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Writing as a mediational tool for learning in the collaborative composition of texts

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex relationship between writing in the secondary school classroom as a tool for learning and the dialogical communicative processes involved in crafting and revising talk and inner speech into written speech. A theoretical framework is introduced from the work of Linell, Mercer, Vološinov and Vygotsky to develop a language of analysis for the dialogical processes involved in classroom composition. The framework draws on the concepts of the dialogical self, semiotic mediation and recontextualization. Empirically, the article reports on data from a qualitative case study of a state secondary English class for 13–14 year olds students in the UK that follows a sequence from classroom talk to a written text involving four students. The findings suggest that classroom writing that develops from socially mediated activity can become a dialogical tool for meaning making. The data reported on in this article challenge assumptions that dialogic classrooms are always spaces of concord and agreement. Critical incidents of discord, whereby students challenge, debate, argue, and ultimately recontextualize meaning, can be important precursors for some students to transform their resistance to dialogical learning. These findings suggest that more research attention should be paid to these complex processes of recontextualization.

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of writing as a learning resource (e.g. Dysthe, 2002; Langer & Applebee, 1987; Lerner, 2007) suggests that writing in its different forms has the potential to support learning. However, Ackerman (1993) points out that those who claim writing to be a unique tool for learning often “ignore the complexities of cultures, classrooms, assignments and other media that might equally facilitate learning (p. 334).” Ackerman suggests that more attention needs to be paid to institutional cultures and the extent to which these cultures support particular forms of writing intervention. Our purpose in this article is to explore in depth some of the dynamic processes involved in written composition as a cultural collaborative activity for the secondary school student; processes through which students develop abilities of contextual sense-making and individual consciousness as intertwined sites of learning. We argue that, in particular situated cultural contexts, collaborative writing can become a mediational tool for learning. From our perspective in this article written texts are not inert objects, complete in themselves as bearers of abstract meanings. They are “emergent, multiform, negotiated in the process, meaningful in the uptake, accomplishing social acts” (Bazerman & Prior, 2004 p. 1). As Nystrand (1986) argues, writing is a social practice and activity which develops from the relationship between writers and readers and the writer’s developing understanding of the conventions of text genres.

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Research on the processes involved in writing has shifted its focus in recent years from strictly cognitive accounts of learning to write and to revise content to fit genre conventions (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981) to the importance of students acquiring knowledge of genre and the conventions of writing within a structured social setting (e.g. Bazerman, 2009; Graue, 2006; Myhill, 2009; Prior, 2009; Russell, 2010). Bazerman (2009) argues that the contexts of “genre, situation and social activity system” (p. 282) call in to play a variety of writing processes. Thus students encounter in situated contexts specific forms of writing through the mediational tools of particular textual norms and genre conventions. Research associated with the “writing to learn” movement in the USA (e.g. Fecho, 2011; McCutcheon, 2008) suggests that introducing an element of play or experiment into the activity of writing allows writers to develop and challenge their own ideas.

There is also much research evidence to suggest that dialogical pedagogy can be productive for students' learning (e.g. Alexander, 2008; Nystrand, 1997; Wells, 1999). The term “dialogic pedagogy” builds on Bakhtin's (1981) and Vološinov's (1973) concepts of the centrality of dialogue to the formation of mind and refers to the importance of dialogue in literate activities for effective teaching and learning. Other research (e.g. Karsten, 2014; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Prior & Shipka, 2003) has explored the relationship between writing and dialogic activity. There is also some research evidence that highlights the importance of the expressive mode of writing (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975) as a mediational tool for development (e.g. Brand, 1987; Smagorinsky, 1997). However, there is as yet little research on writing as a tool for students' learning within classrooms that frame writing as collaborative activities.

In order to capture the negotiated nature of text production, we apply a dialogical approach to writing and define composition as a social communicative practice within situated contexts. The texts created are uniquely situated in communities with specific expectations and needs (Linell, 2009). Through the telling of situated social narratives, students engage themselves as well as their readers in cultural and dialogical meaning making that link both the reader's and the writer's experience with the content of the text (Wittek, Askeland, & Aamotsbakken, 2015). Accordingly, in this article a dialogical perspective is applied to the processes through which students negotiate meaning in the collaborative act of composing texts. We aim at a conceptual contribution, and suggest an analytical approach to the rich, complex collaborative activities of writing in school. In particular we will look at the role of writing as a tool in the development of an adolescent student's process of meaning making. We apply the concept of meaning making to capture the creation of meaning in a specific context, while learning refers to a higher level of cognitive development. Finally, we will discuss how activities of student writing could be designed in classrooms for the purpose of developing semiotic sense making.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Writing as a psychological tool

Writing can be viewed as a psychological tool for cognitive development through which the disorder and fragmentation of inner speech is articulated into a new communicative form of written speech. Vygotsky (1986) argues that writing involves “the deliberate structuring of the web of meaning” as the writer draws on and internalizes a cultural sign system for communicative meaning making and then attempts to externalize in a written text to be read by others (p. 182). Olson and Oatley (2014) point out that the production of a written artifact uses the “reflexive properties of language for particular social purposes and in particular historical contexts” and is “open to design and analysis and to revision and reinterpretation” (p. 8). However, Brandt (1990) warns against an artificial separation between oral language learning and literacy (reading and writing) language learning as they both involve “figuring out how language and occasion work to bring meaning to each other (p. 6).” Just as we learn to speak through listening and interacting with others so writers are most likely to learn about writing from understanding the purposes and practices of other readers and writers. As Brandt (1990) puts it: “If the key knowledge for literacy development is finding how people do reading and writing, then literacy is indeed dependent on oral transmissions, for this knowledge must be passed mouth to mouth, person to person (p. 7).” Through the appropriation of a written sign system as a cultural and psychological tool, the writer builds on the situated cultural and contextual resources which are inherited from dialogue and social interaction and which are then transformed through the activity of producing a text. Wells (1999) argues that it is through “engaging with others in the social practices of interpreting and creating text” that an individual writer “is able to appropriate these cultural resources and use them for the construction of personal understanding” (p. 278).

For the purpose of conceptualizing in-depth from a dialogical perspective the role of collaborative production of texts in transforming cultural sign systems into a psychological tool for making meaning and cognitive development, we will elaborate on the following concepts of: the dialogical self; semiotic mediation; and recontextualization.

2.2. The dialogical self

The dialogical self refers to the complex interplay between the self and the social in the development of mind. According to Linell (1998, 2009) the dialogical self has two main components: *contextual sense making* and *individual consciousness*. The individual mind is social in that knowledge, norms, concepts and language originate in the social world. *Contextual sense making* can be defined as an “in situ” matter for both the speaker or writer and the interlocutors (Linell, 2009, p. 222). Linell (2009) defines consciousness as “knowing with others” (p. 79) which “implies being aware of one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviors' as well as the perspectives of others” (p. 109). Consciousness then is *interactional* as “thinking involves a sort of dialogue with others” whether those others are actually present or not (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 62). Internal and external voices are invoked

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