

# Writing in the Dialogical Classroom

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS RESPONDING TO THE TEXTS OF THEIR LIVES



BOB FECHO

Principles  
**in Practice**

WRITING IN TODAY'S  
CLASSROOMS

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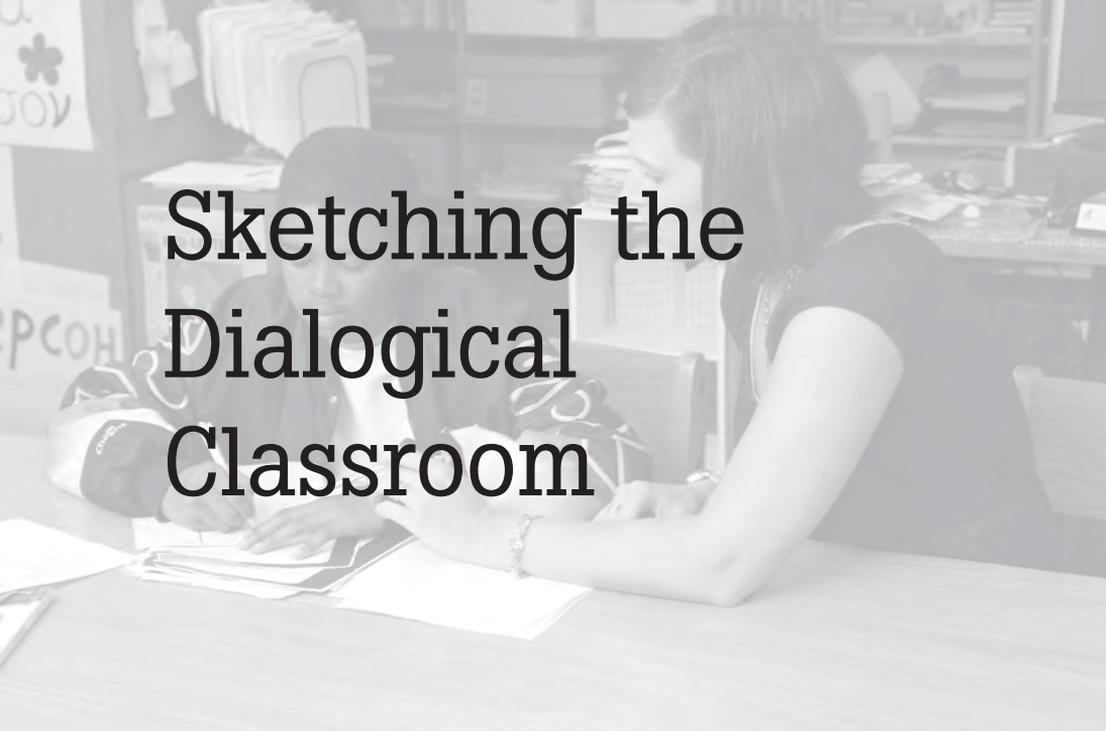
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# Sketching the Dialogical Classroom

**A**shley, a college junior, wrote the following excerpt while she was a student in an undergraduate content area literacy course I taught a few years back at the University of Georgia. I had asked her and her classmates to write an essay about what each, as a preservice teacher, had come to understand about the importance of using reading and writing to better teach content. What follows is her introductory paragraph to a longer essay.

Content literacy in all content areas, such as language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science entails that students obtain and direct writing and reading tactics to gain knowledge. Although literacy is expected from students in all content areas, it is necessary to convey that this is not factual information. However, it is an educator's duty to assist their students in reading and writing comprehension in each content area. Lacking content literacy skills in any subject will inhibit a student's ability to create significance and achieve understanding. Incorporating reading and writing instruction is a job for all teachers no matter the grade or subject area. Therefore, the content area I have selected to direct my focus is Social Studies, which is my second area of specialization. Reading and writing tribulations can hinder a student's improvement and generate unnecessary obstacles to perceiving the social studies subject matter. With that said, there are numerous issues that frighten me and, simultaneously, fascinate me about content literacy in social studies.

