Critical Conversations: Tensions and Opportunities of the Dialogical Classroom

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Bob—one author of this article—teaches a class called Culture, Literacy, and the Classroom, whose focus is not to develop a consensus of understanding but create an atmosphere in which "wobble" (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005) takes place. As defined in Bob's course framework, wobble is that moment when there has been "a shift in balance" in one's belief system and "[a]ttention must be paid. A response must be authored" (Fecho, 2008, p. 1). Ridiculously, wobble is akin to vaudeville acts in which plates are kept spinning atop wooden dowels and, sublimely, the concept owes much to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, where learning often occurs in a context that feels unfamiliar and less secure. Knowing that learners exhibit a range of tolerance for wobble, Bob urges students to "trust the process" and be willing to call their own stances into question as rigorously as they might interrogate those of others, even though doing so may make them feel uncomfortable, distressed, or angry.

In the spring 2008 iteration of the course, the class engaged in dialogue both online and face-to-face that dealt with the complicated issue of ability tracking. Shortly after a class meeting, Beth, a coauthor, sent Bob the following email:

> Hi Bob.
>
> I need to share a couple of things about tonight.
>
> As a person who represents much of the "white middle class" viewpoint, I have had significant parts of my value system questioned thus far in class. I have been trusting the process, even when it is hard, and I am making a real effort to interrogate myself and my beliefs and ideas. I have tried to be courageous and share what I think, although my personal experiences run counter to what might be acceptable in class. I am wobbling. And I am thinking hard.

I came to class tonight ready to discuss my thoughts and share what has been my authentic experience with tracking students, meaning my own children. I was surprised to hear you say, twice, that saying it [tracking] doesn't work is unacceptable and off the table. I am not saying it didn't work for you, and I value hearing how this has happened, but to have my voice completely dismissed was troubling to me. Perhaps I misunderstood you, since at the end of the class we were allowed to touch on it for a little bit, but I felt like you had already made clear what was not acceptable to say.

I am trying to participate in the dialogue, and I absolutely believe that dialogue is necessary to effecting change. I came tonight ready to discuss and share, even though I knew it was going to be hard. I would like to hear your thoughts. If not on email, it would be fine to talk face to face for a few minutes at some point. I am committed to being a part of this class and changing myself. In order to continue on that path, I need to share these concerns. I appreciate you considering them and correcting me if I am off base here.

Thanks, Beth

One way to characterize this exchange is to indicate that Bob said something that shut down dialogue, at least for Beth. But by sending this email, Beth continued to trust the process and was, indeed, opening herself to further dialogue, despite whatever confusion or mixed signals might have been sent or perceived.

We believe that when participants embrace the dialogical possibilities of their focus of study, dynamism can increase, but so can tension, as unifying forces tug in opposition to those that individualize. Such continual pull can make for rich, engaged explorations but can also be disorienting and perplexing. Beth's email positions her between these opposing forces, showing both her reticence and willingness to proceed deeper into dialogue. If there hadn't been a context for dialogue—one that provided support, tools, and expectations for making new meaning—Beth most likely would have mentally if not physically removed herself from future class sessions.

What does it mean to enter into dialogical transactions within a literacy education classroom and what are the implications for the field?

In the remainder of this article, we—the authors—respond to this question: What does it mean to enter into dialogical transactions within a literacy education classroom and what are the implications for the field? In particular, we explore dialogical transactions on which our understandings pivoted and what they meant to us as participants in the course. By examining how we each embraced, struggled with, and employed the dialogical opportunities presented in the class, we suggest what can happen when educators choose to acknowledge and live within the centripetal and centrifugal tensions of

a dialogical classroom (Bakhtin, 1981). Ultimately, we argue that, to better prepare preservice and inservice teachers for understanding and working within rather than against the tensions of their own dialogical classrooms, teacher educators need to create classes that are dialogical spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) noted that tension is part of learning: "But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth" (para 9). It's in this spirit that we draw on the work of Bakhtin, Hermans, and Freire to provide a means for seeing tension as both necessary and productive. Our intent is to pull a thread—one focused on the complexities, struggles, and existential necessity of making meaning—across the work of each theorist, the better to deepen our understandings of what we mean by working within rather than against tension.

Bakhtin (1981) argued that understanding and response are contingent on each other. Utterance, response, and meaning—the building stones of dialogue—are merged in a recursive, continual, and transactional process. There can be no meaning without response. There can be no response without future response. All who engage in language use are linked by all past, current, and future responses. This construction of understanding is fraught with complexity and even "our thought itself—philosophical, scientific, and artistic—is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggles with others' thoughts" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92). If language remains fluid and under tension, then meaning, too, remains in process and is never easily obtained.

