

Spinning out of control: Dialogical transactions in an English classroom

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ABSTRACT: Using the experiences of Andy, a working class adolescent exploring his gay identity, and the dialogical and transactional relationship he developed with Kristi, his senior-year English teacher, we argue that the teaching of reading and writing must be seen as more than the learning of discrete skills to enable future employment. On the contrary, all transactions with texts should be viewed as providing learners with a range of ways to scrutinize their lives and the lives of others. We suggest that by taking a transactional and dialogical stance on the teaching of English, teachers and learners become inquirers into and ongoing co-constructors of their individual and collective selves. Through dialogue with others, they simultaneously dialogue with themselves, becoming agents in the continuing formation of their many cultural lives. Specifically, we use the experiences described herein to show the unique and necessary presence of dialogical transactions in the lives of Andy and Kristi and the range of possibility and consequence these transactions provoked.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent literacy, Bakhtin, dialogical transactions, English classrooms, identity, Rosenblatt, working class.

VIGNETTE ONE

Andy (all student names are pseudonyms) walks into senior English on the first day of class sporting his letterman's jacket. Little and squirrelly, blond hair sticking wildly in every direction, he is excited about his senior year of wrestling the 112-pound weight class. His face lights brightly when he notices that Jamal, a friend and fellow wrestler, is also in the class.

An early assignment for senior English is a reader autobiography. Students write about themselves as readers, describe books that have been meaningful to them, and explain their reading preferences. They have a few days to work on the pieces, which they eventually share with a small group of classmates, and then with me.

On the Friday that reader autobiographies are due, Andy does not attend class. He returns on Monday, seemingly nervous. After explaining the agenda for the day, I request that any late autobiographies be turned in before the end of class. On the way to lunch, Andy approaches my desk, paper in hand.

"Hey, Ms. A.," he says quietly. "I heard we have to share our papers with the class. And I don't want to. Mine's private."

I don't think much about his request and assure Andy that I will never require him to share something against his will. Slipping his autobiography into my briefcase with the others – I'll look at it later – I hurry away to lunch.

That evening, I pull the stack of autobiographies and read through them. Finally Andy's is at the top. His handwriting is tiny but not hard to read – neat and compact. As I read, I soon realize why Andy has been hesitant to share with his classmates.

“Then came my junior year. A lot of important things happened to me. One was that I got my first car, the second is that I would be turning 18 soon, but the most important thing was that finally, I came out to my parents and family; I also met my boyfriend. During this time in my life I started to read more about gay culture. My favourite book of all time is How I learned to snap...In the past I have considered myself to be a slow reader, but I finally figured out it was because I was reading things that were of no significance to me.”

“It's gonna be an interesting semester,” I think to myself.

BRINGING FOCUS AND PURPOSE

For us, one of the most fascinating aspects of classrooms is that they are dynamic, transactional spaces. As Pratt (1991) has indicated, classrooms are zones where languages and cultures cross borders and come into contact, where the many lives we live have the potential to mingle with the many lives of others. In the vignette that opens this article, Kristi, co-author of this work and Andy's former teacher, describes how the two of them, this early winter day, were poised for a dialogical relationship. In asking her students to write about their literate lives, Kristi presented an invitation for them to share facets of their polyphonic selves. Taking Kristi at her word, Andy revealed aspects of his identity and a culture that he was only beginning to investigate for himself.

However, one problem that Andy and others like him face is that many secondary English teachers don't open themselves to dialogical relationships. They worry that by validating students' personal searches for meaning, their own identities as teachers and the traditional culture of the classroom will spin out of their control and chaos will reign. Fearing this loss of control, teachers behave in ways that recognize only certain cultures and validate the identities of only certain students, primarily those who are White and come from homes where cultural and financial capital are the norm (Finn, 1999; Heath, 1983). The drive for standardization of assessment, curriculums, and even dress are, as Jensen (2004) noted, initiatives “to make sure students meet a set of standardized criteria so they will later be able to fit into a world that is itself increasingly standardized” (p. 5). As a result, assessment that is mandated with little local input or interpretation (Schultz & Fecho, 2005) drives curriculum and pedagogy, creating a narrow, primarily economic view of literacy (Coles, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Pressed to the wings of the educational stage, students who are marginalized for socio-cultural factors such as race, class, gender and sexual identity find it difficult to see themselves in the culture of school (Fecho, 2004; Hull & Schultz, 2002). Consequently, many opt out. For example, students in the US living in low-income families were at approximately four times greater risk to drop out of school than peers from high-income families (Laird, DeBell & Chapman, 2006).

