Authorizing the Individual Voice, Becoming a Citizen: Dialogue Journals as Transitional Sites

by
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Dialogue journals have recently piqued the interest of teachers in many fields. Teacher education programs have implemented dialogue journals that help to develop thoughtful, reflective, questioning professionals (e.g., Copeland, 1986, Korthagen, 1985; Schon, 1990; Weade, Shea, and Seraphin, 1988; Zeichner, 1987). English teachers have used dialogue journals as a place for responding to literature (Atwell, 1987) and as a place to encourage their students to mutually construct meaning through written conversation (Staton, et al., 1985). Whatever the initial intent, dialogue journals serve many purposes. Our interest here is to describe their use in advanced expository writing courses as they function as a transition site where students begin the work of authorizing their individual voices and in so doing engage in the critical and reflective conversation requisite of responsible citizenship.

In introductory college composition courses, a central assumption is that students enter as novice participants into unfamiliar literary discourses. In these courses the students are about the business of learning the conventions and expectations of those discourses. For students at this stage, writing may most frequently be bounded by this situation (the particularities of the composition classroom or the assignment), by this reader (the professor or perhaps a peer), by this writing self. Other situations, other readers, other writing selves may not be imaginable. Indeed students are perhaps becoming aware for the first time that multiple literate discourses exist, even contend with one another. Nonetheless, for them, Authority (or authorities) and the Answer (or answers) are typically "out there" in the world. As writers they are not agents freely acting in that world of multiple discourses, "correctly" speaking the language (or languages) of that world—yet.

In the advanced expository writing courses we are describing, many of our students experience for the first time a situation in which they are not, to paraphrase Louise Weatherbee Phelps, the objects of the application of these multiple universes of literate discourse (75). Rather, as writers—and as thinkers—they are experiencing a growing sense instead of their own agency. But the questions inevitably arise: agents for what? by what means? on what terms? at what consequences? As writers, as thinkers, many encounter in a personal and intellectual sense something akin to what William Perry describes as Relativism in his scheme of cognitive and ethical development (79). They find that where discourses contend or, as Perry phrases it, "Where Authorities don't know the Right Answers, everyone has a right to his own opinion; no one is wrong" (79). This response to contingency may at first (or for some time) seem to be a possible resting place, comfortable in its way, but in the end it is an unsatisfactory, in fact impossible, ethical ground from which to embark upon the dual role of the citizen as she or he pursues free yet responsible engagement in the world. As teachers we know that we must assist our students as they move on to a dynamic stance that embraces contingency, makes commitments and accepts responsibilities, a stance which is, in Perry's words, "wholehearted while tentative" (79). Thus, as college students are about to enter the larger community, they face the dual concerns of the citizen: What is it to be free? What is it to be responsible?

In the advanced expository writing classes we teach, our chief aim is to create a context—through reading, through discussion and, crucially, through writing, a context in which an exploration both of this fact of contingency or indeterminacy and of the necessity for freely-embraced commitment and responsible action may be undertaken. As writers, as thinkers, as citizens our students must, as a first step, create or authorize their own voices. For this to occur, it is essential that some "space" be cleared within the classroom where the teacher's role is restricted and where expectations regarding the teacher's status as authority are undermined.

Dialogue journals serve as a site where this authorization can be enacted. Within the context of the dialogue journal, roles and role relationships are negotiated. The classroom community is decentralized, traditional authority relationships destabilized. In enabling diverse voices to be heard, the dialogue

journal is a site where an increasingly mature writing and thinking identity may emerge, a site where a surer bond between a free and responsible voice may be developed. These developments occur as the unfolding and dynamic nature of the dialogue journal as conversation asserts itself. In reading and responding to the entries of other participants, in negotiating the purposes of this conversation, journal writers experience a growing sense of community and mutual responsibility.

This social and communal nature of communication, especially of writing, is in the forefront of composition theory and practice. In Democracy and Education, John Dewey states, "Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication is educative....One shares in what another has thought and felt and insofar, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified.... It may fairly be said, therefore, that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it" (4-5).

