

# Dialogic Learning Across Disciplines

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The phrase “writing across the disciplines” carries with it, for me, a trace of writing under erasure, that trick Derrida used in *Of Grammatology* of x-ing out words that are inaccurate but necessary, of casting doubt on what they signify. Although often it is the notion of writing in courses other than the required first-year course that is put in doubt, what I want to problematize here is not writing, but disciplines. To use a more recent allusion, I also think of writing across the disciplines as a form of border crossing, where the lines of convention that are drawn between disciplines to facilitate communication and the growth of knowledge within the disciplines can also be seen as limiting both communication and learning. In thinking of borders in this way, I conceive of disciplines—like cultural groups and languages and dialects—as subject to two counterpoised urges: the urge to maintain the kind of separate identity and uniformity of thought that leads to stability, and the urge to allow for communication with other groups and for the necessary innovations that come from without that lead to productive change and a greater integration within social life. It was Mikhail Bakhtin who drew attention to these two urges as two forces in language, the centripetal force of unification and the centrifugal force of diversification, the two forces always in dialectical tension, never fully resolved, but conditioning every utterance act. Bakhtin’s “dialogic” theory helped him explain better than most other theorists how the individual enters into social life through language. And I think a similar dialogic approach to writing will help us design writing across the disciplines projects that better serve the needs of both the academic community and the larger society.

Dialogic literacy can be seen as an answer to the problem of writing across borders, a problem that arises not only in programs that endeavor to teach writing within different academic disciplines but also in literacy programs, which struggle with the borders created by the discipline of academia, and in programs for multicultural classrooms. But dialogic literacy is not just a new trick to make these programs succeed. Encouraging dialogic literacy in an educational setting, I want to argue, commits one to a particular stance on questions of knowledge and education, a stance that must be acknowledged and reflected in teaching practices if something other than confusion or cynicism is to result. As Freire says, “The question of consistency between

the declared option and practice is one of the demands critical educators make on themselves" (Freire and Macedo 39). If we declare that we value different perspectives, as a commitment to dialogic literacy will lead us to do, perspectives of those new to a discipline or to academia, perspectives different from ours culturally, then we must develop practices that also value these differences. Such practices in turn commit us to a dialogic theory of learning that sees knowledge not only as the product of disciplinary inquiry, where well-established conventions allow the accumulation of coordinated data, but also as the product of ongoing discourse, where different perspectives draw on the power of the negative to lead to a higher integration of understandings. Practices that value difference and a dialogic approach to language and learning are not easy to formulate or to employ in our academic environment. As Foucault has explained so clearly, the institutional constraints we work under fairly consistently enact a notion of disciplinary knowledge, where the only valid form of knowledge is the accumulation of a stable set of ideas and data through the use of disciplinary conventions, and where knowledge is transmitted to neophyte members of the discipline as they learn the conventions. It is not surprising, then, that writing across the disciplines is often seen as a way of enhancing learning through simply teaching students the separate conventions for writing (and for creating knowledge) that constitute the different disciplines, that literacy is often seen as a way of enhancing employability and even humanity through simply embracing the language conventions and culture of the ruling class, and that interdisciplinary programs are often seen as simply forming new disciplines.

If, following Bakhtin, we problematize disciplines, if we see disciplines as ongoing projects subject to both the forces of unification and the forces of diversification, we can, I believe, create more productive programs. I believe that it is possible to see writing across the disciplines programs as enhancing learning through encouraging students to connect ideas presented in different disciplines and to connect those ideas with their everyday experiences. It is possible to see literacy as enhancing the economic and cultural fabric of our society by promoting communication among different classes and groups. It is possible to see interdisciplinary programs as exploiting the opportunities to formulate new questions and new answers available in the borders between disciplines. It is possible, in short, to see the project of research and education as that of promoting a new form of public discourse in which people with different experiences and different training can come to understand things together and in which knowledge is not mediated by authorities and specialists. It's possible, but given the institutional structure of education and the role it currently plays in our society, it isn't particularly easy, just as it wasn't particularly easy for Bakhtin, in the wake of Saussurian linguistics, to explain that language might involve something more than a system of conventions.