Before you read on, I suggest you think about what you would do if you were to sit down with Ashley for a writing conference? How would you counsel her? What questions would you ask? How would you talk about the strengths of this paper while also helping her consider what might be less successful?

Go ahead. Think about it. I'll wait.

On first glance, Ashley comes across as a young woman with a sound grasp of the English language and many of its conventions. Words are spelled correctly, punctuation is in place, word usage is crisp, and the text has the semblance, if not timbre, of academic writing. I know of many high school teachers who, having worked with students struggling with writing mechanics, would fall to their knees to have a student produce this paragraph.

But those same teachers, upon a more considered look at Ashley's introduction, would most likely want to raise some questions. For all of its correctness, the paragraph barely speaks to anyone, least of all Ashley. She has not created what Lysaker (2006) has called a relationship to text; therefore, she has removed herself from the writing by approximating the language of the academy and falling back on paragraph-writing formulas that held her in good stead through her high school education. The writing feels close-ended and deterministic. There is little sense that what she is committing to paper is going anywhere of depth or interest, or that new thoughts might be uncovered in the process. Instead, she has written an introduction—indeed, an entire essay as it turned out—in which the only context was the assignment I gave and the only purpose of being seemed to be that assignment.

My intent here is not to demean Ashley or the many writers who, like her, are products of their education. When she wrote this introduction, I'm sure she was, yet again, calling upon her experience writing countless five-paragraph essays based on decontextualized prompts, putting forth what she thought I wanted. But isn't that part of the issue? Ashley tends to see writing in school as something that, in the end, belongs to teachers. You write to please them as opposed to writing to make meaning for yourself and others. Outside the writing classroom, Ashley might be a writer of fluid and vivid prose, but in school she resorts to a style that was practiced repeatedly and most likely brought her praise for those efforts.

Although I had taken care, both in written instructions and through discussion, to point out the importance of bringing a sense of self even to academic writing, Ashley felt, most likely based on past experience, that she had good reason to doubt me. I wouldn't be surprised if she had been taught by at least one English teacher who had insisted that the way Ashley wrote in the introduction was what "they expect you to do in college." In fact, her work is exemplary of the writing I too often see produced in the kinds of high school and college composition classrooms where writing is taught through recipes and formulas: mechanically correct, but largely lacking a sense of purpose or identity.

Ashley's excerpt doesn't feel natural. Stolidity has to be carefully taught. I suspect that she didn't enter high school writing in ways that completely separate who she is and what she cares about from how she represents herself in text. I doubt that a sentence such as "Reading and writing tribulations can hinder a student's improvement and generate unnecessary obstacles to perceiving the social studies subject matter" flowed easily and organically for Ashley. Such writing is imposed on young writers. It is the teaching equivalent of dressing children in formal attire so they look good for the family photograph, even though the tight collars, stiff hairstyles, and rigid poses have nothing to do with who that child is 99 percent of the time.

Having taught English for more than twenty years in an urban school district, I deeply understand how teachers feel conflicted when their time is constrained by overly invasive curricula and the pressure for narrowly defined success is applied by high-stakes testing. When confronted with imposed instructional "choices," a perceived inclination toward expediency on the part of their students, unreasonable expectations by administration to have students perform well on decontextualized tests, and an impossibly short time within which to manage all this effort, teachers tend to stress what they view as the practical option. That option, too often, turns out to be persuasive essays packaged in the five-paragraph format, a genre of writing they and their supervisors argue will help students in professional and academic venues, even if they have concerns as to how well such instruction works.

Despite these impediments, Ashley has much going for her. She's White and middle class, and that accident of birth grants her many privileges not afforded others. She started her education with her language and culture closely aligned with that of the school. She, on a daily basis, saw others like her in positions of authority and responsibility. When she opened books to read, from the very first basal reader to her senior year literature course, Ashley recognized the people, events, and contexts of her life there on the pages. And even though the school might have wanted her to dress her prose in old-fashioned collar stays and cuff links, the mainstream culture had so embraced her that the trade-off of self for a distanced formality seemed a small sacrifice. She was confident of who she was and what she could do because what she saw in media and experienced in life had confirmed her potential.

