Performance as the Foundation for a Secondary School Literacy Program

A Bakhtinian Perspective

Eileen Landay

Nothing is so practical as a good theory.  

– James Britton

The theories of M. M. Bakhtin, philosopher of language, literary critic, and social theorist, have had wide influence in and beyond the academy. Writing in Russia in the years between 1920 and 1960, the period of the Russian Revolution and the rise of the Soviet state, and deeply influenced by those events, Bakhtin’s project was to explore and challenge the formalist theories developed by the linguists and literary critics like Saussure and Jakobson. Language, Bakhtin argued, is never a fixed and closed system. Instead, it is a living, ever-changing entity, “social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259).

If Bakhtin’s formulations are useful – and the extent to which they have been taken up and explored in the West since the 1980s suggests they are – there are relevant questions to be addressed: how do these formulations apply in settings whose explicit purpose is to support students’ language and literacy development (i.e., schools)? To what extent do school settings promote learning through social interaction? What sorts of social interaction take place in those settings? How can we use Bakhtin’s insights to provide a richer, more equitable environment for literacy teaching and learning?

I use these questions, and Bakhtin’s (1981) framework, specifically that part of it laid out in “Discourse in the Novel”, and the work of several other theorists, including Lave and Wenger (1991), to explore key elements of a specific secondary school literacy program, the ArtsLiteracy Project (ALP), begun in 1997, and currently under development at Brown University. The ALP combines work in literacy and the performing arts for secondary school students at all levels of literacy proficiency, and incorporates both
a professional development program for teachers and professional actors and model curriculum for adaptation in secondary school classrooms.1

The first section of this chapter provides a summary of four core concepts in Bakhtin's work: *heteroglossia*, *dialogism*, *social languages*, and *authoritative discourse/internally persuasive discourse*. The second looks at classroom applications of these concepts. The third offers an overview of a specific literacy project, the ALP, examining it from a Bakhtinian perspective. The fourth suggests a summary set of characteristics for language/literacy learning in classrooms, and discusses issues of implementing and assessing a program like ALP in schools.

A word about terminology: as numerous critics have noted, Bakhtin's work is, in Holquist's words, a "baggy monster" (Holquist, 1981a, p. xviii), often critiqued for lacking systemization. Although this imprecision adds a literary richness to the text and encourages repeated re-readings, it also adds difficulty to using terminology with accuracy. So, for example, there are overlaps in the way Bakhtin uses terms like *word*, *utterance*, *discourse*, *language*, *voice*, and *social language*. Those who have followed him have attempted to clarify and systematize. Holquist provides a glossary that addresses each of these terms, and others (cf. Gee, 1992, 1996) have continued to unpack and clarify. In the section below, I briefly gloss these four key concepts.

**BAKHTIN: FOUR KEY CONCEPTS**

As described above, Bakhtin's work focuses on the social nature of language. Alive and always active, language moves in multiple directions simultaneously: in perpetual tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces - the tendency to unify, centralize, fix, formalize, privilege, and create norms - and the tendency to invent, innovate, vary, expand, and specialize. Bakhtin terms the locus of those forces heteroglossia. The meaning of any utterance is never fixed, but differs in rich and complex ways according to the context and conditions within which it is used. "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272).

Further, all aspects of language are dialogic. True to his belief in the fusion of language and the social world, Bakhtin (1981) uses both utterances and individual speaking subjects as his units of analysis. Utterances, in his famous phrase "are populated - even overpopulated with the intentions of others" (p. 294). They contain within them multiple possible meanings that "speak" to one another, create linguistic richness and depth as well as tension and conflict. Traces of past dialogues are embedded in every utterance an individual has at his or her disposal.

One cannot simply adopt the words and utterances of a given social language because each is - to repeat the classic phrase - "populated - overpopulated with the intentions of others. Expropriating (a social language), forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). Any given individual speaks in multiple languages, many of which are in conflict with one another, and among which, at every given moment, a person must choose.

On issue of power relations, Bakhtin (1981) distinguishes between major categories of social language. Authoritative discourse is the discourse of tradition, generally acknowledge truths, the official line, the voice of authority. Internally persuasive discourse is the discourse of our personal beliefs, the ideas that move us, that shape us and create the stories we tell ourselves about the world and who we are. Bakhtin spends a considerable portion of his essay exploring the definitions of and the interplay between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. First, he points out that there are not one but many authoritative discourses. These are the unitary languages, or system of linguistic norms that "work toward a concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271).

