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# Why Voice Matters When Talking About Books

*To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act.*

— Carol Gilligan

The first week of June, hallways and courtyards of El Cerrito High echo with voices: the last week of classes and, for seniors, a moment of truth. Beneath their inside jokes, the laughter that interrupts class, is the subtext of change, the sense that once the almost indiscernible California summer has passed, they will be living lives they cannot yet quite imagine.

Despite it all, this group of seniors is eager to tangle with one more book. Early in the year, Daniel[1] had asked, after a set of arduous exercises

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1. Students are referred to by pseudonyms.

preparing for the Advanced Placement (AP) Composition Test, why not read more books? Other students joined in, and the mission of the class expanded, taking a turn toward literature. Their teacher, Joan Cone, gradually allowed the students to assume partial responsibility for text selection. In an interview, she described the process this way:

> They get to choose some of the books. Like they chose to read *Malcolm X*. And so that really kind of inspired me. I thought, *Oh, I'll just ask them what other book they want to read*. You know what they chose to read? Vera wanted to read ROOM OF ONE'S OWN. She said, *Well, Virginia Woolf, I think we should read something by her*. I don't like Virginia Woolf. . . . they said, *Well, don't we get to vote on it?*

When Vera suggested reading *A Room of One's Own* in May, it fit what had become routine this year: the students voted in favor of reading the book and agreed to buy copies themselves, since the school budget had been exhausted. Cone told them she had never seen anything like this: "I don't know a class I ever had in AP English that was willing to work this hard up to the end. I know that this book is difficult. I think that you're going to find the discussion rewarding."

After a year of watching Cone's AP class, I am convinced that these students had assumed an important sort of authority during discussions, an authority that has enabled them to take on a range of complex texts and, moreover, has prepared them to enter college classes next year, ready to speak with confidence. This might have seemed less remarkable if the class had been composed exclusively of students from an "honors" background. Actually, the group was made up of what a student, himself an African American, had once called during the discussion of a Didion essay, "all kinds."

The class was heterogeneous in several senses. The twenty-four students include those new, as seniors, to the honors program. The mixed ability of the group—that Cone referred to as a "broadband" of learning—is somewhat revolutionary in itself, given prevalent tracking practices that typically dictate who is eligible to enroll for Advanced Placement courses in many districts. In addition, the class was ethnically diverse. In an interview, Daniel described the group this way: "We've got Asians like Lou who I think is Chinese, we've got Patricia who's Spanish or Mexican, and Vera, Donald and I who are black, um then we have Rich who is Jewish and David who's Jewish, we have Norm who is atheist, we just have them all." He might have added Ravi, who is Iranian, and Bonita, a Latina who joined the class in January.

The unconventional composition of the class was a consequence of much soul searching by Cone and her colleagues. Cone wrote that faculty

at the school agreed to "several changes to make AP English accessible to a broad range of students and to reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of our students" (1990, 23). Rather than relying on traditional placement procedures such as general academic record, Cone opened enrollment in her twelfth-grade Advanced Placement classes to all interested students, regardless of their previous background. Consequently, this "Advanced Placement" course—a designation usually reserved for certified college-bound kids—was opened to a group of students, many of whom would not, under ordinary circumstances, qualify for admission. This led Cone to first wonder, once she had opened a Pandora's box of diversity, whether she was equipped to conduct such a class. Almost unheard of in an advanced-placement context, this class might be labeled "mixed ability." Privately, teachers in the district confided that, historically, tracking of English classes seemed patterned on ethnic and racial backgrounds, to such an extent that it led them to question placement procedures—and ultimately call for their reform by dismantling tracking entirely in English and, soon after, in social studies.

Cone found that changing the enrollment of the AP composition class had a profound effect on, among other things, student participation. In fact, she realized that changing the composition of the class required rethinking her approach to teaching it. When the class was talking about the things they had read, for instance, Cone discovered that it was important to grant students the responsibility of leading the discussions themselves and, at moments, even negotiating with the teacher about curriculum. Students responded by expressing a sometimes bewildering range of perspectives, directly reflecting the diversity of the group. Given their differences, students also engaged during such discussions in what might well be termed "negotiations." What was at stake was their interpretations of what they had read. Yet, importantly, the process also involved coming to understand one another.

When talking about readings, of course, students often compare their initial responses. When this group wrote following discussions, they frequently drew on what had been said. Yet previous accounts of relationships between oral and written language do not focus on how such interaction contributes to textual interpretation. This has led me to wonder how it is, exactly, that students draw on, and respond to, each other's ideas during discussions. Moreover, in what ways can student "readings" be derived from, or otherwise inspired by, instructional conversation? More broadly, just how are talk and writing interrelated so as to "interact" with one another in the first place?

