

**UNVEILING THE AUTHORITATIVE VOICE:  
THE EFFECT OF A DIALOGIC STANCE IN A TECHNICAL COLLEGE  
COMPOSITION CLASS**

**by**

**SEAN JOSEPH MCAULEY**

**(Under the Direction of Bob Fecho)**

**ABSTRACT**

In the current state of writing education, our prescriptivist, statistically-driven definitions of literacy squelch the life-affirming power of self-expression through literate acts. Moreover, such rigid exclusivism is spirit-dampening and inauthentic with regards to democratic principles of expression. Yet, we seem to be caught in this pedagogical maze of authoritarian tradition. Thus, in this practitioner study of my own writing classroom, I adopt a dialogic pedagogical stance based in the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Freire (1970, 1992, 1998) in order to promote student voice and negotiate the writing curriculum. Through this research, I seek to widen the lens on the definitions of teacher, learner and writing in the composition classroom. Likewise, I seek to promote a more democratic view of education in general.

**INDEX WORDS:** Education, Composition, English, Technical College, Social Constructionism, Language, Dialog, Democracy, Bakhtin, Freire, Qualitative Interview Research

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**SEAN JOSEPH MCAULEY**

**BA, Kennesaw State University, 2002**

**MA, University of Georgia, 2005**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**ATHENS, GEORGIA**

**2010**

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**SEAN JOSEPH MCAULEY**

<b>Major Professor:</b>	<b>Bob Fecho</b>
<b>Committee:</b>	<b>JoBeth Allen</b>
<b>Janette</b>	<b>R. Hill</b>

**Electronic Version Approved:**

**Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
August 2011**

## **DEDICATION**

To Rita, your family was your life's study, and you were brilliant. Thank you for your love.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you, Lord, for bringing me to this place and carrying me through. Thank you most of all for my patient, sweet and loving wife who has worked full-time and doubled as super-mom throughout this time.

Thank you, Bob, for your excellent direction, advice and encouragement, and thanks for working with me despite my ghost-like tendencies. Thanks also, JoBeth and Janette, for your support and insight. Working with the three of you has been a joyful challenge.

Thank you, Jennifer, for being so understanding and for giving me all the time I needed to work. You are a gift from God, and I could not have done this without you. Thanks to my wonderful family for listening to me go on and on about education, and thanks to Dad for the condo and the cash. Last, thank you, Sena and Asa, for giving me so much laughter, happiness and peace in the middle of such a whirlwind. I love you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“It’s all on your mercy,” said Audrey. Various snickers and laughs around the group seconded the motion.

“My mercy?” I laughed and looked at her, incredulously. After six weeks together in our dialogic English classroom, did she really still see me as a judge? Did they all?

“At the mercy of the court,” I quipped, hoping she would qualify or reconsider her view.

“Well, that’s what it is,” She replied flatly.

Audrey was serious. As far as she was concerned, the valuation of her writing and her academic fate, at least in this class, rested on my opinion. Like a defendant awaiting sentence before the judge, she stood silent. Her perspective shocked me.

Looking back, I suppose I should not have been as surprised as I was. As an English Composition teacher in my fifth year at the city’s technical college, I had become accustomed to a good portion of the students placing me in this role. In fact, I had even played it from time to time, early on. In addition, I wasn’t just a teacher, but I was an English teacher, a position which carried its own judgmental stigma even beyond the academic context. I’ve lost count of the times that people in the community treat me as if I am judging their language once they find out I teach English.

“What do you do?” The cosmetologist asks as she snips away my hair.

“I’m an English teacher.” I reply.

“Oh.” She laughs, self-effacingly. “I don’t speak so good. English was never my thing.”



I try to explain that all language is beautiful and complex, but she just smiles, nods and keeps on about her lack of skill in the language she is using wonderfully and effortlessly. Lately, I've given up trying to explain my descriptivist position on language. No one seems to hear what I am saying. Moreover, I've taken to calling myself a writing teacher, which seems to be less provocative among the general public.

However, this class was supposed to be different. It was supposed to address those very issues of judgment and discomfort associated with English class. I had taken a dialogic stance, opened up areas of negotiation with grading and curriculum, and created a forum for student voice on their experience as writers and students. I was purposely and explicitly coming down from the judicial bench in order to leave the courtroom and stand with the students in a democratic forum. Yet, many of the students seemed like the cosmetologist who heard only the voice she knew. Thus, this study, initially conceived as a look into the workings of dialog among teacher and students, became a look into the strength and presence of the voices that the students hear rather than the one that is before them.

### **Context of the Study**

The class I taught and researched for this study was a section of English 1101: Composition and Rhetoric, which is the freshman writing class. We were on the quarter system, which gave us nine weeks of meeting time. We met once a week, each Saturday, for five hours, from eight a.m. to one p.m. with a 20 minute break. As for this break, the students opted to cut the last twenty minutes of our meeting and to come and go as needed during class. Our scheduled classroom was a computer lab in a fairly new building. In addition, I requested a non-computer lab in the same building, which we used for discussion sessions or any time the students weren't writing.

Since the class time was so extended, we were able to engage in well-developed discussions and alternate between them and writings. However, a drawback to the once a week meeting was the disconnect students and I felt if they missed a class, as that removed them from the loop for two weeks. In fact, the class started with twenty but dropped to sixteen within four weeks, and each of those four had missed at least one class. The sense of disconnect likely influenced their withdrawal.

As I mentioned, I have been teaching for five years at the college in this study. Primarily, I teach English 1101. On average, I teach eight sections per year. Thus, I had taught about thirty sections of English 1101 prior to the section in this study. The class group was a fairly diverse mix among gender, age and race. On the first day of class, all sixteen of the students in this study filled out autobiographic poems that offered some self-description. From those poems, seven of the students identified themselves as Black or African-American and nine self-identified as White or some variant of Anglo-Saxon heritage. Of the Black students, only one was male, and, overall, the females outnumbered the males eleven to five. Five were between thirty and forty and the rest were between nineteen and their early twenties. In addition, all the students were local residents whose families lived in the area.. Moreover, the majority of the students self-identified as middle class, with only one describing herself in her poem as lower class. Lastly, I learned through class discussions that most of the students were parents.

Yet, even these many categories do not truly reflect the diversity in the classroom. For instance, among the parents, some were married with older children. Some were young single mothers living on their own, working and going to school. Other single mothers were living with their parents, working and going to school but with much child rearing help. Some of the older students had attained previous degrees and were changing careers. Others hadn't been to school

since high school. Some of the White students were rural, some urban, likewise with the Black students. The differences could continue. The point, though, is that these categories are meant to give a sense of the diversity in the classroom rather than encapsulate it.

### **Purpose of the Study**

For all the arguments, debates and solutions surrounding education today, it is rare to hear the voice of the students. It is not that students are silent or have nothing viable to offer; rather, policy makers rarely listen to them. Even worse, as Oldfather (2002a; 2002b) pointed out, researchers in the field rarely value students' subjective educational experiences. Yet, I believe that the first and most important place to look for insight into the condition of the classroom is the students themselves. When we want the details of any circumstance, any good news agency knows that the best information comes from those in the center of the situation.

Thus, my purpose in this study is to contribute to the understanding of the students' subjective experience in the composition classroom of a technical college. My perspective is based in a social constructionist and constructivist frame and centered in a combination of a Bakhtinian (1981, 1984, 1986) dialogic and a Freirean (1970, 1992, 1998) critical democratic pedagogy. Through qualitative thematic analysis of interviews, student and self-journals, and audio recordings of reflective classroom discussion, I build a discussion about the effect that a critical-democratic/dialogic stance has on my and the students' perceptions of what it means to be a teacher, student, writer and learner.

### **What Am I Doing Here?**

As a qualitative researcher with a social constructivist epistemology, I believe an objective observational perspective is impossible. One's perspective of the scene is always tempered by one's subjective experience. In other words, my experience with education not only

skews my view of the classroom but also fuels my passion. Thus, I must reflect first on what compels me not only to teach but to understand the classroom.

As a high-school dropout, I suppose I am particularly sensitive to the classroom's atmosphere and workings. Like many of my teenage peers, I had a chip on my shoulder about authority; however, I enjoyed learning. At nine years old, I read every book about dinosaurs our small-town library had to offer. That desire for knowledge has continued throughout my life. As a result, I found it doubly annoying when teachers took arrogant, condescending stances toward students. Unfortunately, I found no shortage of haughtiness among my teachers. The students were not expected to question or even suggest, unless those interjections fell in with the curriculum; students were meant only to listen and reproduce the knowledge they were given. From the traditional Catholic to the supposedly progressive public high-schools I attended, I found that when I questioned the value of their curriculum, the answer was authoritarian rhetoric.

As my grades and attitude began to slip, their reaction was to chalk me up as another problem and scoff at my suggestions for improvement, and I actually had some. In particular, I remember sitting in the Vice Principal's office while he spoke on the phone to the Principal about me. When I honestly offered insight into the failures of their disciplinary system, his reaction was not only sarcastic but dismissive in the fact that he did not address me but spoke sarcastically to the principal that I was now telling him how to run the school.

I felt truly helpless and ignored; my only recourse was wholesale rejection of the system. Had any of my teachers or administrators taken the time to talk to me as a person with valuable knowledge rather than as a disciplinary or psychological case, I might have succeeded and benefited from education sooner. Unfortunately, nobody saw me, or other "problem" children, as a source for insight on their own behavior or thoughts.

As I sit writing toward my doctorate, I have to count myself as one of the seemingly unlikely success stories among dropouts. I say success because I hold to Freire's (1970) ideal that education, i.e. dialogic not authoritarian, allows one the opportunity to shape one's world, to engage those subtle and obvious forces that would oppose such freedom. Thus, my education helps me name the sources of my own negative educational experience and drives me to value student voice, humble my demeanor, and question the educational authority.

In addition, my education helped me recognize that the authoritarian educational system I rejected, the very one embraced so readily by the majority of our country, is as detrimental to those who "succeed" within it as to those who drop out. Such a system produces students who do not ask questions. As Freire (1998) explained, "authoritarianism will at times cause...students to adopt *rebellious* positions, defiant of any limit, discipline or authority. Yet, it will also lead to apathy, excessive obedience, uncritical conformity, lack of resistance against authoritarian discourse, self-abnegation, and fear of freedom" (p. 40). I find it frustratingly ironic that so many in our country decry an increasing lack of critical thinking among our publicly educated population while embracing a system geared to suppress that very mindset.

Through my admittedly then juvenile understanding of the world, I recognized even in high-school that human beings need room to grow. We are intellectual beings with free choice, which is recognized in this country as a civil right to free expression, and the classroom should not only promote but be founded upon those principles. My high-school experience felt more like juvenile detention than education, and the resentment that drove me out grew into a determination that education can and should be a life-affirming, personally and socially enriching experience.

## **The Story of the Question**

What does it mean to be a student, teacher or a writer? These questions, and questioning in general, undergird the dialogic composition classroom. Whereas, in the grammar and organization-focused writing classroom, these questions, if they are ever considered, are given over-simple answers: To be a so-called good writer is more often than not to be grammatically correct and clearly organized according to a sanctioned pattern. Likewise, a so-called good student is likely one who listens to and follows the information and directives of the teacher. Lastly, to be a so-called good teacher is most often to give and enforce the sanctioned knowledge, hardly a creative educational endeavor.

On the other hand, a dialogic stance, while not dismissing grammar, organization or received knowledge, digs for the assumptions behind knowledge in order to interrogate it. Fecho (2004) reminds us that in dialogic pedagogy, we often will find ourselves having to “summon up the courage to ask the next question” (p. 13). We need courage because good questions will lead to us to our foundational assumptions. It will unearth ideas that we might not want to look at or expose. Though this process is challenging, it is truly the only way to grow (Freire 1998).

Given the tense nature of dialog, the ideal classroom is one in which students come under an umbrella of equality and safety in order to express and interpret themselves and the world around them. This interpretation requires creativity, critical engagement and encouragement from the students and teachers. Yet Freire (1970, 1992, 1998) argued that the classroom often reproduces social oppression by mirroring society’s hierarchies and discriminatory dispositions. In fact, according to Freire (1998) the educational act is a political act and, as such, inherently contains power relations. To ignore or deny that such relationships exist is to allow them to continue unchecked. It is an ethical responsibility on an existential and political level that

educators inquire into the power relations within the classroom. One way for teachers and students to resist exclusionary practice in the classroom is to adopt a dialogic stance, which pushes all consistently to question the status quo and reflect upon the answers to those questions.

Being a college instructor, I am not subject to the pressures that K-12 teachers feel from state and federal standards and high-stakes testing. Yet, the effects of this era of education are felt well beyond the borders of secondary education. People in general seem to have a statistical, quantitative mindset when it comes to education, and so-called good numbers and a competitive edge in the global market seem to be the order of the day. Accordingly, the young-adult and older-adult students in my composition classes often carry this quantitative perspective of composition, either explicitly or implicitly, into the classroom. Coupled with the quantitative perspective is the prescriptivist notions of language mentioned earlier, in which students feel very strongly about correctness. Yet, whether they come with acceptance of and determination to master the standard or with a sense of intimidation and disdain, few come to challenge the so-called correctness of the standard or even its existence as a concrete reality, spoken by someone else, out there somewhere.

Therefore, over my past five years as an English teacher, I have become increasingly focused on the question of student questioning. At first, I asked where students could find the space to ask questions about their education, assuming they wanted to ask them. More recently, I asked the question that moved me into this study: Where does that space exist in which students can begin to want to ask questions? Furthermore, where does that space exist where their questions can be explored at length?

### **Problem Statement**

As a composition teacher with a firm belief in the generative, life-affirming power of creative self-expression through literate acts, I find the prescriptivist, statistically-driven atmosphere particularly narrow for defining literacy. Moreover, such rigid exclusivism is spirit-dampening and inauthentic with regards to democratic principles of expression. As Fecho (2004) found in his inquiry-based English classroom, questioning the assumptions behind the Standard frees all from “the prescriptivist notion of language often fostered by traditional grammar texts and equally traditional classroom instruction” (p. 55). In addition, such questioning moves us to recognize the inseparable social and political functions of language (Fecho 2004).

There is no doubt that quantitative, prescriptivist approaches to writing are appealing for their simplicity: essays broken into grammatical and mechanical pieces can then be assigned clear values: five points per sentence fragment, comma splice or fused sentence; one point per comma error, and so on. In addition, this approach creates the illusion of objectivity in grading. However, literacy is not simple and it should not be simplified for purposes of quantification or convenience. Such an approach promotes a disconnect between teacher, student and the literacy occurring in the classroom.

Though I recognize that some form of quantitative measure is unavoidable, the path to that assessment should complement the act. Namely, writing is a complex, subjective and sociocultural act that should be measured as such. How heavily is the writer grappling with the topic? Is she pushing to make meaning of the text in a personal and social context? Questions such as these, which complicate rather than simplify, are unavoidably subjective, and, as such, they require the teacher’s and students’ voice to answer. Thus, as Matusov (2009) argued,



dialogue is “*the* educational discourse” (p. 70). In accordance, I hope this research will widen the lens on what being a teacher and learner in the composition classroom means individually and socially. Likewise, I hope it will promote a more democratic view of education in general.

### **Research Questions**

With this vision in mind, this study first of all offers insight that continues my endeavor to be a teacher who promotes creativity and growth. Second, this study lends credibility to the perspective that a dialogic, democratically geared educational setting is desperately needed in our society. Yet, this insight and credibility are gained not through an answer to the original research questions.

When I entered this study, my first two research questions asked the effect of the critical-democratic/dialogic stance on the students’ perceptions of themselves as writers, the role of education in their lives, and their sense of agency as learners. The third question asked the implications for tech school writing classrooms, and is thus discussed in the implications section. Yet, the data did not quite address the first two questions. I say not quite because the critical-democratic/dialogic stance did have an effect on the students, but perhaps not so much on their perceptions of themselves as writers and learners. In addition, many students noted that the class felt different, mainly because their voices were more respected, but that difference did not explicitly shift their view of writing, education or sense of agency. Rather, the dialogic stance seemed to just scratch the surface of a shift. Thus, in retrospect, I identified a new set of questions as I analyzed the data:

1. What is revealed about students’ perceptions of writing and themselves as writers when their tech school writing instructor adopts a critical-democratic/dialogic stance on his practice?

2. In that same classroom, what is revealed about the students' perceptions of the role of education in their lives and their sense of agency as learners?
3. What are the implications of this study for tech school writing classrooms?

### **Theoretical Frame**

In this section, I discuss the theoretical underpinnings that drive both my practice and my research.

#### **The Freirean Critical-Democratic Principal**

I locate Freire and Bakhtin as distinct point-sources of discussions of dialog because they are the seminal authors from whom dialogic understandings are drawn in education literature. In addition, it is common to find one or the other as the sole source of many of these discussions. Indeed, this distinction is not unfounded, as the two understandings of dialog are fundamentally different. Though Freire (1970) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) both employed the term *dialog*, Freire's understanding of dialog demands that people negotiate and shape the world as equals. Thus, a Freirean pedagogy is dialogic in the sense that teacher and student must come together as equals from within a democracy. Moreover, this equality requires that we look into social justice. For, if anyone is being oppressed or silenced, then our Democracy is undermined. Therefore, to separate Freire's dialogic from Bakhtin's, I label Freire's dialogic as a critical-democratic principle.

In addition, on an epistemological level, Freire (1970) is based more in a Hegelian dialectic than a Bakhtinian dialogic. The dialectic, though useful for conceptualizing the development of knowledge, is somewhat rigid and limiting: the thesis leads to the antithesis which leads to the synthesis, and so on. First, this understanding tends to force the construction of knowledge into an unrealistically linear pattern, when knowing is a messier, organic process.

In some sense, the dialectic thought is akin to the idea of a writing workshop that assumes that people always work in the same way, for instance brainstorm, draft, discuss, revise, submit. But just as writing is a complex, recursive process, so is the construction of meaning.

In order to establish a distinction between the Freirean and Bakhtinian dialogics, I rename Freire's dialogic as a critical-democratic principle because it is first and foremost a conscious, social act, in which people make the choice to listen to, learn from and edify each other. Freire (1998) argued that "no one lives democracy fully, nor do they help it grow, if, first of all, they are interrupted in their right to speak, to have a voice, to say their critical discourse, or, second, if they are not engaged, in one form or another, in the fight to defend this right" (p. 65). Furthermore, he argues that in education, and elsewhere, dialog is an act of freedom through which oppressed individuals become aware of, evaluate and act on their realities. Not only does this critical stance assume that people are being oppressed, but it assumes that oppression occurs if people do not speak up. Thus, the critical-democratic principle uses dialog to raise questions about the social power relations inherent in the classroom.

### **The Bakhtinian Dialogic**

Matusov (2009) argued that Bakhtinian dialog, which he calls "radical, strong dialogism," is "*the* discourse of education" (p. 76). In addition, he maintained that Freire's (1970, 1992, 1998) penchant for social justice prohibits him from engaging in this strong dialogic in favor of a weak one. Thus, Freire (1970, 1992, 1998; Freire and Macedo 1987) argued for dialog in education, but his vilification of capitalism and social-class lead him to an ironic and naïve embrace with and pedagogical modeling of communistic, oppressive political regimes, such as Mao's China (Matusov 2009).

I have argued that Freire's critical-democratic principle is necessary for the composition classroom, thus I disagree with Matusov's (2009) assessment of Freire's (1970, 1992, 1998) theory. Yet, I do not disagree with the critique of Freire's (Freire and Macedo 1987) pedagogical practice in Sao Tome and Principe, upon which Matusov (2009) based his conclusion of a weak dialogic. The problem, perhaps, lies not in the theory but in the desire for quick and radical change, which tends to blind us to the consequences of our actions.

The composition classroom which strives to be dialogic must avoid this overzealous, theory-to-practice trap. Suoranta and Vaden (2007) argued that a critical classroom "is a place of discussing, criticizing, arguing, synthesizing, and building an understanding" (p. 149). Furthermore, a dialogic stance should strive to "question every institution and thought that impacts our lives. In doing so, we enhance our ability to continually discover new possibilities for social justice" (Willis, et al 2008 p.18). Yet, just as I have to be careful not to assume to know the students, I have to be careful not to assume to know what is impacting their lives.

Bakhtin's dialogic provides the theoretical underpinning that tempers overzealous tendencies in critical pedagogy. As a teacher taking a dialogic stance, I envision the classroom as a temporary camp upon which many paths converge. Though I come to the classroom with my opinions, I have to be careful that those opinions do not become polemical, monologic agendas. As Weiner (2007) warned us, "by introducing their own ideological project directly into their classrooms, teachers risk dampening the intellectual creativity that can occur in dialog" (p. 68). The classroom is a meeting of people with different cultures, discourses, beliefs, idiosyncrasies, emotions, knowledge and experiences. It is a place where we meet for a sustained moment with each other to discuss what we have seen until we move off in many possible directions of continued exploration.

The pragmatic reality is that everyone in the class is living in a multicultural, representative democracy within which the ability to think and act critically on their own behalf is crucial to their betterment and those around them. Denzin (2007) succinctly defined the dialogic classroom as that which helps people realize “how to make...changes in their lives, to become active agents in shaping the history that shapes them” (p. 135). We all need to be able to discern our condition and to change it.

Likewise, Willis, et al (2008) wrote that “what makes a person critically conscious is challenging the underlying assumptions that work in the internal and external worlds to privilege some while disprivileging others” (p. 5). Yet, the critical pedagogy of Freire’s proponents is too often steeped in an anti-Capitalist, anti-conservative, anti-class system stance that assumes the lot as the entirety of oppression in students’ lives. In such a case, students arrive in class only to have their experiences interpreted for them. Nevertheless, to single out any entity as the sole source of oppression is itself a lack of critical thinking: a dialogic classroom is one that questions rather than asserts.

This is not to say that the Bakhtinian dialogic is naïve to power relationships. For, according to Bakhtin (1981), “language is heteroglot,” i.e. diverse, “from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between...different socio-ideological groups..., between tendencies, schools, [and] circles” (p. 291). Moreover, each of these heteroglot pieces of language are on a hierarchy, stratified as “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (p. 291-2). That is, Bakhtin (1981) argued that as a function of society, languages are not on an equal field. For, all the socio-ideological groups are “capable of stratifying language in proportion to their social significance;

they are capable of attracting its words and forms into their orbit...and in so doing to a certain extent alienating these words and forms from others” (p. 290). In other words, language has power for its attachment to powerful groups and vice versa. In my classroom, then, each of the types of language is in dialog with the others, but that dialog is not equal. Many intricacies of social power plays are occurring during these dialogs.

Thus, the Bakhtinian dialogic works in concert with the Freirean critical-democratic principle as it maintains a spirit of inquiry through analysis of the power structures in students’ lives in order to determine areas of oppression. In a Bakhtinian dialogic stance, problems are examined, analyzed, critiqued, broken down, tied to economic, intellectual, historical and political positions (Berry 2007 p. 94). Yet, those ties cross all boundaries, and any system is open for question.