The concept of the dialogical self derives from the work of Hermans, a psychologist who cited the work of Bakhtin (1984) to argue that the self, primarily constructed through language, is a "highly contextual phenomenon" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p. 78) that remains dynamic. He suggested that an individual's identity, similar to Bakhtin's construct of language, continually undergoes centripetal and centrifugal tension, subject to both unifying and individualizing forces simultaneously. He further argued that these tensions are necessary for an identity; individuals represent themselves in some unified way to the world, yet need to also allow for dialogue among a range of identities to remain in transaction with the world. As such, multicultural beings live in multicultural contexts.

The work of Brazilian educator Freire connects dialogical concepts to pedagogy. As he noted, "People know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompletion. In this incompletion and this awareness lie the

very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation" (1970, p. 72). For Freire (1970), dialogue is intended to transform all who enter into the process. He argued that dialogue springs from the word and that within the word, two dimensions—action and reflection—remain in tension.

It's this tension between action and reflection that sustains dialogue. In this process Freire calls praxis, humans generate understanding of the word and the world. It is a creative act, one that Freire stresses is "an existential necessity" (1970, p. 77). Where Bakhtin (1981) wrote of centripetal and centrifugal forces, Freire explored the "interplay of the opposites *permanence* and *change*" (p. 72; italics in original), respectively centering and decentering forces in their own right. It is through such tensions that dialogue occurs and posits education in a state of becoming—cognizant of the past, generative in the present, and pitched toward the future.

Methods

Course Description

Bob's course—LLED 8300, Culture, Literacy, and the Classroom—is intended to be a personal and collective exploration of the ways culture and literacy transact in literacy classrooms and lives outside school. The first weeks of the course are devoted to explorations of personal experiences that entail crossing cultural boundaries, and the work is designed to start dialogue about the ways, as Hermans and Dimaggio (2007) suggested, multicultural beings transact in multicultural contexts. The middle section of the course focuses on theoretical underpinnings of multicultural education via the investigation of the ideas of educators such as Delpit (1995), Gee (2008), and Nieto (2002). In the last third of the course, participants discuss the way theories about culture and literacy learning transact in classrooms such as those described by Fecho (2004) and Tatum (2005).

To help unpack these readings, students write responses that represent a "dialogical series," in that, like Russian dolls, each nests in the other. To start, students respond to readings via an online discussion forum in which they are required to make at least one entry per week. At monthly intervals, three brief exploration papers are completed. They are designed for students to tug threads from the class work and, as their label suggests, explore some aspect of language, literacy, and culture. Two culminating projects—a blog composed of contributions from all participants and individual extended arguments—are developed to help students take ideas in play and expand, polish, and refine them. Ideas expressed in the earliest online entries often get continued exposure in the exploration papers and the final projects.

Participants

Beth, Nicole, and Amy were selected to participate in this study because Bob's preliminary data analysis indicated that all three had employed the dialogical possibilities of the course in ways that were personally productive, but they also raised significant issues about such work. This factor, plus their accessibility as full-time doctoral students and their communication skills, rendered them ideal potential coauthors.

Beth, a mother of three, was raised in a conservative middle-class suburban household in the southeastern United States. Her interest in libraries and adolescents' access to resources informs her research. Nicole is a middle-class Black woman and a former elementary school teacher and district reading specialist. These lenses color a great deal of her experiences as a doctoral student, as does her decade-long practice of Nichiren Buddhism. Amy is a former secondary English teacher, raised in a conservative suburban area in the western United States. Bob's working-class roots and high school teaching experience are evidenced in his research and teaching, both of which focus on sociocultural issues related to adolescent literacy.

Data Analysis

The data set is comprised of three narratives written by Beth, Nicole, and Amy. Bob asked them to revisit their writings from the course and identify events in which they found themselves, as the course frame suggests, wobbling. Based on that investigation of primary data, they each developed a narrative that reconstructed one event in detail.

We subjected the narratives to a variation of an oral inquiry process (Himley, 2000) and Nicole's experience with the protocol was typical. She began by reading her narrative aloud, although she could have opted, as Amy did, to have us read to ourselves. After the reading, Beth, Amy, and Bob jotted notes on the following agreed-on questions: (1) What stood out for you in this text? (2) What issues about dialogue does this text raise? and (3) What connections/associations to your own experience/writing did you make to the text?

With Nicole as note taker, Beth, Amy, and Bob addressed the first question, responding in turn. At that point, Nicole summarized the responses from her notes. Questions 2 and 3 were handled in a similar manner. Nicole's round finished with an open discussion of any lingering ideas, clarifications, or comments on the process. Each took the collected notes from the protocol and individually identified themes that worked across the narratives.

Limitations

This study is limited because it only represents the viewpoints of three people who were willing to "trust the process" and to share the changes in their beliefs that resulted. Others who attended the course may likewise have rethought old assumptions and values. Moreover, for educators who are interested in establishing dialogical classrooms, this study may seem unfulfilling in the sense that it does not provide step-by-step instructions for how teachers may engender transformative spaces. In fact, we believe it would be counter to our theoretical framework to attempt such a list of instructions. A dialogical classroom is grounded in individual contexts, with individual voices and experiences shaping the conversations and course outcomes. Though we will not presume to recommend one specific way to establish a syllabus, one set of activities to try, or one book that must be read, dialogical classrooms are born of a dialogical *approach*.

