Storytelling as Academic Discourse: Bridging the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in the Era of the Common Core

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ABSTRACT: Bakhtin's dialogism provides a sociocultural approach that views language as a social practice informed by the complex interaction between discourse and meaning. Drawing on this theoretical framework, I argue that a dialogized version of storytelling can be helpful in creating a reflective form of academic discourse that bridges the gap between the demands of the Standards-based classroom and the needs of English Language Learners. While storytelling has widely been used as an effective ESL strategy, the current paradigm of education theorizing often characterizes narrative narrowly as personal and decontextualized, thereby dismissing storytelling as an inferior form of academic knowledge. Building on Bakhtin's theory of meaning as dialogic interplay, I propose a notion of storytelling as a generic template for academic discourse that has the potential to integrate a multiplicity of genres and hence allows learners to negotiate between personal and public voices.

KEYWORDS: Common Core Standards; English Language Learners; storytelling; academic discourse; dialogism; heteroglossia

National efforts to better prepare students for college and career such as the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS 2010) accentuate the role of academic discourse skills for students' success across all disciplines. The Common Core Standards, however, articulate a narrow construct of academic discourse that prioritizes argument as "the most important skills of incoming college students" (Appendix A 25) and often dismisses storytelling as an inferior form of academic discourse. I argue that the current paradigm of academic discourse in P-12 education risks reinforcing the cultural-linguistic divide in public schools, which, in turn, perpetuates social stratification and class distinctions. Recently, as a response to increasing cultural and linguistic diversities in schools and communities, educators have turned to Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic approach to language and meaning as a pedagogical vehicle that offers a subversive expression for the absolutist and authoritarian notion of academic discourse and genre while enabling emerging voices and perspectives. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, I theorize a form of storytelling as a generic template for academic discourse that is flexible enough to represent "various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social 'languages' [that] come to interact with one another [sic]" (282). A *dialogized* notion of storytelling provides a reflective form of academic discourse and has the potential to bridge the gap between the learning needs of ELL students and the demands of the Common Core Standards. While this article is set in the context of K-12 education, it has important implications for higher education and basic and ELL writers.

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ACADEMIC DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMON CORE CLASSROOM

As the most recent effort to address the ever-heightened sense of crisis in the U.S. education system, the National Governors' Association in 2010 launched a state-initiated educational reform in which a framework of learning standards was put in place to set the expectations and guidelines for student performance. In order to increase the global competencies of our children, the Common Core Standards call for increasing academic rigor in students' development of knowledge and skills to align with "college and career expectation" (CCSS "About the Standards").

As a framework for discussing the ways that students should perform in the areas of reading, speaking, listening, and writing in all disciplines in order to be college and career ready, the CCSS have effectively redirected school curricular and instructional focus towards more "academic" skills. Among the six "shifts" associated with the Common Core Standards is an increased attention to informational reading and writing (EngageNY). In order to foster students' global competencies in today's knowledge and information based economy, the Standards call for calibrating the school curriculum to reflect a mix of 50 percent literary and 50 percent informational text, including reading in ELA, science, social studies, and the arts (Coleman and Pimentel 5) in elementary grades and shifting toward 70 percent in higher grades (CCSS ELA 5).

In accord with the growing emphasis on information texts in higher education and professional settings, the English Language Arts Standards identify three text types and purposes that students are required to master: argument, informational/explanatory text, and narrative (CCSS ELA). While the Common Core Initiative emphasizes that all three types of texts complement each other, it clearly prioritizes argument. In a section of the Standards (Appendix A) entitled "the Special Place of Argument in the Standards," it states:

> While all three text types are important, the Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness. (Appendix A 24)

The emphasis on argument is progressively increased in higher grades. As evidenced in Appendix C, the Standards include only student samples singularly labeled as argument or informational/explanatory in higher grades (from grade 9 on), even though the selected student samples often incorporate narrative and expository writings within an argumentative structure and hence cannot fit neatly into the standard format of a genre matrix. It is evident that the CCSS define argument in the narrower sense found in logic rather than in a broad sense that includes personal narrative. David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, lead writers of the Common Core, write:

> The standards emphasize arguments (such as those in the U.S. foundational documents) and other literary nonfiction that is built on informational text structures rather than literary nonfiction that is structured as stories (such as memoirs or biographies). (5)

