

***Bridging the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in the Standards-Based Classroom:
Storytelling as a Reflective Form of Academic Discourse***

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Abstract

In this paper, I theorize how Bakhtin's dialogism – a sociocultural approach that views learning not as an individual cognitive achievement, but as a social practice informed by the complexity of human interaction – reconciles academic discourse and storytelling in a compelling way. As a literacy approach, storytelling is widely considered as an effective way to bridge the gaps between meeting the demands of the Standards-based classroom and fulfilling the needs of English Language Learners. However, under the current paradigm of education theorizing, personal testimonies were often dismissed as an invalid form of academic knowledge.

Conceptualizing cultural discourse as dialogic utterance – premised upon the mutually conditioning of understanding and responses - Bakhtin's theory of discourse incorporates the vision of inclusion and diversity as a resource for learning and signals storytelling as a template to explore conflicting interests and complex interaction within contemporary life. His pedagogical approach to communication and literacy results in a new form of academic discourse that can be used to bridge the cultural-linguistic divide within the standards-based classroom.

Key terms: storytelling, academic discourse, cultural-linguistic divide, Bakhtin, dialogism

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Academic discourse in the context of the common core classroom

In this paper, I discuss critical challenges facing English Language Learners in developing academic discourse skills in the Standards-based classroom. Privileging academic discourse risks reinforcing the cultural-linguistic divide in public schools, and that, in turn, perpetuates social stratification and class distinctions. Building on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, I argue that storytelling provides a template that can be used to bridge the gaps between fulfilling the needs of ELL students and meeting the Common Core Standards.

In recent years, fueled by Americans' fear that their children may lose their competitive edge in global economy, there has been a public outcry to raise academic standards in public education (Massell, 2008; Polikoff, Porter and Smithson, 2009; Shepard, Hannaway and Baker, 2009). In response to this crisis in the U.S. education system, in June 2010, the National Governors' Association launched a state-initiated educational reform in which a framework of learning standards was unveiled to set the expectations and guidelines for student performance (Achieve, 2011; Fletcher, 2010; Toppo, 2012). State by state, the Common Core Standards (CCSS) have been adopted as a means to measure student progress. One shift the CCSS make in curricular and instructional focus is the increasing emphasis on academic rigor in students' engaging academic discourse (Massell, 2008; Polikoff, Porter and Smithson, 2009).

Under the Standards, academic discourse is understood as ways of thinking and language use in both oral and writing forms that are practiced in academic settings. The skills that academic discourse requires include:

- Reasoning abstractly and quantitatively;
- Constructing viable arguments and critiquing reasoning of others;
- Constructing explanations and designing solutions;
- Engaging in argument from evidence; and
- Asking questions and defining problems (Hakuta, 2011)

Academic discourse understood as such has been used to measure students' proficiency in content-area studies and is considered as a vital skill for college and career success. Since the rollout of the Common Core Standards, academic discourse has increasingly taken on a new dimension of importance. As students are expected to demonstrate their proficiency in content-area studies through their engagement in academic discourse, teachers are pressured to develop skills to help students engage in academic discourse (Achieve, 2011; Fletcher, 2010; Hakuta, 2011; Toppo, 2012).

Academic discourse in each content area is highly specialized and often involves its own vocabulary, grammar, lexicons, patterns of reasoning and argumentation, and rules of regulation and application. Social studies may have its own terminology and pattern of argument that are specific to that particular domain while mathematics has its own. As a social practice, developing academic discourse skills involves a complex learning process that utilizes a myriad of literacy, linguistic and thinking skills. It involves meeting standards and mastering know-hows through diligent study and practice.

In order to help students develop academic skills/knowledge in highly specialized domains, schools play the role of initiating and apprenticing students into those practices that their future prospect may depend on. The linguistic and cognitive demands of academic discourse call for teachers to model, coach and drill students' basic skills. In an ideal Common Core classroom, students are provided with plenty of opportunities to practice ways of thinking and speaking sanctioned by the educational system, in both small and large settings. Teachers are also expected to provide ongoing feedback to assist students in mastering academic discourse skills.

The fact that academic discourse is embedded in social practices conforming to the standards and expectation of the majority of a larger academic community ensures the technicality of academic discourse. Its reliance on a set of standards, prior knowledge and know-how also makes those who have prior exposure to this form of knowledge advantaged and puts those who don't have at a disadvantage. In the American education system, the achievement gaps within public schools correlate with the cultural-linguistic divide. While academic discourse poses great challenges to most of the students, it is even more so for English Language Learners, who are expected to subject to same academic standards while still learning basic English.

