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Literature Review

Igniting the conversation

How empirically based research helped me to promote authentic discussion in my classroom

Abstract

This paper describes how a thorough review of evidence based literature helped to transform my entire approach to teaching. The article begins with a summary of my experiences teaching at an alternative school in upstate New York and then demonstrates how research of class discussion helped shift my focus away from monologic styles of discourse (teacher centered) to dialogic styles (student centered). The paper reviews the theoretical foundations of discussion based approaches to learning, describes how authentic classroom discussions are created and sustained, and argues that dialogically oriented classrooms are inherently more democratic, emancipating, and inspiring than traditional ones.

Introduction

When I first began teaching at a newly formed alternative school designed to meet the needs of challenging teen-agers in a small rural district in upstate New York, I had many idealistic visions. Most notably, I sought to create an environment where students had the opportunity to learn at their own pace with a curriculum largely generated from their own interests. If only the kids could choose what they studied, I thought, they would be more motivated to learn. If only my students could go at their own pace, without the pressures of being on "grade level," then they could progress in a way that didn't threaten their already delicate self esteem. I assumed that they hated school because they were disinterested and bored. I also assumed that their failure to succeed in the traditional high school setting was largely due to the fact that they had "fallen behind," and lacked the fundamental reading, writing, and math skills upon which academic success is often predicated.

I made many assumptions during my first year, most of which were correct on the surface, but none of which really led me to the deeper truth. The problem with assumptions is that they're too easy. They don't require you to really dig for the hard answers, the ones that don't present themselves so obviously. When I was younger my father took my sister and me digging for crystals in Herkimer, New York. There were special sites where people would camp, and sometimes dig twenty feet beneath the ground to find "Herkimer Diamonds" as big as my arm. I remember feeling somewhat disappointed that the crystals we found were small by comparison; but we just didn't have the right tools. Looking back on my first year teaching is like looking back on the crystals I gathered, which were scattered all over the ground. There were some real finds, some good rewards; but they were found largely by accident, and they were nothing near as beauteous as what lay below the surface.

This is not to say that I simply went on instinct my first year teaching. The classroom structure was based upon models of alternative education which seemed to fit with my assumptions. I created a reading/writing workshop based upon the ideas of Nancy Atwell. I had students vote on periods of history they wanted to study, a method that met with much success in my own high school alternative education program called SWAS (School Within A School) at Great Neck South High School. How wonderful this all appeared to me in theory. My students would pick out books that they "wanted" to read and therefore would read them. My students would vote on studying the Civil War, and therefore would learn about the Civil War. Some of this came true, but not much of it. The truth is that although the broad structure of the program was alternative, the day to day pedagogy was sadly traditional. In my class on the Civil War, I relied on many of the methods that my teachers used when I was in high school. I lectured, handed out

readings and maps, assigned reports, had the kids do work-sheets. When I tried to generate discussion, it was mostly for recitation of facts, not for triggering authentic, open ended conversation.

I'll never forget the time when we had been studying the Civil War for two weeks, and I asked my students, mostly for rhetorical reasons, who the two sides were. The dumbfounded looks on their faces remain permanently etched into the cover of my mental notebook of how not to teach, and have served as a constant reminder of the failure of lecture style pedagogy. My students weren't learning about the Civil War. They weren't learning much of anything, except that history was still as boring as ever. The real civil war that semester occurred inside the classroom, and it's not difficult to guess who the two sides were. The battle lines were clearly drawn. The teacher, authority figure, standing in the front of the class; the students, sitting in their desks, waiting to strike at any opportune moment. In my arsenal I had a number of behavior management and crisis intervention techniques at my disposal, which I employed on a daily basis. But I was clearly outnumbered. These kids were well adept at causing mischief in the classroom, interrupting me with a barrage of sarcastic, inappropriate, rude remarks on a continuous basis; refusing to do the most minimal of assignments; and antagonizing one another to no end. I would often go home frustrated, discouraged, and exhausted. I would scour the Internet for creative projects and assignments relating to the Civil War, and try them out with my students, only to be sadly discouraged. It seemed that whenever I had my students collaborate on projects, let's say mapmaking of important battles in the Civil War, they would invariably goof off, and I would spend most of my energy keeping them on task. This experience led me to another dangerous assumption: the types of students I was dealing with could not function as a group. Because of their socially disruptive behavior, they would get more work done working alone than together

During that first semester, my co-teacher and I had many discussions relating to what was and was not working in the school. We were trying to offer an alternative to the traditional style of education, but we both knew that we had fallen into the same teacher centered patterns as the regular high school. Our students were clearly rejecting this model so we needed something different. Based upon our observations that our students didn't learn through a structure in which the teacher stands in front of the class and gives a lesson, and also that our students didn't seem to be able to act appropriately in a group, we decided to completely individualize the curriculum. We called this the tutorial approach. Students would collaborate with my co-teacher and me on their curriculum in each subject, and we would come up with assignments and projects based upon their own interests plus their requirements to pass state tests. Each student had the freedom to choose what and when to work on any given subject, and my co-teacher and I would circulate amongst the students, helping them with their work. This system worked much better than the stand and deliver a lesson approach. The frequency of student misbehavior dropped dramatically, and there were many days in which I felt like the students were really learning. There were obvious drawbacks though. The most glaring inadequacy was the inherent difficulty of getting around to each student. Even though our class size was typically small, ranging from seven to ten students at a time— this was

due to the fact that many of our students spent a half day with us and the other half either doing work internships for credit, or at BOCES— it was often impossible to sufficiently cover content material in this manner. Often times, I would find myself helping one student, and telling the rest to stay on task. Sometimes students didn't want any help, and I assumed the role of babysitter, telling them to keep quiet, and do their work. By default, the kids who really learned with this method were the ones who enjoyed working one on one with my co-teacher and me. The rest were less disruptive, but very often unproductive.

