



Hunting the position: On the necessity of dissonance as attunement for dialogism in classroom discussion

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ABSTRACT

In exploring the relationship between talk, power, and the nature of knowledge in an elementary classroom, I examine how participants position themselves and others within the tensions and dilemmas of dialogic discourse. I argue that in order to understand the complex dilemmas of enacting dialogic discourse in classrooms, power structures must be foregrounded as important theoretical and analytical constructs. Various factors contribute to the positioning of ideas and participants, including teacher question types, the polarization of ideas, and deictic pronouns across multiple layers of activity. I trace a small group discussion of a debate about the moral versus legal ethics of hunting animals in order to make the central claim that dissonance is necessary to dialogism, but it must emerge out of relations of care and the continuous effort of attunement. Despite seemingly dialogic tasks and forms as well as a desire to create dialogic contexts on the part of the teacher, authoritative meanings can pervade the learning.

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1. Introduction

Authoritative ways of knowing, such as the notion that knowledge and truth exist only within the teacher or in the text, pervade classrooms despite the established finding that dialogic approaches to understanding texts in classroom settings leads to meaningful comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005). With respect to literacy instruction in the United States, policy initiatives have focused on evidence from the text as a highly valued way of knowing. Due to the recent emphasis on the Common Core State Standards, teachers engage students in close reading practices (Brown & Kappes, 2012), asking more text-dependent questions and thus magnifying the authoritative stance that presupposes the text to be the primary knowledge source (Boelé, 2016; Snow & O'Connor, 2013). Although many teachers purport to value multiple meanings and perspectives of text, orientations toward single correct meaning continue to be privileged in classrooms (Cazden, 2001).

A space in which mutual understanding is achieved through listening, reasoning, and encompassing multiple contested viewpoints as a forum for learning is an idea taken up by political,

legal, philosophical, and educational theorists alike (Dewey, 1966; Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1990). Dialogue can become the tool for democratic participation, liberation, and education. Yet dialogue is more than its forms. Conversations shape and are shaped by the situations, institutions, and social structures that contextualize the interaction. Power asymmetries among participants can exacerbate the extent to which particular meanings are privileged in the discussion (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Because much of interaction is implicit, interlocutors have to infer meaning (Grice, 1975) based on contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982), and these cues play an especially significant role in learning through teacher-student interactions. Conversational cues can be so entrenched in classroom discourse that students attend to these cues in order to provide the correct response (Billig et al., 1988) rather than responding purely to the content of the question. Further complicating the context is that classrooms consist of power relationships of teacher and student in the classroom space, with the location of knowledge largely assumed to be solely within the teacher. In this paper, I argue that axes of power must be foregrounded when examining the dialogic nature of discourse because power contributes significantly to the meaning constructed in classrooms. Positioning as a mechanism of power shapes the ideological stance that is constructed within authoritative and dialogic discourse.

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1.1. Dialogic discourse

Bakhtin's (1986) notion of dialogic discourse frames my understanding of the degree to which multiple perspectives exist within an interactive space. A heteroglossic, or multi-voiced, space necessarily invokes an egalitarian plurality of voices, and as such, dialogic teaching manifests from a collective quest for truth (Bakhtin, 1984). Dialogic discourse can be characterized as the *spirit* of conversation between individuals relating to each other (Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Lefstein, 2010). In deference to this spirit and its guidance, interlocutors work toward *attunement*, where "dialogically structured activities involve the creating and bringing into existence of what is uniquely new, what has never existed before" (Shotter, 2015, p. 9). Within attunement, dispositions of humility, openness, concern, respect, affection, and hope permeate dialogic relations (Burbules, 1993; Lefstein, 2010). And yet, dissonance and disagreement are key qualities of discussion that serve as catalyst for dialogic relation. It is in the dissonance that we find our definition of and orientation to the unique other. Disagreement can generate the risk of a face-threat; however, it is also more than being confrontational, impolite, or un-preferred (Charoenroop, 2015; Netz, 2014). Dialogism does not account for the absence of crisis, but "bound by habits of heart" (Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 96) it instead follows rules of relational commitment and reciprocity among members of the discursive community.