However, as he takes pains to point out, these are not fixed and real but "always in essence posited ... guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallizing into the real although still relative ... unity of the reigning conversation" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 270). These authoritative
discourses – like all discourses – "are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (pp. 291–2). Discourses are never neutral. Instead,

(1) language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. . . . All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (p. 293)

These concepts, heteroglossia, dialogism, social languages, and authoritative discourse/internally persuasive discourse represent important features of Bakhtin’s theory of language, and provide a powerful lens for analyzing environments, programs, and organizational structures for language teaching and learning.

FIVE KEY CONCEPTS: CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

As educators in the United States try to make good on a national commitment to support the learning of all students, and as the backgrounds of our nation’s students grows increasingly diverse, Bakhtin’s theories become more and more relevant, providing a useful foundation on which to design and measure teaching and learning environments. If, as Bakhtin argues, heteroglossia (in the original Russian, literally “different speech-ness”) is the fundamental condition within which meaning is constructed, then classrooms where didactic instruction is the norm and the teacher the primary speaker are not likely to be effective instructional environments, particularly for those whose background, perspective, and knowledge base differ substantively from the speaker’s.

Not merely on command or by rote can or will students appropriate a discourse. It cannot be transmitted from one person to another unaltered like a product sent unchanged from one end of a pipeline to another (Reddy, 1993). Instead, as the concept heteroglossia reminds us, every utterance is embedded in a particular set of social circumstances, shaped by the particular context in which it occurs, and therefore, most clearly understood only by those who most completely share the speaker’s understanding of the circumstances and contexts. As Bakhtin (1981) notes,

language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speakers’ intentions. . . . Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. . . . It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . , but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (p. 294)

Even this formulation of appropriating language from others through use is complicated by the fact that each individual speaking subject is not the site of one unitary language but rather of multiple competing languages. Embedded in the consciousness of us all are multiple languages, each reflecting a different aspect of our lives. Within one consciousness, these languages are not necessarily compatible and harmonious, but often at odds and in conflict.

How, then, as the locus of numerous competing languages, is an individual identity formed? Bakhtin (1981) argues it happens when these discourses come into dialogic relationship with one another or what he terms “critical interanimation” (p. 296). As we speak, we continually transmit and interpret the words of others, sometimes repeating them directly, sometimes reporting and commenting on them:

In the everyday speech of any person living in society, no less than half (on the average) of all the words uttered by him will be someone else’s words (consciously someone else’s), transmitted with varying degrees of precision and . . . partiality. (p. 339)

In choosing the utterances we want to appropriate and precisely what meaning we want to attribute to them, we choose the stance we want to take. It is in the choices one makes toward these discourses that ones’ identity is formed. “The ideological becoming of a human being . . . is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (p. 341).

Applied to educational settings, then, heteroglossia suggests that in a productive language-learning environment, the learner is subject to a rich and varied range of utterances and is encouraged to participate in the discourse. In this setting, the speaking subject both absorbs and works with language, putting it to use, then interrogating it through interpretation, analysis, reflection, and revision.

Literacy activities promote dialogism, both internal – within one individual consciousness – and external – between two or more speaking subjects (Holquist, 1981b). Writing can serve as a form of dialogism between an earlier and later self. Many writers describe the experience of coming upon a piece of their own writing and wondering over its strangeness, its sense of having been composed by someone other than themselves, in which the ideas seem vaguely familiar, but at the same time distant and external to their reality. A dialogue with those distant texts or with texts closer to one’s present self can be a powerful component of ideological becoming. E. M. Forster said it famously: How can I know what I think until I see what I say? But perhaps this aphorism misleads by assuming a preexisting self that is uncovered by writing. It can be much more: it can be an act in which the self is formed. Joseph Harris, cited in Lensmire (2000, p. 62), notes, “Writing is not simply a tool we use to express a self we already have; it is a means by which we form a self to express.”
Reading – especially fiction and the biographical forms – promotes several sorts of dialogues: within one’s self, between the self and the author, and when the text is shared, between readers. In The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination, Coles (1989) describes how a reader’s moral imagination is formed through exemplars provided in stories. In You Gotta Be the Book, Wilhelm (1997) identifies the differences between readers who can and those who cannot – to return to Bakhtin’s phrase – critically interanimate the contents of text with the concrete experiences of their own lives; he then turns this knowledge into a method of instruction that uses drama and visual art to animate texts.

Many recent instructional approaches are designed to promote dialogism. The idea of classrooms as reading/writing workshops, for example, was popularized by Atwell (1998), Calkins (1986), and Graves (1983), in primary, elementary, and middle schools, and later in secondary schools first as an approach to writing instruction, and applied more recently across the grades as reading pedagogy. In workshops, students are asked to replicate the processes and apply the strategies of those who read and write because it is central to their personal and professional identity. As it applies to writing, this instructional model generally has a three-part structure: brief direct teacher presentations in the form of modeling or minilessons, extended opportunities for students to initiate and practice literacy activities, and a time for sharing their work among peers followed by some form of publication. Ideally, students write for real audiences and real purposes.