The prioritization of argument at the expense of narrative is further exacerbated by an increased pressure imposed upon schools to demonstrate accountability. As the CCSS has continued to roll out, we have seen an understanding of narrative—in particular, personal narrative—as problematic in many states' policy guidelines. New York City, for example, clearly focuses on argument-based literacy skills in its implementation of the Common Core:

> Writing needs to emphasize use of evidence to inform or make an argument rather than the personal narrative and other forms of decontextualized prompts. While the narrative still has an important role, students develop skills through written arguments that

> respond to the ideas, events, facts, and arguments presented in the texts they read. (The DOE-selected Common Core Standards and Instructional Shifts for Literacy)

In this interpretation of the Standards, narrative—instead of being considered integral and adding depth and richness to an argumentative writing—is defined as a separate category distinct from argument, and dismissed as merely "personal" and "decontextualized."

The problem with this prioritizing what English and education professor Gerald Graff refers to as "argument literacy" (CCSS Appendix A) is its tendency to view genres as compartmentalized, which prevents us from forging a fuller conceptualization of academic discourse skills. In a blog created and maintained by Grant Wiggins, who is one of the co-authors of "Understanding by Design" and the president of Authentic Education, many expressed the concern that while supporting claims with evidence and reading rich non-fiction texts are critical for students to develop cogent thinking and reasoning, a single-minded demand to attend to information, evidence, and logic is likely crowd out instructional time for more authentic learning experiences in reading and writing, making it less likely for students to develop academic discourse skills more thoroughly.

In addition, a lopsided construal of academic skills may do a great disservice to students who are still developing their skills as emerging readers and writers. In their inquiry into a Common Core-aligned grade 9 writing class, Kelly Chandler-Olcott and John Zeleznik found that students' success "in marrying elements of narrative and other genres" (99) contributed to their identity as burgeoning writers. Their study shows that the implementation of the CCSS need not require seeing genre narrowly or "banishing narrative to a backseat" (99) in the classroom. On the contrary, teachers viewing genre as "more diverse and more hybrid" (99) than the discrete Standards in the Common Core can help create a classroom discourse that encourages genre-bending and creativity, and hence allows students to explore, wonder, and opine.

Most importantly, the Standards' narrow framings of academic discourse skill might exacerbate an already strong test-driven educational culture that fosters the tendency to teach, practice, and test skills in isolation. Under the current paradigm of teaching academic discourse skills, teachers often concentrate on ways in which students can be helped to adapt their practices to those of academia, taking the codes and conventions of academia as given, as Mary Lea and Brian Street argue. (157). Learning academic con-

tent and skills is often reduced to the acquisition of fundamental language proficiency—knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and conventions of use that are the essence of *knowing* a language (as evidenced in a plethora of websites featuring the teaching of academic discourse skills such as Teaching Channel, ALD network, Solution Tree). Lea and Street characterize the dominant approach to academic discourse skills development as the study skills approach:

> The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as a kind of pathology. The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling. (158)

As a test-driven culture continues to narrow the school curriculum, the Standards foster an approach to literacy that conceptualizes students' reading and writing as skill-based and the job of teachers as modeling, coaching, and drilling students' basic skills. Learning an academic skill is reduced to "developing familiarity with the ways of being, thinking, writing, and seeing the world of those experts in the disciplines" (Hermida 2).

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE AS A FORM OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

The ability to engage productively in academic discourse can be translated into access to the discursive practices of school curricula. Since ELL students are expected to master academic discourse skills in content area classrooms while simultaneously learning basic English, they are presented special challenges because the skills required to understand classroom instructions are the same skills required to participate in academic conversations in content area studies. A narrow understanding of academic skills as manifested in Common Core fosters a literacy approach that takes for granted the mutual relationship between language and power that has profound implications for educational outcomes and equity in the U.S. education system.

How the dominant language is used as an instrument of power is an important theme in Pierre Bourdieu's work. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu argues that language is a form of cultural capital that perpetuates social class privileges and class distinctions by shaping educational outcomes. Having the capacity to define what is academic success allows the dominant elite to monopolize the interpretation of academic standards. According to Bourdieu, the mastery of academic discourse skills is hence closely associated

with academic achievement and material reward. Bourdieu states:

> Since mastery of the legitimate language may be acquired through familiarization that is, by more or less prolonged exposure to the legitimate language, or through the deliberate inculcation of explicit rules, the major classes of modes of expression correspond to classes of modes of acquisition, that is, to different forms of the combination between the two principal factors of production of the legitimate competence, namely, the family and the educational system. (61-62)

Since the mastery of academic discourse is highly valued in schools and other institutional settings, it becomes an embodied form of capital that allows access to power and privileges through structural inequality in the education system. By privileging a language reflecting the values favored by the majority of the larger intellectual community, schools risk perpetuating a social structure that maintains power over ELL students who hold the least of linguistic competency in English.

