

Feasts of becoming: Imagining a literacy classroom based on dialogic beliefs

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Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the dialogic nature of language are the framework for this article.

The bell rings. Some late arrivals scramble for the door, but at least one continues his slow amble down the high school corridor. In a scurry of squeaks, the teacher finishes writing the title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the white board. Pointing to a pile of paperbacks on her desk, she nominates two students who begin distributing them amid the familiar chaos of students readying themselves for class. Hearing the door close, she turns and frowns at the ambler who is just crossing the threshold. "Marquis!" she mouths silently, her blue eyes directing him toward his seat. The young man flashes a sheepish grin and continues, in no apparent hurry to sit down. They have danced this dance before.

"OK, today we start reading one of my favorite novels, one that always inspires me. When you get it, open to page one. Who'd like to start reading for us?" Surveying the class, she sees only one hand in the air. "Marquis, do you want to read?"

A look of shock covers the adolescent's face. "Uh, no, Ms. Turner, you know that ain't my thing, reading in class and all." The class laughs. "But I do have a question." Ms. Turner turns up her palms as if to say, "Let's have it." Marquis con-

tinues, "I sorta like read ahead on the weekend—my sister had to read this book last year and she never turned it in. She's always doing stuff like that, reading and..."

"Marquis," Ms. Turner interrupts softly, "your question?"

"Oh yeah, well I was just wondering, how come it's always the white guy saving the black guy?"

Our fictional Marquis could have been any number of students Bob (Fecho, first author) taught and admired as an English teacher at a neighborhood high school in Philadelphia or that Stergios (Botzakis, second author) worked closely with at a Baltimore middle school. Having struggled and enjoyed small triumphs in these venues, we know that this class is teetering at what we have called a teachable, researchable moment (Aaron et al., 2006). Like the equally fictional Ms. Turner, we have been at this verge, both as secondary teachers and teacher educators, and we know that she would have an array of choices before her in terms of where this day's lesson could go.

However, whether it's from pressing administrative mandates to ready students for omnipresent testing or feeling hemmed in by fears that discussions of complex social issues might open a Pandora's Box of repercussions, some teachers, and some teacher educators, opt to table the dialogue that might emerge from further in-

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vestigation of a salient student question. Many educators do not have a clear framework for negotiating a class where question and response are fluid and frequently have never experienced such a classroom in their own education. Unsure of how to proceed, they seek the comfort of the known rather than explore the possible. Somewhere within, Ms. Turner suspects she should have the class address the question from Marquis, but she may lack the experience and the support to take that risk. Like Marquis, she ambles down that educational corridor sensing that she should be heading somewhere but not sure if she really wants to go there.

Support in terms of the framework Ms. Turner seeks might lie in an unlikely source. Although ostensibly about literary criticism, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin—a Russian literary scholar and philosopher who did much of his writing during the regimes of Lenin and Stalin—focuses primarily on dialogic aspects of language. As Emerson and Holquist (1981a)—frequent editors, translators, and interpreters of Bakhtin—put it, “At the heart of everything Bakhtin ever did...is a highly distinctive concept of language” (p. xviii).

There is something in that vision of the ways we use language that sings to us about teaching in literacy classrooms through sustained and substantive dialogue. By providing insight on the ways language operates, particularly in context, Bakhtin offers teachers parallel insights into how language should be taught. We are also captured by his acknowledgement that language undergoes tensions that shape it, that we learn language continually through social contexts demanding response. Maybe part of the attraction lies in how in Bakhtin’s words we hear echoes of Delpit’s (1995) discussion of various language codes, Freire’s (1970) vision of dialogue, Gee’s (1996) insights on language and identity, Rosenblatt’s (1995) views on transaction and reading, and Vygotsky’s (1978) development of social theory. We’ve been struck by how Bakhtin’s work not only helps the work of those others resonate anew but also pulls those many perspec-

tives into a comprehensive whole. Another aspect to the attraction lies in the gifts of language he gives us, the metaphors and images that he uses, particularly when he’s just been unreasonably dense and obtuse. Suddenly an image surfaces—“a feast of becoming” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10), language tasting of others (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293), or “the word is a drama in which three characters participate” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 122)—and it’s as if he has twisted the lens and brought the whole complexity into focus.

