

**Writing 2000. Biennial conference of EARLI sig  
University of Verona, Italy, 6.-9. Sept. 2000**

**Olga Dysthe  
University of Bergen, Norway**

**”Giving them the tools they need to succeed”**

**A high school teacher’s use of writing-and-talking-to-learn in a literature class**

**Abstract**

The overarching aim of this paper is to show that writing-to-learn is not just about writing but also about how writing is used in the learning process. I will do this by demonstrating how the interaction of writing and talking was systematically used in a literature class to develop students’ understanding of literary texts as well as to communicate their knowledge. The paper is based on an ethnographic classroom study in a Californian high school, consisting of elite students on the one hand and ambitious, but not so well prepared students, on the other. In order to give all students equal opportunities of success, the teacher developed recurrent patterns of ’reading to write’, ’writing to talk’ and ’talking to write’ as part of the communal learning processes. The study documents how a teacher who combined a strong subject matter expertise with a belief in dialogical pedagogy with systematic integration of writing and talking, created a cooperative and communicative learning environment where students with little academic preparation learned how to talk about and write about literature in a scholarly way. The focus is on how the teacher created a community of learners and facilitated learning through various communication pattern of writing and talking.

**Introduction**

Joan’s literature students had discussed the first novel they had been assigned to read and she was satisfied with the student engagement and active participation. After class, Paula came to the teacher and said with aggression in her voice : *”I’m in the wrong place. This is the wrong class for me. I can’t talk like these kids. I cant. I understood the book but I can’t talk about it. I should never have taken this class. I want to get out of here.”* ”You’ll be okay.”, Joan responded. ” I promise. Stick with us.” Paula left the room close to tears, and the teacher started thinking about what her promise really meant in terms of change in her own teaching.

Paula was the only Latina girl in the class and she knew few of her classmates, but more importantly, she did not have the scholastic background of the majority of her classmates. She had previously gone to mediocre school, suffered mediocre teachers and academically uninterested fellow students, before she was admitted into this Advanced Placement Class on the basis of an entrance test. Now she was overwhelmed by the verbal competition among many of the pupils in the class and she was terrified by their ability to articulate their ideas as well as by their occasional arrogance. In educational terms it was a case of integrating bright, but academically underprivileged students with elite students and giving both opportunities to develop as learners.

This episode became a turning point in Joan’s pedagogical life. From then on she redefined her role as a teacher. In an interview I had with her, Joan said: *”That night I started to work out strategies for the work in class which would allow **all** students to succeed. I got an extended teacher’s role.”* She understood that she as teacher had the responsibility to develop the tools the students needed to become proficient in the subject. In a literature class this meant specifically to develop their abilities to talk and write about literature and language.

Joan's classroom was one of three which I observed over 5 months at Greyville High School, California, and she was still in the process of trying out the practical implications of this fundamental insight when I observed her implement this by creating a climate of cooperation and establishing communicative patterns as vehicles for the development of literary understanding. . The biggest challenge were the quiet pupils who lacked self confidence.

## Method

The case study is one of a series of ethnographic studies of classrooms in the USA and Norway. My initial purpose was to investigate how teachers in different subjects used writing-to-learn, but gradually I realized that *the key issue was not writing alone, but the interaction of writing and talking*. Extensive non-participant observations, tape recordings of interviews and document analysis were the main methods of data collection. The material was analyzed using standard methods of establishing categories through iterative readings and interpretations checked through participants' reading of drafts. While three others of the case studies were published in a Norwegian book, titled *The Multivoiced Classroom*, this case study has not been published before, even though what I learned in Joan's class was pivotal to my findings. The reason was that I decided to concentrate my first study on subjects which were traditionally oral and where the use of writing-to-learn was a foreign concept.