Another way to think about what I am advocating is to see it as an attempt to appropriate the energy and strength of interdisciplinary programs for all kinds of writing programs, to infuse back into disciplinary inquiry the kind of questioning and diversity that makes and has made interdisciplinary programs so productive. In his argument for the necessity of disciplinary integration in psychology, James Wertsch pointed to the work of Soviet scholars in the early twentieth century: "Motivated by a desire to help construct what they saw as the first grand experiment in socialism, these scholars tried to deal with practical issues that extended across disciplinary boundaries" (4-5). About the particularly broad-based writing of Vygotsky, Wertsch concludes: his ideas "continue to inform our view of a variety of problems today, more than half a century after his death" (5). Wertsch emphasizes the necessarily collaborative and ongoing nature of interdisciplinary work, evident also in the writings of the Frankfurt School and, I would add, in the work of the Bakhtin circle and in the more recent work of the scientists in multiple disciplines who created chaos theory.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I will attempt to explain more fully the notions of dialogic literacy and learning through a brief reading of Bakhtin's theory of language as it is laid out primarily in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Then I will examine what these notions might mean in terms of student writing and how teachers respond to this writing, using as a basis for my analysis some writing by a group of diverse graduate students in an interdisciplinary program. What I hope to create in this discussion is a vision of discourse and knowledge that does not succumb to the binary opposition of foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, that instead conceives of discourse and knowledge as ongoing projects that are always responsive to the dialectically linked forces that urge both unity and diversity.

### Language is Oriented to Understanding

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Bakhtin opposes his theory of language to two trends in the philosophy of language that he calls abstract objectivism and individualistic subjectivism.<sup>2</sup> Both trends are wrong, he says, "in taking the monologic utterance . . . as [the] basic point of departure" (Volosinov 94), or, in other words, in taking unambiguous, "single-voiced" language as the norm. The claim of abstract objectivism is that language exists in individual minds as "an objective system of incontestable, normatively identical forms" (Volosinov 67), or conventions, that enable hearers to recognize what speakers are saying and speakers to know what hearers will hear. Against this claim, Bakhtin argues that for both speakers and hearers what is important about a linguistic form, what enables them to use it to create meaning, "is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign":

The task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity. (Volosinov 68)

This is not to say that the recognition of the identity of forms does not play a part in language use—the recognition, for example, that the sign “aardvark” is the same sign even when it is printed in different type faces—but such recognition is a minimal condition for language and not, as Saussure claimed, definitive of language. Recognition of identity, Bakhtin argues, is effaced by the orientation of language to understanding, to the process of being heard and responded to.

Bakhtin argues that abstract objectivism went astray by deriving the properties of language from the study of dead and alien languages, which appear to be monologic systems because they are considered and experienced apart from their use to say something in a particular situation; all one can do with them is recognize identities of meaning. Similarly, discourse that aspires to the monologic—such as authoritarian discourse, which attempts to fix meaning across situations and for all speakers and hearers—can do nothing but repeat what it already has said. As Bakhtin says in a late essay on the problem of the text, “If we anticipate nothing from the word, if we know ahead of time everything that it can say, it departs from the dialogue and is reified” (Bakhtin 122).

Just as Bakhtin denies that language is primarily a monologic system of conventions, he also denies that language is essentially the monologic expression of an individual self. This is the claim of individualistic subjectivism, and against this position Bakhtin argues that “it is a matter not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions” (Volosinov 91). Like Vygotsky, his contemporary, Bakhtin believes that language is social through and through: it evolves in social contexts, and its mode of existence, even in “inner speech,” is always social. The word does not belong to an individual speaker, but rather “is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor” (Volosinov 86). Individuality in language does not derive from the original self of the speaker but rather from the unique use of a language form in a particular context. But individuals are essential to language: they inhabit the territory of the word, turning abstract linguistic forms into language: “When one begins to hear voices in languages, jargons, and styles, these cease to be potential means of expression and become actual, realized expression; the voice that has mastered them has entered into them” (Bakhtin 121).