Students engage in internal dialogues when they keep journals, revise their own writing, develop and maintain portfolios, and ultimately return to and reflect on and gloss these written records through subsequent written responses. Dialogue among people in classrooms takes place in the many current approaches to collaborative learning and groupwork (Cohen, 1986; among many others); in structured discussions such as Socratic or Paideia seminars (City, 2000); book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997); literature circles (Daniels, 1994); or debate programs (Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschn, 1987). Reading strategies suggest students question the author, mark up and talk back to the text, and work with a wide range of graphic organizers (Allen, 2000; Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001; Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

This work takes place in the tradition of what Willinsky (1990) and others have called New Literacy studies. The central goals of these practices are to afford students the chance to participate actively rather than being passive recipients of an information delivery system; to create environments where they have increased choice and control over their work; to give teachers methods for honoring and supporting students’ intentions; to make the work personally meaningful; to provide increased interactions among students; and to minimize the existing hierarchy of power. In this mode, “everything means (emphasis mine), is understood as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interactions between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. . . . Which (meaning) will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is actually settled at the moment of utterance. A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, deprivileged, aware of competing definitions for the same thing. Undialedized language is authoritative or absolute” (Holquist, 1981b, p. 426–7).

How, when, and under what circumstances adolescents willingly enter into and wholeheartedly engage with the work of dialogization is an important issue for educators. As numerous writers and researchers (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1984; Kohl, 1994; to name just a few) remind us, many adolescents enter secondary school literacy classrooms knowing they are in a world where an alien language is being spoken, a language that is not their own.

For adolescents, engaged as they are in identity development, this may be dangerous territory, particularly for those whose forming identities are at odds with the norms of mainstream society. A deep gulf often exists between the authoritative discourse of the schoolroom and the discourses Bakhtin identifies as internally persuasive. Authoritative discourses or what Delpit (1995), Gee (1992, 1996), and others have termed the language of power encode cultural capital (Bordieu & Passerin, 1977). Internally persuasive discourses, on the other hand, are often “denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and frequently not even acknowledged in society . . . not even in the legal code” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342).

This distinction becomes important in thinking about literacy development among youth, given that they are one of the primary social groups within our society that create what Bakhtin refers to as the “language of the hour.” Adolescents constantly coin new terms that characterize and define youth culture, and set it at odds with authoritative discourses. To students for whom school has not been a friendly place and in which they have not been deemed proficient or successful, the discourses they have found internally persuasive, and the identity they have crafted with and around those discourses, are not those privileged in schools (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gilmore, 1987; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981).

Other students appropriate the authoritative discourse, but only in the most superficial ways. These students read and write correctly, and complete tasks dutifully, but without being genuinely engaged either with the ideas or the process. These same students often find ways to passively resist efforts to draw them into more substantive engagement with the work.

Gee (1996) writes persuasively about the extent to which language and literacy are social practices, closely tied to one’s identity. Discourses in Gee’s formation are ways of displaying through words, actions, values, and beliefs, one’s membership in a particular social group or social network. A Discourse (always capitalized by Gee to differentiate this meaning of the term from many possible others) is a sort of identity kit that comes complete with the
appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life that integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. Not everyone is comfortable enough with the dominant discourse, confident or willing to participate, to commit wholeheartedly to serious learning even in a classroom that uses workshop methods.

Not all words for just anyone submit easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property; many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294)

Many activities in the most progressive classrooms are based on the idea that reading and writing a wide range of texts – within which are embedded a wide range of social languages – will contribute to an individual’s cognitive, intellectual, and moral development, especially if the work is carried out in a social setting where students are encouraged to talk about texts. But among the students in our classes, not all are in a position to see the value of – or seriously engage in – these activities.

A reading of Bakhtin suggests that in the most comprehensive sense, a person cannot put on and take off a discourse like a garment of clothing. To a preview an argument I will make shortly, though, it may be that by engaging in substantive performance activities within a community of practice, students may “try on” a discourse and perhaps even “borrow” it, an appropriation that offers the possibility of future thoughtful and selective assimilation.

Further, this interpretation of Bakhtin suggests that to help all students reach high levels of literacy, educators need to think beyond the workshop model and beyond the even newer practices of helping students attend to processes of reading and writing through direct instruction in comprehension strategies (cf. Tovani, 2000). Although both approaches work well for individuals already convinced of the value of appropriating a discourse, for other students, prior conditions must exist. Those conditions are best described as engaging students as valued apprentices in a community of practice that requires high levels of literacy.

“Discourses are not mastered through overt instruction but by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse” (Gee, 1996, p. 139).