In a past issue of the Minnesota English Journal (Winter/Spring 1991), Anne O'Meara focuses on the current "emphasis on writing as a social act, an emphasis which values audience awareness and 'contextual flexibility'" (33). To envision writing in this way as a social act rather than as a process requires a rethinking of concepts such as purpose, audience, and context. In an effort to engage university students from a variety of disciplines in an independent activity embedded in this understanding of the social nature of writing, we asked students in our upper level expository writing courses to keep dialogue journals that walked among three or four students and the teacher.

We hoped that these journals would serve as transitional sites, providing a space where students might begin the move away from a reliance on their voices as students to the adoption of the more mature voices of citizens within a larger community. In the dialogue journal, students explored course topics and opinions, and communicated with one another in "a more informal, tentative, and exploratory manner" (Beach & Anson, 1993) than they did in expository essays. This informality allowed students the opportunity to test opinions, to respond to opinions of others, and to experience the teacher as a participant in — but not the arbiter of — the dialogue. We believe that such a dialogue

encourages a sense of classroom community and serves to promote a dynamic conversation as the students move into the community beyond the classroom, toward increased autonomy but also increased responsibility. And so, as the individual voices within the dialogue journal assume more responsibility for the maintenance of collegial inquiry, a self authorized voice emerges — a voice offering and defending an opinion, but also a voice open to considering other opinions — the voice of a citizen.

Voices and purposes in action

Each of our advanced expository writing classes was distinct. In one class, the teacher prepared an anthology of thematically organized readings; in the other class, students selected and provided to class members articles germane to their intended profession. Our purpose in this paper is not to discuss course content. Rather, it is to focus on the transitional role the dialogue journal can play in any advanced expository writing class, no matter how a course is otherwise structured.

In our classes, dialogue journals were shared by groups of three or four students, each of whom wrote entries on the average of once per week. When one participant completed an entry, the journal was then passed on to the next participant who had several days to read over the preceding entries and write a response. Topics were never assigned. We, as teachers, also participated in the dialogue, but tried to restrict our role to that of co-participant. In one class the teacher wrote as frequently as the students; in the other class, the teacher contributed an entry twice during the quarter.

When analyzing these dialogue journals, we were interested in the processes by which journal participants developed or authorized their voices and the manner in which they engaged in the conversation the journal represented. We will describe our findings in two overlapping areas: 1) the voices student journal participants assigned themselves, 2) the purposes and meanings these participants construed for the journal. Commentary on one of these areas will inevitably lead into commentary pertinent in the other area; we do not, therefore, try to maintain a separation.

The journal participants whose task it was to write the first entry had not only to initiate this joint-project but to establish an individual voice as well. The following entry, made by a young woman (we'll call her Mary), states the problem:

> Being the first group member to write in this journal, I feel quite uncomfortable. At this point I do not know its use and I do not know how to interpret its usefulness. Being the leader, I know I should have asked more questions regarding how the journal should be conducted. Alas, class is over and done with and my opportunity to ask my question is past. So, I wing this journal entry and hope for the best. Here goes...

In this opening paragraph, Mary is grappling simultaneously with the dual problem the journal immediately poses. The implicit questions are: What purpose does this journal serve? By what authority do I write in order to advance that purpose? Mary does not answer these questions nor speculate directly. Nevertheless, she initiates a conversation in which the questions can be explored. She is "the first group member" writing, "the leader" by chance. As leader she accedes that it is her responsibility to learn more about the purpose of the journal, but the opportunity to do that, to query the teacher for specific instructions, is past. Yet, in her role as group member, Mary enlists the fellow-feeling of the other participants in the journal who could have easily been in the same predicament as she finds herself in now. Mary at once establishes herself as both a participant in a group project and as an individual with responsibilities to the project as a mutual effort.

Another journal participant (we'll call him Ted) states the problem he is facing in a similar manner. He says: "Since I have the unenviable task of beginning this journal, I feel I have the right to begin this in a very simple way with a simple entry." Ted, like Mary, is sure neither of the purpose of the journal nor of his role in advancing that purpose. He reasons, however, that as it is his "unenviable task" to begin, he has a certain latitude, a certain authority, regarding the manner in which he shoulders that responsibility.