A narrow notion of academic discourse, instead of facilitating access to classroom learning, may alienate ELL students whose lack of previous exposure places them at a disadvantage. Research suggests that certain elements of academic discourse are often implicit and students are expected to gain a grasp of academic literacy without explicit instructions in academic conventions. For example, citing students' self study at Bronx Community College, Andrea Parmegiani and Sharon Utakis argue that one of the main problems facing ELL students with the development of academic discourse skills is their unfamiliarity "with college expectations, what is required to be successful in college, and how to navigate academic affairs, policies and procedures of the college" (23). They suggest that what is considered as academic competency is often culturally-specific: "the academic literacy practices our students are socialized into in their home countries might differ significantly from some of the ones they might be expected to master" at an U.S college institution. Their study calls for teachers to take account of the cultural and contextual components of writing and reading practices by adopting a template that empowers students to explore, critique, and integrate divergent language and literacy practices (25).

As Lea and Street point out, there is a need to see the literacy demands of the curriculum as "involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines" (159). Unfortunately, more often that not,

academic discourse in mainstream educational settings is heavily couched in a language that reflects cultural specificity. For example, Andrea Parmegiani argues that higher education often privileges western literacy practices at the expense of minority students who may have different notions of academic discourse rooted in their own cultures (9). To provide students access to academic discourse "whose mastery is correlated with socio-economic empowerment" (9), he suggests including students' personal narratives by inviting them to "bring their life experiences into academic discourse" (8). A holistic literacy approach that takes into account students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs as well as the complex linguistic repertoire that characterize their lives will invite students' participation in academic discourse and empower them by expanding their "sense of personal agency" (14). A narrowly defined set of standards, prior knowledge and know-how, on the other hand, will only widen the already widening cultural and linguistic divides in our school system.

STORYTELLING AS A SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY

Storytelling has long been considered as an effective scaffolding strategy in serving the special needs of ELLs. Since the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) was founded in 1974, storytelling has been widely utilized as a literacy strategy, ranging from preschool through university level classrooms. More recently, storytelling has been promoted as an effective way to teach the English language to English Language Learners and to help prepare for their transitioning to the mainstream classroom. Three studies that provide rich descriptions in this topic are those by Susan Craig, Karla Hull, Ann G. Haggart, Elaine Crowder; Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky; and E. Martin Pedersen. By tapping into ELLs' prior knowledge, storytelling provides students a way to approach the text that they otherwise may find intimidating by bringing their perspectives to bear upon the understanding of the text. Whether it is about making text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world connections, storytelling conceives students' prior knowledge as an important resource in their construction of new knowledge. The pedagogical benefits of storytelling can be enumerated as follows:

1) Stories are usually thematically organized and have a universal appeal to students. Storytelling incorporates elements that appeal to students' experience, interests, and cultures. In addition, it validates students' experience and voice, making them feel valued and that they have something to

contribute to the learning that takes place in classrooms. Pedersen advocates storytelling as a pedagogical method, especially when working with ELL students in small groups. Stories help students communicate literary and cultural heritages while helping them better develop a sense of rhetorical structure, which assists in the study of literature, non-fiction texts, and their own writing.

2) In accessible ways, storytelling utilizes a wide range of literacy skills that can help ELLs' transition to the mainstream content area classroom. According to Sara Miller and Lisa Pennycuff, storytelling is "an effective pedagogical strategy that utilizes 'social elements of language' "(37). Elements of stories typically include: a storyteller or narrator, a setting or social context in which the story is set, a set of occurrences that unfolds in a specific sequence, an audience with certain qualities which the narrative must address, and a message or moral of the story that the narrative is trying to convey. The components provided by narratives offer many advantages for teaching and learning. For example, to hold the audience's attention, the narrator must engage the audience through questioning, discussing, comparing, and ultimately inviting the audience to assume the role of a storyteller. It is a playful dance between the narrator and the audience (37).

