Dialogic Encounters of the Critical Kind: Theoretical and Practical Considerations for English Language Arts Pedagogy

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In September 1991, I was a junior in high school. Under the crisp blue skies and rich golds and reds of that Midwestern fall, I fell in love—twice. I started dating my future husband that fall. And that same September, in Ms. Cosgrove's A.P. Literature class, I also I fell in love with English. As I reflect on the origins of both of these love affairs, both grew out of similar stuff. Relationships grow through the intermingling and interweaving of ideas, hopes and sometimes, fears. And such relationships—whether among family, friends, colleagues, or classmates— are primarily accomplished through the medium of conversation.

Six Septembers later, as a novice English teacher, I came into my first classrooms eager to engage my students in conversations about literature, film, writing, and social justice that had made my own experiences in high school and college so rich. I wanted my students to fall in love with English the way I had. I knew discussion was an essential component of this vision I had for my classroom practice. What I did not know, but soon learned, was how difficult such conservations are to achieve.

I know that the pre-service teachers I work with today wish ardently for the same rich type of classroom conversation. And yet time and time again as novice teachers, and even as veterans, the conversations we attempt to facilitate fall flat. Where we find students' silence, we too readily fill the uncomfortable yawning gap in conversation with our own voices. In that discomfort, and in the wake of a long tradition of teacher-dominated classrooms, we turn the potential for dialogue into our own monologue on the symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*, the surprisingly violent imagery in *Romeo and Juliet*'s balcony scene, or the virtues of the semi-colon. Even though we know better, we revert to Initiation Response Evaluation (Nystrand and Gamoran 263-264), the ubiquitous quiz-aloud structure that effectively shuts down the possibility of true dialogue.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to nurture the capacity for richer comprehension in our students. This demands that we de-center ourselves and position students' voices at the core of our practice. I argue in this paper that if there is one guiding principle for a richer, more humane, and more critical practice in English Language Arts, it is that we gauge our success as literacy by our ability to achieve dialogic encounters for our students within our classrooms.

In the spirit of literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of dialogue, I use the term *dialogue* broadly. This might include the common concept of a dialogue—a face-to face conversation between two or more individuals. However, I also include any opportunity in spoken, written, or intrapersonal communication in which two or more voices are in interplay with one another. Thus, constructing dialogic encounters for the classroom offers English Language Arts teachers a broad array of curricular and instructional choices which merge well with our intent to improve students' capacities for communication in multiple genres and media. Amid these diverse possibilities, the key goal remains consistent: ELA teachers should be striving for pedagogical choices that position students' voices at the center of classroom practice, and offer rich opportunities for their voices to intermix with one other and with the voices of authors and characters in the curriculum.

I begin by outlining the theoretical basis for dialogue's place at the center of ELA classrooms, and then describe some of the classroom practices that have aided me in my own quest for more dialogic classrooms.

Traditional Classroom Practice as Monologue

While common sense and much research agree that more effective teaching is a key to closing the achievement gaps, what "effective teaching" looks like is less readily describable. However, given current national tendencies toward standardization, and in the need for efficiency in over-crowded classrooms and overburdened curricula, the subject matter and the instructor remain at the center of too many classrooms. Especially at the secondary level, students' individual and collective needs, interests, and voices remain peripheral objects.

As such, a hierarchical, dualistic approach to secondary pedagogy lingers. Subject matter takes primacy in an environment where the teacher is supposedly the all-knowing expert. Students continue to experience classroom features held-over from the factory era of schooling, such as individual seatwork and multiple choice tests, in lieu of the collaboration and critical thinking required by today's knowledge-based economy.

Why should this be? Why do the efficiencies of teacher-centered or subject-centered instruction fail? Bakhtin's theory of language offers framework for understanding why monologic approaches to classroom instruction, such as those centered on the teacher or on the subject matter, are doomed to fail. Likewise, his work is instrumental in articulating a philosophy of dialogic pedagogy.

