The Creation and Support of Dialogic Discourse in a Language Arts Classroom

Teresa Sosa

Mary Pat Sullivan

University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract

This exploratory study examined the complexity and interrelatedness of dialogic discourse, disciplinary literacy, and the social environment necessary for student learning. Taking place in an urban school in a large Midwestern city, analysis of three 8th grade language arts lessons indicated that dialogic discussion was sustained and supported by a social environment signifying third space and that conversations must be situated within the disciplinary specific demands for learning. This work offers deeper understandings of the contextual and relational dimensions of educational teaching and learning with implications for teacher education.

This exploratory work focused on three language arts lessons over the course of an academic year in Mr. Cooper's (all names are pseudonyms) class, a highly successful 8th grade teacher. By focusing on these three lessons, we aimed to provide further insights into the complexity and interrelatedness of classroom conversations and the social environment necessary for student learning in a language arts class. Specifically, this work focused on two questions: What makes disciplinary discussions in this classroom dialogic in nature? How is a beneficial social environment that supports these types of discussions created?

Research specific to classroom talk makes a distinction between the types of interactions in the classroom that help students learn and those that do not. Classroom talk as recitation, where students are merely expected to recall what they have learned or read (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) with little or no opportunity to voice their own ideas and opinions, (Wells & Arauz, 2006) are often described as procedural (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) and monologic (Wells & Arauz, 2006, Gutierrez, 2008). Classroom interactions that are more like conversations among participants and ones where students can bring in their understandings and experiences allow for substantive engagement and are described as dialogic in nature (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Dialogic discussions or discourse promote "coherent instruction and learning, as shared understandings are elaborated, built upon, and revised" (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 275). Much work discusses the benefits of this type of classroom discourse (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Wells & Arauz, 2006).

Because the nature of classroom talk influences discourse practices students acquire (Beach, Appleman, & Dorsey, 1990; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995), when looking specifically at literary understanding, it is necessary to look at the interactions and expectations that shape how students talk, think, and learn about literature (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003; Langer, 2010; Lee, 2007). Pertinent to literary understanding is the "disciplinary conversations" (Applebee, 1996) that help advance the exploration of works and multiple perspectives. Also needed are the practices, norms, and orientations in literary discussion and interpretation for discipline-specific learning and understanding to take place (Grossman, 1991).

The social context of the classroom is just as important. Talk functions as a social and cultural tool regulated by normative rules (often tacit) in given situations and spaces (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). In the classroom, the social environment influences and transforms a space for learning (Gutiérrez, 2008). Paying attention to the social space created in a literature classroom allows a view into how students' evolving understandings and their experiential knowledge are regarded, taken up, ignored, refused, or incorporated into further understandings (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). When students are allowed to be equal partners in their learning and their knowledge is seen as an asset to learning, a new kind of space, a theoretical third space, is created where teachers do not dominate the talk and the power relationships between teacher and students are more balanced (Gutiérrez, 2008).

In the following sections, we first discuss the theoretical frameworks pertinent to this work regarding classroom discourse, third space, and literary understanding. We then provide a context for the study and the analytic procedures in the methodology section. The results offer evidence of the complexity and interrelatedness between classroom discourse rooted in the discipline of literature and the social aspects of learning. Finally, some conclusions and implications of this work are discussed in the last section.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Dialogic Discussion

When classroom talk is dialogic, the teacher and students collaboratively co-construct meaning. That meaning is interdependent with the actions and statements of others. What was said is connected with a speaker, its significance and all related remarks that preceded it. "In the dialogical view the essential condition for understanding to take place is that the listener should be able to relate the position that the speaker's utterance represents to other positions expressed earlier in a given discourse community" (Lahteenmaki, 1998, p. 79).

Meaning making is collaborative when the teacher and students shape the course of talk through negotiation (Nystrand, 1997). When engaged in dialogic conversation, teacher and students share ideas and resolve gaps or misunderstandings. Participants must listen to each other and thus make an attempt "to understand from each other's perspective" (Wells & Arauz, 2006, p. 382). It is through this way that teacher and student collaboration in shaping meaning impacts learning (Wells, 2000).

Dialogic discussions depend on the relationship between teacher and students. Because talk is much like conversation, teachers do not dominate but lead the discussions and the relationships between teacher and students are described "like a partnership, observing reciprocity and thinking of each other as they work. Students are an essential factor in the discourse" (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 269). Discussions that are dialogic in nature are especially beneficial to students from non-dominant backgrounds because they help build a bridge between students' prior knowledge and disciplinary knowledge (Wells & Arauz, 2006).