Accordingly, this understanding of dialog should bring us to the realization that we must engage the Freirean critical-democratic principle through the establishment of the Bakhtinian dialogic exchange in the classroom. As Matusov (2009) argued, “Like for Freire, for Bakhtin genuine learning involves other people because without a dialogue with other people, a person is locked in ontological circumstances of his or her own being...and cannot transcend this ideologico-ontological imprisonment (sic)” (p. 78). The growth of our democracy requires that we each speak into that democracy. The fewer the voices being heard, the less growth, and thus freedom, occurring.

Thus, this theoretical frame will be not only the lens for my research but also the lens for my continued practice. Drawing from Freire’s (1970) argument for praxis, I see constant, progressive dialog between teacher, student and practice as the best path for educative and social

growth: theory and practice are inexorably linked. Though my theoretical frame will grow and change, it will remain an integral part of my practice.

### **Subjectivity**

I am a White, middle-class American from a working class background. Though my students did not necessarily know my background, what they saw was a White male, which is a somewhat privileged category of person in the USA. Since the White male has traditionally held, and for the most part still holds, most positions of authority in this country, this status is particularly relevant to my goals for sharing power in the classroom (Shor 1996). In particular, I had to recognize that the students might doubly defer to my authority as teacher and as White male. Thus, I had to be extra diligent throughout the study to stress my desire that the students speak out honestly, even in opposition to or criticism of me.

In addition, I come to this study as a student who has experienced a fair amount of disillusionment throughout his education experience. I am a high-school drop-out, but I never considered myself to be a student who didn't get the material. In fact, I thought most of the class content overly simple and dull. My problem was, first, that I couldn't get over the arrogance or detachment of the teachers. Second, I couldn't get over my own arrogance and detachment. Yet, it seemed wrong to me that so few teachers and administrators were interested in trying to reach me. Rather, they seemed not to care who I was, where I came from or where I was going. Moreover, I found the same self-absorption in professors throughout my pursuit of a master's degree.

Thus, I recognize that part of me has a rebellious or cynical attitude towards educational authority. Though it is those questions about the nature of authority that brought me to this study, I had to be careful not to impose my authority issues upon my students' voices. With this

concern in mind, I feel that the methods of open-ended interviews and class reflections performed well to reflect student voice and sentiment. Likewise, the amount of evidence drawn from the text in order to build the discussion demonstrates the analysis's alignment with that voice. This is not to say that the study is completely the voice of the students. I was the interpreter of the students' text, and my experiences directed my interpretation. However, the recognition of my subjectivity helped me avoid overstatement of the data's information.

### **Study Outline**

For the remainder of this study, I offer in Chapter 2 a literature review based on dialogic practice in the classroom. Though I am a college teacher at a two-year tech school, the literature review looks into college and K-12 dialogic practice on the assumption that themes of dialogic practice are applicable to all levels of education. Across this literature, I identify two major themes within dialogic education: voice and community building and tension. In addition, the discussion of Tension is divided between *Confusion and resistance* and *Transcendence and transformation*. The review concludes with a call for research on dialogic education in two-year colleges.

In Chapter 3, I begin with the physical details of the school and classroom context and the demographics of the school and the class under study. Then, I present first the theoretical reasoning behind my teacher-research approach, which is to document my and the students' voices and actions in order to reflect on the same and, subsequently, alter my practice towards a humanizing pedagogy. Next, I continue with the theoretical reasoning behind my methods for data collection, and analysis. After that, I offer a look at the actual data collection, which consisted of entrance and exit interviews with five students, three recorded whole-group reflections on writing and class time, and student journals. Afterwards, I briefly describe the



analysis processes. Then, I move next into a detailed description of the five students that are the study's primary focus. Finally, I conclude with a consideration of possible limitations.

In Chapter 4, I offer an interpretation of the data, in which I consider the relationship of the data to my original research questions. Second, I tease out from the data the idea that the students carry with them pervasive monologues from authorities of their past education. Specifically, the students have adopted negative views of themselves as writers and learners, of education as a process, or a combination of both. Through the discussion, I unfold a disturbing picture of the student-academy relationship in which the authoritative voice of the academy squelches student expression.

Chapter 5 lays out implications for my practice and then moves on to those for other dialogic writing educators in technical college, the institutions in which they work, and the students themselves. In particular, I argue that writing education is in an unhealthy state and, therefore, needs dialogic intervention. Yet, I warn that dialogic educators must be ready for the adopted authoritative voice in students and must spend time in dialog over its presence. Moreover, those educators must be patient and persistent. In addition, dialogic educators must work with each other and also with dialog with non-dialogic educators and administrators. Yet, the technical colleges must make moves to allow more freedom and voice for teachers. Furthermore, they must relax the staunch insistence on Standard English and promote a more fluid and inclusive forum for expression. Lastly, I argue that students need to push past the complacency of simply playing the game and expect more from themselves and their academic writing experience. Overall, more research in these types of education contexts is needed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this review of literature, I had expected to find a fair amount of discussion of student reaction to dialogical practice in the writing classroom. In addition, I had hoped to find a wealth of empirical, practitioner articles. However, my investigation into the practice and effect of dialogical teaching in two-year degree programs reveals a dearth of research in this area. In fact, over the last twelve years of articles, analysis of the implementation and effect of critical stances in any writing classrooms is scarce. This condition is inspiring as it reveals a need for many such projects, but it is also troubling as it shows a lack of interest in the field. As such, this discussion is expanded to include the effect of critical stances taken in all classrooms, assuming that the fundamentals of such stances are applicable to considerations for the two-year composition classroom.

#### **Search Terms**

I first looked for any articles in the last ten-years that mention dialog or dialogic. Immediately, the results revealed that the two sources of the term were Bakhtin and Freire. The two understandings begin in different spaces but intersect and work well together. Yet, the results for dialogic education in practice were low, so I took the two sources and searched for any articles that mentioned Bakhtin or Freire. I then filtered the results to those that also mention the classroom. In addition, since I identify my stance as critical-democratic/dialogic, I searched the past ten years for articles that focus on the effect of critical pedagogy or democratic classrooms.

### **Themes of the Dialogic Classroom Experience**

After reading the literature on democratic/dialogic stances in the classroom, one conclusion is clear: the dialogic stance is unsettling. When students and teachers experience the dialogic classroom, everyone knows that something different is occurring. Moreover, that difference creates tension that forces action from the students. Fecho, Collier, Friese and Wilson (2010) argued that when the move is towards dialog rather than silence, growth occurs. Though the dialogic stance is variable in result, the effect is a noticeable change in everyone's perspective. The strongest positive effects that emerge across the articles are student empowerment, inner reflection and identity reconsideration. The dialogic can build community and foster egalitarian thought and action. Yet, a recurring experience, which can but does not always end well, is student resistance and confusion. In these cases, it seems that the dialogic stance reinforces staunch individualism and status quo thinking. Overall, it seems clear that the effect of critical stances on students is never mundane.

### **Voice and Community Building**

One of the basics of a democratic/ dialogic stance is a student-centered curriculum. According to Freire (1970), the content of the class must be centered in the experience and knowledge of the students. Without such a focus, the content of the course will alienate rather than serve the students. Moreover, the literature bears out this tenet.

To begin, Brooks (2011) argued that the foundation of dialog must be an awareness of students' emotions and sense of vulnerability. Her experience as a dialogic instructor taught her that dialog is not merely a discursive exchange but also a dialog of emotions. In her article, she recalled an emotionally injured student who reached out to her. Brooks' (2011) response was first to console that student and then to encourage that student into dialog, with the class, over

the emotional injury she had sustained. According to Brooks (2011), a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, the attention to and, more importantly, the allowance for her undergraduate students' emotional vulnerability was the key to creating a more comprehensive dialog in her Social Foundations for Education classroom. In other words, such discomfort must be acknowledged, sympathized with and talked about.

Similarly, Fecho, Collier, Friese and Wilson (2010) found during Fecho's graduate course, *Culture, Literacy and the Classroom*, that the dialogic classroom must not be considered a "safe space" in the sense that everyone is comfortable (p. 445). Rather, through their experience, the writers found that the dialogic experience has great potential to bring the participants to places that are deeply rooted in identity and emotion. Thus, the dialogic space is one in which everyone must learn to relate to each other on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. As such, the dialogic becomes not a "safe space" but a "safe to" space, in which participants feel that they are "safe to engage in personally challenging explorations" that will very likely feel unsettling (p. 445).

In addition, there were studies that, though they did not speak explicitly of the emotional aspect of dialog, seemed implicitly to suggest that emotional bonding was a component of the intellectual exchange. For instance, in her experience teaching Research English as an Additional Language (REAL) at Australia's Adelaide Graduate Centre, Cadman (2005) found that a dialogic stance, which inherently includes the knowledge and experience of students, creates "warm and fascinating dialogues, allowing students to get to know each other's personalities and research directions with both intellectual interest and affective connection" (p. 4). This sense of community exchange is found also in Tessema's (2008) analysis of a critical stance in an undergraduate teacher education course. Though he studied rather than taught the class at

Ethiopia's Adelaide Graduate Centre, he found that over the span of the classroom dialog, the "increasingly coherent relationship paved the way for intense discussions and sharing interdependence." As a result, he found that "developmentally, new understandings emerged" (p. 358).

In other words, students in both Cadman (2005) and Tessema (2008) responded to the dialogic stance with a perspective of themselves as valued voices within a community of learners. Moreover, the students viewed themselves as individuals who are able to contribute to the teacher's knowledge and the class's overall.

Basu and Barton (2010) supported this perspective in their study of democratic pedagogy enacted in the 6-12 grade science classrooms of the School for Social Change, which they describe as an "institution located in a Caribbean immigrant neighborhood in a large, urban center in the northeastern U.S." (75). Like Cadman (2005), they found that students move from a perspective of themselves as individual recipients or reproducers of knowledge to one of "agents of change—shaping what happens, what is taught, and how teaching and learning occur" (p. 84). The student-centered curriculum, which is integral to dialogic pedagogy, provides "students [with] authentic opportunities to engage science in ways that validated their voices and perspectives" (p.84). This validation, in turn, gives the students "motivation, a desire to learn, energy for being engaged in science content and classroom debate" (pp. 85-86).

In the interest of community building in his first-year college writing course at a four-year institution, Porter's (2001) dialogic stance affected the students' tone and depth in peer review exercises. In his experience with peer review assignments, he found that students were often prescriptive and harsh in their estimations of their peers' writings. Subsequently, he also found their critiques to be superficial. However, asking them to become more charitable,

dialogic readers improved their critical awareness of their peers' ideas while increasing the complimentary bent of their critiques. In addition, he attributes to his dialogic stance a marked increase in student desire to communicate with him and each other.

However, this student-centered curriculum and sense of confidence and community is not an end in itself and will not necessarily lead to an egalitarian classroom. As McInerney (2009) learned in his study of Australian high-school classrooms, a student-centered curriculum is not synonymous with critical pedagogy. In particular, he noted that "many teachers built curriculum around student interests [but] failed to connect generative themes to issues of oppression and injustice in the lives of students and communities" (p. 32). This student-centered but non-critical approach is akin to Matusov's (2009) weak dialogic, a trouble-spot for would-be critical classrooms. Students in such a classroom might find confidence, but that confidence is not a positive element if it works to reinforce oppressive ideologies.

An important point of McInerney's (2009) analysis is that the weak criticality "says something about teachers' hegemonic ideology, particularly the powerful grip of instrumental reason and technical rationality in shaping conceptions of teachers' work" (p. 33). As a teacher taking a dialogic stance, I must be careful to foster critical considerations. If I fail to do this, the students will ultimately suffer with the status quo. As McInerney (2009) warned, "organizational and cultural changes within schools, together with a much greater emphasis on collaborative and critically reflective forms of teacher learning, are necessary to transform schooling for the most disaffected students" (p.33). The transformation of student perspective of themselves as valuable, critical voices and agents of social critique and change is largely dependent upon a strong dialogic stance.

## **Tension**

A large theme across the literature is the tension inherent in the critical classroom. The effect of tension on students is often one of confusion or resistance, in which the students and teacher find themselves overwhelmed and struggling to make meaning of their experience. Conversely, the tension, which can begin in confusion and resistance, can lead to transcendent and transformative critical perspectives in the students and teachers. Since the larger of the two reactions to tension was confusion and resistance, I'll begin there.

### **Confusion and resistance.**

To revisit Cadman (2005), what she found initially in her graduate class was student resistance to the choice of research direction inherent in the dialogic model. In addition, she found that the once students begin to engage in the dialogic classroom, the “public as well as personal issues can be overwhelmingly demanding of students' attention” (p.7). Thus, students have to become very self-motivated and organized when the limited class-time is pulled in many different directions. She finds that students who do not do so become quickly overwhelmed and disengaged.

In her first year English course at the largely Afrikaans University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, McKinney (2005) also found struggle with democracy in the classroom. In particular, she noted the irony that the dialogic stance, although empowering for students, unsettles as it attempts to turn the traditionally “undemocratic space (the classroom) into a more democratic one” (p. 386). She finds that student resistance to dialog over social justice, coupled with the teacher's relinquishing discursive power, allows the students to position the teacher in her discourse and to challenge the teacher's discursive power. Though this effect might be seen

as positive in the students' sense of self, it is challenging for the teacher to maintain an egalitarian setting while trying to offset an anti-democratic uprising.

In considering his agency as the instructor of an undergraduate Advanced Composition classroom at Eastern Carolina University, Farmer (1998) noted the prevalence of “asymmetric relationships between teachers and students” (p. 203). In exchanges with his junior and senior students, he finds that dialog is tense as it questions and resists traditional educational hierarchies and other established social structures. Plus, he is troubled by the place of teacher opinion in this questioning. Despite his dialogic stance, he finds that the expression of his opinion can cause students to rebuild the asymmetry and play what Freire (1970) called the role of the naïve, a role in which students willingly imbue the knowledge and wisdom of the moment to the teacher.

Yet Farmer (1998) found that hiding his opinion is futile, since “amidst the happenstance discourse of the classroom—the desultory asides, comments, silences, assertions, quips, [and] sighs,” teachers cannot hope to conceal their positions on the topics under investigation (p.198). Thus, he found himself in a disconcerting balancing act in which he must constantly counteract student movement into the submissive role.

Similarly, Yagelski (1998) of SUNY Albany recognized in his undergraduate writing classes the problems inherent in the decentralization of the power in the classroom, which he finds can lead to difficult moments. In fact, he reveals that the dialogic stance can lead teachers to doubt their own ability when student empowerment becomes aggressive and dialogically-minded teachers find themselves in a quandary as to how to proceed.

In his experience, the dialogic transformed his composition class into “a sometime tense forum on issues of gender and authority in the classroom and...on [his] teaching” (p. 36). Ultimately, his quest to maintain a dialogic balance led to a split in class focus and the general



dissatisfaction of all. Rather than achieving a sense of community, Yagelski (1998) lamented that the dialogic stance “increased the distance between [him] and his students” (p. 37) and challenged his sense of himself as a teacher.

Sometimes, that challenge can be too much for teachers. In opposition to Farmer’s (1998) realization that explicit teacher opinion is a necessary and productive aspect of a dialogic stance, Kopelson (2003) documented teachers rejecting such a stance after doing so seemed to be counter-productive. After students have received nearly twenty years of instruction via Porter’s (1998) pedagogy of severity, attempts to decentralize the classroom power confuse students and incite them to resistance. Along with this troubling defamiliarization, Kopelson (2003) noted that the dialogic stance necessarily foregrounds teacher position on the topics under discussion and of “political commitments” (p. 120). She argued that the teaching of rhetoric “requires [the] modeling [of] political advocacy” (p. 120), but the stance of the teacher is inevitably pervasive. Coupled with the already disconcerting dialogic stance, the students are likely to shut down quickly.

Indeed, Kapitulik, Kelly and Clawson (2007) found that the majority of their Massachusetts State undergraduate sociology classes remained in resistance to the instructors’ critical stance. In fact, the instructors anticipated the resistance to the “political nature of some of the assignments,” and constructed a wide-latitude grading scale to remove the pressure of grades (p. 140). Despite the de facto removal of grades, the authors still faced ideological resistance. In fact, the authors noted the irony that although the class was advertised as overtly civic and political, the resistance to the “unnecessarily ‘political’” bent of the course rose and remained (p. 140).

In addition, Kapitulik, et al (2007) found the perception among students that they were “being forced to accept the politics of the instructors of the class” (p. 145), which reduced participation. Though the instructors tried to create a balance of perspectives through “written texts, expert guest lecturers, and pedagogical interventions,” they were mostly unable to overcome this student perception (p. 145). They speculated that part of the problem was different definitions of the term political going into the class.

Lastly, Kapitulik et al (2007) found a persistent strain of “individualism and shortsightedness” in their undergraduates. They located this superficiality in the undergraduates’ conception of education as a practical step toward so-called better things rather than as an arena for ideological and philosophical development towards social improvement. In other words, most of the students viewed education as a means to a personally beneficial, material end. Thus, “their time was better spent passing classes, earning credits and getting a diploma” (p.145). Such a mindset finds students viewing education as an exercise in busy work and hoop-jumping in order to get the social capital for personal success. In such cases, content and awareness of democratic responsibility go largely by the wayside.

Lalik and Oliver (2007), researchers from Virginia Polytech and New Mexico State University respectively, echoed this finding with their study of critical literacy’s effect on adolescent female students. Through documentation of a yearlong writing project between Oliver and the four girls, the researchers found persistent resistance from the students to the push by the teacher for critical engagement with cultural perceptions of the female body. Despite the instructor’s problem-posing of the commodification of the female body, the students resisted analysis and favored uncritical acceptance of the cultural expectations. Though the teacher wanted to push them to reflect on the nature of their focus, her interest in democratic dialog

caused her to maintain a cooperative space. As a result, she did not insist on her opinion or interests; subsequently, she felt the cooperation compromised the critical nature of the course. Thus, the students' critical perspective remained largely static.

Like the teacher in Lalik and Oliver (2007), Kopelson (2003) sought to serve students' needs, and like Yagelski (1998) she discovered that the dialogic stance derails the students' preconceptions of teachers. Her study shows that the explicitly dialogic stance is detrimental specifically to the minority teacher's authority, especially when dealing with a majority-representative class. In one example, a black, female teacher found that "the more 'dialogic' and student-centered her pedagogy, the more all her students focused on *her pedagogical performance*" and "questioned her authority and knowledge" (p. 127). In fact, the teacher argues that students perceive her as "someone lacking experience in controlling a class, or worse yet as someone too lazy to deliver more conventional lectures" (p. 127). Unfortunately, her inclusion of student voice turned into a mutiny of sorts.

Similarly, despite his intensely dialogic approach and initial student enthusiasm, Thelin (2005) from the University of Akron found his undergraduate composition class "had not gelled" (p. 122). In reflection, he offered that the "career-oriented goals of students make them more pragmatic in their approach to learning composition. Students...do not want to have their notions complicated" (p. 115). He found the effect of the dialogic approach was ambiguous or variable. In one classroom, disdain for peers, absenteeism, lack of participation and assignment submission and revision was high. While in another class later in the day, the opposite was true. The dialogic stance worked well.

Therefore, this would suggest that student attitude certainly plays a role in the outcome. In the class under study, the dialogic did not "inspire a better attitude toward education" (p. 129).

However, he argues that the dialogic stance, in spite of the general lack of student participation, led students to consider their learning processes as well as to reflect on “the institutional, social, and political elements in higher education” (p. 128). Likewise, the students recognized that the dialogic stance looks and feel different than what they had been given elsewhere, i.e. the “formulas to follow, not knowledge to apply” (p. 136). Certainly this new ground had something to do with their disengagement.

Overall, in this section, we have seen that a dialogic stance can be troubling. It can create confusion and chaos. Moreover, it can cause teachers to feel insecure, disoriented and even threatened. When the tension in the dialogic stance creates these walls, they seemingly become insurmountable roadblocks to learning. Indeed, a return to so-called normal, information-transfer education in these circumstances must seem like a welcome relief. Yet, in the following section, I would like to discuss my interpretation of the literature that show the benefits of pushing past those supposed insurmountable walls. Therefore, we’ll begin where we left off with Thelin (2005).

### **Transcendence and transformation.**

In spite of the meltdown and subsequent self-questioning the dialogic stance placed upon Thelin (2005), like Yagelski (1998), he used it as an opportunity for inquiry. In fact, looking into his practice he found no problem with his practice or theory. Instead, he found that “unpleasant moments must spring from attempts to implement critical pedagogy” and that the outcome of “democratic, progressive pedagogies are hard to anticipate” (p. 127). Likewise, McClure and Vasconcelos (2011) of UGA found that McClure’s dialogic stance in his classroom raised resistance and cynicism in students and self-doubt in the instructor. Yet, like Thelin (2005)

and Yagelski (1998), they also used those underlying tensions as springboards for dialogic reflection upon teacher and student roles and responsibility.

One of the responsibilities discussed in the literature was the need for critical-dialogic pedagogy among populations of privileged students. Although McKinney (2005) voiced concern over large-scale resistance to critical pedagogy in largely privileged student populations, Young (2007) argued that critical pedagogy “should be practiced with all students...including those with situated privilege” (p. 14). In her New England high-school Contemporary Issues classroom, Young (2007) found that a critical stance with relatively privileged students worked to help them “understand and problematize oppression, and work as “transformative intellectuals” towards social justice” (p.15). In the end, she discovered that “critical multicultural pedagogy can help students with situated privilege to interrupt their own behavior and reinvent themselves as agents of change” (p.18). Though the tension can be palpable at first, the teacher’s perseverance can win over some students.

For instance, through analysis of Allen’s critically based teacher education course at the University of New Mexico, Allen and Rossatto (2009) showed that one type of student that can be a catalyst against majority resistance is those minorities who have “internalized White racism” (p. 173). In particular, Allen and Rossatto (2009) discussed Mexican-American and Hispanic students in privileged school populations who disparage the Chicano movement. When a critical stance engages such a topic, transformation of even one individual in the majority can lead to group shifts in consciousness. Allen and Rossatto (2009) claimed that when minorities “see their classmates from oppressor groups change before their eyes, it is difficult to hold on to an assimilationist, fatalistic, or repressed identity” (p. 173).

Once the minority perspective begins to shift, the recognition of oppressive ideology within the social perspective comes to the forefront. Though this shift brings tension, the authors argued that “the potential for coalitions that can arise out of sustained critiques of oppressor identities is invigorating for those who have lost hope in achieving an egalitarian society” (p. 173). Thus, the tension is a positive space for change.

For instance, McClure & Vasconcelos (2011) of UGA discovered that the points of tension in McClure’s dialogic classroom were the very points that pushed the classroom to higher plateaus of learning and expression. Likewise, Kynard and Eddy (2009), professors at what they call Historically White Colleges and Universities, also noted the tension inherent within their critical composition classrooms. Like Allen and Rossatto (2009) and McClure and Vasconcelos (2011), they saw the tension not only as unavoidable but as the central, positive frame of the classroom. In their article, one teacher remarked that those in the dialogic classrooms are “entering disorder and chaos as a community informed tension to get at raw truths and multiple freeing voices, and yet there is a palpable understanding that we have to come through this chaos and disorder of multiple truth-telling together” (p. 31).