In this article, we argue that there is much in the work of Bakhtin that would benefit teachers and teacher educators, that time spent trying to make meaning of Bakhtin is time well spent for us. Specifically, we wonder what a dialogic classroom—one that aspired to realize the potential of Bakhtin’s work—might look like. We wonder what possibilities for teaching are inherent in Bakhtin’s conceptions of language and how they might transact in coherent ways within working classrooms where the authoritative voice of outside agendas is loud and dominating. We wonder what such praxis—a mutual shaping of theory and practice—would look like and what it would mean for literacy pedagogy in adolescence through adulthood. Furthermore, we wonder what might be done to help Bakhtinian theory more directly inform pedagogy in adolescent and adult literacy classrooms.

What we don’t want to construct is a model of a dialogic classroom based on Bakhtinian ideas—we doubt such a thing exists and we would look with suspicion at anyone who advanced such a model. Instead we are offering a framework, an endoskeleton to which other conceptions can be added. Doing otherwise, we feel, would fly in the face of dialogic process. Nor do we want to offer our work in place of direct transaction with the words of Bakhtin. Instead, we anticipate this article beginning a dialogue about classrooms built upon wide considerations of Bakhtin’s theories, what they have to offer, and what they might specifically provide to those of us in literacy education. For some, this article

might bring initial access to the work of Bakhtin, but for others it might represent a chance to regard these ideas in a new light. Whatever the case, we hope the article invites continued and vigorous exploration into his words in the light of what they might mean for adolescent and adult literacy education.

A dialogic classroom based on Bakhtinian concepts

Our intent here is to imagine a literacy classroom that is sustained through dialogue and builds from Bakhtin's theories about language. We have no illusion that this sketch is either comprehensive or final. Nor do we imagine that anyone reading this will have a fleshed out understanding of Bakhtinian concepts. For that, one needs to go to the source. Instead we see it as Bakhtin (1986) might, a chance to make meaning through response. By authoring a response to our wonderment, we hope to connect to responses that have gone before and to provoke fresh responses, ones that expand, curtail, or critique that which we offer here. Ultimately, we hope to engage teachers and teacher educators in the possibilities of a classroom built on dialogue.

A classroom is a complex space, one that is fraught with possibility and pitfalls. Any attempt to simplify that space runs the risk of shortchanging this inherent complexity. That said, there is really no way to capture all that occurs and should occur within a classroom. By necessity, we must consider where best to place our lenses for more detailed examination, knowing full well that what lies outside those lenses most likely also bears scrutiny. Perhaps one way to consider what we offer here is to think of these characteristics of a dialogic classroom, one steeped in the work of Bakhtin, as the minimum that we could imagine and still honor the spirits of dialogue and Bakhtin. For our discussion here, then, we feel a dialogic classroom is one where, at the least, the following practices occur with some regularity:

- (1) raising of questions and the authoring of response by and among all participants,
- (2) embracing the importance of context and the nonneutrality of language,
- (3) encouraging multiple perspectives,
- (4) flattening of or disturbance within existing hierarchies, and
- (5) agreeing that learning is under construction and evolving rather than being reified and static.

In the remainder of this section, we'll unpack each of these characteristics, using Bakhtin's theories to illuminate them. One word of caution: Bakhtin is not above labeling ideas in ways that can be oblique and thus daunting. Our advice is to sail past the term and, much as he might argue, find in the discussion of the term that which you might own for yourself. A full unpacking of Bakhtin's terminology and concepts could fill volumes; therefore, in the short space allotted, we have limited our explanation and urge readers intrigued by these concepts to delve more deeply into the discussion in the source material.

Questions and response

Perhaps nothing is more at the core of a Bakhtinian take on dialogue than the linked actions of questioning and responding, a classroom activity that we feel is directly tied to his concept of heteroglossia. Even as we type this term, we can sense readers distancing themselves from something that seems so Latinate and steeped in jargon. But the idea of heteroglossia represents a complex and critical process toward examining the possibilities of dialogue in literacy classrooms, one worth the time spent unpacking. A simple breakdown of the roots of *heteroglossia*—"different tongues"—makes it somewhat less imposing but only begins to point toward its implications. Using a definition by Emerson and Holquist (1981b) as a guide, we argue that heteroglossia establishes the importance of context as a factor for meaning. Bakhtin posited that context, or the

temporal and spatial environment into which words are delivered, holds primacy over text, the medium—speech, pixels, print—containing the words. More to the point, the conditions under which we express ourselves alter the meanings of the words we use. For example, the phrase “Date oatmeal for mother” would mean one thing if written on a kitchen “To Do” list with a pen and cereal box nearby, something else if compiled by a son taking breakfast orders for the family, and still a third if scrawled on a notepad by a phone after a talk with a matchmaking parent.