Studying classroom language with an eye to interactions—between students and texts, between talk and writing and, of course, among the students themselves—necessarily involves working within multiple theoretical

frameworks. First, I consider the various ways in which the property of voice has conventionally been attributed to writing and, moreover, how Bakhtin's theories offer an important counterpoint to other recent thinking about voice. Specifically, to approach the appropriation of language from literary works during class discussions, as well as the internalization of talk and its subsequent representation in writing, I draw on Bakhtin's theories of polyphony and voicing. Finally, drawing also on theories of textual interpretation, particularly reader response, the study explores how a group of readers, especially one as ethnically diverse as this class, inevitably arrives at a range of "readings," some more defensible than others. Response-oriented theories also suggest how interpretations of text are, in the context of the classroom, inevitably socially situated.

## Voice in Writing

More than ever, the concept of "voice" is in vogue. In the popular parlance, it signifies most anything: from perspectives based on shared history, ethnicity and gender to those based on beliefs held in common, whether religious or political. To illustrate, listen to how a young Puerto Rican-American writer for the D. C. teen magazine *New Expression* conceives of her own role as journalist. Speaking for Hispanics to a largely African-American readership, Rivera claims, "I like to say that I kind of did my people justice. If I don't write about us, who else is going to? I've learned that my voice matters. That our voice, the voice of teens matters—not just mine, but *mine* in the sense of all of us" [italics in original] (19). (Featherstone, 1996).

Even in the popular mind the concept of "voice," given its ambiguity, raises the thorny theoretical question of where social language ends and self begins. As Gilligan (1993) suggests, voice is at once "relational . . . and cultural as well as deeply psychological" (xv). In fact, she equates voice with "the core of the self" in relation to the language and voices of others and, thereby, to *culture*. Faigley (1989) recounts how viewing voice as identity has gradually become conventional wisdom in social-constructionist circles, "a socially constructed self located in networks of discourses." Decades of sociological and literary theory, especially post-structuralism, have advanced such a view of personal or individual "identity" situated in a sociocultural context (108–9). Similarly, Fulwiler (1994), articulating the strong form of the social-constructionist position, speculates on the implications of such theories for the concept of voice: "Our voices are determined largely outside of ourselves, according to where we live and work, what we read, and with whom we interact" (p. 157). In this scheme, conceiving personal identity centers on language: internalizing the words of others, turning them over in our minds and memories, making some of them our own.

In an era that has given rise to cross-dressing, dancers in an L. A. club carefully position themselves in the interethnic pastiche signalled by costumes they consciously compose. An orphan raised in urban California aspires to become a country-western singer and, upon succeeding, claims a kind of authenticity of blood and language. Attired in a period polka-dot housedress and playing a vintage Gibson guitar, Gillian Welch knows exactly what she is up to: "I can say maybe it's in my blood. Because I was adopted. Maybe my biological parents are from Deep Gap. We don't know. That's the romantic vision for you. The truth is, this is just what my voice, both my physical voice, and my creative voice sounds like . . . at least now" (Gates, 57). The subtext is revealing: what we *choose* to sound like is who we actually are. In the case of a performer, of course, identity is a role affected to fulfill the expectations of a specific audience. It is a rhetorical relationship.

One hardly needs to be versed in contemporary social theory of the self to grasp that classroom language lies at the cusp of such interaction with others and, indeed, that our "voices" are heard in such a context. As Dickerson (1988) has claimed, "we fashion our own voices within and against the voices of self and others in our culture" (1). The young journalist, Rivera, senses intuitively what a theorist such as Elbow (1994) acknowledges: what is at stake are "large ideological questions about the nature of self or identity and about the relation of the text to the writer" (xi) and, one might add, *readers* as well. Could it be that the very promise latent in the concept of voice is just the paradox that makes it appear initially problematic: *individual* identity is situated in a *cultural* context. In some respects, these apparent contradictions seem a bellwether of English studies generally: reckoning with the *social* dimensions of writing, reading and responding to text. At the end of the day, this study turns to Bakhtin for a theoretical framework perfectly suited to analyzing the "text" of classroom discourse— and determining the place of voice in the discussion of literature.