In "Discourse in the Novel" (from *The Dialogic Imagination*), Bakhtin explains: "In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active; it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system" (282). Thus, in any speech act, in or out of the classroom, passivity on the part of the audience equals failure to communicate. Without active engagement, without the student's self-determined drive to understand text, teacher, or concept—there is no communication, and thus, no learning. In this manner, Bakhtin's insistence on the essential importance of dialogue aligns with that of other influential educational philosophers, including Socrates, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Freire (Holden 2-4). However, in its suppleness as both a theory of literature and linguistics, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is particularly relevant to English Education. It affords ELA instructors the opportunity to develop a coherent theory for practice as equally applicable to literary texts as it is to classroom pedagogy.

To return to the failings of traditional Initiation Response Evaluation approach to classroom discourse more specifically, the problems with monologic pedagogies become more apparent. Within the IRE pattern, the teacher initiates questions. These questions tend toward monologue in that they usually have narrow and specified answers—answers to which the teacher is already privy. Students intuit the inauthentic nature of such questions. Thus, student responses in this mode tend to be limited to just a few individuals confident enough they have the desired answer. Even for those students who do "speak," the response tends to be brief and sure, not an inquiry or enjoinder to further conversation.

The IRE sequence concludes when the teacher evaluates the response of the student. This additionally closes off dialogic potential. Typically, the evaluation tends toward simplistic judgment: "good," "right," or "wrong" (Nystrand and Gamoran 264). This confirms what the students already suspected—the inauthentic nature of the question. It verifies that the teacher had a predetermined answer in mind. The public nature of this judgment may further inhibit students from taking risks and engaging in speculation. In such a pattern of discourse, the teacher is the only subject, the only one demonstrating understanding. Thus, the IRE based approach to classroom discourse closes off the opportunity for active engagement and achieves only a pseudo-dialogue.

In contrast to the IRE pattern, true dialogue will be tentative, hesitant and incomplete. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues understanding only comes through response. Bakhtin proposes that "primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes into fruition only in response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (282). Yet, the IRE sequence belittles response. Instead of the back and forth of true conversation, IRE conceives of response as the rehearsed performance described above. Alternatively, a pedagogy based on understanding must center on response. Understanding is only possible when students' engaged responses are the center of classroom pedagogy. Traditional classroom discourse, such as IRE, fails to achieve authentic response, fails to achieve understanding, and subsequently fails to achieve learning.

Thus in critical pedagogy, and indeed any effective pedagogy that values student understanding, dialogue must be the defining feature. Although dialogue should be an essential component of classroom discourse, it has remained relatively illusive and peripheral. As such, I will next describe pedagogical strategies that I utilize to promote dialogue within my classrooms. First, I explore considerations for planning curriculum, specifically selecting texts and questions for inquiry. Then I present some of the instructional choices that I have found support and sustain classroom dialogues.

Selecting Texts for Dialogic Encounters: Multiple Voices

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads.
>
> -- Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 276

While Bakhtin claims that the living utterance will inevitably brush up against others, as teachers facilitating learning for thirty or more students each period, we know that our curricular choices will greatly impact the effectiveness of those dialogues. One of the richest ways to weave these "dialogic threads" into the classroom fabric is to build curricular units around texts that contain multiple voices in dialogue with one another, or by combining multiple texts in such a way that they "talk back" to one another.

Bakhtin adopted the concept of *polyphony* from music and applied it to narrative to indicate the multi-vocal quality that characterizes novels. In authentic circumstances with multiple voices, voices may not always harmonize—but can refract and cause tensions. It is in these tensions between differing ideas and voices that learning is possible. Dimitriadis and McCarthy, in their pedagogical exploration of postcolonial art, advocate for inclusion of text that "does not offer the viewer clear solutions to complex problems. . . .[but] is marked by contingency, raising questions more than it offers firm solutions" (Dimitriadis and McCarthy 31). Postmodern and postcolonial texts that are constructed with multiple voices, narrators, characters, or perspectives are predisposed toward dialogic encounters. Contemporary adult fiction, such as *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, make use of such structures, as do young adult titles like *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes and *Monsters of Men* by Patrick Ness. As students read such texts, they confront and question the complex relationships between storytelling, perspective, and truth.