Bakhtin’s argument is that language is material, that it is a process that takes place in the social world, not a system of conventions that exists in the

minds or psyches of individual speakers and hearers. In his view, people do not so much master language as participate in it. He concludes:

In reifying the system of language and in viewing living language as if it were dead and alien, abstract objectivism makes language something external to the stream of human communication. . . . In actual fact, however, language moves together with that stream and is inseparable from it. Language cannot properly be said to be handed down; it endures, but it endures as a continuous process of becoming. Individuals do not receive a ready-made language at all, rather, they enter upon the stream of verbal communication; indeed only in this stream does their consciousness first begin to operate.

(Volosinov 81)

As is clear in this last sentence, Bakhtin sees a tight link between language and thought; thought is also essentially social because it takes form in language. Truly individual thought is as incomprehensible (and thus as meaningless) as a private language; as Bakhtin says, "The 'I-experience' actually tends toward extermination: the nearer it approaches its extreme limit, the more it loses its ideological structuredness and, hence, its apprehensible quality, reverting to the physiological reaction of the animal" (Volosinov 88). Thought is social—or as Bakhtin would say, dialogic—because it must be apprehensible by another in order to be something that can be reflected upon; a thought that is not apprehensible remains an unmediated reaction, something that cannot literally be thought about.

For Bakhtin, language and thought are linked in the process of understanding; in fact, though he uses the three terms—language, thought, understanding—to refer to things discriminated in other theories of language, for him the three are inextricably interwoven. All three are ongoing processes without closure; all three are social processes involving at least two people. He defines understanding as essentially dialogic: "Any act of understanding is a response, i.e., it translates what is being understood into a new context from which a response can be made" (Volosinov 69n). Similarly, any act of language is a response, oriented to what has been said before and to what can be said; any thought is a response, oriented to what is thinkable and to what can be apprehended.

We might at this point observe that Bakhtin's theory of language has eluded the charge leveled at structural theories that they make of language a "prison-house": for Bakhtin the speaker is not a prisoner of an abstract system of language, mouthing only what the language has already said. And he has eluded the charge leveled at poststructural theories that they subject the speaker to the tyranny of endless interpretation: for Bakhtin, interpretation, or understanding, is always anchored in the particular situation of the speaker and hearer. But one might think that this freedom has been bought at the price of subjecting the speaker instead to the tyranny of the addressee. Does what you say mean only what your hearers take you to mean? In the essay "The Problem of the Text," Bakhtin addresses this problem directly by postulating the presence of a "superaddressee" in all texts:

The author can never turn over his whole self and his speech work to the complete and *final* will of addressees who are on hand or nearby (after all, even the closest descendants can be mistaken), and always presupposes (with a greater or lesser degree of awareness) some higher instancing of responsive understanding that can distance itself in various directions. . . . In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth). (Bakhtin 126)

One might be tempted to read Bakhtin's superaddressee as the anchor of meaning, the guarantee that there is in the end a fixed meaning to language, a meaning fixed by one of the varying authorities Bakhtin lists here. But I think this would be wrong. Although the superaddressee has in the past taken forms in line with foundational ideologies, in more general terms, the superaddressee is the pressure of infinite semiosis on the particular utterance, the always available possibility that the utterance could be understood differently. In this context, Bakhtin talks about "the nature of the word, which always wants to be *heard*, always seeks responsive understanding, and does not stop at *immediate* understanding but presses on further and further (indefinitely)" (127). What I think Bakhtin is getting at, once again, with this notion is the essential dialectical nature of language, thought, and understanding, where meaning is not fixed forever but only temporarily and provisionally, and not fixed solely by the conventions of language or by any other external authority, but also by the situated intentions of a speaker and by the situated response of a hearer.

### **Learning and Academic Discourse**

The linking of language, thought, and understanding in Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language implies a similarly dialogic theory of learning. If we grant that learning is dependent on discourse and that discourse is not simply a system of conventions but also "a ceaseless flow of becoming" (Volosinov 66), learning too must be an intersubjective, dialogic process and not simply the transmission of a monolithic system of ideas. And if understanding is a matter of response as well as of recognition, knowledge must be a product of differing perspectives as well as of conventional disciplinary methods. That Bakhtin also saw and was committed to the implications of his theory of language for a theory of learning and knowledge is, as I suggested earlier, also evident in the nature of his research, which was highly collaborative and resistant to closure.