Academic discourse skills as a form of social, cultural, and symbolic capital

Bourdieu's theory of the role of language in mediating power and privileges can be used to further illuminate the potential of academic discourse in reinforcing the cultural-linguistic divide within the United States public school system. Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher known for his analysis of power relations in everyday life (Bourdieu, 1994). Much of his view on language and its role in mediating power and privileges evolves from his critique of Marxist theories of the role of economic capital in social positioning (Bourdieu, 1994). By expanding the notion of capital to include non-economic capital such as language among social factors that contribute to the perpetuation of social stratification and class distinctions, Bourdieu's work can be used to further address social and educational inequalities (Bourdieu, 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In accord with Marx, Bourdieu defines capital as the resource, the command of which enables one to maintain a position in the status hierarchy of society. "Capital" in this sense is capable of ordering the relation between people in any given part of social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The privileging of a form of capital over others is what accounts for the inequality existing within an educational system.

Bourdieu's analysis of educational inequality in terms of the privileging of certain forms of capital finds its echo in the American educational system. In the United States, access to linguistic competency in English can be translated into access to the discursive practices of school curricula. For ELL students who enter mainstream, content area classrooms with limited competency in English, access to the content of school curricula could be extremely challenging.

In societies characterized by a differentiated social structure and a system of formal education, linguistic competency is closely associated with academic success and material reward (Bourdieu, 1994, p.37-38; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu stated:

Since mastery of the legitimate language may be acquired through familiarization that is, by more or less prolonged exposure to the legitimate language, or through the deliberate inculcation of explicit rules, the major classes of modes of expression correspond to classes of mode of acquisition, that is, to different forms of the combination between the two principal factors of production of the legitimate competence, namely, the family and the educational system (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 61-62).

By privileging a language controlled by the majority of a larger intellectual community, schools perpetuate a social structure that maintains power over ELL students who hold the least of linguistic competency in English (Handsfield, 2006; Weininger & Lareau, 2007). The distinction of academic and non-academic languages hence plays an important role in maintaining and perpetuating class distinctions. Since the competency to use academic language is highly valued in schools and other institutional settings, the lack of prior exposure to academic English may put ELL students at a disadvantage and limit their access to the content or knowledge of school curricula that requires the competency in academic language (Handsfield, 2006; Weininger, 2005).

The privileging of academic discourse in the American education system ensures that academic discourse is regarded as a higher form of culture. Academic language serves as a marker that creates social distinctions that sustains and supports the culture and ways of life that it represents. It embodies the standards and expectations that reflect the world-view of the majority group. It possesses the power of representation, by objectifying those who are different from the majority. As a marker, academic language is invisible and is what everything else is measured against. Students are to expect that their opinions and academic practice will be measured against the set of standards embraced by the majority group, those who occupied important posts at the end of their academic or career paths. The demand that shows proof or evidence is coded in the way of social practice that is deployed to perpetuate the existing order (Handsfield, 2006; Weininger, 2005).

Hence in the American education, those who fail to conform to the dominant standards are designated as a problem domain, standing in need of rectification. Their discourse is considered illegitimate, unscientific, and in needs of correction.

Challenges facing ELLs in the Common Core classroom

Academic discourse poses great challenges to many students, but more so for English Language Learners who are held by the same standards and expectations while learning basic English at the same time (Achieve, 2011; Bailey and Huang, 2011; Bunch, Kibler and Pimentel, 2012; Hakuta, 2011; Toppo, 2012). The challenges facing ELLs in the standards-based content-area classroom can be summarized as follows:

Linguistic challenge: The ability to engage productively in academic discourse in the Standards-based content-area classroom is closely bound to literacy skills in the English Language. Since ELL students are expected to master content area subjects while learning basic English simultaneously, they are presented special challenges because the skills required to understand classroom instructions are the same skills required to comprehend and construct knowledge in content area studies.(Abedi,

2004; Ahmad, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Garcia, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; Roseberry McKibbin, Brice & O'Hanlon, 2005; Tollefson, 1991).

Cummins (2008) makes the distinction between two differing kinds of language proficiency that are important to the understanding of special challenges facing ELLs in the standards-based classroom. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are the skills that students need to develop through interacting with native speakers. CALP Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is the language skill to process the information found in textbooks and used in classrooms when content area curricula are presented and discussed and is the basis for student's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon them in content area classrooms. Academic language is domain-specific. Each content area has its own terminology and rules of rhetorical convention. Mastering academic language is important to all students' academic and career success.