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While this approach may—and probably should—manifest itself differently in different contexts, it is characterized by an insistence on a more flattened hierarchy among students, teachers, and texts; a belief in the importance of both listening and responding in ways that can honor and challenge what is said; and a willingness to navigate the tensions that arise while engaging in important yet risky discussions.

Sharing Experiences through Narratives

The following narratives, written by Beth, Nicole, and Amy, illustrate some of the tensions often found in dialogical classrooms. These three transactions, as well as the role of the teacher educator in each, illustrate well what makes dialogical teaching and learning so complex yet, in many instances, so transformative.

Beth's Narrative

It is not difficult to identify the moment when my wobble threatened to go into full tilt. At the beginning of the semester, I shrugged off the warnings of wobble with a laugh. I had been in classes that worked through issues of social justice before. My eyes had been opened to the fact that there were many other people in the world, people who did not live the way that I did, both by and not by choice. For a White, middle-class female raised in a con-

servative, relatively sheltered environment, I thought I had made quite a bit of progress toward learning about and accepting differences.

The first weeks of the course were manageable. Then, through weekly writings, I started to cross into places that made me uncomfortable. When I wrote a response, I would reread and tweak it many times before posting it. I would check multiple times to see if anyone responded, either positively or negatively. We were talking about morality, justice, and the classroom. These discussions began calling into question cherished parts of my upbringing. Still, I was able to maintain some emotional and intellectual distance.

It was the topic of ability grouping, or "tracking," that hit home in a way I could not distance myself from, and it brought me to the pivotal moment in the semester. The wobble went from uncomfortable to overwhelming. Suddenly, the tensions between what I was learning and what I was doing in my life erupted. It was a crossroads, and I did not know it was coming until I was standing smack in the middle with many questions needing answers. The topic of tracking thrust a dimension into the dialogue that was fiercely personal: my family.

Tracking had been an undercurrent of my entire educational life. I was in "the red reading group" in first grade, gifted classes in elementary school, and then attended an elite private high school. Later as a parent, I believed the education of my two elementary-aged children was mismanaged due in part to mixed-ability classrooms. I felt that my son had been shortchanged in his time in school because he was in the "upper part of the middle" of his class. He often grasped the material presented with little effort. He glided through and, in my estimation, wasted a lot of time while the teacher provided instruction to students who did not get the material as readily. School bored him immensely. These circumstances were difficult for me to endure both as a parent and as an educator. My daughter's experience was somewhat similar, although she seemed to find ways to fill up the idle time with social interactions and personal projects such as writing songs. My son's strategies were not always so innocuous.

I had taken proactive steps to ensure my children would be grouped with their intellectual peers as much as possible. When I read Sonia Nieto's (2002) thoughts about tracking and its underlying injustice, I could see some of her points, but that did little to change my mind about my own children and the environment I felt they should be in. It had worked for me, and it would work for my children.

After the class read Nieto, I posted my thoughts in the electronic forum, however hesitantly. I discussed, with a touch of shame, some of my thoughts in my small group, and I felt relatively safe sharing them. I was

a little surprised to hear agreement from two other mothers in the class, one who had seen children underserved in mixed-ability classrooms, the other who could easily imagine it. These affirmations, both with friends in conversation and in the online forum, made me feel more confident. No one would deny that tracking had done damage at times, but we were also not willing to simply dismiss it.

At the beginning of the semester, we had created some class rules. At the time, it seemed a little funny, just like the whole wobble thing. To make rules like "be brave," "be willing to talk even when doing so feels uncomfortable," and "allow dialogue to help you form ideas" seemed a little ridiculous before we had even started discussing anything. But the syllabus said "Trust the process," so I did. I thought about those rules when I arrived in class the night of the discussion about tracking, knowing my views would be unpopular with some. I knew several people in the class had deeply passionate views against tracking, including the instructor. I prepared myself as best I could. My instinct is not to talk in class, but I thought I was ready for an interesting discussion, one that abided by the rules we had set up.

As far as what actually happened that evening, it is hard to say. From where I sat, I was told in so many words that talking about how untracked classrooms may not benefit all students was unacceptable. I listened to people agree, support, applaud the virtues of the untracked classroom. "It doesn't work" was the one thing we were not allowed to say. Our instructor had seen it work. Others had, too. And at once, my experience was invalidated, as were the experiences and needs of my children. My words were silenced; my contributions were rendered invalid. For someone used to privilege, that moment was definitely unfamiliar.

The rest of the evening was a blur of heat and tension. I remember crossing my hands over my chest, pushing back from the table, and glaring for the remainder of the class. I seethed. I had never been so angry in a class before. Tears silently rolled down my cheeks. My voice remained stuck in my throat for the entire two and a half hours, save for some sarcastic mutterings about the value of "dialogue" as I packed my things and headed for the car. I was screaming by the time I got home, and I generally consider myself a pretty reserved person when it comes to expressing anger.