Importantly, they find that tension builds community and camaraderie despite the lack of final consensus. In fact, the dialogic stance rejects the goal if not the possibility of consensus. Moreover, according to Kynard and Eddy’s (2009) article, “these tensions shape the curriculum. The heated discussions and arguments were always present in the classroom that we taught, but there is a notion that we, as a people, have to deal with this and talk about it. It’s the “we, as a people” that sets the space...apart, not shared agreement” (p.31).

As for the effect of the dialog on the students’ sense of writing, the authors found that students “began to see their writing and very existence as inextricably linked with the fate of the

black masses who have been locked up endemic to the functioning of the prison industrial complex” (p.40). Likewise, Hughes (1998), a teacher at a Melbourne, Australia university, found that the dialogic approach in her composition classroom builds confidence in students and helps them recognize themselves as agents in their education rather than passive recipients. In addition, the students came to recognize writing as an authentic task with real-world consequences. In line with Freire’s (1970) ideas of literacy as a personally and socially formative act, the effect on the students in Kynard and Eddy (2009) and Hughes (1998) was the development of their ability to “imagine their lives and political-intellectual directions” and to engage them through literate acts (Kynard and Eddy 2009, p.40).

The idea that the classroom is a place of development rather than attainment is central to a critical-democratic/dialogic understanding of the classroom. For example, Kumamoto (2002) argued that a dialogic project he undertook with first-year composition undergraduates revealed the classroom as a meeting and grappling between self and other. In other words, students come to the classroom already engaged in a struggle for meaning. The dialogic classroom offers a sanctuary in which to work out that meaning. To place individualistic, information based set of performance standards on each student only isolates and alienates students, thereby increasing the pressure they are under.

Conversely, Kumamoto (2002) found that the dialogic pushes students to not only engage in but put on the shoes of the other in order to understand the other and so themselves. In the recognition that others share their struggles, the students simultaneously feel less pressure and gain a larger perspective. In addition, he noted that the students writing production increased and their academic writing skills improved. He argued that as his students assumed other’s roles, they adopted the “tone of lucid restraint that is the supposed ideal of scholarly prose” (p. 77).

Yet, Kumamoto's (2002) analysis of the effect on the students is questionable. To his credit, he did present his claims with tentative prose. Yet, viewing the excerpts of their work that he includes, I find it difficult to find what he finds in their writing. I do not see the shift in epistemology or ontological awareness that he suggests. It seems possible that his desire for the dialogic experience to bring students to a new critical level clouded his vision of the actual effect on students.

What is clear, however, is that the dialogic stance opened the students up to the realization of themselves as writers and gave them what Kumamoto (2002) called a deepened "dialogic ability and self-literacy" (p. 80). It encouraged them to relate their own experience and thus their voice, and in turn improved their ability to self-critique. Kumamoto (2002) noted that "writing begins with and returns to knowing and seeing the community of one—oneself" (p. 67). Somewhere in that process, the writer's voice is socialized and is altered. And Kumamoto (2002) did mark some change in his student's considerations of themselves as a result of the dialogic experience.

Moreover, the dialogic stance gave the students the opportunity to begin to look at themselves as individual voices within a community and shape their social identities through writing. The dialogic not only values the other's voice in a social setting but allows for the individual growth of the voice. Thus, the dialogic does not merely value the individual's voice but assumes that the dialogic process challenges one's assumptions and forces one to "discover, examine, and critique one's claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person, or culture" (p. 72). The dialogic allows one to recognize one's agency within and without a group and even to see the potential to move between discourses.



Similarly, Sommers and Saltz (2004) found in their Harvard undergraduate composition classrooms, that the dialogic stance caused students to realize a “flesh-and-blood” audience of human beings, “not simply teachers...poised with red pens, ready to evaluate what they don’t know” (p. 139). Like Kumamoto (2002), the authors’ dialogic experience viewed the first-year, college composition classroom as an intra- and inter-personal dance. Students were empowered by the dialogic stance, which valued their voices and interests in a subject, and told them that they matter within the classroom. But Sommers and Saltz (2004) also found that this encouragement allowed students to embrace a view of themselves as novice writers. Recalling Porter’s (2001) lament over vague, terse feedback on writing, Sommers and Saltz (2004) found that the detailed, dialogic feedback affects the student realization of voice. Specifically, dialogic feedback awoke in the student the realization that someone is not only paying attention to but cares about what they are saying.

As with Kumamoto’s (2002) students, the dialogic does not necessarily translate to an improvement in the academic quality of the writing, at least not within the course of a semester, but it does allow for a positive change within the student towards the purpose and position of writing. Paradoxically, the dialogic invites students’ passion, which drives writing but can limit critical thinking. However, Sommers and Saltz (2004), like Jackson (2008) and Borkowski (2004), discovered that the dialogic stance invites disarray. Of his undergraduate writing classes at Jersey’s William Paterson University, Borkowski (2008) remarked that he’d often felt as though he had lost control. Yet, he reflected that this lack of control meant that students were speaking out and growing. Moreover, this messiness is the important first step. Sommers and Saltz (2004) argue that passion must be the root of writing that propels freshmen students

through graduation and beyond. Eventually, the dialogic classroom engages the give and take of other valued voices that provide critical perspective on individual passions.

### **Looking across the Literature**

A look back at the entirety of this literature review reveals that tension is the focal point of the dialogic classroom. Although the first theme identified here was Voice and Community Building, to make such the goal of critical-democratic/dialogic pedagogy is misleading and heads quickly towards Matusov's (2009) weak dialogic. I say misleading because at first, logic seems to dictate that a pedagogy designed to value student voice would never deny one voice in favor of another. Yet, this intuition contradicts democracy, which allows for every voice to be heard but must, as a decision making process, decide for the majority and thus deny the minority. Thus, if the empowering of student voice is misinterpreted as the equalization of each point of view and the search for unanimity, the process is stalemated.

Likewise, if the idea of community is misinterpreted to mean harmony of thought, then dialogic exchange is squelched. The dialogic classroom is the problem-posing classroom. For each so-called answer, a new question is raised, a rebuttal is given, and the move towards growth is made. As the literature shows, growth is critical engagement, a moment of defamiliarization that leads to questions new to the individual. Therefore, the dialogic classroom never settles nor should it seek to, and the move toward growth is not necessarily synonymous with group consensus. Though bonding may occur, trust may develop, and life-long friends might even be made, the classroom is largely a temporary camp upon which many paths converge and from which many paths continue. As such, the students' create the meaning of the moment and carry that meaning elsewhere.

Moreover, if community is misinterpreted as the situation in which no one offends another, dialog is again flattened. The community of the dialogic classroom revolves not around consensus but around the willingness to listen to and learn from others and to speak out as well. This type of exchange is inherently tense. Thus, the ability to continue in it requires respect, sympathy and even empathy, but it does not require agreement. Rather, the dialogic classroom builds on respect, sympathy and empathy as the basis for community. Thus, community in the dialogic sense is more a vision of mutual edification than agreement.

### **Directions for Research**

In response to student resistance to critical pedagogy, Sapp (2000) vented his frustration and called for study of “the variety of voices and experiences in response to becoming a co-participant in the teaching/learning process.” In agreement with Sapp (2000) and with a focus on language instruction, Godley and Minnici (2008) called for a “clearer understanding of the potentials of and barriers to such instructional approaches... as language and grammar instruction in the United States seems to be returning to traditional instructional methods that have long been shown to be ineffective” (p. 320).

This review has shown that more study is needed in the area of two-year college writing programs. First, the study of writing itself, as a social act infused with ideology, should be increased tenfold. If we are to begin to improve our democratic society, dialog over our communication and expression must be included. Second, my experience as an instructor has shown me that the population of my technical college is a varied blend of genders, social classes, cultures, and generations. Such classrooms hold excellent potential for our understanding of democratic/dialogic interaction.

Moreover, it is clear from the literature that the tension within the dialogic classroom is disconcerting. We must continue to embrace and explore tension as the space where the crucial decision points occur. It seems to me that the best literature hinges on tension and strives for meaning. The writing classroom, then, must be steeped in dialogic tension in order to write for meaning. To understand the effect of the dialogic tension on the students' perceptions of themselves as writers and learners is crucial to the development of more authentic composition experience.

Lastly, I agree with Godley and Minnici (2008), who saw student engagement and social empowerment as the major impetus behind the need for more study of critical pedagogy in the writing classroom. Change is often perceived as a threat by those who are in a comfortable position; therefore, resistance is surely no surprise. In addition, radical change is difficult, no matter what position one is in. Nevertheless, the change that does occur is worth the effort.

In their study, Godley and Minnici (2008) found that as "students began to deliberate about multiple perspectives on language use and racial identification, they also began to articulate their own understandings of the powerful connection of language and identity and how the ways in which people speak can signify membership in or disassociation from a particular group, their values, and their beliefs" (p. 331). This recognition by students of the "connection between language and identity, and the relationships of power mediated through language" is particularly important to students who speak stigmatized dialects of English (p. 320). Such students are "often negatively affected in material, economic, and emotional ways by dominant, 'commonsense' views" of [their dialect] as illogical, ungrammatical, or unintelligent" (p. 321). The students' ability to unveil and dismantle such views is seemingly a direct result of critical

inquiry in the English classroom. Thus, continued study of the critical stance in the classroom is warranted and even crucial to the growth of our democracy.

### **Considerations and Hopes**

The literature here gives hope to me and others who would attempt a dialogic stance. For, most of these authors testify to the fact that teachers who take the dialogic stance and fight through the difficulties are rewarded with a richer classroom experience. It is most obvious that the dialogic stance is not the path of least resistance. Yet, the hardest paths are often the most noteworthy. Since I believe that I am bound ethically to take a dialogic stance toward my students, I have to also believe that it is worth standing for.

What we must realize, though, is that the dialogic stance requires patience. We must fight our urge for instant gratification. Although a dialogic is surely a more humane approach to education than an information-transfer, knowledge-control model, it will not dismantle and reassemble our unequal social structures in one semester or even one lifetime. The dialogic approach by nature embraces uncertainty, thus we must grant ourselves flexibility and see all outcomes as opportunities for reflection and action.

Also, we must always keep in mind that the focus of the dialogic is the service of the student rather than the betterment of our careers or the furthering of our theoretical musings. Composition students need time and safe space to write, and the dialogic stance gives them both. Of course, it is difficult to consider the reality that my students will most likely find a pedagogy of severity in their next composition course. I hope that the dialogic experience will give them the hope that not all educational experiences have to be severe and the courage to critically engage those that are.

Though one dialogic experience might not fundamentally alter their lives, hopefully it will be strong enough to alter positively their sense of place in the classroom and that of writing, language and expression in their present and future lives. Perhaps the self-worth they feel in the dialogic classroom will carry over and empower them for future challenges against their voices. Hopefully it will help them recognize and resist the political and social agendas behind much of their education. Finally, I hope that many of them return to school as dialogic teachers so that the face of education will slowly change for the better.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

In this chapter, I lay out first the physical details of the school and classroom context and the demographics of the school and the class under study. Then, I give the theoretical reasoning behind my teacher-research approach, methods for data collection, and analysis. After that, I offer a look at the actual data collection and analysis processes. I move next into a detailed description of the five students that are the study's primary focus. Finally, I conclude with a consideration of possible limitations.

#### **Context**

I am a teacher/researcher. As such, I am immersed in my context, and so this study is not so much an observation as much as it is a documentation and subsequent interpretation of my classroom. Where do I teach? I teach in a typical United States classroom, but what do I mean by typical? I mean typical rows that face two large dry erase boards and a teacher's podium.

In this study, the classroom was a computer lab, so the tables were in fixed rows. The layout seems to be the epitome of the individualist, isolationist tendencies in education that Dewey (1904) recognized over one hundred years ago. Each student is alone with their own computer screen, which tends to squelch their human interaction, and their faces show it; people have a particularly dead expression when they are staring into a computer. It's as though the computer removes, through the eye, the brain's ability to function socially. The pale glow of the monitor only strengthens the illusion of zombiism.

Consider the implications of the physical layout of the classroom: The teacher's podium forces those who would use it into a position of authority; if I want to stand, I am positioned

above the seated students. If I want to sit, the chair is still higher in order to match the height of the podium. I face the students; they face me. The podium's fixed position reveals the theory of education that the designers subscribe to: the teacher is the authority whose place is above the students.

Because I seek to level the field as much as possible, when the college gives me a computer lab for the quarter, I seek out alternate rooms for most class meetings and save the computer labs for writing days. The movable tables and seats in the alternate rooms allow me to decentralize the classroom and place us on equal footing: small group pods and large group conference table seating works well. If an alternate room is not available, I lay the computer monitors, which are flat-screen, on their faces and group people around the tables. It's less comfortable, but it achieves the purpose.

The last physical object under consideration here is the room's single, large window covered by small-slat vertical blinds, which covers the wall just behind the teacher's podium. The window does not open, but the natural light is refreshing. Plus, the stale room needs all the light that the single window can offer. I'm sure that it's mostly in my mind, but the light seems to defy the rows and computer screens and the numbing processes that they represent.

The light, however, doesn't come through the blinds very well. In order to overcome the fluorescent haze, computer glow and general feeling of homogenized educational process, the blinds need to be raised. Yet, someone in the college has posted explicit instructions, complete with arrows and illustrations, that the blinds are not to be raised. I break that rule. Can we really be ordered to ration such an essential element for life? Don't we have a right to light? Moreover, what rationale labels us incapable of raising and lowering blinds but capable of educating



individuals? This simple restriction seems to touch the heart of the tension that inhabits my study's context.

Along more statistical lines, the general context of this study is Athens Technical College, which is a two-year degree and certificate granting institution in Athens, Ga. The student body consists mostly of Black and White US citizens from the local area. According to the college's data for Fall 2009, the White population is about 65%, the Black is about 22%, the Asian about 7%, Hispanic about 4% and American Indian/Native Alaskan about 1%. Along gender lines, females dominate at 60%.

The specific context of my study was my own English 1101 classroom. Initially, 20 students were enrolled but by the third week, the class leveled at 16. The class population generally reflected the overall college student body, with 11 women to 5 men, and 9 Whites to 7 Blacks. The class was a once a week Saturday session that ran from 8am until 1pm. The class voted to move the built in breaks to the end in order to dismiss each session 20 minutes early, at 12:40pm. Athens Technical College was on the quarter system, so the class stretched ten weeks.

English 1101 is the equivalent of a 4-year college freshman English class. The official name of the class is Composition and Rhetoric. The teachers work from a common syllabus developed by the department heads. In that syllabus, the college's official description of the class is as follows:

Explores the analysis of literature and articles about issues in the humanities and in society. Students practice various modes of writing, ranging from exposition to argumentation and persuasion. The course includes a review of standard grammatical and stylistic usage in proofreading and editing. An introduction to library resources lays the foundation for research. Topics include: writing analysis and practice; revision; and

research. Students write a research paper using library resources and using a formatting and documentation style appropriate to the purpose and audience.

The lack of agency I have in the creation of the common syllabus is an area of tension for me, but the college does allow us to create addendums. Thus, the first area of negotiation I opened with the students concerned an addendum to the syllabus. For each composition class I teach, I present an addendum in which I give specific class policies. Thus, I had written out the various areas, but I presented each to the students as areas for negotiation. If the students wished to make changes, they could suggest and vote on changes.

In the main syllabus, the college divides the class grading percentages into seventy percent classwork and thirty percent final exam. Of the seventy percent classwork, the college allots fifteen to the instructor to do with as he sees fit. The students agreed to base this fifteen percent of the grade on weekly posts and in-class writing and discussion. We agreed that these would be low stakes writings, for which the grade would be based upon on their level of engagement rather than grammar or mechanics. In other words, if they were asking questions and demonstrating some intellectual interaction with the text or each other, they would get full credit.

In addition, they tied attendance to this grade, in which four absences negated half of their weekly writing points. They also agreed that chronic tardiness, early departure, texting, talking or sleeping would qualify as absence. Perhaps because they anticipated missing a lot of classes, they negotiated an extra assignments clause in order to make up for their absences, which would include the classwork plus an extra piece of writing. Despite the fact that the majority of the students missed at least two weeks of class, and a couple of them were regularly late or leaving early, no one took advantage of this clause.

The remaining fifty-five percent of the graded classwork was over the formal papers. Though the college wrote a directive that required the students to write four different papers of 500-750 words, it is not actively enforced, so I usually go with three papers while maintaining the required word count. Yet, I did give the students the three or four paper option, and negotiated the grading weight and revision policy for each. Accordingly, the students voted for three papers in a fifteen, twenty-five, fifteen percentage order, the first two being academic argument and the last creative. In addition, they voted to revise every paper and negotiated a 30/70 averaging ratio, in which the original grade was 30% and the revision grade was 70% of the final grade. Revisions had to be submitted within a week of the paper's original due date, and unrevised or poorly revised papers kept the original grade.

### **Methodology**

In this section, I offer the theoretical reasoning behind my teacher-research approach, methods for data collection, and analysis.

#### **Why Teacher Research?**

The inspiration for my teacher-research comes primarily from Freire (1970), who argued that if teachers are going to move towards humanizing pedagogy, they must consistently, critically, and recursively reflect and act on their practice. My goal as a teacher is indeed to increasingly humanize my practice, which is important in itself and doubly important in this era of increasing mechanization in the practice of education. Thus, I must reflect on my practice, and this reflection requires research.

However, there are those who might argue that a teacher is too close to the context and that an outside observer might provide a more objective perspective on the situation. I have at least two objections to that position. First, as I laid out in my theoretical frame, I believe that the

search for objectivity in qualitative research is a hangover from a quantitative mindset; it is an anachronism of sorts. Second, the idea that a contextually disconnected outside observer would somehow offer better data on the context is misguided. As Allen and Shockley (1996) pointed out, the teacher lives in the context and is therefore able to navigate the nuances and shifts of the research. It is not that outside observers cannot provide excellent data from classroom observation, but their presence is always artificial to some degree. Conversely, the teacher, who is steeped in the context, can provide the richer data.

### **Why These Methods?**

Epistemologically, my critical-democratic/dialogic stance resides in a social constructionist and constructivist perspective (Vygotsky 1978; Oldfather and West 1999). Appropriately, this perspective has a bent towards education for democracy, as it recognizes the classroom as a place where we are constructing “particular meanings...within particular sociopolitical contexts” (Oldfather and West 1999 p. 84).

Thus, to match the democratic/dialogic aspects of the study, one important method for data generation was to record three reflective classroom discussions. The students wrote three papers for the class, and the reflective discussions occurred the day that the paper was due. These discussions were designed to reflect on the students’ writing process in and out of class and the class experience in general. Drawing from Shor’s (1996) use of student groups for on-going critique of curriculum, class-activity and teacher performance, the reflection/discussion focused on the students’ perception of the classroom interaction as a help or hindrance to their writing. For example, what did they receive from the classroom time that helped or hurt? What did they not receive that they needed? How was the writing experience outside of class? The discussion was open ended, so the questions were guidelines that created an important dialogic exchange.

Second, drawing on Oldfather and West (1999), I used student journaling as a type of learning biography of their practice as writers and students. As with the group discussion, I wanted them to write about their engagement with in-class exercises and individual papers. Though these journals covered much of the same ground as the in-class discussion, they gave a forum for those more reticent students who might have felt less comfortable speaking up in the group.

Third, I used open-ended, discussion based entrance and exit interviews. These interviews served to gain more insight into student perceptions of themselves as writers, learners and the education/literacy experience. In line with the democratic ideals of Freire (1970; 1992; 1998), these interviews served also to value the student's individual voices. In addition, the less crowded setting generates more focused data. In their classroom research, Thomas and Oldfather (1995) used such interviews with students, and found that they offer excellent opportunity for reflection of and dialog between students and teachers on the practice of their classroom. Plus, the open-ended, reflective style of data collection allows for a more autonomous version of student voice than, for instance, a series of directive questions or limiting surveys. Importantly, the conversational and reflective format of the interviews offered better opportunity for thematic analysis.

Fourth, based on the Freire's (1970) ideal of student self-representation and interpretation, and in the interest of promoting student voice in a democratic forum, I used auto-bio poems to garner student self-descriptions. In this way, I was able to represent them here in their own words rather than simply on my impressions of them. Though this information does not figure prominently in the analysis, it does provide perspective on the students. For reference, I have included in the appendices a copy of the interview and auto-bio poem protocols.

Lastly, I recorded my own audio reflections. Like the auto-bio poems, these were not part of the analysis of this study's data, but they did play a large role in the implications as I reflected back on my feelings, ideas and goals. I drew this use of personal audio reflections from Hankins (2003), who offered the insight that "teaching is...movement from the confusing to the merely uncertain" (p. 14). Thus, she finds this method of immediate reflection particularly useful for its tendency to produce rich insight into her practice by helping her to objectify her practice and "separate feeling from thinking and one event from another" (p. 1). Likewise, my interest in self-reflective journals was to keep a log that would help me keep track of my insights on and perceptions of the classroom interactions as the study progressed. My method was to record pre-class reflections, in which I spoke about my feelings, ideas, or goals. Similarly, I would record post-class reflections in which I would again record my feelings, ideas or goals in light of how the class proceeded. On occasion, if a particularly troubling, confusing or inspiring moment arose during class, I would record a reflection mid-class.

The combination of these methods give representations of personal and public voice, offer opportunities for non-directive expression, and value the student voice as subjective observer. Furthermore, these methods recognize that both the teacher and the student are part of the classroom experience and that their experiences are in dialog with each other. Thus, they fall in line with the dialogic-democratic epistemology, which views knowledge as socially authored and voices as equally valuable. In addition, they agree with the dialogic-democratic stance in that the students become co-researchers as they reflect on their experience as students, as noted by Oldfather and Thomas (1998). Overall, the combination of these methods should give focus upon and thus insight into the "nexus of intrapersonal, interpersonal and cultural aspects" of the literacy experience (Oldfather and Thomas 1998 p. 649).

### **Why this Analysis?**

One of the ways Freire (1997) encouraged teachers to understand their classrooms is to read their students as if they were texts. Although I did not read the students as if they were texts, the compilation of the texts generated by the students served as a type of overall text of that class experience from which I drew a literary style, interpretive, thematic analysis in order to locate and analyze student perceptions.

### **Methods and Analysis**

In this section, I discuss the process of data gathering and give a brief explanation of my process of interpretive analysis.

#### **Gathering the Data**

One of the primary methods I used for data collection was open-ended interviews. On the first day of class, I invited all students to participate on their own time. I passed around a calendar and asked that each choose a date, time and place that they would feel comfortable interviewing. I also offered in person, phone or online-chat options. I explained that the interview would take about thirty to forty-five minutes. In addition, I explained that I was interested in getting their perspectives on writing and education. In the interest of not coercing them, I strongly encouraged rather than insisted that they participate. As a result, only seven students agreed to complete the entrance interview, and of those, only five followed through on the exit interview.