But not all students come to school perched in the comforting embrace of mainstream culture. The Latina living in rural Georgia whose parents have immigrated legally nevertheless spends the day fretting that one day she'll come home from school to find that immigration officers have swept her parents into custody. The child in the double-wide whose father runs a crystal meth operation worries about every police siren he hears. The rising senior on the wrestling team spends his Saturday mornings at the mall bookstore furtively reading gay magazines for

insight into who he is and how to best reveal himself to others. The African American young woman, who often misses school to watch her younger siblings because Mom and Dad work late hours, writes and signs her own absence excuses. The recent Korean immigrant spends long days doing nothing of substance at the mall rather than face the long days of doing nothing of substance in school. How are their cultures celebrated in classrooms? When do their issues get addressed? What in their writing opportunities helps them to devise their sense of self and become better writers at the same time?

That's what this book is about: creating ample opportunities for students to use writing to explore who they are becoming and how they relate to the larger culture around them. I attempt to carve out space in literacy classrooms for an approach to writing that is more dialogical. Focused on adolescent learners, this approach seeks to develop writing experiences in schools that are reflective across time. Such writing should not be at the sacrifice of learning content and craft, but, instead, will foster even deeper explorations of such. To reflect on the experiences of William Shakespeare's Juliet, Sandra Cisneros's Esperanza, or Sister Souljah's Winter is to reflect on self. In this text, I create an ongoing conversation between classroom practice, theory, and research to show how each informs the others. Ultimately, my intent is to illustrate the need for empowerment that can result from implementing a dialogical writing classroom, as well as the complications of such a classroom.

To some degree, all learners have a desire to pry into understanding who they are, why they behave as they do, and where they might be heading in their lives. Her mere membership in the mainstream culture of power does not make Ashley immune from the vagaries of life. She could, no doubt, write of family issues or personal complexities that leave her confused and perplexed. How might she wonder about the ways that, as a woman, her opportunities might be diminished? On the other hand, what would it mean for Ashley to call her socioeconomic privilege into question? She, like anyone, would benefit from a more systematic and intentional means for reflection and action that would help her make better sense of who she is in the many social worlds she encounters.

However, as Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon (2000) argued, those whose lives are more marginalized from mainstream access to power and status have even greater needs to make meaning of what can only be construed as the absurdities of racism, classism, homophobia, and other socially constructed societal sifting mechanisms. Accordingly, it benefits such students to view literacy in general and writing in particular as means for making sense of their lives, as well as means for continuing to dialogue with mainstream culture. And, in the end, all classrooms, no matter where they are located, are populated by students who, for a multitude of

factors, find themselves relegated to the sidelines. Six-figure salaries and four-bedroom houses don't preclude sexual abuse, rank prejudice, feelings of loss, worries of low self-esteem, and the like from occurring and, in some cases, may even exacerbate or mask such incidents.

### What Is a Dialogical Classroom?

To answer the question posed in the heading of this section, my first response is to suggest that you should just be patient and read the book. It will eventually become clear. Still, I understand the need for and the practicality of a working definition, something we can attach to understandings already present in our cosmos and to which we can attach future understandings.

For the purposes of this book, a dialogical classroom is one in which literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives. Let me unpack that. When I write *literacy is used to immerse teacher and students*, I'm urging those of us who teach to get in over our heads with explorations into who we are becoming, and that reading, writing, speaking, and listening be the means for doing so. We need to bring our expertise to these explorations, but we also need to bring our sense of wonder, so that we might value the expertise of our students and open ourselves to the dialogue. The liberal educator Paulo Freire (1970) reminded us that no dialogue can begin with the premise that some chosen among us can enter that dialogue, or that some voices carry more weight than others. So, to immerse is to expect all to go deep and take part in constructing new understandings, to blur and reinvent the definitions of teacher and student.