In the classroom dialogic exchanges involve uptake, which happens when the speaker recognizes and validates the previous speaker's perspectives by incorporating those ideas for further discussion. When ideas are taken up, the interactions become much like conversation, less predictable and repeatable, and more authentic. This is different from the typical inquiry-response-evaluation pattern of talk in which the teacher asks a question, the student answers and the teacher evaluates the answer, then starts a new sequence with a pre-planned question that is not related the student's response. With dialogic discourse, rather than the transmission of information or facts, the purpose of instruction becomes the "interpretation and collaborative construction of understanding" (Nystrand, 1997, p. 7).

Classroom discourse shifts to the dialogic when teachers ask more authentic questions, students direct the flow of topics and ideas, and teacher's utterances take up or build on students' responses (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Marshall, et al., 1995). However, Nystrand (1997) emphasizes that dialogic discourse is more than just elements of uptake and authentic questioning. Moving toward student engagement through discourse involves not only changing instructional moves (e.g., asking authentic questions) but also devising activities and situations that allow teacher and students to take on new roles (Langer, 2002; Marshall et al., 1995). Such new roles can create shifts in power and control related to classroom dynamics. This change to a more equitable social environment is aptly discussed in the literature on third space (Gutiérrez et al, 1995).

Third Space

Third space is a theoretical space and operates under the assumption that knowledge and power are linked and learning environments are most productive and effective when

knowledge is negotiated (Gutiérrez, 2008). This theoretical space makes room for the academic discourse to meet everyday or informal (nonacademic) discourse, "merging of the teacher and student world views" (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995 p. 452-3) and for the possibility of students' narratives to shape discussion. In third space, the relationships formed in classrooms through classroom talk and interactions allow for the inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices that lead to a deeper construction of meaning (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Such meanings can only take place when conversation is not dominated by the teacher but co-constructed with students (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Third space allows for hybrid discourses where cultures, relations, and power interplay (Kamberelis, 2001). Dialogue that takes into account these aspects is considered hybrid because no one perspective or knowledge (that reflective of school norms) is privileged nor does it exclude others (that of students' cultural and experiential knowledge). In fact, hybrid discourse helps link the school's norms and students' everyday life, making room for and seeing the value of students' discourse while disrupting traditional power relationships and passive student participation (Kamberelis, 2001).

Moving beyond general understandings of effective discussions, dialogic discussions must be situated within the social environment in which they take place and within the specific discipline. This is important since content area understanding requires specialized ways of talking or conveying information (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Moje & O'Brien, 2001; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Literary Understanding

Both Langer (2011) and Rabinowitz (1987) point out that literary understanding is influenced by, among other things, a reader's culture, gender, experiences, and prior knowledge. In order to make sense of literary texts, readers make interpretations through "the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers" (Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 22). As Crawford and Chaffin (as cited in Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 27) emphasize, "understanding is a product of both the text and the prior knowledge and viewpoint that the readers brings to it." Readers' prior knowledge and understandings have been the focus for making interpretation explicit through Cultural Modeling (Lee, 2001, 2006, 2007) and related frameworks (Moll, 1992; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). It is important to consider the reader's worldview and experiences they bring to reading and interpretation (Hillocks, 2010; Lee, 2007).

Langer (2011) emphasizes that the understandings one has about a text are dynamic, meaning that they are "subject to change at any time as new evidence emerge and new ideas come to mind" (p. 10). She calls this "building envisionment." Readers of literary

texts explore "horizons of possibilities," an exploration where one considers different perspectives, feelings, intentions, life situations, eras and cultures in order to make interpretations of the text (Langer, 2011).

Another aspect of literary understanding is through discussion. Here, the aspects of literary understanding are still important but more so, are the ways in which these understandings are made public. The work by Applebee et al. (2003) suggests that what contributes most to students' ability to effectively participate in language arts disciplinary conversations are approaches that "used discussion to develop comprehensive understanding, encouraging exploration and multiple perspectives rather than focusing on correct interpretations and predetermined conclusions" (p. 722). Similarly, Langer (2011) asserts that support in literary discussions includes helping students move beyond thinking that there is a 'right' answer and to encourage students to ask questions that come to mind related to the text they are reading. Wells and Arauz's (2006) work indicates that the shift from monologic to dialogic discussion happens when the questions asked have multiple possible answers and teachers encourage students to respond and build on each others' ideas and understandings. This is important because when teachers engage in dialogic discussion, they play a key socializing role, "modeling the kinds of questions and issues that are germane …to academic discussions of literature…" (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991,p. 265).