Though I tried to contact the two who dropped out of the exit interview, they did not maintain contact with me. Subsequently, I did not find out why they chose not to complete the interview. However, later in the quarter I was able to ask without feeling coercive why so many students chose not to do an entrance interview. The overwhelming reply was an initial confusion

of the purpose coupled with a desire not to have to do any more work for the class then necessary. In other words, they saw the interviews as work, and since I asked rather than insisted, they opted out. Nonetheless, the interviews were rich and the five participants relatively diverse.

Of the five singled out in this study, Art and Nami chose the phone as the medium for their entrance and exit interviews, which I audiotaped and transcribed. Joel and Eric chose to meet in person. Joel chose a local coffee shop for the first interview and the campus coffee shop for the second. Eric reversed that pattern, choosing to meet at an outdoor campus patio for the first interview and over lunch for the second. Layla chose online chat as an option for her first interview and the phone for the second. Though the online chat was convenient for its real-time transcription, Layla and I agreed after her second interview that the online chat was time consuming for slow typists. I would also add that I could not decide if the medium limited information or made it more concise, due to the desire on both our parts to be conservative with our word counts. However, I preferred the fluidity of the phone and in-person interviews.

The other prominent source of data for this study was the class reflections. The reflections were scheduled after each of the three papers, and they fell at weeks three, six and nine. During the first two meetings, I posed open-ended questions to the students about their writing process and their feelings about the writing and the class time spent around it. In the interest of articulation, consideration and documentation, I had them write out their responses to the questions. Then, each student would share their response with the class as I wrote down the common themes that emerged. After they shared, I used the themes to generate discussion and kept further thematic notes. After discussion, we negotiated the next paper based on their experience with the first. The third reflection was similar, except that it came after the third



paper, so the negotiation segment was left out. In its place, I asked the students to reflect back on their experience in the class as a whole. I audio taped and transcribed each of these sessions.

The third, but less productive, source of data were the journals. I was not surprised that they did not generate as much data, as I had designed them mostly as an alternative mode of expression in addition to the class reflections. Specifically, after each reflection, I opened online discussion boards and asked the students to contribute anything that they did not get to say. These journals were online public forums, so that everyone could see and learn from the writer's ideas. The idea behind them was that some students might not feel comfortable speaking publicly, so the journal was a way to express themselves to the rest of the class. In addition, there were times other than after reflection that I asked the students to post, usually about an interesting idea that came up in discussion but that we had not had the time to develop. Yet, very few students posted to these boards. During the middle of the quarter, I asked why students weren't posting, and it took a long time for one person to reply that they didn't have anything to say. However, like their reason for not interviewing, I suspect that their online reticence was also due to the fact that the journals were voluntary.

### **Data Analysis**

As I explained in my methodology section, I took a literary style approach to my analysis, for which I:

1. Collected all writings and transcribed all audio recordings.
2. Read over the materials several times in order to identify and organize recurring themes, with a heavier focus on the five highlighted students.

3. Discussed those themes in relation to the critical-democratic/dialogic pedagogical stance and the students' sense of themselves as learners and writers, and their perception of their education in general.

Since I have already discussed the collection and transcription of audio data, and the discussion of themes is the body of Chapter 4, I will offer here a description of my reading and organizing of the data. As I mentioned, the data for analysis consisted of the interviews and class reflections. Thus, to begin my coding process, I printed all the interviews, which included the interviews from students who completed only the exit interviews. In addition, I printed the class reflections and accompanying journals.

Since I had decided to focus the analysis on the five students who had completed exit and entrance interviews, I read through their interviews first. To begin, I read through their entrance interviews first and identified common themes I saw across the data. Then I read their exit interviews and did the same. I used Microsoft OneNote to organize my data because the program functions as a digital filing cabinet of sorts. It has easily accessible, tabbed pages that you can drag and drop or copy and paste text onto. After I had identified themes in the entrance and exit interviews, I titled OneNote pages with those themes and used the digital versions of the interviews to copy and paste the related text onto those pages. In this way, I was able to build themed pages that contained expressions from each of the students along those common lines.

Second, I followed the same strategy with the class reflections. If information in the reflections matched the themes already identified, I copied the information into the appropriate pages. If new themes emerged, I created new themed pages in OneNote and copied the information from the reflections onto those new pages. I then did the same with the journals that accompanied the class reflections.

Third, since I was using the exit interviews as augmentations to the voices of the five students who completed entrance and exit interviews and to the class reflections, I read through the exit interviews from the other students through the lens of the themes I had already identified in the first five interviews and class reflections. I then copied and pasted any information from those interviews that aligned with the pre-identified themes.

At the end of this process, I had identified fifty-two themes or codes. I then printed out the themed pages and separated them onto the floor. In the interest of consolidation, I looked through the themes to see if any of them were matched closely enough to be grouped together. This step helped me consolidate some of the codes until I arrived at forty-seven.

At this point, I looked across the codes to locate the themes that were most prominent across the group. This step helped me reduce the focus to ten of the codes. Although I did not completely dismiss the other codes, I now had a clearer place to begin constructing the interpretation of the data. Thus, from these most prominent themes, I constructed the overarching theme of Pervasive Monologues, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

### **Participants**

Since the focus of this study is my own composition classroom, in order to qualify for the study, students must have registered for and participated in the composition class. In addition, students must have been willing to participate in the study, which meant that they were willing to be recorded in whole-group discussion, engage in open-ended interviews, and to write and submit reflective journals. Although not all students participated in all of the previous activities, they had to have willingly signed the consent form to have their participation used as data. Only one student refused to sign the consent form, but near the end of the quarter, she wanted to be interviewed and asked to sign the consent form, thus the entire class contributed to the study. In

the following section, I offer detailed description of the five students that are the main focus of this study. The descriptions are a combination of their self-descriptions, factual data of their actions, and my impressions of them.

### **Focus on Five**

Buchanan (1993) wrote, “I hoped that through studying one student’s writing, teachers would be able to ask questions about both the writing and the writer” (p. 213). In other words, she chooses to focus on a single student in order to create a clearer picture of writing in that particular classroom. As Broemmel and Swaggerty (2008) explain, such a narrow focus can provide a “rich description [that] can be useful in informing similar situations” (p. 59). Thus, Baum-Brunner (1993) finds that her attention on a single student gives a focus to her study that garners rich details. Thus, to focus on a single student or a small group seems particularly relevant to the aims of this qualitative study.

Yet, what drives the choice between one student and the next? For Buchanan (1993), the choice seemed fairly arbitrary; the student had asked a question that stuck in Buchanan’s head, so she decided to focus on that student’s writing. However, for Baum-Brunner (1993), the focus on a particular student centered on that student’s contributions throughout the course and the tensions she felt toward that student.

I would like to say that I chose to highlight these five students because they were unique in their contributions or that I felt tension surrounding them, but this is not the case for all. My intentions were to conduct entrance and exit interviews with each student and to purposefully choose five or six students. I wanted to pick as diverse a group as I could in order to represent the typical population of my college’s composition classes. Unfortunately, only five students completed the entrance and exit interviews.

Though the group is not as diverse as I would have liked, it is enough so that I feel comfortable in its representation as a general classroom at my college. Thus, I highlight each of these students in order to gather the rich data that will provoke teachers to ask questions about their own writing classes and to compare and research their own similar situations.

To offer the students the opportunity to introduce themselves, and to gather for myself some information about their assessments and views of themselves, I used an autobio poem. The poem was comprised of fourteen questions that created a list poem centered on the student's identity. In the interest of the dialogic/critical democratic stance I took, the auto-bio valued student voice and offered a balance to my impressions of them offered here.

### **Eric.**

Eric, who was just forty, described himself as “logical, thorough, prepared, and reserved.” He claimed to be a middle class American and aligned with his English-Irish descent. In addition, he mentioned his love of “ideas and a good book,” which spoke of the prominence of literacy in his non-academic life. In addition, he made note of his philosophical/spiritual pursuit of inner peace. Lastly, his love for family came through in his mention of his brother and his grandparents.

Eric attended every class and was a major contributor on every level. He not only submitted his work on time but he also completed drafts of each paper in order that he might get my feedback. I designed the class with an online post element, which he always contributed to. His contributions were in-depth and he regularly read and commented on other's posts.

In line with his self-description, he had a mellow demeanor. His glasses lent to the overall thoughtful air that he carried. He regularly hung around after class to strike up brief conversations with me about class content or other matters. He was thoughtful in conversation,

taking longer pauses to think about his answers, which were usually in-depth, and his interviews reflected this general tendency.

In class, he took a parental/teacher feeling towards the students. He would often give instructional-like advice during class. For example, once he broke into an explanation of the benefits and joys of critical thinking. Yet, he was also thoughtful enough never to dominate classroom discussion. He was well-educated, with a B.S. in engineering from a large, respected technical college in the area. He also had experience in education as a middle grades para-pro. In fact, when he had decided to switch careers, he considered getting a degree in education, but his witness to the pressure and bureaucratic rigmarole placed on teachers dissuaded him from that pursuit.

### **Joel.**

Joel, nineteen, described himself as “cool, entertaining, fun and responsible.” He claimed no ancestry other than white and considered himself a member of the middle class. Interestingly, or perhaps flippantly, he claimed that he was “related to no one special,” but that he himself felt “special, awesome and tired.” His most immediate needs were “entertainment, fun and food,” and he said that he would most like to see “a giraffe.”

Like Eric, Joel attended every class, and was a regular contributor. Yet, in fashion similar to his autobio poem answers, his class offerings were on a largely superficial, quip-styled level with the occasional insight. Similarly, he submitted his work on time but it seemed to be rushed, as if he had written it hours before it was due. His plan was to transfer to a local four-year university, and he was attending the college only because it was inexpensive and on the quarter system, which allowed him to complete many core classes cheaply and quickly in order that he might enter the four year sooner.

He kept his hair cut short all around save for bangs that hung over his eyes. He had a habit of shaking them off every so often, which gave an affect of youthful disdain. Overall, he had a generally bemused, flippant but clever air about him. For instance, he usually spoke with a slightly sarcastic tone, as if to leave some ambiguity to his statements. This ambiguity was further heightened by his tendency to be evasive and reticent when I questioned his replies or pressed him for further explanation. In addition, he would often reverse his positions when I asked him questions, as if my questioning was meant to challenge his position and he was trying to pretend to agree with what he thought my opinion might be. In addition, he always seemed slightly annoyed during these exchanges.

#### **Art.**

In his autobio poem, Art, nineteen, described himself as “single (for now), friendly, funny and outgoing,” the latter of which seemed to contradict his shy demeanor. Like Joel, Art claimed no ancestry other than white and considered himself to be in the middle class. As with Eric, Art was outspoken about his spiritual pursuits, but he was much more adamant about its presence in his life. He called himself “a lover of the Lord!, Church and the Bible.” Likewise, he was “at peace and happy.” For emphasis, he reiterated that he needed ““church, prayer and study” of the Bible and would most like “to see heaven.” Interestingly, he described himself as “one who gives light.” Art attended every class and was a fairly regular contributor to discussion and writings. His work was punctual and detailed.

He had a quiet, pleasant demeanor. In fact, Art was extremely shy and would avoid eye contact, stumble over his speech and display general discomfort with social engagement and public speaking. Moreover, in looking over the auto-bio poem that he wrote, I saw that he had

noted twice, with underlines and arrows, that he went by his middle rather than his first name.

Yet, I somehow addressed him by the wrong name the entire quarter. Yet, he never corrected me.

Nonetheless, he was insightful and deep thinking and always seemed to be engaged with the class discussion or activity. As a student of Christian scripture, he was focused on it during much of his writing. In general, he took his studies seriously and seemed to enjoy learning. In fact, the college was something of a family alma mater in which he took pride.

### **Nami.**

In her autobio poem, Nami, nineteen, described herself as an African-American member of the lower class who loved books and learning. Interestingly, she was the only student not to identify as middle-class, yet I suspect there were more students in a lower socioeconomic position than the poems revealed. In addition, though Nami declared a love for learning, her attendance was spotty. She missed three weeks out of ten. Furthermore, though she turned her papers in on time, she contributed to fewer than half the posts and to discussion only when pressed. Yet, even when she spoke up at my behest, she was very reticent in her contributions.

However, her interviews revealed a talkative and imaginative personality. Though she dressed fairly conservatively, she had multiple piercings: one above her left eyebrow and one in her tongue. Plus, in her autobio poem, she described herself as “short and sexy.” The piercings and declaration of sexiness coupled with the shyness suggested a daring person beneath the introverted public persona. Yet, this daring person never came through in her writing.

### **Layla.**

Layla, also nineteen, described herself as “hard-working, kind of quiet, friendly, busy.” As with Joel and Art, she described herself as white and middle class. Like Eric, she expressed a love for family and, like Art, a feeling of happiness and contentment. Layla’s greatest needs at



the moment were “sleep, a day off and a new car” She considered herself as one who was connected to others through her giving of “time, support and friendship.” Like Joel’s giraffe, Layla somewhat flippantly offered that the one thing she would like to see was “Anderson Cooper.” She attended every class, submitted her work on time and offered insightful written and conversational contributions, though she did not comment on other’s posts.

In general, she carried herself with a laid-back, everything-is-cool demeanor. Her dress was casual, jeans and plain shirts, and she wore little makeup, if any. She did not offer her voice often in discussion, but when she did, she was usually insightful and incisive in her commentary. She struck me as someone who knew how to play the school game, and I say it that way because she seemed to treat her time in the class as something that did not mean too much to her or pose her much of a challenge. Yet, she maintained an air of light-cynicism rather than disdain for the educational proceedings and seemed comfortable in any situation the class offered.

### **The other voices.**

Although I highlight five of the students, the study is designed to gather the voices of the entire class. The five highlighted are a baseline for theme generation, and I use the rest of the journals, discussions and interviews as augmentation to the themes found in the five.

### **Limitations**

The first question is directed at the assumptions behind the research: is qualitative research an unreliable source of information? Yes, if one is trying to measure the depth of the ocean or plot a trajectory to the moon. If twenty people swam to the bottom of a pond and then engaged in dialog in order to determine the depth, the answers would most likely not provide reliable quantitative data. We might get a good sense of what the experience felt like, or how long it took the average person to reach the bottom. In fact, we might even be able to draw

reliable, general inferences, such as the pond's depth or temperature, but we would likely not arrive at an accurate, quantitative measurement.

In considering limitations, we must remember that every form of research is limited. Yet, qualitative data, it seems, is subject to scrutiny by those who favor quantitative data. Indeed, this debate is at the heart of this study: an objective, quantitative driven education versus a subjective, qualitative one. One problem with defending qualitative research to quantitative critics, at least in this paper, is that the argument is located in the epistemological and even ontological realms and require philosophical theses of their own.

Perhaps a better consideration might be the appropriateness of a qualitative approach. I choose to engage in qualitative research because I believe it is the most appropriate approach to the existential experience. How can a number, a list of them, or an equation represent an emotion or an experience? I am studying perception, which lies in the yawning realm of interpretation. People's experiences and feelings are the narratives of their lives, and drawing meaning from narrative is the realm of hermeneutics (Oldfather and West 1999; Oldfather 2002a; Hankins 2003; Gadamer 1994).

As for the validity of interpretation of qualitative data, it ultimately falls upon the researcher's responsible action as an interpreter that any specific, external measurement. As Koro-Ljungberg (2010) argued, "a single, realistic truth and a transcendental criterion for validity can become problematic because it limits how truth can be conceptualized" (p. 604). In other words, to claim an objective method for measuring validity is a positivist mindset. In addition, Lewis (2009) maintained that the quantitatively derived concepts of validity and reliability are out of place in qualitative research. In other words, validity in qualitative research cannot be measured as one would stick a thermometer into a roast. Rather, as Koro-Ljungberg

(2010) explained, validity is determined by the presentation of the study itself, which reflects on the “researchers’ responsibilities and how they have been carried out.” (p. 604). In my study here, I have presented a methodological approach, employed data gathering methods in line with that approach, and offered thematic analysis that focuses on recurrent patterns within the text.

Beyond the considerations of qualitative research, I considered the particular methods employed. For the interviews, I maintained the democratic stance. In other words, I strongly encouraged rather than forced students to interview. Thus, one limitation I initially anticipated for the interviews was the possibility that only highly motivated students would volunteer for the interviews and the post-analysis response. Although the interview respondents were low, only five students interviewed for entrance and exit, the results were varied enough to create rich data for discussion.

When using student journals and interviews, I also had to be aware that students might have conformed to my goals, as a form of reactivity (Lewis 2009). In other words, they might have told me what they thought I wanted to hear. The first measure I took against this was to be open-ended and non-directive in the questions and topic. I did not want the students to know what I wanted to hear, if, indeed, I even knew myself. Thus, the questions were designed as guides to begin the discussion about the student’s feelings. I interviewed as a guide who helped the interviewee inquire into the feelings and thoughts that he or she raised. Though I pushed towards certain areas, I was wary of feeding the students opinions on those areas.

For example, during both interviews with Joel, I felt a consistent tension in this area. When he stated an opinion that I found interesting and I asked him to elaborate, he would often back off or switch his opinion, as if I were disagreeing with him and he wanted to agree with me. In these instances, I had to explicitly tell him that I was not trying to force him into any particular

stance but that I was interested in knowing more about what he had to say. Though my efforts in this direction did not cure his reticence, I felt that they kept track of his tendency to some sort of compliance towards me.

Likewise, the same problem with compliance could have occurred in the class reflections and journals. In the beginning of the class, I stressed to the students that their participation or non-participation in the study had no bearing on their grade. Likewise, once they had agreed to take part, I had to continually stress that their opinions did not affect their grade in the class. I felt that at first, they were hesitant to express their negative feelings or to be honest about their writing processes for fear of telling the teacher that they hated English or struggled with writing. As I began to encourage them to be honest and expressed a sincere desire to hear their voices and experiences, they began to open up. Moreover, I treated the classroom reflections with the same open-endedness that I maintained in the interviews. That is, I had some general areas to begin discussion with, but from that point, the discussion themes were generated by points that the students brought up.

Another possible critique might arise from my inclusion of self-reflective journals, which could be seen as a trap of my own subjectivity. To answer this possible charge, I recorded my frustrations, confusions and queries in order to objectify and thus analyze them (Hankins 2003). Any author who creates a text sees a different side to it once he or she gains some distance from it. As Freire (1998) explained, “the ‘distancing’ from the object is epistemologically ‘coming closer’ to it” (p.93). In other words, like those with hyperopia, we must back up in order to see things clearly. Moreover, my personal audio journals serve more to help me recall my perspective in order to write about it rather than supply specific data.

However, this defense is again an issue of quantitative versus qualitative. From my Bakhtinian/Freirean dialogic position, I see no way and have no desire to avoid subjectivity. The self-reflection, subsequent analysis and placement in dialog with the students' voices is a combination of subjective and objective. The Vygotskian (1978) understanding of social constructivism showed us that subjectivity and objectivity work together always to create meaning. Moreover, the dialogic epistemology recognizes that the interchange between the two is not only inevitable but desirable.

### **Summary**

As I have mentioned, the interviews, class reflections and follow-up journals supplied the text from which the following discussion was generated. I focused on the five students who completed the entrance and exit interviews, and augmented their perspectives with those from the class reflections that sympathized. Through the lens of the Bakhtinian/Freirean dialogic, I found individuals steeped in monologic education who had difficulty locating or trusting their own voices in the academic context. Rather, I found that they echoed the internalized authoritarian voices from their monologic educational conditioning.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

In my literature review, I located two common themes. In one, the dialogic stance resulted in confusion and resistance. In the other, it resulted in transformation and transcendence. Given the disappointments I had with my own education, my desire for my students to experience a more authentic writing education, and my belief in literacy as a life-affirming activity, I had hoped that my dialogic stance would result in transcendence and transformation. What I found, however, was more like confusion and resistance. Though I was initially disappointed, I took heart that the dialogic had opened important doors for the students and offered insight for English educators.

As I explained in my theoretical frame, the theories of Bakhtin (1981; 1984; 1986) and Freire (1970) drive my educational practice and cause me to recognize student voice and empowerment as an essential element of that practice. To reiterate, my goal in this study was to invite students into dialog over the curriculum and the direction of the classroom. By taking this dialogic stance and opening as many areas of negotiation as possible, I hoped to cause students to reflect upon themselves as writers and learners and upon the ideas of writing and learning. Moreover, I hoped to empower students to take more control of their educational experience. Yet, I found that the dialogic stance was such an anomaly in their experience that its nature and potential barely began to come into focus by the time the quarter had ended. As I wrote in my introduction, the emergence of this realization caused me to reevaluate my original research questions.

Although the original questions were not quite answered by the data, I do not completely dismiss them. It would be easy to say that the answer to the original questions is that the critical-democratic/dialogic stance has no effect on the students' perceptions, but that would be a hasty conclusion. Rather, I argue within this chapter that the dialogic stance hints at change and suggests potential for positive perspective shifts in students.

For this chapter, I offer my interpretation of the data in which I tease out the idea that the students carry with them pervasive monologues from authorities of their past education. Specifically, the students have adopted negative views of themselves as writers and learners, of education as a process, or a combination of both. Through the discussion, I unfold a disturbing picture of the student-academy relationship in which students reveal negative perceptions of their language in relationship to the academy's. In addition, I find in some students a dependence on the teacher for the dispensing, analysis and interpretation of knowledge. Still, in other students I find cynicism and ambivalence towards their education and alienation from it. In all, I argue that the internalized authoritative voice of the academy squelches student expression and perpetuates a dehumanizing educational experience.

### **Expectations and Definitions**

When I began this project, I pictured the dialogic stance as a space where the students would readily engage in the shaping of their schedule and assignments. In this vein, I assumed that they would take an active role in determining with me the goals of the course and the assignments to meet those goals. In turn, I figured I would document this active engagement and discuss to what extent it changed their perspective on their literacy and learning.

As I mentioned in my methods chapter, the dialogic theory of Bakhtin (1981) taught us that the students interpret and reinterpret their moment even as they are experiencing it. I

expected that the students would encounter the class and begin to interpret on an entirely different level. What I did not expect, but what I found, is that the dialogic space became a place where the authoritative discourse, i.e. pervasive monologues, of their educational past would be revealed as they spoke out, thus bringing the monologues rather than dialog to the forefront of this discussion. The students, I found, interpreted the dialogic moment through the lens of their previous, non-dialogic educational moments. Thus, I chose to document and discuss the pervasive monologues left from their past because they stand as stumbling blocks to student empowerment.

