Tim (all student names are pseudonyms), a young English teacher, took a position in a corporately owned charter school. Despite misgivings—“Just not sure privatization and choice are the saviors of public education”—Tim needed a job and accepted what was offered.

Typically for Tim, he threw himself into his teaching, getting additionally involved in class sponsorship and student government. As an offshoot of these activities, Tim asked his sophomore classes to write about, and then discuss, the seeming lack of school spirit and what they could do about it:

In all of the classes, we talked for at least 30 minutes. Really talked. They purged some demons. Complained a little. They hate the uniforms. Some teachers don’t care. Some don’t teach. Some of the sports teams aren’t good. No technology. No money. No new textbooks. Lots of interesting stuff there.

But when we turned to ideas about making the school better, they had some great ones. “What if we got involved and did some fundraising?” “What if we got our parents involved to help with some fundraising?” “What if we supported the football team instead of talked trash?” “What if we looked into some other ways of getting some technology in the building?” “What if we painted the walls different colors so that they weren’t so boring?” so on and so forth...It was, I think, the first time someone had ever asked them for their ideas about making school better.

My sixth-period class—which has an attitude and personality unlike any other class that I’ve had before (which is mostly a good thing; a little spunk/attitude never hurt anyone, right?)—probably got into it the most. They had great ideas. They can be a little, well, rowdy at times, but they were quieting each other down—respectfully, mind you—so that people could be heard.

Even the girl who never says very much contributed a great idea. The kid in the back who has to be the center of attention—any kind of attention—had some great contributions to our discussion. It was awesome, and I hope transformative. They were fired up about maybe being able to make some changes in their school, about working with the student government to do some cool things.

It’s stating the obvious: Tim’s excitement was palpable as he narrated his experience. There was energy generated in these discussions that ran through him as well as his students. It was as if they had found a bottle in the sand, opened it, and released a genie that had charged them with electricity.
But amid the excitement, one line strikes a note of sadness: “It was, I think, the first time someone had ever asked them for their ideas about making school better.” Granted, it’s a sweeping statement, but one that our experience suggests is true all too often for too many students.

With educators racing to the top trying to leave no child behind as they invoke a set of standards common and central to all learners, we, the authors of this piece, are struck by how seldom students and teachers are asked to enter into dialogue about that which matters most to them: what occurs in school.

Schools have become supersized, standardized, depersonalized spaces that alienate teachers from students via imposed organizational structures and the institution of schooling itself (Meier, 2000). In such spaces, we find teachers, often alone, who work against the institution’s discourse in their efforts to make students feel “important, capable, valued, and empowered” (Hyland, 2009, p. 102).

However, these efforts to bypass the strictures of the authoritarian school system too often end with stifled dialogue and disenfranchised teachers who subsequently become frustrated and discouraged (Dever & Carlston, 2009). Moreover, when educators capitulate to pressure from administrators to perform to a predetermined standard, the loss of autonomy trickles down through teachers to the students and many teachers resort to authoritarian stances (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

When such monological measures of learning prevail, how can students be heard and valued as diverse makers of meaning instead of as test takers? As it stands, the future of public education seems grim without a strong influx of dialogical pedagogy to reinvigorate the voices of teachers and students.

As we watch dialogue die within governmental chambers, must we also watch it die within classroom walls? We think not, although the work will be considerable and the hours long.

We argue here that establishing a critical dialogue in literacy classrooms is needed, perhaps now more than at any time in our past. Failure to do so will result in yet another generation of students, and an ever-growing number of teachers, who will perceive school more as a place for serving time and less as a nexus of making meaning of the lives they coconstruct.

What Is a Dialogical Classroom?

In a dialogical classroom, literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives (Fecho, 2011a, 2011b). By writing “literacy is used to immerse teacher and students,” we’re urging educators to get in over our heads with explorations into our continually developing identities.

Accordingly, reading, writing, speaking, and listening become the vehicles for doing so. We must bring our expertise to these explorations, but we also need to bring our sense of wonder, so that we value the expertise of our students and leave ourselves open to dialogue.

Freire (1970) reminded us that no dialogue begins with the premise that only some chosen among us can enter into the dialogue, or that some voices carry greater weight than others. So, to immerse is to expect all to dive deeply and engage in constructing new understandings, to blur and reinvent the definitions of teacher and student.

An ongoing reflective conversation is tied to Bakhtin’s (1981) notions of response. As readers and writers of text, we author responses. A nod, an exclamation, a graffiti tag, a class discussion are all responses. Bakhtin claimed that understanding is merged with response, and that through response comes meaning—a restless, transient, ephemeral meaning that is contingent on context and inclined toward its next response. As he noted, “The relation to meaning is always dialogic. Even understanding itself is dialogic” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 121, italics original).

