Widening the theoretical lens on talk and writing pedagogy

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article discusses the contributions to this special edition where authors explore the dialogic spaces opened when writing instruction and professional learning facilitate opportunities for 'meta-talk,' talk about writing as a mechanism for deepening thinking about writing. Given the prevalent theme of the notion of dialogic space, particular note is given in our discussion to each article's description, both theoretically and empirically, of this construct. We consider the articles in terms of their commonalities and differences and evaluate their collective contribution which we see broadly in terms of illustrating methods and analyses that allow researchers to explore pedagogy and the nature of talk that potentially opens up dialogic spaces. We offer some thoughts of our own regarding dialogic space.

1. Introduction

The articles in this special issue provide insight for thinking about the enigmatic phrase, attributed to James Britton (1983), describing reading and writing as floating on a sea of talk (p. 11). Collectively, they consider one focus in that talk, namely, teacher talk, and the idea of the dialogic nature of such talk. The authors of these articles explore the dialogic spaces opened when writing instruction and professional learning facilitate opportunities for 'meta-talk,' talk about writing as a mechanism for deepening understanding in teachers' and students' thinking about writing.

Talk has been a central concern in writing research and in considerations of writing pedagogy. This research has pursued a number of avenues. A major focus has been a consideration of the relationship between oral and written language, the ways in which they are similar and different (e.g. Sperling, 1996). Essentially, the relationship between oral and written language was captured in the two models of writing proposed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1997) and described in their book, appropriately titled, 'From conversation to composition'. The "knowledge-telling" model of writing is one where writing is largely talk written down, whereas the "knowledge transforming model" involves the writer considering the rhetorical demands of audience, the communicative purpose, and the requirements of the written discourse, then transforming and adjusting the communicative message accordingly. The development of the ability to write was seen broadly as involving moving the student from a natural oral conversationalist to a communicator who could generate a largely shared meaning in the absence of an immediate audience.

Unlike oral language, writing has to be taught; writing pedagogy drew on the notion that, although writing was not talk written down, students could be supported in various ways to draw on their oral language and desire to communicate, to

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develop as writers. In fact, Britton's (1983) use of the metaphor, floating, suggests that talk can be used as support for writing. Pedagogical moves have sought to build on, and actively utilise, students' desire to engage in social relationships and their existing facility with oral language as seen in the extensive works of Anne Haas Dyson (e.g. Dyson, 1997). Peer collaboration and interaction are seen to help learning (Carnell, 2000; McCarthey, 1994); such talk is orchestrated or harnessed by teachers as a means for developing writers to gather and to test ideas for writing and to respond to the writing of others (Farnan & Dahl, 2003).

The other focus of research concerning talk in the writing classroom involves teacher talk. Within this broad area, notable foci have been teacher modeling of the writing process, making the processes of writing and the strategies for performing the processes "visible to students" (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991, p. 338), largely through think aloud (Block & Israel, 2004; Regan & Berkeley, 2012) and teacher leading of shared writing involving the joint construction of text. Teacher talk is also foregrounded in the deconstruction of texts as models and in their drawing on notions of interextuality (Jesson, Fonterich, & Myhill, 2011). Teacher conferencing is another major arena for talk for developing writers to learn to interact with and craft meaning for a reader (Graves, 1983). However, conferencing is a complex and challenging task where the interaction is often characterized by less than desirable pedagogical moves (e.g. Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003).

Much of this work on talk in writing instruction notes the lack of opportunity for genuine student initiation and contribution. Classroom talk that is dialogic in nature has become an area of research interest in the wider educational literature. Scholars use the term 'dialogic' in a variety of ways but a common thread running through the literature on dialogic pedagogy is affording students greater control over the content and flow of discourse and greater agency in the construction of their knowledge and understanding. Bakhtin (1981),Bakhtin (1986)Bakhtin's (1981), Bakhtin's (1986) work is foundational, especially the idea that language and the ideas it embodies are continually structured by heteroglossia— multiple voices that produce tension, sometimes conflict, within and between participants, as one voice "refracts" another (Nystrand, 1997). For scholars of dialogic pedagogy, difference is all important; meaning emerges "when different perspectives are brought together in a way that allows them to inter-animate or inter-illuminate each other" (Wegerif, 2006, p. 146).

While each of the articles in this issue relates broadly to the pedagogical literature concerning talk and writing, they largely focus on the role and actions of the teacher, the type of talk the teachers engage in, and the likely outcomes of that talk for creating opportunities for students' writing development. The authors consider how talk and the dialogic spaces created by the talk occurs might mediate such development. Specifically, they examine writing instruction that might be considered to take a dialogic stance to building expertise, largely of students but also of teachers. The articles encompass: teacher talk to open space for voices to coalesce and create authorial voice; a consideration of balancing the development of individual student voice as author with the need to build knowledge about effective ways of constructing text; a view of teacher talk as recontextualising deep semantic knowledge to build student knowledge, and talk as a means of building teacher understandings of constructs in writing.

We first consider the contribution of each article individually, starting with the framing article in which the authors discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the contributions. Given the prevalent theme of the notion of dialogic space, particular note is given to each article's description, both theoretically and empirically of this construct. We view them in terms of their commonalities and differences before evaluating their collective contribution and offering some thoughts of our own.

2. Theorising talk in writing

Theoretical perspectives underpinning the literature on writing pedagogy generally, where such theory is acknowledged or apparent, tend to have paralleled the broader trends in educational scholarship, moving from a focus on the text as product, to cognitive and to social processes. Evidence-based practices in writing instruction, as examined, for example, by Graham, Harris, and Chambers (2016) in their chapter in the latest *Handbook of Writing Research* (MacArthur, Graham & Fitzgerald, 2016) are largely drawn from cognitive theory. Examples of such practices are strategy instruction and fostering motivation and metacognitive, self-regulatory activities like goal setting, planning, and self-assessment. Writing interventions involving peer collaboration and feedback represent more socially-oriented theorising, predicated on socio-cognitive or sociocultural perspectives on learning. Talk in these pedagogies is viewed as a cognitive tool to help students organise their thoughts, reason, plan, and reflect on their actions, or as a sociocultural tool that students internalize or appropriate to advance their problem solving, learning, and understanding.

The articles in this special issue are richly theorised. The first, by Jesson, Fonterich, and Myhill (this issue), maps the theoretical landscape. The authors start by positioning the articles in this special issue as drawing on sociocultural theory: the idea of writing as a social practice and learning as a mediated activity, shaped by social interaction. Language used to talk about writing involves metalanguage and the talk, as a mediational tool for learning about writing, is considered metatalk. Other ideas from Vygotsky that the authors draw on include his notion of the development of understanding of scientific concepts. Here the idea of scientific concepts is applied to specialised terms in writing, including grammar terms, but also extended to culturally shaped ways of talking about writing like the use of terms such as genre or reader awareness. Similarly, Vygotsky's notion of deliberateness is also utilised. Vygotsky considered writing to involve deliberate structuring of meaning and this is viewed in relation to the development of meta-linguistic understanding in the writing classroom. And, the idea of deliberateness is also applied to the engineering of opportunities for developing scientific understanding of