In the following section, I describe one literacy program whose primary emphasis is on developing a community of practice that calls on and helps students develop strong literacy skills. In this performance program, the ALP, students work collaboratively to share their internally persuasive discourses, explore authoritative discourses, and subsequently learn to compare discourses and develop metaknowledge about them all (Gee, 1996).

THE ARTSLITERACY PROJECT

The ALP is a program for secondary school students aimed at literacy development through the performing arts. The project involves students working with one or more core texts to bring them to performance. It is not a traditional drama program that replicates plays for audience consumption. Neither is it process drama (Wagner, 1999), which uses role play to deepen participants’ understanding of content or develop skill in perspective taking. Although it combines elements of both approaches, ALP’s major focus is to construct a classroom community in which adolescents develop the skills and habits of mind to convey meaning through – and recover meaning from – a range of symbol systems, most explicitly, print text.

In the seven years since the program’s inception, core texts have included challenging works by Shakespeare, Shaw, Garcia Lorca, and Sophocles; children’s books, such as Where the Wild Things Are, used with a class of new English speakers; and The Bill of Rights, used in a American history/American literature class. Students are introduced to the text, work with it in a variety of ways, and produce an original work in response. Their final performance, which is presented publicly to an audience, incorporates sections of the core text, other relevant texts, and their own original work, combined and organized to respond to a central theme.

In each ALP classroom, a teacher works collaboratively with a professional actor. After joint professional development in which teacher/actor partners incorporate planning, teaching, feedback, and reflection, they design and teach a unit using a curriculum framework called the performance cycle (Fig. 5.1). *

Classes include students at all levels of proficiency and have included students identified as gifted, honors, English language learners, and special education. The work is done within the schedule of the school day in ordinary classroom spaces.

Key features of the program are its:

- Design that incorporates a high-quality final public performance
- Pairing of teachers and professional actors with ongoing mentoring by experienced mentors
- Focus on a building sense of community between and among students and faculty
- Emphasis on creating conditions in which students become increasingly receptive to – and capable of – bringing their own interests and ideas to bear on challenging texts.

The goals of the program are both socialization and skills. The first segment of the cycle focuses on building a community of practice in a classroom; the final segment on one or more performances by an ensemble

* Developed by ALP project director Kurt Wootton and faculty director, Eileen Landay.
that includes all members of the class. The performance is a culmination of all the work done during the course of the cycle, an artistic presentation of students' original work created in response to the many texts they have encountered. In creating this performance, students' knowledge is transformed and displayed; they use what they know and demonstrate what they have come to understand (Wiske, 1998).

Although most literacy programs begin at either step three or step four of the cycle (comprehending text or creating text), a major emphasis in the ALP is steps one and two (building community and entering the text). In so doing, the project takes into account how closely literacy practices are tied to identity, especially for adolescents who do not count school literacy activities as a central part of their identities.

Through work in performance, students enter the richly dialogic world of multiple discourses and critically interanimate its texts, exploring and practicing in order to choose which of them will become internally persuasive. The discourses are presented through the lives and language of speaking subjects. Students "try on" and "practice" a discourse in a provisional way. Do you want to know and feel what it is like to be driven mad by jealousy in an uncertain world, mad enough to destroy what you most prize? Try on the discourse of Othello. Want to tell Othello a story of your own or a story of someone you know? Want to wrest an explanation from Iago beyond his final and infuriating, "From this time forth I never will speak word"?

Creating a Community of Practice

In looking carefully at what constitutes the kind of community of practice where rich, substantive language and literacy learning go on, we imagine with Bakhtin a site where the social life is vital and full of energy, where participants move about, talk, and listen to one another to share ideas, where official and unofficial discourses "interpenetrate." We have to look beyond Bakhtin for a more precise description of such a community and the mechanics of how it develops. Here the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) is helpful. As they describe it, being a member of a community of practice implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. (p. 98)

A classroom as a community of practice then, has a shared purpose, one that everyone involved understands clearly and believes has real meaning for him/her, and for others who are important to them. The specific attributes of the community shape the kinds of learning its participants do.

"Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind.... Learning is, as it were, distributed among coparticipants, not a one-person act. While the apprentice may be the one transformed most dramatically by increased participation in a productive process, it is the wider process that is the critical locus and precondition for this transformation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15).

This wider process is a picture of how the whole community works. How apprentices (in our case, students) develop depends at least in part on how clear a vision they have of the purposes and workings of the community.

"Apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community. This... sketch of the enterprise might include who is involved; what they do, what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners. It includes an increasing understanding of how, when and about what old-timers collaborate; collude and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire. In particular, it offers exemplars (which are grounds and motivation for learning activity), including masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners. Such a general
view, however, is not likely to be frozen in initial impressions. Viewpoints from which to understand the practice evolve through changing participation in the division of labor, changing relations to ongoing community practices, and changing social relations in the community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 96).