3) Storytelling has the potential to promote a vision of inclusion and diversity as a resource. It is instantly multi-genre, multi-literate, and multimodal. In the comfort of a familiar narrative structure, students are encouraged to exercise their freedom and imagination. In storytellings or retellings, details are selected and then given coherence, meaning, and direction. In a literature review, Heidi Bordine Fitzgibbon and Kim Hughes Wilhelm report that using stories encourages students to create their own interpretations, especially when working in small groups. They claim that using storytelling lowers students' affective filters so that learning can more easily take place (23-24). Crag, Hull, Haggart, and Crowder maintain that students with a wide range of oral and written abilities are more likely to participate in storytelling that can be used to bridge "apparent cultural divides" (46).

Despite the proven track record that storytelling has established in the field of ESL, storytelling continues to be slighted in K-12 education (Enciso 22-23). Although the Standards do not explicitly exclude personal narrative, there have been efforts within the current standards-based reform to increase the emphasis on informational text and argument at the expense of other forms of discourse/knowledge, including narrative. Yet, as it has played out in the context of school reforms and policy implementation, the overestimation of the value of logic and information in the current Standards results in

a backlash against personal narrative. David Coleman, the principal CCSS architect, has argued:

> [A]s you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a sheet about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. (Introduction to the Common Core State Standards for ELA and Literacy Part 4)[1]

The storytelling mode remains rare in the natural sciences and still radical in the social sciences where an objectivist model drawn from the natural sciences continues to have a strong hold on the disciplines (Czarniawska 1). Though there have been instances of what can be characterized as "the narrative turn" (Riessman 1) in research traditions influenced by phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, and new criticism since 1970s, academic discourse in typical science reports and research papers continues to be preoccupied with structures and techniques that mask narrative standpoints and voices—as opposed to embrace and celebrate them (Czarniawska 2).

The artificial distinction between academic and non-academic discourse that is so prevalent in educational practices in both K-12 and higher education greatly limits the depth of learning and prevents voices, multiplicity, dynamism, and creation from coming into existence. What is important is not the fixity of meaning, but a meaning-making process that enables emerging voices and insights into the complexity of human experiences. But storytelling and academic discourse need not be mutually exclusive. Academic discourse does not necessarily need to be in the form of argumentative prose or in clear-cut inferential or implicative structures as explicitly or implicitly assumed in academic and professional settings. As Walter Fisher insists in "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," all genres of discourse can be understood as "conceptions that inform various ways of recounting or accounting for human choice or action" (6). In order to allow English Language Learners to express their ideas, we need a rich form of academic discourse that incorporates both narrative and other forms of discourse into a more encompassing understanding of human endeavors while providing instructional scaffolding for their learning.

TOWARD A MORE INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

While argument and logic are a valid paradigm of academic discourse, scholars from the socio-cultural tradition such as Bakhtin, Fisher, Freire and others help us understand that a narrowly defined evidence-based criteria may not be appropriate in understanding the complexity of human phenomena to which the use of language and communication is essential. For Freire, profound knowledge and authentic learning can only be realized through our relationships and connections with the world from which we draw sources of inspiration to our life: "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (244). From this perspective, true learning can only be fashioned through conversation, questioning, and the sharing of one's thoughts with others, through mutual humanity.

Instead of viewing learning merely as an individual cognitive achievement, sociocultural approaches (e.g. as seen in "New Literacy Studies") conceptualize literacy development as a social practice situated in a broader context of social circumstances, and hence the goal of learning is to reconstruct knowledge and achieve dialogue in fuller breadth and depth. As many educators from the socio-cultural tradition would agree, academic practices connect to and are shaped by values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships. In this broad picture of learning and literacy skills development, social relationships and connectedness are particularly valued, as "literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities" (Barton and Hamilton 8). Storytelling successfully captures the social dimension of academic skills development by inspiring purposeful talking and writing, by familiarizing and introducing students to literary devices and conventions, by promoting a vision of diversity and community in the classroom, and, above all, by giving a motivating reason for students to read and write.

Dialogism, *Heteroglossia*, and Storytelling

Drawing upon Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, I suggest that in addition to serving as a scaffolding strategy that values ELLs' prior knowledge and voice, a *dialogized* notion of storytelling can be taken as a "master metaphor"—as Walter Fisher calls it (6)—that subsumes all other genres and hence symbolizes human communication as "an interplay of reason,

value, and action" (59).