While personal style may once have served as a litmus test for voice, I would argue, in light of Bakhtin, that what is at issue is authorial *ownership*. The essence of voice in writing is above all a question of identity, that is, *whose* words and perspectives are represented on the page. Traditionally, when voice has been associated with identity, the prevailing assumption has been that a writer possesses a *singular* voice. It is just this central assumption that has widely been called into question. As Booth (1988) concludes, Bakhtin's theory of the "social self" requires that individuals (as well as narratives) be viewed as embodying a multiplicity of perspectives, how each of us perceives internally "voice against voice." Indeed, even autobiography, that most personal of genres, can be examined with an eye to multiple voices (Wolff 1988; Dickerson 1988, 1989). Fulwiler (1990) explores how voice, not unlike tone or style, varies depending in part on

genre, topic, purpose and, importantly, *audience*, complicating the traditional image of the solitary writer composing in isolation.

The incongruities in our understanding of voice might be said to stem from fundamental differences in theoretical orientation, ways of viewing identity politics in terms of a socially situated and "constructed" self. Conceiving of voice in a social context as opposed to a highly private sense is consistent with social constructionist theories of self (Harris 1989; Fulwiler 1990). Moreover, if one subscribes to the concept of *self* as social, the theory of voice must be revised accordingly. Authorship can be viewed as stemming from the interaction of voices in the mind, reflected in written text. Written text in turn exhibits a comingling of voices presented in service of the writer's own purposes, for when viewed as polyphonic, voice in writing is itself composed of various and even competing elements.

While Bakhtin, as we will see, offers a well-elaborated theoretical framework for voicing, the term *voice* in writing has been widely used in several contexts and carries a variety of connotations, including those associated with literary criticism and composition theory generally. Consequently, it is important to sort out the various ways in which voice has conventionally been attributed to writing. Before going on to consider how Bakhtin's theories offer both an extension and a departure from other recent thinking about voice, I will distinguish the several ways in which voice is commonly understood and examine underlying assumptions.

The notion of voice in writing, of course, is a metaphor; perhaps this is why it can be used to speak in virtually the same breath about aspects of writing as various as style, ethos, authority, and identity. Moreover, when the term *voice* is used in any one of these several senses, its other meanings may be implicitly invoked. Therefore, it is important to sort out the various ways in which voice has conventionally been attributed to writing. Implicit in the very idea of voice *in writing* is a comparison to speech. As early as the 1960s, composition teachers and theorists saw advantages in coupling the study of oral and written language in a fashion that anticipates current whole language approaches. Tellingly, Walker (1963) sees voice as precisely that element that spoken and written language share in common (5).

References to spoken-like tone are still common when the notion of voice in writing is invoked. While the distinctiveness of an individual's speaking voice is often equated with the qualities of personal expressiveness and colloquial tone in prose, we dare not lose sight of the fact that a skilled writer can affect a particular tone: that is, present a persona to suit specific rhetorical aims. Less rigorous references to voice in writing emphasize general qualities of informality and expressiveness. Colloquial uses of the term *voice* coexist with more technical ones. Unfortunately, casual references to voice have inherited and perpetuated the murkiness inherent in such terminology.

Yet the idea of voice in writing resembling speech also survives in contemporary criticism. The following example, for instance, appears in the favorable review of a just-published, first collection of verse: "The voice that comes off the page is convincing because it is so immediate; [the poet] seems to be *talking* right to you, without fuss, without affectations, *expecting a response*" (Alvarez 1996, 5) [emphasis mine]. More startling even than the prevalence of the auditory metaphor and reference to what ordinarily would be termed tone or style is how the metaphor is extended to suggest a sort of implicit *dialogue* between author and reader, mediated by text and narrator.

While comparisons of writing and speech are initially tempting, decades of research reveal a complex mix of similarities and differences between oral and written language. The metaphor of voice in writing highlights the former while obscuring the latter. Fulwiler (1990) has advanced the auditory argument, though not accepting it outright. While the term certainly cannot be equated with resemblance to speech alone (Elbow 1981; Banfield 1982), in practice, writing that is closer to a spoken style is the writing often said to possess voice. Elbow summarizes this position by claiming that, "Writing *with voice* is writing into which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people when they are enjoying a conversation" (1981, 299) [emphasis in original] or, again, "Voice in writing implies words that capture the sound of an individual on the page" (287). Elbow's formulation has stood as a defacto standard among pedagogical definitions of voice in writing; yet, Elbow's (1994) later work, informed in part by contemporary social theory, enriches our understanding of voice obscured by earlier, less complex uses of the metaphor.