To counter these trends, we must see the teaching of English differently. In the remainder of this article, we argue against teaching literature and composition as subjects unto themselves. Instead, we argue for teachers in English classrooms to situate the reading and creation of texts as ways of making meaning, as processes through which we develop an existential sense of ourselves as actors in larger social worlds. Through a theoretical framework anchored by the works of Rosenblatt, (1994, 1995), Bakhtin (1981), and Hermans and Kempen (1993), we indicate that, particularly for those learners whose lives are marginalized from the cultural centre, reading, writing, and other forms of expression are valuable media through which learners seek understanding of the expectations placed on them.

Using the experiences of Andy, a working class adolescent, and the dialogical and transactional relationship he developed with Kristi, his senior-year English teacher, we argue that the teaching of reading and writing must be seen as more than the learning of discrete skills to enable future employment. On the contrary, all transactions with texts should be viewed as providing learners with a range of ways to scrutinize their lives and the lives of others. We suggest that by taking a transactional and dialogical stance on the teaching of English, teachers and learners become inquirers into and ongoing co-constructors of their individual and collective selves. Through dialogue with others, they simultaneously dialogue with themselves, becoming agents in the continuing formation of their many cultural lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework upon which we drape this chapter is informed by Rosenblatt's (1994, 1995) transactional theory, Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogic theory, and the dialogical identity theories of psychologists Hermans and Kempen (1993). Our first intent is to establish dialogue across these theoretical perspectives in ways that are resonant among the perspectives themselves. We also provide a theoretical context for understanding the importance of seeing transactions with texts as attempts to take some control of one's life through the mutual shaping of reader/writer and text. Finally, we use these theories as a foundation for a concept we call dialogical transactions.

Rosenblatt and transactional theory

The concept of dialogical transactions is in direct reference to Rosenblatt's (1994, 1995) transactional theory of reading and writing. To Rosenblatt, a transaction is more complex than simply giving and receiving. Instead the term describes activity where context, both temporal and spatial, is considered and those persons or objects involved shape each other in ways that create new texts.

What does that mean? When we read, as Rosenblatt (1994, 1995) suggested, we are transacting with the text and new texts are created. Because each of us reads by bringing the whole of our experience to any text, all readers bring personal interpretations to all text. These interpretations may intersect with the interpretations of others or they may differ markedly. As Rosenblatt (1995) put it, "There are no generic readers or generic interpretations but only innumerable relationships between readers and texts," (p. 291). Most importantly, both the printed text and the reader as

text – as something to be interpreted and made meaning of – remain in a process of mutual shaping. Readers, through their interpretations, create original texts of the material before them and that material shapes them as they read. A parallel process occurs with writers who, in shaping a text, are being shaped by that text they are creating. Humans engaging with text are simultaneously always readers and writers of text, for in reading we write the text anew and in writing we are the first readers of that text.

Although Rosenblatt was primarily interested in transactions between readers and printed text, she conceded that humans are constantly transacting with their environment. Seeing such transactions through the Freirian (1983) lens of reading the world and the word argues for wider definitions of what counts as text. Consequently, how we read this wider range of texts results in a sense that we read everything around us and are in a constant process of transaction. Deciphering the sound of the ocean scattering shells on the shore, enjoying the smell of the first spatters of rain on a beach road, encountering storm flags ripped to attention in heavy gusts, chatting with a neighbour about gathering clouds, and examining a Doppler radar map streaming on a computer screen are, in our parlance, dialogical transactions. As such, they require us to simultaneously interpret the world around us and decide how that interpretation figures into our ongoing creation of self.

Bakhtin and dialogue theory

We argue that the work of Bakhtin dovetails well with that of Rosenblatt. As the Russian language scholar indicated, “language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Akin to the way meaning can be widely interpreted in Rosenblatt’s concept of transactions, language in a Bakhtinian (1981) world remains in flux, tugged between opposing tensions in a process he called heteroglossia, literally different tongues. In this process, centripetal forces pull language toward the centre, seeking stability and unification. Construed benignly, such forces foster communication because they allow large numbers of language users access to a language that remains constant and undergoes little change. However, at their most malevolent, such forces become the tools of oppressive regimes that, through control of the language, seek also to control flexibility of thought. Stripped of personality and fluidity, language becomes, as Bakhtin noted a “dead, thing-like shell” (p. 355).

Conversely, the opposing force of heteroglossia is centrifugal, urging language away from centre toward variety and individuality. In a positive light, centrifugal forces allow for language users to find themselves in and have input into the language, creating a personal connection. However, when too much individualism and flexibility occurs, the language loses commonalty and the result is diminishing degrees of communication. The language becomes so closely identified with such a discrete group of speakers that it no longer fulfils the need for wider understanding.

Bakhtin (1981) suggested that a healthy state of language exists at the point where the centrifugal and centripetal forces intersect. As he noted, every speaking turn or writing task “serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear”, where they “intersect in the utterance” (p. 272). He elaborated: “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and

tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (p. 272, parentheses in the original). The upshot of this transaction is that language remains fluid and, to an extent, in conflict. What individual and combinations of words mean is entirely dependent upon the context in which they are uttered or written.