My co-teacher and I had scored a pyrrhic victory. What we had done, in essence, was provide intensive one on one support to those who wanted it, often enabling them to pass their Regents and go on to graduate. We had also allowed those students who didn't really want our help, yet still wanted to do their work, to independently cover the material, but in a rather superficial manner. These students often did the kind of seat work that is offered in most high school classes— work-sheets based upon readings in a textbook. And there were still other students who didn't do much at all. But whereas before they were disrupting the entire learning environment, with our new structure of independent learning, they did not do this as much. We created rigid guidelines for our new individualized approach, creating various consequences for "talking" during "work" time. During "free work time," where our progressive philosophy of allowing students the freedom to work on any subject they wanted required minimal distraction to meet with success, students were not allowed to socialize with one another. If they did, various privileges would be taken away, and if they continued to disregard school policy, they would be suspended. As you may imagine, this policy resulted in a number of suspensions, and daily power struggles about "talking" during work time. But at least there were fewer disruptions. My co-teacher and I had achieved a more manageable, quieter school environment. Our administration was pleased with the fact that some of the most difficult students in the district were actually passing their tests, and attending school on a regular basis. We justified the failure of other students in our school by saying that they would not have passed in the high school either. And at least in our school, they were still attending, as well as participating in some of the more creative classes such as art and music. I am ashamed to say that we followed the independent work model for another two years. It was only when we began to enroll more students in the program, that we were forced to switch back to group instruction.

Obviously the type of teacher centered, group instruction, we employed during our first year was not going to work. We needed an entirely different approach, but like those larger crystals hidden twenty feet beneath the ground, this approach was not directly evident. I always knew that academically isolating our students from one another was a highly imperfect solution to the behavior issues we were dealing with. Although many students were happy working on their own, or with my co-teacher and me, I understood that this structure was a structure based upon defeat. Since we could not succeed in helping these kids to function in a socially appropriate manner as a group, we were going to separate them. But this was clearly counter-productive. If there was one thing these kids needed to learn, it was how to work together.

When the district began to place more kids in our school, it became impossible to instruct all of our students on an individual basis. We went back to group instruction with mixed results. Many of our students were unhappy that some of their previous freedoms had been taken away, and they could no longer choose what and when they wanted to work on something. Other students, however, seemed to enjoy the change. They liked the group interaction and conversation that often resulted. As opposed to our first year, the groups seemed to work better because the relationships we had with our students were much stronger. This year we had begun to employ weekly school meetings where students and teachers could talk about their problems or issues dealing with the school environment. This gave students a sense of ownership that they might have lacked in the past, and consequently, made them more willing to cooperate with one another. Unfortunately, this cooperation did not translate into any real enthusiasm. The majority of my students were still reluctant learners, and I was still engaging in many teacher centered types of classroom discourse. I am proud to say that many of my students passed their Regents tests, but this alone did not make me happy. I was hungry for something else: a style of teaching that would build excitement and love of learning in my students.

Fortunately, our enrollment of more students, and our shift back to group instruction directly coincided with my taking a graduate class called "Research in the teaching of English". My professor allowed us to choose any topic in the field of English Education, and I chose to research empirically based studies of classroom discussion. I knew from experience that the best moments I had teaching were when my students engaged one another in serious, mature, and intellectually substantial conversation. These moments, however, were so rare that I wanted to know what I could do to foster this type of classroom discourse. From my research, I not only discovered methods I could employ to maximize class discussion, I also discovered some of the foundational elements of student centered approaches to teaching. Incredibly, the theories which I put into practice have already begun to transform the entire culture of the classroom. Students considered "at-risk" of dropping out have been having the types of intellectual conversation that one might find in an honors class. They are more interested, and engaged than I have seen them in my three and a half years at the alternative school. There have been challenges of course; for whenever you allow students to talk with one another, you run the risk of getting off track; but these challenges are miniscule compared with the benefits of having my students participate in rigorous, sophisticated, and mature, classroom discourse.

In the main body of this paper, I will review the theoretical foundations behind authentic classroom discussion. I will also review evidence based literature showing a variety of empirical studies concerning *how* teachers can foster authentic, engaging, substantial types of classroom discussion, as well as the challenges that go along with this effort. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this research as it relates to the future of education, and will share my own personal experiences and challenges at the Alternative School, in trying to transform the academic environment to one that includes authentic class discussion.