Widely used in the discussion of writing, of course, the term *voice* carries a variety of connotations including those associated with rhetorical theory and literary criticism; moreover, the property of voice, variously defined, is attributed to a wide range of textual genres. In prose fiction, identity of a narrator discussed in terms of *voice* has been prevalent in literary contexts; to this day, questions of the identity and reliability of narrators remain central concerns within literary theory (e.g., Booth 1988; Chatman 1990; Genette 1980, 1988). Yet concern with the credibility of speakers and authors generally has been central to rhetorical theory from Aristotle onward. The writer of exposition is advised in this tradition to establish a trustworthy self-representation that will, in effect, persuade listeners and readers to consider arguments seriously. These issues map loosely to the rhetorical concept of "ethos," yet Elbow (1994) subsumes such concerns as just one more element of voice, which he terms "resonance" (xli). Indeed, a complete history of the interaction of such terms across disciplines, while beyond the scope of this study, would make a fascinating

account: how such ideas have been received and, in turn, influenced, within
the disciplines of rhetorical, literary, and composition theory.

Despite the long-standing existence of persona in rhetoric, the concept
of a "speaker"—especially the degree to which the historical author and a
textual persona converge or diverge in the text—emerged as a concern cen-
tral to literary criticism rather gradually: at first tentatively, but then per-
vasively. Park's (1989) essay on the evolution and exploration of critical
theories of constructed persona as "speaker" in poetic and narrative texts
dates widespread acceptance (she terms it "hegemony") of this critical
stance to the early 1980s (30). Moreover, as Booth (1961) flatly asserts,
"none of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate" (73)
due to its multifaceted nature; the same could be argued today.

Still, there exists the obvious analogy to the uniqueness of speaking
voice. Speaking voice is notoriously tricky to describe with words: to suc-
ceed means to capture its uniqueness. To illustrate, here is how Ethel Wax-
ham, a turn-of-the-century Wyoming schoolmarm, described in her journal
the voice of her future husband upon first meeting him: "His voice was
most peculiar and characteristic. . . . A little Scotch dialect, a little slow
drawl, a little nasal quality, a bit of falsetto once in a while, and a tone as
if he were speaking out of doors. There is a kind of twinkle in his voice" (in
McPhee 1986, 236–37). How he spoke indeed tells us a good deal about "the
kind of person" he was. It makes one want to meet the man, or *read* him,
had he written.

The term *voice* is readily appropriated to suggest genuine self-disclo-
sure of a writer's personal identity. In an ethnically diverse classroom such
as the one considered in this study, "personal identity" takes on a variety
of social and even political overtones. As reader-response theory has made
plain, the knowledge and perspectives of the individual reader naturally
shape interpretation of literary texts. Nonetheless, it is crucial not to
assume that any one facet of a person's "identity" (or what social theory
might term *subject-position*), ethnicity, for instance, necessarily equates
with specific view—or, for that matter, that such things are fixed for an
individual, or singular and monolithic for any group as a whole.

Viewing voice as an indicator of identity is particularly prevalent in
relation to poetry, especially in the post-Confessionist era. Listen to the
claims of contemporaries, such as Pulitzer prize winner Donald Justice:
"When I say *I* in a poem, I would like to be saying what I really do think
and believe and have done or seen or experienced" (Wallace 1996). Essen-
tially the rhetorical formula he proposes is as follows: the speaker is the
author, the contents are nonfiction, and authority is derived from authen-
tic experience and emotion. Poets from Walt Whitman to Galway Kinnell
also seek to express *univerals* through probing accounts of what is essen-
tially personal experience (Freisinger 1994, 244–45). Poet Ron Wallace con-

curs: "One promising direction in American poetry, I think, is just this embrace of the personal voice, clear accessible language, the sense that you're hearing what the poet really does think" (1996, 11). Such writers make explicit the stylistic and rhetorical preferences that have been practiced by several generations of acclaimed American poets.

Consider also the ways in which writers commonly acquire mastery of genre conventions by studying and even systematically imitiating the writing of others. National Book award-winning poet A. R. Ammons once described how he as a young writer discovered several major authors he admired, including William Carlos Williams, and read them closely until he was essentially able to "write their poems," which for the purposes of this discussion is in part an exercise in echoing voice (personal communication). Once he had completed this sort of apprenticeship, however, he said he simply put their books away and thereafter wrote in his own distinctive style. Yancey (1994), speaking in the context of academic exposition, sees such principles of internalization as central to conflicting visions of voice: "As a metaphor, voice also suggests an ability to define oneself and to locate oneself relative to other discourses, to write ourselves by appropriating and rewriting others" (xix). Thus, the field has moved beyond accounts of "authentic" voice as individual identity, to situate voice within discourse communities: a means for signalling membership and establishing authority.