Effective communities of practice look at themselves as learning systems for all participants. Their purposes are clear to all. They take special care of apprentices, offering them a view of the whole enterprise and access to all participants, especially those slightly more advanced than themselves. They are, by definition, active systems. They also provide a combination of challenge and safety that permits apprentices to grow and develop into full participants.

A community of practice built around performance work supports and encourages dialogism throughout. And it is in dialogism, Bakhtin tells us, that identity develops. Modeling, discussion, transformation of text to gesture, text to talk, text to text, repeated retellings, reflection of numerous sorts and at numerous levels: all are present throughout ALP for all participants. Elements of the community include making the work purposeful, social, active, visible, and explicit. Students report feeling a strong positive sense of membership in an ensemble, being engaged with the work and receptive to new ideas, and experiencing tangible personal and social development.

Membership in an Ensemble

From the outset, students know that they will be working in an ensemble, that they are expected to know their fellow ensemble members, capitalize on their talents and strengths and, in a phrase introduced by one of the project’s teachers, “take care of one another.” A class activity frequently used early in the program is called Common Ground. Students line up on one side of the classroom and the teacher asks questions of the students, such as “How many of you speak Portuguese?” “How many regularly look after younger brothers and sisters?” Those who can answer the question in the affirmative cross to the other side of the room. Through a carefully designed series of questions, the ArtsLiteracy teacher “introduces” students to one another, and foregrounds their talents, skills, and interests, particularly in relation to the themes of the core text they are about to encounter.

Students in ALP classes contrast the classroom climate created by an initial focus on community building with their experiences in other classrooms in large schools where they may go through an entire year without knowing one another’s names. Dominique^5, a student in a 4-week ArtsLiteracy class designed around the life and work of Federico Garcia Lorca (1994), specifically his play, Blood Wedding, commented that in other school situations, group work is undermined “because we don’t really take a long time getting to know each other — it’s like […] ‘I do not like you, so don’t even talk to me!’” In contrast, a strong sense of community, structured by real interpersonal relationships, underlies and enables all the other features of ensemble membership, including “getting things done” at the most basic level.

ArtsLiteracy instructors work hard to model and create a classroom climate in which students can put aside their fears of judgment or scorn — formidable obstacles for all of us, and more so for adolescents — and delve into the work at hand. The results are tangible. On the last day of one class, an instructor has just finished thanking the students for their final performance. The speech ends in rousing applause. Just as the students begin to resume activity, Ashley’s voice rings out: “Wait, wait, can I say something?” The classroom goes quiet as Ashley, a girl who cried on the first day because she didn’t want to perform, stands up on a chair and begins to speak. In her comments, echoed by several students after her, she expresses how much she enjoyed the class, emphasizing the uniqueness of a classroom atmosphere in which “you don’t have to be afraid to look like an idiot because people will still like you.”

In addition to an emphasis on a positive classroom climate, teaching partners work hard to establish a clearly defined sense of purpose. Desiree describes her response to their efforts:

Everybody’s into it. Everybody’s into it because the teachers, they give you the energy to get into it, and you feel like there’s a purpose, that you need to fulfill a purpose, and that’s why everybody’s serious about what they’re doing, like “Come on, let’s get this done.” And everybody’s cooperating, and everybody cares.

Melissa further establishes the link between purpose — specifically the sense of purpose generated by the expectation of performance — and accountability:

You actually have to act, and like, with the other things, you don’t actually have to do anything; you just kind of put in your input and sit around and you talk about it. But with this you actually have to do something. If you make a suggestion you have to follow through on that and actually act it out or something.

As Melissa implies, accountability is possible because, when working on performance activities, everyone’s work is active and visible. Adults model giving explicit directions and asking for explicit and precise feedback. Teachers, actors, and students demonstrate and discuss what good work looks like, and who is doing it. Because accountability exists not as the purview of individuals, but within the bounds of the community values described above, it does not devolve into individual competitiveness. Although

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^4 For a comprehensive description of ArtsLiteracy activities in each component of the performance cycle, go to www.artsliteracy.org/handbook.
^5 Student names are all pseudonyms.
directions are explicit and the work of individuals is visible, like any good team with a collective sense of purpose, the accountability focuses largely on the effectiveness of the ensemble.