Dialogic literacy and learning suggest similar directions for writing programs across disciplines and for writing in multicultural classrooms. Students are commonly oriented to disciplinary academic discourse in two ways, both of which have been illustrated in Calvin and Hobbes cartoons in recent years. Students may see—and may be encouraged to see—disciplinary discourse as a mode of meaning completely cut off from their everyday concerns, as in a cartoon in which Calvin, getting an arithmetic lesson from

his father, “cannot” successfully add eight cents and four cents because, as he says, “those four” (the ones his father asked him to give him to add to the eight cents already on the table) “are mine.” As long as he refuses to separate the abstract mathematical principles from the reality of his economic situation (“you’re the one with a steady paycheck,” he says to his father), he will not be able to learn his lesson. In contrast, students may see—and be encouraged to see—disciplinary discourse as a means of exercising power. In another cartoon, Calvin explains to Hobbes that “with a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog,” and hands Hobbes his book report entitled “The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in *Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes*.” Both of these orientations depend on a “monologic” view of academic discourse as a system that does not change in response to the “ignorant” or “naive” uses students—or other “outsiders”—make of it but instead acts to exclude them until they accede to its demands. The same monologic view of disciplinary discourse inhibits interdisciplinary research and makes too much academic scholarship and research incomprehensible and thus nearly useless to anyone outside a particular discipline or outside academia.

In contrast, a dialogic model of language and learning suggests a more responsive and open relationship between a discourse and *all* its users. A dialogic model suggests that writing instruction should not only acquaint students with the various conventions of disciplinary academic discourse but should also encourage students to respond to disciplinary discourse in terms of their own particular social and academic backgrounds. It suggests that the diverse and “naive” or “innocent” perspectives that students bring to classes are not simply impediments to be overcome but can be encouraged as productive sources of knowledge.

### Discourse Conventions in Process

As I said earlier, practices that draw on the model of dialogic literacy are not easy to insert into current academic practices: they often do not feel traditional or comfortable; they may feel very threatening to some teachers and indeed to some students. In order to work out more concretely both the advantages and the anxieties that this approach to writing engenders, I’d like now to look at an example of student discourse in an academic setting. What I have taken for my example is a transcript of an electronic conference from a section of the introductory seminar for doctoral students in the interdisciplinary program in rhetoric and technical communication at Michigan Technological University. The students wrote in a common computer file once a week about the readings and ideas introduced in the class and about their concerns in beginning doctoral work in an interdisciplinary field. This discourse is a useful example for several reasons: it is a written discussion, and thus easier to relate to writing instruction; as an electronic conference it is not as tightly bound to established conventions of written academic dis-

course as is writing in other genres (see Cooper and Selfe); and it brings together in discussion students from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Of the twelve students in the class, four were graduates of MTU's master's program in rhetoric and technical communication, one had a bachelor's degree in English from another institution, and the other five had master's degrees from other institutions in English, comparative literature, linguistics, education, composition, and technical writing. Eight were women; four were men. One was a native speaker of French. Although all were white, there was some diversity in ethnic backgrounds and economic class. Their training and backgrounds gave them a variety of languages to use; in addition, they drew on the reading materials of the seminar, which included Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and articles written by the faculty of the program, who represent the disciplines of composition, rhetoric, literature, literary theory, technical communication, foreign languages, linguistics, philosophy, communication, cultural studies, psychology, and fine arts.

Although all had been very successful in academia, and although this was only the second year of a new and interdisciplinary program, they still showed great anxiety about entering an unfamiliar discourse community. Marie,<sup>3</sup> the one student who entered the doctoral program directly from undergraduate school, not surprisingly felt especially at sea: she wrote,

If meaning were to mainly come from words, then I would certainly be lost when reading many of the entries in this conference. I have not got some experience which many of you have. Cathy, I agree that language is power, and in many ways I am powerless within the community we have established.

As I will discuss shortly, her plea was quickly addressed by other students, but most of the rest of the students were also apprehensive. As "Faith" said, "I wonder about being initiated into a discourse community. It sounds pretty scary to me."

These students' attitudes toward the demands of academic discourse differ from that of undergraduate students mostly in the relatively greater awareness they have of their problem. Being able to name the problem as involving different discourse communities and being able to articulate what bothers them about the adjustments they have to make gives them more of a sense of control—and also aligns them with the academic community they are so worried about joining. They were also more explicit in manipulating the conventions of their discourse in this electronic conference, and their struggle to define together how they should behave in this discussion (in this context, note how Marie frames her complaint as against "the community we have established"; emphasis added) serves as a good model of how we as teachers might approach the teaching of the conventions of disciplinary discourse on all levels.