## Theoretical framework

The study is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the essential dialogicality of human communication and Lev Vygotsky's theories of the close connection between language and thinking (1978). The study employs an extended definition of dialogue, which includes both written and oral texts, which is based on Bakhtin's view of the utterance as either written or oral, as expressed in the much cited essay *Speech Genres*. (Bakhtin 1986)

My understanding and interpretation of what happened in the classrooms I observed, is based on a sociocultural perspective on learning, which has one of its roots in Dewey (1859-1952) and Mead (1868-1931), another in Vygotsky (1886-1934) and Bakhtin (1895-1975) and has been supplemented by the anthropological studies of learning by Jean Lave. Some key tenets of a sociocultural perspective: Firstly, knowledge and understanding are constructed by individuals in social interaction, dialogue and cooperation. Secondly language is seen as the key cultural tool which mediates learning. Thirdly, learning within a specific discipline takes place in 'a community of practice', which is a wider notion than a discourse society because it also includes trajectories of learning which are dependent on well functioning group processes. Fourthly, because knowledge always is situated, motivation to learn is to a large extent dependent on the learning culture which is created in the particular classroom.

I will here especially focus on Mikhail Bakhtin. Underlying his philosophy of language, culture and communication is an understanding of the centrality of the relationship between I and 'the other'. I only become myself through my dialogue with the other, and I get my sense of myself through my contact with the other". (Bakhtin 1984:311-13) To be means to be for another and through the other for oneself. Dialogue for Bakhtin is a special sort of interaction, an involvement with the other as a necessary condition for understanding, since the 'I' is dependent on the other (the "nonself-sufficiency of the self"). This basic attitude towards 'the other' is important in building a classroom context for learning, and we see it reflected in Joan's attitude towards her pupils and the way she modelled relational behaviour for her pupils.

More specifically, Bakhtin's view of how meaning and understanding are created through dialogue, provides a theoretical basis for developing what I have called 'a multivoiced classroom', where writing and talking about subject matter are the key elements..

In Bakhtin's view understanding and response are dialectically dependent on one another. (Bakhtin 1981:282) His metaphorical expressions for how meaning is created as "a bridge between the speaker and the listener" or as an electric spark between two poles illustrate vividly the joint construction of meaning. (Bakhtin/Medvedev 1978:203-4) 'Multivoicedness' is just another aspect of dialogicality which emphasises the contribution of different perspectives when a topic is dealt with. Learning is never a question of receiving what is transmitted, but through a process of interchange '*appropriating the word*', make it your own. As we shall see, this 'appropriation', making subject matter one's own through the exchange of perspectives, was a central aspect, if not the central aspect, of Joan's classroom. Multivoicedness does not, however, just mean the juxtaposition of voices; not just that students said what they meant. New meaning, new insight and understanding is, according to Bakhtin, dependent on the tension between different voices, viewpoints and perspectives. I will highlight three points of Joan's pedagogy which helped this process: 1) the individual summary writing before all class and groups discussions secured first of all that the students knew the text they were to discuss 2) writing of the personal reaction (commentary) ensured that each student had a voice, a perspective before the discussion. 3) Joan's active participation, not as a teacher but as a dialogue partner, who often challenged the students' views and thus created a tension between the voices 4) her use of role play where students took the part of the characters and students interviewed them.

The task of the teacher is therefore not just transmittor of knowledge, nor just facilitator of social interaction, but an active agent, a representative of the knowledge culture in the particular subject area and a dialogue partner for students. In all educational reform movements in our century the focus has been primarily on change from the role as a transmitter to that of organizer of the social learning environment of the learners. In his book *Pedagogical Psychology* Vygotsky talks specifically about the new role of the teacher which his theories of learning would entail. <sup>1</sup> "The teacher gets a new and important role; - to organize the social learning environment as the only educational factor." (Translated from Linqvist 1999:235) He also points out that "the teacher, released from the demand to teach [lecture] needs to know considerably more than before. You need to know little to teach, but to lead the student to develop his own knowledge, the teacher needs to know much more." Ibid: 238) Joan had made this transition years ago, but she worked out the full implications of her new role only after the critical incident with Paula which I related in the introduction.