To take a moment for definition, the idea of the pervasive monologue is a combination of the theories of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Freire (1970). In Bakhtinian dialogic theory, human beings in social settings interact to create and recreate meaning within those contexts. In those settings, the monologue is that voice which attempts to take control of the meaning. Although other voices are present, the monologic voice denounces those voices explicitly and implicitly: explicitly by declaring the other voices wrong and implicitly by declaring itself right. Similarly, in Freirean theory the oppressor is the group that dominates others in social systems. The oppressor defines reality and subsequently creates systems that reflect and reinforce that reality, to the detriment of those who do not benefit from that reality, i.e. the oppressed. In this study's context, as well as in Freire's (1970), the oppressor is the educational system. In other words, the educational system produces a monologue that aims to control the meaning of student and education.

Moreover, Freire (1970) argued that once a system "has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up" and it leaves its marks upon all involved (p. 58). Specifically, the system of which Freire (1970) spoke is the banking-model style of



education, in which the authority determines the valuable knowledge and subsequently transfers that knowledge to the subordinate students. Sadly, I can say with confidence that the majority, if not all, of the students had experienced an authoritarian, top-down, information-transfer style of education. And, the marks of that education surfaced during their interviews and class reflections.

In addition to the Bakhtinian and Freirean lenses, the pervasive monologues can be further understood as pieces of the students' self-narratives. Wortham (1999) explained, "We contribute structure to ourselves by telling stories about ourselves" (p. 156). In essence, as self-conscious beings, we picture ourselves through narrative. Moreover, this identity building happens incrementally, as we construct running narratives. When the story becomes strong enough, "the narrator acts in accordance with the characteristics foregrounded in the narrative" (156). Likewise Bruner (2004) argued that the human experience is one of culturally and contextually influenced "world making" (p. 694). Over time, "the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience" and "we *become* the autobiographical narratives" in addition to becoming "variants of the culture's canonical forms" (p. 694). Accordingly, the pervasive monologues the students express are the net result of the pieces of the culturally and contextually imposed narratives that they have been putting into place throughout their school experience.

### **The Pervasive Monologues**

Bakhtin (1984) argued that whenever a social context occurs, in this case a college composition class, meaning is constantly being made by all involved. As I have described above, the educational institution creates a monologic rather than dialogic situation, in an attempt to control the context's meaning, but the students are nonetheless answering on the subject,

externally and internally. Yet, Freire (1970) explained that long exposure to the system conditions students to accept and expect the system to some degree. In other words, the monologic banking model of education has caused them to internalize the system's monologues on themselves and their education, more or less. These are the pervasive monologues I defined previously, which are brought out by the invitation to dialogue. Yet, what pervasive monologues did they arrive with?

### **Language Valuation**

As I discussed in chapter one, the students carry into the class their culturally derived evaluations and judgments of varieties of English. Ideas of correct and incorrect English and of right and wrong speech abound. Moreover, the students seem to come prejudging not only language in general but themselves as well. I commonly hear them offer readily on day one that they "don't write too good." Hence, this discussion of pervasive monologues begins with the source of their supposed self-judgment.

#### **Linguistic inferiority of the students' English.**

I'll begin with the disturbing idea that some students see themselves as linguistically inferior. Ironically, or tragically, a few of the students who felt inferior within academic literacy identified themselves as readers and writers in their personal lives. Of those, Nami, a 19 year old, recent high school graduate, was the prominent example of one who felt inadequate with academic literacy yet spoke of a richly literate personal life. From a young age, reading for her had been an imaginative, interactive and self-expressive journey. "I can put myself into a book," she explained, and "really get into it. I just love it. I just love it." Yet, putting herself into the book is not simply an adventurous escape; during emotional times in her life, she finds solace and cathartic relief in reading about others who are going through similar troubles that she faces.

Likewise, writing is crucial to her well-being because she “tends to be a quiet person.” As with reading, writing gives her an outlet, a “way of expressing things.” She explained that “whenever something’s going on I write. I even be with my little sister, when she be going through some stuff; I just be like, you know, write it down; then you...can rip it up if you want to; it won’t bother you. It’s a way of getting it off your chest, so it’s not on you.” This is a great example of writing as a meaning-making act. In addition, she writes not only journal entries but also poems and larger pieces of fiction, mainstays of academic literacy, which allow for more comprehension and interpretation of her circumstances.

In her larger creative works, she explained, “I make an imaginary person and...have her feel the way I do...and then, through the end of the story, she deal with all her problems, and she feels better so I feel better. When I write it down, I read it an be just smiling. I be like, it’s fine; it’s fine, just everything’s real cool.” This love of fiction began in her elementary school classes, when she wrote short stories about dragons and princesses, which she “used to love.”

Tragically, this creative, imaginative and meaning-making writing that she loves has retreated from her educational landscape. In place of her previous love for and connection to writing in school, she now finds disconnection and intimidation. Furthermore, this disconnection and intimidation can be seen as a lack of self-trust that Nami has about her ability, for Freire (1970) argues that the rejection students like Nami have experienced leads to a duality that makes them “distrust themselves” (p. 63). Thus, she loves her writing in her personal context but disparages it in the academic.

“I’m more of a freestyle writer,” she offered. “When I have to write...on a specific subject I’m just like out of ideas.” When I asked the reasons for her feelings, she concluded that when she received assignments, she would get ideas for papers but would feel that those ideas

weren't good enough; they weren't what the teacher wanted to hear. Then she would struggle to write what she thought the teacher wanted. In essence, she was experiencing an internal polemic about her writing and trying to acquiesce to the monologic voice about her writing. That is, she was listening to the internalized voice of the authority on the subject of her inferior writing ability.

When I asked her why she thought her writing wasn't good, she described the ongoing monologue she had received from the educational institution: "when I get my paper back...they're always telling me I need to add more details, but, I...want to add more details, but then I'm wrong and...I get a bad grade. I just be scared to push myself to go there." She is scared because the definition of details remains a mystery, an official stamp that the teachers do not explain. For a recent final paper in another class, she had poured her heart out, given as much detail as she could muster, and still found rejection. "I was just really upset; I was upset" she lamented.

As for her poetry, she denied its value. "I suck at," she said. "It have a small rhythm to it but it don't be like Shakespeare poetry." Her reference to the classic literary canon is telling of her experience in high-school literature classes. The sanctioned knowledge of the classics finds little room for negotiation of poetic voice. Furthermore, if it hurts her to offer up her acquiescent essays for evaluation, I'm sure that to offer her meaning-making, self-interpreting poetry up to the same scrutiny would be doubly painful.

Unfortunately, this pervasive monologue of her linguistic inferiority penetrates through to her ability simply to handle the English language. In her estimation, composition classes exist to ensure that "people who speak slang will use less slang" and will instead "use proper English." Indeed, her personal hopes for English class were that it would help her "phrase certain things

differently without using slang.” In describing the purpose of education in general, she answered that education makes people “better.” When I pressed for a definition, she gave an answer in which she repeatedly stressed that education helps people “speak better and use complete sentences.” According to Nami, the slang or the home language that she, her family and her friends speak is not correct English. Moreover, the ability to speak better goes in hand with improved thinking, perspective and understanding.

However, this so-called improved expression sounds more like a linguistic self-rejection and subsequent acquiescence to an academic dialect. In resistance to this situation, Shor (1996) writes of a democratic stance in which a “new speech community” is created in the class (p. 30). In contrast to the situation that Nami implies, the new community is developed by students and teachers and includes language variety as a part of the class’s community expression. In other words, the students’ home languages are included as part of the classes discussion and writing. This validating inclusion stands in stark contrast to Nami’s devaluation of her home speech in favor of the academy’s.

Yet, Nami’s submission to the authoritative voice on her writing is not surprising. For, Freire (1970) argued that “self-deprecation is...a characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them” (p. 63). Accordingly, Nami, a prolific reader and writer on a personal level, is stifled by literacy in an academic context because the pervasive monologue of that context has spoken against her personal literacy.

Furthermore, her intimidation and lack of recognition of the value of her own literacy was echoed by her classmates. For instance, Chloe, who enjoyed personal reading and writing, reflected, “writing just isn't my thing. Now it's easy for me if I'm writing in my own personal

journal, or a diary. It's easy for me to do that because there's no one else reading it but me. But when you have somebody else reading your writing and critiquing it, it's hard. You want to make sure you're writing and doing a good job of it. Then when you get that paper back and see all the red marks, then it makes you feel like, OK, this isn't for me.”

Except, what is it that “isn’t for” Chloe? Certainly, as with Nami, it isn’t writing; Chloe says she writes regularly, and her writing is intensely important to her understanding of herself and the world. She explained to me that “if I’m stressed out, or if I’m angry. I tend to get a piece of paper to write my frustrations down, so I won’t take it out on nobody else. It helps ease the tension and the stress, so that’s what I try to do.” Also, her meaning making literacy is not limited to working out her past experience but also organizing her future possibilities. She also takes time to write out her “short-term and long-term goals” to help her “stay on task” and to follow through with what she tells herself she is going to accomplish. She turns to writing as a meaning-making experience, yet the reception that her writing has received in academia caused her to devalue it as true writing and to withdraw her voice from the composition classroom.

For those who professed to do little writing or reading in their personal lives, the intimidation and sense of inferiority was still present. For instance, throughout each of the group reflections, Audrey, a high-school graduate in her early 20’s, laughed nervously whenever grammar was mentioned. She warned me often that her work wasn’t very good and that she hadn’t had an English class for five years. She even quipped that she would never submit a first draft to me because I would think that she “was in elementary school.” In addition, she and a few other younger class members repeatedly claimed to have Attention Deficit Disorder and a general lack of ability to think straight.

Where had these notions come from? During our first class reflection, the discussion came around to the tension that surrounds submission of one's work to critique, and the following explosion of expression was telling:

Holly: and previous writings, previous English teachers, you handed in a paper that you thought was good and you get it back, and it's like, well, I didn't do so great

Chloe: and it's full of red marks

Audrey: getting cut down

Hayley: I did that. I handed in a ten page paper in high school and thought I had done great and I got it back and had failed and it really makes your confidence level sink.

Because, if you thought you did great, and then you come to a paper thinking you're not great, then you're sure to fail.

This topic was a sudden spark of liveliness in which each student spoke nearly on top of the other, and when the outburst finished, a general buzz of agreement moved through the room. In fact, the energy of the moment was palpable. Denunciation of their written expression was a common, recurring experience, it seemed. Two of the students were speaking of high school experience, and two of high school and college. Yet, it seemed that most had at some point experienced writing as an experience of rejection that stymied their willingness to engage. The previous negative opinion their teachers held about their writing had caused them to internalize that opinion.

For Layla, a 19 year old freshman, it took college to make her doubt her ability. She had enjoyed her Advanced Placement high school English classes, and looking back from her first year in college, she concluded that the high school teachers cared more about her as a person and learner. Conversely, her first college English class had been with a "total spazz teacher who

criticized everything [she] wrote. Like, it was mean,” she complained. As with Nami’s English teachers, he criticized and ordered her to “fix” her writing without offering her suggestions. Her response was to drop the class. In her initial interview, I asked her what she hoped to gain from this class; “To like writing again,” was her poignant reply.

And that sentiment of discomfort with academic writing ran as a strong vein throughout the first group reflection. Most of the students were reticent in the meeting, but those who were vocal expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to write in a way that would please me or the college. Hayley, a 19 year old who was already gun-shy from high-school English, had “heard that college was...picky on grammar and bibliography.” In addition, she felt inadequate to handle such superficialities, as she labeled them, and resented the very presence of formal documentation. Moreover, her worry over it blocked her ability to write a meaningful essay. The previous red pen had done its damage, but now she felt as though an entirely new weight of criticism had been added to the existing.

As a reminder, the class reflections were meant as negotiation sessions where the students would look back over and assess, for change, the writing of the previous paper, the class time spent around it, the negotiations made over it. Yet, the reflections turned out to be forums in which the students expressed discomfort with writing and showed little sense of how to assess their own writing, let alone negotiate their own education. This lacking sense of self and agency and control follows Freire’s (1970) idea that the students consider the teacher to be the one who holds knowledge. According to Freire (1970), the students “call themselves ignorant and say the “professor” is the one who has knowledge” (p. 63).

A similar situation occurs with what Shor (1996) identified as the “Siberian Syndrome,” in which students disconnect as much as possible from the classroom while still trying to pass the



class (p. 12). It is easy to combine Freire's (1970) identification of student assumed naivety, Shor's (1996) picture of student disconnection and the insecurity in the students of this study in order to conclude that the students don't believe in their writing ability. However, this would be an overly simple conclusion. The fact that Nami and Chloe wrote regularly shows that they believed in their writing ability. Likewise, Freire's (1970) students did not think that the professor held all knowledge but only the knowledge within the classroom context. In addition, many of Shor's (1996) students, while disconnecting from the classroom, held their own strong opinions.

Thus, the negative view of self-expression displayed by the students in this study suggests fear and self-defense rather than total lack of self-confidence. The students have been beaten up for so long that they have retreated into their own spaces for their meaningful writing and offer little of it to the classroom. As Shor (1996) found, many students felt that their voices would not be valued by the teacher, so they felt that expression in the classroom was a waste of time and energy. Likewise, students such as Nami and Chloe did not want to suffer the pain of rejection that they knew all too well, and their self-denouncements offered them some level of protection; if they say they are no good, then they will not be as hurt when the teacher affirms their assessment, and a positive reaction to their writing is then a pleasant surprise.

Another aspect to consider in the students' assessment of language is their relationship with academic English. Many of the students described Academic English as an ideal version, but students such as Nami and Chloe have suffered in English classes because their home dialect did not match the academic dialect. Unlike students such as Joel and Layla, whose home dialects did match, Nami and Chloe have experienced Academic English as a different dialect, which creates for them an extra level of disconnect between self-expression and academic acceptance.

It is not surprising, then, to find reticence and aversion to dialog in such a situation. Moreover, agreement with the academy's valuation of language was also predictable.

### **Linguistic superiority of academy's English.**

In her exit interview, Nami offered that the language of the academy was "real English," a prevalent sentiment for many throughout the quarter. Throughout our class reflections and their interviews, students regularly employed the terms *correct* and *proper* when referring to academic English. Thus, the other side of the coin of the students' linguistic inferiority is the pervasive monologue that the academic language of the English textbook and writing guide is superior and therefore socially more valuable than others. This pervasive monologue is tricky, though, because it is true that our language is a cultural marker, and certain varieties of English are valued above others through their association with certain cultures. Thus, this monologue is pervasive throughout our society and not simply in our educational institutions, which translates to economic in addition to academic consequences for the students.

Yet, the problem is not that the linguistic capital exists but that the students are buying into and reproducing the pervasive monologue of the superiority of the academic English. In this vein, some of the students noted that the composition class is meant to garner them a bit of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1986). For instance, Layla claimed that a composition class could help a person achieve better economic and social standing because "it will make you sound smarter." Note that she didn't say the composition class could help one critically engage the world but that it could make one appear more intelligent, to the right people.

Likewise, in his entrance and exit interviews, Art painted a picture of language in which use of slang makes people appear lazy, while the "good language" learned in English class can turn people into leaders. Similarly, Nami equates better language with being a better person.

While she disparaged the language of her home and community, she saw the language, in particular the grammar and vocabulary, of the academy as that which can “open [people] up to new words and new forms of writing and better understandings.” Yet, it isn’t that the students aren’t right. Language does carry with it social and economic capital. The problem, again, is that the students aren’t part of the process of knowledge development, so they are forced to reject or accept the reality, with negative consequence to their sense of self.

Recall again the different layers of pressure that accompany such a view of Academic English. For students such as Art and Layla, whose home language aligned closely to Academic English, the idea of Academic English as superior, whether they truly believed it, was not much of a threat. Though Layla had been manhandled by the red pen until she disliked English class, she did not have the extra burden of adapting to a new dialect. On the other hand, students such as Nami and Chloe had that burden, which no doubt compounded their insecurity with Academic writing.

Regardless the students’ home dialect, the defensive posturing associated with language was prevalent. Though English classes are commonly presented as a means to stronger student voice, the opposite effect seemed to have occurred for many in this study. Moreover, since language is tied closely to one’s identity, it is no surprise that the attitudes the students had towards language seemed to mirror their larger sense of themselves as learners. In other words, the disconnect and defensiveness they felt towards language was the core of their sense of education as a whole. Thus, the following pervasive monologues show the students’ sense of themselves as subservient learners of other’s knowledge.

## **Students as Receivers rather than Creators of Knowledge**

Another pervasive monologue that the students carried with them was their view of themselves as receivers of rather than creators of knowledge. My goal as the teacher in a dialogic classroom was to be a guide and a fellow learner rather than an authority or, as Shor (1996) explained, to diminish the authoritarian aspects of the teacher's voice by bringing it in as an augmentation to the already active student voices. I wanted us to be "jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire 1970, p. 80). Yet, most of the students looked consistently for me to tell them what to do and how to do it.

The students' attitude found here resembles closely Shor's (1996) "Siberian Syndrome," in which students had "learned to socially construct themselves as intellectual exiles" (p. 12). In essence, the students arrived in class, took their seats and waited for the information transmission from the teacher to begin. This learned behavior is a condition of their past experience with education. Yet, it is important to note that the students in such positions do not necessarily value the information they are receiving. Unlike the students who seem to believe that their language is inferior while the academy's is superior, many who sit back and wait for knowledge do not value that knowledge. They take in the information because they play the game, but not all believe in it. In other words, subservience does not equal sanction. Yet, the conditioning is largely ubiquitous.

Evidence of the receivers-of-knowledge conditioning on the students was prominent throughout the quarter. From beginning to end, Layla, Nami, and Art spoke of education in terms of information transfer in which one receives the knowledge for life navigation. It's interesting to note that these three students took slightly different attitudes towards the English class and their education. Layla's home language seemed to fit the academy, and her writing was generally

strong, but she maintained a lackadaisical, affected boredom for the proceedings. Art's language and writing also seemed to match Layla's, but he held the purposes of English class in high regard. In fact, he seemed very much in line with Nami's estimation of the superiority of academic English. Nami, of course, disparaged her language and elevated the academy's. Yet, with all these different attitudes in play, these students all agreed to the idea that knowledge creation was not their role.

For Layla, the role of the student was unwaveringly "to do the work and take in the lesson." Likewise, Nami explained that the teachers' role "is to provide information to their students so they'll have better knowledge of the subject." She expounded that lesson is comprised of "information that [the students] don't know or might know a little of," but either way the teacher is instilling better knowledge in the students. As Art explained, the role of education is to provide a place where students can listen to and learn from the teachers. Furthermore, Art and Nami described learning as something that happens when someone who knows more than you gives you information. As long as a knowledgeable other is giving information, learning is occurring.

During his initial interview, Eric spoke of the negative aura of information transfer education around him, which he identified as memorization education. He explained that as a student he questions information that is relevant to his personal life, and the teachers usually engage him in conversation. Yet, Eric feels the attitude from his fellow classmates that he is wasting their time. For example, he explained, "I have high blood pressure; when we talk about ace-inhibitors, I'm familiar with those, so I'm asking in-depth and the professor is engaged with me but the rest of the class is like: well, we're here for memorization and not your ace-inhibitor conversation." Thus, it seems that the memorization mindset dominates the landscape.

Although most students go with the banking-model flow, excitement for this type of education is not prevalent. Both Layla and Joel have resigned themselves to and learned to function within the system in which education is done to them: “In most classes,” said Joel with a shrug, “they tell you what you have to learn, and “it goes the way it’s supposed to go. I mean, one thing after the other.” Likewise, Layla quipped that she has “no problem with the whole sit-there-and-listen thing” that she has been subjected to for most of her school years. Both students have navigated and will continue to navigate that system successfully, if ambivalently, filling in the blanks and punching the time-clock.

Yet, besides resignation to the game, some felt the need for the teacher to deliver knowledge. This attitude was expressed best by Audrey, who commented during the final class reflection, “This class has been more directed towards me, and I do better actually learning.” This off-the cuff assessment well-revealed her conditioning, but she retracted a bit, saying, “Well this is learning, but this is more research, and it’s more of me doing the work than you.” I asked her if she meant that she functioned better in classes where the information was delivered to her, and she said “yeah, more lecture, but I’ll take what I can right now.” It’s truly a shame that student engagement in knowledge creation is seen as second best.

It could be that Audrey echoed here Cadman’s (2005) discussion of the seemingly overwhelming demands on student attention that a dialogic stance can incur. Audrey was a single mother, paying for her own education, attending school in hopes of a degree that would bring her a higher-paying and more secure job. In such a case, her concerns are practical and realistic. She wants to get through her classes as easily and quickly as possible. The shame is not that she seeks such a means because that might be exactly what society is asking of her. The trouble is that so much of so-called education is such a shallow, busy-work process. If our education does

not demand our attention, it would seem that true education is not happening. In such a case, education shows only that we can do the work and handle the pressure; moreover, any learning that occurs is peripheral. Information transfer is easier, for sure, but easier is not better. The students position themselves to regurgitate the academy's knowledge because that is what their education has taught them to do. However, as Joel remarked in both his interviews, this type of so-called learning does not mean much to the students; thus, it does not engage their intellects at any deep level.

### **The Teacher as Sole Critical Thinker**

Besides their commentary, this general sense of education as information transfer manifested in their classroom engagement. The best example of this condition was the regular classroom discussions. In the interest of meaning-making dialog, I dedicated much of the class time to discussion of essays and issues that those essays raised. The typical *modus operandi* was to start with small group and then move to large group. Yet, I found that during small group discussion the students would too quickly move to discussions about the latest gossip or generally random topics. Shor (1996) outlined a similar process and result in his classroom, and he found as well that small groups will often use the time as an opportunity for socializing. In his exit interview, I asked Joel to offer some insight into this phenomenon, and he proposed that students “talk about it at first because it's what they have to talk about, and then they put their view of things on it and how it relates to their life and then they kind of wander off into other stuff.” Though at least one group was usually engaged in deeper conversation, throughout the quarter, the majority of the students treated the discussions lightly, regardless my strategic arrangement of group members.

My first thought in consideration of this situation is to Freire (1970), who criticized the banking style education for its embrace of content that is irrelevant to the students' lives. On this thought, I have to note that one restriction in our dialogic classroom was the requirement of the use of the assigned text for the class. The text is a typical college reader, heavy on essays and filled out with smatterings of illustrations, photos and literature. To its credit, the text is somewhat diverse in its general topics and the articles within them are complex.

As a dialogic educator, I had asked the students to choose those topics that sounded most interesting and relevant to them. Moreover, I did not direct the focus of their responses to the multifaceted and often troubling social issues that had, as far as I could see, enormous potential for impact in the students' lives: civil rights, immigration, language, education, racism, sexism, democracy, war, and wage-driven society, to name a few. In addition, some lighter topics were offered, such as popular culture.

Yet, during discussion, a typical small group of four would regularly claim to have exhausted any issue in under two minutes. They simply had nothing more to say and weren't interested in pushing themselves to inquire. If, as Joel said, they spoke about what was relevant to their lives and then moved on, it seemed then that everything was irrelevant. This is not, however, how I interpret their response. Rather, their response is a result of the pervasive monologue of the teacher as the creator of knowledge, which in turn leaves me to do the critical thinking as well. Students do not interpret, analyze or critique because they look to me to do it all for them. This is not surprising, as Freire (1970) noted that the banking style of education "anesthetizes and inhibits creative power"; moreover, it "attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality" (p. 81).



