

Building Consensus: Bakhtinian Dialogue in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT:

The demographics of the United States are changing. As of 2007, 1 out of every 7 citizens was born outside of the United States (Aud, et. al., 2010). This, as well as the growing number of international students who choose to attend American universities, is helping to change the face of our college campuses, and often, instructors find themselves unsure about how best to serve this diverse group of learners. We envision this as the last opportunity to instill, in them, the knowledge and tools they will need for professional and personal success. Instead, this microcosm represents the first of their future encounters. The global economy points to a need for individuals who won't just function in an environment of eclecticism but thrive there, and to enact the positive changes that will benefit a global community. Meanwhile, colleges and universities are faced with ever-increasing pressure to improve student outcomes, retention, perseverance, and completion (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Astin, 1999). Student engagement impacts on these outcomes (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009). Actively engaged students learn more and better (Park, 2003). This essay focuses on how student dialogue engages all students, initiates higher level thinking, including problem-solving, and transforms seemingly unrelated individuals into a cohesive cohort of learners who appreciate the diversity surrounding them.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Constructivist Theory, Cooperative Learning, Dialogue, Multiculturalism

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One needn't be a mind reader to realize you have a reason for reading this essay. Maybe you're in graduate school; preparing for a future in post secondary education, or perhaps graduate school is finally behind you. Soon you will be walking into your first classroom and you're doing everything possible to arm yourself with worthwhile tips and suggestions for success, or you may have chosen to read this as a last resort an effort to try and cure what seems to ail your college students the lackluster attitudes, the lethargy that seems to pervade your classes and chokes the life from students. You may be blaming the administrators and admissions officers for their choice of attendees. If this is the case, take another look at your students. What appears to be indifference may instead be a group of students waiting for an invitation and opportunity to become active participants in the learning community. Teaching, by any account, is challenging, especially with the wide range of abilities and the increasing diversity of our students; the number of minority and international students is projected to continue, and, "By the year 2020, minority students are predicted to represent 39 percent of the total population" (Kewal-Ramani et al., 2010). This leaves many, if not most of us, feeling insecure, unsure about how to best serve all students. Worse, the skills we attempt to instill seem limited; lacking the inclusion of those tools that will serve graduates to contribute to the wider community they will enter. While testing often reflects student learning, there are other, potentially effective ways to impact student knowledge, encourage progress, and motivate growth that will better serve students to both excel academically and become responsible residents of the global community. All this can be done without ever asking students to commit one word on paper. Instead, consider dialogue, whether in small groups, large groups, teams of two, or even between student and teacher. The benefits abound, and perhaps the most

important benefit is the level of satisfaction for both the teacher and students. Authentic discussion could be the way to infuse life back into your classroom, and Bakhtin has much to say on the subject; offering theories and guiding you to a world of learning through dialogue.

Dialogue

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin,1984a, p.110).

Terms like dialogic and dialogism are based on Bakhtin’s literary concepts. According to the theorist, dialogic works of literature were not just extensions of, but in answer to, other written pieces. In other words, there is dialogue between textual pieces; the one being informed by those which came before. This concept applies not just to literature but to all language especially language in the classroom. Classroom dialogue is nothing new, right? After all, classrooms are rarely silent, but while someone is usually talking, how often is that someone you, the teacher? Lecture actually stands in direct opposition to what Bakhtin envisioned; it’s monologic one voiced discussion, as opposed to a discussion between different voices. Just as Bakhtin envisioned written texts, responding to those which came before, presenting ideas which would, inevitably, be responded to in like fashion, so might classroom dialogue. Conversation doesn’t exist in isolation; what any of us say is ultimately in response to something that has been said before, and, conversely, anticipates that which will come afterwards language is dynamic, active, alive.