Both Mary's and Ted's entries continue with a reprise of the discussion that had occurred in class that day. They each make reference to the essay that everyone in the class had read, the ideas the writer had raised that interested them particularly, and the train of thought that the reading as well as the discussion had initiated in their own minds. Mary closes by stating a question and then saying, "(t) his question has been at the back of my mind since Thursday and I still have not found a satisfiable (sic) answer." In a sense, she is establishing a point of reference or making a conversational gambit for the next participant to ponder and perhaps respond to. Similarly, Ted poses several questions, perhaps rhetorically or perhaps as conversational gambits to be taken up by other journal participants. However, unlike Mary, Ted seems to close his journal entry with a disclaimer regarding the path he has chosen to take. He says,

> It would be a lot easier to write if I had more material to draw from, but I had to be the one that started the journal, so I really don't know what else to write about.

Perhaps in this final comment, Ted, too, is invoking a sense of fellow-feeling on the part of his co-participants in this journal project. They could easily have been in the position in which he found himself.

These two journal writers have chosen to authorize their personal voices in order to speak directly to their fellow writers as individuals faced with a dilemma but also as participants in a joint project. However, very few of those who wrote initial entries used this strategy.

Other journal writers begin by speaking in a voice more familiar, one mindful of the presence of the teacher. They speak as students. For example, typical entries of this nature begin in this way:

> Zinsser's comments on clutter call for some observation or thoughts. His idea of ridding all writing of clutter is a good one, but it also may make the world more interesting. A world without useless words would be like a salesman without a good

> line. The world's politicians and their speech writers would surely be out of work and in need of new schooling.

In this entry, Carol knows her role and her voice. As a person, she stands in the shadow of the claims she makes. She is the student, and, traditionally, it is the student's job to summarize or respond to material or events which were shaped by the teacher. It appears that she, as a student, does not feel authorized to question or explore, nor is she allowed the collaboration of her peers. Carol seems sure of her purpose and does not address her co-writers or provide a conversational gambit. Her entry suggests that she does not yet envision the social purpose of the journal and her role in it, but instead assumes what Beach and Anson call "a pose of definitiveness or feigned authority" (192).

Likewise, Jean's initial entry reflects the typical student voice even though it has a more personalized overtone.

> I have to write about Gibbon's article, "In Search of Heroes." I liked it a lot. I almost feel like I know the man, just because the article is so personal. I'm also a sucker for examples that are entertaining, and he used a fair number. His argument is unclear to me, but that doesn't really matter because I just want to talk about heroes.

Her comment, "have to write," seems to imply an assigned topic and to negate her own responsibility for the topic. Just as Jean does not appear to see herself as a free agent taking control, neither does she invite others to share in her discussion of heroes. In a sense, both Carol and Jean appear to know the purpose of the journal; it is to summarize and react to readings, essentially maintaining the student role of object of the teacher's action. Perhaps they are not asserting themselves because the teacher is seen as the authority. They see no need to assert a doubting or uncomfortable self; their position is sure; the role relationships in the classroom are stable.

Ted and Mary on the other hand, by voicing uncertainty and doubt, recognize immediately that the relationship between student and teacher is not

in the proper order. They allow for the journal to be or to become more than just another class activity.

As the dialogue journal continues to circulate during the quarter, the self-authorized voice becomes more evident, as shown through Jane's entry. Personal thoughts emerge as she assumes authority by engaging others with a request for help.

> I'm working on my second paper right now. I intend for it to become a memoir of growing up with two of my brothers, but more than that I want to explore the difficulty people have communicating how they feel about each other, or what they simply think about one another. My family is not a close one at all. And we certainly are not a demonstrative family. As a result I believe many of us have trouble with relationships of every kind outside the family.
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> I realize that I'm getting a little personal and I think I'm starting to ramble. It's just that I've been thinking of this quite a lot lately....Some of the essays we've read for class such as Jane Smiley's "Long Distance" kind of reminds me of my family. Kirby's family has a hard time communicating, just like mine, and it obviously affects other relationships. Like I said, this subject has been on my mind a lot and I want to write a paper about, or rather, I've started a paper about it, but I'm having trouble and I'm not sure why. If either of you have any ideas about anything I've written, I'd welcome them.

In this entry by writing, thinking, pondering, and requesting assistance, Jane seems to realize the importance of collegial inquiry. She has authorized her individual voice; it is not the disengaged student voice "parroting back" to the teacher, but rather a public voice inviting the opinions of others.

