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Using Student Voices to Guide Instruction

Authors' Note: Coordinating author Susan E. Elliott-Johns is a teacher educator and researcher. She initiated both our group's participation in the symposium on student voices and this article, which shares research on innovative practice and suggests action/reflections for increased attention to student voices in contemporary classrooms.

Participation in an international symposium (Elliott-Johns, Booth, Puig, Rowsell, & Paterson, 2010) resulted from our informal research collaborative on the importance of student voices. During the symposium, we discussed building programs around student voices so that they are more engaged in, and actively contribute to, their own learning through conversations, responses, writing, and inquiries, thus promoting authentic discourse and influencing instructional design.

Research studies in process, classroom examples, filmed interviews with middle-level students, and technological support modules were presented and discussed. Our objective was to demonstrate how student voices can be incorporated into authentic classroom activities to strengthen student decision making, extend access to information, and increasingly offer choices in their literacy lives.

Carol Gilles's work (2010) underscores the rationale for meaningful classroom talk and highlights the purposes of integrating "talking to learn" across the curriculum. Furthermore, Gilles emphasizes the need for teachers to teach students explicitly how to use talk as part of effective learning processes; she reminds us that "Although we spend time each day learning how to read and write, little time is spent learning and practicing how to talk and listen" (p. 9).

We advocate for increased acknowledgement of *why* student voice matters, and *how* teachers can integrate opportunities to promote student voices across the curriculum.

Today, a growing body of literature identifies student voice as vital to education (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 2008; Chiaravalloti, 2010; Johnston, 2004; Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008). We advocate for increased acknowledgement of *why* student voice matters, and *how* teachers can integrate opportunities to promote student voices across the curriculum.

The development of student voice through dialogue and conversation is central to learning processes that require students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning—with the capacity for self-reflection. Furthermore, the development of personal agency must be actively supported in middle level and high school classrooms and can, we suggest, be effectively taught by integrating what Gilles (2010) refers to as *talking to learn* (p. 14) in the classroom experiences of teachers and students.

Four excerpts of our work shared here illustrate different explorations of student voices in contemporary classrooms: (1) student voices and instructional design; (2) intensive reading instruction with a hebegogic perspective (i.e., the position that learning and instruction with

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adolescents must be approached differently than with younger students; (3) artifactual literacies; and (4) drama talk and role-play. Each excerpt shares a reflection on attempts at innovative practice. Suggested questions for further action/reflection (Graves, 1991) follow each piece, but it is highly recommended that readers consider these only as "sparks" for generating their own questions, ideas, inquiries, and designs of classroom opportunities that actively engage student voices and promote authentic *talking to learn* moments in varied classroom contexts.

In my work with students and teachers, there is proof that, if we listen well, learners will open up because they trust we can make a difference in their lives at school. We have an obligation to honor their trust and address what they say in our instructional design.

Listening to Student Voices: Instructional Design

Jane Paterson is a system-level administrator, instructional leader, and researcher whose work supports teachers and students in learning design and development. She focuses here on the importance of listening to student voices.

We have much to say about ourselves as teachers and adult learners, about our preferences, interests, what we struggle with, and how we learn best. Under the right circumstances, students will articulate their understandings of themselves as learners in the contexts of instruction we design for them. The "right" circumstances include our urgent need to know our students—their interests, passions, strengths, and needs—and a commitment to use the information gathered to create responsive programs for unique learners.

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The artist in the class reflects, "I've found that nothing drives me to do good work better than being excited about that work." The young man, whose passion is racing off-road cars, says of himself, "I like more hands-on things. I have trouble focusing. If you're just writing things on the board, I'm most likely going to drift and not pay attention, whereas if you give me a task that I can sort of work at by myself or with other people, I'll get it done."

Action/Reflections: *How might consideration of these student voices impact our decisions when planning a program that is responsive to their interests, strengths, and needs?*

Why Student Voices Matter: A Hebegogic Perspective

Enrique Puig is a researcher/practitioner who takes a hebegogic perspective (i.e., approaching learning and instruction with adolescents quite differently than with students in the earlier grades). This perspective significantly influences his research on the importance of student voices in intensive reading instruction and, specifically, the role of imagination in reading with low-progress adolescents.

The term *hebegogy* is derived from Hebe, the Greek goddess of youth, and is the art, craft, and science of learning and instruction with adolescents (Puig & Froelich, 2011). A hebegogic perspective takes a transitional outlook of adolescents' learning and impacts the instructional interaction between students and teacher.

In any classroom, student–teacher interaction is a critical foundation for effective and efficient instruction (Darling Hammond, 1997). After years of students making minimal progress, attention to student–teacher interaction in intensive reading classrooms becomes even more paramount (Baker, 1999). Intensive reading classes provide additional reading instruction beyond language arts or English classes for students whose progress is categorized as "low" according to state standards in reading. In these classrooms, listening to student voices matters, paying attention to cognitive and physical development mat-

ters; these practices amplify instruction, promote accelerated learning, and close the much-publicized achievement gap (Haycock, 2001).