Method

In my research of *how* class discussions come about, I found there to be many more secondary sources than primary. This is possibly due to the fact that the structural analysis of class discussions is a relatively new topic. Much of the prior research done in this area concerns the positive affects of classroom discourse on student achievement and literacy. For those interested in this topic, Martin Nystrand's article, "Research on the role of classroom discourse as it affects reading comprehension" (2006), is a great place to start. Among the primary sources detailing methods of igniting classroom discourse are three empirical studies involving Nystrand, who has done the majority of research in this field. Judith Langer has also done a substantial amount of research on the theoretical underpinnings of legitimate classroom discourse, including detailed analyses of transcribed class discussions. Secondary sources obtained in *The English Journal* include teachers' personal perspectives and experiences regarding class discussion. Other secondary sources are theoretically based essays on such topics as reader response, critical thinking, and radical pedagogy. In my research, I used the following databases: ERIC, NCTE, and the Cornell library, which provided me access, through their Athens account, to a number of different databases on the Internet.

Theoretical foundations of authentic class discussion

Monologic Discourse

Most classroom conversation begins with the teacher asking a question, usually with a right or a wrong answer. What were the two sides in the Civil War? What did the Ghost reveal to Hamlet at the end of Act I? Why is the sky blue? What's the answer to the equation $3X+6=18$? The teacher picks on a student to answer the question, maybe there's a brief exchange, or elaboration, praise or condemnation of the student's knowledge in

the form of "good job" or "You didn't do your homework, did you Johnny?" Then the conversation ends. According to Martin Nystrand (2003), this is not an *authentic* conversation. This type of discussion, which is practiced in classrooms around the world, is what the Russian scholar Michael Bakhtin (1984) would call *monologic*, or one sided. The linguistic and philosophical problem with monologic discussion is that it's a contradiction in terms, almost like a round square. How can there be a real discussion when that discussion is dominated by one side, and only one side's answers are acceptable? In this case, conversation is merely an exercise in automation, a robotic series of utterances which lead inevitably to one answer— as if the people engaged had no free will to come to a different conclusion. Although learning facts is useful and important, teachers often mistake a conversation about facts, or a recitation of the teacher's opinions, for a real discussion. Even in classroom discussions where there is a highly interpretive element to the topic, such as the meaning of a poem, teachers can often steer the conversation in the direction they want it to go— usually to their own interpretations. What looks like an authentic discussion on the surface is really a manipulation of sorts, a type of intellectual coercion to a pre-determined judgment. In these cases, it is usually the teacher's level of authority which impedes the development of authentic discussion. Teachers seek to elicit official answers, and often don't allow students a voice to come up with their own ideas. Nystrand (2003) says that classrooms such as these practice "monologism, at it extreme," where "the relationship of teacher and student is restricted to that of evaluator and novice, organized for the transmission of information" (p.140). In these types of classrooms, which constitute the majority of English classrooms in the United States, students have little opportunity to become active participants in the learning process.

Dialogic Discourse

Discussion is authentic when the participants collectively engage in active meaning making. This presupposes that there is no pre-determined right or wrong answer toward which the conversation is being steered by an authority figure. Bakhtin (1984) called this type of authentic discussion dialogic discourse. For Bakhtin, all discourse is inherently dialogic because all linguistic meaning has been, and continues to be, created by a multitude of voices spanning all of human history. In other words, there has never been, and never can be an idea that exists in isolation, that has never been influenced by another idea. Everything exists in relation to something else, forming an inescapable web of interdependency. Any given "truth" is dependant upon another "truth" to give it validity. For example, even a simple statement such as one plus one equals two, requires the laws of mathematics to make it true. And the laws of mathematics themselves were

at one time created by human beings who had to negotiate their meanings, and provide axioms upon which more complicated theorems would evolve. Unless one assumes a realm of Platonic ideals, where the truth never changes, then we are left with a world in which the "truth" has always been created and re-created by people, often at odds with one another. It's impossible to utter a single word without invoking the intellectual work of societies, evolving throughout time, developing the very fabric of thought itself. One could go back as far as one likes, to our ancestral origins as more primitive animals, plants, and beyond that even— cosmic dust, floating in space, burning in stars. The entire evolutionary process can be seen as a dialogic process, where the very reality we live in is shaped by forces which are in a constant state of flux, never static, always changing, always moving, toward an indeterminate end.   Dialogic discussion is authentic because it mirrors what is actually happening in the world around us. Nothing is fixed. As Heraclitus once said, "You can never step in the same river twice."

When English teachers engage their students in dialogic discourse, they invite them to participate in creating the knowledge that so many of us take for granted. This type of intellectual work can be valuable in and of itself. As Judith Langer (1992) says of critical thinking in the language arts, "the musing itself is the goal" (p.5). A dialogic discussion need not end up with any conclusive judgment to be successful. Rather, as with ideas about writing, it is the process that is of value, not necessarily the product. Therefore, a discussion, let's say, about whether Macbeth killed his King because of his own ambition, or because Lady Macbeth pushed him into it, would be successfully dialogic if the students shared their own ideas and reasons concerning the argument and enthusiastically responded to one another's thoughts and questions.