In contrast to their usual educational mode, I was inviting the students to take part in “an unveiling of reality” in which their consciousness emerges and they “*critically intervene* in reality” (Freire 1970, p. 81). Freire’s (1970) ideal, which I tried to uphold, was that as students are “posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (p. 81). Yet, through to the end of the quarter, I found myself having to walk from group to group and to join the conversation in order to push it further or to get it started.

My initial desire was to move between the groups to enjoy their insights and get a general sense of their reactions. Yet, they made me feel more like a cop on a beat coming across truant minors on a street corner. In his similar situation, Shor (1996) had no qualms with his role as enforcer, for he argued that a dialogic classroom is not a free for all. To waste class time is to show disrespect for everyone involved. Yet, it isn’t the fact that students would move off task but its depth and persistence that caused me to question the source of such a constant behavior pattern.

As I said, I was not a hard case about the focus of the discussions. Though restricted to the text, the students had chosen the essays that they wanted to read. Moreover, the students did not have to answer pre-ordained questions. I simply wanted a response to the arguments they had read; if the topic was relevant or irrelevant, I asked them to offer some reasons why. The philosopher in me couldn’t help but puzzle over their lack of inquisitiveness. Likewise, the researcher in me couldn’t help but catalog their varied postures. Some seemed bored or indifferent, as if they couldn’t be bothered or that it was all a joke. Some seemed annoyed and exasperated, as if the critical consideration of the world and their place in it was far too much of a strain on their psyches.

Often, when I pushed, they would ask me what I thought about the issue and then try to placate me with vague agreement. If I pushed again for them to explain or defend that agreement, they would go silent or rephrase what I just said. My frustration in these situations was sometimes difficult to control. In response, I would often give them the option to talk about any issue that they thought was important to them, yet too many of them could not come up with one. The topics that were important to them were more often things such as sleep and being anywhere but in class. Yet, even if we tried to analyze their overworked lives, disdain for education, and general detachment from writing, the discussion would fall short. I recognized that I was asking them to move in a general to specific direction, which can be overwhelming, but many seemed unwilling even to begin the conversation. At every turn, the students resisted critical engagement with the topics.

Moreover, they seemed to be playing a waiting game in which they refused to engage until I broke down and gave them the answer, as if the interaction between us was guided discovery of rather than dialog towards meaning. Even if they did not value my answer, they expected that I would offer one as the correct reading. In other words, they were expecting the monologic voice from me. This general mindset was demonstrated well by Audrey who, when her turn came during the second class reflection to critique the class time and the writing process, looked at me in earnest and said, “I don’t know; what are we supposed to say?”

Thus, in line with Freire’s (1970) theories of oppressed acquiescing to the oppressor and Shor’s (1996) experience with students’ self-exiled intellects, many of the students in my class surrendered their intellects to mine. Although some had the occasional insight, those were more often elicited. Moreover, those elicitations felt more like coercion at times, as if I were an interrogator. This last point is the most disturbing to me, for as I attempt to engage in a

humanizing pedagogy, it seems the attributes of the dehumanizing one are being forced upon me by the students themselves.

I am not wholly surprised by their tendency to push me into the authoritarian role. Though I asked them to bring their knowledge to the table, as Audrey's desire for banking education showed, the status quo was easy and change was difficult. Change was work. I do not fault anyone for the tendency to avoid work, but I am surprised at its persistence as it becomes clearer that the dialogic classroom experience is richer and more rewarding than the information transfer model.

### **The Teacher as the Director of Writing**

Unfortunately, their ironic enthronement of me as knowledge maker extended into their writings. In essence, many wrote as if the action of writing and submission of their writing to me was guided discovery and they needed heavy guidance from me. They are, as Freire (1970) explained, beneath me in their hearts and minds and so are "emotionally dependent" upon my input (p. 65). In other words, it was as though I held the map of good writing, was giving hints about, but not showing, the map's design and then asking them to draw the map. Furthermore, I was matching their efforts against the real map. Thus, many wrote essays but claimed the process was difficult because they did not know what I wanted, i.e. they hadn't seen the map. This mindset seems to be a logical continuation of the class discussion roundabout: they receive a problem to explore, but the teacher is not there to inquire or interpret for them, and they fall silent, scramble for some semblance of consideration on the subject when the pressure hits, and then wait to see what the real answer is.

As a reminder, I see the dialogic teacher's role as that of a guide. I work to help the students become better writers for them. Additionally, any respect they might offer me is not out

of line, but problems begin when respect crosses over to intellectual submission or deference masks indifference. The point of the dialogic composition classroom is to construct with the students what it means to produce a text that is meaningful to their lives. Yet, co-construction requires active inquiry on everyone's part, and this is what is missing when the teacher is deemed to be the keeper of knowledge. As Freire (1970) warned, the students' ability to analyze, estimate and imagine their own texts is stifled in the top-down system.

Thus, we have reflections such as Pat B.'s, who remarked, "the way I write papers is from my old teacher, but you like it kind of different, so it's kind of like (shrug) so, hopefully you'll like this one better." In addition, he said the second paper was easier to write "because we know what you're looking for and how strict you're going to be about it." The estimation of the quality or value of his paper is a mystery to him and a function of my subjectivity, it seems. Moreover, many similar comments emerged during the second class reflection. Ideas of strictness and judgment prevailed. During reflection on her first paper, Audrey said, "I'm not sure how good it is. That's up to you." Most telling of the complete submission to my estimation of value and quality was her comment that the estimation of her essay's value "comes down to [my] mercy."

If these comments from the students had come on the first day of class, I would not have thought them such strong evidence of the depth of the students' conditioning. However, the comments came six weeks into the class. In addition, I expected more flexibility and engagement from these recent high-school graduates and older adults. After all, they weren't disgruntled high-school freshman. We had negotiated the content and the writing guides for the first two papers, yet these students acted as if they had no access to the body of knowledge against which their writing would be measured, as if I were still holding the map to my chest. They did not

seem to grasp the implications of their part in the creation of that knowledge. In other words, they didn't realize their power as part of the evaluative authority; therefore, they did not inquire into it. Rather, they continued the pervasive monologue that the knowledge of the teacher/authority is the standard against which the quality of writing is measured.

For instance, when we began discussing the third paper, even the highly philosophical and dialogically engaged Eric asked, "Do you have any idea of what you're going to grade on? What are the categories?" Though he had been an active part of the negotiation of the first two papers and had denounced the information transfer style of education, he spoke as if the categories and evaluation were completely up to me. In addition, when it came time to negotiate the third evaluation/writing guide, many students, Eric included, expressed frustration with the process and even requested that I simply grade the papers according to my own knowledge. I did not do so, and, in his final interview, Eric expressed appreciation for the student-centered approach, but his initial reaction revealed his underlying educational conditioning. However, during the final reflection both Nami and Audrey expressed a desire for more teacher input on the guides.

Their feedback surprised me at first, given the assignment's design and what I considered my regular involvement. To explain, the final paper was a choice of specific genre piece, such as a memoir, and the development of the guide was based on their research of the conventions of the genre. They researched first as individuals, then brought their research to the small group, then worked together to create a guide. I gave input as they went and looked at the final version of the guide in order to add anything that I thought might be important. Though I had worked with both of these students intimately during their research for the guides, had repeatedly offered definition of terms and other specifics as they emerged, and had made a routine of asking for

questions in class and through online forums, both these students felt that I was not present enough in the process. Again, their knowledge-receiving conditioning inhibited either their ability or desire to take control of and critically engage with their own education.

Overall, the pervasive monologues reflected the tension of dialogic pedagogy. As Cadman (2005) found, the pedagogical paradigm shift that dialogic pedagogy represents can place a demand upon student attention that overwhelms them. This sense of disequilibrium certainly played a role in the students' reiteration of the status quo. In addition, I found in the pervasive monologue the challenge to my stance that both McKinney (2005) and Yagelsky (1998) experienced. Faced with the unknown, the students pushed back with the well-known, as if to say that I was doing English class wrong. In other words, when I asked them to bring their knowledge to the classroom, they brought out the traditional roles and perceptions. Thus, the quarter became a push and pull between dialog and tradition. Shor (1996) argue that the students have the right to demand that tradition from me, but as the following section shows, the tradition contains an unhealthy alienation that must at least be questioned.

### **Foreman/Laborer Relationship**

The other side of the coin of knowledge-receiving monologue is the pervasive monologue of the foreman/laborer relationship, with the students as laborers. For a few years in my early twenties, I worked for a temporary employment agency, and this led to employment as a laborer in many assembly-line factories. In one instance, I had a job on an assembly line where I stood before a large, very loud machine that produced a steady stream of molded plastic computer keyboard shells. My job was to inspect each shell as it emerged and to use a hand-held, high-pressure air gun to blast off any strands of plastic that the molding machine had failed to cut off. I would then toss the inspected shells into the accepted or rejected bin. If I wasn't on an officially

sanctioned break, I could not leave my station without the foreman's permission. Every so often, the foreman would come by to make sure I was on task and to inspect my work. He would pull random shells from each bin and look them over carefully to make sure they were properly cleaned or rejected.

In this situation, the foreman was the absolute evaluative authority over my work. If he thought I was correctly inspecting and cleaning the shells, he showed his approval by moving on without saying anything. If he thought my judgment lacking, he would pull an inspected shell, stick it in my face while I continued to work, and point out my mistakes. I had no say in the matter; I could either agree and keep working or disagree and be fired or quit.

**Teacher as foreman.**

My experience in the factory is an appropriate illustration of pervasive monologue of foreman/laborer that students carry into the class. Although I invited them to share power, their long-standing position as workers in a system hampered those efforts. As Layla explained, the job of the student is to do what the teacher tells them to do.

This tendency to defer to my authority appeared across all our interactions, from discussions of their writing to subtle interactions during each of the class reflections. As for the class reflections, the format was to go around the room until each person had contributed some input. For each meeting, I asked them to reflect on the previous writing process, to talk about frustrations, successes, and difference from the paper before. I also asked questions about the relevance of the writing to their personal lives and their general connection to the experience. In essence, I gave them prompts that should have pushed them into deep reflection, but I did not demand it of them. In Quaker fashion, I told them to speak as they felt led.

Yet, during the second class reflection, six weeks into the class, their deference to me persisted. To determine the order of contribution to the discussion, we made a paper ball, and I told them to speak until they felt that they had answered sufficiently and then to throw the ball to someone who had not spoken. Yet, when their turns came around, time after time they would speak a bit and then ask my permission to pass the ball. They wanted to know if I thought they had said enough. This tendency even went to the level of asking my permission to go to the bathroom, even though I had stressed repeatedly the point that they should come and go as they pleased, without asking my permission. Although I was trying to lay aside my authority, they kept picking it up and handing it back to me.

In their interviews, both Layla and Nami explicitly offered work as the prime definition of a student's role. In her entrance interview, Layla explained that the role of the student was "mostly to just contribute to the class and do the work assigned. At least that's how it's always been in my classes for the most part." As we continued our discussion, she told me that she thought she was a good student. When I asked her what she meant by that, she dropped the contributions in class and stressed "just doing the work on time." In her exit interview, when the same questions came around to her, she explained that the role of a student was "taking it in and learning it and doing all the stuff you're supposed to do." Again, she told me that she thought she was a good student because she had done her work and attended class. Nami echoed this sentiment; when I asked her to describe herself as a student, she said that she was "a very hard working person." She reiterated that she liked to work as hard as she could and that she liked to get good grades. In other words, the teacher assigns a task and the students complete it.



### **Student alienation from product of labor.**

The pervasive monologue of the laborer student is further evidenced in the students' alienation from their writing. I use the term alienation in the Marxian sense of those detached emotionally and spiritually from the product of their labor. Specifically, industrialized capitalism replaces the cognitively engaged artisan and craftsman with the cognitively disengaged laborer.

In my experience in the factory, I had no emotional or spiritual connection to the molded plastic keyboard shells I oversaw because I designed neither the shells nor the machine that molded them. Likewise, I had no input into the determination of their conditions of acceptance or rejection. Furthermore, I had no say in the design of the environment in which they were produced. As a result, when they left my hands, they left my mind. From start to finish, the shells were completely detached from my creative force and thus my human experience. Therefore, inherent in the pervasive student-as-laborer monologue is the idea that the students are, in the context of the composition class, producing writing for someone else, namely the school or the teacher.

In his description of this historically deliberate process of mechanization, Crawford (2009) explained that “the twentieth century saw concerted *efforts* to separate thinking from doing” (37). In addition, he makes the important point that this mechanized mindset has moved beyond the factory and into education, where, for example, “standardized tests remove a teacher’s discretion in the curriculum” (45). Also, this removal of discretion carries over to the students, as evidenced by the students in this study. They had little connection to the writing and, subsequently, little care for or understanding of its intricacies. They wanted, or at least expected, only the inspection and approval of the foreman.

Along these lines, during the second class reflection, Audrey remarked to me, “I think of you as my main audience. You're the reason we're writing it.” This sentiment was echoed by a few students who commented, more or less, that the second paper was easier to write because they had a better idea of what I want, how strict I was going to be and, as one student quipped, “what makes [me] tick.” When we take both halves of Audrey’s statement above as a logical progression, it reveals the underlying issue: they see me not just as their main audience, but as their only one because they are writing for my rather than their own purposes. This misunderstanding of audience is a direct result of the sense that they are laborers producing a product for me, the foreman. When I was producing the keyboard shells, I gave no thought to individuals who might benefit from their production. Neither did I see shells as a benefit to me beyond the hours of labor they represented toward my paycheck. If my foreman found them to be acceptable, I was allowed to keep earning a paycheck. Likewise, the students had no personal, meaning-making stake in the essays they were writing, thus they were alienated from that writing.

Although the product meant little to them, the evaluation of their performance for the foreman was important to their continued presence in the institution. Perhaps the most powerful marker of teacher authority is the grade. As such, the idea of the grade floated throughout the quarter like a harpoon barrel that kept considerations from moving to deeper water. In addition, the students’ fixation on their papers’ grades, in tandem with their alienation from the content, further revealed the pervasive foreman/laborer monologue.

In the interviews, I asked the students to tell me about themselves as students, and Joel, Layla, Nami, Art, and Eric immediately spoke of grades. Only Eric, the forty-year old back for a second degree, pointed out the superficiality of the “credits in life,” what he called the “you did a

good job” markers. On the other hand, Joel stated in his entrance interview that he was a good student. When I asked him why he felt that way, he looked puzzled and said, “I mean, grades. Basically that's it.” His exit interview was the same: “Still getting good grades. Got an A in my math. Got basically As and Bs. Sufficient.” Likewise, Layla felt good about herself as student because she had “made better grades” and “done her work.”

As Freire (1970) predicted, the students measured themselves by the authority's standards. In Bakhtinian terms, they reproduced the authoritarian monologue about their role. Moreover, Joel, Art and Layla maintained this view from beginning to end. The invitation to negotiation and dialog did little to assuage their grade fever, and authority of the grade as an extension of my power remained likewise in all of the class reflections. Yet, this perspective reflects Crawford's (2009) description of the foreman/laborer relationship, in which “craft knowledge is concentrated in the hands of the employer, then doled out again to the workers” (p. 39). In such a situation, the “brain work” is left up to those who control the knowledge (p. 39). Subsequently, those who dispense the knowledge are the only qualified to judge the quality of the reproduction of that knowledge. Thus, the focus on the grade, which might appear to be the marker of a good, motivated student, in actuality suggests a disconnection from ownership of the content.

Though we had negotiated the topics, grading rubric and schedule, the students' treatment of their writing was one of general dismissal. Indeed, the admission of procrastination came up so much in the first class reflection that we set aside forty-five minutes to discuss the possible reasons, with little insight offered. They didn't seem to know why, but many simply put their writing off to the last minute, turning a two-week assignment into two-days or even one all-night session. For instance, in flippant description of the writing of his first paper, Joel wrote, “It was

Friday afternoon, I just realized that I had a paper due at 8am the next day; my first thoughts were, ‘Oh Balls!’ So I locked myself in my room and began writing.” Indeed, four other students acknowledged this night-before strategy. Though I’m glad they felt comfortable enough with me to be honest, I found their admissions disturbing.

Even the two-day-before approach, acknowledged by a few in the class, showed their perception of writing as a quick, one-shot event rather than a thoughtful, meaning-making process. Moreover, this tendency proved stubborn; I attempted circumvention through use of drafts due a week prior to the final submission, yet most students had slim or no drafts when the time came. Though I took the opportunity during those classes to talk one on one with these students about possibilities for their writing, they struggled, wrote a little during those classes and left the final versions to the last second.

Even students who presented well-developed drafts struggled to engage with their topics. For Layla, though she had played her role more or less successfully thus far, the curriculum she had been handed previously and her writing for this class in no way engendered “the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” that Freire (1970) pictured (p. 81). In the first class reflection, she admitted that the writing was solely an academic exercise meant for a grade. In our exchange on the subject, she was flatly honest:

Me: Layla, did you feel like this paper was meaningful to you at all, did you connect?

Layla: no not really. I just wrote it because I had to.

Me: what does it feel like when you don't connect?

Layla: like a chore

Me: do you feel like you got anything out of it?

Layla: yeah, I learned a lot, but I didn't have anything to put into it out of my personal life

Me: so the information that you learn when you're not connecting, is it helpful, does it mean anything?

Layla: no

Me: so, you write it and you put it down and won't look at it again.

Layla: yep

Joel, who also had navigated the system successfully thus far, felt the same; he produced writing that he claimed meant nothing to him and affected nothing beyond the passage of the class. In his first interview, he explained, “I’m able to make [academic writing] into a good grade, but it’s nothing that I really value.” He reiterated during the first class reflection that the paper was written solely for a grade, to which Audrey energetically interjected “doing it just because you had to do it!” As with the experience of being cut down by previous writing teachers, this was a sentiment that raised a quick smattering of affirming murmurs and nods. Thus, the picture both Layla and Joel painted of themselves as laborers alienated from the product of their labor was representative of much of the class.

The problem with such a relationship between students and their writing is the particularly anti-democratic state of mind it produces. If students are not connected to the ideas they put on the page specifically, then those students are not, as Freire (1970) would say, shaping the word or, subsequently, the world around them, at least not through literacy. Moreover, if literacy is not an avenue for building one’s own knowledge, it is likely the reproduction of someone else’s knowledge, which is a troublingly undemocratic situation. However, the following section lays out the very real understanding of writing as a mechanized, reproducible act rather than an organic, personally unique one.

### **Writing as a superficial skill.**

With regards to education in general and writing specifically, the students almost unanimously equated both with job opportunity. With writing in particular, their estimation was far from a vision of a self and world shaping exercise. As with education in general, most of the students offered that writing specifically had some type of practical application. From first to last, Joel maintained that writing was “semi” important to his life because it “helps with jobs and work.” Likewise, Layla remarked that composition classes exist because “most jobs require you have a little bit of writing experience.” When I asked her if that was the only reason, she quipped, “Mostly. I mean some people look at like a form of expression and all that jazz, but I just look at it from a career standpoint.” So did many of her peers.

For instance, Nami saw composition classes not as a way to handle oneself while on the job but as a way to get the job in the first place. As she stated, when people have to “go get a job they fill out the application; it's more legible to read; they're using complete sentences; they're not using slang; they're using their English words.” Likewise, Art argued, “I don't need writing unless I'm trying to fill out resumes or write for job interviews.” When I asked him if he could see himself writing essays in the future, his quick, nonplussed reply was, “well, what jobs would involve writing like that?” Indeed.

Given that I teach at a technical college, I am not surprised by the heavy focus on classes as a source of job skills. However, Chapter 2 shows that this pull between the idealistic instructor and the practical minded student is a large, general tension in critical dialogic classrooms in universities as well. In particular, Kapitulik, et al (2007) found that the students in his 4-year university undergraduate class resisted a focus on social and philosophical issues. Despite their enrollment in a liberal arts college, they pushed for writing as a skill rather than a meaning-

making activity. This suggests that the statistically-minded quantification of writing has pushed the general perception of composition as a set of discreet, measurable skills. As Art and Nami showed, this mindset was present in the class.

The tension in this mindset lies in the nature of the course and the fact that it is offered in a technical college. Through the last twenty years, the college has vacillated between career-technical writing and liberal arts composition-literature writing. When I began teaching at the college, it had just returned the liberal arts style writing courses to its program. Previously, the college had dropped the composition and literature classes in order to focus on the practical career writing. However, complaints from employers about poor expression and critical thinking skills in graduates caused the college to return to the liberal arts writing requirements.

Nonetheless, students like Art and Nami reveal a disconnect between the college's aspirations and the students' expectations. Of the students in this study, only Joel was using the college as a cheap bridge to UGA. Most were attending the college to obtain a certificate or two-year degree from the college. As a result, Art and Nami represent many of the students' expectations for their writing. Despite the argumentative, analytical nature of English 1101: Composition and Rhetoric, the students expect for the most part that the class will focus on sentence-level, grammar and mechanical skills. When the focus is elsewhere, they begin to chaff.

I cannot say that I do not see their point, but I am aligned with the college in my belief that deep level writing improves critical thinking skills. If we do not wrestle with our understandings of the word and the world, as Freire (1970) says, we are somewhat doomed to have others interpret our worlds for us. In addition, Art and Nami were also representative of the students' vague notions of the type of writing that they would be expected to do on the job or the type of writing that would help them advance to higher positions in their field. In other words,

although they might not understand the role of Composition and Rhetoric in their career scheme, they likewise had no clear expectations for writing at any level.

### **A Sense of Difference but a Lack of Change**

As I said in the beginning of this chapter, I had hoped that the dialogic stance would result in transformation and transcendence, the theme I found in my review of literature. Though the study does not evidence this effect upon the students, the experience was not all negative. Many acknowledged that the class felt different, and that difference was located in my respect of their voices. Unfortunately, they found my interest in their opinion and knowledge to be unique and even novel in an educational context. In the final reflection and interviews, many spoke of liking the class in spite of their initial conviction that they thought they wouldn't.

Layla, who had hoped to like writing again, seemed to move toward that, saying that she had "actually enjoyed the class." Maybe some healing occurred for her. Chloe said she enjoyed the class and even liked some of the papers, but she still did not think of herself as a writer. Perhaps she was heading toward reconsideration. Overall, the majority of the students felt positive about the combination of discussion and writing in the class, especially the public dialog over topics that they were going to write about.

In addition, there were more positive glimmers throughout. For example, Joel, Eric and Nami give a definition of education as more than a road to the work-force. Joel expressed an ideal of education as something that offers "life lessons," and Eric called learning a "lifelong, twenty-four hour mindset" that brings about "self-awareness." Likewise, Nami presented education as that which brings about personal, social and intercultural understanding.

Yet, the positive ideals of education that the students expressed were overcome by the unsavory realities. For example, Joel dismissed his idea that his writing had or could have



anything to do with the “life-lessons” that education should offer. Nami, who engaged in meaning-making literacy outside of school, neither overcame her fear of public expression nor began to write for herself in the class. She always wrote for the teacher.