Academic language proficiency, in particular, poses a unique challenge to ELL students. According to Cummins, academic language is essentially cognitive demanding and context reduced and generally takes ELL students five to seven years to develop to a level commensurate with that of native speakers (Cummins, 2008; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Mastering academic language is especially challenging for ELL students since there are no other sources of help than the language itself when ELL students are engaged in a context reduced task such as listening to a lecture, reading dense text, or participating in class discussion (Bailey and Huang, 2011; Bunch, Kibler and Pimentel, 2012; Hakuta, 2011).

Cognitive challenge: Academic discourse is often culturally specific and cognitively dense. It is abstract, infrequently encountered except in textbooks and classroom discussions, and may be unfamiliar to ELLs and confound their understanding.

An example from my own experience as an English Language Learner may serve to illuminate this point. I studied philosophy at a graduate program in 1990s when the American public was obsessed with the imagination of outer space as the other – in a frenzied search of the final frontier of human ideas, ambitions and hopes. A professor who I took a class with, in an attempt to elucidate a difficult theory for his students, often alluded to a thought experiment involving a scenario in which a person was kidnapped during his sleep and transported to Twin Earth in which everything on that planet was identical to what was on earth, except for the fact that water on Twin Earth was composed of XYZ, instead of H₂O. The puzzle posed to students was such: Given the fact that the substance our doppelganger thought as water was not de facto 'water' as we assumed to be – albeit still drinkable – could his thirst quenching behavior be characterized as water-drinking (Putnam, 1973)? The thought experiment deployed an imagery of outer space that was ubiquitous in popular culture in that period of time such as *Star Trek*. Growing up in a culture that did not share the imperialist vision to colonize outer space, the example that was supposed to illuminate a difficult philosophical topic, failed to enlighten English Language Learners like me.

Academic discourse of each academic discipline contains its own specialized language and concepts rooted in both the American historical narrative and popular culture (Ahmad, 2006). Children growing up in the U.S. are initiated into these

themes through their incorporation into American civic life since their early years. The knowledge they have thus accumulated is a form of ‘cultural capital’ that gives them advantages over their ELL peers (Ahmad, 2006; Bourdieu, 1994). In contrast, such prior knowledge is not so readily available to most of ELL students whose parents may also be struggling to make an entry into a new life and can provide no or little intellectual support for their children (Abedi, 2004; Ahmad, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Garcia, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; Roseberry McKibbin, Brice & O’Hanlon, 2005; Tollefson, 1991). As the acquisition of cultural capital depends heavily on learning from the early days of life, ELL students’ lack of prior exposure to the culture that frames a context in which academic knowledge is constructed has placed them at a disadvantage (Abedi, 2004; Ahmad, 2006; Crawford, 1999; Cummins, 2000; Garcia, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; Roseberry McKibbin, Brice & O’Hanlon, 2005; Tollefson, 1991).

The above example serves to highlight the importance that when providing classroom instructions to ELLs, teachers need to take into consideration the cultural background and knowledge of ELLs and adapt their language to accommodate the special needs of ELLs.

Emotional challenge –Learning academic discourse skills can be very anxiety inducing for ELLs. The fact that ELL students may not be comfortable in speaking English in public in fear of incurring derision and criticism compels them to self-impose silence. The fear can be so debilitating that it discourages them from participating in classroom discussions (Ajayi, 2005; Pappamihiel, 2002). Studies show that anxiety can be a serious block to students’ academic development. In order to reduce students’ anxiety in engaging academic discourse, a learning environment that provides scaffolding and supports that address the special needs of ELLs is important.

Social challenge: Most importantly, academic discourse itself risks of reinforcing the cultural-linguistic divide within the American school system. Academic discourse as a social practice utilizes a wide range of skills involving what Bourdieu calls social, cultural and symbolic capital. The emphasis on those forms of capital in classrooms reinforces a hierarchy already existing within the school system, between the teacher as the scribe/gatekeeper of the system and students as the disciples, and among students, between those who have and those who have not. As such, academic discourse controls the access to educational resources and is the primary factor that accounts for the achievement gaps in the public school system.

By upholding academic discourse/language as a cultural climate and norm, the school system in the U.S. sustains and reinforces a hierarchical system of language use that may perpetuate the existing achievement gaps within the American education system (Cummins, 2000; Pappamihiel, 2002). It should be evident that an instructional strategy is needed to bridge the demands of academic discourse and the needs of ELL students. Unless such measures are in place, the cultural-linguistic divide in the public school system will continue widening.