### **Context for change: the school, the teacher, the students**

Greyville high school was a school with high academic reputation. Many of the students came from 'the hills', a suburban area of high socioeconomic standard, and had well educated parents, in contrast to students from 'the flats'. Joan had been politically engaged in the Civil Rights movement and shared her sense of injustice in the school system. She was known as an excellent teacher and had even won the "Best Teacher of the Year"- award in her district. She had, together with a group of colleagues at Greyville, been instrumental in 'untracking' the school, which involved a major ideological and structural change. 'Tracking' means that students are divided into classes on the basis of their grades in each subject. For Advanced Placement classes this meant that students had previously been excluded from these classes if they did not have a record of top grades. One of the consequences was that very few black or Mexican students were admitted to AP classes. This changed when the admission policy included the possibility of reading several novels and writing two papers during summer vacation. Ambitious students thus got a chance to become AP-students by working hard. One

---

<sup>1</sup> The quotations are from Vygotskij: *Pedagogisk psykologi*, translated by Gunnilla Lindquist in *Vygotskij och skolan*.

such student was Paula, a Latino girl in Joan's English class the year before I did my field work at Greyville.

Joan, who was a very experienced and skilled teacher, did not foresee the extent of the consequences to her own way of teaching. She thought that the high demands of the Advanced Placement curriculum combined with her support as a teacher would help all the students to cope, but this was not the case. The commonplace label, "from transmittor to facilitator" did not catch the essence of her change as a teacher, as she had made that change years ago. She had to to redefine her role as a teacher. Her teaching style changed, as she put it herself, "*not from lecturing to pupil activity, but from free, unstructured student activity to structured activity*", where she as a teacher modelled, gave feedback and acted as a mentor to the writing and talking assignments she gave the students. In the following I will give some specific examples of the detailed and structured work Joan did in her 'extended teacher's role'.

### **Writing-to-talk: Building patterns of writing-and-talking-to-learn**

Paula's problem as she expressed it herself, was, "I can't talk like them", and 'them' were the self confident fellow students who could engage effortlessly in an academic discussion. The teacher's problem was twofold, however; on the one hand to make the selfconfident students see that it was not enough to be good talkers and hold strong opinions; on the other hand Paula and her likes, who not only had to gain confidence, but also had to learn the ropes of a literary discussion. One challenge was student attitudes that texts could mean anything and that all interpretations were equally good.

I was concerned that the students felt that a piece of writing could mean anything they wanted it to mean – "our interpretation is as good as anyone's." I needed to teach them how to read carefully and use this as the necessary first step in literary analysis. ... But instead of giving them a task which they did individually, they did everything together in class, using the pattern: Reading, individual writing, talk in small groups to check out their understanding against one another, and then in full class. ...

I also modelled how to read and make meaning from a poem or novel, how to refer to specific passages of the poem to underpin the interpretation. (Interview 6)

The key to her pedagogy was developing a dialogic pattern for literary discussion at an advanced level, which provided the needed structure, provided individual preparation for each student and secured an informed discussion. After reading a literary text of any kind, the students were given a two phased writing assignment at home which resulted in two distinctly different text types which they brought to class for the discussion, the summary and the personal commentary.

#### **Joan's dialogic pattern of integrated writing and talk :**

1. Individual reading of literary text
2. Individual writing of 1-2 page summary at home
3. Individual writing of a personal reaction/commentary at home or in class
4. Small group work where everyone read their texts and discussed interpretations
5. Class discussion led by prepared student
6. If the class discussion did not function, some students role played the characters
7. Students asked questions to the 'characters', based on their commentary and on divergent opinions in the small groups
8. Individual writing or class discussion to consolidate their insight and understanding

The teacher thus initiated strict rules for interaction in class and group discussions as well as for behaviour in response groups and for giving feedback on written texts, which we will look

at later. Joan thought such rules were absolutely necessary for student learning, no matter what level they were on. Earlier she had been satisfied as long as students were actively engaged in talk, but she realised that *"many of the freeflowing discussions neither helped the good students to get beyond their intuitive understanding of the novel or poem, nor the poor students who needed more structure in order to understand what was going on and how to participate"*. (Interview 7) Introducing the patterns and the role play, was not the problem, however, according to Joan: *"These were the easy changes. The difficult ones were to develop a culture of cooperation and responsibility."* (Ibid) Developing this learning culture was at the centre of Joan's attention throughout the months I observed her class.