When students partake in classrooms that emphasize high academic demands and discussion-based approaches to develop understanding, students are then able to use this knowledge and skills on their own in order to engage in challenging literacy tasks (Applebee et al., 2003; Marshall et al., 1995). Because learning and development is strengthened by classroom discussions (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), helping students to interpret and helping students to participate are both necessary for literary understanding.

Present Study

The present study emphasizes the critical and multiple aspects of learning in one classroom by applying multiple lenses (dialogic, social relationships, literary) when trying to capture a successful learning environment. The three theoretical perspectives complement and build on each other. Research on dialogic discourse points out that teacher uptake of student ideas is important, while the work on third space clearly delineates the learning opportunities when student knowledge is seen as an asset and necessary for learning. Similarly, work on third space emphasizes the social learning environment that supports academic and everyday language use and work related to disciplinary understanding suggests that prior knowledge and experiences inform our literary interpretations. In this exploratory work, it became clear that in order to more fully understand and account for the learning, interactions, and development in Mr. Cooper's class, we needed to look beyond the literature on dialogic discourse.

Method and Analysis

This study was part of a larger, multi-year project comprised of a university partner supporting urban schools in whole-school literacy reform (Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008; Raphael, Au, & Goldman, 2010)[1]. Classroom observations were conducted during the 2008-09 school year to examine the pedagogical and literacy instructional practices that supported whole school literacy reform. Twenty teachers across grades one through eight were observed three times over the course of the school year (i.e., fall, winter, and spring) across five urban schools. The teachers were nominated by the principals at their schools and selected because they were teacher leaders (i.e., grade level chair, member of school's leadership team) and were believed to be implementing explicit reform practices in their classrooms. Observations of typical lessons were scheduled through consultation with the classroom teachers.

Observation Tools. Lessons were observed in ten-minute episodes involving seven minutes recording field notes and three minutes coding. The alternating pattern of seven minutes of field notes and three minutes of coding continued for the duration of the lesson (video/audio recording was not permitted during the observations). Field notes captured dialogue and nonverbal cues for the first seven minutes of every ten-minute episode. For the next three minutes, the observer coded key areas relevant to the seven minutes they just observed. The key areas included literacy emphasis, instructional context, teacher behavior, student behavior, and materials.

Student behavior focused on student engagement and was conceptualized as appropriate, observable on-task student behaviors gauged on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating no student engaged to 5 indicating all students engaged in the activity. The coding of teacher behaviors included facilitating discussion, listening/ monitoring, reading, asking test/school questions and asking thought-provoking questions. For the purpose of this study, we focused on two specific teacher behaviors: asking test/school questions and asking thought-provoking questions. *Asking test/school questions* was defined as asking explicit questions from the text with one correct answer, while *asking thought-provoking questions* was defined as asking open-ended questions that promote higher-level responses and can have multiple interpretations.

Researchers created a coding manual and established reliability through two training sessions. Inter-observer reliability using Cohen's Kappa was .89 or higher across the coding. Through conversations during the training, a field note structure was established. Field notes were used to capture verbal dialogue along with any nonverbal or additional

contextualizing information (e.g., interruptions, calls from the office, bell ringing). To track who was talking, "T" for teacher and "S" for student were used.

The School and Teacher. Diller School is an urban elementary school located in a large Midwestern city. During the 2008-2009 school year, Mr. Cooper taught the 7th/8th grade gifted split class. This was his second year teaching and the first year the school took on the gifted program.

Analysis. Because of our content area focus, we chose to look at the six middle school (7th and 8th grade) teachers observed across the five schools. These teachers taught language arts, writing, social studies or mathematics. We compared the sustained level of student engagement and the presence of *asking thought-provoking questions* in the teacher behavior category across the middle school observations. When averaging student engagement, measured on a 1-5 scale, Mr. Cooper ranked highest in sustained level of student engagement across the three lessons at 4.4. The other teachers ranged from 3.6 to 4.3. When examining teacher questioning in the check off data, across the episodes, Mr. Cooper asked thought-provoking questions more often than any other seventh or eighth grade teacher, in 68% of observed episodes. One other teacher asked thought-provoking questions in 63% of episodes. Four of the six teachers asked thought-provoking questions in 0 to 1 episode. For these reasons, we chose to take a closer look at the field notes from Mr. Cooper's classroom starting with the way he used questions to support student thinking and learning (Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger, & Edwards, 2008). Thus this work is exploratory in that the ideas emerged from the data and in how we systematically explored Mr. Cooper's three lessons in an attempt to contextualize how he engaged his students beyond asking thought provoking questions.

Our analytic treatment of the lessons included first establishing effective dialogic discussion in the lessons. To do this we engaged in careful repeated readings of each lesson, focusing on aspects of talk that made them dialogic in nature (i.e., talk was more like conversation, types of questions asked, uptake, student responses were considered important). In doing so, we developed a better understanding of how the talk sustained consistent levels of student engagement.