Bakhtin's dialogic approach to meaning and language is profoundly informed by his vision of a cosmopolitan, interactive, and heteroglossic society. As result, it is a theoretical construct that lends itself particularly well to understanding the mobility and flux that characterize the lives of contemporary ESL students. A Russian literary critic and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin lived through the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin whose ruthless regime suppressed the literary consciousness and creativity of a diverse Russia. Bakhtin, belonging to a broadly defined sociocultural tradition, dedicated himself to incorporating a vision of inclusion and diversity within his work to challenge the monolingual, monoglossic discourse of Stalin's authoritarian regime. Bakhtin's theory conceptualizes language as born and "shaped in dialogic interaction" ("Dialogic" 279), and ideological, taking place in the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it is embedded.

By focusing on the dialogic nature of language, Bakhtin gives new meaning to our understanding of discourse. Discourse, understood as the use of words to express thoughts and ideas, is shaped by our interaction with others—whether real or imaginary—in response to what has been uttered before and in anticipation of what is to be uttered afterward. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin writes:

> Language lives only in the dialogical interaction of those who make use of it. Dialogic relationships are reducible neither to logical relationships nor to relationships oriented semantically toward their referential object, (these are) relationships in and of themselves devoid of any dialogical element. They must clothe themselves in discourse, become utterances, become positions of various subjects expressed in discourse, in order that dialogic relations might arise among them. (183-84)

For Bakhtin, individuals make meaning not within an isolated linguistic setting but against a "cacophonous" background of other simultaneous utterances ("Problems" 68-69). In this view, discourse is regarded as "a living source of insight and renewal" (White 4) and its meaning extends beyond the written or spoken word alone to include "a consideration of tone, sound, and body language" as it is perceived in living reality (4).

This Bakhtinian notion of discourse entails that all of our discourse in every genre (whether arguments, scientific reports, stories, poetry or other genres) are infused with *heteroglossia*—which Bakhtin defines as "another's

speech in another's language"—through and through. Diversity exists within each utterance, whether we are conscious of this fact or not. When we speak or write, we simultaneously enact the voices of others, inevitably taking into account what they might have responded to what we have uttered, in an attempt to anticipate future responses by incorporating them into our speech. Hence each speech or writing must be regarded as primarily "a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere" ("Problems" 91) and is inherently dialogic. To ignore this dialogic nature of language in living conversation would lead to "perfunctoriness and excessive abstractness," which in turn "distorts the historicity of the research, and weakens the link between language and life" ("Problems" 63).

By introducing dialogic utterance as an essential component of language, Bakhtin outlines a concept of cultural discourse in which "languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways" ("Dialogic" 291) and provides a counter concept to the monological conception of academic discourse that tends to exclude narrative and other speech and literary genres. Highlighting the ever-shifting and *heteroglossic* nature of everyday discourse, Bakhtin finds in Dostoevsky's novels an art of storytelling incorporating multiple layers of literary genres and hence a paradigmatic expression of *heteroglossia*.

Bakhtin's interest in Dostoevsky's work is grounded in his desire to search for a literary genre that, rather than reinforcing the authoritarian control of a national language on consciousness and expressions, can be used to liberate a society from the tyranny of a national, unified language. For Bakhtin, the *heteroglossic* and hence democratic potential of the novel consists in its ability to be "organically receptive to new forms of mute perception." Through the process of inserting other literary language into the format of storytelling, the novel dialogizes other genres, revitalizing and imbuing them with "an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" ("Dialogic" 3,7). This spirit of process and inconclusiveness is what makes storytelling a viable literary device to preserve the openness of a multicultural society characterized by *heteroglossia*.

While Dostoevsky's own work provides a perfect example of *heteroglossic* potential of storytelling as it encompasses diversities within all genres of human communication, a more close-to-home example can be found in the evolving conception of English in contemporary American society. Contemporary American English varieties reflect the ever-shifting cultural landscape of the United States. The global spread of English, together with

the increased migration, travel, and telecommunication within and across borders, has spawned linguistic diversities even within American English, such as Ebonics, Spanglish (Spanish English), Chinglish (Chinese English), Hinglish (Hindi English), Singlish (Singaporean English), and Konglish (Korean English). The growing debate about the hegemony of English in the United States and beyond its borders exposes the futility of any attempt to control and censor expression and communication (Higgins 616).