Monologic and dialogic discourses generally refer to opposing modes along a continuum (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007) that differ by the extent to which varying ideas are taken up and valued (Scott, Mortimer, & Aguiar, 2006). A primary purpose of authoritative discourse is to direct students toward one meaning or interpretation of an idea. Many teachers use this kind of talk to establish an agreed upon account of meaning, and it is the predominant, traditional form of talk in classrooms (Cazden, 2001). In dialogic talk, teachers and students encourage open discussion, pose authentic questions, make attempts at clarification and elaboration, and encourage classroom members to respond to and build upon each other's ideas (Applebee et al., 2003; Chi & Menekse, 2015; Scott et al., 2006).

Authoritative and dialogic modes of classroom talk are not mutually exclusive either/or dichotomies, but both/and hybrids (Cazden, 2001; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007). Both create a dialectic toward learning, with seeds of one being necessary for the development of the other (Scott et al., 2006). Communicative approaches should shift as the purposes of interaction shift (Cazden, 2001), as teachers navigate tradeoffs and dilemmas while fostering dialogic discourse (Lefstein, 2010). As O'Connor and Michaels (2007) describe, the process of conceptualizing distinctions between monologic and dialogic discourse must consider both the ideological stance and the discursive forms; the two are not always the same. A single utterance may be part of a monologic interaction in one context while the same utterance may be dialogic in another. In classroom conversation, a dialogic stance might include some monologic, or authoritative, forms to facilitate learning (Boyd & Markarian, 2011; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Scott et al., 2006). Boyd and Markarian (2011) show how one elementary classroom teacher uses closed-response, or known-answer questions, to create dialogic spaces. Because of the socio-historic discursive patterns he had enacted over time, the students came to understand these closed questions as prompts for elaborated response and reasoning. In the same way, a conversation solely devoted to students' ideas and views is insufficient to productive learning, as the teacher holds a responsibility to the perspective of the authoritative disciplinary community (Scott et al., 2006).

1.2. Positioning as an authoritative discourse practice

Power structures complicate the aforementioned dilemmas, as participants negotiate power and positions within dialogue in the give-and-take co-construction of social identification (Wortham, 2004). An authoritative ideological stance is typically associated with power structures that reproduce when discourse is less open to challenge or change (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007). Within an authoritative stance, participants leverage power structures to position themselves and others toward a fixed set of meanings as they enact the purposes of classroom activity (Davies & Hunt, 1994). This is especially the case if the teacher is assumed to be the intellectual authority in both the ideological stance and the discourse forms used (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007).

Within this tension of authoritative and dialogic discourse, positioning theory (Davies & Harr , 1990) offers a lens through which to examine the ways in which individuals place identities onto others according to social and historical contexts. Positions are "joint social achievements... involve[ing] aligning, distancing, and creative maneuvering vis- -vis other persons, discourses, and social structures—the construction of selves and others through relations of power" (Leander, 2002, p. 200). Discursive positioning works as a tool to produce or maintain hierarchical relationships across various social practices, leveraging various identity markers as situated within power structures, such as race, gender, age, class, and ability level (Collins, 2011; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). It can also be used to understand how people respond to others' positioning and how they work to reposition themselves.

Power operates within any discursive structure or stance. It is not simply or solely mapped onto authoritative discourse. Though teachers are in a position to more easily leverage power, students can claim power as they assert and socially identify themselves (Wortham, 2004). In dialogue, teachers must negotiate their intentions of soliciting multiple perspectives, which are potential sources of disagreement, while at the same time creating spaces of affirmation, respect, attunement, hope, and openness. In this sense, power must be carefully monitored, lest it undermine these dispositions of care. The specific manifestations of positioning within the tensions of authoritative and dialogic discourse, in both ideological stance and discursive form, remain elusive. Because of these difficult tensions, scholars purport that more research is necessary to understand the intricate enactment of dialogic discourses in classrooms (Segal, Pollock, & Lefstein, 2017). In order to support teachers in understanding how to facilitate productive dialogue for learning, researchers must make visible the dilemmas and tradeoffs within the relationship between talk, activity, and the nature of knowledge construction (O'Connor & Michaels, 2007) as situated within the hierarchy of teacher/student.

1.3. Research questions

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how participants in an elementary classroom position themselves and others within authoritative and dialogic tension when a question is posed that leads to opportunities for democratic discussion and multiple perspectives. By examining the multiple layers of activity within the discourse that ensues from the initial dialogic question, I am able to point to the various shifts, or documented changes, that occur in the discourse. From a perspective that language use occurs within asymmetrical relations of power (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), I explore the possible dilemmas between authoritative and dialogic forms and stance in a classroom setting, especially examining the ways in which linguistic forms function to position participants toward certain perspectives. I address the following research questions: (1) How do participants position themselves

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