Storytelling as a sheltering strategy

Storytelling has been long considered as an effective sheltering strategy in serving the

special needs of ELLs. Since NAPPS (the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling) (1974) revived the tradition of storytelling in the United States, storytelling has been widely utilized as a literacy strategy, ranging from preschool through university level classrooms. More recently, storytelling has been promoted as an effective way to teach the English language to English Language Learners and to help prepare for their transitioning to the mainstream classroom (Pedersen, 1995). By tapping into ELLs' prior knowledge, storytelling provides students a way to approach the text that they otherwise find intimidating by bringing in their perspectives to bear upon the understanding of the text. Whether it is about making text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world connections, storytelling conceives students' prior knowledge as an important resource in their construction of new knowledge. The pedagogical benefits of storytelling can be enumerated as follows:

1) Stories are usually thematically organized and have a universal appeal to students. Students like to listen to stories that have elements that appeal to their experience and cultures. Students also like to tell stories, making them feel valued and that they have something to contribute to the collective learning that takes place in classrooms (Craig, S., et al., 2001; Mahala & Swilky, 1996).

2) In accessible ways, storytelling utilizes a wide range of literacy skills that can help ELLs' transition to the mainstream content area classroom. It teaches students the appreciation of the general structure of a narrative – including point of view, plot, style, characters, setting, and theme (Haven & Ducey, 2007; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). Comprehension, critical listening, and thinking skills are also developed by combining storytelling with questioning, imagery, inferencing, and retelling– which is important for students to understand the historical narratives and other expository essays (Craig et al., 2001; Mahala & Swilky, 1996; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

3) Storytelling promotes a vision of inclusion and diversity as a resource. It is instantly multi-genre, multi-literate and multi-modal - by encouraging students to make selections of narrative form based on the anticipated audience, rather than reducing all experiences to the standard format that educators so often use. Students with a wide range of oral and written abilities are more likely to participate in storytelling that can be used to bridge their diverse literacy experience and needs (Craig, S., et al., 2001; Enciso, 2011; Mahala & Swilky, 1996; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008).

However, storytelling has received misgivings under the dominant educational paradigm. The current practice of academic discourse embeds standards and expectations adopted by the majority of a larger intellectual community. It dictates what is considered as evidence, what is considered as legitimate discourses. Against those criteria, storytelling is often considered as not carrying much scientific credential, if at all.

Despite the proved track record that storytelling has established in ESL, storytelling continues to be slighted in K-12 education (Enciso, 2011; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008). In the current Standards-based reform, there is an effort to increase the emphasis on the standard format of academic discourse at the expense of excluding other forms of discourse/knowledge. As reflected in the sentiment of David Coleman - Common Core's architect – “As you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think” (Martin, 2006).

In what follows, I argue that in addition that storytelling can serve as a sheltering strategy that values ELLs' prior knowledge and voice, storytelling represents a higher form of academic discourse when combining with imagining, questioning, and inferencing.

Re-theorizing Storytelling: Storytelling as a form of academic discourse

The current paradigm of educational thinking understands academic discourse as a system of evidence-based reasoning that abstracts away all the vagaries and concreteness of human situations and addresses predominately issues of validity and reliability. While this is a valid paradigm of academic discourse, scholars from the socio-cultural tradition such as Bakhtin (1981), Freire (1970), and others argue that it is not appropriate in understanding human phenomenon to which the use of language and communication is essential. Instead of viewing learning merely as an individual cognitive achievement, socio-cultural approaches regard learning as situated in a broader context of social circumstances, and hence the goal of learning is to reconstruct knowledge in fuller breadth and depth. Bakhtin whose work on literary theory and the philosophy of language signals storytelling as a form of cultural discourse that can further assist us in exploring the complexity of human interaction and understanding (Clark and Holquist, 1984).

Bakhtin's dialogism

A Russian literary critic and philosopher lived under the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin whose ruthless regime suppressed the literary consciousness and creativity of a diverse Russia. Central to Stalin's reign was his vision of creating a linguistically unified Russia at the expense of cultural and language minorities (Clark and Holquist, 1984). Bakhtin, belonging to a broadly defined sociocultural tradition, incorporates a vision of inclusion and diversity within his work to challenge the monolingual, monoglossic discourse of Stalin's authoritarian regime. Known as dialogism, Bakhtin's theory conceptualizes language as inherently dialogic and ideological, taking place in the social context that it is imbedded (Clark and Holquist, 1984).