Hours of classroom observations and many conversations with middle level and high school teachers indicate that if instruction is to be amplified to support the acceleration of student learning, these teachers need to adopt a hebegogic perspective to learning and instruction, carefully evaluating the implementation of well-intended-but-not-necessarily-effective pedagogical practices with young adolescents. This shift in perspective can only occur by listening to and meaningfully evaluating student voices.

Actively listening to students involves accurately discerning their strengths and needs. For example, when instruction for adolescents is grounded in a hebegogic perspective, there are no primary-grade-level alphabetic "word walls" or "learning centers" with specific assignments; rather, there are intertextual theme word charts (e.g., content area vocabulary word charts, prefix word charts, etc.) and resource workstations (art workstation, writing workstation that includes word processing, etc). A teacher who listens to students and adopts a hebegogic perspective understands that, pedagogically, the use of primary-grade-level "centers" supports children in becoming self-monitoring, self-directing, and self-regulating, and that the use of alphabetic word walls in the primary grades (K–3) serves to promote early reference skills. The difference here is in the *terminology and purpose* of the instructional practice grounded in students' voices. The fact is, self-monitoring, self-directing, and self-regulating are all abilities that the majority of adolescent students bring to school, even in intensive reading classes. To adopt primary-grade-level pedagogical practices in middle level and high school—even when the alphabetic word wall is theme-based and the learning center incorporates computers with specific assignments—is to ignore student voices and promote the *lack* of motivation and interest for which adolescents have become infamous. On the other hand, an astute and observant middle school or high school teacher will listen and use student voices to implement age-appropriate hebegogical practices to support adolescent learning.

Listening to student voices to improve instruction should serve as a major guidepost for teachers of young adolescents. Vygotsky (1992) taught us that language is a tool for thinking. The question now becomes: can we use language to think about how we upgrade our own language to improve our thinking about literacy instruction? A good start is to look at the language we use among ourselves as teachers, the voices we use with students, and the voices students share with us. Not only do student voices matter, but the voices we use with students must also matter (Johnston, 2004).

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Action/Reflections: *What does a hebegogic perspective suggest we need to explore in terms of learning/teaching strategies? Classroom practices? The involvement of authentic student voices in learning activities? Our own teacher voices (and uses of language)?*

Finding Voice through Artifactual Literacies

Jennifer Rowsell researches how artifacts (everyday objects) access the daily sensory world in which students live, providing an entry point that recognizes and honors students' out-of-school identities (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). The methodology of Jennifer's ethnographic research focuses on a case study; she has conducted research in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This snapshot of her work demonstrates how encouraging students to write digital stories gives voice to these artifacts—and to the storytellers themselves.

Artifacts bring everyday life to students' writing. In many ways, artifactually based writing provides more voice than an exclusive focus on the written word. Artifacts are not so much multimodal as material, and bring culture to students' thinking and writing. Given its emphasis

on materiality, an artifactual approach to writing opens up definitions of writing to other modes of representation and expression. When a student connects to literacy and is asked to write a story, this is the end of a long process of meaning making that could begin in a different setting—the everyday. For example, s/he may love cars, and be obsessed with collecting them. This interest spills into a story about cars. This could then become crafted as a digital story, or written or narrated as a narrative text. School is one domain of practice, home another. By linking together the material everyday life of a student with narrative, domains of practice, home, and school can be linked, thus infusing more student voice and subjectivity into meaning making.

Teaching artifactual literacy is, above all, about finding voice, particularly for those students who do not feel a part of the classroom.

To contextualize how the artifactual gives voice, I offer an excerpt from a case study of Patsy Flores (pseudonym). From September through December 2008, I conducted research with a teacher-participant on designing digital stories with 20 grade nine students at a suburban New Jersey high school. Within the group, Patsy was a design-savvy student, so much so that other students went to her for advice and feedback about their designs. Patsy began her digital story with an artifact—one of her childhood rickrack dresses that signal her aspirations to be a famous clothes designer (see Fig. 1). After reading *The Odyssey* in English class, Patsy decided to depict her future journey into the world of fashion as her odyssey of self, beginning with the fitting artifact of her childhood rickrack dresses. Patsy produced a digital story that moved from her childhood dreams to a projected future of living in New York City and being a famous designer, like Chanel or Valentino. Her dressmaking was linked to the wider world of fashion.

Figure 1. Patsy's rickrack dress

The images of Patsy's dresses activated her memories of making dresses; the sensory world was evoked by the digital story of her childhood dresses, of their color and shape, of their modalities. Her dresses vary. They range from simple, child-like dresses with blue and white rickrack to much more ornate creations designed for parties. Each dress has a history that is tied to the color, the material, and the choices involved in making the dress.

Throughout the four-month unit, I came to understand the power of artifacts to open up new stories, to enable the telling of a story, and to create a space for listening, which gives students more voice. Teaching artifactual literacy is, above all, about finding voice, particularly for those students who do not feel a part of the classroom.

