Making Meaning in a Dialogic Discourse Diary

Dissatisfied with his method of teaching composition to high school seniors, Joseph M. Shosh sought ways to move from teaching as transmission to teaching as transaction. Asking students to use a dialogic discourse diary resulted in improved thinking and writing. He offers the assignments he gave and documents students' reactions and growth.

As a beginning teacher of composition, I failed my students miserably. I did as I was told and explicitly taught the structure of narrative, descriptive, and expository paragraphs in preparation for that mainstay of so many secondary English classrooms—the five-paragraph essay. Most students, in turn, did as they were told and drafted the writing that I had assigned, producing enough of what they thought I wanted to allow them to eke out the credit needed to "pass." They didn't seem to expect school writing assignments to be particularly meaningful, and many were convinced that good writers are born—not made—anyway.

Unwittingly, I had asked students to pen what British educator and writing researcher James Britton and his colleagues would likely have called dummy runs, or exercises for students to demonstrate their ability to perform a given task (104–05). When the dummy runs produced uninspired writing, I pulled out my trusty red pen and responded with a barrage of awks, frags, and dang mods on students' papers and with grammar minilessons designed to confront surface errors. Authority had been placed in me, or so I believed at the time, to teach the conventions of standard written English and the expected form for individual paragraphs and multiparagraph essays.

Blaming the Students

I was convinced that the students were simply being lazy and careless, so I brought out a list of common "errors" that my high school English teachers had given to me. The list, ironically titled "Too Air iz Humane," included twenty unforgivable sins, ranging from using first-person pronouns to making subject-verb agreement errors. Now the students were forewarned. These were the errors I expected them to avoid, and, to their credit, most tried to do so. At the end of one school year, a lone student confided, "Well, Mr. Shosh, you took off a point for every mistake that was on the list. It didn't take us long to figure out that what you wanted were simple sentences. That way we couldn't make any of those dreaded mistakes! Why is it that English teachers almost always care less about what students say than how they say it?"

I admitted defeat. Why was teaching others to write so much more difficult than I had imagined? Why weren't my well-intentioned lessons actually helping most students? At this beginning point in my teaching career, only the success I was experiencing with students as the extracurricular drama director kept me in the classroom. I pondered why one group of students would freely give up valued social time to rehearse for three hours every day after school and then return on weekends to build sets, sew costumes, and write copy for the program, while another group of students didn't seem to care enough to write a decent paragraph. I came to realize that the students were the same people in both environments, but I was quite different. To convince my in-school students to care enough about what they had to say to want to...
follow my rules, tips, and techniques, I would need to reconceptualize my role as teacher.

**Moving from Transmission to Transaction**

During the school day, I had viewed my role largely as a transmitter of “authoritative discourse,” without acknowledging, accepting, and honoring students’ existing ways with words, or their “internally persuasive discourse” (Bakhtin 342). In marked contrast to telling students what to write and how to write it during the day, after school I encouraged students to play with language as we studied subtext to bring our characters to life. In English class, we followed the rules; at play rehearsal, we reveled in breaking them. During the day, we recited and imitated. After school, we improvised and questioned. In class we avoided struggle. Out of class we improvised and questioned. During the day, we recited and imitated. After school, we improvised and questioned. In class we avoided struggle. Out of class we improvised and questioned. In the words of the liberatory Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, I would need to “abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems” (79).

I explained to students that I hoped our new assignment, the dialogic discourse diary, would help us begin to bridge the gap between what they wanted to say (Bakhtin’s internally persuasive discourse) and the sanctioned format for doing so (Bakhtin’s authorized discourse) by providing a space for genuine inquiry and reflection. Being able to record and comment on the events of their last year in high school in a diary seemed almost too good to be true, but a sense of unease pervaded the room as questions came from every corner. How long does it have to be? Do we have to write every night? How can you possibly grade somebody on a diary? What do you mean by dialogic discourse?

My first inclination was to tell students what I wanted, but I stopped myself and responded with another question. “Well, what is discourse?” Silence.

“Oh, you mean like sex, intercourse? Cool, we can write about our sex lives.”

Laughter.

“No, but you’re on to something here. It’s about you, but it’s not just about you. Look at the prefix di.”