Meaning is so dependent on context that it remains forever in process, at the intersection of centripetal tensions—those forces that usually represent collective authority and seek to stabilize and center—and centrifugal tensions—those forces that usually represent individual interpretation and seek to diversify and pull outward. It’s not an either/or proposition. Language is constantly being tugged in opposite directions; something we feel is a healthy state. Otherwise, language either becomes reified, “a dead, thing-like shell” (p. 355) according to Bakhtin (1981), or something akin to the Tower of Babel, much individualism with little communication.

Elsewhere, Bob and his colleagues (Aaron et al., 2006) have compared these opposing tensions to a tug of war. On one side, the rope is unified and pulled by a composite of defenders of the mainstream power code. On the other side, the rope has frayed into any number of single fibers, each pulled by an individual seeking to use the language in new and unique ways. Somewhere above a cosmic mud puddle a ribbon of language flutters—now pulled more to this side, now more to that. But from a Bakhtinian stance, the object of the game is not to pull either side into the mud but, instead, to keep up enough tension to run the game in perpetuity.

What we feel a working understanding of heteroglossia implies for a classroom is a realization that language and meaning are always in play and that each of us has something to contribute to that intellectual struggle. The authoritative

voice, most often that of the teacher or the text, is a necessary component, but no more so than the voices of individuals—most often students, but we can imagine teachers playing this role also. All participants raise questions, and responses—ones that validate individual perspectives—get spun out in an ongoing process. Meaning is being made, but a meaning that remains dependent on the players and the playground.

In the vignette that opens this article, Marquis is bringing his interpretation of the text to the classroom. He has made meaning of the text in a way that represents a set of individual and cultural experiences, the combination of which only he has come to know. That Ms. Turner will respond is inevitable. Bakhtin (1986) says she has no choice. Even to ignore the question is to respond. Whether she responds in ways that reinstall her authoritative voice or in ways that validate Marquis’s authority remains to be seen.

Context and the nonneutrality of language

As our discussion of heteroglossia asserts, meaning is found in context and that meaning is anything but neutral. Bakhtin argued that words exist in time and space, formed in “the atmosphere of the already spoken” yet determined and anticipated by “that which has not yet been said,” what he called “the answering-word.” (1981, p. 280). Words and their meanings rely upon these ever-changing contexts in order to remain in play. It is within context that understanding and response merge, and “mutually condition each other” (p. 282). Going back to our “date oatmeal” example, an appropriate response is contingent on which one of those scenarios exists.

Simultaneously, words lack neutrality, come with baggage, have histories, shift connotations, and take political stances, whether willed or not. Immersed in context, words come laden with intention and depth of meaning. When it comes to language, one size does not fit all. Language is richer, deeper, more necessary, and more complex

than that. For instance, one person reading the critique “Your voice dominated the discussion” might come away reassured of his or her rhetorical prowess, although another might consider taking a less prominent role next time. These interpretations would be influenced by the past and current contexts of the individuals and the cultural groups to which they belong, forming both an individual and collective valuing of the word *dominate*. What the dictionary provides on the subject remains but a soupçon of understanding in this larger scheme.

According to Bakhtin (1986), at any point in time words perform a three-character drama among the speaker, the listener(s), and “those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it” (p. 121). He follows this point with a remarkable aside: “[A]fter all, there are no words that belong to no one” (p. 122). This prior ownership—this sense that language is something borrowed, tried on, and then altered to personal need—is significant to our thinking about literacy classrooms because it creates what amounts to a give and take among all participants—not only the teacher and students but the current and historical, near and distant contexts as well. Educators need to see the empowering aspects of helping students to move from seeing language as belonging to nobody and then belonging to others before they can ultimately claim it as “my word,” one they imbued with their expression in contexts from their lives.

Learning, if it is to be engaging, must connect meaning to context, must acknowledge the temporal and spatial. The working class, African American young women in Bob’s high school classes frequently couldn’t understand why Juliet didn’t just leave her family and run off with Romeo. In their interpretations, Juliet was a weaker character than often portrayed, one too constrained by family and convention. On one hand, it was helpful to urge them to enter Juliet’s context—her life and times—to understand her motivations and limitations as well as a historical sense of the work, but it was equally as useful to

follow the context these adolescents brought to the text and consider what new understandings that relayed to the play.