Another method to achieve polyphonic curriculum is to select text pairings that layer multiple perspectives. Like pairing food and wine, the goal is to layer contrasting and complimentary notes, rather than achieve sameness. For example, in my ninth grade poetry unit, one particularly successful lesson plan layers "I Hear America Singing" by Walt Whitman with "I, Too" by Langston Hughes and "A Supermarket in California" by Allen Ginsberg. While all three are perspectives on America written by men, the contrasts in racial and historical perspectives offer a rich opportunity for conversation about how our perspectives are shaped by (and limited by) our experiences. In the culminating activity for the lesson, students write a poem that describes their own perspective on America, and add their own voices to the fabric of this question.

Multiple perspectives can also be layered via multimedia texts.   For example, in our school district, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has long been a required text for 10th graders. This novel must be taught such that the racial injustices of the 1930's make sense to students in the context of what they often perceive to be today's "post-racial" society.   Too often, students' reading of the novel shuts off contemporary relevance by arguing that "that was then." Thus, one way to achieve relevant teaching of canonical texts is to put the classic into a dialogue with another more contemporary text. For example, the Academy-Award winning documentary, *Murder on a Sunday Morning* (2000), tells the story of a young black teenager accused of murdering a white tourist in Florida. The film brings into sharp focus the disconcerting realities of race and the justice system of today.

Likewise, the age-old dilemma of a filmed interpretation of a novel or a play can also become rich sites for dialogic encounters. Students might compare multiple interpretations of the same events in *The Diary of Anne Frank*: working from the text to the written play, and then to one of the film versions (see Spector and Jones for a thorough exposition of such a unit). Likewise, with *Hamlet*, I might select the scene containing Hamlet's confrontation with Ophelia (3.1), and compare the original text with selections from film adaptations such as those directed by Olivier, Zeffirelli, Branagh, and/ or Almereyda.

In each of these cases, the teacher's thoughtful selection and sequencing of texts sets a stage for dialogic encounters within the classroom.   However, text selection alone will not be enough to achieve dialogue. Teachers must also attend to the instructional choices they make with these texts, in particular as they select questions for inquiry and position themselves within the classroom.

Selecting Questions for Dialogic Encounters: Relevant and Critical Inquiry

While thoughtful text selection is a foundation for dialogue, teachers' questions guide inquiry into these texts. Thus deliberate and mindful selection of questions is essential to opening up or shutting down the dialogic potential in any given course, unit or lesson. There are two key principles for selecting questions that I have found most beneficial for weaving dialogue into the fabric of my classroom's daily life. The first is that questions for inquiry should be directed toward the real world of the student. The second principle is that questions should open up multiple critical perspectives upon these real world issues.

Relevance

The transformation education may achieve is through transforming one's thinking about the world and approaches to its problems.   A literacy curriculum based solely upon students collecting discrete and decontextualized knowledge about canonical texts would embody

Bakhtin's conception of monologic discourse, and what Freire termed the "banking model" of education. Instead, as Bruner argues, curriculum development should begin with "choos[ing] the crucial problems, particularly those which are prompting change within our culture. Let those problems and our procedures for thinking about them be part of what school and class work are about" (Bruner 98). In ELA, this means teachers must consider relevance when selecting questions for inquiry, whether the texts under study are literary or informational, professional or student authored.

When the curricular inquiry is directed toward the real world concerns of students, there are at least two pedagogical benefits. First, relevance is widely regarded as a key to motivation and engagement with students. When the challenges of their own reality become the focus of the curriculum, students are less likely to be passive recipients of information. The focus on real life issues also adds authenticity to the curriculum. Relevance invites response, and thus disrupts the monologic leanings of IRE's oral quizzing; furthermore, it resists standardized forms of written work, such as the multiple choice test or fill-in the blank worksheet. Whenever possible, students should embark on inquiries that their interests initiate and enrich these inquiries with their own questions.