Thus the *heteroglossia* reflected in contemporary linguistic landscapes challenges the idea of monolithic literary genre and how we conceptualize language. In contrast to the notion of genre as a stable type of utterances, Bakhtin conceptualizes genre as the site of the intersection between language, and social and ideological forces ("Problems" 89). Different genres give expression to contradictions between content and form, between personal and public voices, between different social and ideological forces and so on. A super-imposed dichotomy between the primacy of personal experience and the authority of the pubic examination of that experience would force emergent readers/writers—particularly English Language Learners—who have not yet developed their sensitivity to the nuances of English words and literary genres to face a false dilemma between responding to their experience and responding to their writing. What we need is a fused dialogic concept of genres that will allow English Language Learners and other struggling students to move beyond the false dichotomy between reflection and production, between content and form and help them view reading and writing as a complex and ongoing interplay among personal and public voices.

Retheorizing Storytelling: Beyond the Dichotomy

A Bakhtinian *dialogized* notion of storytelling offers a pathway to escape the false dichotomy of storytelling and academic discourse as manifested in dominant paradigms such as the Common Core Standards. In this view, storytelling and academic discourse, rather than dichotomous, are viewed as taking place in a continuum. All languages include both a speaker/writer and an audience(s)/reader(s), and echo a multiplicity of voices within individual voices. The distinction of storytelling and academic discourse is hence only nominal, as both are made up of different utterances within us. For Bakhtin, it is in/between different literary and speech genres that utterances acquire meaning and a particular typical expression. All genres are forms of language in which this ongoing dialogue takes place.

From this Bakhtinian perspective, academic literacy practice is fundamentally personal narrative in which the speaker/writer adopts a universalist stance that severs standpoints from interpretation and permits both speaker/writers and audience to forget that they are in conversation with a multiplicity of utterances. Very often, this lost perspective can only be recovered with the help of a marginalized voice and regained through an appreciation for the multiplicity within our own voice. Feminist Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber contends that only through stories relating their authors' "deep feelings of exclusion from the dominant avenues of knowledge building, seeing their own experiences, concerns, and worth diminished and invalidated by the dominant powers of their society" (3) can we recognize the importance of lived experiences to the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge. Postcolonial and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha articulates this insight and struggle:

> Working right at the limits of several categories and approaches means that one is neither entirely inside or outside. One has to push one's work as far as one can go: to the borderlines, where one never stops, walking on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit. (218)

In order to engage in a new meaning making process that does justice to the fullness of our lived experiences, we need to challenge forms of discourse that exclude marginalized perspectives, and take on a multitude of different standpoints and negotiate these identities simultaneously (Hesse-Biber 3).

As Bakhtin and many others (such as Fisher) have insisted, any use in language is an ongoing dialogue with socio-historical forces that define us as human (albeit at times unconsciously). Meaning-making takes place within this dialogue. It is in the overlapping space between discourse as a public event and meaning making as private reflection that the possibility of a speaker/writer's voice that is so valued in academic settings can emerge. Reflecting on the shifting and heteroglossic nature of language throws into relief the feigned transparency/objectivity of the dominant notion of academic discourse. By privileging new points of view and voices, storytelling can be used to explore the interplay between individual and autobiographic experiences on the one hand, and larger, socio-cultural discourses on the other. How do we translate this Bakhtinian vision of storytelling into a pedagogical design of academic discourse?

In the following section, I relate my experience of incorporating storytelling in reading and writing activities in a Common Core-oriented classroom, as an attempt to switch from a monological teaching style in which reading and writing are still practiced as a knowledge transmission tool, to a dialogic approach in which students' active approach to meaning construction is prioritized through journal writing. I conclude with reflection and recommendations for future research.

CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS: NEGOTIATING AMONG PERSONAL AND PUBLIC VOICES

Prior to making the transition to teaching at the college level in TESOL, I taught social studies in a New York City public high school for thirteen years. Located in a gentrified area of New York City, the school was a Title I school serving low-income students, with 74% of the total student population receiving free lunch. According to the 2011-2012 Progress Report of the school, 43 % of students graduated within four years and 52 % of students graduated within six years. The low graduation rate subjected the school to repeated threats of closure. In 2012, I taught Regents Prep classes to students who failed the New York State Social Studies Regents Exams once or repeatedly. At that time, the Common Core was just set in motion and a new teacher evaluation aligned with the Common Core was put in place.