But I did have a choice. I deeply considered spending the rest of the semester simply going through the motions of dialogue. I could smile and toe the party line. But, instead of withdrawing, I remembered the rules and decided to stay turned toward this difficult situation. What took me aback when reflecting on that moment was the realization of the level of vulnerability I had reached in Bob's classroom. I had trusted. Without fully realizing

it, I had brought my personal beliefs, my family, and my most cherished ideas into this class in a way that I did not usually acknowledge. For once, all were called into the discussion and questioned. As I thought I was maintaining a safe distance, I had instead inched close to my home and traditions that honored people I cared about: the way my parents, both deceased, had raised me, and the way I was raising my children.

Through my doctoral studies, I have become an advocate for students bringing their cultures into the classroom. I believe that, in order to balance out the White, middle-class curriculum, students need to have their cultures represented. But there I was, in Bob's class, watching my culture attacked in the classroom and feeling angry. I wonder if, that day, I began to feel in a small way what students with different cultural backgrounds feel much more regularly, when the talk in the White, middle-class classroom runs counter to what they hold dear.

I made the decision to continue in the class. I went to speak to Bob, but I still had my armor on a bit. He was open and allowed me to say what I needed to say. He assured me that everything was OK. I believed him, but the realization of vulnerability and the difference of my views were hard to shake. I had lived my life as one who tried so hard to please the teacher, but this was different. I essentially retreated from class discussions for the next couple of weeks but continued to try to be somewhat brave in online postings, inserting sarcasm or humor to protect myself when the discussion got personal.

At one point a paper was due but I was still battling the urge to avoid the tender spot I had uncovered, and also the difficult and conflicting feelings I had about Bob and the class in general. I tried to write about something else, but after several uninspired attempts, I had to face head-on what had happened. A significant portion of my paper was dedicated to trying to sort out the difficult role of the teacher in a diverse dialogic classroom—and not just the "heroes and holidays" surface-level recognition of diversity that is so often given in classrooms. Instead, I looked at a classroom where cultures are actually allowed to be expressed, to conflict, to truly dialogue. It is far more complex than I could have imagined, nearly dangerous at times.

Bob Responds to Beth

Dialogues other than the ones passing between us were occurring. For example, I intuited that Beth was in emotional turmoil during the class she described; she wears her emotions like bright fabric—vivid and undeniable. I also knew from her online entries that the issue of ability tracking had

struck close to home for her, although I wasn't sure how deeply. So even as class was evolving, I was engaged in an inner dialogue wondering if I should nudge Beth into sharing her concerns or give her space and time to open up on her own.

As I explained to Beth in my responses to her concerns, silencing dialogue was not my intention. Still, that was how she perceived my statements. When I declared that I didn't want to entertain the argument that heterogeneous grouping didn't work, I did so in an attempt not to have someone in the class dismiss it out of hand. I thought that I was suggesting that, when done well and with proper support, heterogeneous grouping can be an effective way to constitute classrooms. What I didn't anticipate is that Beth, and perhaps others, heard me say that such grouping is *always* effective for *all* students in *all* cases. Beth had felt I had used my power as instructor of record to exert what Bakhtin (1981) would typify as a centripetal and stultifying force on our dialogue. Further, I failed to acknowledge cultural aspects of her identity that were in conflict with what she perceived to be the dominant view of the course.

Nicole's Narrative

I think I should admit that I didn't even want to take the class at first. Trained to believe in the autonomous model of literacy, I was not interested in the exploration of culture in the literacy classroom. I still approached literacy strictly from a cognitive point of view. My framework included questions such as, "How do you teach reading?" and "Which strategies work best?" My mantra was "best practices."

The class began innocently enough. We were to choose a movie and novel, preferably from an extensive list provided by Bob, and dissect them around culture and voice. Innocent though these opening assignments seemed, they created the first cracks in the veneer of my beliefs about culture. I was suddenly able to hear silenced voices, appreciate the importance of culture, and develop a much more nuanced consideration of the concept.

Although those experiences primed me to wobble, I blame James Paul Gee (2008) for what eventually became a full meltdown. I admitted my growing concerns in a WebCT posting after my initial reading of Gee:

> I don't know . . . James Gee is forcing me to reconsider my thoughts on power and the importance of (as Ladson-Billings would say) culturally relevant pedagogy. I think part of the reason is because I am familiar with some of the reports he quotes, and some of the research he mentions, as I taught the Reading Endorsement program for two years. We used a

lot of those reports/research in our classes. I feel duped. Worse, I feel as though I perhaps misled the over 100 teachers who were participants in my courses, teachers who were primarily teachers in high poverty schools (urban school district).