Bakhtin wrote, "I live in a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, 1989, p.143). In essence, the words we speak have been uttered before you might say they’re borrowed, and our ability to draw from our bank of words and ideas is dependent on the number of words and ideas that have been deposited into our bank. The more exposure we have to language through conversation, through literature, through media, and in this case, classroom dialogue, the larger our banks becomes. Lest you be misled, it’s important to differentiate between words and utterances, as Bakhtin conceived of them; words, in and of themselves, might be considered neutral and have simple definitions. This is what we find in a dictionary. Common understanding of words allows us to communicate we’re on the same page. But, “When we select words in the process of constructing an utterance, we by no means always take them from the system of language in their neutral, *dictionary* form. We usually take them from *other utterances* and mainly from utterances that are kindred to ours in genre, that is, in theme, composition, or style” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.87). An example of the difference might be reflected in the word *love*. If somebody tells you they love apple pie, we understand the word to mean fond of, or partial to. If, on the other hand, someone tells you they *love* their children, I think we can all agree it implies something different a commitment, a deep seeded emotion. We understand what they mean because, through dialogue, we have been offered *context*. Context, according to Bakhtin, is hugely important:

To understand another person’s utterance means to orient yourself with respect to it, to find a proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in the process of understanding, we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. The greater their number and weight, the deeper and more substantial our understanding will be... Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next. Understanding strives to match the speaker’s word with a counter word. Only in understanding a word in a foreign tongue is the attempt made to match it with the ‘same’ word in one’s own language” (Volosinov,1986, p.102).

With this understanding in place, a conversation, more appropriately termed *dialogue*, is possible. So, with any luck at all, two things have been made clear, “Young children develop their knowledge of native and foreign languages in a variety of settings and interactions; they explain that children's awareness emerges as

a multi-voiced, rather than a unified, construct” (Hall, 2005, p.5). The other important point is about how dialogue occurs. “Neutral dictionary definitions of the words of a language ensure their common features and guarantee that all speakers of a given language will understand one another, but the use of words in live speech communication is always individual and contextual in nature” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.88). Now let’s discuss the benefits of dialogue, under the auspices of classroom conversations.

Dialogue and Selfhood

To be means to communicate... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he (sic) is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself... looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another (Bakhtin, 198a, p.287).

Bakhtin’s theory of selfhood through dialogue is in direct opposition to Descartes, who famously espoused, *I think, therefore I am*. This concept reflects selfhood through introspection. Bakhtin, on the other hand, believed that each of us gains consciousness through dialogue with others. Ideologies are the lenses through which we see and understand the world. Because ideologies are fluid by nature, language, through dialogue, mediates between individuals altering, to some extent, the ideologies of those immersed in conversation. Because most of us are members of many ideological communities, each utilizing a unique language to articulate values, and because each utterance reflects those values, our worlds are recreated each time we engage in the social process of dialogue. School should support students in their personal evolution; encouraging the conversations that will, to some degree, cause internal conflict regarding beliefs and ideals, opening the doors for altered ideas and beliefs. This ensuing transformation has far-reaching implications, not just for students’ school lives but their home lives as well. Conflicting ideologies inherently and inevitably seek resolution. Morson (1986), literary critic and author, wrote:

[According to Bakhtin] Selfhood derives from an internalization of the voices a person has heard, and each of these voices is saturated with social and ideological values. Thought itself is but inner speech, and inner speech is outer speech that we have learned to speak in our heads while retaining the full register of conflicting social values (1986, p. 85).

This pertains directly to classroom dialogue, the conversations which, through encouragement and support, culminate in new ideas for students, ideas that take on life and meaning, and which are possible, believed Bakhtin, only through the act of dialogue the combination of both an utterance and response to that utterance. The conversations might be academic in nature pertaining to a classroom assignment, or they may be more personal in nature. The latter should, by no means, be discounted. This kind of dialogue, in some ways, sets the stage for more and better academic learning for students, helps to build bridges, and encourages the evolution of empathy for students. One might consider this type of discourse a necessary prelude to an optimal learning environment.

Polyphony

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels. What unfolds in his novels is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with his own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event[s he depicts] (Bakhtin, 1984a, p.6).

Bakhtin’s concepts serve as theoretic frameworks for us. They can help us understand what terms like *linguistic utterances* mean, not just definitionally, but practically, how and why we should bring such concepts into the classroom. In order to use dialogue effectively in the classroom, we need to internalize how and why dialogue might occur, and how conversations impact us, both as individuals and as a society.