Beyond accountability for the successful completion of the task at hand, ensemble members are also, as Jori Ketten (2002) writes in her paper on the ALP, "accountable with others for the welfare of the group." As ensemble members, students balance their behavior, learning when to take the lead and when to take a less dominant role, when to give and receive criticism, to voice their own ideas convincingly and to listen carefully to those of others. Monica humorously describes the way in which the ArtsLiteracy class has modified the role she takes in group work:

Well, I’ll be serious. I don’t like listening to other people’s opinions. I want what I want. But like, in this class, it taught me to be more, more ... appreciating other peoples’ opinions. Because before, I guess I was just so used to always doing everything; I always wanted everything to be perfect. But then, like now, it’s not like that anymore.

In a successful ensemble, students build intellectual as well as social relationships, learning to see each other not just as friends, but also as "good school minds," with insights and resources to contribute to the task at hand.

Peter expresses his understanding of the give-and-take of ensemble membership:

I love group work. Because ... it gives me a chance to help other people out and also gives me - me the same benefit, like, people helping me out with something that, that I may not know or understand.

Isaiah is more specific:

Cause sometimes ... you have to learn how to ... incorporate different people's opinions into the acting. Remember, you remember that Southern accent? That was, like, my idea, you know, and they, like, accepted it. So it was, like, cool, you know? And ... they, I ... I learned how to accept criticism and stuff.

Implicit in their comments is an understanding and appreciation of the flexibility necessary to effective group work, as well as a respect for their peers' and their own - judgment and intelligence. Student perceptions of each other as talented and serious thinkers/actors/writers is another benefit of ensemble membership. A class that conceives of itself as an intellectual community is primed for substantive learning.

Receptivity

Although community building continues throughout the performance cycle, teacher/actor partners quickly introduce activities intended to help students "enter the text." The types of activities they use contrast with those used in more traditional settings where teachers will give a brief context-setting explanation, if they do anything at all, then assign students to read a segment of a text - The Great Gatsby, for example - for homework, and follow up the next day with a quiz to see if students have read and understood. As one teacher put it, "Students who can't or won't read an extended text independently are very quickly 'put out of the game.'"

In ALP classrooms, the point is to support students in staying in the game. Teacher partners do this by making initial connections with the text in a social setting where students can work with peers to get a sense of the text's content and style, to raise questions about the text, to identify possible personal connections, and to get the maximum possible help in working with assigned material. Much like watching a movie's coming attractions, entering the text activities are intended to introduce students to the material and to pique their interest. For example, in the Museum of Texts activity 6 students browse through brief relevant excerpts of texts and look at related visual materials placed throughout the room. Using a previously prepared records form, they address one or more questions having to do with the contents of the texts and their connection to it. After some time, they gather in performance groups to discuss and compare their findings. This activity prepares them to do some introductory improvisational work, to begin working together in ensemble, and to begin working with the core text.

Working with a challenging and unfamiliar text, students were increasingly open to its themes and language. In ArtsLiteracy classrooms, students are frequently out of their seats, performing. As a natural and necessary part of the process, they read and discuss written work and become active participants in the invigorating multisensory process of bringing a text to life:

It's not what you think, like, "Oh gosh, I can't understand the language," because they bring life to it ... the reason why I think they bring theatre to it is to get you excited about what you're doing and to ... to think differently ... to think that "Oh yes, Shakespeare can be fun" ... all these things that we thought were boring can be fun.

In these activities, the normally invisible act of reading becomes visible, and people's interpretations and reasons for making those interpretations become explicit. Frequent discussion and reflection on every aspect of the work supports students like Monica in asking questions about the contents of the text Blood Wedding and her classmates' responses to it:

We - every time we would finish doing our skits ... we would sit down, in the circle, and we would all talk about it and say, "How do you think Girl feels about marrying Boy?" And we would talk about it like that, and it made me think "Oh, yeah" - and it kinda makes the story better, too. Because it leaves you with questions and you wanna find the answers, so you'll keep reading to find the answers.

As they continue work of this sort, students begin to demonstrate increasing openness to new ideas, an increased ability to focus, willingness

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6 See a complete description of this activity at www.artslit.org/handbook.
to participate, take risks, and learn, and a general state of being "into" the happenings of the classroom. Not all students are completely comfortable initially, but after the first several days, even the shyest students participate willingly. For example, when asked to describe her general feelings about the class, Melissa responded:

Ok, um, the class is really fun ... but sometimes it's hard for me because I'm so shy that it's hard to just get up there and do something. Like, they want us to dance in front of people, and I really can't dance. ... But it's really helping to like overcome some of that stuff and just get out there. Like on the first day, we were all like, "Oh, this is so stupid." But now, we're like more comfortable with each other ... I like the class.

Personal and Social Development

As they participate in ArtsLiteracy activities, students report being aware of many different aspects of personal development. Allison speaks of overcoming shyness.