**Introducing the Dialogic Discourse Diary**

A crucial new assignment to help me replace my transmission approach was the dialogic discourse diary. Rather than lecturing students about my expectations, as had become the norm in my standards-based, rubric-driven high school English department and in my classroom, I began by attempting to create genuine dialogue. I asked the class of twenty-eight seniors to describe their school writing experiences. Everyone had a story to share, and most were not flattering. Sarah’s was typical. “I love to express my opinions, even play with words,” she said. “My least favorite work of writing is without a doubt the research paper. It’s the most uninteresting, tedious, emotionless waste of language there is. The problem stems from the lack of personality and individual ideas.” Ryan agreed, adding, “I love writing where you’re allowed to express yourself. Words and sentences just seem to flow.” The students’ stories captured the tension they felt between wanting to share their ideas and feeling unable to do so through traditional English assignments. Students agreed almost unanimously that schools needed to teach them how to write essays, critiques, and research reports—but in ways that went beyond imitation and regurgitation. As writing teacher and researcher George Hillocks Jr. reminds us, “If we are seriously concerned with the teaching of writing, we must ensure that inquiry is incorporated into our model of what writing involves” (15).

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“Oh, yeah. Two. It does take two to do the nasty.”
More laughter.
“So you mean like two people having, uh, a conversation?”
“That’s right! The diary will be a place for you to have conversations on paper—not just any conversations, but dialogic conversations.”
Silence again.
“Well, in a regular diary it’s only about you and what you do and what you think, and in a conversation, especially with our friends, we might converse without really engaging in dialogue.”
“I think I get it. You mean like pushing ourselves to see things from a different angle, maybe even somebody else’s point of view that we don’t agree with.”
“Exactly! We’ll use the diary as a place where we can write to learn about ourselves, our beliefs, and our writing. Think of the diary as a place to play with ideas that we’ll talk more about in class and even, in some cases, write about in larger papers for an outside audience.”

Negotiating Criteria and Getting Started

Through continued discussion we agreed that having to write an entry every day might quickly become tedious, but there needed to be a minimum number of entries per week. We settled on two, and I would provide the prompts. Students were free to add entries, but I cautioned them that the diary was a school assignment and as such I would be bound to report violations of school policy or law that they chose to write about as part of this assignment. I also reminded students that when we commit our thoughts to paper, even in an exploratory, writing-to-learn context, there exists the possibility that someone else may stumble upon what we’ve written and read without our consent. Words spoken in air might fade with the passing breath, but words committed to paper are different; they have a certain permanence and are no longer exclusively our own.

I would collect and respond to those entries written to my prompts as well as any others that students wanted to share. Once each marking period, students would also pen a self-evaluation of that quarter’s diary entries, in which they would include their criteria for evaluation and evidence that they had met those criteria. If their writing convinced me, I recorded the self-assigned grade. If it did not, the student and I would meet in an after-school conference to discuss the criteria and evidence that they had provided.

I asked students to begin the diary by creating definitions of literature and to consider those definitions in light of the self-selected contemporary novels that they had recently finished reading. Laurel, who confessed to disliking English since her elementary school days in the “Blackbirds,” or lowest reading group, began her entry: “Literature is a hard thing for me to define; I’ve become so accustomed to having people tell me what books I should read because they are samples of good literature that I have never really thought about what literature actually is before. For me, literature has to be well written . . . and it must reveal some important theme or meaning. Using my definition, I don’t consider Douglas Adams’ Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy to be literature.”

I had purposely started with a prompt that would get students to commit their beliefs or their internally persuasive discourse to paper. Then, once we discussed these beliefs, we challenged our thinking by reading a brief excerpt from Terry Eagleton’s Literary Theory: An Introduction. Laurel concluded that her definition would need further revision since she had made a distinction between good literature and bad literature as opposed to the literary and nonliterary. Ryan, who questioned his abilities in English class, concluded his entry, “My understanding now is that whatever social group is in power has the right to decide what is considered literature and what is not. According to my own definition Ian Fleming’s Doctor No is literature, but to the powers that be, I’m afraid it is not.” Katie, confident in herself as a reader and writer, added, “Eagleton’s article does not challenge my thinking; it merely confirms my belief that everyone may have a different definition of literature. I have long known that my definition of literature is different than the school’s definition. If I had my way, we’d be reading more science fiction and fantasy; however the school district doesn’t view many works in this genre as literature.”