To that end, it seems logical to start at the beginning. You may be familiar with the word *polyphony*, especially if you have a background in music. It actually means *many sounds*. Polyphony points to the multiple, independent harmonies that occur simultaneously in a musical piece. This, in essence, was the basis for Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, but the focus was on language rather than on musical notes. He believed in, "... the fundamental plurality of unmerged consciousnesses" (1984a, p.9), and that is, perhaps, the best way to envision our classes; filled with *unmerged consciousnesses*. The first step is acknowledging, rather than ignoring, the diversity of our students; their cultures, their stories, their backgrounds, and their life experiences. Acknowledgement, however, is not enough; these differences need to be validated, valued by us. The celebratory embrace of differences encourages and enables students to find and use their voices, and this is a necessary precursor to open, honest dialogue in our increasingly diverse classrooms.

A Multicultural Classroom in a Multicultural Country

Demographic changes throughout the country are reflected in our classrooms. The infusion of new and different cultures presents special challenges for teachers and their students, as do potential language barriers. These realities, however, present us with a golden opportunity. This infusion of unique ideologies and world views is reflected in the inherent poly-phonic nature of dialogue. In other words, students, like all people, come to the table with opinions, beliefs, and views. Sharing ideas and debating conflicting ideologies encourages dialogue and ideological transformation. Unfortunately, rather than embracing multiculturalism, the emphasis has traditionally been on assimilation. Instead of encouraging clashing ideas to surface so students might examine their legitimacy and origins, teachers, fearing exactly this kind of conflict, often attempt to sweep differences under the table. Ignoring the elephant in the room does not, however, benefit anybody. Differences do not, by default, cease to exist, nor do they cease to matter. Lacking the ability to dialogue does little to encourage exchange of ideas or personal growth. It also does little to reduce the challenges nontraditional students face, and has actually proved to be an "unqualified failure" (Fox, 1993, p.42). The alternative to attempting neutralization of differences calls for practices that both acknowledge and validate what is unique to individuals and the groups they represent. Because of the rich cultures and unique experiences students arrive with, dialogue might serve not just to allow, but to promote active engagement and understanding. Through dialogue, students can teach each other. You have the opportunity to foster a climate of acceptance and support by allowing students a voice. The road, however, can be rough even treacherous. Authentic reactions from students may well stir up conflicts, and you need to be accepting, even enthusiastic, of this process. Bakhtin (1981) acknowledged the turbulent nature of discourse and the potential discord it causes. The outcome, however, can be a heightened sense of self awareness for students and the kind of continuous conversation necessary for the creation and constant recreation of *self*.

Bakhtin and Cooperative Learning

Dialogue is an essential element of cooperative learning, a theory based on the premise that many heads are better than one. Although Bakhtin's focus was not on classroom learning specifically, in many ways, his theories intersect with the principles behind cooperative learning. Rather than treating knowledge as fixed, cooperative learning enables students to actually construct knowledge through their own discoveries and promotes problem solving by making them active participants in communities of learners in much the same way Bakhtin envisioned dialogue leading to new ideas (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15). If you look closely, you'll find Bakhtin is in very good company. Dewey (1938) envisioned education as a social process, and espoused the virtues of learning communities;

This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group... As the most mature member of the group, [the teacher] has a peculiar responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and intercommunications which are the very life of the group as a community... When

education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process,... the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator (pp.65-66).

Under the guise of cognitive theory development, well known theorists such as Vygotsky also supported classroom dialogue, though his rationale was less about the concept of the evolving *self* and more about classroom learning. Vygotsky (1962) theorized that knowledge is socially constructed from group efforts to collectively comprehend and solve problems, and he espoused the necessity of collaborative learning and problem solving for the construction of knowledge.

Collaborative learning and problem solving both rely on discourse and this directly relates to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. There are two types of discourse; authoritative and internally persuasive. Bakhtin (1981) describes the former as infused with power; it mandates allegiance and subservience. The classroom discourse we, as teachers, engage in is, by its very nature, authoritative. Our institutional positions preclude language that is other than hieratic, impregnated with authority. Conversely, internally persuasive discourse is, "...denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (p. 342). It is this form of discourse that is dialogic in nature. These words, lacking in fixed meaning, are open to interpretation and construction of new knowledge.