Analysis across Mr. Cooper's three lessons helped identify patterns, recurring ideas, and descriptions pertinent to how the lessons were dialogic but also included other effective aspects of engagement that went beyond what dialogic discourse covered. The importance of a social environment in which power among teachers and students is shared emerged through repeated readings. Also, the discourse was situated in the discipline of literature and that seemed important. In exploring theories and lenses that spoke to these aspects, we became aware that these were similar in nature to those described as necessary for third space and for literary understanding in particular. We looked for patterns among lessons in an effort to understand how these three aspects of

learning play a part in each lesson and how they complement each other. In particular, we examined how the dialogic interactions allowed students and teacher to collaborate when other learning communities would recognize the potential learning opportunity as a point of disruption (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Also, we looked at scaffolds and supports that helped students to develop an understanding of literature over time through changing and shifting of meaning (Langer, 2011, p. 15).

Findings

Each lesson provided rich examples of dialogic discourse, ways of talk particular to literary understanding, and indicators of third space created through hybrid activity. Because these three aspects are closely intertwined and complementary, we discuss all three in each lesson, thus emphasizing that in this classroom, all three support student learning.

Lesson One: "Harrison Bergeron." The first lesson analyzed was from the beginning of the school year in November. This lesson focused on the futuristic science fiction story, "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut. Harrison is a 14-year-old boy who is exceptionally handsome, intelligent and strong. In this story, social equality is a now law and those who are more intelligent, athletic, or beautiful are handicapped by impediments so that they are no better than anyone else. Harrison, understandably, has to bear enormous handicaps.

In discussions that allow for conversation, the questions posed are not focused on a right of wrong answer but are meant to stimulate points that may bear on understanding the story further. This lesson was built around the inquiry question: Why does Harrison declare himself emperor and order everyone around once he has escaped from jail?

The first focus is on the segment of the lesson where students discussed why Harrison is characteristically strong, athletic and handsome. A student suggested that maybe it was "because Harrison was everything the government didn't want people to be." This comment in turn, opened the door for questions from other students about the reasons behind the government's decision to make everyone equal. In particular, they began discussing the handicapping of intelligent people, which is done by sending out a loud, painful noise to their brains every 20 seconds so that their thoughts are scattered. Here, students discussed possible implications of the government's decisions to enforce equal intelligence.[2]

S: Why does the government stop people from thinking? How will we try to invent something new if people cannot focus for more than 20 seconds? How can someone have an education? …That's almost impossible to do?

---

[2] All responses were recorded as stated by teacher and students.

T: Let me give you the final question: Why is only person who chose to revolt a fourteen-year old boy?

S: I feel that the government, he does not want to society to advance, he wants to power…the government wants them to be more like a lowering of standards…to have the most power.

S: But that wouldn't make sense. Why would you want people to lower their standards? …if you are born…if you are athletic…that's not right.

S: It's like K [a student] was saying, the government is trying to make it like they are most powerful. That's why they dumb everyone down…

S: Why?

S: I disagree with D [a student]…with free will comes competition… with this strategy…

T: [unable to capture what was said]

S: I strongly disagree with what G [a student] say…why not have everyone be equal, be the same?

S: Why not help the lower class people, not like a slow room, but help them more, not…help them understand things more thoroughly?

S: Some people make fun of them…like one time in the classroom, everybody not going to help them…

What is striking about this segment is the amount of questions raised within these 12 turns of talk. In all, nine questions were raised, including the teacher's question. Langer (2010) asserts that asking questions is one of the main principles for arriving at literary understandings. The questions raised by the students about the practices of the government in leveling intelligence are important to the understanding of the story, that is, they not only highlight the type of government that Harrison lives under, they highlight the moral and philosophical issues central to literature (Hillocks, 2010). As Hillocks (2010) explains: "these moral concepts become the basis for the warrants that tie the evidence that readers perceive to the judgments they make about characters, groups, and societies, and the writers themselves and their works as wholes" (p. 1). It seems that inherent in the students' questions, (especially when a student asked that if the goal is to make everyone equally intelligent, then why not help those less intelligent to "understand things more thoroughly") there was a particular perception or judgment formed around the type of government that would make people equally intelligent through such means.

Students' questions also raise critical social issues. For example, the student who made a case for helping others to become as intelligent as others clarifies this by stating, "Why

not help the lower class people, not like a slow room, but help them more?" In his response to this question, another student pointed out an issue with this suggestion, namely that not everyone will be willing to help them, "some will make fun of them." Through the questions and points raised, students not only "elaborate on and incorporate their own narratives into the larger classroom text" (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 453) but also come to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues raised in the story (cf. Wells & Arauz, 2006).