Perhaps most importantly, Bakhtin (1981) argued that understanding comes in response, that the two are contingent upon each other. Utterance, response, and meaning – the building stones of dialogue – are merged in a recursive, continual and transactional process. There can be no meaning without response. There can be no response without future response. All who engage in language use are linked eternally by our innumerable past, current and future responses. Ultimately, “our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, and artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggles with others’ thoughts” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92).

Hermans and Kempen and the dialogical self

Using Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as a base, Hermans and Kempen (1993) argued that the self, primarily constructed through language, is a “highly contextual phenomenon” (p. 78) that remains dynamic. They suggested that an individual’s identity continually undergoes centripetal and centrifugal tension, that it is subject to both unifying and individualizing forces simultaneously. They further argued that these tensions are necessary for an identity, that we need as individuals to represent ourselves in some unified way to the world, yet need to also allow for dialogue among a range of identities in order to remain in vital transaction with the world around us. When one identity becomes dominant, the static circumstance creates a monological personality, devoid of options for social interaction. On the other hand, when there is no dialogue present among a range of sub-identities, a schizophrenic state exists. Desired, instead, is an identity that strikes a working and fluctuating balance between unification and dialogue, one in which the person has a sense of self that remains in conversation with a sense of other.

Who we are – for example, European American, child of working-class parents aspiring toward middle-class status, adolescent male who has embraced literacy, wrestler, gay teen – is a complicated mix of selves that is presented as a whole in the social worlds we inhabit even as various identities within us dialogue. Hermans and Kempen (1993) further explained that power relations mark the transactions among our many selves and between that polyphonic self and social worlds. They indicated that, “The more symmetrical the dialogue is, the more it provides opportunity for mutual influence; the more asymmetrical it is, the more it constrains the exchange of views and experiences” (p. 78). In short, who we are depends on where we are and how we have constructed ourselves to date.

Furthermore, Hermans and Kempen (1993) go on to state that these power relations are carried out between the self and others, creating dialogue marked by “intensive transactional relationships” (p. 78). Although arguing that clear boundaries between the outside world of families, schools, places of worship and the like and the inner world of the self are artificial at best, they acknowledge that the dialogue that occurs in the contact zone between self and context shapes both. It is in this dialogue where what Hermans and Kempen labelled as *dominance relations* in the outside world

“organize also the inside world” (p. 78), alternately approving and disapproving stances taken by the many identities within us. We would argue that, to varying degrees of effect, the inside world serves to also organize the outside world.

Dialogical transactions

Looking across the works of Rosenblatt, Bakhtin, and Hermans and Kempen, we coalesce the concept of dialogical transactions: life events steeped in language and literacy that, through their dialogical nature, mutually shape self and other. We argue that from such transactions comes meaning – a restless, transient, ephemeral meaning that is contingent on context and inclined toward its next iteration. But it is meaning nonetheless. As Bakhtin (1986) reminded us, “*meaning* is always dialogic. Even understanding itself is dialogic” (p. 121, italics in the original).

In the heteroglossic blur of these dialogical transactions where language, response, and meaning routinely engage, marginalized learners try to define space for themselves that helps them establish a foothold in the dominant culture without subsuming too many of the more individualistic selves within them. So too, teachers, tugged between the authoritative voice of standardized teaching and assessment and their own inclinations to engage with students and their lives in the classroom, seek to make meaning of a complicated pedagogy. Teachers and learners alike try to retain some recognizable sense of self even as that self is in process. In doing so, they, to varying degrees of intentionality and effect, shape the dialogues they enter.

DESCRIBING THE STUDY

Andy was one of six participants in a study of attitudes of adolescent boys who had embraced literacy and had been raised in working-class families. By *working class*, Bob, the other author on this paper and the person who first imagined the study, meant that the parents held jobs in the service, manufacturing, agriculture or business industries, for which they had little say as to their job description, the conditions of their employment, and the future direction of that business. Using this definition, an electrician who ran his own business would not consider himself working class, although an electrician who was employed by a manufacturing firm to service their machines would. Although how much money one makes and what one values certainly figure into any discussion of what counts as being of the working class, ultimately for Bob, a position for which a worker has little power over the circumstances of that position is frequently the deciding factor. Although we suspect there are readers who would contest this definition, we can’t imagine any definition of *working class* that would stand uncontested.

By the phrase *embracing literacy for their own purposes*, Bob meant that he was looking for young men who routinely read books and/or other print and electronic media and/or routinely wrote via traditional pen and paper media and/or electronic media as a means of making sense of their contexts and their identities within those contexts. More briefly, they read or composed outside the classroom because they had need to do so.