One of the novels the class worked with during my observation period was Amy Tan's book: *The Joyluck Club*. The students had written a summary and a personal response to the book at home. The structure of the class was as follows

1. Review the contents of every chapter in small groups by sharing summaries
2. Writing assignment: "Freewrite 5 min about "What was Amy Tan's purpose with the book?"
3. Class discussion (Fieldnotes 36)

The summary writing was of great importance because it made the students work on the contents of the novel. Often in the past students just relied on a superficial knowledge of the text. Joan also focused on how to write a good summary by modelling, reading good student examples and discussing criteria for this text type. She did the same with the commentary, as initially students thought that they were free to express whatever fell into their head. Again Joan modelled how to use specific references and passages in the text to discover meaning, to defend interpretation and to provoke exciting questions. But it turned out that it was also important to the students to have the prediscussion day summary and reaction papers in front of them. Once when she wanted to see how the discussion would go if they did not have their written ideas in front of them, the discussion faltered. They needed their written reflections to "remember what we knew" as one of the students commented.

One of the general findings of my study was that such short writing assignments before oral discussions were very effective in broadening student participation and enhancing the quality of the discussion. This particular freewriting assignment was more focused than the commentary, and prepared for the class discussion. It was what Nystrand calls 'an authentic question', where there is no correct answer; every student must argue for his answer. This kind of question elicits students' own ideas and thoughts, and my study showed that authentic questions, is a very important element in the multivoiced classroom, both as written assignment and in oral discussions. The following excerpt illustrates three important Bakhtinian points: 1) how each student presents a different voice or a different perspective on the novel 2) how the tension between the voices affords an opportunity for new insight 3) how the teacher has chosen to be an active agent and dialogue partner and with her perspective challenges the students to think once more about their own opinions.

Robert: I think Amy Tan wrote the book to show the contrast in mother-daughter relationships.

Angel: I thought it was about how the mothers had expectations of their daughter, and it also has to do with moving, how expectations kind of change.

Joan: Why did she write this?

Kae: I agree with what Angel said, that all mothers kind of had a similar story, in China and then, like the relationship with their daughters and what they expected of them. ... She wrote it because she wanted to show what the relationship was like between Chinese-American women.

Sam: When I was reading it I thought that except for the names, I forgot that the people were Chinese ... I think that anyone could relate.

Carl: Well child dislike mom and in the end girl realises that mom and the culture is just wonderful and she should accept it, - it's like a fairytale - I got that hint of all's happy in the end sort of thing.

Joan: I really do disagree with you. I don't think they all end happily. [...]

Marlo: No?

Joan: I think that the daughters got what the mothers were about. But there is some real sadness for me about some of the stuff. [...] I think what the book is about is the pain of having a relationship as an adult with your mom. And all the stuff you carry over from your childhood.

Ryan: I thought it was about a little more than that,- that the culture was also an issue. [...] The cultural transition, and the resistance upon the mother's parts and the eagerness of the daughters. The stories end up saying that there are some valuable things that should be remembered from our own culture, rather than jus, "ma was right".

We meet students who are confident talkers and know how to express themselves. Joan starts with an authentic question: "Why did she write the book", relating back to their freewrite. And the students eagerly offer their opinions. It is worth noting that Joan takes part as an equal discussion partner: "I really disagree with you." She is not afraid of giving her own opinion as she knows her students will not take hers as the authoritative voice.

Joan's role in the multivoiced classroom offered a stark contrast to another teacher I observed, Ann, whose context was completely different. Ann taught at an inner city school where students' lacked academic self confidence Ann's concern was to bring the students' voices to the fore and make them interact. Joan's concern in the context of very bright students was to challenge them to think deeper and to underpin their own opinions in the literary text itself. Joan also took care to *model* how she wanted the students to perform in a literary discussion. Being a good model in verbal interactions, was an ongoing concern to her, as this interview excerpt shows:

First I demonstrated, I showed instead of tell. In discussions I was careful to listen, show respect when I answered and be careful not to take control over the discussion. Then I let the students take over, while I kept in the background. When they met a problem, I did not solve it for them. I joined a small group with them to help them solve the disagreements. This way of working takes more time, and therefore I had to cut down on other activities. But I found time spent on talk made the students experience learning and they felt good with the own contribution to the learning of the others. (Interview 6)

### **Talking-to-write: oral preparations for writing assignments**

In the next example the point is to illustrate how Joan spent time to develop the tools the students needed. Joan gave them a writing assignment in connection with the Amy Tan novel which tied on to their personal life. She wanted them to interview an older woman in their family. She used two whole periods to make them understand what were good interview questions and what was not, how interviews functioned and to master some of the skills they needed to do a good job as interviewers.

#### **Writing assignment and preparations for the task:**

1. "I want you to write in the mode of Amy Tan. I want you to write a story, a woman, older woman in your family. ... I want you to interview her with the idea that you are going to discover something about her and tell a story about her. I might suggest that you tape it because then you can get all kinds of really specific detail. "

2. "Write down 3 questions you'd like to ask that woman. Share the questions."

#### **From the sharing and the discussion of questions in class:**

Brian: What is your biggest regret?

Joan: Like going to school, not marrying X?

Chad: What occupation did you wish that you had?

Joan: That is a one line answer ... You've got to ask why. You don't want to ask them closed questions, but some which will lead them to tell you a story.

Surya: It's to my mam, and I want to know why she feels that I need to be protected....

Joan: We've got this full list of questions. I do not want you to go through your fifteen questions. I want you to choose three questions that you think will get the most interesting answers. ... Do the interviews, get the story down and I suggest that you take some notes down along with the tape if you want to. And bring the story to class on Monday. (Fieldnotes 37)

This is a very straightforward example of how the teacher tried to give her students the tools to succeed with the assignment she had given them; a situation which should be commonplace, but which is more rare than we like to think. It is worth noting that she does this through dialogue and cooperation. The class functions as a community of practice where the pupils gradually build up expertise together. (Lave & Wenger 1991) There is no way Joan could have given her students the insights and understanding of the tools or of the text; it grows out of the dialogic interaction and the juxtaposition of the student voices, as Bakhtin would have said.

### Building a trusting community of writers through response groups and portfolios

I will briefly mention two other important patterns which were built in similar manners in this class, where the teacher was an active agent in establishing useful communicative patterns and then withdrew in order to make the students learn how to use the tools for learning. Developing student response groups to deal constructively with peer drafts, had been part of Joan's repertoire for several years, and the elite students had experience from this way of working. The less privileged students usually had no such experience, and Joan's task was to ensure the groups would work for both categories. She balanced each group with equal numbers of secure writers and insecure writers, modelled group behaviour, gave strict rules and asked for written feedback from the groups for each session about what worked, what did not and how things could be improved. Gradually the students themselves took over responsibility for making the groups function effectively for everybody. *"They changed the format I had suggested for group work when they felt it did not work or when they came up with a better format."* (Interview 7) *"Rather than the usual response group where the criticism comes after each individual – one at a time – we jumped in freely – the three of us providing a concentrated focus of opinions, hitting each paper from every angle."* (Pete) *"This time we read each other's papers and then the leader selected a person to be the first 'respondee'. ... We also picked someone to lead the evaluation. This method worked."* (Dean) Sometimes the students read each others' papers silently and responded in writing, sometimes they asked to read each others' work at home and bring in their comments for the next day's group sessions. (Cone:22)

The point I want to illustrate here is how communication patterns like this develop from very rigid to flexible tools. First the teacher models as well as gives instructions. She is very directive and asks the groups to stick to the rules in order to make everyone familiar with the pattern and feel confident about how to use the tool. Once the group has 'appropriated' the tool, made it their own, they can make changes depending on the contexts. This flexibility makes the tool even more useful for the particular purposes. This was a general finding in all the classrooms I observed, but it took much longer to reach this situation in some groups than in others.<sup>2</sup>

It would take too much space to describe how Joan developed her students' self assessment through the use of portfolios, but the principles were the same. One important finding, which has been corroborated by a later study I have made of Norwegian teachers using portfolio assessment of writing, is the building of up of an interpretative community of practice through the systematic discussion of texts, which forms the very basis on which each student is able to assess his or her own work in a portfolio.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian writing researcher Torlaug Løkenstgard Hoel, who has studied the interaction patterns of response groups in upper secondary schools, shows the same development in what she calls the 'classic communication rules for response groups'. Hoel 1995, 2000.