**A dialogical classroom is one in which literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives.**

Then what do I mean by *an ongoing reflective conversation*? As readers and writers of text, we author a response. A shrug, a sentence, a formal essay, a class discussion, a full-scale production with puppets are all responses. The Russian literary and language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) claimed that all understanding is merged with response, and that through response comes meaning—a restless, transient, ephemeral meaning that is contingent on context and inclined toward its next response. As he noted, “The relation to *meaning* is always dialogic. Even understanding itself is dialogic” (1986, p. 121, italics in the original).

Therefore, the conversation is not only reflective, it is ongoing; it exists over time. What occurs at the start of class pertains to that which ends it. Literature

read in October is overtly connected to readings in March. What is written in brief one day can be extended a week later and added into a longer piece later in the month. Thoughts occurring in English class intersect with those from other subject areas. The dialogical classroom becomes unbounded and exists across time as well as space.

And always, we respond to text, or what I've called *the texts of our lives*. For me, what counts as text here begins with traditional print text, but also opens into electronic media, music, art, and other sensual stimuli. A pebble made smooth by the flow of a river, if you know how to read it, is as much a text as *A Tale of Two Cities*. The distant look in the eyes of your partner as the two of you try to untangle a relationship issue communicates meaning. The painting by Rousseau in which a couple in carnival garb emerges from the bare forest as the winter moon rises says one thing to me and, perhaps, something else to you. My dog, standing near where his treats are kept and staring bullets through my head, is trying to tell me something, if only I would interpret his actions as he intends. The blinking cursor and the doubt I feel as I ponder the next line . . .

As readers and writers, we are creators of texts, argues Louise Rosenblatt (1995). Doing so is an existential act. In creating text, students engage in what Bakhtin (1981) has called a "process of becoming," an ongoing dialogue with themselves and others in an attempt to make personal understandings of the contexts of their lives. All texts, the ones we read and the ones we write, become, to at least some degree, our texts. We take at least partial ownership of text, there being as many interpretations as there are readers (Rosenblatt, 1995).

There is a scene in the film *Saturday Night Fever* in which Stephanie, Tony's dancing partner, is gushing over the Franco Zeffirelli film production of *Romeo and Juliet*. "Oh yeah," says Tony, in recognition, "Shakespeare." Stephanie shakes her head. "No, Zeffirelli." The scene is played as a joke on Stephanie, but, in some ways, her response illustrates what both Rosenblatt (1995) and Bakhtin (1981) argued. True, Shakespeare originally wrote the play, but he adapted it from earlier sources. When Zeffirelli made his film, he freely interpreted Shakespeare's text in ways that were different from, say, the earlier George Cukor version or the more recent production by Baz Luhrmann. So it becomes Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, or Stephanie's, or yours. Yet the text also always remains, at least in part, Shakespeare's.

Based on this working definition, I argue that all classrooms are dialogical; that they fit somewhere on a continuum between *completely dialogical* and *completely monological*, but never reach either limit. They can, however, skew in either direction. The less that educators recognize the dialogical possibilities and the less they create opportunities for multiple perspectives to be heard and considered, the more their classrooms will remain shifted toward the monological end of the scale. If

teachers lecture in pronouncements, proclamations, and absolutes—if they never, at some point, say to a student, “That’s an interesting way to think about it that never occurred to me”—then whatever dialogical sparks that exist in that room will find no tinder to ignite. A classroom that is driven by recitation of information instead of exploration of questions will, in the words of Bakhtin (1986), seem “meaningless to us; it is removed from dialogue” (p. 145).

### **A Working Definition of Dialogical Writing**

When I began writing this book, teachers I worked with through the Red Clay Writing Project asked me what I meant by *dialogical writing*. I’m glad they asked, because as much as I hate to be pinned down on such things, I also knew that I needed to clarify for myself and others what such writing entails. Writing it down, I knew, was the means to compel me to bring some form to thoughts I allowed to roam a bit too freely in my head. I didn’t necessarily want to break my wild horse thoughts—to define them into meaninglessness—but I did want to do more to fence in their grazing land.