What was most important to me was not whose definition of literature students ultimately accepted but their awakening realization that they had the right to define it for themselves and to debate the merits of the definitions of others.
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to define it for themselves and to debate the merits of the definitions of others. Freire points out that “[b]ecause dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, [there] must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others” (89) and that “true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” (92).

Writing in Analytic Modes

These first entries represented two of the five types of responses that I attempted to elicit from students to engage them in naming their world for themselves and thinking critically about that world. In the first, an analytic inductive entry, students analyzed their prior experiences with works they considered to be literary and nonliterary and built their definition accordingly. The second I classified as analytic deductive because students made meaning of Terry Eagleton’s definition of literature before applying his criteria to their own. In a subsequent analytic inductive entry, I asked students to define chivalry as they experienced the concept in childhood stories, movies, and their lives. In a companion analytic deductive entry, they applied those criteria to the medieval Sir Gawain. These analytic entries in the dialogic discourse diary often served as exploratory prewrites that students later developed into full-length papers.

Allowing students to pose questions and offer up preliminary hypotheses was crucial to the creation of a culture of inquiry that propelled students to want to continue to read, write, research, and learn. Whether they could distinguish between deductive or inductive modes of analysis didn’t concern me as long as they shared how they felt, and why, as they considered their ideas in a dialectic with the ideas of their peers and the texts they read. What did matter was that I provided as many educative experiences as possible to help students engage in dialogue with a variety of meaningful texts (Dewey 25). Having discussed and written about modernism in twentieth-century British literature, for example, students enjoyed exploring the concept visually as well. Our class planned a trip to New York City’s Guggenheim Museum, and students wrote about works of art in ways that mattered to them. Katie, who recognized that the school district chose to define literature differently than she did, also enjoyed thinking about why various artists had made their respective choices. Pondering Robert Delaunay’s Eiffel Tower with Trees, Katie questioned the art as she would a text, conjectured a response, and posed a working hypothesis based on her understanding of this painting in the context of modernism, writing in her diary, “I don’t know why [Delaunay] chose to portray the Eiffel Tower bent out of proportion or why he chose to frame it with trees. Maybe it was just to show us a different way of looking at an all too familiar object. I suppose that’s what most modern artists are trying to do in one way or another.” Responding to Picasso’s Fourteenth of July in the same entry, Katie concluded, “It made me think—a quality I appreciate in any work of art, whether it be a written work or a visual work.”

Before I could ask Katie and her peers to take on the authoritative voice demanded by the thesis-based essay or research report, I needed to provide multiple opportunities for them to ask “Why?” and ponder the possibilities. As English educator John S. Mayher points out, “The important issue is to find out what meaning the student has made, and to help her reflect on why she has made the meaning she has, not to weigh in with our superior response, which usually has the effect of further alienating precisely those readers [and writers] who most need encouragement and support if they are to continue to engage in the process” (222). Allowing students to pose questions and offer up preliminary hypotheses was crucial to the creation of a culture of inquiry that...
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**Writing in Reflective Modes**

Two additional types of entries that helped students bridge the dialogic gulf between Bakhtin’s internally persuasive discourse and authoritative discourse were the reflective textual and reflective procedural entries. Recognizing that students would face reading challenges with limited textual supports, I designed a series of reflective textual prompts. Where once I would have assigned study-guide questions or administered a plot-based pop quiz, I now devised prompts to help students make meaning in transactions between reader and text. For Beckett’s *Endgame* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, students selected quotes that were meaningful or puzzling and pondered their significance. For Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and Virginia Woolf’s “The Legacy,” they read and responded as feminist critics and defenders of patriarchal tradition. The ensuing class discussions, based on what students had written in their diaries, were lively and insightful and clearly demonstrated that we did not need experts to pose questions for us.

