it tomorrow, you at work, you know I got a desk job, trying to look up sources and all that and people come up and say, what you doing on line?.” Though not Standard English, her expression was explosive in delivery, active in tone and full of motion in style; however, such language would be rejected without consideration in most English Composition classes.

Unfortunately, the brief offering of class discussion coupled with its non-poetic nature offered only a glimpse of the poetic and prosaic voices these students had found in their dialect. Certainly the classroom missed an excellent opportunity to study student-derived literature and linguistic knowledge which would likely have been as rich and articulate as their class dialog, if not more. Moreover, such an experience would surely have edified the students' sense of linguistic voice while achieving the goals of the curriculum.

With these opportunities in mind, Nystrand et al, argued that dialogic communication allows for a modeling of academic discourse without denigration of the students' home literacies. In other words, the teacher is the model for academic discourse, and through the positive experience of dialog with the teacher, the students maintain their own voices but absorb and reproduce the academic discourse at their discretion. Moreover, Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) argue that in a dialogic classroom, students construct their own academic discourse by having “some input into and control over instructional discourse” and by taking turns at “being the teacher” (p. 73). I found such a case in my own study. The student, Eric, responded to the dialogic format with regular advice for me and his fellow students concerning classroom management, assignment design and composition strategies. At first his advice was somewhat shortsighted in its subjectivity. However, as he continued to interact with and listen to the people in the class, he began to offer more objective advice based on the individual's experience. For instance, he was quite familiar and comfortable with computers and software and assumed the same of his peers. Moreover, he was without the responsibility of young children. As the quarter progressed, his academic discourse acquired a more insightful content and sympathetic tone. Eric's final reflection on the course was that he felt edified by the sense that he was a part of rather than a subject to the class.

However, this construction of a secondary discourse is not the only benefit to students. A most important point is the definition of knowledge, or, more specifically, who gets to define what counts as knowledge. In Freirean fashion, Nystrand (1997) argues that “the fundamental issues in a dialogic conception of instruction concern the scope of public classroom space for student voices and how various teacher roles and moves enhance, constrain, and otherwise affect the interpretive roles and therefore the learning of students” (p. 15). In the dialogic classroom, where students are “full-fledged conversants” (Nystrand & Gamoran 1997 p. 73), knowledge is negotiated. And, just as Freire (1970) pointed out, true learning comes when people negotiate their realities. In my study, my initial goal was to foster in students a more critical eye towards writing and education. Although the students in the dialogic context did not express a deeper connection to the content of their essays, they did acknowledge a growing awareness of the inner workings of writing and education in general. They sensed a possibility for deeper engagement through dialog that they had not and most likely would not again experience in their other classes. Through negotiation, students felt as though they mattered.

From this Freirean base, but with Bakhtinian leanings, Nystrand (1997) writes, “our relations with...others in our lives shape our consciousness—how we understand ourselves,

others, and the world around us” (p. 10). Remembering Bakhtin’s internal polemic, the effect of the multiple voices on the individual can be negative. When our discourses come into contact with others, we change. Our root systems stretch out to take in new water, and we are altered for it. According to Bakhtin, the change is inevitable even if each person is monologic in their naming of what is real and valuable. And, this affect could be negative, driving each to more exclusionary and/or self-demeaning conclusions as they realize the position of the other. Though a dialogic exchange has happened, it is a polemic. Nystrand (1997) explains that “a dialogic perspective on instruction [in the Bakhtinian sense] highlights the role that intersecting multiple voices play in individual’s learning and the development of their understandings” (p. 10). The salient example of such intersecting voices in my study was the sense of what the students labeled “correct” and “incorrect” English. Those students who felt that their learned way of speaking was incorrect were less likely to express themselves, initially. Conversely, those who felt comfortable with their speech spoke freely and somewhat proudly. My insistence that all language is equally valuable and complex was met with disbelief by some and outright scoffing by others. Yet, as the quarter progressed, more students were speaking out confidently, which led to deeper communication. As teachers taking dialogic stances, then, we must highlight the negative and positive power of language within our classrooms but push for the positive growth of all. Importantly, the positive potential within dialog defies student self-deprecation, for the Freirean dialogic says that people can change if they make the effort to listen to and learn from each other. This is the role of dialog that we must strive for. The more we engage together in non-monologic expression, the more respect we can gain for the other, recognizing that we come together and are shaped by each other. In other words, we create new discourses together.

According to Nystrand (1997), discourse, and specifically all levels of discussion in class, is the biggest shaper of understanding, a point based in his Bakhtinian understanding of dialog. Though we strive for a non-monologic exchange, the dialogic classroom does not have to be neat; in fact, it is unlikely that it will ever be so, since objection and tension, in a respectful atmosphere, build understanding. People have to voice their opinions, present their ways of being and measure them against other’s. This process will be tense, but conflict in dialog is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, Nystrand and Gamoran (1997) remind us that Bakhtinian dialog is full of tension, arguing that “teachers must prize vigorous discussion in the dialogic classrooms, encouraging what Bakhtin (1981) calls the struggle of ‘contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments’” (p. 73). Asserting this sentiment, Nystrand (1997) maintains that “conflict, disagreement, and struggle” between perspectives promotes growth. Moreover, Freire (1970) speaks of dialogic pedagogy as an “incessant struggle” in which people make “oppression and its causes objects of reflection” and “from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (p. 48).