In doing so, I created what I continue to call a working definition of dialogical writing. Even though at some point this definition will be frozen in time by the limitations of print-based media, I offer it as only a dialogue starter. What in this definition speaks to you? What would you add, drop, reorder, amend? How might this definition work in one situation and not another? And I reserve the right to continue to work this definition to fit my own ever-changing contexts.

To start, *dialogical writing represents an intersection of academic and personal writing*. Barbara Kamler (2001), an educator working in Australia, writes about the need to relocate the personal. She has argued, and I agree, that much of the writing done in school is either too exclusively personal or much too devoid of personal-ity. An example of the overemphasis on the personal is the classroom in which students write tons of journals, but rarely are encouraged to revise those journals into more easily shared writing. Her concern is that although students might gain much experience in expressing their lives through writing, they gain little sense of how to craft and use those thoughts so that others can more readily find relevancy.

The other pendulum extreme, however, is marked by the seeming insistence that nothing of the experience, emotions, and biases of the writer enters into the finished product. Although columnists such as Maureen Dowd, Thomas Friedman, and Paul Krugman, all of whom

#### **Dialogical writing . . .**

- represents an intersection of academic and personal writing.
- allows writers to bring multiple voices to the work.
- involves thought, reflection, and engagement across time and is located in space.
- creates opportunities for substantive and ongoing meaning making.

write for the *New York Times*, continue to affect public opinion through op-ed pieces brimming with personality, many English teachers insist that student writers vacuum all vestiges of self from their writing. Kamler (2001) argues that it is not one or the other. Instead, teachers need to help students see how their personal writing benefits from academic structures and how writing that is more academic in intent can benefit from the life and spirit of the personal.

In addition to being personal and academic, *dialogical writing allows writers to bring multiple voices to the work*. Those multiple voices are both within and without the writer. Kamler (2001) also writes about being wary of the term *voice*, as in “students need to find their voice.” Two points in that phrase concern her. The first is that voice is set up as a kind of treasure hunt, something whole to be discovered instead of something in the process of creation. The singularity of voice also troubles her. Instead, she argues that we have many voices—for example, sister, child of divorced parents, experimenter with sexual lifestyles, comic book collector—and all of them are changing through dialogue over time. We need ways for all of those voices to come to the surface and not necessarily all in turn.

At the same time, we need our multiple voices within to engage with the multiple voices in our immediate and distant physical worlds. Our texts must be written in response to other texts, to which others will respond and we will remain in dialogue. Multiple and many forms of feedback and engagement should occur. Students writing to authors and characters; to younger students in other grades; in response to one another; in dialogue via online discussion forums; through multi-genre formats; on classroom wikis; in reaction to film, art, and music are all experiences that allow students to see writing as more than a singular self writing solely to the teacher as a requirement for a grade. And the more that we can coax diverse response, the more able we might be to see our work through the eyes of others.

*A third aspect of dialogical writing is that it represents thought, reflection, and engagement across time and is located in space*. Bakhtin (1981) reminds us that all meaning is contextual; our understandings depend on our experiences to date and the current experience as it anticipates future experience. Here’s a quick example of what I mean. On a ride home from a beach weekend, I passed a hand-painted sign with the word *Stop* on one line and the word *Peaches* below it. Given that there was a roadside stand just up the highway, the context seemed to indicate that the sign was imploring us to pull over and check out the fruit. But a plum grower who felt that peach farmers were stealing his business might pass that spot and see himself as part of a growing movement to curtail peach production. The sign could also give insight into a personal drama in which one family member had left a roadside note to another family member to restrain their relative who everyone called “Peaches.” And, of course, for want of a comma, the sign could even be a plea to Peaches herself.