Overall, this segment shows that students' answers are not evaluated but their responses are taken as points to consider and build upon. This is a mark of dialogic discourse, where there is no clear pattern of questions solely posed by the teacher, where the teacher does not control the conversation or what interpretation students need to support. Through the dialogue in this lesson, students were able to connect the complex issues the story covers to something that is more familiar: the idea of differences in learning/ ability in schools. Conversations that allow students to bring in their understandings to connect to those of the text can only come from discussions that are open to their experiences and understandings.

It seems that issues of fairness take center place in this lesson because the classroom environment allowed for dialogic discussions in which students can think deeply about the stories they read. In this lesson, larger issues of humanity and moral and philosophical dilemmas are exposed. In order to develop this level of understanding, the environment must be one that allows for the development of such understandings through providing classroom time and support of students pursuing their own ideas and interpretations (Langer, 2010). The environment conducive to this understanding allows for a shared control between teacher and students of what questions are raised and discussed (Gutiérrez et al., 1995). In the above segment, the teacher's decision to table his own question for the sake of students' continued discussion around the issue of intelligence is indicative of this shared power (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Lesson Two: Romeo and Juliet. The second lesson took place in March and focused on examining the language and human intentions from Act II of Romeo and Juliet. We focus on three particular segments of the lesson in order to highlight the three aspects under consideration – dialogic discussion, third space, and literary understanding.

 At the beginning of the lesson, a student asked about the meaning of the reference to fruit as Romeo's friends talk under a medlar tree. In this scene, Romeo's friends are trying to get Romeo to appear from the darkness of the trees and in doing so discuss his relationship with Rosaline as one based on lust. The student questioned the significance of the scene, making clear he did not understand the sexual innuendo or the context in which it took place. Mr. Cooper explained that the medlar fruit represented a female body

part and the two friends were drunk and "pigs." Instead of snickering or giggling, another student commented on the literary importance of the scene.

S: I think he wrote this in the sexual tension. He did, he wanted to see certain people, if you only got the sexual tension, then you missing the point.

T: Can I pick up to add to that?

S: I think it was one of the, those comedic parts to get the audience laughing.

Through the explanation of the fruit, Mr. Cooper was willing to take on the student's question and tackle material that could have been deemed as inappropriate given the sexual innuendo. After he explained the meaning behind the language of this scene, Mr. Cooper did not control the conversation, instead, he took up the student's question. This contributed to the third space where students were able to establish that the scene was intended for a literary purpose, for comic relief. In this segment, students were in and moving through envisionment (Langer, 2010), using personal knowledge, text, and context to furnish ideas and spark thinking in a literary way.

In the next example from this lesson, the class discussed beliefs around falling in love. One student claimed Romeo and Juliet fell in love "based on looks and that's really shallow." The teacher acknowledged the point, and added, "We have to read more to find out if this is a deep sort of love or shallow." He went on to say that students' interpretations may differ depending on one's personal belief that "there is one soul mate for you or believe that are lots of someones" and that both interpretations are equally valid. Mr. Cooper guided his students to focus on close reading of the text and to be aware of their individual goals and beliefs about love (cf. Lee, 2007). Through the discussion, he invited his students to "become critics identifying tensions between the author's and our own sense of the world" (Langer, 2010, p. 20; see also Nystrand, 1997, p. 8) when he directed his students to attend to and be aware that their beliefs about love, in part, influence the interpretations they develop (Rabinowitz, 1987).

In the final segment from this lesson, students explored factors contributing to the characters' actions and behavior. The teacher asked students to "compare and contrast Romeo and Juliet." In doing so, they described Juliet as naïve, smart in how she handled Romeo, and also as young and in her first relationship. Mr. Cooper, a few turns later asked:

T: Do you think she's [Juliet] a respectable woman?

S: Yes, because Romeo, he be trying to get her, but she be trying to get him to tell her he loves her. If she loose, she would have already given it up.

S: Is her parents really in love?

T: That's a good question.

Here, the question about Juliet's parents seems to be inconsistent with their discussion regarding Juliet's character. The class takes up this question and the conversation continues for few more turns of talk before the lesson ended. While most of the student dialogue was inaudible, the teacher's response indicates that the discussion centered on Juliet not wanting the kind of relationship her parents had.

T: I like this connection, too. I think [student's name] is tapping into the Capulets. [They] do not have a love relationship and Juliet doesn't want that...it may be her first time, but she's ready to love.