Action/Reflections: *(1)What does this piece suggest about the potential for explorations of teaching and learning with artifactual literacies in your own classroom(s)? (2) Douglas Barnes's work (Barnes, 1992) uncovered exploratory and presentational modes of talk. How might increased understandings of using talk during "rehearsal" stages of the writing process further students' own voices?*

Drama Talk: Finding Our Own Voices through Role Playing

David Booth is a professor emeritus, researcher, and author. He writes extensively about the importance of student voice in the language arts curriculum. In this

contribution, he explores the role of drama education in promoting student voices across the curriculum.

Drama may be an effective means of providing the types of speaking/listening situations that curriculum guides now demand from teachers. It can facilitate a wide variety of language uses in contexts that require full participation within an affective/cognitive/physical frame. This, in turn, promotes types of talk important to encouraging deep-level thought, such as expatiation, negotiation, clarification, explanation, persuasion, and prediction.

Drama's true role in language processing lies in the young adolescent being inside drama, inside the languaging experience, using it to make meaning, both private and public, in the "here and now dynamic." It offers the potential of abstract reflective thought at any given moment. In other words, drama allows participants to use language and thought within the context of the drama frame.

Role-play lets students leave the narrow confines of their own worlds and gives them entry into new forms of existence. At the same time, they must find a sense of their own relationships to this fictional life—the "me in the role" and the "role in me." When they participate in drama, students are in charge of building the dramatic experience through their actions and words. They become the drama, discovering ideas and directions that will surprise and change them. Because meanings are being made and not given, unexpected responses and language powers are discovered and engendered by the collective drive for group meaning.

The teacher contributes whatever is necessary to keep the learning productive—directing and focusing it from inside the group, but not dominating it. In that scenario, the teacher can be an "actual listener," not an "evaluator," thus accessing a whole new range of communication strategies and operating through a wider spectrum of roles beyond the traditional options of instructor, narrator, and side coach.

Being "in role" means that the young student is able to practice language codes that are very different from those dictated by society. The drama context sets up language demands that will vary from situation to situation. Both emotional and cognitive commitment, supported by the drama, will provide stimulus for language exploration, thus freeing the individual to try out a range of language possibilities and to further develop voice. Through interaction, students test their symbolic formulations against those of others. They express their ideas, in search of reflection and refinement. When students are developing their speaking abilities, the responses of their listeners are an important indicator of whether they have successfully communicated their messages.

Action/Reflections: *(1) What does this bring to mind in terms of Alexander's (2008) work on talk for dialogic classrooms, as predicated on five criteria (collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful)? (2) Barnes (2008) said, "The communication system that a teacher sets up in a lesson shapes*

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Learning to Use Voice in Writing

The concept of voice is often difficult for middle school students to incorporate into their writing. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan **Teaching Voice with Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*** provides a clear example of an author who created four specific voices. By reading and discussing the characters in Anthony Browne's picturebook, ***Voices in the Park***, students will gain a clear understanding of how to use voice in their own writing. Students begin by giving a readers theater performance of the book and then discussing and analyzing the voices heard. They then discuss the characters' personalities and find supporting evidence from the text and illustrations. Finally, students apply their knowledge by writing about a situation in a specific voice, making their character's voice clear to the reader.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/teaching-voice-with-anthony-167.html

the roles that the pupils can play, and goes some distance in determining the kind of learning that they engage in" (p. 2). How might increased opportunities for role-play enhance and extend students' own voices in your own classroom?

Final Thoughts

Gilles (2010) cites the issues of control and preparation as two central factors in teachers' reluctance both to harness students' natural tendencies to talk and to utilize talk in enhanced curricular learning. Despite a revival of curriculum integration in the 1990s and concerted efforts to find creative approaches for collaborative planning, Gilles makes an accurate observation relevant to both the US and Canada: ". . . content integration has been all but buried beneath the time-consuming task of preparing for standardized tests. Once again, subject areas are like silos, isolated from one another" (p. 13).

Students who know how to talk and think deeply in language arts will become proficient in using similar structures to create meaning and understanding across the curriculum.

"Talk throughout the curriculum" (Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008) is essential to boosting the role of student voice in *talking to learn*. Talk is an invaluable tool for learning and for communicating that learning. Students who know how to talk and think deeply in language arts will become proficient in using similar structures to create meaning and understanding across the curriculum.

As researchers and teacher educators, we believe teachers must maintain an active, self-reflective learning stance; we must continue working to recognize the critical role of intermediaries from outside the classroom on student learning and development. More collaborative research projects, conducted by researchers, teachers, and young adolescent students in contemporary classrooms, will offer enriched insights, heightened understandings, and myriad ways to honor student voices in classrooms—classrooms where innovative programs are indeed conducive to "making the most of talk."

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Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant's teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Proposals on which two or more K–12 classroom educators have collaborated are also welcome.

Applications for the Moffett Award must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the project (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the applicant and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2012 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2012**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.