Co-researchers

To initiate the study, Bob recruited four area teachers – all teacher consultants with whom he had working relationships due to their common involvement in the Red Clay Writing Project, a local site of the National Writing Project, a long-established, professional learning initiative in the United States. These teachers – Kristi being one of them – volunteered to participate in the study and were given the charge noted earlier. Beyond identifying students Bob could approach, the teachers' responsibilities were to act as liaisons among the students and their parents and Bob, and to be part of the data-gathering team. They would send weekly email vignettes about the student(s) they identified, discussing some event in the classroom that they felt gave insight into the student's literacy experience.

Data set and data analysis

In addition to the weekly email vignettes sent by the identifying teachers, the data set, collected from January to May of 2004, consisted of two 45-90 minute interviews – one at the start and one near the end of the data collection period – conducted individually with four of the participants (Andy being one); one 45-90 minute interview conducted individually with two of the participants; field notes of monthly observations of each student; weekly listserv discussions among the students, frequently prompted by Bob; weekly individual questions asked and responded to via email; and occasional writing artefacts volunteered by the young men. By capturing the experiences of these students through a variety of methods, media, and perspectives, Bob gained a data set that was triangulated and rich in possibility. To enhance the triangulation, Bob invited two graduate students – co-author Kristi, as well as Sarah Skinner – to help analyse and report the data.

After multiple readings of the data, general themes were identified: (1) measuring the gap between one's own and the dominant culture, (2) being centrifugal to an aspired-to peer culture, (3) filling existential needs, and (4) improvising within social worlds. At this point, the team began to write the data (Richardson, 1994) as a means of making understanding of those themes more complex, using multiple and wide-ranging manuscript drafts filtered across several years to enrich our dialogue on the data. For this article, Kristi focused on five vignettes she wrote about her teaching relationship with Andy, rewriting the originals to better enable reading by those unfamiliar with her context and to deepen and nuance her already complex understandings of these dialogical transactions. Because the rewritten vignettes best illustrate these transactions, they are the focus of analysis in this paper.

Limitations of this study

This work is based on six, focused studies conducted in a limited amount of time: one semester. Like all focused work, it is unwise to make generalizations for large populations from them, although we would argue that such holds true for all research. Regardless, there is no attempt to argue that what we have come to understand about the dialogue between Kristi and Andy is the same for all teachers and their working-class, male students. Nor do we argue that the teaching practices described by Kristi are in any way "best practice". They are simply the practices that she was able to enact at the time the data were collected. That said, we do argue that the experiences

detailed here and the understanding we derived from these experiences give us insight into the larger considerations of what can and might transpire among teachers and working class students, and what they could mean for classrooms.

By looking closely at specific, dialogical transactions of one adolescent male – Andy – and his teacher – Kristi – we put faces on the theory. In particular, in terms of Kristi, we indicate the ways these dialogical transactions caused her to bring her practice into focus and to reconsider her pedagogy. If thought and action mutually inform, then this section vitalizes the substantive, but somewhat abstract discussion to this point, even as it points toward the understandings and challenges to come. Specifically, we use the experiences described herein to show the unique and necessary presence of dialogical transactions in their lives and the range of possibility and consequence these transactions provoked.

THE TEACHING CONTEXT

In some respects, Andy was situated in the mainstream culture of the small, but growing city in which he lived. Being White, male, and a successful athlete on a school team brought him much social capital. However, Andy was thrice marginalized, at least as far as the world beyond the school figured into the equation. Being raised in a working-class family and attending an urban, public, high school worked against the accrued social capital described above. Perhaps most significantly, Andy's third degree of marginalization came from his tentative attempts at coming out as gay to his family and peers.

Fortunately for Andy, he landed in Kristi's English class in the last semester of his senior year. As Vignette One indicates, Kristi invited students to share some aspects of their literate lives and Andy responded with sketchy, but telling details about his exploration of sexual identity. Through a series of writings and conversations – mutually shaping, literacy-based learning events that we are calling dialogical transactions – teacher and learner developed their relationship around a variety of texts. Recorded in vignettes that Kristi shared with the research team, these transactions give insight into the ways Andy used literacies in and out of school to investigate his sexual identity. They also provide a sense of how Kristi used this dialogue to critique and then rethink her practice. As we discuss each vignette, Bob is the lead writer on the analysis of Andy's participation, while Kristi is the lead writer when discussing what the dialogue meant for her practice. In each case, those sections will be written in the author's voice.