Unfortunately, dialogic discourse is seldom practiced in America's English classrooms. In the landmark study, "Questions in Time: Investigating the Structure and Dynamics of Unfolding Classroom Discourse," in which more than 200 eighth and ninth grade English and social studies classes were observed, Nystrand et al. (2003) found that dialogic discourse occurred in English classes only 4.81% of the time. This is somewhat ironic given the fact that teachers, when interviewed in a similar study, said that they highly valued discussion, and included opportunity for discussion in their lessons (Nystrand & Christoph, 2001). Although teachers like to think that they make a space for authentic discussion in their classroom, they are very often mistaking real discussion for its evil twin, the question and answer type of conversation which is so pervasive in our educational system.

Areas of Convergence

Since the purpose of this literature review is to show *how* dialogic discourse is generated in the classroom, I analyzed the research for similarities among the approaches of different teachers who participated in the studies. From my analysis, I found there to be five fundamental aspects of legitimate classroom discussion: (a) reduced teacher authority, (b) open-ended questioning, (c) uptake or follow up, (d) active student questioning and participation, (e) scaffolding. These five methods or concepts are frequently mentioned in the research, often with different names, as being the sparks that may ignite a quality class discussion.

Reduced Teacher Authority

In order to foster the type of environment where students feel free to question and discuss, teachers may need to downplay some of their intellectual authority. Because most teachers have built up a considerable amount of knowledge, they often feel it necessary to share that knowledge with their students. But this isn't necessarily good teaching. To encourage class discussion, teachers must subtly control the environment so their students feel free to talk. Langer and Roberts (1991) found that having the class sit in a circle was very helpful in one teacher's attempt to promote more class discussion. By doing this, the teacher sent a message to her students that she was also a participant in the class, and did not set herself higher than anyone else. When interviewed, students remarked that they found it easier to talk in a circle because they were more comfortable and felt less frightened about having the wrong answer.

In another case study, Smith and Connoly (2005) found that students were much more likely to participate in a discussion about a poem when the teacher did not show as much "authority." This case study examined three different conditions in which the teacher taught a poem: one where the teacher taught a poem he had written: another where the teacher taught a poem he had taught many times previously: and a final condition where the teacher taught a poem that he saw for the first time along with his students. The researchers carefully transcribed each lesson and determined that the most dialogic discourse had occurred in the third lesson, where the teacher was approaching the text for the first time, along with the students (Smith & Connoly, 2005). As in the Langer and

Roberts study, the students appeared to be more comfortable talking when they perceived that the teacher was more of a participant in the discussion, rather than the leader. As one student said, "There was nothing holding me back. The teacher had not read the poem before, so he was doing the same thing as me— trying to understand it"(p. 285).

Nystrand et al. (2003), found that teachers could promote dialogic discussion by withholding some of their opinions and evaluations, and encouraging students to respond to one another. Having observed 872 English and social studies classes, they concluded that dialogic discourse is created by teachers who are willing to keep many of their pre-conceived notions to themselves and let students do the talking instead. Another case study by Nystrand and Christoph (2001), which followed a teacher's transition from a monologic to dialogic classroom, revealed that the best discussion of the year took place when the teacher was willing to let go of her authority and allow students to direct the conversation.

Open-ended questioning

Perhaps there is no more important aspect of starting a dialogical conversation than asking an open-ended or *authentic* question. Nystrand et al. (2003) define an authentic question as "one for which the asker has not prespecified an answer" (p.145). Nystrand et al. concluded that authentic questioning is a significant predictor of a precipitating dialogic discussion (p. 187). Unlike questions which have a pre-determined right or wrong answer, open-ended questions allow students the opportunity to come to their own conclusions. On the other hand, Wood (1992) cautions that the use of what he calls 'closed questions,' requiring students to answer factual information, deprives them of the opportunities to engage in intellectual work

English teachers are in a unique position when it comes to asking open-ended questions, because literature allows for a multiplicity of interpretation. Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work, "Literature As Exploration," lays the foundation for the reader response theory, suggesting that the meaning of a text is derived from what the reader brings to it, rather than from the text alone (1938). Reader response theory works very well in accordance with the idea of dialogic discourse because it supports the premise that students have legitimate ideas to contribute about any given text. Even without any literary training whatsoever, beyond being able to read, students, by virtue of the fact that they have experienced life itself, which is the very subject of literature, bring meaning to a text.

Talented English teachers are able to ask the types of questions which help students voice their own interpretations, providing a solid basis for authentic discussion. Friedman (2001) gives a good argument for the use of literature to foster engaging class discussion. In her action research study, she collaborated with high school teachers in Boston about ways they could use morally ambiguous situations found in fiction to spur conversation about a character's difficult choices. She provided teachers with lessons and organizers supporting the idea that in literature, as well as life, there are often no "right or wrong" answers. In one class, students had a rigorous debate about whether George's decision to shoot Lenny at the end of the book *Of Mice and Men*, was a good or a bad one. The open-ended nature of this debate provided the class with ample opportunity to have discussion.

Another study by Judith Langer (1991), where she transcribed classroom talk from 21 middle and high school English classrooms in city and suburban schools, found that students' "most productive literary reasoning" involved an "exploration of possibilities" (p.4). That is, a consideration of the open-ended nature of literary interpretations. Langer observed that teachers were most successful at generating high level class discussion when they asked questions which made students consider many possible meanings. Kim, Crosson, and Resnick (2005), in a study which included quantitative analyses of classroom discussion in 21 language arts classrooms from three urban districts, found a significant connection between teacher use of authentic and open-ended questions and ensuing dialogic discussion. Nystrand and Christoph (2001) observed that an English teacher's best class discussion occurred when she asked her students an open-ended question about who they thought the most important character was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In this instance, "she was not committed to seeing any particular response as correct. In other words, her question was authentic" (p. 270).

