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# Creating Dialogic Spaces to Support Teachers' Discussion Practices: An Introduction

Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, Emily R. Smith, and Martin Nystrand

**T**his issue of *English Education* examines efforts to support English teachers' development of classroom discussion practices. The featured articles explore how teacher educators and university researchers work with preservice and in-service teachers to create *dialogic spaces* within and across university teacher education and secondary English classrooms to support this development. Drawing on Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and on sociocultural activity theory, we envision dialogic spaces, or what Nystrand (1982) defined as *textual space*, as sites of interaction where the practices and resources that participants bring with them from a range of settings intersect and provide openings for new, hybrid understandings and practices to emerge. Collectively, the articles document the processes through which dialogic spaces are constructed and provide readers a rich set of conceptual and practical tools for understanding and enacting cross-institutional practices that can assist teachers in enriching classroom discussion.

## Why Discussion?

Though discussion practices vary widely in English classrooms, ranging from teacher elaborations of student answers to predetermined questions, what Wells (1993) calls the IRF (Initiation-Response-Follow-up) pattern, to debates and open-ended exchanges of ideas (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990), the articles in this issue focus on developing English teachers' understanding of and skill in facilitating open-ended discussions that build on students' understandings and engage students in co-constructing meaning of and through literary texts. Such discussions present teachers with unique oppor-

tunities to scaffold students' critical thinking about literature and to ask questions and make observations that model complex interpretive strategies.

While many English teachers believe discussion is important for their students, few devote significant classroom time to it. Commeyras and DeGroff (1998) found that, while 95% of the English language arts teachers they studied said they valued peer discussion in literature instruction, only 33% regularly made room for it in their teaching. Similarly, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that all the teachers in their study of eight ninth-grade suburban English classrooms believed it was important for their students, in the words of one, to "discuss, contribute, and offer original ideas." Observations of the classes, however, documented not even one second of such open-ended discussion. In their expanded analysis of 58 American English language arts classes in urban, suburban, and rural schools involving hundreds of class observations, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that open-ended whole-class discussion averaged a scant 15 seconds a day. Sixty percent of all classes had no discussion. Only one class averaged more than 2 minutes.

Despite the infrequency of open-ended whole-class discussion, students in classes in which discussion did occur made statistically significant greater gains in reading comprehension and literature achievement than students in classes in which no discussion took place. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found strong effects on student learning for the overall dialogic quality of classroom discourse. In classes in which teachers devoted more time to discussion, students recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes. These results are striking given that the classes observed engaged in so little discussion. Subsequent studies (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2005; Langer, 2001) at the Center for English Learning and Achievement (CELA) support these findings.

Why is dialogic instruction effective? One clue is offered by CELA researcher Sean Kelly's (2005) study of student participation patterns in dialogic classrooms. Working from videotaped class observations, Kelly found that achievement gains were a function of the overall dialogic environment of instruction. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) reached similar conclusions. In classrooms in which dialogic discourse is more pervasive,

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students learn that their ideas count, that class is not just a review of last night's homework or a quiz about what they have just read, but also about collaboratively figuring things out in class, face-to-face. Their teachers validate student responses by following up with subsequent questions, a process Collins (1982) calls "uptake." Their teachers also ask open-ended, "authentic" questions to see what they think, not just what they can remember. In the give and take of such talk, student responses and questions, and teacher response, not just teacher questions, shape the course of talk. The discourse in these classrooms is therefore less scripted because it is negotiated and jointly determined in character, scope, and direction.

By opening the floor to student ideas, authentic teacher questions and uptake "prime" discussion. Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, and Long (2003) found that each instance of uptake and authentic teacher questions increases the probability of discussion cumulatively. They also found that clusters of student questions were the strongest such dialogic "bids." These instances were significant not for what the teacher did, as in the case of authentic questions and uptake, but rather for what the teacher did not do—ceasing to ask questions and, thus, opening the floor to student curiosity. Juzwik, Nystrand, Kelly, and Sherry (in press) have shown that spontaneous narratives by both teachers and students, for example, in explaining ideas can also nudge classroom discourse in the direction of discussion. Metaphorically, getting a discussion going is a little like building a fire: with enough kindling of the right sort, accompanied by patience, and along with the spark of student engagement, ignition is possible, though perhaps not on teachers' first or second try.