(1) It's been different, and a little bit hard for me cuz, I'm really shy and like, can't, I don't like to like, talk a lot. I'm more like a inner person, I don't say anything - I like to write things, and I don't tell anybody anything about ... but it's helping, been helping me a lot, cuz I've been, all my life I've been wanting to be more open and talk more. And I - I think I'm getting it.

Desiree mentions having increased confidence in expressing her own opinions.

Being able to get up in front of people without being scared. Saying what I feel, not being scared to share my opinions. Because before in school, I'm so like scared, I'm so paranoid. Kind of the kids ... but over here, you know, they teach you ... because you know, you're practicing for a performance, so you have to get out there and you have to. ... It really does help me to be louder and more open.

Dominique identifies the goals of the class as "trying to show you a way to say what you believe in." Drawing on the material of the course, which had to do with the life and work of Federico Garcia Lorca, she said,

It's gonna be controversial cause everybody doesn't have the same beliefs, but like, through poetry ... [Lorca] was a poet - even though he got executed in the end, he still said and fought for what he believes in.

Referring to expectations articulated by Ricardo, the actor in his class, Peter describes how he is learning to apply those same expectations in other areas of his life:

Um, just like, Ricardo saying, "I won't accept failure," and "I don't want you to accept failure either." And ... it's even, like, helped me in doing, like stuff with my band, like I'm not going to half-ass this, you know? I'm gonna do it so it's right. And, and I'm gonna do it, so that way I feel good about it, knowing that people who are listening to us, or watching us is going to feel the same way. And they're gonna say like, "Wow. They're, like, giving it their all." And then I'm saying, "I'm giving this all my all, I'm doing it like, the best possible."

Finally, Lily, a recent immigrant from Vietnam, describes increased comfort with the language and the resulting sense of confidence that has brought:

I can do more what I want to do, right? So I can speak up ... speak up.

CONCLUSION

By using Bakhtin's four key concepts - and specifically the master trope heteroglossia - to explore and analyze a particular approach to literacy teaching and learning such as the ALP, do we stray too far afield from the circumstances for which these concepts were developed? After all, Bakhtin worked principally as a literary theorist, and the essay in which these concepts are most clearly explicated is titled "Discourse and the Novel" (emphasis added). Or, as the foregoing pages suggest, are these theoretical constructs a helpful lens through which to look at language learning in school settings?

Holquist (1981a) provides these grounds for generalizing from a study of the function of language in a novel to the function of language in the classroom:

At the heart of everything Bakhtin did is a highly distinctive concept of language ... an almost Manichean sense of opposition and struggle ... a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart and centripetal forces that strive to make things coherent. This Zoroastrian clash is present ... in the specificity of individual consciousness. ... The most complete and complex reflection of these forces is found in human language ... and stresses the fragility and ineluctably historical nature of language and the best transcription of language so understood is the novel. (p. xviii)

Like the world of the novel, the world of an active, purposeful, reflective classroom, is by definition a place described by Bakhtin where several languages established contact and mutual recognition with each other to create "a dialogue of languages" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 294-5).

As soon as a critical interanimation of languages (begins) to occur in the consciousness ... then the involvability and predetermined quality of these languages (comes) to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them begins. ... Consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of having to choose a language. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it. (pp. 295-6)
In both the world of the novel and the world of the active, purposeful classroom, the dialogue of languages is ongoing, and the participants' position open to modification, a condition I have called receptivity.

"The more intensive, differentiated, and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance attaching, among other possible subject of talk, to another's word, another's utterance, since another's word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support, (and) further development" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 337).

In describing what he terms a speaking collective, Bakhtin identifies attitudes, activities, and forms of learning in a community of practice. By applying this theory in developing a specific school literacy program, the ALP, we have arrived at the following organizing principles:

- Create opportunities for students to do shared purposeful work that culminates in public performances of understanding.
- Embed the work in a community of practice that includes peers and adults, where expectations are high and the climate is positive.
- Establish an environment in which students and their discourses are resources rather than liabilities, in which they work productively on the boundaries between the canonical and the vernacular.
- Support students in bringing their own interests and ideas to bear on challenging texts, producing their own texts in response, and combining multiple, rich, and varied forms of discourse to shape a final performance that demonstrates their understanding of a significant issue illuminated by those texts.
- Design activities that create visibility through modeling and demonstration, explicitness through clear directions and continual feedback and response, and reflectiveness by jointly establishing standards and discussing means to achieve those standards.