Uptake/ follow up

In addition to asking open-ended questions, teachers who successfully generated authentic discussion were able to "follow up" student comments with discourse which kept the conversation productive. Nystrand et al. (2003) give an excellent example of this from a ninth-grade lesson on *The Odyssey*.

The teacher asks, "What do they have to do to Polyphemus?" A student replies, "Blind him." The teacher then follows up, asking, "How come the plan is for blinding Cyclops?" This last question is an instance of uptake, since the teacher follows up on the student's response on "blinding him." (p.145)

The practice of uptake or follow up can take many different forms during the course of a conversation. O'Connor and Michaels (1993,1996) focused on the importance of "revoicing" student comments as a means of affirming and clarifying what the student has said. According to Mercer (1995), successful follow ups are intended to "incorporate students' contribution into the flow of discourse" (p. 26). Langer and Roberts (1991), in their observation of one particularly discussion oriented teacher, noted that this teacher spent 29.1% of her total speaking time restating her students' comments. They are careful to specify that the teacher's restatements never contained "the teacher's ideas or additions" (p.44). As mentioned before, vocal teacher expertise and authority on content can often diminish student conversation. Thompson (1997) points out that teachers' evaluative follow ups may indicate that the exchange has ended and the teacher wants no further information form the students. In this fashion, a good discussion can be stopped dead in its tracks.

Nassaji & Wells (2000), in their seven year action research project, argued that because of a frequency of evaluation, a teacher's selection of follow up moves can be more important than the initiating question. They found that when students are given follow up moves that are evaluative, students participate less. One possible reason for this is that students become more self conscious and begin to worry about saying something that is perceived by the teacher as incorrect. In a classroom where discussion is highly valued, the teacher often acts as a conductor, orchestrating the conversation without dominating it. Nystrand et al. (2003) explain that "the teacher's role is mainly one of directing conversational "traffic," focusing on issues, and guiding students through the text to answer their own questions (p.172). Roberts and Langer (1991) report that the dialogically oriented teacher in their case study spent 54.4% of her total speaking time orchestrating class discussion

Active Student Questioning and Participation

The fact that a teacher's questions highly influence the pattern of conversation in a class might seem obvious. What is less obvious, but nevertheless demonstrated by research, is

that student questions have an even greater impact on the emergence of dialogic spells. Nystrand et al. (2003) show the occurrence of student questions raising the rate of dialogic spells by 72%, relative to classes where no student questions were observed. Nystrand et al. also discovered that student questions are less frequent in classes where the teacher has a lot of experience. As mentioned before, this could be due to the fact that teachers with more experience tend to have a more formulated view of the material, and consequently limit the amount of open-ended discussion where students have the opportunity to question. Rabinowitz (1998) suggests that English teachers often have preconceived judgments about the texts they teach because they have read them so many times. Hamel (2003) found that this type of "reading against memory," serves to distance a teacher from the actual experiences of students reading a text for the first time (p.54). Instead of acknowledging the interpretive, open-ended nature of literature, experienced teachers tend to already have a "legitimate" interpretation in mind, and will only accept answers that fit into their fixed body of knowledge.

The teacher in Langer and Robert's study (1991) was particularly successful in organizing her class to maximize student participation in discussion. She did this by frequently having her students form small groups, which organized topics to discuss from books that the class was reading. One such discussion was completely "shaped by the questions and concerns of the students themselves" (p.38). Small group work was also found to be successful at generating discussion by Gokhale (1995), who observed that collaborative learning "facilitated discussion and interaction" (p. 28). Nystrand, Gamoran, and Heck (1993) reinforce this idea as they noted that particularly "autonomous" small-group work, with the groups themselves shaping the topics and questions to discuss, generated a substantial amount of authentic classroom talk. Unfortunately, this type of "autonomous" small-group interaction only occurred 11.1% of the time. Most teachers in this study broke the class up into small groups to have them work on the same types of close-ended, test oriented questions that are used by teachers in a large group.

Perhaps the most inspiring example of active student questioning, participation, and discussion comes from the Mississippi Freedom Schools project in the 1960's. In early 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed alternative schools designed to promote student activity, expression, critical thinking, and community participation (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998). A central component of these schools was promoting class discussion in every educational activity.