Moreover, Joel’s ambivalence in this area continued to the end. In his entrance interview, he dismissed the meaning-making value of his, or any, academic writing. Yet, when I brought him back to his suggestion that academic writing improves conversation skills and general thinking, he seemed to get annoyed, retorting “OK. Yeah, it definitely helps in life; if you can express yourself better, you get better jobs and better everything.” His tone and delivery and quick turnaround on his previous assertion revealed his general dismissal of the topic and the value of discussing it. In fact, he employed the same tactic on the same subject during his exit interview. At one point, he claimed that the writing class had no effect on his writing skills but that the class had offered insight that helped him write a better paper. His reply carried the same level of dismissal: “OK. Yes, I feel like I gained better paper-writing skills through your help and interaction.” His statement carried all the sincerity of false confession drawn from a political prisoner at gunpoint.

I wouldn’t think so much of it if he hadn’t expressed some positive valuation of education, writing and the class. He sees the ideal English class as one in which the teacher guides the students in conversation, creates an environment in which the students want to learn. It’s as though he sees what education can be, but he can’t be bothered with it. Moreover, Art offered that the role of a student could be to teach the teacher, a very dialogic ideal. Yet, he admitted that he had never seen or at least recognized it in action.

But these two students represent my overall vision of the students after reflecting on all their words here. I see intelligent, knowledgeable and creative people who want their education

to be more than it is but feel unsure of how or resigned to the fact that they cannot change it. Yet, I also see that I cannot expect miraculous shifts in perspective. Indeed, how can a nine week course reverse twelve years of conditioning? To return to the opening metaphor, the dialogic classroom is the roofless town-square into which the students step briefly, only to return to the familiar enclosures. It allows them to speak, momentarily, and that moment scratches the surface of their expression and hints at their potential for affecting change.

### **Looking Across the Chapter**

As I said, my original intent with this study was to document the effect of a dialogic stance on the student's perceptions of themselves as writers and learners and of education in general. What I found, however, was that the dialogic stance exposed the effects of the monologic education of the students' pasts. Through thematic organization, I have attempted to find the students' voices where they were at rather than where I expected them to be. Moreover, though many more themes and nuances of themes could have been drawn from the data, I chose those themes that seemed most prevalent and therefore most important to the students. Thus, my intent was not to suggest that these themes sum up the students' voices or experiences. Neither was my intent to paint a picture of the students as oblivious victims or as mindless automatons. Rather, my intent was to show complex human beings speaking out in a specific context. Bakhtin's (1984) theory of dialog shows us that the students are always making meaning, and this study documents that process, even if their construction of the classroom was not the dialogic that I had envisioned

However, as with Yagelski (1998) and Thelin (2005), the confusion and resistance that cropped up in this study caused me to question my dialogic stance. Was I somehow disenfranchising the very space I sought to democratize? Shor (1996) argued that, in a

democratic classroom, “Students cannot be compelled to be nontraditional; they can only be invited and if they choose not, they have the right to compel me to be traditional toward them” (p. 77). Their resistance caused me to wonder if I was taking away their rights. However, I concluded that I cannot wholly subscribe to Shor’s conclusion. Rather, as a member of the dialogic classroom community, I felt that I had to negotiate as much as I could toward what I believed in as much as the student should.

Plus, my overarching belief in the classroom is that true education occurs only when we wrestle with something new and break new ground. I gave the students space to negotiate into the curriculum the superficial writing skills that they felt they needed, but I could not completely abandon the class to information transfer. In my view, that would be a misrepresentation of the analytic and creative nature of Composition and Rhetoric. In addition, to let someone else do the thinking for you while you fill in the blanks is some type of learning, I suppose, but it’s akin to the difference between a paint-by-number landscape and a vision created from a blank canvas. The possibilities for mistakes are more numerous in the latter, but the lit review shows that the tension from those mistakes leads to a more meaningful educational experience for all involved.

However, this could be my idealism fighting against the students’ practicality. As I said earlier, the pervasive monologues could be defense mechanisms that the students are engaging. Sadly, this dialogic classroom is likely the only one the students will find during their academic careers. Although the dialogic experience is different, the difference is perhaps just a novelty after all. The overriding imperative, it seems, is to get through the course successfully. Although the students might feel insecure about their language and thus their identities in the academic context, they are not interested in starting a revolution. Despite the potential for a deeper educational experience that dialog offers, they will not question the status quo in their next class

but will likely follow along as they have in the past. This is a good survival strategy given the nature of education these days, and the students' resistance suggests that a deeper, dialogic writing education will come not from a grassroots movement of students but from a fundamental shift in our society's understanding of the nature of writing. Until the students have entire programs dedicated to dialogic writing education, the students have no practical reason to consider anything save the status quo.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS

When considering the pervasive monologues uncovered in this study, it would be easy to slip into the trap of trying to present possible remedies for each. Yet, this approach would make the mistake of reifying these monologues, as if they are a given for every composition teacher who would take a dialogic stance. In a sense, but perhaps not quite in the sense that Freire (1970) meant, these pervasive monologues are “generative themes” drawn from the students’ world view (p. 106). As such, they are unique to these students at this time in this place.

Thus, attempts to generalize them would move us into a quantitative mindset that exists outside the dialogic frame of this study. Moreover, this reification would in essence turn the dialogic stance into a method: talk this way, about these things in order to uncover and address these monologues. McClure and Vasconcelos (2011) warned us that to mistake dialog “as a mere method or technique for promoting conversation and discussion among learners,” is to reduce it to “conversation or “idle chatter” that has lost its connection to co-constructing knowledge” (p. 106). Likewise, Freire (1970) argued that dialog, “which occurs in the realm of the human, cannot be reduced to a mechanical act” (pp. 107-108). In order to remain potent, dialog must stay completely open to the fresh potential of each new dialogic moment.

Rejection of specific generalizability, however, does not mean that we completely dismiss the possibility of finding similar situations in dialogic classrooms. And this is where this study can be helpful. As my literature review revealed, dialogic educators commonly find confusion and resistance in their classrooms. What this study offers is the possibility that the

source of the confusion and resistance is the authoritative voice of the academic institution. This perspective is supported by Freire (1970), who argued that an oppressed social group will internalize the voice of the oppressor. In addition, he maintained that oppressed groups hold an “unauthentic view of the world” which has been created by the “domination which surrounds them” (p.66). I don’t use the idea of unauthentic in the sense that the students are obviously mind-controlled subjects with no sense of themselves. Rather, I understand the unauthentic view as one in which the students believe and reproduce a lie told to them about them.

In addition, the discussion of self-narrative (Wortham 1999; Bruner 2004) helps us understand the pervasive monologues as the deceptive stories from the academic authority that the students have reproduced about themselves. I call those views inauthentic primarily because they deny the students’ potential for expression. If a teacher denied that potential in a student, few would argue that position was an authentic view of reality. Therefore, we must conclude likewise if that same claim is adopted by the student. Thus, the pervasive monologues are examples of inauthentic views of the students as writers and learners that begin with the authoritative voices in their education. Subsequently, this discussion will focus on the general idea of the internalized authoritative voice rather than the specific pervasive monologues.

The study shows that though these pervasive monologues are prevalent, they are not uniform. Some students assimilated the pervasive monologue that their active, personal literacy is illegitimate because it is not in line with or sanctioned by the academic standard. Others had an unauthentic view of writing. Because of their negative experience with English classes, they rejected the idea that writing can be a personally meaningful, self- and world-shaping endeavor. Still, others viewed of themselves negatively as students. They saw students as workers or

players in someone else's game rather than thinkers, thus they disregarded the value of the writing.

Yet, they do not seek to change the game, for "as long as their ambiguity exists, the oppressed are reluctant to resist" (p. 64). Some reject the system but see resistance as futile, while others rely on the system to direct their thinking and wouldn't know where to begin. Regardless the manifestation, the consequence of the domination is some perversion of true education. For, what is the point of education? Certainly, the goal cannot be to teach students that they are inadequate or to push them to cynical disengagement or compliance. Rather, the goal of education should be to empower people to bring themselves to a better understanding of their world and their roles in that world (Freire 1970). Subsequently, education should empower people to shape their own destinies.

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue the need for critically-democratic/dialogic educational stances in writing classrooms. Then, I move into a series of implications, which I split between dialogic educators, technical colleges and students. For dialogic educators, I argue the need for the unveiling of and dialog over the authoritative voice within the students. Although I include myself implicitly in all implications for dialogic educators, I discuss the need for dialog over the authoritative voice as an explicit personal implication. I then discuss the need for strength, long-sightedness and outreach among dialogic educators.

After educators, I discuss the implications for the college, in which I argue for a general flattening of the hierarchical structure. In particular, the college must begin to trust its teachers and allow them agency in the decision making. I then move to implications for the college's writing program, in which I make the case for a non-quantitative approach to writing and a

relaxation of an overbearing adherence to Standard English. Subsequently, I offer suggestions for less stringent and more expressive writing classroom.

The section following offers brief implications for students, in which I recognize the difficulty of change and argue for its rewards. Moreover, I encourage students to promote each other's voices and to find knowledge and edification in each other. Lastly, I claim that this study shows a positive student reaction and that a longitudinal study of dialogic education would begin to sound the depths of dialog's potential in the students' academic lives.

### **The Need for Dialog in Writing Education**

How can democratic dialog in education bring about these goals? It's crucial to remember that when we talk about dialogic versus authoritarian education, we aren't debating aesthetics such as paint colors or cuisine. Rather, we are talking about a human experience, a social institution to which people are subjected and through which our society is ultimately shaped. Thus, we are arguing for a humanizing educational experience versus a dehumanizing one, for education that moves toward human growth rather than mechanization.

To continue on this point, many of the students in this study perceived of themselves as inferior or incompetent writers. They were fearful of or indifferent towards their education. In fact, they seemed to display many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to PubMed Health, one of the symptoms of PTSD is "recurrent distressing memories of the event." Presumably, the students' past experience with composition classes did not haunt their daily lives, but once they were in the composition class or engaged in writing, their stressful past experiences came to the forefront of their minds. Likewise, PTSD manifests in "feeling as though you don't care about anything," "feelings of detachment," and "less expression of moods." Certainly, the students' lack of passion and engagement reflects all of the above.



Yet, the similarities continue, as sufferers of PTSD tend to avoid “places, people, or objects that remind [them] of the event” and often have “difficulty concentrating.” Between the students’ expression of anxiety, spotty attendance, and high level of procrastination, it seems that many students avoided writing and class as much as they could without failing. In addition, the claims of ADD recurred throughout the quarter from at least four of the younger students.

At first, I thought the comparison between education and a traumatic event, such as war, to be interesting but slightly extreme. Yet, as I mulled it over, the comparison seemed to make increasingly more sense, especially in light of Freire’s (1970) insistence that an oppressor’s domination over the oppressed, even in an intellectual rather than physical fashion, is a form of violence enacted upon the oppressed. The domination that the students have endured has prevented them from “being fully human” (p. 56), which is surely a traumatic experience. Therefore, we need the dialogic stance in order to reveal the pervasive monologues, bring them to the forefront and engage in dialog over them because they are unhealthy. When students find their voices and feel confident to act upon their own education, then healthy growth can occur for them and all.

Yet, as it stands, the quantification of composition is strong in my college and those English teachers who run the department are beholden to non-composition administrators who look for the number. What is more, the search for the number forces teachers to whip students into line and to search for objective, superficial grading standards: grammar and mechanics, word choices, formatting. These are the superficialities of writing, the trim on the house, decoration. The heart of the writing is the content and if a teacher can first let a student know that what the student has to say is important, then this study suggests that the student will open up to the teacher and take the teacher’s suggestions about how to better express what it is the writer is

trying to say. Conversely, getting beat up for a sentence fragment or a double negative is degrading and it causes students to shut down.

### **Implications for Dialogic Educators**

For the teachers in technical colleges, the dialogic stance is tough. In order to employ it wholesale in the English classroom, a paradigm shift would have to occur. The teachers must run the department. The administration must trust the teachers and the teachers must be responsible for the results. Yet, the hierarchy is well established: the administrators do not trust the teacher and the teachers do not trust the students. However, dialogic education does not occur without trust, and that trust begins with the dialogic educator encouraging the students to find and use their own voices.

### **Uncovering the Authoritative Voice**

Of the oppressed, Freire (1970) explained, “in truth, the boss [is] inside them” (p. 64). This implantation of the external authority has to be recognized and addressed before the students’ voices can overcome the internal polemic and progress in democratic dialog. Dialogic teacher-researchers, especially those of students who have been inculcated into the system, must realize that the authoritarian voice is entrenched and infused in all aspects of education, but most importantly within students, where it must be identified and addressed. For when the students accept the legitimacy of the authoritative voice, at any level, it takes strong hold within them. Moreover, our top-down educational system is so entrenched that the imposition and reinforcement of pervasive monologues most likely occurs at an unconscious level for most involved. Predictably, it is the unconscious motivation that is the hardest to recognize and address.

As Freire (1970) argued, the narrative of education that we've constructed tends to solidify roles. Since the students have heard the story for so long, it's now common sense to them that students sit, listen and work while teachers teach and evaluate. In my interviews, most of the students reacted somewhat glibly to my questions about the role of students and teachers. What do you mean? That's a silly question, they seemed to say. You might as well ask the roles of antennas and radio waves; students receive and teachers transmit. Likewise, many of the students reacted to my dialogic stance with the questioning tilt of the head or the blank stare, wondering what was going on. As a result, many resisted or remained indifferent. For many, dialog translated to complaint or a forum for joking, light discussion and dismissal of the process. In other words, dialog meant a class that was going to ask them to chat and play, rather than work. Critical engagement with their role as students seemed a vague and somewhat esoteric consideration.

Yet, it is that critical engagement that must be achieved in order for real breakthroughs in themselves and, subsequently, their education to occur. As Freire (1970) realized, "it is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves" (p. 65). As the pervasive monologues show, the authoritative voice within the students squelches their confidence as writers and active learners. However, they do not believe in themselves precisely because they have not recognized their internalization of the authority's voice.

### **Dialog over Authoritative Voice: Personal Implications**

Yet, discovery is merely the first step. Freire (1970) continued that "serious reflection" must be taken upon the unveiling of the authoritative voice within the student (p. 65). In reflection on my practice during this class, sustained inquiry over the authoritative voice is the

area where I struggled. Specifically, I missed opportunities to engage the students in dialog over the pervasive monologues they were voicing. Though the write-up of the data clarified the presence of those monologues, the write-up is in retrospect and the students are not part of it. As I said, the motivation for this study was partly located in the sense of disdain students had for English class and the condemnation or bias many felt was inherent within it. If we had built the class as an inquiry into their educational conditioning, they might have moved more clearly toward confidence and connection in writing and learning. As a result, I wish now that I could spend another ten weeks with the same group in order to inquire solely into their perspectives of themselves

Looking back, much of my trouble centered on how to use the department's required textbook. To preface this point, the college's insistence on the use of the textbook is somewhat indirect. The syllabus states that the textbook is required. Moreover, the department requires that the students use it as their sole research source for the final. Yet, the department's unofficial policy is that the manner of use in the class is up to the instructor. In fact, I have heard from students that many instructors do not use the text at all. However, I've learned from experience that the majority of students are not adept at handling an unfamiliar research source during the already constrained final exam essay. Therefore, my strategy in this class was to begin discussions around the book's very general topics and to see where they led the students. In this way, the students would become familiarized with the essays in the book, hopefully, find topics that were personally meaningful to them.

As a critical-democratic/dialogic educator, this idea of personally meaningful topics is important. I believe that the areas of inquiry for the classroom should rise from the students (Freire 1970). Therefore, I did not want to hand them the book and give them a predetermined

essay topic. Rather, I was hoping that the broad choice the students had would help them generate their own themes. In my mind, they would read and respond individually to essays within the book, exchange ideas in-class with their small groups, and the small groups would then present the salient points of the exchange to the class. Throughout the entire process, I would problem pose and encourage students to do likewise. Through the dialogic exchange and problem posing, the students would locate specific areas of inquiry to continue into. Then, I would form new small groups based on similar areas of focus, with an eye for dialogic exchange over their writing as it progressed. Thus, that is how the class progressed for the first two papers.

This was a good plan on paper, but a couple of problems emerged. First, what happened in the class was that too many of the students ambled through or were reticent in the discussions, delayed their choice of topic, and picked something they thought they could write about at the last minute. In other words, their writing was more assignment completion than inquiry. Regardless of my intentions toward dialogic exchange and reflection that would build their writing over time, many of the students were going through the regular English class motions: pick a topic and write on it. If we had used the students' perspectives rather than the book as the basis for inquiry, the class would have been more focused and dialogic and less disjointed and compartmentalized.

The second problem was the fact that the first class reflection was the point at which the true student-based themes emerged. The authoritative voice of education was the overarching theme identified by the class, and the pervasive monologues were specific areas for inquiry. Yet, the class reflections remained as a type of reflection and negotiation, a democratic forum that ignored the important themes that emerged in favor of the process that had been set in motion. I see now that I would have done well to drop the themes from the book and begin an inquiry into

the students' feelings about writing and learning in academia. We truly missed out on a rich and important area of inquiry.

However, my ability to make the move is hampered by my lack of agency to remove the textbook from the picture. Previous to this study, I had attempted in three separate composition classes to focus on writing and education as the sole subject of inquiry for the quarter, but I struggled each time as the pressure of the textbook topics always drew me away. The problem is not that we would not be able to find essays in the book that could contribute to our inquiry. Indeed, the book covers such obviously related topics as education, language, identity, work and authority. Yet, the final exam directs the students to write about specific topics that do not relate, and it's thirty percent of their grade. Moreover, the students do not have access to the questions prior to the exam. Thus, any information related to those specific exam topics would have to be garnered incidentally during our inquiry and used on the fly while they concoct an essay based on an unfamiliar topic.

Thus, my dilemma is how to inquire into writing and learning while preparing the students for the final exam. One possible solution is to have a question related to our inquiry placed on the final exam. Each quarter, the department solicits final exam questions from the instructors. However, those questions are placed on the final at the department's discretion, so there is no guarantee the questions would actually appear. I feel relatively confident that at least one question would appear on the exam, but my lack of agency to ensure that result troubles me. Given the superficial nature of the final and the added fact that I grade the exam, I believe that the students and I would be able to work out a viable solution. Yet, I have a difficult time seeing any solution that does not at some point find me at odds with the department.

One important reason I pursued a doctorate was to gain a better perspective on writing education in order to help students. In addition, I felt that the doctorate might offer the credibility I need to make the changes I feel might be necessary. Thus, if I find myself at odds with the department, I might be able to engage productively with the department heads towards solutions that will serve the students. In considering my own agency in this context, I could meet with the department heads, petition them for changes, meet with the other teachers to find like-minded peers (activism), I could argue against their directives that I disagree with, and perhaps my doctorate would carry some weight with my arguments. I might even have the opportunity to become part of the curriculum development if a job opening happened. But, this is all speculation, and though I feel each of the possibilities listed above are viable options, it is just as likely that I would be asked not to return to the college if I didn't fall in line with the heads' ideas.

Regardless, this study has convinced me that the first to be uprooted and laid on the table should be the presence of the authoritative voice in the students. We cannot go through the same old motions of English class, yet we will if dialog does not occur over their self-perceptions as writers and learners. The narrative of education must be rewritten by the students for them. As Freire (1970) explained, growth cannot occur, progress cannot be made for a group until the "political, economic, and cultural decision-making power is located" within that group (p. 161). Therefore, until students reject the dominance of the internalized, self-opposing voice, they will have trouble taking ownership of their expression in the academic arena.

### **Encountering Student Resistance**

Those educators who would embark on dialogic educational journey will find resistance. In light of the current educational climate, this statement may seem over obvious, especially to

those who have been interested in dialogic education for any length of time. Yet, the implications from this study are that the resistance will come from the students themselves, most likely unconsciously, because they have internalized the authoritative voice.

As I have mentioned, the discovery of the pervasive monologues and subsequent student resistance to dialog shocked me. I expected, naively, that students would join in dialog readily and happily, that they would emerge into the open air of the metaphoric town square like prisoners from dank cells, embrace freedom with joyous exaltation and never look back. When their reaction was less than revolutionary, I was taken aback and somewhat discouraged. Though I had read and theorized about hegemony, I had never tried to oppose it. And its strength surprised me. Thus, the dialogic educator must be ready for the presence of the authoritative voice in order not to be discouraged at its emergence. Yet, we must also be careful not to misread the resistance.

In Chapter 2, the literature shows student resistance centered on the political stances of the social justice orientation of the teachers. This is a typical critique of Critical Pedagogy, that a conservative authoritarian voice is replaced by a liberal one. As mentioned previously, Kapitulik, et al (2007) found the perception among students that they were “being forced to accept the politics of the instructors of the class” (p. 145), which reduced participation. In addition, the politics of the instructor were perceived by the conservative students as liberal.

The resistance in my study here might be perceived along these lines, but I do not see it as quite the same. In the literature review, the content of the students’ writings were issues of social justice. For example, Lalik and Oliver’s (2007) writing project attempted to push the students to take on a feminist lens in their writing about the cultural perceptions of the female body. As with Kapitulik, et al (2007), the students resisted the shift in their politics.



However, I find that the students in this study are not overtly opposing a perceived political stance on my part. Though the subjects of essays we read centered on social issues, the content of the writing was not geared towards any particular lens, as with Lalik and Oliver (2007). Rather, I encouraged the students to take any stance they wished and to support it well. Thus, I find that the resistance in this study is centered on the change of the roles.

The critical object of this study is the student. In Freirean terms, the student is the oppressed. Thus, my critical agenda is the empowerment of the student. Although I did not overtly state that I thought they were oppressed, it might be possible that the students are rejecting my politics. Like the students in Lalik and Oliver (2007), the students in this study might have assumed that they were not oppressed and therefore needed no change in their role. They did not need dialogic education because it just muddied the water.

I could follow this line of thinking and sum up their resistance to dialog as a political conservatism except for the recurring statement from them that they felt respected. As Eric stated, he felt like he was a partner rather than simply a recipient. Moreover, many students commented that they liked the respect their voices were given. This notice implies that the difference in the dialogic experience and the traditional one is a positive difference. They felt respected and therefore they felt more human; they mattered more,

Thus, the discussion of their resistance cannot be simply summed up as a response to my political agenda toward their empowerment, as was the case with Kapitulik, et al (2007). Rather, their resistance would seem more to do with the practical realities of education and career that they were dealing with. That is, despite the positive aspects and humanizing potential of dialogic education that they perceived, radical change threatened their goals. They were threatened most presently by the fact that dialogic education was not the norm in their educational path. Though

the dialogic classroom offered them a view of a better educational experience, that view remained just a view.