Bakhtin and Constructivist Theory

If Bakhtin were still alive, there's a strong possibility he would disagree with current classroom practices as they discourage opportunities for developing *self*. Learners, too often, play a passive role in the process of learning. Teachers deliver information and students are expected to regurgitate that same information in the form of essays or responses to examination questions (Brooks & rooks, 1993). This process prevents authentic dialogue, limits the breadth and depth of knowledge, dulls the brain, and can potentially bore students into a comatose state. Constructivists, by contrast, believe "the brain needs to create its own meanings. Meaningful learning is built on creativity and is the source of much joy that students can experience in education" (Caine & Caine, 1994, p.105). If we commit to redefining our role as teachers, if we discard our image of students as vessels to be filled with knowledge, we might engage them, both academically and personally, through moderation and facilitation, corner-stones of constructivist theory. This scenario creates opportunity for the kind of transformative dialogue Bakhtin envisioned because dialogue begins with an utterance that elicits a response. It is through this interaction that ideas are born, take root, and blossom into new meaning.

The idea lives not in one person's isolated individual consciousness if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others (Bakhtin, 1984a, pp.87-88).

Bakhtin and Carnival

Most of us are familiar with Mardi Gras the frenzied festival celebrated annually in New Orleans. It begins on the Feast of the Epiphany and ends the day before Ash Wednesday. The tradition began in Venice centuries ago, and as is true with its current-day incarnation, during Mardi Gras, anything could happen. This is the essence of the *carnival* Bakhtin referred to when he wrote,

[Carnival] celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (Bakhtin, 1986, p.10).

Bakhtin wrote on carnivalesque in literature most often dialogue found in Menippean satire, where everything seems to be turned upside-down; beggars become kings, fools become wise men. Menippean satire questions the political, cultural, and societal status quo, potentially, in an attempt to enact change (Bakhtin, 2003). Novels like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* are good examples of such literature, and Twain was a master of Menippean satire. Think about the Duke and King in Huckleberry Finn. They were just con artists, peddling their get rich quick schemes, often successfully, because of their impressive yet meaningless and fraudulent titles. These passages may make us laugh, not necessarily *with* but *at* these characters; after all, the Duke and King are buffoons, and those who are swindled do, to some degree, get what they deserve. Does this mean we're basically mean spirited readers? Not necessarily. Does it mean we're unsympathetic to the plight of those duped? Potentially. So there you have it; an extremely abridged and simplified explanation of carnivalesque in literature. What would happen, do you suppose, if a degree of carnivalesque dialogic discourse were to erupt in a classroom? Would it bring bedlam or benefit? Does carnival reflect rebellion or creative play?

Carnival in the Classroom

Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act... The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is no carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it... or any other form of inequality among people (Bakhtin, 1984a, p.122).

Hypothetically, consider a more traditional classroom, potentially didactic in nature an orderly classroom. A teacher asks a question, hoping for active participation; proof of life. Even if he or she is lucky enough to see a hand go up, the student's response will be, by default, either correct or incorrect. What if the student answers incorrectly what happens next? Most often, the teacher is kind and says something like, "No, but that was a good try!", and he or she moves on to the next student, right? So how, exactly, do you reconcile this scenario in relation to Bakhtin's thoughts on wholly participative dialogue? Does it exist because hands were raised, voices were heard, a response to an utterance was offered? If you answered "Yes.", I'd have to say, "No, but that was a good try!" Just as there is no final completion of *self*, dialogism is, by its very nature, ongoing without end or resolution. Offering a student a choice of answers does not qualify as dialogue and the conversation does not end when the lesson is completed. The innate need for voice is never silenced, though the conversation may not be verbal or productive. Failure to obey rules, a sneer or a smirk, a sleeping student; these are just some the ways students find to *respond* to the teacher or the lesson, and if we're honest, we know what miserable failures we feel like when this occurs. More than likely, you're not the failure your approach is. Monologic didacticism limits students' thoughts, speech, and actions in the classroom, and confines you to the one dimensional role of decision maker or authority figure (Britzman, 1999). The alternative, however, can be scary. Enacting carnival means surrendering your sheriff's badge; your classroom becomes a lawless place where there is no boss. Everyone is an equal. Rude, crude comments and raucous laughter might erupt. Survival depends on your ability to laugh at yourself, or more frightening, allowing your students to laugh at you. It means allowing intellectual and moral passions to erupt, and allowing you the latitude to do the same. At this point, you might ask, "Why on earth would anyone allow this behavior? Who, in their right mind, would welcome this kind of bedlam?" Because festive play has the ability to bridge the gap between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Carnival is a way of overthrowing hierarchies and power inequities. For Bakhtin (1984b) "the unofficial carnival is people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (p.8). Carnival encourages students to find their *voice* by internalizing and redefining the words of others. Palmer (1991) argues "there is a growing sense that teaching and learning don't really happen unless there is some kind of building of relationships not only between teacher and students but between teachers, students and subject" (Claxton, 1991, p.23). A degree of carnivalesque discourse can aid in this pursuit. Billig (2005) makes the point that "rebellious humour