They were to be places for political education and student empowerment. These were to be schools for questioning, schools for exposing students to meaningful discussion experiences targeted to help them understand the social forces that were controlling their lives, schools for enabling them to manage at least some of the social conditions under which they lived. Students would be encouraged to ask questions

about their experiences and their personal situations. Asking a question was a first step toward overcoming the pattern of passive acceptance of authority; a step toward learning to think, to inquire; and ultimately, a step toward converting learning and inquiry into action. (p. 172)

For those involved in the Mississippi Freedom Schools project, student questioning was not simply a tool for generating discussion in the classroom, it was the first step in a process of political and social emancipation. In their lessons, teachers would deliberately bring up controversial topics to encourage students to question the world around them, and ultimately take action to change their lives for the better. For example, Chilcoat & Ligon describe a classroom discussion which was generated by the teacher writing examples of "black" English in one column on the board, and their comparative "standard English" translations in another column. Students were then asked to question which sentences were more appropriate to use and why. The students then got into a heated debate about the ways in which language can be used to restrict opportunities for some, while perpetuating advantages for others. Some students felt that they should learn "standard" English in order to move higher up the social ladder, while others felt that there was nothing "wrong" with the way talked, and that it was incumbent on "white" society to accept their way of speaking. Discussions like these helped to show that many of the forces which served to oppress these students were created and perpetuated by individuals who had no legitimate claim to authority. Rather, the laws which for so many years had kept them down were created in order to serve the interests of one group of people over another. Through the act of questioning and discussion, students began to take back the freedom of expression and thought that they had been denied for most of their lives.

Scaffolding

Since most students are not accustomed to having a dialogic conversation in class, the teacher needs to provide support, or scaffolding, in order to nurture the kind of environment where discussion can grow. In the Mississippi Freedom Schools, teachers often provided scaffolding in the way they presented a controversial topic— such as writing politically charged sentences in two columns on the board, as previously mentioned. By framing the issue in such a way, the teacher helped students consider how language shapes and is shaped by political and social forces, without directly telling them. This indirect method of structuring an issue to be discussed by the class was also used by the teacher in Nystrand and Christoph's study (2001).

Kathy did a considerable amount of scaffolding, calling students' attention to important evidence in literary texts but not explaining to them at the time how the evidence might be interpreted. Then during a subsequent class session Kathy would again refer to the textual evidence in a context in which students could make the connection between the evidence and a plausible interpretation. (p.263)

Although most students have the raw intellectual capability to have meaningful class discussion, the teacher is still the teacher for a reason. However, teachers must use their knowledge in order to facilitate student discovery, never directly telling the way, but shining a light down the appropriate path. Equally important is for the teacher to select relevant and appropriate material for the class to focus on. Langer and Applebee (1986) found the appropriateness of the instructional task to be an essential component in scaffolding class discussion. If the topics of discussion become too challenging or irrelevant, students may shut down. Conversely, if the teacher is able to select topics of discussion that all students can participate in, the likelihood of having a meaningful conversation increases (Nystrand, et. al. 2003). In their case study, Langer and Roberts (1991) observed that students with different reading levels were all able to participate in the majority of the classroom discourse because they had all read the book. The selection of appropriate reading material was consequently a factor in generating maximum student participation in class discussion.

Scaffolding can also mean providing students with the necessary instructional aids to understand and organize material on which a discussion will be based. Audrey A. Friedman (2000) used a graphic organizer called a "Dilemma Worksheet" to help students identify and organize evidence related to George's decision to shoot Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. The worksheet asked students to come up with "two possible choices" of George's dilemma, and then give "information, evidence, or expertise" that would support each choice (p. 102). By providing an organizer for the students, Friedman was able to help them clarify their thoughts prior to the discussion. When the discussion then took place, students had a number of ideas to contribute.

Teachers can also provide scaffolding by the ways in which they interact with their students. Nystrand and Christoph (2001) observed from student interviews that a significant factor of the quantity and quality of class discussions was the teacher's respect and care for her students. Because the students felt comfortable and safe in the classroom environment, they were able to speak out and take more risks during conversations. It is not surprising that the best discussions occurred at the end of the year, due to the fact that the teacher was able to build relationships with her students and create a sense of community.

Discussion

The majority of examples given in this literature review come from classrooms in which discussion is highly valued and practiced. But what about those classrooms in which the teacher is relatively inexperienced at generating dialogic discourse yet still wants to engage students in authentic class discussion? What are some of the obstacles teachers might face as they attempt to shift from monologic to dialogic teaching styles? Probably the biggest deterrent to switching to a dialogically-organized classroom is the potential loss of control. Even with scaffolding, when you let students lead discussion, you inevitably run the risk of getting off task and face the tough job of steering the conversation back on track. The teacher in Nystrand and Christoph's study (2001), who was attempting to promote more discussion in her class, found this to be the most challenging element. In one example of a lesson regarding *The Miracle Worker*, she was trying to help her students understand the word "temperance" by putting it in context. She asked if any of her students were Pentecostal, and for the next ten minutes, instead of talking about the word "temperance" in relation to *The Miracle Worker*, students discussed their feelings about their religion. The teacher repeatedly attempted to bring the students back to the original focus of the conversation, only to be continually redirected by the students. Eventually, the teacher got the class back on task, but from reading the transcript, this was obviously a frustrating experience.