In my classrooms, making texts relevant often means that students engage in meaningful dialogue around socio-cultural issues presented by (or ignored in) the text. This includes politics, race, class, gender, as well as explorations of beliefs and values held by characters and themselves. While I might direct an activity or discussion toward a contemporary issue, attention to relevance doesn't mean I have to throw out the canon entirely. It does mean that when my classes approach a text like *Hamlet* (or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Lord of the Flies*) I must be mindful to explore it through a series of inquiries that matter to my students.   Like Hamlet, as young adults, they too are often struggling with decisions, with depression, or even with death. Selecting relevant questions for inquiry into texts gives me a basis to support a more dialogic curriculum. In *Hamlet,* students take up concerns regarding gendered attitudes and double standards regarding sexuality and mental health. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students inquire into the way characters are positioned by Scout and privileged or silenced as a result of their race, class, or gender. Students are more engaged, more likely to initiate sustained response under such circumstances, and thus authentic learning is more likely to take place.

Critical Inquiry

When my pre-service teachers take up the question of critical theory in the secondary classroom, inevitably someone will raise the question: "Isn't this stuff too political for the classroom?" It is a legitimate question given the highly politicized climate across the country these days.   But there is a subtext to this question that requires attention: it requires conversation about what values are important to the ELA curriculum today.

As students of English literature, pre-service teachers often have the misperception that formalism is a neutral stance on a text. They excelled at those A.P. Literature exam multiple choice questions. They may even enjoy them, for what mystified their high school classmates, perhaps came easy to them.   Additionally, as rookie English teachers, their interpretative skills help them claim their teaching authority. They may attempt to school the next generation of readers into this same style of reading literature. In short, they might do exactly what I tried to do at the start of my career. The problem, however, is that formalism never represents a "neutral reading."

One of my main goals for all of my students, regardless of whether they are in a middle school, high school, or college classroom, is to have them begin to recognize that all perspectives have bias. As Bakhtin explains: "There are no neutral words and forms—words and forms that can belong to "no one"; language has been completely shot through with intentions and accents" (293). In order to be an effective reader and thinker in today's information-saturated world, students need to be able to read a text and identify the traces of these "intentions and accents." Regardless of the context in which it is taught, literary theory posits that "knowledge must be approached as problematic in its social construction, and the problem of representation, interpretation, and meaning. . .must become central" (Britzman 43). Thus, ELA students require explicit instruction in critical perspectives such that they can name and select the reading tools they have at their disposal (Appleman).

I am not suggesting that eighth graders need to be studying the more esoteric details of Marxist literary theory—although they certainly delight in the carnivalesque. However, as a means to design developmentally appropriate questions for secondary students, our department adapted three simplified categories of literary theory for younger adolescents: reader response, text-centered, and world perspectives (Meyers 66).

First, the reader response perspective opens up space for the personal to be reflected in reading practices. These types of questions are extremely beneficial to engage and motivate students in examining the relationship between themselves and a text. However, an over reliance on reader response can limit the depth of interaction with a text ("I can't relate, therefore, the text is not relevant"), as well as interactions with others ("We all have different interpretations"). Such impasses defeat the goal of achieving dialogue. Reader response can also become intrusive and problematic if students do not feel safe sharing their personal lives in the public sphere of the classroom (Appleman).

In contrast to the personal focus of the reader response, text-centered approaches such as formalism and structuralism offer tools for close textual examination. Students benefit as readers and writers from careful noticing of the ways an author layers meaning throughout a text. However, these theories also have their limits. Bakhtin notes, "From the point of view of stylistics, the artistic work as a whole . . . is a self-sufficient and closed authorial monologue, one that presumes only passive listeners beyond its own boundaries" (274). Text-centered responses tend to stop at the text; thus they need to work in concert with the addition of reader-based or world perspectives to insure a relevant and authentic inquiry.

Thus the third category, the world theories, might include developmentally appropriate aspects of postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist theories in order to open a wider range of perspectives on texts. This final group of critical theories offers students tools for the deconstruction of sexist, classist, and racist misrepresentations (Johnston 21) and the examination of "systematic oppression and normative privilege" (Ketter and Lewis 179). True, these lenses are openly political. However, naming and giving students access to these major literary theories, as well as a discussion about other "real life" lenses people may bring to a text (i.e. religion, GLBT, environmental, or activity–based), empowers to students select and hone these reading tools for themselves, rather than me inculcating them into one particular way for reading.