Bakhtin gives new meaning to our understanding of cultural discourse by focusing on the dialogic aspect – that is, in any given speech and writing there is more than one voice within the object of a discourse. His theory is premised on the understanding that cultural discourse as mediated in and through language is inherently dialogic, its meaning being shaped by our interaction with others - real or imaginary - in response to what has been uttered before and in anticipation of what is to be uttered afterward. When we speak or write we presuppose the voices of others, taking into account what they might have responded to what we have uttered, in an attempt to anticipate future responses by incorporating them into our speech. An effective speech hence is one that incorporates a profound vision of inclusion and diversity within one's voice. This makes discourse a social practice, not passive, abstract but inherently multi-voiced and heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011; Clark and Holquist, 1984, Holoquist, 2002). As Leslie Baxter explains, for Bakhtin, "Because all language use is riddled with multiple voices (to be understood more generally as discourses, ideologies, perspectives, or themes), meaning-making in general can be understood as the interplay of those voices" (Baxter, 2011, p. 101).

An example of this theory can be seen in contemporary readers' responses to Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* (1865) that still strikes an emotional chord in Americans' mind, outlining for many a vision of a nation America should strive to be (Fesler, 1944). His speech anticipates challenges that America is facing in the generations to come, and still resonates with many Americans when they hear his speech. As Paludan clarifies, "Here is a man not just speaking well-remembered phrases easily recalled and embraced by later generations. Here is Lincoln the lawyer, Lincoln the politician, Lincoln the constitutionalist. And because each of these occupations is grounded in the realities and necessities of time and place, here also Lincoln must be sought, living within his age and fitting ideas into the practice of politics" (Paludan, 1994). The reverberation of Lincoln's words consists in its being a live document that bears witness to the differences and conflicts that divide the United States, baring a conflicted conscience in its ongoing struggle to reconcile "the thousands of different ends that this diverse nation appeals to and symbolizes" (Paludan, 1994).

Bakhtin's valorization of Dostoevsky helps further illuminate his theory of dialogism/heteroglossia. Known for the epic scale of his novels, Dostoevsky's novels comprise perspectives from different walks of life, and reflect the complex literary consciousness of the contemporary society under the Soviet Union, leaving in its wake the marked trace of struggle between different viewpoints, languages, dialectics, ideologies. He successfully incorporates a vision of inclusion and diversity in his narratives, juxtaposing different languages on a single plane. He invokes official/provincial, formal/informal languages all at once and yet retaining the inner struggle or conflict in his narrative (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 1986; Baxter, 2011; Clark and Holquist, 1984; Holquist, 2002).

The greatness and depth of Dostoevsky's work can only emerge from a multicultural society already characterized by a vast and complex polyglossia – the coexisting of multiple languages. In deploying literary devices, Dostoevsky skillfully liberates each language from the tyranny of national, unified language under an authoritarian regime. Dostoevsky provides a paradigmatic expression of the highest literary consciousness, by simultaneously reflecting the mutually conditioning of understanding and responses. His work is not enclosed within set boundaries. Instead, he opts for a literary device that is essentially unfinished, and unstable always open for outside influences, ready to acknowledging others, rather than remains passive to the confining restraint of the walls of a national language (Bakhtin, 1981; Bakhtin, 1986; Holquist, 2002).

This act of introducing dialogic utterance into our understanding of cultural discourse provides a counter concept to the popular concept of academic discourse. By highlighting the ever shifting and heteroglossic nature of cultural discourse – bounded by speaking subjects in sociohistorically specific circumstances - Bakhtin's theory counters the excessively abstract concept of academic discourse propounded by the current paradigm of educational theorizing: "For speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects. Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 71).

Understanding discourse as dialogic utterances entails our seeing discourse as involving specific activities that inevitably bring what the speaker is trying to express into conflict with interpretations of others. As Holt elucidates, discourse embodies a struggle, an awakening to the dialogic and heteroglossic nature of utterances, whether of one's own or others', in an attempt to structure the message as a variant on "official" discourse to "reflect the peculiarities of one's own unique place for seeing" (Holt, 2003, p.227). To formulate an utterance, then, is to simultaneously answer the requirements of one's unique place for seeing in concrete situations and the social re-positioning involved in accommodating the vantage points of others.