conveys an image of momentary freedom from the restraints of social convention”, and “constitutes a brief escape... a moment of transcendence” (p.208). And should you fear mutiny, a total loss of control, remember the way in which Bakhtin considered carnivalesque humor in the middle ages it was ambiguous; rebellious and conservative, mocking authority even as they restored the social order to its previous equilibrium. Lin and Luk (2005) propose that teachers should enable students to construct in the classroom “their own preferred worlds, preferred identities, and preferred voices” (p.94). This, they believe, will allow teachers far better insights about their worlds, their voices, their identities. This heightened knowledge, they believe, will enable teachers to “capitalise on the local resources of students to build bridges between students’ life world and what is required of them in the school world”.

Bakhtinian Theories in Action

I’ve been teaching for more than 20 years, and even before I heard the name *Bakhtin*, I intuited the wisdom of authentic dialogue and laughter in the classroom. Figuring out what brings students to class isn’t rocket science, especially if you teach at the college level where attendance is not necessarily mandated. The reality is kids do not, by nature, have an aversion to classes or learning... they have an aversion to boredom and what they perceive as wasted time, so make them welcomed, give value to their voices, and they will come. At this juncture, I’d like to share my story, and then I’ll offer some of the more valuable studies that show how Bakhtinian theories have proved beneficial in classrooms, both here in the U.S. and abroad.

For the last 15 years, I’ve taught developmental composition at a relatively small private college in the northeast. I love my job, and I owe my success, at least in part, to that internal voice that craves dialogue with others, not just the teacher-student dialogue, but on a multitude of different levels, and it’s allowed a degree of mutual trust and respect to flourish in my classes. If a person defines themselves as simply *teacher*, they run the risk of internalizing a kind of scripted identity. McKnight (2004) interpreted Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984a) thoughts on this subject as, “...those who enter into certain roles, with highly regulated rules of method and behavior, often assume the full acceptance of those monologic policies as an ethical duty. However, this acceptance diminishes dialogue and the project of self” (p.291-2). In other words, teachers who define themselves in terms of a single dimension, *teacher*, fail to nurture and sustain growth of *self*. This could leave teachers feeling somehow isolated, while students feel unrecognized. Without dialogue, no relationship is formed, and lacking this relationship, the subject itself becomes subjugated. The result is unhappy students, unfulfilled teachers, and unexplored subjects.

Each semester, I welcome an eclectic group of students to class. Their backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses vary but what they share are their expectations for success, or more to the point, their lack of expectations. Creating a team, a kind of family, not only improves their level of comfort, it creates a safe zone where they know their thoughts and ideas will be appreciated. This doesn’t mean there are no good natured barbs or laughter over the absurd, but they know that beneath the guffaws, there’s a level of respect they can count on. And sometimes the laughter is aimed at me, but they know that’s good too. They know it’s okay because they know me, and they know me because of the ongoing conversations we share. Rather than seeing me as the one with all the answers, they see me as having as many questions as they do, and this makes them more confident in posing their questions. More questions lead to more conversations, more rethinking, more engagement, and, ultimately, to improved writing. These things are possible because they choose to attend, and they choose to attend because class, according to the vast majority of my students, is always lively and fun.