No doubt, other contexts could be imagined. But the point is that the words are meaningless without context. And that context is more than a physical place—a room, a country, a planet—it is also a place in time. It has a remembered history, a contemplated now, and an anticipated future. Therefore, when we write dialogically, we engage with our thoughts while keeping those many interconnected contexts in mind. We must also be aware that our contexts will engage the fluid contexts of every reader of our work.

The only way to maintain this engagement is to see our writing as interconnected. The writing I jot today feeds my writing tomorrow, which nourishes or perhaps inhibits my work on a third day. As such, lower-stake, more tentative, and more frequent writing experiences (e.g., journals, freewrites) merge into higher-stake, more polished responses (e.g., blog entries, draft essays) that then result in more cumulative, more refined, and accomplished pieces (e.g., multigenre compositions, op-ed columns, interactive websites). Another way to think about the connectedness of text is to understand how reading and writing across genres can benefit all attempts at writing, no matter the genre. For example, I may not ever publish a poem, but I routinely write them because the effort nourishes and gives me insight into my prose. The intent is to keep my mesh of writing experience strengthening as it expands.

Finally, *the reflection, the multiple perspectives, and the engagement through context create opportunities for substantive and ongoing meaning making*. Writers come to understand how to use their writing to make multiple meaning of text, of issues, of themselves, of the world around them. Just as all classrooms have dialogical potential, all writing can help us make meaning of our lives. Most of us would imagine that a grocery list might not hold much spark to have us consider our existential condition. But given the right context—perhaps you’ve recently endured the sudden death of a close friend who died young and tragically—that routinized activity might help you understand the need to do the commonplace to see you through hard times, or it might help you realize that you’ve spent too much time on rote activities and need to shake up your life. Whatever the case, seeing writing as a dialogical act from which meaning is generated is what enables such an insight to occur.

### **What a Dialogical Writing Assignment Might Look Like**

To be in dialogue, then, is to multitask. Bakhtin (1986) likens it to a drama with three characters: the self, the listener, and the larger society. My writing is a response to my general or some explicit experience. Take that tired old writing assignment, *What I did on my summer vacation*. If I were a student faced with responding to that prompt, I’d have to take several factors under consideration.

Among other things, I would need to connect to my understanding of vacations, what vacations look like in my family, what happened on my most recent vacation, and, specifically, what aspects of that I wanted to share. So the writing begins both from within and without the writer. As I write, I should be aware of what my writing reveals to me and to my reader about me and us. Why did I write so much about body surfing and not a word about dropping my dad's iPod in the sand, or vice versa?

Although my immediate reader might be the teacher, I, too, am a reader, and so is the larger society outside the classroom, although that connection is often, even for older students, difficult to grasp. My vacation essay connects to the many vacation essays written before and presages those to come. If, in my writing about that trip to the beach, I come to understand that the time spent there was really bittersweet or that sitting on the beach reading a book was more the highlight than riding waves, I have entered into a dialogue with myself, my direct audience, and the more indirect larger culture. I have now contributed to what we know and understand about summer vacations.

However, if the teacher does little or nothing to enhance the dialogic opportunities of the assignment, I am less likely to do all of the above consciously and with intent. If, at 9:30 on a Monday morning at the start of September, the teacher asks me to put away my math homework, take out my three-ring binder, and write five paragraphs about what I did last summer, I am very unlikely to enter into much dialogue with myself, the teacher, and, least of all, the community outside the school. No context has been created for dialogue, so therefore no expectation of dialogue exists. More important, if this is how most writing has been contextualized in my education, then writing as a tool for reflective dialogue has been stolen from me, if it was ever mine to have in the first place. On top of all of this, if I spent summer vacation taking care of my three-year-old brother while most of my classmates traveled the United States and abroad, there's a good chance I won't feel connected to the assignment.

But consider another scenario. My teacher has raised this overarching question for the year: *What happens when we, or circumstances, interrupt our daily routines?* The class, as a group, has decided that, for the first few weeks, we'll focus on the way summer vacation interrupts the routine of school. In particular, we want to know what might be useful and what might be problematic about having time away from the rigors of school.