Discourse conventions are a site of struggle, the place where competing purposes and interests come into conflict, and this, of course, is why, though



they are necessary for clear and efficient communication, they are also always changing. One struggle that occurred in this discussion centered on how writers were to identify themselves. Early in the conference, one student wrote, "This is Penny signing on. Could we change one of our conventions and begin by saying who we are? Does it bother anyone else that they don't know who is speaking until the end of the contribution?" The next student who wrote ratified this proposal, both in explicitly agreeing with the convention and in using the same words: "Per Penny's request (which I think is a good idea), this is Thomas signing on." From then on, most of the students began their entries by identifying themselves, though they used different forms, often seeming to pick up new forms from one another as they went along; here's a series of entry beginnings:

I, Carl, also wonder . . .  
I, Penny, like Carl's note . . .  
Hi, Donna here . . .  
This is Kent, disturbed and confused . . .  
Hi. This is Marie . . .  
(Charles) . . .  
Faith here.

Although Faith went along with the convention, she registered a protest: "I don't like announcing myself." Two weeks after Penny began this convention, Nicole, who had not before announced herself at the beginning of entries, began an entry using the parenthetical form pioneered by Charles (who is her husband), but added, "I agree with Faith. I don't like to announce myself by putting my name first before writing on this conference: it seems that words would have a different value depending on who says them. But I will follow the group's conventions (to a certain extent)." The effect of the convention of announcing yourself at the beginning of an entry is clear in Nicole's comment: it allows readers to associate the ideas with the writer and the writer's position. Whether a particular writer or reader will find this practice enabling or oppressive depends on a lot of factors, including their perception of their standing in the community and among their peers. Given this, it is not surprising that agreement on whether or not to announce oneself at the beginning of entries was hard to achieve.

As this example also demonstrates, even for individuals who agree to follow a convention (to a certain extent), the practice of following a convention is more complicated than simply repeating a form. Repetition in language is never a simple repetition; repetition expresses also a variety of attitudes—supportiveness, separateness, parody, irony, and so on—toward the group using the convention and the ideas and values the convention represents. The slight changes in form that students used to identify themselves at the beginning of entries express microadjustments of their relations to the others in the group. Note how some students repeat the form

used by the previous student, while others initiate new forms; how Marie links herself to not one but two previous students by combining their forms; and how Nicole, when she at last reluctantly agrees to use the convention, uses the form of the person she feels closest to. The parenthetical form used by Charles and Nicole also stands out from the other forms by its relative impersonality, and in this way also subtly expresses some resistance to personal tone that the convention was at least partly designed to create.<sup>4</sup>

Conventions are also negotiated in less explicit, more complicated ways that also demonstrate how individuals strive to establish and adapt discourse conventions in line with what they are trying to do in their writing. In the same entry I quoted from earlier, Marie joked about another convention that she saw as particularly academic: “‘This ain’t no party, this ain’t no disco, this ain’t no fooling around!’ Everyone seems to be teaching me that an important element to the electronic conference is to quote other people. So there’s my quote (Thanks to the Talking Heads) and here’s my first entry.” Given the context in which this writing was taking place, no one had to explicitly initiate the convention of quoting from various academic reading, but Marie tacitly disputes its usefulness by quoting something that is defiantly not academic. Along with her discussion of how she struggled to make sense of Saussure by drawing on everyday experience, and her complaint about how she felt powerless in this community, her parody of this convention was a powerful plea for a change in the way students were writing. Penny directly addressed Marie’s complaint:

I want to begin with Marie’s feeling of powerlessness. Is it possible for us to talk about our theory of language without excluding some members of this community or, to put it another way, without disempowering some? Maybe instead of all this quoting and theorizing we could look at more daily instances of language for a while.