The next week, I posted again about Gee:

> I'm having a moment of dissonance now with all the talk about power. I became interested in the idea of identity work, and how cultures at odds with the culture of the classroom impact academic performance (i.e., to some urban Blacks, being smart means "being White"). . . . Now, though, I'm conflicted. Too many discussions on power and the status quo, and too much talk about contextualized literacy. It almost begs the question, what is the purpose of schools? I mean really?

My group members responded to my cries for help, but I wasn't satisfied. I felt as though I would explode. I was mourning old ways of thinking and I was confused.

I had to make sense of the emotions I was feeling, and writing about them was no longer enough. Though the class was designed to encourage open communication, I felt a whole-group, in-class conversation would not give me the space to really explore, and posting on WebCT, while a helpful start, wasn't going to give me the rich and immediate back and forth I needed. This realization, that I needed to *talk*, was a pretty dissonant one in its own right. As an introvert and fiercely independent only child who loves to write, talking about things was not normally my method of choice. Instinctively, I knew the talking would help me move through the wobble and toward solid ground again.

I felt some relief after a heart to heart with my adviser, but I was struck by a feeling of polarization. By that I mean I came to the class firmly on one side of an argument, and then suddenly found myself all the way at the opposite pole. I interrogated this feeling in my second exploratory paper, using it as an opportunity to examine and make sense of the seismic shifts I was experiencing.

I admitted the disparity between my philosophy of education and the reality of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970) I unwittingly perpetuated. I mused about the purpose of schools and my travels from one side of the argument to the other. I wrote, "I entered the World of Wobble with my feet firmly rooted in one assumption: Learning is due to good teaching, period. Without even realizing it, I held a completely one-sided view of teaching and learning." Through dialogue and writing, I was able to challenge those extreme points of view.

Bob created a safe space for respectful and meaningful conversation. Yet as much as I appreciated it, I resisted it. I was a lurker in class. I contributed on occasion, but I was content to listen. Sometimes this was because I had other things pressing on my mind. Other times it was because I didn't feel like voicing what could be interpreted as the "Black" perspective. As the only Black person in the class, there were instances where I felt my divergent opinions were rooted in my Black experience of the world. I debated whether to share, but sometimes it's tiring—feeling as though it's a duty to share a missing viewpoint.

One day the only Taiwanese student in the class asked me, "Is this class hard for you? It's hard for me sometimes—being the only one. You are like me, you are the only one."

"Yes," I agreed. "Some days it *is* hard."

The most excruciating day was when we wrote "I am from" poems. Everyone had to share at least an excerpt of their poem, which was written quickly, during class. I honestly wrote about my roots, which included a celebration of my Blackness, of my middle-classness, of my shyness and my family, including my deceased parents. Would I cry as I read aloud? Would someone snicker at something that wasn't meant to be funny? Would they understand what I meant? Would I sound defensive? I concentrated on minimizing the shakes in my voice when my turn came. It was beautiful to hear what everyone wrote and appreciate just how diverse a class we were, race aside. Beautiful, but stressful all the same.

Although the exercises we did in class were wonderful ways to engage with each other and the texts, I begrudged having to be vulnerable. I remember being especially irritated toward the end of the semester that I had to, yet again, post my weekly entry onto WebCT. I will readily admit that writing the posts and papers helped clarify my thinking, but I resented having to broadcast my state of mind all the time. And I didn't particularly care that "everyone else" had to do it too.

As uncomfortable as I was throughout the process, I appreciated the multiple channels of dialogue available—even though some of them had no direct connection to the class. During my meltdown, I needed to have real dialogue—not a communal discussion—about the class and my feelings. In other words, I didn't want to share *with* the class, but still wanted to share with someone *about* the class. It was crucial that this discussion be with someone I trusted to listen *and* talk, someone with whom I felt I was on equal footing and who also understood the work I was doing. No matter how "safe" the space was in class and on the discussion board, and no matter what "norms" were set, I had to engage where I felt safe. This meant at a time,

place, and format of my choosing, with a handpicked audience. Not in the classroom, not on the discussion board, and not in the papers I wrote for credit.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned during the course was the importance of dialogue and reflection. No matter what form it takes (internal and voiceless, on paper, with another person or group), I think each instance helps us grow—especially when we are confronting our beliefs. My blog posting, an academic poem meant to explain wobble for the uninitiated, provides an appropriate summary of the experience:

> The World of Wobble is, quite simply, painful.
> Your previously held beliefs are uncovered and suddenly you are naked in your own uncertainty.
> Wobbling is work.
> Old ideas die as new ones are born—a labor of love, but labor nonetheless. The theories I have encountered have forced me to uncover and interrogate my thinking, and consider dramatically different, even antithetical, points of view.
> Mourning the loss of old thinking as you integrate new ideas is no easy feat. The dissonance is unsettling at best, disturbing at worst, and always, always there.
> If you are ready to push and be pushed beyond your limits, outside the containers of prejudice, privilege, ignorance and assumption, you are ready to Wobble.
> After Wobbling, will you ever be the same? No.
> But maybe, just maybe, you will forever be grateful for the difference.