Eventually, every participant establishes a voice in the journal. For many participants this involves self-revelation as well as a direct and honest

engagement in dialogue with another journal participant. Their understanding of the purpose of the journal evolves within this context. Aiki, a Japanese student, speaks with an honest and self revelatory voice in her entry:

> I think I am going to kind of answer about the question posed by Ted in the very first entry, which is, "Can a word like peace have a definition? And if so, whose definition should the word be defined?" My response is that meaning of words are decided by context or cultures, so roughly speaking, everyone can have a different meaning for the same word. It's not quite answering the question, since it's not about definition of a word, but it's my opinion.
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> ... I think it is true that language shapes people to some extent. I've been living here for only seven months, but my behavior is different when I am speaking in Japanese and in English. For example, I do not talk to strangers in Japanese, but I do say "Hi!" to the people whom I'm not familiar with in English. So I suppose language affects our behavior.

Aiki not only recognizes that she is free to offer her own individual experiences to the conversation, but also that she must assume the responsibility that her contributions as a participant in an on-going dialogue be relevant. She seems to do so willingly.

However, not all participants establish a voice which supports dialogue or shoulders responsibility for the continuation of the conversation. For example, John, throughout the journal, begins his entries with a formalized thesis statement, making a claim about an aspect of the essay the class had read. Throughout the term he maintains the voice of the student, neither addressing his co-participants by name nor referring to their entries. At the other extreme is Amy who, while she establishes an individual voice, seems to deny both her responsibility for and her knowledge of the implicit purpose of the shared journal:

> Oh, smile... spring has begun. Nolan Ryan is still pitching (year 27) and John Cougar Mellencamp has an album due in the summer. So keep your heads up — school will be over in a couple of weeks.

Amy's entry stands in contrast to that of Aiki discussed above. While Amy recognizes her freedom to assume an individual voice, she denies her responsibility to contribute relevantly to the conversation already initiated. She also seems to misconstrue the purpose other participants had established for the journal conversation, which is to explore, to respond relevantly to, and to elaborate and comment upon ideas offered by other participants.

Frequently, such a conversation challenges comfortable or long held positions. Kari's entry is a good example of how this may be handled. Her entry follows a class discussion on the ethics of fetal tissue use and responds to Brad's previous entry stating his position on the issue.

> As far as the fetal tissue issue is concerned, I am having a difficult time deciding how I feel. You see, I am a part of the "Catholic category" Thomas [another journal participant] mentioned. Although I do not agree with everything my church says, abortion is one issue that I do side with my church on. I believe life begins at conception, and therefore, abortion is murder. I realize others feel differently, and although pro-lifers and pro-choicers may never understand each other, as Americans we all have the right to our opinions. So, because of my belief concerning abortion, it would be a contradiction to support fetal tissue experimentation. Unfortunately, because abortion is legal, I have to consider Brad's point of view. As long as abortion does exist, why not make a positive thing come from it?

Here Kari examines her views within the larger social context of the contending claims of church and society. She recognizes the complexities within which she holds her position. At the same time, while she disagrees with Brad,

she does so in a manner which supports the continuation of the dialogue. Tolerance of Brad's views, in this case, doesn't mean accepting them, nor does it mean abandoning her own. Instead, Kari recognizes that tolerance for alternative views creates a space within which genuinely meaningful conversation can take place.

In conclusion, we have found that the dialogue journal serves well as a site where our students can explore and nurture their growing awareness of both their own agency and their increasingly complex understanding of the community they will join. It is a site where they may consider, in dialogue with one another, how they are situated in such a community, the freedoms it provides them as well as the obligations it requires of them.

In authorizing their individual voices, their first step is to move beyond the role of the student. In initiating the conversation, some participants are put in the position of assuming a leadership role. Those who accept this role squarely recognize that it requires of them that they not only make decisions about the nature of the journal and offer a possible vision of its purpose but also that they invite the comment and response of other participants in their joint pursuit of that purpose. These participants recognize that for the journal to be really vital, they must contribute to it in a manner which is cognizant of the community nature of the project. The conversation requires that they make relevant contributions and supportive responses. The individual voice speaking in isolation undermines, even denies the purpose of the dialogue journal.

The dialogue journal opens up a space where authentic conversation can take place. The participants in the dialogue journal give voice to the commitments and responsibilities that they must accept as individuals and as members of multiple communities, the commitments and responsibilities that are the partners of individual freedom and autonomous action in a democracy.

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