Returning to our vignette, we see two contrasting visions of the text being brought forward. Ms. Turner views *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a source of inspiration for its themes of equity and justice while Marquis worries that it reinforces racist stereotypes of ineffectual African Americans needing the paternalistic helping hand of well-meaning whites. In a sense, both interpretations are “correct,” if what we consider correct are ideas brought forward based upon personal and social interpretation of text. What each believes at this point in time emanates from the lenses they brought to the text, those lenses being intimately connected to values they place upon the words in the text and the context surrounding their readings of those words. Perhaps if Ms. Turner feels a bit more sure of the fit of her ideas than Marquis, it’s only because she has worn this belief longer and has had others in her cultural group acknowledge it more often. Perhaps, too, she has become too comfortable in the fit and doesn’t notice where it might be fraying around the edges. Still a dialogue has been initiated. What we need to consider now is in what ways and to what extent will conditions prevail that will allow these perspectives to remain in dialogue.

Multiple perspectives

Bakhtin (1981) began his essay “Discourse in the Novel” with the admonition that

Form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract thinking. (p. 259)

This is a far-reaching statement as much for the latter half as for the opening. Although we agree that what people say and how they say it are inextricably linked, we are, at least for our purposes here, more concerned with the pervasiveness of

the social in discourse. Earlier we likened our classroom example to an endoskeleton and, if that metaphor holds, then this concept of discourse as social to the extreme is the backbone, the spine to which the attendant, but necessary appendages attach.

In some ways, it is obvious. Of course, language use is social. Certainly, classrooms are spheres of social activity. However, we wonder to what degree teachers and teacher educators overtly use the social aspects of a classroom to further the learning occurring there. Are students meant to give back only what the teacher or the text has relayed to them? Are they expected, as Freire (1970) has critiqued, to be mere depositories of knowledge from which educators make regular withdrawals through which to test their students' solvency? Or are students expected to be an organic part of the learning process in the classroom, the ones who contribute a range of perspectives to the knowledge being constructed there?

Bakhtin's work indicates the latter to be true. We also argue that the invitation of widespread participation implies the need for multiple perspectives to be in play in the classroom for more than one possible slant to have efficacy. As evidence, we offer his discussion of the necessity of response. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) have stated their reading of Bakhtin implies that "the world must be answered—authorship is not a choice" (p. 272), and Bakhtin (1986) himself posited that for the word "there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*" (p. 127; italics in the original). Elsewhere in his work Bakhtin writes of chains of meaning and, similarly, chains of utterances, noting their lack of self-sufficiency and the sense that each "utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on" all other utterances (Bakhtin, p. 91). A result of these links is a sense that knowledge is under construction and always open to scrutiny. One perspective begs the need for other perspectives. One utterance seeks the company of other utterances. One text positions itself within other texts.

In our dialogic classroom, learning is seen as cumulative; response builds upon response. Knowledge is tentative and remains open to further inquiry. Perspectives may get favored, but other stances are allowed to linger in the air somewhat like planes above an airport, waiting for their invitation to land while altering the flow of traffic. This idea is counter to the belief implemented in many schools that knowledge is fixed. Under such monologic systems, students come to see formal learning as information being handed down in a ritualized manner, a 21st-century reenactment of the official feasts Bakhtin (1984) described in his discussion of the literary work of the French satirist Rabelais. In these systems, knowledge is conferred, as one might pass a baton or scepter, in ways that maintain the past in the present—"stable, unchanging, perennial" (Bakhtin, p. 9).

However, at the heart of heteroglossia is the understanding that individual voices provide the necessary centrifugal tension to counter this centripetal and stultifying voice. If allowed in, if validated, if permitted to count in some way of importance, these voices create opportunities for a range of perspectives to share space. Ms. Turner has suggested one interpretation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Marquis a second. Somewhere in the room, other perspectives may lie waiting to be triggered by the dialogue. In that unknown lies discovery and possibility, ultimately leading to engagement.