As we have seen before, here, the teacher did not resist student's questions as outside of the classroom's theme or topic (Gutiérrez et al., 1995). As a response, the class took up this question, shifting the conversation to talk about the relationship between Juliet's parents and the possible impact it may have on Juliet. This seemingly disconnected question could have been shut down or ignored, but Mr. Cooper realized the student was inquiring about a possible relation between Juliet's actions toward Romeo and her parent's marital relationship. Mr. Cooper mediated the conversation, commenting that this question, which could have been construed as irrelevant or off topic, was a good one. He was able to "moderate, direct discussion, probe, foresee, and analyze the implications of student responses…a process that values personal knowledge and accordingly promotes student ownership" (Nystrand, 1997, p. 17). What is also important to note is that the teacher was not guiding students to a particular interpretation of the text but to their struggles with making sense of the text and possible meanings. Dialogic discussions allow for students' interpretations to emerge and be supported or debunked because their role is not merely to understand and support the teacher's interpretation.

Across the three examples from this lesson, it is clear that students were learning about noting particular details when interpreting literature (Rabinowitz,1987). This important aspect of understanding literature, knowing not only how to interpret but how to talk about that interpretation, is underscored in the next lesson.

Lesson Three: Student Poems. The third lesson, which took place in May, is different than the two previously analyzed. Mr. Cooper was beginning a unit on poetry and the focus was on helping students pay attention to details of a picture in order to create a poem. The picture portrayed a mother holding her young child; the child has his arms wrapped around the mother's neck. In the picture, the peaceful faces and subtle smiles suggest a strong bond and love between the mother and the child. As a culminating activity, students were to read their own poems to the class and the class was to provide comments on their work. Because this was a new way of interacting in the classroom, that is, moving away from discussions of literature to creating poetry and critiquing each

other's poems, the focus was on ways to model and support discussion of poetry. As we have seen in the previous lessons and noted in our discussions of these, ways of talking about literature requires support in both development of ideas and how to talk about literature (Langer, 2010). As Langer (2010) states, "[w]hen teachers support students' ways to discuss, they focus on social behavior..." (p. 93).

Our first segment is of a poem read early on in the lesson. Mr. Cooper introduced the poem by stating, "She has a different take on this image." From his statement, Mr. Cooper placed the student as author who used language for a specific purpose. The student's interpretation of the picture, suggesting that the child is not loving towards the mother, may have been considered outside of what is acceptable to write about (Gutiérrez et. al, 1995) in some classrooms. By acknowledging that the student had "a different take" on the image, he embraced the student's work as part of the creative collective as opposed to a rule-breaking act.

S: [reads poem] It's about the child about to do the unthinkable, choke the mother.
T: I am interested why you chose this perspective on this image?
S: Don't you think...
T: Three comments
S: I thought that you would...it was creative to take it to another side.

Through Mr. Cooper's introduction ("she has a different take on this image") and follow-up questions, he not only modeled the type of considerations and questions that are acceptable when discussing poetry, he also validated the author's craft. This, in turn, set up the ability for students to take seriously the author's take on the subject. For the author of the poem, her ability to manipulate language to convey meaning is obvious; that is, the student knows enough about irony to create it in her poem. Her own description of her poem "It's about the child about to do the unthinkable" is evidence that she is aware that her audience would not be expecting what her poem portrays. It is clear that students pick up on the irony of the poem when one student states, "it was creative to take it to another side." Here, the manipulation of language by the author is recognized as an intentional invitation to an imaginary world (Lee, 2007).

The next segment highlights Mr. Cooper's support for social behavior and ways of talking when critiquing poetry. After a student read his poem titled "Poverty," the student explained that his poem was about poverty and escape.

S: It's so deep I'm drowning.
T: So, who's got a comment, please somebody different or else I'm calling someone out.
S: ...Put your head up. I heard that you were kind of nervous.
T: How about a comment that someone can use...putting someone on the spot, that's not cool.

S: You did good with your creativity...save me and stuff. I felt that was real good, deep.

S: In the picture they are happy, in your poem you was like even though you're happy, but still going through struggles.

S: I like how you focus on...[inaudible].

T: Last comment.

S: Reminds me of that movie we watched, how they had to run a mile to get back to their home.

The segment begins with a student's playful comment "It's so deep I'm drowning." This comment may be evidence of internally persuasive discourse. According to Bakhtin (as cited in Marshall et al., 1995) there are two types of discourse: authoritative, which is rigid and relies on a power imbalance, and internally persuasive discourse, which allow students to make talk their own, move it to contexts beyond the classroom, and allow 'play' and 'flexible transitions' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). We see these types of play and transitions in the previous lessons (for example, in the second lesson, when I student stated, "I wanted to be my own person" in response to the teacher's point that one's worldview affects how one interprets the developing relationship between Romeo and Juliet).