Therefore, the conversation is not only reflective, it is ongoing. An activity that opens class should speak to that which ends it. My Left Foot, if read in October, gets overtly connected to The Miracle Worker when it’s read in March. An online journal written one day is expanded during another period and formalized on a third. A discussion about the Harlem Renaissance, even though occurring in English class, sparks connections to the science, politics, and art of that
era. In these ways and many others, the dialogical classroom becomes unbounded and exists across space as well as time.

And we always respond to the texts of our lives. For us, what counts as text begins with print, but also opens into electronic media, music, art, and other stimuli. A pebble made smooth by the river flow, if you know how to read it, is as much a text as “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” The distant look in the eyes of your partner as you try to untangle a relationship issue communicates meaning. The multiple paintings of grain stacks by Monet, each from a different perspective, suggest one thing to one viewer and something else to another.

In creating text, humans engage in an existential act, what Bakhtin (1984) has called a “feast of becoming” (p. 10). In this ongoing dialogue with self and other, we make personal understanding of the contexts of our lives.

All texts, the ones we read and the ones we write, become our texts. We take at least partial ownership of text, there being as many interpretations as there are readers (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Based on this working definition, we argue that all classrooms are dialogical, that they fit on a continuum between completely dialogical and completely monological, never reaching either limit. However, too many classrooms—constricted by imposed testing, standards, and instruction—skew in a monological direction, even though the teachers inside those classrooms, if given informed choice, would choose otherwise.

If teachers are lectured to by administration with pronouncements, proclamations, and absolutes—and if they never have the invitation to bring critical lenses to the school—then whatever dialogical sparks that exist in their classrooms will find no tinder to ignite. Any school governance that hems in teachers and students through micromanagement of what can occur in the classroom will, in the words of Bakhtin (1986), seem “meaningless to us; it is removed from dialogue” (p. 145).

**When Dialogue Is Restricted**

The following narratives, taken from studies conducted by Sean (third author) and Dawan (second author), provide some insight into what occurs when dialogical opportunities are thwarted in literacy classrooms.

Sean, who taught composition in a technical college, discusses how many of his students have accepted the authoritarian narrative of school to the point that they are confused when provided opportunities for dialogue. For her part, Dawan describes a student whose self-conception as a struggling reader has been shaped by too many monological transactions with teachers.

**Sean’s Narrative**

The goal of my quarter-long study was to invite students into dialogue over the curriculum and the direction of the classroom. By taking this dialogical stance and opening as many areas of negotiation as possible, I hoped to help students reflect upon themselves as writers and learners.

Moreover, I hoped for students to take more control of their educational experience. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that students interpret and reinterpret their moments even as they are experiencing them. Thus, I expected that the students would encounter the dialogical classroom and begin to interpret differently than in their pasts.

Sadly, I found that the students interpreted the dialogical moment through the lens of their previous, less dialogical educational moments. As such, they sidelined the potential of the dialogical moment.

But why would students perpetuate something so seemingly self-defeating, especially when offered opportunities for self-empowerment? Wortham (1999) explained, “We contribute structure to ourselves by telling stories about ourselves” (p. 156). In essence, as self-conscious beings, we picture ourselves through narrative. Moreover, this identity building happens incrementally as we construct running narratives. When the story becomes strong enough, “the narrator acts in accordance with the characteristics foregrounded in the narrative” (Wortham, 1999, p. 156).

Likewise, Bruner (2004) argued that the human experience is one of culturally and contextually influenced “world making” (p. 694). Over time, “the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes
that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience” and “we become the autobiographical narratives,” in addition to becoming “variants of the culture’s canonical forms” (p. 694).

Accordingly, the monological, academic voice expressed by students was created through cultural and contextualized transactions with the imposed narratives that they have been encountering throughout their school experience.

For students like Nami, who described herself as an African American member of the “lower class,” a sense of linguistic inferiority pervaded her ability to handle the English language. In her estimation, composition classes exist to ensure that “people who speak slang will use less slang” and will instead “use proper English.”

Indeed, her personal hopes for English class were that it would help her “phrase certain things differently without using slang.” In describing the purpose of education in general, she answered that education makes people “better.” When I pressed for a definition, she gave an answer in which she repeatedly stressed that education helps people “speak better and use complete sentences.”

According to Nami, the home codes that she, her family, and her friends spoke were not correct English. Moreover, she felt that the ability to adopt the academy’s linguistic code went in hand with improved thinking and understanding.