Flattening hierarchies

In Carnival, a celebration in which traditional hierarchies and systems of rank were blurred as all members of society took part in humor that deprecated self as well as others, Bakhtin found a metaphor that neatly embodied his idea of language undergoing opposing tensions. Through the wearing of masks and the donning of costumes, the wise could become fools and the poor could assume the guise of the wealthy. Protected somewhat by a kind of anonymity, the outrageous and sublime could be uttered, addressed by

anyone toward anybody. Although sanctioned by the state, Carnival, as Holquist (1984) reminded us, was a force emanating from the needs of the people rather than the dictates of a king.

Despite its grassroots origin, the curious point about Carnival is that it is institutionalized. It is what we would call sanctioned anarchy—a semichoreographed upheaval of the status quo. One doesn't live in Carnival; one visits Carnival periodically. It represents a segment of time when the quickly reifying present, consecrated by the authoritative past, receives a "temporary liberation" through a "suspension of all hierarchical precedence" that allows for a "feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). As such, it creates a time for equity and an opportunity for other possibilities, other conceptions of the present to emerge and be heard. Although, at Carnival's end, the hierarchies, prohibitions, and norms return, things are never exactly the same. The iron hand has been loosened; the oppressive corset is no longer cinched so tight.

We suspect that Ms. Turner, like many educators, regardless of their level of teaching, worries about what will happen if she opens her classroom to dialogue. Confined by an ethos prevalent in too many schools, one that assumes a quiet classroom is a learning classroom, she is concerned about what open dialogue might mean for her authority; her lesson plans; her ability to stay on schedule; and her need to appear competent in the eyes of administration, colleagues, and parents. Where, she might ask, am I—the teacher—in all this?

We are not advocating an immediate shift in anyone's pedagogical style. If student voice rarely enters a classroom, failure will result if an educator suddenly creates the equivalent of an educational free-for-all. Neither the educator nor the students will know what to do with such a sudden shift of routine. Unlike an actual Carnival celebration, there is no air of anonymity or tacit agreement that what happens in the classroom, stays in the classroom. So care must be taken to somewhat protect participants and gradually

open them to greater degrees of dialogue. Nor do we argue for a minimizing of the teacher's role. Dewey (1938), who was an early and strong advocate for what has come to be called student centered learning, reminded us that it was folly to follow only the student, that there was a place and need for a teacher's wisdom.

Instead, we think Bakhtin (2004) would argue for the relationship he seemed to seek and have with his own students, one that acknowledged the wisdom on both sides of the teacher's desk and routinely sought opportunities to mine that wisdom through mutually empowering discourse. Consequently, we view the implementation of a Carnival atmosphere into a classroom as evolutionary. Carnival-inducing events like inquiry discussions, group work that expects analysis and synthesis, student initiated readings and projects, and the like should be introduced slowly and then occur more frequently and for longer periods of time. The goal would be to have some event that opened dialogue and flattened hierarchies on a daily basis. Teachers could pick their moments either through deliberately planning activities that invite more dialogue within the class or by being more attuned to where classroom discussion might be flowing, even if away from their original intentions. Educators can provide a clear and sturdy framework, one that is substantial enough to create a sound basis for starting work, but one that allows the class to build from it in individual and collective ways (e.g., having students chart responses and reactions to stories, participating in various forms of dialogue journals, taking part in online chats). Ms. Turner teeters at one of these moments. Inaugurating Carnival—temporarily flattening the hierarchies—is completely within her control.

Dynamic and active learning

As we suggested in previous sections, meaning exists in context and is subject to interpretation. Through our discussion we have implied, to this point, a fluidity with which knowledge is constructed in classrooms where dialogue prevails, a

characteristic we'd like to now address more directly. In support of this notion of dynamic and active learning, we offer an argument based upon Bakhtin's notion of hybridity—the concept that any utterance can represent two or more linguistic stances simultaneously. At base, Bakhtin (1981) states that “any *living* utterance in a *living* language is to one or another extent a hybrid” (p. 361, italics in the original), or a “mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance” (p. 358).

Within a novel, hybridity plays a literary role. However, in life situations, hybridity accounts for change in language over time. It's what allows *cool* (not quite cold) to be *cool* (hot or chic), to be *cool* (OK), and so on. It's one more example of centripetal and centrifugal tensions acting upon language, with a word living, “as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 284). The life of a word is both constant and constantly changing. Additionally, Bakhtin argued that hybrids that come from living languages not only mix “two languages, but also two socio-linguistic world views” (p. 360). As the language reshapes itself, the culture also reshapes, as do we who use the language.