Lee (2007) ties this type of word play to what is required to a response to literary reasoning. Specifically, response to literature requires "a playful attitude toward linguistic detail and ability to deconstruct figurative language" (p. 20). Although Lee discusses in particular the cultural ways in which signifying is used by African American students to make sense of rhetorical features in fiction, this seems to fit because the student's comment above is, after all, an exaggeration of a feeling and a play on words used to indicate the depth of meaning in the poem.

The student's comment "In the picture they are happy, in your poem you was like even though your happy, but still going through struggles" is particularly interesting because the student here is attending to an allusion. The student is able to pick up that in art, or writing, concepts or ideas sometimes are not what they seem to be and thus he is able to extend his interpretation of the poem (Lee, 2007).

The comment by the last student in this segment provides an example of how students successfully enter into dialogue with the text in order to arrive at meaning. When the student stated that the poem, "Reminds me of that movie we watched, how they had to run a mile to get back to their home," the speaker is successfully building his understanding of the poem through his history (personal and school history) to form some understanding of the poem (Langer, 2010; Lee, 2007; Rabinowitz, 1987).

In the lesson overall, students were engaged in dialogic discussion all the while learning how to provide constructive comments to their peers about their poems. In this lesson,

attention to literary techniques, language, and ways of solving literary problems were made more explicit. Along with attention to techniques in poetry, this lesson exemplifies the supports needed in order for students to participate successfully in literary discussions. As Langer asserts (2010) "Supplying collaborative support for ways to discuss helps students learn the social rules of discussion, such as what is appropriate to talk about in an envisionment-building classroom, how to check that they are being understood, and how to take turns"(p. 93).

Conclusion

All three lessons show high levels of student engagement. Each lesson consisted of whole class discussion where most of the students participated. The strongest evidence of engagement in discussion is the expanding of ideas, critique of interpretations, and providing evidence both from the text and personal experience. In the three lessons, students did just that.

The analysis of these three lessons suggest that dialogic discussion is necessary for learning but just as important are multiple aspects of student support and practice. In particular, this work makes it clear that dialogic discussion is sustained and supported by a social environment signifying third space and that these conversations must be situated within the disciplinary specific demands for learning.

This work also supports the idea that since learning is contextually based, we may need to focus on more than one framework to understand what is going on in a classroom that seems to promote student learning. In looking at the interrelatedness of the theoretical underpinnings, we realized that classroom conversations are never devoid of a domain and so they must be analyzed in the discipline in which they occur. Also, as the findings confirm, conversations do not happen unless students' experiential knowledge and capacity are recognized as assets. That is, the teacher becomes a co-participant in the classroom discussions instead of the person who controls the answers. Students equally partake in building and leading discussions by connecting what is being discussed to what they know. The literature on dialogic discourse does not consider discipline specific talk or fully explains the importance of the social environment. This work bridged these three aspects and provided deeper understandings of the various dimensions of educational teaching and learning.

There are limits associated with field notes as the only source of data for this work. More specific data about the influence of the classroom environment and disciplinary conversations are lacking. However, this limitation also points to a need for further inquiry into the influence of students participatory roles in discussions, the social environment and how these are related to students' own sense of learning and understanding.

The current study has several implications for practice. Teacher training programs need to help pre-service teachers understand the importance of the disciplinary specific demands for understanding literature, the norms and practices that support dialogic discussion, and the power relationships that influence student engagement and learning. More specifically, teacher training and in-service programs must include information on how to foster the type of discussions that are dialogic in nature and the beliefs necessary for disciplinary specific understanding and interpretation (for example, realizing that in literature understandings cannot be reduced to simple right and wrong answers). Also, teachers need to be provided with strategies and practice in forming, improving, and sustaining beneficial environments. Along the same lines, training needs to address ways to help teachers develop the type of teacher-student relationships that value and build on student knowledge and experience. As Gutiérrez et al. (1995) remind us, if a classroom does not have enough "interactional experience in the third space to mediate participation" then it quickly comes to a close due to being an "uncomfortable territory" (p. 466).

Future work will need to focus more closely on how disciplinary specific practices for literary interpretation, ways to engage students in practice of dialogic discussions and the space that allows for a prioritizing and voicing of student knowledge and experiences are especially beneficial for advancing minority students' understanding. This is of particular importance for minority students attending urban schools where often their cultural and experiential discourse is ignored or silenced (cf. Gonzales, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 447).

References

Applebee, A., Langer, J., Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (2003). Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: Classroom instruction and student performance in middle and high school English. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(3), 685-730.