For a few class meetings in a row, we've been writing, sharing, and discussing—online and face-to-face—short bursts of writing about vacations that went bust, ones that surprised us, dream vacations, stay-at-home vacations, and the like. At the same time we've read fiction, nonfiction, and poetry devoted to taking time away, charting as we did what they told us about breaking routine. We've also

been exploring and then experimenting with the genres we've read, building on the shorter impromptu pieces. After a couple or three weeks, my teacher asks each of us to reflect upon what we've done by rereading not only what we've written, but also some of what others in class have shared. As we're reading, we're writing notes in margins or on sticky notes as we rediscover ideas that stand out to us, that make us think. Finally, we're told to develop an essay that's an argument about vacations and that springs from aspects of our accumulated work. After careful consideration of a few themes I've identified in my work, I decide to write about how not going to camp separates me from many of my friends, and how that decision by my parents—one predicated on short finances—has both disappointments and hidden rewards.

Back again in my role as teacher educator, I purposely chose to play with this shopworn assignment just to show that it's not the assignment, but the context that allows for greater possibilities for dialogical exploration. Given the context of questions and investigations into other texts, the theme, *How I spent my vacation*, takes on complexity and nuance. It also allows me to write about socioeconomic class issues in a way that is neither superficially frosted over nor one-sidedly moribund. Instead of reporting in a repetitious "and next" style, my writing about my summer becomes an exploration into that experience. It becomes a living conversation with myself as well as others.

## What to Expect

What I've written is just a taste of where this book is going. Better yet, unlike the vacation writing assignment—which I fabricated solely for this chapter but really would like to try—the remainder of the examples will be taken from classrooms of teachers who are engaged in a dialogue with their practices. Although I certainly admire them and they're justifiably proud of what they've accomplished to date, neither they nor I want you to see their examples as best practice.

In a dialogical classroom, practice is always subject to context and is forever in a state of becoming. Therefore, what the teachers share here is practice—messy, complex, thoughtful, inspired, limited, and full of potential. It is offered for the dialogue it will stimulate. It is suggested with the full understanding that it could be done differently. It is practice that we hope will be adapted and not adopted. It is one possibility among many.

My intent in this chapter has been to raise questions about and give tentative insights into the nature of dialogical writing. I have given you a taste of the opportunities and complexities of teaching writing from a dialogical stance. But it's only a taste. In Chapter 2, I address concerns that teachers frequently raise about enacting dialogical classrooms. Although I give credence to these legitimate issues,

I also argue for how we can develop means to move past them. Within this discussion, I highlight the principles and research that drive this work, as well as how all this connects to belief statements about writing developed by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

The next chapter is the first of three that illustrate what a dialogical stance on the teaching of writing might look like. This chapter asks what ways of thinking about and viewing classrooms do teachers need to develop to foster dialogue there. My concern is that, unless we as educators develop perspectives and ways of knowing that support dialogue, all other discussion on the subject is moot. To help readers cultivate these perspectives, I have coupled anecdotes from classrooms with discussions of the work of theorists, such as Rosenblatt, Freire, Bakhtin, Kamler, and Hermans and Kempen, whose work underpins taking a dialogical stance. The intent is to have the anecdotes animate the theory.

In Chapter 4, the focus is more attuned to the nuts and bolts of a dialogical classroom. Given what we know about the perspectives needed to create a dialogical space, what does this look like in terms of helping students learn about themselves while they also learn to craft their writing skills? Again, classroom anecdotes drive the discussion of the range of possible dialogic approaches. To better show the many facets of dialogical writing instruction, I've culled seven examples from a range of secondary classrooms, many of which are taught by teachers who have

had substantive experience with the National Writing Project. Particularly in this chapter, I describe successful dialogical projects that can be done in a few days or no more than two or three weeks.