Thus, tension in dialog is not only inevitable but productive. Like the resistance that strengthens the muscle, through dialog we hone and edify one another and ourselves as we construct meaning through the “expansion of a personally coherent interpretation of information and events” (Nystrand & Gamoran 1997 p. 73). Indeed, it is not realistic to think that we would meet new ideas without having to reconcile them with our current way of thinking. If everyone agreed, what new understandings could we achieve? In order to gain knowledge, students need to “get the floor,” hear others do the same, and engage in the tense but healthy undertaking of public expression of ideas (Nystrand 1997 p. 21).

Lastly, as Freire (1970) argued that teachers and students are “Subjects...in the task of unveiling reality” and “of re-creating that knowledge” (p. 69), Kachur and Prendergast (1997)



similarly argued that the teacher must maintain a self-concept as a coach that lets dialog occur rather than an overseer seeking the “right” answers. Moreover, the teacher cannot adopt a laissez-faire stance toward dialogic exchange, but must actively work against extended polemics. The dialogic classroom is an exploration, an adventure with no prescribed outcome and a place that assumes nothing is “a container for correct meaning” (Kachur & Prendergast 1997 p. 82).

### *Teacher and Student Interaction*

If dialog opens the doors, how are classroom participants to navigate the new experience? In line with the Bakhtinian perspective on dialog, Stock (1995) framed the classroom as a place where “dialog is already underway” from the first moment (p. 10). In addition, she argued that initial compositions are introductions of the discourses that people bring to the classroom. Moreover, she maintained that “individuals from different communities accept different logic as persuasive” (p. 13). Thus, the dialog that is occurring is a meeting of values, beliefs, and ways of being. And, in Freirean fashion, she argued that teachers need to tap into and encourage the continuation of that dialog because the dialogic curriculum gives students the opportunity “to translate the preoccupations of their lived worlds into intellectual occupations in their school world” (p. 20). In other words, student knowledge locates the problem areas that they will explore through literacy activities.

For instance, Stock (1995) noted relationships, drugs and violence as “issues of significant concern” to her students and thus as areas for inquiry (p. 23). But, this departs from Freire’s (1970) direct challenge to Capitalism, skirts the Marxist bent of his work and offers the dialogic stance as one against any and all power structures. Her goal within the dialogic stance, she writes, is to help students “gain control over things that made them feel out of control” (Stock 1995 p. 14). Though this version of a dialogic stance still assumes and addresses oppression, this is a much more general view of its source. In my own study, a number students identified English class as the oppressive environment. Their history in composition classes was one of rejection and silencing rather than self-discovery and empowerment. Thus, the dialogic English class is appropriate for such students who need to gain control of their composition experience in order to find their critical minds and voices.

As a composition teacher, Stock (1995) presented the dialogic composition classroom as one that rejects explicit grammar-mechanics instruction in favor of dialogic modeling. She presented a case in which her written dialog with a student lead to the student adopting elements of the academic discourse that Stock herself uses. Echoing Freire (1970), she argued that compositions are not simply arguments but representations of reality. Consequently, she implied that student adoption of academic discourse occurs because the validation of student knowledge inherent in dialog gives the students confidence to represent themselves as members of the discourse. Yet, including ideas from Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), she recognized the process from student validation to expression as partly the result of a student inner-dialog of discourses that manifests as an outer expression of the same.

As readers of student writings, Stock (1995) explained that we teachers become “students of our students’ developing literacy” (p. 60). So, here is the understanding drawn from Freire (1970) that we consciously erase the line between teacher and student. Moreover, Stock (1995) sees the teachers not just as dialog coaches but as “advisors, consultants, counselors, learners” (p. 60). Certainly, both the teachers’ and students’ role in the dialogic classroom is dynamic and complex.

### *Dialog as Democratic-Critical Pedagogy*

To build on the inclusivity of dialog, hooks (1994, 2003) argued for an emphasis upon a critical focus. For hooks, education is an emotional, spiritual, non-reproducible, human experience. Each classroom is a unique event with unique results. This point seems obvious at first, but the positivist, standardized view of education that prevails today warrants her assertion. hooks' (1994, 2003) reminded us that the classroom is an existential event, and she argued that the dialogic stance is the only one equipped to foster learning within such an experience.

The dialogic, she posited, views the classroom as a community event, the success or failure of which is not pinned on a single individual. By rejecting the teacher as the hero or tragic figure, and the particular students as model citizens or trouble-makers, the community-based dialogic stance allows all to be vulnerable, de-mythologized and, therefore, real. In such a case, true learning can occur, which follows Freire's (1970) ideas of individuals seeing their worlds and themselves realistically in order to act on them.