At the time that Kristi met Andy, she was looking to increase student opportunities to engage in dialogical transactions in her practice. She struggled between providing spaces for students to seek out more authentic and interrelated reading and writing practices – requiring them to choose books to read independently and asking them to write about events that mattered in their lives – and yielding to institutional constraints of state-mandated assessments, prescribed curricula and heavy-handed administrative policies. Though Kristi worked in a school where she was fortunate to have supportive colleagues and to be part of an extended professional network through the National Writing Project, she questioned how to negotiate the multiple, and often contradictory demands, placed on her as teacher. The school where Kristi

taught was often described by those outside the school as a “tough place to teach”, and many of her students had few incentives to make school learning a priority. Though she tried to build supportive classroom communities, sought to see the potential of each student and to connect with students through sharing her own life experiences, she often bowed to the centripetal forces pulling toward a model of school that standardized learners and teachers, as the next vignette suggests.

VIGNETTE TWO

For the past ten days, my senior classes have been muddling their way through Macbeth. On day one, we start out by writing about whether we believe humans are endowed with the capacity to see the future. After discussing our thoughts, we read the opening scenes of the play together, focusing on the witches and their predictions for Macbeth and Banquo. I want the students to get hooked into the story before they tackle reading portions of the play in small groups or on their own.

In order to read the first scene aloud, I need students who are willing to take parts. This sometimes takes a bit of arm-twisting. In third period, Andy reluctantly agrees to read the role of one of the witches. During the reading, Andy’s normally exuberant voice becomes very quiet, almost imperceptible, but he sticks with it and finishes the part. After the reading, I hear a sigh of relief.

While we’re reading as a class, I frequently stop student readers to ask questions and explain passages that are tough for modern readers to understand. During these exchanges, I look around the room, attempting to make eye contact with each student in an effort to either pique or sustain his/her interest. Andy usually has a look of puzzled concentration on his face during these times, and he rarely answers questions that I pose to check student comprehension.

In stark contrast, he approaches my desk on Friday with a huge smile replacing the bewilderment prompted by the class reading of Shakespeare. He has just visited the library and returned with a book tucked neatly against his chest.

“What’d ya find?” I quiz him the same way I do any student who returns from the library with a new book.

*“One of the books I asked the librarian to order finally came in.” Excitement fills his voice as he hands me a novel entitled *Geography Club*, a young adult novel about gay teens.*

*As I read the summary on the back of the book, Andy keeps talking, his words rushing out in a torrent. “I also asked for *Rainbow Boys*. Ms. S. said it should be in soon. I was hoping it would come before spring break, but I guess I’ll have to wait. I heard it’s really good.”*

“Enjoy your break,” I say.

Bob discusses Andy and Vignette Two

As Hull and Schultz (2002) have shown, students frequently have literate lives that slip under the radar of school. Andy is no exception. Perhaps both intimidated and put off by Shakespeare and having to read aloud, he cooperates in class, but appears disinterested and even perplexed. His normally outgoing self is reined in and reading is more a chore than an engagement. Despite Kristi’s attempts to support struggling readers, Andy, possibly worried that he won’t know the right answer, opts out of her comprehension checks. As noted in Vignette One, he has had over eleven years of

seeing himself as an inadequate reader and this assignment seems to conform to that image as it reifies a description of school as being more monological than dialogical.

In contrast to the student disinterested in *Macbeth*, the Andy that rushes to Kristi's desk with a book he sought in the library is wide-eyed and exuberant. He not only opens himself to printed text, but actively seeks it out, petitioning the librarian to track down certain texts. Rather than being reluctant to share his sense of the book, Andy, prompted by Kristi's sincere interest and conversational tones, eagerly and fluidly informs Kristi about his choices. In this dialogical transaction, he has become the knower and she the novice.

Kristi addresses Vignette Two

In the class Andy was taking, British Literature/Composition, the expectation was that students would read a Shakespearean tragedy – either *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*. Each year I taught one of the two texts, bending to the centripetal forces that told me I must, and each year I wondered, why do students need to read this now? As an accomplished adult reader, I see the richness and multiple entry points that such plays provide readers, but helping 17-year-old, struggling readers to see them was an almost insurmountable task. I suggested a variety of reading strategies, attempted to make connections to contemporary events that students better understood, provided “translation keys” that modernized Shakespeare's language. Yet nothing seemed to help. Students were bored, and so was I.

The differences in Andy's response to *Macbeth* versus his response to *Rainbow Boys* crystallized my frustrations with the way I was asking students to engage with the requisite reading of canonical British texts. If I wanted students to act as engaged readers, why couldn't I recognize and reward reading they found meaningful? If students read texts with which they could transact, ones where, as Rosenblatt (1995) posits, they brought as much of themselves to the text as they took away from it, the struggles with reading “strategies” disappeared. Students dialogued with books that mattered, shaping both the texts and themselves in the process. And teachers were afforded the luxury of moving away from the role of task-masker and toward the role of co-inquirer. Vignette Three points us in that direction.