Au, K. H., Raphael, T. E., & Mooney, K. (2008). Improving reading achievement in elementary schools: Guiding change in a time of standards. In S. B. Wepner & D. S. Strickland (Eds.), *Supervision of reading programs* (4th ed., pp. 71-89). New York: Teachers College Press.

Beach, R., Appleman, D., & Dorsey, S. (1990). Adolescents' use of intertextual links to understand literature. In R. Beach & S. Hynds (Eds.), *Developing discourse practices in adolescence and adulthood* (pp. 224-245). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Gonzalez, N. (2005). Beyond culture: The hybridity of funds of knowledge. In N. Gonzalez, L.C. Moll, & C. Amanti (Eds.), *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms* (pp. 29-46). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Grossman, P. (1991). What are we talking about anyway? Subject-matter knowledge of secondary English teachers. In J. Brophy (Ed.), *Advances in Research on Teaching: Teacher's Knowledge of Subject Matter as it Relates to their Teaching Practice* (Vol. 2, pp. 245-264). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Gutiérrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly, 4*(2), 148-164.

Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Tejeda, C. (1999). Rethinking diversity: Hybridity and hybrid language practices in the third space. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 6*(4), 286-303

Gutiérrez, K., Rymes, B., & Larson, J. (1995). Script, counterscript, and underlife in the classroom: James Brown versus Brown v. Board of Education. *Harvard Educational Review, 65*(3), 445-471.

Hillocks, G. (2010). *The territory of literature*. Unpublished manuscript.

Kamberelis, G. (2001). Producing heteroglossic classroom (micro)cultures through hybrid discourse practice. *Linguistics and Education, 12*(1), 85-125.

Langer, J. A. (2010). *Literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction, 2nd edition.* NY: Teachers College Press.

Langer, J. A. (2011). *Envisioning knowledge: Building literacy in the academic disciplines.* NY: Teachers College Press.

Lee, C. D. (2001). Is October Brown Chinese? A cultural modeling activity system for underachieving students. *American Educational Research Journal, 38*(1), 97-141.

Lee, C. D. (2006). 'Every good-bye ain't gone': Analyzing the cultural underpinnings of classroom talk. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19*(3), 305-327.

Lee, C. D. (2007). *Culture, literacy, and learning: Taking Bloom in the midst of the whirlwind.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lee, C. D., & Spratley, A. (2010). *Reading in the disciplines: The challenges of adolescent literacy.* New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Marshall, J. D., Smagorinsky, P., & Smith, M. W. (1995). *The language of interpretation: Patterns of discourse in discussion of literature.* Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English

Mercer, N., & Littleton, K. (2007). *Dialogue and the development of children's thinking: A sociocultural approach.* London, England: Routledge.

Moje, E. B., & O'Brien, D. G. (Eds.). (2001). *Constructions of literacy: Studies of teaching and learning in and out of secondary classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Moll, L. C. (1992). Literacy research in community and classrooms: A sociocultural approach. In R. Beach, J. L. Green, M. L. Kamil, & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives in literacy research* (pp. 211–244). Urbana, IL: National Conference on Research in English and National Council of Teachers of English.

Moll, L. C., & Gonzalez, N. (1994). Critical issues: Lessons from research with language minority children. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 26*(4), 439–456.

Moll, L. C., & Greenberg, J. (1990). Creating zones of possibilities: Combining social contexts for instruction. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education* (pp. 319–348). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nystrand, M. (1997). *Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Nystrand, M. & Gamoran, A. (1991). Student engagement: When recitation becomes conversation. In H. Waxman & H. Walberg (pp. 257-276), *Effective teaching: Current research.* Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education

Rabinowitz, P. J. (1987). *Before reading: narrative conventions and the politics of interpretation.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

Raphael, T. E., Au, K. H., & Goldman, S. R. (2010). Whole school instructional improvement through the Standards-Based Change Process: A developmental model. In J. Hoffman & Y. Goodman (Eds.), *Changing literacy's for changing times*. New York: Routledge/ Taylor Frances Group.

Shanahan, T. & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 78*(1), 40-59.

Soter, A.O., Wilkinson, I.A.G., Murphy, P.K., Rudge, L., Reninger, K., & Edwards, M. (2008). What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 372-391.

Wells, G., & Arauz, R.M. (2006). Dialogue in the classroom. *Journal of the Learning Sciences, 15*(3), 379-428.

Please address all inquiries to: Teresa Sosa, Ph.D., ,University of Illinois at Chicago, Learning Sciences Research Institute, 1007 W. Harrison St. Room 2048 (MC 057) Chicago, IL 60607, tsosa2@uic.edu