Unlike Stock (1995) and Nystrand et al (1997), hooks (1994, 2003) presents a dialogic stance that is more overtly Critical in its pedagogy. Adding to Freire's (1970) critique of Capitalism, hooks (2003) identifies "imperialist white-supremist capitalist patriarchal values" as the "covert conservative political underpinnings" that shape classrooms and undermine true education (p. 9). However, like Stock (1995) and Nystrand et al (1997), hooks (2003) does not limit the dialogic stance to the deconstruction of extreme Conservatism. Though her personal experience testifies to the presence of these forces, she is willing to let student experience drive the inquiry within the dialogic classroom.

What hooks (2003) expects of the dialogic stance is not simply the creation of anti-white-supremist-imperialist-patriarchal communities. Instead, she envisions the dialogic as the microcosm of "life-sustaining communities of resistance" (p. 12). All forms of domination must be resisted, and hooks (1994, 2003) has the insight to recognize that the teacher's opinion imposed on the students is simply another form of domination. She argued that the dialogic classroom must maintain a "commitment to 'radical openness,' the will to explore different perspectives and change one's mind as new information is presented" (p. 48). In concert with Nystrand (1997), hooks' (2003) position here shows us what the push against the monologic polemic should look like.

Equating the dialogic stance with democratic education, hooks (2003) views this openness as a necessary component for mutual growth in which all "commit to engage with the other person or the other community" (p. 47). For hooks (2003), true engagement in democracy is others-centered. Like Nystrand (1997), hooks (2003) believes that "conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator" (p. 44). We must talk together. For, like Nystrand (1997), hooks (2003) implies that we can create new discourses together. "The democratic educator," she argues, "works to create closeness" (p. 49).

Thus, the dialogic classroom is a democratic event within a larger democratic community, and hooks (2003) shows us that we must recognize the classroom as an already occurring social act that must uphold the democratic values of our society. In dialogic classrooms, we come together to practice democratic thinking and expression that can serve all.

## Considering a Comprehensive Dialogic in the Classroom

The Freirean view of dialog is the closest to the initial understanding of dialog as talking versus aggression. Indeed, Freire's (1970) dialog is about conflict resolution, but on a very specific and more ideological level than simply coming to a mutually acceptable, *quid pro quo* solution. Rather than being a method for building transitory peace between hierarchical social power structures, the Freirean line of dialog imagines a cultural paradigm shift. Dialog is not "a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants. Nor is it a hostile, polemic argument between those who are committed...to the imposition of their own truth" (Freire 1970 89). Instead, it is a re-imagining of society where sacrificial love trumps desire for power over others. In such a picture of dialog, the classroom is re-imagined as a place where teacher and student both learn and teach.

As instructors, then, we can't simply open up our classrooms to argument and expression of opinion and call it dialogic; in that framework, the instructor's direction for the class most likely reigns in the end. Moreover, we run the risk of producing and strengthening restrictive and oppressive polemics. The Freirean dialogic demands that education be an "organized, systematized, and developed 're-presentation' to individuals of the things about which they want to know more" (p. 93). First, the student is the center of education. Second, the Freirean dialogic is part of Freire's (1970) praxis, in which reflection and action occur simultaneously and recursively for the point of the student, teacher and society becoming more fully human. Third, this requires critical investigation by students and teachers into the students' concerns in order to re-present those things about which they desire to know more.

What the Bakhtinian line of dialog offers to the Freirean is an intricate insight into the cultural interplay occurring through classroom linguistic exchange. Certainly, Freire's (1970) declaration that the word and the world are inseparable reveals his attention to language; however, Freire's center of focus is more upon historical interplay of political voice than linguistic analysis. For Freire, liberation is the ultimate goal of pedagogy, and achievement of that goal is acquired through "increasingly critical knowledge of the current historical context, the view of the world held by people, the principle contradiction of society, and the principle aspect of that contradiction" (p. 176). If we are to understand our students and our relationships with them, we need to perceive more than their concerns and desires or the fact that they are being oppressed. Where the Freirean dialogic offers the general relationship of oppressed and oppressor, the Bakhtinian gives a much more nuanced view of the discursive and pragmatic linguistic practice at work within the Freirean general categories.

Specifically, the Bakhtinian derived insights on the role of language in power relationships are particularly relevant to composition classrooms. Understanding the power and submission implicit within the language used in the classroom is crucial to engage in hooks' (2003) "will to explore different perspectives and change one's mind" (p. 48). In other words, the Bakhtinian understanding of dialog brings in the necessary meta-linguistic aspect mostly missing in the Freirean.

Finally, Freirean and Bakhtinian lines argue in concert that the word is vitally important to the human experience. This reality should give us pause as teachers, especially in Composition classrooms. For Freire (1970), the word is the active agent of change. People use the word to name their world and so transform it (p. 167). Naming your world means having agency in that world. For Bakhtin (1981), uttering a word is a complicated human experience through which we enter into a "complex play of light and shadow" within the social arena of meaning (p. 277). To cherish

the humanity in the classroom is not only the necessary first step but also the thread that must run throughout the dialogic composition classroom if it is to be successful.

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[criticaleducation.org](http://criticaleducation.org)

ISSN 1920-4175

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