By offering students these three theoretical domains of response, students become better equipped to name their own style of response and to craft their own questions for inquiry. In my 9th grade classes, these three broad categories of response worked to frame our reading response journals. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is problematic as a text about race, in that it offers

the view of an upper middle class, white, female child on the events. In order to truly "walk around in some else's shoes," students needed multiple lenses. I found that our explorations of social class, gender roles, and the racial caste system in Maycomb were more focused and explicit when students could name the type of interpretative lens they were using. Likewise, when studying *Romeo and Juliet*, each act of the play required three journal responses, one from each category of Reader, Text, and World. As students gained confidence with the components of each perspective, they would gradually be released from pre-assigned prompts, and craft their own questions within each category.

With this foundation in critical inquiry established in ninth grade and developed in tenth and eleventh, by the time students entered twelfth grade the entire course could be built around integrating critical lenses. Units were designed around specific theories, including Reader Response, formalism, archetypal, postcolonial, Marxist, and gender (Appleman). Each unit integrated texts suited to illustrate the uses of the lens with related writing tasks: a personal narrative in reader response; a synthesis of critical responses to a film in formalism; and ethnography within the socio-cultural perspectives. In addition to diverse academic writing genres, students completed a cumulative portfolio assessment. At the beginning of the course, each student self- selected a unique film to study. A take-home exam at the end of each unit asked students to interpret the same film through the unit's critical lens. By the end of the course, most students were able to identify, apply, and critique each of these perspectives. They reflected on the entire portfolio of critical approaches they had generated, and argued which lenses were most productive for their selected text. Their final writing assignment asked them to utilize the lens of their choosing to develop an inquiry into a story from *The Things They Carried*. Students in this course were rarely aspiring English majors. However, their final reflections often carried a message that read approximately: *Thanks a lot. You totally ruined watching television for me. I can't watch anything anymore without thinking of the lenses.*

In other words, this deliberate scaffolding of multiple critical approaches allowed students to generate dialogue with themselves around the multiple meanings of texts. Bakhtin uses the image of a prism to suggest the dispersion of meaning into the social atmosphere (277). In today's world, such an image is manifest. By providing students with explicit instruction in a variety of theoretical perspectives on texts, we equipped them to engage in dialogic inquiry within our classrooms, as well as empower them to ask such questions about the real life controversies and dilemmas they will encounter in the world outside school.

Selecting Instructional Practices for Dialogic Encounters: Students Voices at the Center

Even when we as teachers have worked to select relevant texts and inquiry questions for our students, we must also create an environment in which their voices are scaffolded to interact in dialogic ways. Bakhtinian theory insists that everyone be an active participant and minimize the division into teacher and student as occurs in a more traditional monologic classroom.

Most importantly, a pedagogy that is directed toward students achieving dialogic encounters must carefully consider the role of the teacher within those encounters. What we as teachers do and do not say will have a major influence on the quality of the classroom dialogue. Despite our normative understanding of teachers as subject matter experts, if we hope that our students will achieve dialogue within our classrooms, we need to structure activities that will allow them to explore the contours of communication arts with us as guides, but not as dominant voices. As social activist and educator Miles Horton states, "The expertise of the educator should be in knowing not to be an expert" (Horton and Freire 131). In ELA, this means we as

teachers need to know how to let students engage with texts and ideas without our interpretations dominating theirs. Appleman simply puts it: "Less me. More them." Whether I am working with middle schoolers, college students, or in-service teachers, my self-evaluation of each lesson starts with asking myself how well I achieved "more them."

In these remaining sections, I offer three common types of ELA classroom activities that can support dialogic opportunities: these include increased use of writing, small group discussions, and large group discussions. Each of these offers dialogic potential, but also comes with limitations that instructors need to consider and reflect on during their implementation in practice.