Working with many ELL students compelled me to incorporate ESL strategies into my classroom practice to help them overcome their trepidation about using academic language in speaking and writing. I decided to use storytelling as a tool to provide ELLs with points of entry into academic communities by engaging them in meaning-making through a process that allows for the dynamic interplay between reflection and production. I also decided that Bakhtin's theory of *heteroglossia*/dialogism would help us move beyond the fixed meaning of the text toward a fuller understanding of the complex interaction between discourse and meaning while allowing students to cultivate their voices. However, Bakhtin's narrative paradigm—a narrative strategy that signals the interplay among the expressions of self, other, and the collective voices and identities through stories—would be a deviation from my previous practice, which basically followed the traditional mode of "teacher models, students practice." Rather than relying on templates and rubrics as I normally did in guiding students through their reading and writing process in a standards-based classroom, the narrative approach was an open, unfamiliar territory into which I treaded with uncertainty.

The challenge of using multivoiced narratives in the standards-based classroom is to uphold learning standards while providing instructional scaffolding for ELLs and other struggling students. As an exit assessment, students were expected to write a Regents style essay about an event chosen from history, discussing about how historical circumstances giving rise to the event and how the event impacted on different groups of people in global history. I grappled with the following question: How do I fit the open process of a multivoiced narrative into the straightjacket of a standards-based teaching and learning task? In searching for a feasible plan, I decided to go back to students' Regents Examination essays and explored ways to enhance and enrich their writing. I found most of their writings were teeming with sentences such as "One negative effect was the workers in the factories were treated poorly and had poor living conditions. Because of the conditions at the factories, many died"—sentences that were flat, monologic, and void of the complex and dissonant voices echoing the social heterogeneity that characterizes their lives. To tap into the heteroglossic potential that I saw latent in my students' writings, I decided to help students identify and explore textual voices in reading and writing.

Inspired by Mary E. Styslinger and Alison Whisenant's "Crossing Cultures with Multi-Voiced Journals," in which the authors documented their experience of journaling with students, I structured my classroom activities and assignments with a view toward demonstrating the heteroglossic nature of all discourses. My primary focus was to explore jointly the multiplicity of voices within the text as well as within ourselves, to experience what Bakhtin refers to as "an intensive interaction and struggle between one's own and another's words" ("Dialogic" 354-55). Within such space of interaction, students would hypothesize possible meanings, evaluate their propositions, and draw conclusions while reading and writing. Most importantly, through this process, students would construct what we encountered through reading and writing as a larger, more complex account of humanity. Hence I used storytelling as an inquiry tool to recover the context of coexisting multiple voices/perspectives within texts and in so doing I hoped to promote student discourses that Nancy Welch describes as "internally persuasive and publicly meaningful" (500).

As part of my practice of using storytelling to enhance students' academic skills, I read with students a multiplicity of documents from the early era of Industrialization. These texts provided juxtaposed perspectives and often contradicting accounts of early industrial societies. I challenged students to expand the choral potential of texts, seeing each text as "doubled-

voiced, expressing simultaneously two different intentions" that are dialogically interrelated: the direct intention of the author, and his or her refracted intention in response to a socially charged reality. We began by learning to reject the view of "the utterance as a direct, single voiced vehicle for expressions" ("Dialogic" 324, 354-355). Instead, students were encouraged to see as if each utterance is a dialogic counterpart of another, as a negotiation of different voices, including their own. As an example, I chose "Letter of Crewe Factory Girl" by Ada Nield Chew—to study how *heteroglossia* is mediated and echoed through a marginalized voice. She writes:

> And therefore, on that account I feel reluctance to reveal them, greatly as I value this opportunity which you, sir, have so kindly given me of emphasizing—or it must already be known—the fact that we are suffering from a great evil which stands in urgent need of redressing.

As a class we explored the *heteroglossia* of a discourse by noticing how texts enter into dialogic relations with each other. I brought to students' attention that her narrative was dressed in the form of a public document—as a testimony against the management. We compared her narrative with another in which a worker told his story in an affidavit to be used as evidence in court. We realized that genres are not fixed or discrete categories but relate to social practices embedded in a broader context of social relations. In the Victorian era, personal narratives mostly existed as part of public discourse. This awareness helped us better understand the apologetic tone in Chew's voice. Living in a society known for its rigid social structure and mobility, she could only dress her grievances in the cloak of public causes.