As you might expect, students in composition class are immersed in reading, writing, and conversation dialogue. One of our projects asks students to identify a problem and present a realistic solution. Rather than shying away from issues that might be considered controversial or politically sensitive, I encourage students to explore the inequities they perceive, and to use research to compare their perceptions with the potential objective realities. I love this assignment because it encourages students to build bridges between their home

lives and their academic lives. It helps students find their voices, and it inherently challenges ideologies. It also necessitates dialogue between students, dialogue that brings to the surface clashing beliefs. These authentic, sometimes heated, conversations culminate in new understanding of social issues and better understanding between classmates. Though it might seem counter intuitive, creating activities that focus on cultural perspective actually brings students together and fosters newfound respect between students, respect that comes from better understanding. While my story is anecdotal, other teachers and researchers have studied the impact of dialogue and come to similar conclusions.

Research on Bakhtinian Theory in Action

Social Dialogue and Rethinking:

According to Bakhtin, our internal conversations, the dialogues that make up our texts, will inevitably be richer if they occur in sociocognitive and cognitive spaces where multiple voices and multiple ways of voicing are welcomed (Freedman, 1994, p.227).

Knoeller (2004) conducted research in a twelfth grade AP English classroom in order to study the impact of social dialogue and class discussions on rethinking. After reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, students were asked to write an essay in reaction to the text. After classroom conversations, students were asked to write another essay, focusing on “what happened to you today in class and now what do you think” (p.160). After reading essays, observing classroom conversations, and interviewing five students, Knoeller was surprised to find that, “... oral language of the classroom had been carried forward in writing: In a Bakhtinian sense, that what had been internalized and appropriated proved to be part of an ongoing “inner dialogue”. He was also impressed by, “... the willingness students ultimately had shown to accommodate perspectives expressed by classmates that differed, sometimes dramatically, from their own” (p.168).

Dialogic Narratives Impact Understanding

We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths” (Bakhtin,1986, p.7).

In 2006, pre-service teachers in the Midwest participated in a pertinent study. Researchers began by asking, “What is the variety of practices for preparing students to teach literacy in diverse settings?” (Rogers et al., 2006, p.220). The aim was to challenge students’ assumptions, and help them better understand the complex inter-workings of literacy, diversity, and schooling. Using student experiences at local community centers in an urban area, researchers drew upon Bakhtinian theory to develop a framework for students to engage in a dialogue of their own and others’ narratives on the subject. “The dialogic narratives that took place in our seminars, together with community-based literacy experiences, provided a rich discursive context in which pre service teachers could address these issues of language, literacy, and diversity” (p.221). The findings proved illuminating. The dialogic nature of this exercise, together with the often alien ideologies students confronted, enabled even encouraged students to challenge each others’ positions; their ideologies researchers too felt the tug of inner conflict, questioning their own constructs and beliefs. Creating spaces for dialogue also allowed researchers to better understand the way in which outreach impacts the construction of teacher identity.

Dialogue and Otherness

The next study focused on something a bit different. Since 9/11, Muslims have, to some degree, become suspect simply on the basis of their religion. Before we can understand the importance of this research, it makes sense to offer a crash course in the concept of *otherness or outsidersness*, the role Bakhtin believed it played in dialogue, and they played in dialogue, and the impact of *otherness* on *self*.

Bakhtin(1986) wrote the following in an open letter to the Russian literary journal *Novy mir* in November, 1970:

There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. . . . Of course, a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture . . . is a necessary part of the process of understanding it; but if this were the only aspect, it would be merely duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. After all, a person cannot actually see or make sense of even his own exterior appearance as whole, no mirrors or photographs will help him, only others can see and understand his authentic exterior, thanks to their spatial outsideness and thanks to the fact that they are others. . . . In the realm of culture, outsideness is the most powerful lever of understanding (pp.6-7).

In essence, studying ourselves through our own lenses accomplishes little. We learn more expansively by studying the *non-I*; the *other*. Emerson (1996) interpreted Bakhtin's vision of the world: "... outsideness, boundaries, no coincidence, and a love for difference are the first prerequisites for creatively understanding another person or another culture and for being creatively understood by them (p.111).