Connecting theory and practice through analyzing “more daily instances of language” is Penny’s preference in these discussions too; later she voices a similar concern about finding a different language so that she can explain what she is studying to her sisters and her kids. But she also offers an academic precedent for the insertion of everyday experience into theoretical discussion, referring to a speech she had recently heard at a conference: “One of the most effective speakers, Mary Louise Pratt, began by telling the story of how her son developed literacy by playing with baseball cards. . . . This example, drawn from common lived experience, empowered her audience.” Perhaps more common in speaking than in writing, the convention of using examples from everyday experience is often, as here, perceived as a rhetorical move. In writing in electronic settings, this convention can serve a more expressive goal. It has often been noted that writing in these settings tends to be more laden with emotions, and, a few days after Penny wrote, Donna used this convention to enable her to talk about something that was much on her mind, the recent death from AIDS of a childhood friend. In tracing the

development and use of this “convention” of drawing on daily experience, we can see how what is considered appropriate is negotiated and contested, and how it has sources in the languages of different situations.

A more obvious example of students’ drawing on conventions of different discourses in their discussion comes as they debate more directly how and why and to what extent one has to change one’s vocabulary in different situations. Thomas, who does consulting work as a technical writer, raised the topic:

As a technical writer, I speak of mips, megahertz, memory (alliteration?), information mapping, and desktop publishing. As a graduate student, I speak of theory, hermeneutics, semiotics, epistemology, and de Saussure. But I rarely use academic language in industry or vice-versa. . . . What are the consequences of using language across communities? How sensitive do we need to be when we use language?

In entries following Thomas’, other students cast this problem into the vocabulary of different disciplines, which highlighted both the problem Thomas raised and the value of including these differing perspectives in a discussion of a common topic. To Nicole, a native speaker of French with a master’s degree in comparative literature, using the “appropriate” form or register in a different situation was just like using the native language of a different country, a matter of cultural acceptability, and she did not see it as particularly threatening to her identity: “We can learn to think differently by learning to speak differently.” To Elaine, with a master’s degree from a very traditional English department, the question of appropriateness raised the questions of meaning and speaker’s intention: “If we speak inappropriately in a particular situation, have we failed to communicate—or have we communicated something we did not want to communicate?” Carl, who works as an advisor in the business department, saw the differing languages as simply part of the “process of initiation into professional discourse communities,” although he hoped that “in the end this posturing provides knowledge that can be utilized for greater communication competence.” Carl’s remarks assume that differing languages are to be tolerated only if they contribute to clearer communication. These shifts in terms are not just shifts in language, but also shifts in underlying assumptions and values: differences in registers and national languages are assumed to result from differences in social situation or culture and imply a valuing of group dynamics and identity; differences in meaning and intention between speaker and hearer are assumed to result from differences between individuals and imply a valuing of individual intentions; and differences between professional discourse communities are assumed to result from differences in occupation and imply a valuing (or, as Carl implies, an overvaluing) of expertise. An answer to Thomas’ question, “What are the consequences of using language across communities?” is demonstrated in this discussion: such a practice can lead to a confrontation between the differing values and assumptions of different

communities and at the same time to a fuller understanding of the issue under discussion—in this case, how and why language differs in different situations.

### **The Responsive Development of Understanding**

Finally, I'd like to look at how these students demonstrate in this discussion Bakhtin's idea that understanding is responsive, how they learn dialogically by translating each other's comments into a new context from which a response can be made and by collaborating in the construction of knowledge as a series of partial truths. What I mean by partial truths (which is a concept I am borrowing from James Clifford) is that each entry they write represents something that is considered to be true in the particular context in which it is written but is not considered, either by the writer or by any of the readers, as representing the final word or the whole truth about the matter under discussion. This resistance to closure is particularly facilitated by the ongoing nature of this discussion, but it is also a characteristic of more formal academic writing currently, and it is increasingly something teachers look for and encourage in the writing of their students.<sup>5</sup>

Shifts in class discussion as students translate the ideas raised into the context of their own situations and concerns can be bewildering. But I would like to focus here on how this responsive development of understanding is not only essential to individual learning but also enriches a discussion of complex ideas. In the conference, Penny initiated a topic that was responded to by several other students: "We academics won't influence [the military industrial] complex if we sit in our towers and talk theory to each other. Bleich says we need more permeable boundaries between communities." The communities she's looking for permeable boundaries between are the academic and personal communities; earlier in this entry she talked about her struggle to explain her studies to her sisters or her kids. In the next entry, Donna responded to the notion of permeable boundaries by putting it in the context of the situation of her friend who died of AIDS: "The words 'gay,' 'homosexual,' 'queer,' 'AIDS' all affected the material conditions of my friend's life. . . . Yes, Penny, the challenge of language is to achieve more permeable boundaries between communities." The boundaries Donna was thinking of are erected not on the base of access to certain kinds of knowledge but on the base of differences among people, and which differences should count, and making these boundaries permeable is a different kind of language challenge than that Penny was talking about.