In my own attempts to create opportunities for discussion at the Alternative School, I have faced similar challenges. For example, I began a discussion on the aftermath of the Russian Revolution by asking students whether they felt Lenin was justified in arresting and killing those who opposed the revolution— or in other words, whether the ends justified the means. Students took this conversation in many directions and began talking about some of the terrible things they might do in order to survive. One student related how if he was a soldier stationed in Iraq, he would shoot a child coming toward him because, in his view, many soldiers have been killed by child suicide bombers. Another student then spoke of how we should wipe out everybody in Iraq because of what happened on 9/11. At this point I felt the need to interject that those in Iraq were not responsible for 9/11, but as you can see, we were now on an entirely different subject. The conversation then took another turn, as my students began to talk about American military might, and how we could wipe out any country in the world if we wanted to. Another student then brought up the fact that China was becoming powerful, and the discussion degenerated into a hypothetical conversation on who would win in a war between the United States and China. I eventually directed the students back to the topic at hand, at which point they said they didn't want to discuss it anymore, and didn't

understand why they were made to learn about history. The conversation then centered around the necessity of learning history, a useful conversation no doubt, but one which turned into more of an argument than a discussion. Basically, I was trying to be dialogic, by asking the students to consider the possibilities of why schools make students learn history, but the responses were very negative, and could be reduced to the idea that "schools suck." At this point, the conversation was serving only to agitate my students, and with each open-ended question I asked, they became more defiant in their opinions about school. I then asked them about how they would organize a school if they had the opportunity. This was a more useful conversation but at this point, the period was practically over, and I failed to cover what I had intended. It occurred to me that the organic nature of dialogic discourse did not fit very well into an educational system in which students had to cover a certain amount and type of material in order to pass state tests. Maybe with students who were more compliant, the teacher could successfully bring conversations back into focus, and consequently cover the necessary material. But with particularly defiant students, who question the relevance and legitimacy of school itself, dialogic discourse, for better or for worse, can provide an opportunity for students to vent frustration and anger about their own lives.

Ideally, without the pressure to cover material, I could see the Alternative School as being organized around issues that are directly relevant to my students' lives. In the same way the students in the Mississippi Freedom Schools questioned the legitimacy and authority of those who oppressed them, students in my school could have authentic debate regarding similar issues in their own lives. Of course, any good teacher tries to relate the educational material in all disciplines to a student's experiences, but the goal is always to learn the content through this process. I think the conversation my students had on why schools make them learn history was extremely important, maybe more important than any other possible discussion about history, but with too many conversations like this we will surely fall behind, and my students will then be at risk of failing the Regents. Inherent in the nature of dialogic discourse is that students get caught up in the conversation. Units that I planned on taking two weeks are now taking three. I don't want to interrupt the flow of discourse too much, but I also feel obligated to have my students pass their tests, for a variety of reasons. I am beginning to wonder if there is too fundamental a split between the practice of dialogic discourse and the test oriented educational environment in which American teachers operate. Obviously, a teacher cannot get away with being purely dialogic in this culture. But just how much does one need to compromise in order to have a maximum degree of dialogicity, and still have students, especially "at risk" students, pass state tests?

Now that researchers have shown the benefits of dialogic discourse, and ways in which teachers can spur class discussion, they might want to focus on some of the larger issues at hand. A suggestion for further research might be to implement a program of dialogic discourse within an entire English or social studies department and observe the

challenges that go along with making a substantial shift in discourse patterns. This kind of study would be especially beneficial for those like myself who are trying to transform their own classrooms. Researches might also study the differences between monologic and dialogic classes in their effects on Regents scores. I'm curious as to whether a test that is mostly factual in nature can be better prepared for through dialogic discourse. Ultimately, I believe questions surrounding the implementation of dialogic discourse in the classroom are political in nature. As long as the national educational system is dominated by standardized tests, which value factual recall and recitation, teachers will continue to teach to the tests and justify themselves through a similar logic as Lenin's: the ends justifies the means. There is a very legitimate reason that so few classrooms practice dialogic discourse, and it has to do with the monologic type of society we live in, where power is maintained by those who demand that people obey rather than question. How to go about changing the culture at large is therefore inextricably bound to the question of how to shift monologic styles of classroom discourse to dialogic ones. Research such as the kind presented in this literature review will only reach a small number of teachers and even then will only be practiced by an even smaller number due to the challenges involved. But if the larger educational environment can be changed to accommodate more dialogically oriented classrooms, I believe there could be a substantial shift in teaching styles. Schools need to become more politically active in order for this to happen. For example, the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, after months of political activism, has received a temporary waiver for students taking the Regents and will receive a permanent waiver if they can prove that their students are meeting State standards. As someone who has taught in a number of districts and who has talked with teachers from around the state, I can tell you that teachers are upset about the barrage of state tests that they must prepare their students for. They show legitimate concern about their lack of autonomy and relate all the wonderful things they could be doing with their classes, if only there was enough time. The conditions are ripe for a substantial movement in education, for more teacher and district autonomy, but teachers need to be at the forefront of the movement. Unions need to devote more energy to these fundamental issues and truly put pressure on the government if there is to be real change.

Empirical research can no doubt be an incredible asset in the movement for educational reform. If researchers can further demonstrate the positive affects of dialogic discourse on student achievement, and also show the deleterious affects of standardized tests in teachers' efforts to promote dialogically-organized classrooms, then there could be a legitimate claim toward reform. There could also be more research showing possible connections between dialogic discourse and the development of critical thinking skills, which is often cited as a goal in state educational standards. Even then, the road to a substantial movement toward dialogic classrooms will be challenging because of the cultural inertia of the society we live in. Most teachers, I fear, revert to the same patterns of behavior that they observed in the teachers they had. Since dialogically-oriented teachers are few and far between, the prevailing tendency among teachers will be to teach in the dominant monologic style. It may be up to the teacher education programs in colleges and universities to train teachers to become more dialogic, with professors

modeling dialogic styles of teaching for their students. Yet even this might not be enough to change the dominant mindset, as many new teachers, without tenure, end up teaching in the ways that their departments see fit.