Chapter 5 describes five extended dialogical projects and specifically sketches the ongoing dialogue between curriculum, teaching, and assessment that exists in literacy classrooms. In particular, I argue that some forms of assessment—for example, portfolios, multigenre projects, self-selected projects—foster an assessment process that is more dialogical than more traditional, one-off kinds of assessments. Additionally, a dialogical assessment process is one that is educative and invites the learner to play a more active role, thus seizing some of the power and responsibility that accompanies assessment.

The last chapter of the book has two purposes. The first is to discuss the implications

### Questions You Might Ask Yourself

- What does dialogue look like in a literacy classroom?
- What might teachers need to do and what perspectives might they need to cultivate to have their writing pedagogy better support a dialogical stance?
- How can an emphasis on dialogical writing enable students, whom school has marginalized, to feel that they and their cultures are more welcomed there?
- In what ways would a dialogical stance be crucial in an educational world in which too much writing practice seems driven by test scores and standardization?
- If I start to dialogue more with my students, will this open me to dialogical opportunities with colleagues, parents, and other educational stakeholders?

of this work: What does it mean for teachers, teacher educators, students, parents, administrators, and policymakers? Part of this discussion is the “so what” of taking a dialogical stance, but part of it is to provide all stakeholders with the responsibility and possible tools for engaging dialogue on the issues. The second purpose of this chapter is to remind readers of the existential and immediate need for this work and to argue that teaching writing in formulized ways for out-of-context, standardized writing tests hurts students, the teaching process, and, ultimately, our society. It’s my belief that the negative effects of narrow views of literacy, and how it should be taught, get doubled and tripled for students whom school and society has marginalized. We need to conceive and implement better ways, and we need to do so now.

I follow the chapters with two short bibliographical essays, both of which are intended to jump-start further reading about writing and writing classrooms. The first of these essays highlights books by writers reflecting on the writing process and includes reflections on their craft and art by writers as diverse as Flannery O’Connor and Eve Ensler, to name but two. The second bibliographical essay showcases books on the teaching of writing that I feel are worth the time tracking down, no matter what grade level you teach. For example, I discuss texts by Katie Wood Ray and George Hillocks, despite the fact that the former is focused on elementary students and the latter on adolescents. What matters most is that both books will inform your practice and enhance the writing of your students.

All of which leads us back to Ashley. If I think that she is cheating me and cheating herself by not engaging earnestly, intellectually, and emotionally in her writing for my course, I have to do more than blame her, blame all her former teachers, and/or blame a permissive society. I have to take responsibility. I have to engage her in dialogue about the content of the course and about the possibilities of developing understanding through writing. Maybe Ashley needs to do more to see and use writing as a dialogical act, but then, so do I. And that’s what the rest of the book seeks to do: provide the wherewithal to rethink our writing classrooms as dialogical spaces.

In the dialogical classroom, students use writing to explore who they are becoming and how they relate to the larger culture around them.

Dialogical writing

- Combines academic and personal writing;
- Allows writers to bring multiple voices to the work;
- Involves thought, reflection, and engagement across time and space; and
- Creates opportunities for substantive and ongoing meaning making.

How can we, as teachers, carve out space in our literacy classrooms for a more dialogical approach to writing? Focusing on adolescent learners, Bob Fecho argues that teachers need to develop writing experiences that are reflective across time in order to foster even deeper explorations of subject matter, and he creates an ongoing conversation between classroom practice, theory, and research to show how each informs the others. Drawing on *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*, this book illustrates the empowerment that can result from dialogical writing even as it examines the complications of implementing this approach in the classroom.

In this book, you will discover how to fashion a dialogical writing program that meets your and your students' needs. Fecho helps you get there by providing a window into the classrooms of middle and high school teachers who are engaged in a dialogue with their practices. You'll see how these teachers enact practice in different contexts, and you'll hear them explain the essentials of their teaching as they demonstrate how dialogical classrooms depend on context and are forever in a state of becoming. The dialogical classroom: often messy, complex, thoughtful, and inspired, but most of all, full of potential.

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