Writing

One of the best ways to scaffold richer dialogue is to insure that students have opportunities to think through and write about their ideas first. Writing can serve as a form of dialogic response in itself, as well as a means to enhance and extend oral dialogue. Within both my high school and college classrooms, student use informal writing as a means of dialogue with their peers and with me. Within the classroom, students can trade written journal responses with their peers or teacher, and write back to one another. Digital writing, such as a blogs and wikis, accomplishes similar goals, but also affords a wider audience and asynchronous response.

With more formal writing assignments, dialogic potential is enhanced when students are given agency to find authentic subjects and audiences for their own writing. When writing becomes a performance of teacher dictated norms and ideas (such as the five paragraph essay, or narrowly fixed topics), it can become a monologic activity. Without an authentic subject and audience, and the freedom to select the best methods to address the subject to the audience, the dialogic potential of a writing assignment is limited.

Writing is a vital scaffold for oral discussions as well. Before a classroom discussion, writing allows students to focus their thinking, and can build the confidence needed to enter the public discussion. After oral discussions, writing can serve as a means of self-assessment, as well as a way for students to deepen their responses to their peers. As a teacher, this also can be a helpful tool to know who was engaged but perhaps didn't feel comfortable speaking. It also can provide me with additional perspective or lingering questions to follow up with later, and thus it supports the dialogue in numerous ways.

Small Group Discussions

One of the most obvious ways to limit the intrusion of teacher monologue in the classroom is to structure is simply to remove the teacher's voice from the activity. Literature circles (Daniels) and other types of collaborative groups have gained traction in secondary ELA classrooms, and part of their theoretical appeal is that they improve the chances for dialogue by limiting teacher involvement and reducing the number of voices competing for limited turns and time.

However, small group work can turn monologic. Daniels has noted, and my own classroom research has confirmed (Lloyd), that highly structured responses in literature circles can backfire, especially through overreliance on pre-determined "role sheets." Instead of the give and take of discussion, a literature circle can turn into a series of monologic reports. Additionally, in the absence of a teacher, some students may dominate in terms of discussion management (Lewis) or ideological perspectives (Lloyd). In order to be successful in achieving dialogic small group work, teachers need to carefully structure assignments to encourage broader

inquiry, and scaffold students into small group dynamics. Both students and teachers need to carefully observe and reflect upon their patterns of interactions within those groups.

One of the approaches that worked well for my students was that each student prepared questions for the conversation via a different theoretical perspective. This encouraged both differentiated work and diverse perspectives. As students asked their own questions, it offered a more balanced approach to group management by distributing the "teacher-like" role across each meeting. This small revision of the literature circles model more richly supported the possibility for dialogue within the small group discussions.

Large Group Discussions

While small group discussions benefit from the increased turn and time allocation to each student, large group discussions offer the possibility of a wider diversity of voices and opinions. Additionally, students in small groups might feel less inclined to take up controversial or challenging discussions. In order to sustain rich conversations, instructors cannot shy away from conflict, critique, and disagreement (Johnston). However, such work often necessitates that an instructor/ coach is there to facilitate and model the dialogue required to investigate multiple perspectives. Bakhtin argues that we take all of our language from other people's mouths (293-4). In large group discussions, instructors have the opportunity to encourage and model talk about challenging subjects, such as difference, in order to help students develop a discourse of ethical respect (Dilg).

I believe that learning to facilitate large group discussions is one of the most challenging parts of developing an ELA practice. It is still a tricky balance as I try to monitor topics, themes, turn taking, synthesis, and group dynamics. None of the techniques described below is solely my own. I draw heavily here on the work on Mortimer Adler and Paideia style seminar discussions (Holden 4-7). After years of watching fabulous teachers as a student and as a colleague, I have assembled and refined my own *bricolage* of tools for large group discussions which offer it as a productive site for student dialogue.

First, students should never enter a conversation cold. Using writing and small group discussions as warms up supports a richer and more confident exchange within the large group. Usually, even the shyest student will take the floor if he has a journal response prepared to draw upon. Opening a conversation with a reader response question can ease students into a comfort with sharing. I also find asking broad, open ended questions about the text are a powerful way to get started. "What did you notice?" or "What surprised you about this text?" will usually be enough to get well-prepared students talking.