However, this so-called improved expression is more like a linguistic self-rejection and subsequent acquiescence to an academic dialect. In resistance to this situation, Shor (1996) wrote of a dialogical stance he took in which a “new speech community” was created in the class (p. 30).

In contrast to the situation implied by Nami, the new community was developed dialogically by the students and teacher, and it included language variety as a part of the class’s community expression. In other words, the students’ home languages were included as part of the class’s discussion and writing. This dialogically based validation stands in contrast to Nami’s devaluation of her home speech in favor of the academy’s parlance.

Furthermore, Nami’s devaluing of her literacy was echoed by her classmates. For instance, Chloe, who identified herself as a middle-income African American who enjoyed personal reading and writing, reflected, “Writing just isn’t my thing. It isn’t for me.” Except, what exactly “isn’t for” Chloe, who said she writes regularly?

According to Chloe, writing is intensely important for understanding herself and the world. She explained that, “if I’m stressed out, or if I’m angry, I tend to get a piece of paper to write my frustrations down, so I won’t take it out on nobody else. It helps ease the tension and the stress.” She turned to writing as a meaning-making experience, yet the reception that her writing has received in academia caused her to devalue it.

Nami and Chloe were not alone in their experience or feelings. Yet, when I offered students the opportunity for dialogue over their writing and the class, they were reticent and unsure of how to proceed. When they finally did begin to speak, they spoke in frustration and complaint about education but were hesitant to make many suggestions for change.

Students noted the positive feelings they had toward the dialogical environment because they felt as though their voices were valued. They felt that they were part of the process rather than a subject being processed. However, in the end they still felt, as one student expressed, that their success in the class was at my “mercy.”

Most students couldn’t shake the sense of the teacher as the complete authority, as the hanging judge holding court. Even though some acknowledged the positive effect of our dialogical exchanges, such transactions were little more than a blip on the radar screen; this dialogical classroom was likely the only one the students would find during their academic careers. The overriding imperative for the students was to get through the course successfully and move along.

Although the students felt insecure about their language and thus their identities in the academy, they were not interested in starting a revolution, personal
or otherwise. This stance is a good survival strategy in the short term, but the long-term civil and intellectual outcomes of such an education are bleak at best.

**Dawan’s Narrative**

Like Sean, I was interested in the stories students tell about their experiences in classrooms and the way these narratives influence their identity, particularly as readers. Kearney (2002) explained that we tell stories “in the light of our past memories and future anticipations” and interpret who we are now based on where we’ve been and where we are headed (p. 4).

From this perspective, our experiences exist “among other meanings as a link in the chain of meaning,” all of which play a part in our process of becoming (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 146). The experience of Maurice, a student I interviewed as part of a study on reader self-conceptualization, brings this theory to life. Growing up in a handful of cities, he attended several schools over the years and even repeated a grade.

Although he started out as “a loud student” and often got in trouble, once he got to high school, he tried to change. This 16-year-old freshman now described himself as quieter than ever because, based on his past experiences, he thought silence might be the key to his success. According to my observations, he stuck to this idea. Dressed in skinny jeans and one of his brightly colored hoodies, he wandered into class each day and took his seat in the far row, pulling his hood over his short Afro. He rarely dozed off and never caused a disturbance, but he also never said a word in class. He’d occasionally nod or laugh at comments, but he worked hard to keep his vocalizations to a minimum.

As Maurice and I talked, he explained his past and ongoing struggles with reading in school. He described how, after being retained in fifth grade, his teachers treated him differently because they thought he was stupid. He explained, “Every time I’d try to ask them something, like really simple questions, or answer a real simple question, they wouldn’t want me to or nothing.”

His teachers thought that if they called on him, he would answer questions wrong or read poorly, so instead they wouldn’t ask him to participate. His written work didn’t fare much better, and he often turned in his assignments unfinished because he didn’t know how to do them, even though “it was going to make me look retarded.”

These are Maurice’s interpretations only. Assuming the best of his teachers, perhaps they avoided calling on him so he wouldn’t be embarrassed by asking a question he should know the answer to, or by offering an incorrect response, or by struggling as he read aloud. Perhaps they accepted his work and felt sorry for him, passing him to the next grade, not wanting to be another teacher who retained him. But whatever the intent of the teachers, these moments reinforced his stories about himself as a struggling student, full of feelings of failure as he considered his abilities and potential as a reader and learner.

Maurice’s perspective offers insight into the significance of dialogue—or the lack thereof—in his process of becoming. These moments became links in a chain of internal dialogues about himself as a learner and a reader as well as reading itself. “Every time I think about [reading],...it makes me feel stupid,” he explained, “like I can’t get most of it. That’s how I feel most of the times.”