Bob Responds to Nicole

I was holding a dialogue with myself even as Nicole was searching for dialogue outside the classroom. Primarily, I was seeking signs from her that would indicate if the wobble the course induced was more than she felt comfortable with. During the same class in which Beth felt excluded, I noticed that Nicole was also quiet. The next morning, I sent an email to her that suggested I had gotten on a soapbox in class and hoped she wasn't feeling silenced. She responded by saying that she "thought the soapbox was wonderful," and she would have enjoyed teaching in my small learning community. Her distraction was the result of a family issue that had caught her off guard.

Despite this instance, Nicole was a hard read; her outward evidence of wobble was minimal. Based on online entries, I knew she was finding dissonance between the beliefs she held as an instructional coach and the ideas I was asking her to consider for the course. I also suspected that being the only African American in the class was raising some concerns for her. But

Nicole's outer cool hides inner conflict. Unlike Beth, Nicole, perhaps owing to her Buddhist leanings, maintains a surface calm. Yet, as she noted in her anecdote, she doubted the solidity of certain ideas that seemed to be crumbling beneath her. The need to talk and to write, both within and without the structure of the class, became an imperative. As the work of Hermans and Kempen (1993) indicated, Nicole was constructing a complex sense of self within the complexity of polyphonic discussions of culture.

Amy's Narrative

For me, the dialogues held in Bob's class transacted with my experiences in the larger world, ultimately resulting in a semester that changed my life. One of these experiences occurred in a middle school English class I taught in a community containing several families that had currently or recently practiced polygamy. In her autobiography, one of my students had indicated that, beginning at the age of 18, she wanted to have 12 children, all of whom would be named after prophets.

That experience prompted much introspection and discomfort for me. My immediate reaction was to feel that I had somehow let this student down in my attempts at critical literacy instruction. Seemingly, the heated discussions and debates in my middle school class about characters' gender roles had not sunk in with her. My second thought was to feel guilty: Who was I to impose my beliefs about women on this young girl, whose desired life path was perhaps simply different from the one that I had taken? Early in the semester in Bob's course, I tried to come to terms with this tension in a paper I wrote:

> Students' identities are profoundly emotional, intimate, personal—perhaps *sacred* is an even better word. If schools are going to be transformative places wherein students can reconceptualize themselves in new ways, then this process may require young people to look with a critical eye at their religious beliefs and the people who are closest and dearest to them. . . . A young polygamist's goal to have many children may be grounded in scriptural authority. Should teachers even attempt to interfere?
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> My answer—arrogant and dangerous though it may sound—is *yes*. But first, let me insert a caveat. I am not saying teachers should be seen as "liberators" who have "The Answers" for their students . . . . What I am saying is that teachers have a responsibility to open up doors for people. Getting pregnant at age 18—and again at $19^1/_2$, and 21, and 23, and so forth—is a valid option, but it may be limiting if it is someone's *only* option allowed by her worldview.
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> Accordingly, classrooms should be a place where different worldviews can clash, shaking each other up a bit in the process. In Bakhtinian

terms (1981), schools should be places where dialogue is born, where one word—*success,* for instance—can be defined, discussed, and shared by a polygamist girl, and then taken up with this new history and connotation by [another student from a different background], who redefines that word and speaks it again. Then another student might pick it up and use it, as the multivoiced chain continues. By hearing each other's definitions and stories surrounding this word, *success* has the potential to take on new nuances and meanings for those who engage in the sustained conversation.

While writing this paper, I appreciated the opportunity to grapple with some of the deeply felt anxieties and tensions I had encountered in my interactions with students. I also appreciated the opportunities that the course provided me to engage deeply in issues surrounding the intersections among culture, literacy, and identity. My engagement in these issues, however, was soon to become even more deep, involved, and personal when Bob wrote to me in response to the above paragraphs: "So it's a tightrope. Are you aware it's one I walk with you?"

My first response to this comment was shock mingled with a little bit of indignation. *What right does he have to say that to me?* I wanted to know. Coupled with this sense of resentment, however, was an underlying sense of unease with some of the central tenets of the religion I was practicing, including its emphasis on strict gender roles.

After reading Hermans's (2001) assertion that a person's self is comprised of multiple, conflicting voices, I began to examine the positions that different voices occupied in the authoring of my own actions. I quickly saw that many of these voices were in discord with one another. For instance, doctoral student, woman, and member of this religious organization were uneasy coauthors because my doctoral program's push to present and publish in national settings seemed to contrast with denominational pronouncements to stay at home. Most importantly, the position within me that would hope to be an advocate for humanity felt uncomfortable with contributing money and time to an organization whose actions and beliefs I increasingly did not embrace.