I urged students to explore the ways the author negotiated different voices and social expectations in her writing. I asked students, "Who are the intended readers of the text?" Bakhtin's notion of narrative as a dialogical and heteroglossic genre ensures that reading a text always involves multiple possible ways of interpreting the text. As Bakhtin suggests, as readers, we have the responsibility to multiply "the artistic wealth of humanity" through "creative understanding" ("Speech Genres" 137). In trying to make sense of the text, we were inevitably led to question how we identified ourselves vis-à-vis our historical counterparts. We came to understand the Bakhtinian moment: "(i)n all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varying degrees of accuracy and impartiality" ("Dialogic" 337). Once we

experienced the complexity of discourse as ongoing, interactive, multivoiced social dialogue, I instructed students to journal in her voice using their imaginations.

As usual, we stopped periodically to predict what would happen next, connect to what we have known, explore the meaning of her feeling and infer the purposes behind her words. Students were encouraged to consider whether they would have acted differently in the situation described in the text, plotting possible courses of action for our heroine. A series of problems and choices were created, and students then were prompted to explore each choice and consider how their choices might have provided different results. Students were also encouraged to act out a piece of text and retell the story in Reader's Theater. Students shared and discussed their thinking with each other. Sharing one's work in public space *dialogized* the writer/speaker's utterances. We discussed the necessary dynamic interplay between what the speaker/writer may not realize, but the reader/audience can infer or know.

Together we struggled to move away from our monological habit of seeking a single-voiced, pat, ready-made meaning in the text and toward a more complex, *dialogized* interaction with the text, to negotiate our own "internally persuasive" discourse through "listening to, selecting and orchestrating" words that are half our own and half another's (Welch 495).

The movement was a tortuous one. In the beginning, students expressed reluctance and resistance, for this activity contradicted their classroom expectations. From time to time, students verbalized their frustration with the meaning of multivoicedness, "Is this sentence multi-voiced?" Reactions such as this one promoted me to think that I might have unwittingly imposed my own monologic, authoritarian discourse on students in the name of empowering them. I assured them that the struggle to discover multivoicedness within one's voice through engaging another's words is a perpetual, existential quest shared by all (certainly including myself) and hence the fate of our humanity.

We spent almost two weeks on this lesson, more than what the curriculum recommended. Compared to their previous writing, I found more nuanced, textual voices in their later drafts. At the end of the second week, some of them were able to write about how early industrialization, in its progressive promise of prosperity and expansion, belied a form of entrapment for individuals: While earning wages gave individuals (especially women) the hope to attain financial independence and helped them develop a self-image that eventually contributed to the rapid individualization of the society, the meager factory wages proved to be a dead-end alley. Some students

also talked about different forms of entrapment they found in their lives. I believe that many students learned to value *dialogized*, multivoiced thinking as they struggled to retell the story in their own way and make it their own.

This narrative approach is different from the traditional academic approach I used to adopt in many ways. As a scaffolding strategy to engage English language learners in their own internally persuasive discourse, storytelling helped my students meet the demands of the Common Core and State Standards by reflecting and collaborating through dialogic co-construction of knowledge. In spite of students' initial reluctance to engage time and effort in other students' texts, students all agreed that multivoiced feedback and co-construction of knowledge was the most valuable lesson they learned from this two-week project.

CONCLUSION

Dialogic storytelling has the potential to provide a rich and authentic context for learning, including a context that enables English Language Learners to draw upon their own experiences, thus assisting them in better understanding the complex interaction between discourse and meaning required by the Common Core Standards. In support of the Common Core, storytelling can be used to facilitate ELL students' access to the ways of talking, reading, understanding, and writing in a specific area of knowledge. This access can be achieved through integrating teaching strategies that encourage ELLs to actively engage in the process of meaning construction by retelling stories and negotiate disciplinary meanings. The dialogue between students and their real and imaginary others constitutes a particularly effective means to construct knowledge and negotiate between personal and public voices. Through participating jointly in retelling stories, the narrative approach to academic discourse allows ELL students to express their understanding of texts through classroom activities.

In addition to being an instructional tool supporting the Common Core, storytelling can be utilized to promote critical reflection on knowledge and text. The potential agreement and conflict endorsed by divergent voices could lead students to reflect on and transform a text's meanings and knowledge. Hence not only is storytelling compatible with academic discourse, not only can it bridge between the demands of the Common Core and the special needs of ELLs, but it is a reflective form of academic discourse that can be utilized to enhance and support academic discourse skills development by helping students think more richly and critically.

Endnote

1. In offering the transcript for public download, the State of New York censored the word 'shit' and changed it into 'sheet.'

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