The reflective procedural entries asked students to reflect metacognitively, or to think about their thinking, writing, interactions with peers, and growth over time. I provided prompts to lead students to comment on how their thinking had changed between a first reading and a second reading of a text; how their writing was stronger in a later draft of a formal paper than an earlier draft; what they had contributed to a group project and how they would approach that same project differently in the future; and how they had grown as readers, writers, listeners, and critical thinkers since the beginning of their senior year in high school. Students enjoyed keeping a record of their exploits as they created video renditions of one of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* just as they enjoyed writing about “lost youth” as their senior year drew to a close. Entries that asked students to self-evaluate their learning process with a grade as well as narrative commentary seemed more forced and less insightful than those where students could genuinely write for learning rather than evaluation.

**Playing with Language**

The final category of entries was creative generative, where students could use the diary as a place to play with language, ideas, and images. Students translated Middle English into contemporary prose; tried their hand at sonnet creation; wrote poetry based on personal experiences; tried out the voices of book reviewers and theater critics; and drew diagrams, doodles, and portraits of literary luminaries. Matt revealed in rereading his entries and creating wittily titles from “Well It Ain’t Bulletproof, But It’s Still a Strong Paper” to “The Play That I Wish That Wasn’t,” where he lamented that “The Dead” from James Joyce’s *Dubliners* was transformed into a Broadway musical. In one of his typically irreverent pieces, Matt text-tapped the Bible to create his “If Only We’d Gone First,” which started as follows: “In the beginning there was an idea and the idea was good and the group smiled upon the idea and gave it form (and signed up for some free space from angelfire.com). Then the group created code and a homepage along with some opening graphics. Other parts of the project were delegated. The group smiled on this and it was good.”

While Matt’s self-critique of his project fit neatly into my creative generative category, it could just as easily have been labeled analytic inductive since Matt created his criteria for evaluation; analytic deductive for providing evidence to support his criteria; reflective textual for finding new meanings in a hypertext of his creation; and, of course, reflective procedural for self-assessing his and his group’s creative processes. Sometimes our classification schemes can enhance our understanding of another’s authoritative discourse, as I hope the categories I have presented have begun to do here. Sometimes, though, our classification schemes can set up false boundaries that get...
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in the way of our internally persuasive discourse and distance us from the authoritative discourse we’re supposed to learn. I know this was the case for many of the students when I taught exposition, narration, description, and the five-paragraph essay as distinct forms with “to err is human” rules to be followed and punishment to be meted out to those who inevitably made mistakes. Therefore, I didn’t share my classification of entries with students. Each entry required the student to engage with ideas and write to learn more about those ideas by dialoguing with the self before writing for an external audience.

The dialogic discourse diary didn’t replace formal essays or the research report. Students composed a major paper each quarter, including a thematic analysis, a comparison/contrast essay, a book review, and a reflective narrative. Students used the diary as a sketchpad, a playground, and a sounding board to convince themselves they had something worthwhile to say and to try out a variety of modes of analysis and reflection that would serve them when they needed and wanted to sound authoritative in the formal papers.

Stacy, who graduated at the top of her senior class, said it this way: “When it comes to writing, I used to dread it. There was nothing worse than sitting down in front of my computer and trying to organize my ideas into three body paragraphs with a topic sentence and three supporting details. I don’t like writing when it seems forced, and that’s why the diary entries are my favorite. I actually like writing research papers, too, as long as I pick the topic. I never used to have a lot of confidence in my writing, but I do now.”

When we ask students to compose final drafts in an authoritative voice without providing ample opportunities for them to think through their ideas, they resist the externally imposed structure. Nick, who had a particularly negative experience in his junior English class, concluded his diary as follows:

First of all, my relationship with language and literature has gone from a hatred and a belief they are the “Devil’s work” to writing a sonnet for the heck of it and reading a book that I don’t have to. I’ve come to enjoy writing that shares my opinions and thoughts. I feel that this is the only true type of paper because I’m sharing my opinions and original ideas—not somebody else’s. When I write these types of papers I write better, clearer, and even ahead of time.

I still struggle with my nondialogic ways. It’s easier to avoid the struggle and to teach by telling monologically rather than to teach and learn by posing problems dialogically. Freire reminds me, however, that in a problem-posing education, “[t]he students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (81). Fortunately, as I have written to make meaning of my teaching practices, students have been my most able teachers.

Works Cited


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