Instruction often falls somewhere between these two extremes of recitation and discussion. It is not uncommon for teachers to review essential points of information as a way of establishing a topic or issue that can then be discussed more interpretively. Discussions can sometimes "downshift" into review as this becomes necessary. We must be careful, too, not to define pedagogical engagement in terms of either how much students actually talk or how much time they spend on a given task, i.e., time-on-task, a frequent measure of student engagement. The usefulness of such talk or time can only be assessed when the nature of the talk or task is considered. On the one hand, lectures can be useful when they respond to, anticipate, and/or engender curiosity and important student questions. On the other hand, many lively discussions are not really so free-formed but, like recitation, can be orchestrated by "right" answers, hidden agendas, and preordained conclusions. In the final analysis, the key features of effective classroom discourse cannot be defined alone by particular linguistic forms such as

question types or even the genre of classroom discourse (lecture, discussion, etc.). Ultimately the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher-student interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious epistemic roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understandings.

### **Creating Dialogic Spaces to Support Teachers' Discussion Practices**

Though a growing body of research documents the importance of discussion to student learning, the literature on how novice and veteran teachers learn to plan for and facilitate discussion remains sparse. Studies that examine such learning highlight obstacles and challenges. Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999), for example, argue that because the university and school constitute distinct activity settings governed by different norms and tools of practice, novice teachers tend not to carry the constructivist practices, such as discussion, that they encounter in university methods courses into their secondary classrooms. Similarly, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) document the challenges that veteran teachers encounter as they attempt to adopt more dialogic practices. Because of its open-ended character, discussion can veer far from preestablished goals and objectives, challenging both the teacher's textual authority and his or her ability to maintain the smooth flow of classroom activity. Efforts to assist preservice and in-service teachers' development of discussion practices confront a further set of challenges. Discussions depend on and are vulnerable to the contingencies of social interaction. Other practices, such as teaching writing, can unfold over several activities and produce multiple artifacts, affording time for the reflection on and modification of practice that can readily occur in the university methods course or professional development setting. Discussion, as a deeply embodied and situated practice, is more difficult to examine and modify in this way.

The articles presented here show how the creation of dialogic spaces is vital to addressing these challenges. The dialogic spaces that the articles describe emerge as English teachers, teacher educators, and researchers interact with each other across their respective institutional settings. In each case, the exchange of competing perspectives, practices, and tools that the different actors bring to their interactions create a space in which the in-service and preservice teachers can develop new insights into and understandings of discussion. More specifically, the articles illustrate the critical role that *boundary objects* play in the creation of such dialogic spaces.

Boundary objects are material resources that reify lived experiences, practices, and thought, freezing them into representations that can be examined and reexamined to shape and reshape practices across a range of settings (Wenger, 1998). Such objects, which include videotapes of student teachers' efforts to facilitate discussions, a performance-based rubric for assessing preservice teachers' discussion practices, and a research tool for observing classroom discourse, take center stage in the articles in this issue as the authors show how these objects serve as focal points around which teachers, teacher educators, and researchers exchange, question, and enrich their understandings of discussion (see also Bowker & Star, 1999; Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Star & Greisimer, 1989). Collectively, the articles demonstrate the potential of boundary objects to foster dialogue, reflection, and learning among teachers, teacher educators, and university researchers committed to assisting the development of dialogic discussion practices in secondary English classrooms and university methods courses.

Each of the articles examines these processes as they play out in the different settings in which teachers develop their practice. The first, by Kevin Basmadjian, explores how preservice English teachers expand their conceptions of discussion as they jointly examine classroom videos. The teacher candidates videotaped themselves leading discussions of literature in a diverse set of field placements and shared these videos with classmates in their university methods course. Drawing on activity theory, Basmadjian analyzes classroom transcripts to trace how the teacher candidates broadened their view of the teacher's role in fostering and facilitating dialogic discussions. The videos served as tools that the teacher candidates could use to challenge each other's preexisting beliefs and to co-construct new understandings of the purposes and processes of discussion in secondary English classrooms. Basmadjian's work highlights the potential that video tools hold for creating dialogic spaces for preservice teacher learning about discussion in English methods courses.