VIGNETTE THREE

As we continue our study of Macbeth, I ask students to write a journal entry in response to a prompt I provide for them. Before we tackle the end of the play, I want students to think about the kind of political leader Macbeth becomes over the course of the play and to compare him with modern political leaders. This writing prompt can sometimes lead to an enlightening discussion of modern politics, which is especially appropriate for seniors, many of whom will be voting in their first presidential election in November.

Andy responds to this prompt by making it his own. He starts out by writing, “I think that all the political leaders of today are trying to get into office just to try and make more money. I also think that elections are just a big popularity contest. I can't really put into words what I mean, so I will write about a topic that has been in the news quite a bit and it will affect my future. That is the issue on same sex

marriages.” He then writes a full page about an incident in which he argues with his parents after they watch a television news report focused on our State’s proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriages. He finishes by writing, “I really don’t care if you can get married to certain people; I was just trying to make a point.”

At the bottom of the entry, Andy writes: “*Please hold this paper and give it directly to me. I don’t want the wrong people to see it.”

Bob discusses Andy and Vignette Three

Someone once told me that students are always on task; it’s just not always your task. In this vignette, Andy, in a purposeful way (“*I can’t really put it to words what I mean, so I will write about a topic that...will affect my future*”) decided to make Kristi’s assignment work for him. Part of the motivation for the switch could have been lack of knowledge of the text – I know he wasn’t enthusiastic about *Macbeth* – but, regardless, he seized the moment to share an incident that must have upset him. Unable to bring a satisfactory close to the dialogue he had with his parents on gay marriage, Andy decided to both vent, and also engage Kristi in the discussion, while simultaneously ensuring her confidence. Such a move on the part of a student is most likely built on a relationship of trust; his belief that she will both accept his topic shift and respect the confidentiality. Furthermore, both Andy and Kristi, through a series of ongoing responses, were crafting meaning for themselves.

Kristi addresses Vignette Three

My confidential relationship with Andy developed through our dialogical transactions. These transactions occurred not only when the two of us talked, in off-hand moments, about books that caught Andy’s interest, like *Rainbow Boys*, but also through formal school writing. Andy managed to fulfil the assignments for my class, while simultaneously tugging them in a centrifugal direction. These shifts away from centre forced another pedagogical question for my consideration: If my goal was for students to write, why did the subject of their writing matter?

What was my purpose? Was it for students to write on the topics that fit the centripetal dialogue of school? Was it to prepare students for high-stakes testing in which they would be expected to fit the mould of state-sanctioned writers? Or was it for students to use writing as a way to make meaning of their complicated histories and ever-shifting identities? Transacting with Andy’s writing forced me to consider pedagogical questions that were easily pushed to the background among the competing demands of teaching. By accepting Andy’s personal take on the assignment and giving it the stamp of official school approval in the form of a grade, I walked a tightrope between fulfilling the requirements of my state-paid job and encouraging students to explore and make sense of their worlds through writing.

VIGNETTE FOUR

On Friday, I give students time to read independently or get caught up on missing assignments. Several students are buried in their books, a cluster finishes an assignment from earlier in the week, and others visit the library to look for new reads.

With all four library passes already distributed, I don't have one to give Andy when he approaches my desk. He is carrying a three-ring binder, the thick 3" size, held closely against his chest.

"Well, can I read in the hall then?" Usually I would issue an automatic denial. Our administrators frown on unsupervised students working in the halls.

"Why do you need to work in the hall?"

Andy opens his binder to display a book tucked inside the interior pocket. The title reads Someone is watching.

"It's the one I was telling you about – the one about the high school wrestler. Remember? I just don't want anyone to see me reading it. That would be hard to explain." He tempers the excitement in his voice so that other students don't notice.

Then he slips the book discreetly across my desk so that I can read the back cover.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt for you to sit on the bench. But this will be an exception, not a rule. Got it?"

Twenty minutes later, Andy knocks on the door, signalling that he is ready to rejoin the class. I motion him over to my desk and ask what he thinks of the book so far, expecting the same level of subdued excitement as when he left the classroom.

"I'm not sure," he hesitates for several seconds. "It's kinda offensive."

"Do you think the author is trying to grab his readers' attention by shocking them?"

"I dunno. I've read like 40 pages, and....well, it's pretty rough. The boy in the book keeps getting these notes. And, they're dirty. Here, look at one."

He shows me a page from the book that contains one of the notes the main character is receiving. "See?" he asks as I read. "I'm not sure if I want to keep reading."

I seize the opportunity to re-emphasize the idea that it's okay to abandon a book if it doesn't meet our expectations.

Andy decides he'll give the book one more chance. I wonder if he will.