Connecting to this sense of being immersed in language change, Bakhtin (1984) noted that Carnival “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (p. 7). Literacy learning is similar in that it requires active participation on the part of all learners because it is so much a part of learners' lives. The point is not just to learn a language but also to use it. In order to keep up with ever-shifting meaning, one needs to remain in epistemological motion. Some of the impetus for this thought is based on ways Bakhtin (1981) described language transactions. His images are forceful, almost violent. He wrote of “alien voices [that] enter into the struggle for influence,” (p. 348), of how the word “enters into an intense interaction” that results in being “born in a zone of contact” (p. 346),

of the authoritative word that “demands that we acknowledge it” before it “binds us” (p. 342), of the word “breaking through to its own meaning” (p. 277), and of having to force language “to submit to one's own intentions” (p. 294). Who would have guessed that language transactions could be so graphic?

The study of such transactions, if not violent, should at least be forceful and dynamic. Bakhtin (2004) indicated that from the working class high school students for whom he taught grammar, he found that young learners are capable of sophisticated inquiry into the structure of language and meaning if given time, guidance, and opportunities to develop purpose and motivation. Likewise, Bob's (Fecho, 2004) work with high school students showed them to be willing investigators into language, writing, and literature, especially when they knew their perspectives on the subjects were valued. The interest Marquis is showing in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is really a request on his part; he's asking to bring his ideas into dialogue. By responding to the text, he's showing some willingness to become and perhaps remain a more active part of this classroom.

Understandings and possibilities

At the start of this article we left Ms. Turner and Marquis dangling somewhat in the pedagogical air. What would we have Ms. Turner and other educators do? Really something fairly simple, but it's based on principles of dialogue as we think Bakhtin would define them. Shifting from talking at students to dialoging with them often begins with a reconsideration of the questions we ask. Perhaps her easiest response would be a question such as “What makes you say that, Marquis?” or “Has anyone else wondered about that and what it might tell us about ourselves?” In doing so, or something similar, she would, among other things, be doing the following:

- (1) honoring the question and response aspects of the classroom in ways that promote dialogue,
- (2) recognizing that Marquis brings a context to the work that is different from hers,
- (3) encouraging multiple perspectives by seeking a range of responses,
- (4) flattening the hierarchies by giving Marquis the opportunity to set the agenda, and
- (5) implementing her belief that meaning is made and not given or found.

She would, in fact, be encouraging dialogue.

What we ask of Ms. Turner and other high school teachers, we also ask of ourselves, we who are or aspire to be teacher educators. The poet Etheridge Knight (1971) once lamented at how difficult it was to make “jazz swing” (p. 207) within the formal constraints of haiku. But he was up for the job. We have also complained that developing dialogue in critical and substantive ways within the limits of a once a week, 15-session undergraduate course is equally maddening. But we, too, need to be up for the job. It is not enough for us to advocate classrooms where dialogue flourishes; we need to find ways to make our own classrooms rich and deep in the give and take of substantive and multiple perspectives. Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon (1998) have shown that emerging teachers are more likely to implement teaching practices that they have experienced in meaningful ways.

Accordingly, we devote time in our class sessions to activities that encourage students to bring their ideas and understandings into dialogue. From the first day of class, when we frequently have students do rotating interviews of one another on questions pertinent to the subject matter, to the last day of class, when we use a variation of the same—this time with student-generated questions—to evaluate what worked and what didn’t work for them, students are invited to bring their input to the class in ways that

count. This concept of having student input count is crucial; students need to begin seeing how exploration of their beliefs pays off in the short term—it helps them learn through the work of the course—and in the long term as well. Emerging teachers need to see that the ideas they chart in small groups, the discussions they have online, the passages in texts that they cite, and the projects they complete help them to become teachers who will not only have a stronger sense of their own beliefs but also be more likely to teach in literacy classrooms that are based on dialogic principles.

What the work of Bakhtin provides, as we have construed it here, is a unified collecting of substantive ideas for promoting dialogue, all presented within an argument that is embedded in the language itself. As the language goes, so goes our learning of language. If we deny the dialogism of language, the contextuality of language, the equitability of language, the polyphony of language, the dynamism of language, and the complexity of language, we create classrooms where language, learning, and the love of learning come to die. If we cannot see the ways language operates in artistic and daily expression, then we cannot imagine classrooms more invigorating than the soul-deadening ones to which we currently too often sentence students, even those as young as 5. When our conception of language is one that is fixed, neutral, and isolated—something to be preserved rather than animated—then the literacy classrooms we create become museums to the past rather than playgrounds, workplaces, and intellectual spaces of the future.