Ultimately, I can’t help but wonder how Maurice might have interpreted these moments differently if his teachers had been listening amidst his silence and sought out “missing conversations, overlooked perspectives” (Schultz, 2003, p. 109) and moments when Maurice might have felt silenced. Doing so would have allowed them to not only challenge these interpretations of them as teachers, but also Maurice’s interpretations of himself as a learner.

Maurice wondered that, too. When I talked about what teachers could do to help him, he said “You gotta understand where I’m coming from and try to just listen and just be friends instead of just yelling and telling me to do something all the time...instead of just being my teacher.”

I pushed him to explain what he meant by “friend,” and he explained someone who would “talk to me like we’re friends and then I’d feel like we’d have a better connection. I could listen and then I feel like I could trust them and I could do my work better and stuff.”
According to Maurice, learning and dialogue takes place among friends. The kind of friendship he sought in his teacher involved understanding, responding, listening, and trusting; in short, it involved dialogue. What he needed and wanted were opportunities to engage with his teachers in ways that allowed him to work through his struggles and empower himself as a learner.

Reclaiming Classrooms Through Dialogue

In 1986, Goswami and Stillman published a book that became a landmark call for teachers to take inquiry stances on their teaching. Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change argued that teachers be seen as professionals who need time and space to reflect on their daily transactions with students.

It was through what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) came to call “systematic and intentional” inquiry that teachers would regain autonomy of practice. In effect, by establishing an ongoing dialogue with their practice, with their students, and with the political context of their instruction, teachers would enable themselves to have more say about what occurred within their classrooms.

If literacy teachers and students have ever needed to reclaim their classrooms, now is certainly the time. But what exactly does it mean to reclaim the classroom through dialogue and what are the implications of such actions? What do we risk by not engaging in dialogue in our classrooms and schools? Consequently, such dialogue allows students to lay claim to their educational experience.

To start, we risk creating generation upon generation of passive learners and passive teachers. Such passivity, a consequence of having fewer opportunities to engage in dialogical meaning making, leads to a devaluing of schooling.

As indicated in the narratives of both Sean and Dawan, students often do not seek to change the game of school, for “as long as their ambiguity exists, the oppressed are reluctant to resist” (Freire, 1970, p. 64). Too often, the same effect occurs with many young, inspired teachers who, stonewalled by the system, eventually capitulate.

Some teachers and students reject the system but see resistance as futile, while others rely on the system to direct their thinking and wouldn’t know where to begin to push back. Finally, many with grit leave. Regardless the manifestation, this pervasive monological narrative usually generates an equally monological education.

Surprisingly, all of this problematic practice seems to be supported by policymakers, who, as Darling-Hammond (2011) surmised, “advocate for teachers with little training—who will come and go quickly, without costing much money, without vesting in the pension system, and without raising questions about an increasingly prescriptive system of testing and teaching” (para 10).

Ultimately, with such governance, we risk the foundations of our representative democracy. If we don’t value questioning and a multiplicity of voices among teachers and students, then we reify meaning. Without many voices and perspectives participating in the shaping of our society, we are left with one perspective, a condition that violates the heart of democracy.

For what is the point of education, especially in our democracy? We want to believe that the goal cannot be to teach students that they are inadequate or to push them to cynical disengagement or compliance.

We like to think that schools aren’t being legislated to mass-produce graduates like cars off a Detroit assembly line. Rather, we hope the goal of education is to create empowering opportunities for people to bring themselves to a better understanding of their world and their roles in that world (Freire, 1970).

Subsequently, education in our democracy should encourage people to shape their own lives and the cultures within which they identify. We believe dialogical education is a pedagogical stance most suited for such an endeavor.

When we consider what it means for teachers and students to reclaim the classroom, it brings us back to Tim. In another excerpt from the e-mail that starts this commentary, he suggested that sustaining an

But what exactly does it mean to reclaim the classroom through dialogue?
effort to be dialogical might be difficult and wouldn’t always result in success, but was necessary to pursue because, “These kids are yearning for something more, for something better, for something great for themselves.” And then he added this coda:

I mentioned in passing to a student yesterday that I don’t teach English, I teach kids, people, human beings…. During our discussion today, he brought that up, how he wished other teachers and administrators felt that way. I told them that I couldn’t change other people, even though I might try, but I could guarantee that whenever they walked [through] my door, that’s how I’d treat them. It touched me that he had actually listened to me and that what I’d said meant something to him. Then I was saddened, because in his 11 years of school, no one had ever told him that. It’s truly a big hill we’re climbing here.

We couldn’t agree more.

References

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