Bob discusses Andy and Vignette Four

What stands out about this vignette is the way Andy is able to bring critique to his self-selected reading. He is not a naïve consumer uncritically validating all he chooses to read. Despite his pursuit of this book and its appropriateness to his own life situation, Andy finds it too sexually explicit. He has taken time to sample forty pages, but doesn't feel comfortable continuing. Quite unlike what she might have done with a classroom assignment, Kristi suggested that good readers don't always finish every book they start. Importantly, the two of them used classroom time to act increasingly like two friends having a chat about books at a coffee shop rather than taking the inquisitor/rote responder roles seen all too frequently in too many literature classrooms. Despite the more relaxed tone, Andy's need to keep his sexual identity secret kept the subject of their discussion discreetly between them.

Kristi addresses Vignette Four

During our under-the-radar conversations about the books Andy read to fulfill his independent reading assignment, I was able to perform as a different kind of teacher than when I interacted with the whole class around a canonical text like *Macbeth*. In this one-on-one setting, I could more easily model the habits of an accomplished

reader. My expertise mattered to Andy here, and through our dialogical transaction, each of us learned something new. My lesson was hard-learned. Students rarely have the chance to abandon books that teachers assign. A test looms at the end, and attached to that test, a grade, a credit, a chance to graduate high school and move on with life. By removing the option to not finish a book, teachers demonstrated something other than a “real” reading practice. What have students learned when individual agency is disrespected?

I made another important choice during this transaction. Not only did I support Andy’s questioning of the status quo, I became a subversive myself, challenging a school policy in order to provide what I considered the best learning environment for my student. In this way, I succumbed to centrifugal, individualizing forces, spinning away from centre, allowing Andy to move further from the unifying pressures of school and more toward a literacy practice that actually taught him something of personal importance.

VIGNETTE FIVE

Curious to know if he’s still reading Someone is Watching, I call Andy over and initiate a conversation. We’re sitting on opposite sides of the table, facing each other. Sensing that I’m planning to ask about his current reading, he’s brought over a blue paperback that has a photograph on the cover.

“Whatcha reading?” I ask, looking at the title, Prayers for Bobby and the image of a young man with his arm around a middle-aged woman.

“It’s this true story about a guy named Bobby written by someone else. That’s a...a biography, right?” He looks at me for approval of his use of literary terminology.

I smile my approval. “Yeah. A biography.”

“He was gay, and his parents were really religious – worse than mine – and they wanted him to get healed from being gay. His mama put a lot of pressure on him until he finally killed himself. But they didn’t think he had been planning it ‘cause he had just bought a new mattress and a bunch of other things, so it’s like a mystery what made him finally decide to do it.”

“He didn’t leave a note?”

“No. He just did a back-flip off this highway overpass and landed on the back of a semi-truck. It killed him instantly.”

“Whoa. That’s heavy,” I say.

“But the cool thing is that after he died, his mama decided to change. She goes around the country now speaking out about gay teens and how they need support and all.”

“Oh, so at least something positive came out of his life and death.”

“Yeah. That’s what made me like this book so much. And ‘cause Bobby seems a lot like me. Not like the suicide part, but just the family issues.”

“So you’re finished with this already? You read it quickly.”

“Yeah. I got so into it I couldn’t put it down.”

“Does this mean you decided not to finish Someone is watching”. I remind him of the book we last chatted about.

“Yeah. I might start it again later. But not now. It just doesn’t feel right.”

The bell chimes, and we all start the dance of getting ready for the next class. As I straighten up rows of desks, Andy scampers back to his corner to throw his books and papers into his backpack. On the way, he almost bumps into DaQuan, another student in the class who is rushing through the door, back from a trip to the library. He holds a copy of Rainbow Boys, one of the books Andy had asked the librarian to order.

“That’s a good book,” Andy says quietly to DaQuan as he heads out the door for another day.

Bob discusses Andy and vignette five

Although this vignette illustrates several points, I will focus on two I consider key. First, the dialogue between Andy and Kristi was fairly relaxed and the relative distance between the traditionally defined roles of teacher and student were somewhat bridged. For example, he talked and again she responded in casual ways about how the subject of the book committed suicide. Still, I detected the heteroglossic play of language occurring here, the more central tug of the formal classroom jostling with the more centrifugal, individualistic informality. In particular, Andy seemed to be trying on usage, checking with his teacher if his calling the text a biography was correct, before more confidently using it subsequent to her affirmation. The dialogue, especially from Andy’s stance, was seen as having immediate purpose, as commenting upon current and shifting conceptions of self rather than some far-away and probably not even hoped for identity as literary scholar.