The moment that was most significant for me in the course, however, was the writing of my final paper. As I reflected on my identities, the question that remained for me was this: "In my identity construction, what were the positions I valued most, and was being a member of this denomination compatible with the voices from those positions?" To be sure, identities can be in conflict in the moment-to-moment decisions of life, such as when I have to decide whether to be a teacher or a daughter by grading papers or spending quality time with my parents. In the end, I concluded that being

a member of this organization was not only an uneasy coauthor with my other valued identities, but in fact it was an impossible and hostile coauthor. As I thought of writing the acts that comprised my life, I knew I wanted different identities—researcher, friend, advocate for people, for instance—to come to the fore.

I finished my final paper for Bob's class on a Sunday afternoon after attending a church service. As I wrote the paper, there was something in that act that served as my good-bye. It was my final break with the organization, and I haven't looked back. I lost friends and received the denouncement of local religious leaders and was also faced with a host of uncertainties as I asked myself new questions: If this wasn't what I believed any longer, what *did* I believe? If I no longer had predetermined moral mandates to act in certain ways in given situations, then how *should* I act?

These are still questions I am asking myself today. However, rather than being a moment of wobble, I characterize my decision as a moment of strength. Likewise, the reading, writing, and thinking that led me to that decision were moments of strength. I am confident that, though certain situations in my future may be less predictable, I am happier with who I am as the author of that future.

I return to the question I asked of the girl in my middle school classroom: "As students imagine futures for themselves, should teachers even attempt to interfere?" I speak now after having experienced a student's perspective on this question. I am not abandoning my original response, but I now recognize a host of new complexities. Encouraging students to adopt critical stances toward texts or their circumstances can be anxiety-inducing, with significant ramifications for their relationships and emotions.

Although interference can bring its own set of problems, at the same time, *not* intervening can be perhaps more problematic. The kind of teaching that changes students' lives may not be painless. Indeed, as a teacher, I have a newfound compassion for the strains and stresses that my students may be going through as they encounter challenging new ideas. At the same time, transformative teaching does not mean promoting the instructor's beliefs or agenda, but rather offers opportunities for students to see old ways in new lights. Such teaching is worth the struggle.

Bob Responds to Amy

What Amy didn't know at the time was that my writing was not done offhandedly, but was a result of much thought over several weeks. Based on our transactions, I saw Amy poised to make a decision. There was urgency in

her class dialogue that indicated that the issues were more than academic. Yet I wondered if I should acknowledge to her that I was aware of her inner dialogue and that it was causing a dialogue within me. In each of three shorter papers, Amy wrestled with ideas of faith, identity, and learning, all filtered through her teaching experience. It was only in the third paper, after considering and dismissing the thought many times, that I indicated that I, too, was walking a tightrope in terms of how much to bring her inner dialogue to the surface. Amy and I were both balanced on that Freirian (1970) pinpoint between thought and action, waiting for the dialogical tide to move us.

Making Meaning

Stories carry with them lived experience and that alone makes them worthy to be shared. But stories can be data, a means for gaining insight into what happens when literacy education classrooms embrace dialogical transactions to develop deeper understandings of the subject matter, in this case, the intersection of culture and literacy. Using the oral inquiry process, we identified a range of themes across the narratives. In particular, three themes—the multiplicity of dialogues in an unbounded classroom, the ways that dialogue can invoke personal and emotional response, and the paradox that a "safe" space can also be one of risk and uncertainty—suggested greater understanding of the complexity and potentiality of taking a dialogical stance on teaching.

The Multiplicity of Dialogues in an Unbounded Classroom

The stories and experiences related to the course suggested engagement in a range of dialogues that carried beyond a certain classroom at a certain hour. The class was not bounded by time or space, an academic endeavor in which we participated on Tuesday nights and then left behind as we interacted with our friends, our families, our religions. Instead, the tensions that we experienced within the course sometimes joined into a larger dialogue with other components of our lives. For Beth, the course transacted with the voices of her parents, her children, and past and present teachers, forming a new dialogue that prompted her to challenge deeply held beliefs about her children's schooling. For Nicole, the readings and the online discussions in the course transacted with conversations she held with her adviser and

> **The class was not bounded by time or space, an academic endeavor in which we participated on Tuesday nights and then left behind as we interacted with our friends, our families, our religions.**

friends, ultimately causing her to start reconceptualizing best practices in education. For Amy, the papers she wrote, coupled with Bob's comments, transacted with sermons and her former students' writings to help clarify how her religious practices were not always consonant with her beliefs.

These examples illustrate that dialogue can challenge boundaries between self and other, as dialogues with others may shape voices within ourselves, and vice versa. Our stories indicate that dialogue is also unbounded by time as voices from our pasts may come to bear on the words we speak, write, and experience in our present. However, just as Bakhtin (1981) asserted, utterances can carry connotations from our pasts and may be powerfully shaped by our futures. As Beth imagined a new future for her children, as Nicole imagined the preservice education she might provide for prospective teachers in years to come, and as Amy imagined a future ethical self, these anticipated events also helped shaped the dialogues that they held with themselves and those around them. Ultimately, then, Bob's course served as an intersection: a place where past beliefs transacted with possible futures, where others' written and spoken words transacted with other students; and where institutions, people, and events in the "outside world" transacted with the "classroom world" in a mix that enabled members of the class to author new actions, new ideas, and—in some ways—new selves.