Cultural and religious *otherness* or *outsideness* was the focus of Van Eersel, Hermans and Slegers' (2010) research. They were concerned about feelings of isolation for students; *otherness* in relation to religion, especially in one particular Catholic grade school. While 57 percent of the students here identified themselves as Catholic, 33 percent labeled themselves Muslim, and 2 percent identified themselves as Hindu. This comparatively heterogeneous environment presented challenges for faculty whose task, among other things, was to teach theology generally, and Catholicism specifically. If, hypothetically, an instructor attempts to teach a subject, any subject really, what understanding is necessary on the part of the instructor not about the material but about student beliefs, experiences, ideologies? Presuming a level of knowledge on the instructor's part, how and when do they use this knowledge to create a dialogue a bridge connecting the *I* and the *non-I*, the *other*? The researchers were interested in answering three questions:

- *How far do teachers orient themselves to pupils' otherness as articulated in interreligious communication?
- *How far do teachers appropriate pupils' otherness as articulated by pupils in interreligious communication?
- *How far do pupils evaluate teachers' orientation and appropriation in inter-religious communication?

In seeking answers, the researchers utilized the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism so they focused on dialogue between teacher and students rather than on conversations between students. Teachers were asked to, "...intentionally use the communication in their lessons to promote understanding of the otherness of pupils' belonging to different religions. They were free to design and structure their own lessons, but the lesson had to relate to at least one religion other than the teacher's own". What researchers hoped for were conversations pointing to expanded understanding, a sense of cross cultural awareness, but their findings were mixed. While teachers did overtly attempt to minimize the sense of *otherness* that students of minority faiths sometimes feel, they tended to rely on authority discourse which limited the dialogue, causing students to retain a feeling of outsideness. The discourse left little room for communication with teachers in other words, students' inability to dialogue openly on the subject left teachers unaware of the wall between them and their students. The use of dialogue as a tool did, however, help researchers better understand the classroom dynamics, which was, in actuality, the problem, and the authors, in their summary, wrote that they would like to pursue the topic further, utilizing "...full dialogical sequences (i.e. sequences of orientation, appropriation, and evaluation)". What they failed to note, however, was the need for internally persuasive

dialogue, the kind of conversations possible only if and when teachers disavow their one dimensional role as authoritarian, and reposition themselves as equal participants. This, it seems, will allow for dialogue that is both authentic and internally persuasive.

Dialogic Utterances in Norway

A graduate level qualitative class in Norway was the sight of Postholm's 2002 study in which learning was studied from the students' perspective. The White Paper No.27 was, to Norwegian education, what the Common Core Standards is to education in the U.S. In the midst of educational reforms, the college instructor/researcher studied the impact of enhanced student engagement through active learning, as The White Paper sought to accomplish on a national level. The theoretical framework of this study was socio cultural theory, in which, according to Bakhtin and Vygotsky, language and dialogue play a decisive role in learning. Rather than presenting the subject matter to passive listeners, Prudholm attempted to actively engage students through dialogic interaction.

During the semester long class, Prudholm, the instructor/researcher, relied on Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic utterance in verbal and written dialogue which occurred, both between students and between they and their instructor. Bearing in mind the goal increased learning, the findings were hopeful. However, increased dialogue did, as Bakhtin warned, cause a level of tension which needed to be navigated. "Activities in groups create learning opportunities but also place heavy demands on both students and teachers. Students have to be willing to work in groups and to resolve any conflicts. Teachers must listen to the students' experiences and must be willing to help students solve any conflicts that arise" (Postholm, 2007, p.238).

The Benefits of Play in the Classroom

It would not, I think, be unrealistic to describe the traditional Chinese classroom as teacher centered; a place where monologic didacticism is the rule rather than the exception. However, beginning in the late 1990's, Drama-in-Education was imported to Hong Kong from the west. This is where researcher Po-Chi (2010) examined the impact of Bakhtin's carnival theory in a fourth grade classroom which became transformed as teaching tasks and play were blended. Laughter erupted as students engaged in improvised story enactment meant to improve their narrative skills, and the teacher's language, knowledge and culture became subjugated by the spontaneity and playfulness of students engaged in role-playing activities. Po-Chi found:

Drama pedagogy provides students with a context, frame, issue or role to explore, and express experience. Through vigorous interaction in and out of the fictive world, students can partake in the construction and re-con-struction of the classroom discourse by tapping into their own cultural and linguistic resource.