The second article, by Emily Smith and Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, explores how secondary English teachers enriched their understanding of discussion through participating in the English Educators' Network, a collaboration that brought together university teacher educators and secondary English teacher-mentors to improve the learning-to-teach opportunities both groups provided preservice teachers. Smith and Anagnostopoulos focus on the Network's creation of a performance rubric to assist teacher candidates in leading dialogic discussions. Drawing on analyses of transcripts of Network conversations, the authors trace the teachers' voicing, critiquing, and re-voicing of multiple and sometimes competing understandings

of discussions over the course of creating the rubric. Eventually, as they worked together to revise their initial text, the teachers co-constructed a dialogic understanding of discussion that moved beyond using discussion to check for student understanding or elicit students' personal responses toward a view of discussion as engaging students in examining the multiple perspectives and experiences that coexist within literary texts and in students' social worlds. Smith and Anagnostopoulos highlight the importance of both *conversational brokers*, who bridged the social languages of classroom teaching and university teacher education, and the joint engagement with and production of shared texts, to the veteran teachers' learning.

The final paper, by Samantha Caughlan, Mary Juzwik, and Mary Adler, uses the Partnership for Literacy developed at the Center for English Learning and Achievement as a site to explore how a research tool—Nystrand's CLASS 4.24 (Nystrand, 2002) computer program developed for analyzing classroom discourse—can be appropriated as a tool for teachers' development of discussion practices. Drawing on Latour's work in the social studies of science, the article delineates the processes of recontextualization through which the researchers created representations of classroom discourse. The authors then show how researchers and in-service English teachers took up these representations in their work. The authors illustrate how the joint examination of CLASS data by university researchers and the in-service teachers they studied fostered the teachers' conceptual development, their closer attention to their questioning practices, and their analysis of moment-to-moment classroom discussions. Interestingly, Caughlan, Juzwik, and Adler found that jointly examining CLASS data with researchers scaffolded novice teachers' development of dialogic discussion practices. Analyzing CLASS data collected in their classrooms prompted these teachers, often left to deal with the challenges of learning to teach by themselves, to undertake efforts to move beyond managing classroom discourse and toward facilitating substantive conversations about literary texts.

Looking across the varied contexts of teacher learning—the university methods class, a cross-institutional teacher educator network, and a research-based professional development project—the articles illustrate how collaborative efforts by teachers, teacher educators, and university researchers across their respective institutional settings can facilitate not only teachers' development of their discussion practices but can also contribute to the creation of what Engeström calls *horizontal expertise* (Engeström, 2003; Engeström, Engeström, & Karkkainen, 1995; Kerosuo & Engeström, 2003) for teaching and teacher education. Horizontal expertise is the knowledge that professionals create as they interact with each other across institutional

boundaries. Engeström and his colleagues developed the concept of horizontal expertise through their work in multi-organizational terrains, including healthcare networks and manufacturing partnerships, in which coordinating work across diverse settings is necessary but difficult. Teacher education, both for in-service and preservice teachers, also exists on a multi-organizational terrain that includes university classrooms, secondary classrooms, and a myriad of other professional development settings such as teacher networks, in-services, and conferences. Professionals in multi-organizational terrains share common goals but work in settings that afford and demand different, often conflicting cognitive tools, rules, and patterns of interaction. Achieving common goals requires professionals to cross organizational boundaries and combine the resources, norms, and values from their respective settings into new, hybrid solutions. Horizontal expertise emerges from these boundary crossings as professionals from different domains enrich and expand their practices through working together to reorganize relations and coordinate practices.

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As the featured articles reveal, horizontal expertise for teacher education rests on the commitment and capacity of teachers, teacher educators, and researchers to move between their respective activity contexts and to engage in the exchange and mixing of their domain-specific expertise and discourse. It requires that all parties engage in continual negotiations. In each of the articles in this issue, horizontal expertise emerged from the interaction of teachers, teacher educators, and/or researchers around the boundary objects created, re-created, and used in the different contexts described. As the process of creating horizontal expertise sup-

ported teachers' development of discussion practice, it also supported the adoption and revision of new practices and tools by university-based teacher educators and researchers.

At the same time, difficulties and conflict arose in the development of this horizontal expertise. As the articles reveal, the negotiations and hybridizations through which horizontal expertise inheres necessarily gives rise to tensions as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers seek to accomplish their respective goals and to construct and maintain their professional identities (see also Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Basmadjian, 2007). It is these tensions that ultimately make it possible to open up the dialogic spaces that



can facilitate not only teachers' learning but also the learning of teacher educators and researchers as well. The combined importance and challenge of facilitating dialogic discussions in secondary classrooms make such efforts to facilitate the development of this horizontal expertise critical. We hope that the articles in this issue contribute to these efforts.

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