Invoking Personal and Emotional Response through Dialogue

Although Beth, Nicole, Amy, and Bob may have been students and teacher sharing an academic experience, it was not always possible, or even desirable, to limit ourselves to solely intellectual responses. Some of us came to the course believing it would be a purely academic undertaking. But somewhere in the midst of the reading, talking, listening, writing, and reflecting, we each encountered a trigger—some kind of "poke"—that all but erased the boundaries between our academic and our personal selves.

Through dialogue, humans can reflect on their reality and remake it (Shor & Friere, 1987). Dialogue, though most often a collective experience in class, became an internal discussion and reflection on who we were and how we positioned ourselves. Specifically, the nature of our dialogue was critique, and we interrogated, not simply other authors and people, but our own backgrounds, how we were raised, our schooling, and the choices made with families. These personal subjects often led us to emotional and sometimes painful responses. As we made and remade our individual realities, we individually considered questions such as "Were our parents right?" "Did our schooling properly prepare us?" "What are my rights as a teacher?"

Freire (1970) argued that we are historical beings, moving toward but never reaching completion. In this journey to become more fully human, humans are always in the process of transforming realities. In the course, dialogue pushed the class to engage in praxis: simultaneous reflection and action. For Beth, that meant reconsidering her children's education. For Nicole, it meant reframing her ideas about literacy and teacher education. For Amy, it meant rethinking her positioning as a teacher and as a member of a religious organization. For Bob, it meant, yet again, gauging the cost of perhaps inserting too much wobble into the life of a student. In all of these ways, the dialogue, no matter what form it took, prompted inquiry within our lives, a personal and emotional investigation.

The Paradox of Safe Spaces

Most educators seem to value literacy classrooms that are "safe spaces." Hopefully, no one would wish for a literacy classroom that was an unsafe space. But what is meant by *safe space*? From the start, Bob's course emphasized the importance of listening to the ideas of others and the need to respect those ideas. Interrogating ideas was also valued through the rules students wrote and the syllabus the instructor created, but care was to be taken to interrogate the ideas and beliefs themselves more so than the people who expressed them.

Bob's course, then, was designed to be a safe space; however, as the experiences of Beth, Nicole, Amy, and Bob demonstrate, learning in a safe space does not equate to learning at a distance. It does not mean that cultures should be left aside, creating a "neutral" zone. Instead of being a classroom where the students were *safe from* ideas or difficult discussions, this course was designed to create a space where students were *safe to* engage in personally challenging explorations and lines of inquiry that called thinking into question. The paradox is that creating a space where it is *safe to* engage, inquire, and dialogue may feel very *un*safe.

A *safe from* space may be thought of as one where negative emotions and experiences are minimized. In Bob's course, as a *safe to* space, intense emotions and experiences were not unexpected. Invitations to dialogue and the acceptance of those invitations involved risk and uncertainty for everyone. Personal inquiry work often requires a space where it is safe for all class members to sit a while with contradictions, realizations, anger, and the loss of old ways of thinking. Beth, Nicole, and Amy were given the space and the encouragement to engage with the issues that the class brought up. No assurances were given that difficulties would be resolved or that consensus

would be reached, either internally or with others. There were, however, assurances that engagement with the readings, others in the course, and indeed oneself would be honored. Thus a safe space was created to do this difficult work and develop different beliefs and new ways of thinking and acting.

Working within Tension

In setting the purpose for this article, we claimed that English teachers and educators of English teachers should work within rather than against the tensions present in their classrooms. For us, nothing could be more key. Until university teacher educators construct and enact classrooms that embrace the dialogical tensions and possibilities within those settings, new and veteran teachers in the profession will have few if any sustained experiences upon which to base their own dialogical classrooms. Moreover, to either deny that tensions exist or to struggle to eradicate them is to misunderstand the purpose and possibility of tension. Learners caught between stabilizing and destabilizing tensions enter a state of wobble, one that asks them to pay attention to the issues at hand and to author a response. The goal is not to remove oneself from that tension but instead to enter into a dialogue that, like the cables on a suspension bridge, uses tension for support and equilibrium.

Bob does not set out to have students make radical decisions in their lives, nor does he want all students to adopt his worldview, except perhaps for this one point: Everyone in his class must be willing to engage the tensions that the class dialogue identifies. Such engagement can plumb personal and emotional depths, provoke a multiplicity of dialogues, and render all participants vulnerable. Experiencing academic turmoil can be difficult. The hope is that, despite the sense of disequilibrium caused by opposing tensions, all in the classroom will find moments of clarity, resonance, and growth.

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