Reflections on Reflection

According to Zeichner (1996), "there is no such thing as an unreflective teacher" (p.207), and reflection was the focus of Hallman's 2011 study. Hallman considered the ways in which dialogical rhetoric, genre, and heteroglossia were utilized by one pre-service teacher, over the course of two semesters. Heteroglossia, translated from Greek, actually means *different language*. Bakhtin believed the power of the novel came from the conflict between different types of speech the author's, the narrator's, and the characters'. Hallman's focus, however, was on the different voices involved in written dialogue; the way in which writers' opinions are altered through dialogue with themselves and others. Hallman's inquiry was twofold: Why Annika, unlike the other students, rarely earned 10/10 on her weekly reflections, and how Annika perceived and engaged the 'intended other' for her reflections. Throughout the period, the researcher offered Annika feedback on her reflections, raising questions and concerns, sometimes reminding her of the focus of her reflections. As Annika reframed her reflections, the dialogues gained depth and resulted in the writer

transforming her perceived role as teacher. Writing allowed Annika to formulate solutions that became game plans to be enacted. Findings indicated, not surprisingly, that a dialogic approach to reflective practice in teacher reflection "...bridges the process/product divide and views all reflection as response to an intended 'other.' All reflection is indeed action, and thereby urges teachers and teacher educators to consistently question and deliberate the intent of teachers' reflective practice (p.544).

I see this research as having wider educational implications. Many teachers, especially ELA or composition teachers, include student reflection in assignments. The rationale is similar to that behind teacher reflection to encourage rethinking through written dialogue that will culminate in enhanced knowledge of one's process and one's product. Reflecting on the triumphs and tragedies while creating, it is hoped, will impact the way in which students approach future endeavors, and Hallman showed this can indeed be the outcome.

Instructions for Instruction

At the point you might be saying, "Sounds good, but the school day and curriculum leave little time for the kind of ongoing dialogue purposed." If this is your only reservation, you're in much better shape than you thought. I've been where you are, literally and figuratively. Before teaching composition, I taught ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders. Dialogue, I've found, happens naturally when you create an environment of trust, respect, and good will. This isn't part of the curriculum, and doesn't need to be squeezed in during class. It starts when your students walk through the door. I know it sounds hokey but do you greet them with a warm, welcoming smile? Do you ask how a student's baseball game went? Do you comment on the way-cool backpack somebody has? Maybe more important, do you tell them about the interview you heard on NPR during your drive to work? After explaining what you heard, do you ask them what they think? Do you really listen to their responses? Do their thoughts matter? All this activity happens before my class begins, and it sets the tone for the morning. More important, it creates an environment where curiosity and voice are embraced. Most times, students' energy and enthusiasm is a direct reflection of the teacher's. If you're happy to be there, if you're ready and rearing to go, they will be too! Perhaps the most important piece of advice I can offer is don't be afraid to be you. At the core, before you are a teacher, you are a person. Let them get to know you on a personal level, be curious together, let the classroom be the place that nurtures personal and academic growth through ongoing dialogue.

The End of the Road

Many Bakhtinian theories have gone unaddressed, and you might find further reading illuminating. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, long before I ever heard the name, I unknowingly utilized Bakhtin's theories in the classroom and found them to be not just appropriate but advantageous. Ongoing conversations need to be encouraged. Engaging students and inspiring open, honest dialogue yields newly constructed knowledge, real ongoing reflection, and maximized learning, and isn't this our goal? Also important is the level of satisfaction, both for students and teachers. Dialogue celebrates diverse voices, embraces what is unique, and this emancipation is not limited to that gained by students. Ongoing dialogue also encourages our voices, our freedom. It encourages the evolution of our own *self*. Someone once said, "Laughter is the best medicine". If students get a bit boisterous, if a sense of carnival erupts, don't panic. Instead, let your students enjoy a moment of emancipation. When the school year is done and the kids walk out of your classroom for the last time, would you rather they remember *learning*, or that *learning gives voice to their thoughts and opinions*?

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