In pursuit of more fine-grained program principles and specific practices, I raise issues and suggest questions in three categories. First are questions of effectiveness. For whom and under what circumstances will programs such as the ALP be internally persuasive? Given that many schools—particularly those that serve students who live in poverty—have dropout rates frequently in the range of 60 percent, it is crucial to look as honestly and unflinchingly as possible at what it will take in school and out to create circumstances that will lead to improved student literacy not as an end in itself but as a means of improving students' chances to lead a more productive life. Anthropologists, sociologists, and organizational theorists (cf. Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994) look at literacy development as socially situated in circumstances that include but go well beyond students' lives in school. This perspective suggests that schools, especially as they presently exist, are one small and often insignificant aspect of shaping students' lives.

On the other side of the issue is evidence that power relations are established and shaped in the microinteractions of discourse in everyday life and that students' experiences with social languages in schools are significant aspects of those microinteractions (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorow, 1989; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Mehan, 1979; Michaels, 1981). This perspective leads us to ask how to create a school environment that recognizes the distinction between the internally persuasive and the authoritative, and finds ways to productively merge the two.

A second set of questions has to do with the environment of schools and the extent to which, as the keeper of the authoritative discourse, it can be shaped around recognizing and honoring students' goals rather than its own drive toward efficiency, order, and conformity. Numerous studies (cf. Minick, 1993) have shown how classroom discourse acts to socialize students to follow orders literally, and not to ask questions, and punishes them for interpreting, questioning, or taking initiative. Although the adoption of workshop or New Literacy practices is aimed at altering those practices, it is not clear how genuine or effective these efforts are and how they function within the larger school setting. Can work in one classroom alone alter the negative effects of an overall environment that is repressive? What kinds of active, social, purposeful work will the institution tolerate? Will large secondary schools, especially those who serve poor students ever be able to treat their students as "resources"? Given the other demands on resources, will such a program—and its requirements of time, space, and human energy—be viewed as cost effective?

Finally, there are questions about the efficacy of the language practices in an environment such as the ALP. Assuming that work in such classrooms supports students' developing engagement with language and literacy, what amount and type of practice and skill development will students need to move to and demonstrate proficiency? Under what conditions does practice with "skills" contribute to creating internally persuasive discourse? Exactly what are these "skills," and under what circumstances are they best practiced? Although some answers are beginning to emerge that are consistent with the theories laid out by Bakhtin and Lave and Wenger (cf. Heath, 1999), strong pressure exists to measure success almost exclusively through students' scores on standardized achievement tests.

It is clearly unrealistic in the present climate to expect test scores as a measure of student literacy achievement to vanish or even to diminish any time soon. However, it may be possible to sharpen general awareness that test scores are designed to support and to measure only authoritative discourse, and that only in the extremely specialized and narrow context of multiple choice or short-answer responses. Further, it is hard to refute the point that these highly circumscribed circumstances are created for the sake
of efficiency and intended to serve institutions and not learners. To expand the idea of assessment to include performance work is to enrich it in ways that may serve individual learners within strong communities of practice.

It is important to acknowledge that critiques of the New Literacy practices come from several sources and deserve serious attention. How rigorous is the work undertaken and produced? To what extent are students genuinely engaged? How do we define substantive and productive learning, and to what extent are students achieving it? Theoretical frameworks such as Bakhtin’s and practical applications such as the ALP help us to frame the questions, and continue to seek the answers.

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References


Double Voiced Discourse

African American Vernacular English as Resource in Cultural Modeling Classrooms

Carol D. Lee

Language is a powerful mediator of learning. It is the dominant medium through which communication occurs, and it provides humans with symbolic resources through which to manipulate ideas and solve problems. The study of literature is directly situated on the plains of language use. Literary texts are themselves multilayered. Readers stand in dialogic relationship to the multiple layers of potential meaning that the language of literature conveys. In this chapter, I describe an apprenticeship into literary response in a high school serving African American students who are speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Bakhtin provides a set of constructs through which to analyze the role that AAVE discourse norms played in socializing students into a complex literate practice. The focus on AAVE with these students is important for several reasons. First, a majority of the students had standardized reading scores well below the 50th percentile. The high school had a history of underachievement. The students learned to tackle challenging problems of interpretation in very difficult literary texts within a short period of time, despite their low reading scores. In addition, the variety of English that served as their primary medium of communication (i.e., AAVE) has been denigrated in the academy and viewed more as a detriment than a resource (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Orr, 1987; Stotsky, 1999). Because these student attributes are more often than not viewed as detrimental, it is useful to understand how the students' language resources supported learning. Bakhtin is very useful in this regard (Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995).

Bakhtin (1981, 1984a, 1986; Volosinov, 1986) argues that language is inherently dialogic in nature. That is, when we speak, we take up the social languages and genres that are already in existence in the language and cultural communities in which we actively participate. On a macro level, one could argue that African American English stands in a dialogic relationship with so-called "standard" English of Wider Communication. We also respond to propositions, beliefs, and values that are already in currency, whether we