In a sense, the students were like passengers on moving train: the countryside they passed might have been a beautiful and much more enriching path, but jumping off the train was dangerous and impractical, since the train was moving, the track laid and the destinations relatively fixed. Moreover, as the teacher, I was not really riding that train, so to ask the students to jump was hardly enough to persuade them and might have been construed as recklessness.

Thus, as dialogic educators, we have to recognize that student resistance is not simply a lack of critical thinking or a stubborn political conservatism. Rather, we must keep in view the practical world that the students must negotiate and work with them to empower their voices within that context.

### **Long-term Effect Rather than Instant Gratification**

For many years, I earned money as a house painter. Though the work was often physically tiring and mundane, I enjoyed the sense of progress that most days brought. There is a certain satisfaction that comes when you begin the day with bare drywall and end with a freshly caulked and painted room. You can stand back and see the results of your effort, measure the progress and calculate the remainder of your work. I suppose that this sense of instant gratification is what drives much of the quantification in education today; everyone from student to administrator wants to know the progress. And a number is the best way to achieve that goal. You feed information into the system and measure, in a prescribed fashion, what comes out. At the end of the day, you can stand back, see the result of your effort and feel good, even if the sense of progress is largely illusion. However, this is not what occurs in the dialogic classroom, and dialogic educators must realize and draw encouragement from this.

As I noted in my discussion of the data, the students expressed little outward change in their perspective of themselves as writers and learners. Those who came in with a sense of writing as a meaning-making activity and of education as a forum for student voice, left with the same. Likewise, those who entered anxious, angry, cynical or ambivalent exited unchanged. Thus, I felt at first as if the dialogic stance was a failure. Indeed, where was the self-affirming change, the democratic revolution of student thought? It did not seem to be happening. However, upon further consideration, I realized that hegemonic thought is deeply rooted and complex.

Let's consider the metaphor of the dialogic classroom as a town square. Some students were intimidated or confused by its open space and freedom of movement; some thought it a novel distraction along their way; some enjoyed the air and public discussion. Regardless the reaction, it's important to note that no one seemed oblivious to their surroundings. That is, the students seemed largely confused about or ambivalent towards dialog; however, the fact that all had some type of reaction revealed the radical departure that dialog was from their usual experience. They noticed difference, which is a positive step, and the perspective of steps versus the completed journey is important to maintain as a dialogic educator.

To think that one nine-week, dialogic classroom experience could remove thirteen years of hegemony is unrealistic. What is realistic, however, is to see this experience as a change of trajectory. Over long distances, a single degree in trajectory translates to major changes in destination. For example, one degree alteration in a mission from Earth to Mars is the difference between landing and heading off into deep space. In this case, we want to head into deep space, and the dialogic is that slight shift in degree that can lead to a very different destination.

If only for one moment, I changed the student's educational context. Furthermore, that moment has become a part of their educational experience. It is the one degree of difference that

can have enormous consequences for their final destination. From the students' interviews and reflections, it's hard to say how profoundly they felt that difference. But they acknowledged it; they took it in consciously and unconsciously, so it will always color their understanding. Like the pervasive monologues they've inherited, they now carry with them a different possibility for their education.

Sadly, I imagine that they will carry this possibility with them back into the traditionally monologic educational structures from which they came. In other words, they head back to classrooms in which they will sit and receive information. How much will their experience with dialog cause them to raise their voices in such circumstances? I wish I knew, but hopefully it will be more than less. I would not want the students to raise their voices to their own detriment in those non-dialogic classes, but I hope that they would have found enough confidence in their voices to at least ask questions of the status quo. Similarly, if they do encounter another dialogic classroom, perhaps the experience they had here will have prepared them to engage in dialog, to move forward more than to linger in the past, to find their voices rather than echo the authority's.

### **Engaging in Dialog with Other Educators**

The students in this study revealed that they came from and were currently experiencing an authoritarian model of education. First, dialogic educators need to find solidarity with those of like mind order to inspire each other, grow together and to present a unified voice to the administration. Perhaps then the teachers can have a voice in curriculum development, which translates to more room for student voice in the dialogic classrooms. Second, if we talk to non-dialogic educators, we can perhaps inspire them to move toward dialog. If dialogic educators remain isolated, dialog ends up being occasional visits to the square, an anomaly within the educational experience.

For, teachers might make individual dialogic efforts, and those efforts might open students' eyes to the possibilities of dialogic education, but the result is still only a day spent in the square. When the sun goes down and the stars appear, it is time to move back into the restriction of the buildings. Occasionally, the students might venture back out into the dialogic arena, if another teacher takes that stance, but the policy of the college will be the more constant force. Solidarity and voice tend toward growth in those solidified areas. People inspired by like-mindedness are strengthened in their convictions. Likewise, a unified voice tends to gather followers. Thus, a movement of dialogic educators could grow within a college, and the students could pick their classes accordingly. If students were offered a continuous and contiguous dialogic experience, we could possibly move from a trajectory change to a paradigm shift.

### **Implications for Technical College Writing Programs**

To talk about the implications for the college's writing program is difficult because of the contradiction between its authoritarian approach and stated desire to produce students who think critically and communicate effectively. While I want to believe the college's stated intentions, the college does not actually seem interested in producing students who truly think critically. Rather, the surface of its rhetoric speaks freedom but the undertow whispers domination. For example, the department's English 1101 syllabus mentions critical thinking, but it does not offer a definition. Does critical here mean questioning the status quo or developing analytical skills toward job related problem-solving? How critical does the college want the students to get? The syllabus is heavy on behavior and performance of skills, which seems to be more about producing a good worker rather than a critical thinker. Thus, contradictions abound.

### **Dismantling Authoritarianism for Critical Thinking**

The college vows, as part of the course, to “teach essential workplace ethics,” part of which are “organizational skills, communication, cooperation, and respect” in order that students “become accustomed to standards of behavior in the workplace.” The focus here on behavior rather than thought is further revealed by the Warranty of Graduates, also on the syllabus, which reads “if one of our graduates educated under a standard program or his/her employer finds that the graduate is deficient in one or more competencies as defined in the course/program standards, the College will retrain the employee at no instructional cost to the employee or the employer.” Thus, the college reveals that it sees itself as a training facility rather than an institution of critical thinking.

Recall, however, that the pervasive monologues that the students carried went in hand with negative views that students held of themselves as writers and thinkers. In addition, the pervasive monologues were the internalized voice of the students’ previous authoritarian educational institutions, which the college appears to be reproducing. Nineteen year-old Layla’s experience with the harsh English teacher shows this, as do Layla, Eric and Joel’s experiences with mind-numbing information transfer in other classes. If the college is to produce critical thinkers, the students must engage in writing that is a meaning making, communicative, world and self-realizing experience. In order for that to occur, the college needs to dismantle its authoritative voice and allow its teachers and students to rewrite their education narrative.

However, if the college is wrapped up in the hegemony that produced the pervasive monologue in the students, then it will continue to repress students and to stifle critical thought. Although some student will learn the organization, communication skills and respect that will help them become good workers, the college’s supposed goals for critical thought in students

will be frustrated by the students' lack of confidence and voice in and sense of ownership of their writing.

### **College-Teacher Relations**

Another aspect of the college's position that can have an indirect effect on the student's writing ability is its attitude towards the teachers. If the teachers are dominated by the authority of the college, they are likely to give up their efforts toward student improvement or to move on to another school. For example, during my undergraduate program, I spent a semester observing and assisting a twelfth grade English teacher. I was struck by her camaraderie with the students and her blasé disdain for the curriculum. In fact, she was the epitome of the burned-out teacher teaching to the test. She knew what was on the exam, so she focused on those areas with great success.

One of my jobs for her was to grade essays, and she said that I paid too much attention to the students' writing. I admit, I overworked myself given the number of essays to grade, but she had gone over to the other side in her burnout; she didn't care to engage the students at all in their writing. She would put a few marks on an essay to show that she had looked at it, but she graded basically on a participation level. If the students handed in their work, they got an A or B, even if it was late. The B's were reserved for those essays that were struggling too much to be justifiably given an A. The lack of dialog and feedback over their work did not promote opportunity for growth as writers.

In her own words, she was just shy of retirement and looking forward to it. Very cynically, she recalled that she once was very idealistic about the potential for literacy in student's lives. Yet, her ideals about the value or role of education and writing had been squeezed out of her many years ago by the domination of the fickle and politically minded

administration. Any work she might have done toward making writing a meaningful part of students' lives was forfeit.

Likewise, as dialogic educators invite students to wrestle with the internalized voice of educational authoritarianism, the college can achieve its goal of student critical thought by supporting its instructors and promoting dialog. Conversely, if the college continues the authoritarian bent, it not only continues the unhealthy monologues but runs the risk of squelching educators' dialogic ideal or driving them off.

### **Letting Go of Quantification of Writing**

Lastly, if the college truly wants to develop student voice, the educational system needs to let go of this quantification of composition classes and its promotion of the superiority of standardized English. In fact, this is also an important point for dialogic instructors. If education is to be truly freeing, people need to be free within it. With this in mind, the discussion here shows that the heavy focus on grades and standard English is restrictive and counterproductive to expression.

First, the quantification of composition, that is the heavy focus on superficiality and grades, must be greatly reduced if not totally eliminated. For, it is the ultimate representation of the academy's authoritative voice. Moreover, the quantification of the writing causes the point of the work to become the grade. Thus, the graders search for ways to mechanize the grading, to make it more like an assembly line, conducive to quick production. To desire quick turnaround is understandable because of the great number of students the typical Composition teacher has to deal with combined with the pressure put on the teacher to provide quantifiable evidence of production from students. Yet this pressure reveals a systemically derived marginalization of the meaning-making heart of written expression.



When this happens, the focus for the student is not on the process but on the polish, the plugging in of the correct items: exciting introduction, clear thesis, topic sentences, repeat of thesis in conclusion, no comma splices, fragments or fused sentences. In other words, the fixation on objective measurements in order to produce a number for submission to authority causes us to reduce writing to a series of interconnected pieces, like a puzzle. In this scenario, as long as all the pieces are in place, the writing is considered good, even if it is cliché and meaningless to student and teacher. Promotion of such writing makes good puzzlers but does little to develop writing as a critical thinking, meaning-making exercise.

Another way the quantification of writing defeats the purpose towards critical thinking is that it seems to have the effect of making the evaluation of the work up to the teacher's subjectivity. The students have no stake in the expression within the writing, so they have no attachment to it. They see it as a thing that only the teacher values, thus the teacher assigns the value. In such a case, the students do the work and then hope that I see it as an A. As one student said in the second reflection, "maybe this time you'll say it's a C." They are like people bringing old jewelry to a jeweler; they stand anxiously wondering while the expert examines the rock to determine its value. The jeweler with his light and loupe looks up and declares: twenty dollars. The sellers shrug their shoulders and take the money. What can they say? Likewise, the evaluation of the writing gets put on the teacher and remains a mystery to the students.

However, this study suggests that the tendency to place valuation on the teacher's shoulders is very strong. As proof of this, consider the students in this study; they negotiated the writing and evaluation guides for each of their papers. They engaged in reflective class meetings that shaped the subsequent paper and the class time surrounding it. Moreover, for the last paper they had almost total control. Yet, they balked at this responsibility, grew tired of the effort

involved, felt that I was shirking my duty, and paid little attention to the guides while they wrote. They did not understand the power that the guides gave them; rather, they simply wrote and submitted to my subjectivity, regardless my abdication.

### **Rethinking “Standard English”**

Another goal presented on the college’s English 1101 syllabus is that the students learn to handle “standard grammatical and stylistic usage” of English. On its developmental English syllabus, the college labels this “basic standard English.” Yet, as the testimony of Nami and Chloe showed, the harsh prescriptivist bent that accompanies the enforcement of the standard leads to student alienation from and misunderstanding of academic writing. The Standard English of the classroom, as Gee (2008) argued, is merely another dialect of English, no better than any other. Moreover, he offered that education is really more about behavior than personal enrichment and promotion of the social mores of the “elites of society” (p. 59). Within the context of English class, the dialect that most closely matches that of the elites is considered right while all other are considered wrong. Until students and teachers dismantle the understanding of Standard Academic English as the right way, the domination of the elite will continue in the classroom. In such a situation of imbalance, self-expression and growth are seriously hampered.

Even more disturbing is the self-degradation that can accompany a view of oneself and one’s culture as linguistically deficient. As Hayley and Chloe explained in the first class reflection, to get cut down by the red pen leads to fear of academic writing rather than an embrace with self- and world-changing literacy. As Delpit (1998) argued, the language that students bring to school is “intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity. To suggest that this form is “wrong” or...ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong

with the student and his or her family” (p. 19). If students are forced into a defensive posture by teachers’ insistence that students’ languages are wrong, strides in the students’ powers of expression or empowerment will likely not be made. On the other hand, in line with Gee’s (2008) descriptivist view of language, Secret (1998) explained that when the teaching of Standard English is approached as teaching ...a second language, not fixing the home language” of the students, then the students’ culture is respected, and they feel valued rather than negated (p. 80). In such a case, the students are willing to take more risks and, subsequently, to learn.

Therefore, until the college relaxes the insistence upon the exclusivity of Standard Academic English, or at least opens it up for dialog, the students’ sense of inferiority or disdain will likely remain. Furthermore, the more tightly the college retains its grip on language, the more it will promote that same attitude in its teachers.

### **The Future of Composition at the College**

Perhaps what the college might do is move toward a sense of writing as an art form. Every culture’s language is complex, creative and beautiful. Moreover, standards exist for levels of expertise in all art forms. Yet, some might say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so the level of success can be measured by how many people are moved by a particular piece of art. People feel that something relevant to their own lives being communicated in that art. In this sense, art creation and appreciation might be the most democratic and dialogic interaction between people.

Writing can be very basic or highly sophisticated, but it is an art form. Therefore, we need to let go of the quantification standards and let people create like those who influence them. If I want to be an artist, then I need to imitate art that I like. But most importantly, if I want to be an artist I need to practice my art. If I want to be a writer, I need to practice my writing. The

quantification of writing and the heavy-handed prescriptivism that accompanies have turned writing from a form of expression into a chore. The high-minded, artistic stuffiness that accompanies so much of written expression in the academy has caused people to reject writing as a flowery, fluffy pursuit of the intellectuals among us. Even basic essay writing becomes a part of the ivory tower. Let the common man do what he has to do and let the leaders and philosophers among us deal with all that writing, seems to be the general attitude conveyed by those in this study.

In any creative writing class that I have been a part of, the most common activity was writing. Moreover, the feedback was very dialogic. The instructor, a published writer or holder of a degree in the field, would give some general feedback and specific suggestions for clarification, but those suggestions were presented as a discussion. For example, the instructor might say, “I’m interested in what you have to say, and I want you to succeed, but I’m having trouble understanding you at this point in your text. Can you tell me what you mean? Maybe we can work together toward clarity.”

In addition, we would read our work aloud for the group, or the group would read our works silently, sometimes both, but the readings would then generate discussion about the work; questions would be raised, comments and praise would be given. Then the writer would catalog the feedback and use it to produce an improved work, as the writer saw fit. Any of the revised works over the semester could be handed in for the final portfolio. Although I have been able to take this approach from time to time in my composition classes, the college pushes me away from this approach by pressing its prescriptivist agenda. In particular, the college enforces a final, one-hour and fifty-minute essay for its English student that constitutes thirty percent of the

grade. Yet, such essays are inauthentic writing experiences that demand a display of superficial writing skills rather than reflection and meaning making.

I took poetry classes because I wanted to learn how to write poetry. I continue to write poetry because I want to learn how to write poetry that expresses what I am feeling in a way that moves a reader to that place where I am. Before I began this study, my experience as an English teacher taught me that most of the students take composition classes because the college wants to teach them composition rather than the student wanting to learn. In other words, it's a coercive relationship. This is never good for learning. In such situations, students can learn how to follow directions, play by the rules, and reproduce clichés. Nevertheless, this type of writing is not meaningful to them. It is not transformative.

The dialogic approach is not an anything goes type of atmosphere, but it is much more writing with much less prescriptivism. We need to adopt a system of composition that trusts students to find themselves in their writing and to find that space where their writing serves them and their worlds. If people are to live their lives, they must be free to choose how to live those lives; likewise the writing associated with those lives must be fluid.

### **Implications for Students**

The writing education that they have received, despite the occasional good experience, has fallen well short of what they deserve. They need to expect more from themselves, each other, their teachers and their educational institutions. Just as dialogic educators must band together, students need to listen to each other in order to recognize their shared experience, find solidarity and present a unified voice. Similarly, students need to listen to each other because some students have a clearer recognition of dialog's potential. For instance, Eric was the lone example of a student ready, willing and engaged in the dialogic process. He recognized the

opportunities that the democratic/dialogic classroom offered, and he encouraged his peers at most every step to recognize and take advantage of their position of power.

For example, when they were reticent in class discussion, which they were often, as I have discussed, he spoke to them of the importance of the issues they deemed irrelevant, such as freedom of speech or race relations. He had a sense of his own voice, and when his peers misunderstood the point of sources or struggled with writing and editing strategies, he offered insight from his own experience.

In addition, if students are more aware of dialog's potential, they might recognize and promote democratic/dialogic ideals in themselves and each other. For instance, Art suggested that students could teach teachers but admitted that he had never seen that happen. He then dropped the subject. Yet, if students felt unified and empowered and recognized the freedom within the dialogic forum, they would more than likely pick up an ideal like that and explore it. In that, they would be exercising critical thinking.

However, conditioning breeds complacency and faceless enormity a sense of impotence. Thus, students resist change. Often, they want just to get through the program with the least friction possible. This sentiment was expressed often in our class. When students have become accustomed to the top-down system, most would rather deal with it than change. Changing the system means work. As Audrey said, the dialogic stance meant that the students did more work than the teacher. I disagree, but her statement reveals a common student perspective that they must resist.

### **Implications for Research**

Once, when I was in fourth grade, I failed to complete a homework assignment, and the teacher mocked me before the class. Even thirty-four years later, I hear her sarcastic tone and see

her scrunched face as she prances along the board to the laughter of the other students. “Look at me,” she whines. “I’m Sean McAuley, and I don’t care about anything.” I was crushed by embarrassment and rage. I was only nine, but I knew in my heart that she was wrong. Yet, the rage was not simply for her but for the injustice: she was abusing me and I had no recourse. I had no choice but to take it and move on.

I left that school when we moved across the city that summer, but the abuse did not end there. The next September, I found myself attending a small Catholic school named after an apparition. Early on, we had an assignment to write a short poem and present it to the class, so I offered a limerick that I was very proud of. When my turn came, I, the new kid, got up in front of the class and read it, excited about the work I had done. When I finished, the first words out of the teacher’s mouth were not the praise I expected but angry accusation as she barked, “Who wrote that? Where did you get that?” I was astonished and angry as I stood before the class, but I managed some sarcastic indignation as I retorted, “I *wrote* it!” She dismissed me to my seat, and I stomped back, angry and powerless once again.

I am not sure if she spent the remainder of the year trying to find the limerick in some published work, but she never mentioned it again. Furthermore, her assessment that it was too good for me to have written remained her only praise. Begrudgingly, it seemed, she gave me an A. After that, she paid little attention to me as long as I handed in my work, which I guess was average enough to be acceptable.

As I noted at the beginning of this discussion, I was surprised initially that dialog brought about the emergence of the pervasive monologues within the students of this study. However, upon reconsideration, I am not so surprised. Unfortunately, the stories above are not the only examples of mistreatment during my school experience; furthermore, I know my experience is

not unique, as I have seen others treated similarly time and again. Nevertheless, the point here is not to present a list of grievances but to offer examples of an authoritarian stance common to our educational system that squelches creativity and engagement. I am not sure what those teachers thought they were teaching me, but what I learned was to distrust teachers and to dislike school. I suppose on some level, I adopted the Foreman/Laborer monologue. The teachers didn't care if I liked my job, they just wanted me to behave and do it in a timely manner. I played that role for a while, but I finally became so alienated from and disenchanted with the system that I dropped out.

Though the students in this study had not dropped out of high school, most of them expressed a host of negative perceptions derived from their school experience. Yet, even if they had not been explicitly abused, they had received a message about themselves that squelched their confidence and engagement. Thus, the implication for research is that the students need time to engage the pervasive monologues. Once they have unearthed the negative views of themselves as writers and learners, dialog can begin and should continue through many classes.

Many of the students in this class commented that this class felt different, in a good way. As I said, no radical shifts in perspective occurred, but the student knew that their voices were heard, which is the first step in dismantling the authoritarian power structure. As Eric, the forty-year old with the engineering degree, noted in his final reflection, he felt like "a partner rather than a student that shows up waiting to be taught." Thus, a longitudinal study of the effect of dialog on the students' perspective would help us better understand the potential of this felt difference.

Unfortunately, this most likely means that the study would not occur in a technical college, since dialogic forums are scarce in the context. Yet, teacher-researchers might be able to



find opportunity with the technical college to continue with students dialogically through two writing classes. In the college of this study, many students have to take developmental writing classes before they take 1101. Thus, it is possible that a teacher-researcher could spend both classes with many of the same students. This study has brought about an awareness of student internalization of education's authoritative voice, thus the teacher-researcher in a two-class study might have an area of focus that could expedite dialog much more quickly.

This scenario, if realizable, is only two classes, and it's very likely that many of the students won't continue in college for more than a few more years. They are at the tail end of their experience. Moreover, this study shows that dialog in a technical college is akin to damage control or therapy. Thus, research on dialogic education needs to start much earlier in order that it can be implemented much earlier. Nami's reflections speak as evidence for this argument. According to her, academic writing in elementary school was a joy. When did the separation begin? She seemed to suggest middle school. Perhaps, then, an ideal place to begin a longitudinal study of the effect of dialogic education on student writing would be in high school and into college, if possible. The logistics of developing such a study are daunting, but any long term opportunities that are available should be taken. Whether conducted by an outside researcher or a teacher-researcher, if one could find a dialogic high-school writing program, the long-term, relatively fixed student body would be an ideal place to gain a perspective on long-term effects. If those perspectives can be gained, the way might open for middle-schools, high-schools and colleges to move toward a cohesive dialogic curriculum, and, subsequently, a more inclusive and humanizing pedagogy.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### **Interview Guideline**

1. What is the role of a student?
2. What is the role of the teacher?
3. What is the role of education?
4. What is the reason for composition/literacy classes?
  - a. Besides your grade, what do you want to get out of this class?
5. Tell me about yourself as a writer?
  - a. Why do you feel this way?
  - b. Can you think of an event or specific reason that makes you feel this way?
  - c. How important is writing to your life?
  - d. What type of writing do you do?
  - e. Why do you write?
  - f. Think about your day, week, month as a writer. What have you written?
6. Tell me about yourself as a student?
  - a. Why do you feel this way?
  - b. Can you think of an event or specific reason that makes you feel this way?
7. How would you describe your relationship with the college?
  - a. Can you think of a particular event that is a good example of your relationship with the college?
8. Tell me about yourself as a reader. How important is reading to your life?
  - a. What type of reading to you do?

- b. Why do you read?
- c. Think about your day, week, month as a reader. What have you read?