Also, this vignette showed how Andy’s dialogue with the young adult literature he was reading shaped the decisions he was making about how much to expose himself to fellow classmates and, indeed, to the world. The literature he read was transacting with life, helping him to use his experiences with a range of texts to compose an identity and keep that composition a work in progress. And those transactions informed the ways in which Andy was able to discuss a text that was useful to him – *Prayers for Bobby* or *Rainbow Boys* – as opposed to ones culled from the literary canon that were read but not put to work in his life. Andy was making sense of himself and his experiences through reading. He was rehearsing future performances, reconstructing the cultures he knew. The comment made to DaQuan, an openly gay student, in the moment when the classroom was almost empty, indicated to us Andy’s pushing of the boundaries. He used transactions with texts to improvise on the edges of identity by, yet again, trying on newly constructed facets in ways that felt somewhat secure and in control to him. Over the course of the semester, Andy had more closely meshed his inside and outside school literacies so that both were in service of his ongoing identity construction.

Kristi addresses vignette five

In this dialogical literacy transaction, the distance between Andy’s identity as student and mine as teacher became, as Hermans and Kempen describe it, more symmetrical. Though my power as teacher could never be completely diminished, Andy and I conversed about *Prayers for Bobby* easily. These transactions around Andy’s self-sponsored literacy were far more provocative to both of us than the transactions that occurred during “normal” class time. Even so, Andy was able to demonstrate his knowledge of literary terminology (that is, biography) in a setting that was low-stakes

yet meaningful for him as learner. All of a sudden this literary term mattered as something more than a correct answer on a test.

Based on these dialogical transactions with Andy, I was forced to rethink several aspects of my approach toward teaching literature and composition. What is essential for students to know and do? How can my teaching goals be best met? How might the roles of teacher and student shift, making symmetrical relationships more the norm in high school classrooms? My relationship with Andy left me with these questions and more. How would I change as a teacher based on what I'd learned from Andy?

UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGES

In trying to understand Andy through these vignettes, we saw a young man who, despite or perhaps owing to his various marginalisations, was actively constructing facets of his polyphonic identity through dialogical transactions. He felt compelled to read and write with the intent of better understanding himself in terms of larger social worlds around him. Using both formal and informal constructs of school as a means for identity exploration, Andy saw the need to transact with text in multiple ways. He sought to continually engage in ongoing dialogue about how he felt marginalized and what such marginalisation meant for his ongoing identity construction. However, as we argued above, Andy is more the exception than the norm among working-class families.

To counter these trends, we urge teachers to engage in dialogical transactions, much as Kristi did, to see the teaching of English as an opportunity to support adolescent existential explorations. She embraced the idea that the texts we encounter shape us as we shape them, and, as such, these dialogical transactions within classrooms take on immediate and enduring existential importance. The acts of reading, writing, listening and speaking become ways of making meaning and the intention no longer becomes teaching the literary canon or even young adult novels as texts with discrete knowledge contained within the pages. Instead, the purpose becomes using those and other texts to help teachers and students make sense of the many complex, social worlds within which they transact. Importantly, the more someone becomes self- or other marginalized, the more necessary it becomes for him or her to use dialogical transactions to make meaning of the marginalisation. In the making of meaning, the need to improvise and act upon the meaning making becomes critical. Without proactive measures on one's behalf, the reflection remains somewhat distant, sterile and ineffectual.

At the start of this article, we offered the observation that many teachers fear a loss of control. They accept if not embrace many centralized efforts at standardization because such efforts create a space where little variation in subject matter and response occurs. When the expectation for student response is primarily to give back information previously supplied by the teacher or a text, then classrooms maintain a certain pace and comfort for teachers beset by calls to teach and test with regularity and conformity. In this manner, teachers maintain control over students, principals maintain control over teachers, superintendents over principals, and so on.

To break this hegemonic chain, we suggest that teachers spin out of control. Generally, the thought of spinning out of control has negative connotations. Calamity,

it is thought, can only follow such an event. But we suggest that perhaps the only way for teachers to escape the centralized and standardized curriculums, pedagogies and assessments is to spin out of that control. Until teachers and teacher educators see the ways response, and thus meaning, are controlled via centralized and standardized means, we can't imagine ways to open the dialogical possibilities of response.

As Kristi and Andy illustrated, engaging in dialogical transactions allowed them to gain new insight in the respective identities they were building. For Andy, dialogical transactions with Kristi helped to enlarge his sense of self as a reader and writer as well as contribute to the deliberate construction of self as a gay teen. As he wrote in a final paper for Kristi in response to a Nadine Gordimer short story, "This just goes to show you what you lose when you let something like fear rule over you....Anyone can see that if you let fear run your life you can never be happy." So too, Kristi's ongoing construction of herself as a literacy teacher was, at least to an extent, built upon her ongoing dialogical transactions with Andy and her willingness, like Andy, to show some gumption in terms of pulling her practice away from the centring forces of standardization. This leaves us with a perhaps odd, but still fitting question: given the experiences of Andy and Kristi, why aren't more teachers spinning out of control, the better to engage their students in personal and meaningful, existential explorations?

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