I give students explicit instruction in seminar-style conversations before our first conversation, and reinforce these goals through review, teacher feedback and self-assessment on both group and individual performances. I make our early goals for whole classroom discussion explicit—everyone is expected to speak, and everyone is responsible for encouraging one another to speak. I tell them that I will try to be limited in my intervention and responses. I want them to talk to each other, not to me. As such, I warn them that I will purposely limit my eye contact with them as they take turns. They should know that I am listening intently, usually talking brief notes on the topics they bring to the conversation, and charting turn-taking on a copy of the class list. I will occasionally interrupt, especially with students who are less experienced in seminar style discussions. I might jump in to reframe a question, follow up on a question, call on students who have not taken turns, or ask students who are dominating to step out to offer the floor to others.

I also try to teach the students some of the most useful types of responses that help eliminate the monologic tendencies of IRE, and sustain richer conversations without my intervention. For example, I explicit teach students to enrich their conversation by asking extending questions such as:

- Could you say more about that?
- Why do you think that?
- What does someone else think about that?

When addressing controversial discourses, sometimes we want to voice an idea, but we do not want to own that discourse as "ours." In such cases, Beach, Thein, and Parks suggest prefacing a controversial comment with the stem: "Some people might say. . ." (131). This allows another perspective, even a potentially unpopular one, to become part of a more authentic dialogic exchange.

None of these above suggestions alone will insure a fabulous large group discussion, particularly as each class will have its own social and intellectual dynamics. But through gradual implementation of these techniques, and reflection on their implementation, large group discussion can become a rich dialogic encounter for all participants.

Rethinking Our Teaching: Dialogue as Critical Reflection

The theoretical potential for dialogue offers a vision of an English Language Arts curriculum that is relevant, authentic, and firmly places students' voices at the center of learning. However, in order to achieve such a vision in practice, it is essential that as teachers we continually evaluate the decisions we make for both curriculum and instruction. In each case, we can ask ourselves, "Is this promoting dialogue within my classroom?" We can do this through our text selections: searching out texts that already include multiple voices, or layering multiple perspectives across a sequence of texts. We can do this through our choices of questions for inquiry. We can commit to asking questions that are relevant and authentic, and to teaching our students to ask such questions themselves. We can give our students critical lenses as a tool for learning to see texts from a variety of perspectives.

We can also make careful choices about how we work with the texts and questions within our classrooms. It is not enough to have just fabulous, multi-vocal texts, and rich, open-ended questions. We must also attend to the instructional choices we make with those texts and questions, to insure a coherent vision of a dialogic practice unified across curriculum and instruction. When students have the opportunity to interact with multiple voices and ideas, both written and oral communication afford the possibility of dialogic encounters. At the same time, even though we try to limit the dominance of our voices, almost any activity can turn monologic if completed in a rote manner. Thus it is essential that we still carefully monitor and adjust practices as students work together. Dialogue should open up potential ways of seeing and hearing the world, not limit it. When students do not achieve dialogue their own, it is our responsibility as educators to help them reflect on and refine their communication practices.

Finally, I want to encourage one additional and important type of dialogue— those dialogues that take us outside our own classrooms. Teaching can be a lonely job done in a crowd. We need to interact with other educators in order to sustain ourselves and improve our practices. This work of attending to our own learning is also best accomplished through dialogue. Whether I am refining assignments and lesson plans with colleagues teaching the same course, reading a journal article which challenges my thinking, or attending a conference session, dialogue is how we as teachers learn best too. Schools and departments need to insist on the

times and structures that support the opportunities for teachers to engage in rich conversations. We need to take up discussions around national and local controversies, such as the canon, approaches to grammar instruction, or school policies on technology. In dialogue and collaboration with other teachers, we insure our own life-long learning, and reaffirm our commitment to improving our teaching for the sake of our students. And when we accomplish this, we equip ourselves and our students with the tools they need to fall in love—with learning, literature, and life.

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