It seems then that envisioning dialogic discourse patterns as being dominant in America's schools is a little like envisioning a Utopian society. I fear that dialogic discourse, as a mainstream methodology, can only exist in a truly democratic society where power is shared and negotiated equally among citizens. In many ways, our schools are a reflection of our culture at large, where those with power dictate much of what we know and think. The social, political, and economic laws we live under are by and large fixed entities, and people are not taught to challenge basic assumptions of the power structure. A larger movement toward dialogic ways of interacting would affirm that teachers and students were already empowered and were reflecting a more democratic culture than the one we have now. In other words, if dialogic discourse practice was part of the mainstream in education, it would prove that we had achieved a higher level of democracy.

Yet all is not lost in the present. Individual teachers and schools can still make strides toward achieving more freedom of expression and thought in their classrooms.   By creating the type of environment where students have the opportunity to question and discuss the world around them, teachers help them to realize their own humanity. The humanization of students is the highest possible outcome of the educational process: when students consider their own power to make and remake the world around them, when students acknowledge their self worth as human beings, and when students discover that they have a valuable voice to contribute to the melody of the world.

Table 1: Primary Sources

Author and Year	Participants	Nature of Study	Conclusions
Gokhale, 1995	271 students enrolled at Western Illinois University.	An examination of the effectiveness of individual learning versus collaborative learning.	Students who learned in a collaborative manner scored higher on a posttest of critical thinking questions. Small group discussion was reported to be a fundamental element of collaborative learning.
Langer & Roberts, 1991	One heterogeneously grouped seventh-grade middle school English class.	A detailed analysis of one dialogically-oriented class discussion. The discussion was coded and analyzed according to the types of "talk moves" used by both students and teacher.	The teacher is able to promote class discussion in her classroom through the following means: orchestrating, revoicing, scaffolding, and asking open-ended questions.
Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993	54 ninth-grade English classes in 9 Midwestern high schools.	An analysis of the differences between monologic and dialogic discourse patterns in small-group work.	For small-group work to be successfully dialogic, teachers must promote activities that are properly scaffolded.
Nystrand, Gamoran, Long, Wu, & Zeiser, 2003	200 eighth-and ninth-grade English and social studies classrooms in 25 Midwestern middle and high schools.	A qualitative and quantitative analysis of monologic and dialogic discourse patterns. The researchers computed the probabilities and effects of particular discourse moves, and analyzed their relationship to class discussion.	Authentic teacher questions, uptake, and student questions significantly impact the dialogic nature of a discussion.
O'Connor & Michaels, 1993	Two sixth-grade classrooms.	A qualitative study on the role of teacher "revoicing" in classroom discourse.	Teacher "revoicing" of students' comments facilitates alignment with academic tasks.
Smith & Connoly, 2005	Two ninth-grade English classes.	An investigation on the impact of teacher authority as it relates to class discussion.	High teacher authority results in less dialogically-oriented discussion.
Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005	21 elementary and middle school language arts classrooms from 3 urban districts.	An examination of the relationship between classroom talk and academic rigor in reading-comprehension lessons.	The teachers' ability to reformulate and clarify students' ideas, as well as to encourage students to elaborate, was a significant factor in the academic quality of the discussion.

Table 2: Secondary Sources

Author and Year	Participants	Nature of Study	Conclusions
Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998	40 Freedom Schools in Mississippi.	A case study of how questioning and discussion were at the center of a curriculum which focused on social change.	African American students were empowered by the opportunity to question, discuss, and evaluate their experiences in a segregated society.
Friedman, 2001	A heterogeneous tenth-grade American literature class in a Boston high school.	Action research designed to show how an examination of literature can lead to reflective class discussion.	Through a consideration of a fictional character's morally ambiguous situation, students were able to generate open-ended discussion.
Langer, 1991	Two middle and high school English classes from city and suburban districts.	A case study focusing on two divergent types of discourse: one teacher centered, and the other student centered.	Students in the student centered, as opposed to teacher centered classroom, took a more active role in the learning process by assuming ownership and control of class discussion.
Mercer, 1995	Teachers and students from Waitling Middle School in Milton, Keynes, England.	An examination of the process of teaching and learning as a social, communicative activity.	When students are given the opportunity to contribute to class discussion, they help to shape the knowledge that is created in the classroom.
Nassaji & Wells, 2000	Nine elementary and middle school classes in Toronto.	Seven year action research project analyzing the effect of teachers' follow up moves on class discussions.	Evaluative follow up moves can often stifle class discussion.
Nystrand & Christoph,	One English classroom in an inner-city high school.	Case study of one teacher's transition to a dialogic classroom.	Scaffolding, asking open-ended questions, and making space for students' interpersonal relationships, helped this teacher overcome many obstacles

2001			in her efforts to be more dialogic.
Thompson, 1997	Teacher trainers and trainees at the University of Liverpool.	Case study on the ways in which teacher questioning and response are used to maximize class discussion.	Open-ended questioning and non-evaluative follow ups are the best ways to encourage class discussion.

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