Kent next linked the idea of permeable boundaries with the question of whether one must also be "tolerant of the intolerant," and then Marie struggled to link what he said with Saussure's notion of value. Finally, Charles put the idea of permeable boundaries into yet another context and came up with what was, to me, a very surprising response:

The Saussure obsession has overtaken us all! You folks discuss this concept of permeable boundaries, but I think that we all have been quite successful in creating our

own impermeable Saussurian microsystem. If we find that we have no other option but to nourish this obsession, I think it is time that we look outside our boundaries to the works of the authorities and critics of Saussure. It's time for us to examine the concepts of arbitrariness and linguistic value from other frames of reference. We have to prevent ourselves from developing the same type of mental block Calvin has with math. Let's first try to identify our eight pennies, add four, and see if we can't come to a general consensus that we do, indeed, have twelve cents on the table.

His argument, that we should "look outside our boundaries to the works of the authorities and critics of Saussure" in order to "help each other in the quest for Saussurian truth," seems to me to be the reverse of Penny's argument that we should find ways to talk about our studies with our relatives; instead of negotiating meanings across a broad spectrum of positions, he recommends an appeal to what experts have said about Saussure. He supports his argument with his reading of the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon about mathematics, which I had included on an assignment sheet for one of the papers in the course because I thought it was a good demonstration of the artificiality of schooling practices which require students to ignore the everyday contexts of problems they are set to solve. In contrast, Charles, describing Calvin's problem as a "mental block" against the disciplinary discourse of mathematics, reads the cartoon as a demonstration of the necessity of accepting disciplinary procedures in the pursuit of knowledge.

I found Charles' response to the notion of permeable boundaries and to the cartoon confusing—and slightly irritating, since I had been pleased with the direction of the group's discussion up to this point. But my confusion and irritation also encouraged me to notice two important things. First, Charles' bringing into question the new boundaries created by our insistence that scholarly knowledge should be connected with everyday life demonstrates that boundaries between communities are not abolished by dialogic literacy and learning practices, that they are evolving continually and can be continually brought into question. And second, his argument for appealing to the established meanings and forms of disciplinary discourse demonstrates that many students are not exactly delighted to be required to participate in the more open-ended practices of dialogic learning.

My reaction to Charles' understanding of Bleich and Calvin and Hobbes also emphasizes that teachers must remember that their own understanding of concepts and texts is also partial, also a translation into their own context and concerns. I could have characterized Charles' use of Bleich's idea of permeable boundaries as a misreading—certainly it has little to do with what Bleich seems to me to be saying. But Charles *is* understanding the phrase; he is putting it into a context in which he can form a response; he is contributing a useful perspective that I habitually exclude from my thinking. A commitment to crossing educational boundaries requires teachers to listen as well as students.

That teachers are very often liable to "misread" student writing is made even clearer by one of the entries I wrote in the conference. I was responding

to an ongoing discussion of Saussure's notions of arbitrariness and value, and I read a comment by Elaine as a misunderstanding of Saussure's notion of arbitrariness. Here's the relevant part of her entry, a part of the following entry by Thomas, and a part of my entry:

What actually was the function of language in the case of Joe? Is the language the culprit in this case? The language seems to be only the means by which those who choose to can define and create individual value associated with certain signs. That is, since there is no one-to-one relationship between signification and signal for all users of the language, we can determine our own values for individual signs. The language seems to be neutral in this case; it is human beings who are not. (Elaine)

Thomas here. . . . Elaine raises an interesting point when she says that, "language seems to be neutral . . . it is human beings who are not." We know that language is socially constructed, and therefore, a reflection of values operating in our system. (Thomas)