## **Concluding discussion: Writing and talking to learn and the teacher's role**

In this paper I have showed how a literature teacher made writing an integral part of a continuous learning dialogue in her classroom. I have focused on the teacher's role because it is crucial to the students' learning process. Giving up the transmitter role means taking on a complicated balancing act between being on the one hand being directive in creating structures and patterns for how students work, and on the other hand trusting them with the freedom to develop the learning tools in their own way.

A major question for Joan what kind of an expert role she was to play; how to use her expertise without taking the explorative initiative from the students. She had consistently a double focus: on writing and talking, on content and pedagogy, on the individual student and on the social collective. In this paper I have highlighted how students learn a subject through participating in a community of practice. (Lave and Wenger 1991) Joan was particularly explicit about her own role as expert ('master') as well as about relying on good students. Both in full class discussions and when she participated in small groups she modelled how to talk about literature or about students' texts, and when groups functioned on their own, some students would act as 'more capable peers', helping students develop in their zone of proximal development. (Vygotsky 1978) At the same time the teacher was an indispensable representative of the disciplinary culture, not just as the facilitator of learning processes. Joan had the complexity of the teacher's role in mind when she commented on her own change in understanding of her responsibility in the multivoiced classroom. She uses writing neither as a learning strategy nor a vehicle for content alone, but both are closely interwoven in the dialogic encounters

Teachers will here find a model for how to use writing and talking to learn in order to create a linguistically rich social learning environment which fosters literacy skills as well as subject matter knowledge. The study highlights the particular learning potential of the interaction of writing and talking.

By way of summary, my conclusion is firstly that the way the teacher uses writing-to-learn is just as important as the writing itself, secondly that the interaction of writing and talking enhances learning and thirdly that establishing communicative patterns based on a dialogic interaction of writing and talking is an effective way of creating communities of practice in the classroom which enhances the learning potential for all students. . Basically it has to do with access for students who are strangers to the culture of the particular subject as it is dealt with in school: *"Creating opportunities is not enough" - the teacher needs to plan how students can learn to use the tools they need to succeed"*.

## **Literature :**

Bakhtin, M. M. /Medvedev, P. N. (1978) *Formal method of literary scholarship*. Baltimore, ML.: John Hopkins University Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination. Four Essays*. Edited by M. Holquist, translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981) "Discourse in the novel", in *The dialogic imagination*, p.259-422.

Bjørgen, I. (1992)"Det amputerte og det fullstendige læringsbegrep." *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift*. 1/92.

Dysthe, O. (1993) *Writing and talking to learn. An interpretive study of three classrooms in the USA and Norway*. Report 1/93 APPU, University of Tromsø, Norway.

Dysthe, O. (1996) "The multivoiced classroom . Interactions of writing and classroom discourse". *Written Communication*, Vol. 13. No.3, 385-425.

Dysthe, O. (1996) *Det flerstemmiga klassrummet*. Stockholm: Studentlitteratur.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning - Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Linguist, G. (1999) *Vygotskij och skolan*. Stockholm: Studentlitteratur.

Mellin-Olsen, S. (1989) *Kunnskapsformidling. Vriksomhetsteoretisk perspektiver*. Bergen: Caspar.

Sweigart, W. (1991) "Classroom talk, knowledge development, and writing." *Research in the teaching of English*, Vol. 25, no. 4: 469-496.

Tharp, R. & Gallimore, G. (1988) *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning and schooling in a social context*. Cambridge: UK: University Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1987) *Thought and language*, ed. A. Kouzulin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ziehe, T. (1985) *Ambivalenser og mangfoldighet*. København: politisk revy.