We would be among the first to argue that none of the characteristics of what we will construe to be a dialogic classroom based on Bakhtinian concepts are new to progressive literacy educators. Researchers and theorists (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; hooks, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1995; Smith, 1997) have been advocating variations of these classroom stances for much of the last century. It’s not that we in education don’t know these things;

what we don't know is why a critical mass of K–12 teachers, teacher educators, and university professors adapting these ideas for their classrooms hasn't surfaced and what can be done about that. Dialogue, it would appear, too often has been wrung out of education as surely as water from a dishrag.

Our hope is that the work of Bakhtin provides a different, more unified, and—dare we say—more exuberant way to connect these visions of dialogic teaching to an argument that is embedded in the language itself. To better understand the ways we develop and communicate with language is to better understand how we might teach through language. As we argue in this article, a dialogic classroom is one where language is central to the meaning-making process and one in which the meaning-making process informs us about language.

Perhaps what Bakhtin most uniquely brings to this discussion of literacy pedagogy is a sense of the absurd, a vision of humor and laughter as components of language that allow for transcendence of the limits of tradition and the status quo. As he argued, “Only dogmatic and authoritarian cultures are one-sidedly serious” (1986, p. 134) and laughter lifts us above and delivers us from the hopeless situations with which seriousness burdens us. Bakhtin brings back to classrooms what we feel has been too absent: joy. In an educational zeitgeist where, as a local saying goes, we're trying to make the pig fatter by weighing it and most learning has been whittled down to a list of standardized skills to be met on a precise schedule, the vision of language classrooms where “Laughter lifts the barrier and clears the path” (Bakhtin, p. 135) is more than refreshing. Perhaps it is our liberation and salvation.

Bakhtin (1984) was quick to point out that rebirth and renewal rise from the decay of the dead and dying. Carnival was born out of crises and turmoil. Words find life through struggle. So perhaps literacy educators can find hope in a perception of a dialogic classroom as Bakhtin might have conceived it. Perhaps we who take ourselves

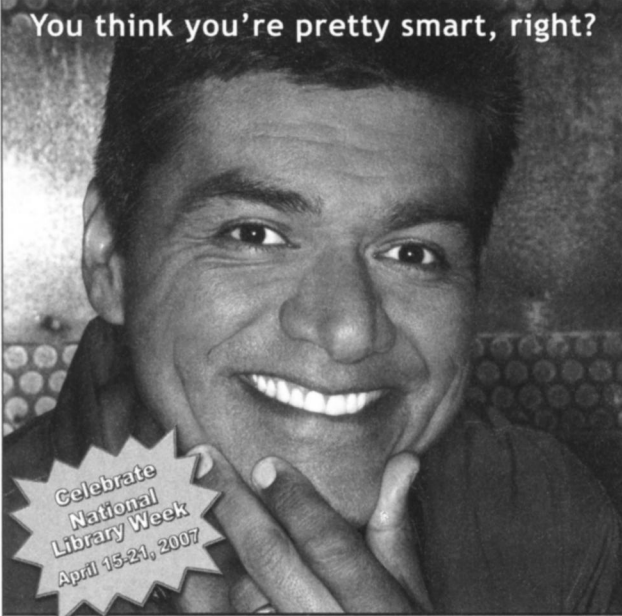
so seriously in education need to adopt a little more of the Carnival spirit, to see the power of laughter. Carnival humor is equal opportunity humor—“The doors of laughter are open to one and all” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 135)—and no one escapes its reach, not even those generating the humor. According to Bakhtin, “The entire world is seen in its droll aspect” (1984, p. 11) and it simultaneously is triumphant and derisive, deadly and renewing. Our guess is that we who labor in language arts classrooms, Kindergarten through university, need to embrace a simple idea: “He who is laughing [at the world] belongs to it” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.12). Having posed the questions, perhaps we need to seek the answers. In opening our classrooms to critique, in laughing at our folly and ourselves, we enable new life—one based on Bakhtinian theories of language—to take root. Who'll be the first to answer? Who'll be the first to laugh?

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
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