In response to Elaine, Saussure would say that arbitrariness does *not* mean that individuals can determine their own values for signs. . . . The fact that values are arbitrary at base does not mean that we have no reasons for holding them and all are equal in a particular situation. They are socially constructed within specific situations and they can be evaluated on the basis of their effect on people. I think one important implication of Saussure's notion of arbitrariness is that we are responsible for these effects. (Marilyn)

In understanding Elaine's remark, I translated it into the context of common misreadings of Saussure, which prompted me to respond with a correction: the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary in that it is not natural, not arbitrary in the sense that anyone can make any link they want to. But in rereading her entry and my entry, I began to see that this understanding of her comment is not the only way to read what she wrote. The idea that an individual can by him or herself determine the value of a sign is indeed a possible interpretation of what Elaine said. But I also note that she got to just about the same conclusion in her (more concise) entry as I did in mine. If one focuses on the "we" in her comment that "we can determine our own values for individual signs," her point then seems to be that the social construction of language means that values of signs can be changed and that we are responsible for them. Thomas understood Elaine's comment that "language seems to be neutral . . . it is human beings who are not" in this way, as implicating us in the social construction of the values of the language system.

Which is the right reading of Elaine's statement? Which of us "really" understood what Elaine meant? To ask these questions is to reject the whole premise of dialogic learning, that each act of understanding is fundamentally a situated response, not a definition of some essential meaning. Similarly, to search for the universal and whole truth about language, about meaning, about people's use of language, is a goal that conflicts with the practice of dialogic learning, in which knowledge develops in the social world as ongoing individual expressions of partial truths. The point I have been trying to make here about the dialogic nature of language and learning is as good an example

as any of a partial truth, for anyone who listens closely to my arguments will notice how they are systematically marked by the pressure of the opposite truth that language and learning often are—and often necessarily and usefully are—monologic. If absolute knowing is possible, it is not the property of any human consciousness.

Disciplines are no more the custodians of absolute knowledge than are individuals, and the partialness of the truths they offer are especially well demonstrated in the responses of students to their teachings (as in the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon about mathematics). Understanding student writing as a response rather than as a more or less correct statement of truth, and understanding teachers' writing as also a response and not as correction, will not only allow teachers to help their students learn in an ongoing way but will also enable teachers to learn from their students. Furthermore, dialogic learning provides a model in the classroom of the kind of public discourse I envisioned earlier, where people work together to create useful knowledge rather than relying solely on experts and authorities to provide the truth.

The decision to "allow" a variety of languages or voices in disciplinary writing is also not just an unfortunate necessity in classes grounded in a commitment to dialogic learning. As Clifford Geertz comments in his famous essay on blurred genres, such mixing represents a shift toward a hermeneutical methodology in the social sciences, an understanding of the primacy of interpretation and of language in studying and talking about human behavior and practices. Perhaps more importantly, the mixing of voices in academic writing can be seen as a commitment to an active role for academics in society. If we want our research to have any impact on public policy decisions, we must not only help people to read our research through training them in reading strategies but also through demonstrating the connections between our theories and the practices of society in the way that we write. This is not simply a question of making our research more accessible to the public; it is a question of acknowledging the ways in which our experiences in the social world influence our research and of demonstrating the implications our research has for social structures and practices. And there's no better place to begin doing this than in the classroom and in our responses to student writing, by encouraging students to adapt and adopt disciplinary conventions that serve their purposes and by responding to their "naïve" understandings as thoughtfully as we do to those of our "expert" colleagues.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For an account of the working methods of the Bakhtin circle, see Clark and Holquist, especially pages 149-50.

<sup>2</sup>In attributing this work, published under the name of Volosinov, to Bakhtin, I follow the arguments of Clark and Holquist, pages 160-66.

<sup>3</sup>I have provided pseudonyms for all students.

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank Wendy Hesford for suggesting that I think about the question of repetition in this context.

<sup>5</sup>I don't think this is a particularly radical idea about the nature of truth in the discussion of complex subjects. That people rather normally judge the truth of a statement in relation to the particular situation of utterance is attested to by the American public's general acceptance of President Clinton's failure to propose a middle-income tax cut after his election, despite the attempts of the media and the republican congressional representatives to evaluate Clinton's campaign statements as if they had been timeless truths.

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