Building on Bakhtin's notion of dialogue/dialogism, it can be claimed that storytelling provides a rich template through which to observe human interaction and to explore the multi-voicedness within an utterance as ways of expressing the complexity of human understanding. The act of introducing an utterance is merely a moment in the "ongoing stream of discourse", with the utterance depending for its meaning on discourse occurring before and after it is "ushered into social existence" (Holt, 2003, p.226).

Storytelling understood in this sense is not just an inferior form or water-down version of academic discourse for less educated, less informed folks, yet to be developed into a more superior, polished, refined form of discourse. On the contrary, storytelling, in its capacity to address inclusion and diversity, allows different languages, different genres to inter-animate each other in a single text or voice. It can be deployed to challenge, mock, tease the false and forced distinction between academic and non-academic languages, and to reflect the wealth of the enriched image of the contemporary society. It is also more democratic in its openness to different tongues, expressions, dialects, and openness to adaption and change.

To recap, Bakhtin's theory of discourse suggests that the power of storytelling originates in its capacity to reconcile the coexistence of, and the conflict between, different points of view: the speech of characters, the speech of narrators, the speech of authors and the speech of readers simultaneously, in its ability to anticipate responses, in its capacity to incorporate multiplicity within a single discourse. So the art of storytelling consists in the ability of the speaking subject to be able to reconcile the conflicts arising from the coexistence of multiple voices or perspectives within a concrete situation that a discourse is embedded.

Not only storytelling is compatible with academic discourse, it is a reflective form of academic discourse that defies the attempt to ossify, objectify a live, fluid fabric of the civil society, defies the attempt of being reduced to formulaic sterilized expressions that muffle creativity and expression. It recognizes discourse as essentially dialogic, an ensembles of multi-lingual expressions, simultaneously multi-genre, multi-modal and conditioned by and always anticipate others' responses to our words.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Reflecting on the shifting and heteroglossic nature of language helps throw into relief the feigned transparency/objectivity of academic discourse. By privileging personal experience and voice, storytelling can be used to explore the interplay between

humans' individual and autobiographic experiences on the one hand, and larger, socio-cultural discourses on the other. How do we translate this Bakhtinian vision of dialogism/heteroglossia into a pedagogical design of academic discourse?

As was discussed previously, the current paradigm of academic discourse places an emphasis on logical argument with a rigid notion of semantic unity. Following the Bakhtinian notion of discourse, we can turn our desire for meaning making into an inquiry tool: to expose, analyze and challenge the dominant discourse through the art of storytelling.

While teaching high school social studies in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom, I often implemented instructional approaches that included the use of visual art, drama, storytelling and discussion. I used storytelling in combination with imagining, questioning, and inferencing to assist students in engaging texts in ways that aimed to identify points of contradiction, hypothesize about possible meanings, evaluate their propositions, notice metaphors and their connections with characterization and themes and draw conclusions from what we read. The purpose was to use the art of storytelling as an inquiry tool to recover the context of coexisting multiple languages within a single language by seeing language as dialogic utterances in response to what has been uttered before and in anticipation of what is to be uttered thereafter.

As an example of my practice of using storytelling to assist students in reconstructing knowledge in fuller contexts, we as a class did a writing on the point of view of a female worker living during the age of the Industrial Revolution that took place in England around the 19th century, exploring multi-voicedness within her perspective – her internalizing the society's expectation of her as a woman, her determination to rise above poverty, her desire to become independent and yet bounded by the obligation she felt toward her aging parents, and the defenseless feeling of her dream being crushed under the weight of the reality, etc. In doing so, we were inevitably led to question how we identified ourselves vis-à-vis our historical counterparts.

In these ways we echo Bakhtin's emphasis on meaning making as the encounter between difference, on constructing meanings which keep such difference in play. It indicates that the bringing together of different voices within a single discourse is an effective way of meaning making, and exemplifies the potential creative force of storytelling which are, Bakhtin says: 'pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 36).

Concluding remarks: storytelling as a reflective form of academic discourse

By jettisoning the notion of semantic unity and by seeing language as dialogic utterances as a part of an ongoing stream of discourse open to constellations of change and evolution, storytelling seeks to recover a richer, fuller context that the speaking subject is embedded, in an attempt to effect a thicker interpretation of history. By combining imagining, questioning and inferencing, storytelling can also help students interrogate their stance toward history, and assist them in developing a critical understanding of the world. Hence storytelling is not only compatible with academic discourse, not only functions as a bridge between the demands of academic

discourse and the special needs of ELLs, but in fact enhances and supports academic discourse by helping students think more richly and critically.

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