Accordingly, voice has long been referred to in relation to genres other than poetry and narrative, including exposition. As Cherry (1988) notes, composition textbooks also routinely refer to voice in writing. Clearly, voice is by no means limited to the "literary," but can be seen to enter into all writing, including *student* work. Britton et al. (1975) developed a comprehensive typology for student writing. In what has proven a landmark empirical study of school writing, they viewed personal or expressive writing as a precursor to mastering forms of discourse addressing others. Others had made similar claims, arriving at them through a theoretical analysis of written discourse types (e.g., Moffett, Macrorie, Elbow). Britton et al. observe that a particular composition "sounds as though it is taken largely from someone else's writing." They claim that the work is not the student's own, since it is not "coloured by the [original] writer's own voice." Yet while the style of source material can still be heard echoed in the student's writing, they argue that the writing is not necessarily plagarized since the student may well have written in good faith, inadvertently drawing on authoritative textbook prose. This is an important claim in that it highlights the intertextual nature of much student writing, an issue that has been addressed in studies of "reading to write."

Similarly, teachers of exposition who employ more traditional approaches still encourage students to emulate a variety of prose models,

sometimes in order to master a wider repertoire of styles: that is, a greater range of *voices* as well as structures (Woodworth 1994). More progressive composition theorists, for example, Bartholomae, use parallel approaches to arrive at issues of authority and ownership in the context of discourse communities, such as the university itself. Of course, asking students to write in the voices of characters or narrators as a creative response to literature is also based on the assumption that *multiple* voices are within ready reach of every writer.

Curiously, there has been a recent renaissance of prose genres resembling the traditional essay that allow personal intrusion of the author, often blending exposition with narrative. Prime examples include what has been dubbed "literary journalism" of authors such as Annie Dillard, Carol Gilligan, Stephen J. Gould, Susan Griffin, Tracy Kidder, Barry Lopez, and John McPhee. Feminist rhetorical theory has long argued that personal experience deserves its rightful place as evidence in the essay, and that the perspectives and "subjectivity" of an author likewise belong there.

While prose evoking personality can be dated to Montaigne, who pronounced, "I speak to my paper as I speak to the first man I meet," modern scholars of the essay, such as Klaus (1994), still emphasize the auditory, suggesting that the essay offers "illusions of a spoken voice . . . hauntingly akin to the sound of a person's voice . . . carrying on a conversation with [the reader]" (111). The fact that such writing appeals to impressively wide audiences—and wins major *literary* awards—suggests that modern readers welcome the friendly presence of the historical author conveyed by narrative episodes, personal reflections, and, presumably, recognizable voice.

In the analysis of fiction, *voice* often refers to the characters assigned to serve as narrators (a parallel case, of course, can be made for invented speakers in poetry). As such, it represents a special case of voice as identity in that the character "speaking" is a fictional construct. Invented narrators, other than the actual author, long a mainstay of fiction writers, intrude to color the telling in interesting and artful ways. For the novelist, then, selection of a narrator is a critical craft decision since the choice shapes the information and perspectives conveyed, while also dictating narrative voice. Yet whose voice, exactly, do we hear when a novelist performs this sort of textual ventriloquism and we, in turn, view the printed page? Clearly, readers must construct a sense of speaker, making inferences about the "character" of the person whose voice "speaks" through a text.

Authors of the post-modern era are keenly interested in exploring such devices. Contemporary fiction is populated with constructed narrators whose reliability, at times, becomes suspect. The reader is wise to stay alert to such possibilities. Yet constructing narrators in prose fiction has an

illustrious history, including such notable works as *The Canterbury Tales, Don Quixote*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain prefaces the latter with an "explanatory" note: "In this book a number of dialects are used. . . . I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding." While the mock seriousness of this disclaimer parodies authoritative discourse, it allows Twain to highlight in a tongue-in-cheek fashion that the voices that follow in the novel are distinct from one another but, nonetheless, socially situated. The passage is well ahead of its time in flirting with sociolinguistic concepts of speech communities and perhaps even social construction of self—and voice—through language (Gibson 1963).

In narratology, specifically, the question of voice in writing is understood in specialized ways: generally, it concerns the identities of authors and narrators, though various theories of narrative distinguish between the two differently (Banfield 1982). Indeed, distinguishing between human author and textual narrator has become since the 1950s a highly conventional critical maneuver. Contemporary teachers of literature commonly ensure that such concepts are virtually "second nature" for students (Park 1989, 141). Students of literature have traditionally learned to identify canonical authors of passages excerpted from major or less familiar works, often on the basis of distinctive style or, conceivably, narrative voice. Park (1989) recounts in the *Hudson Review* having been quizzed as a schoolgirl on "previously unseen passages whose period and author we must identify merely by style, by the way the words went" (23). One might reasonably consider these exercises in recognizing narrative voice.

Despite an irksome potential for ambiguity, the term *voice* is frequently used by authors, critics, and theorists alike when discussing writing; used loosely, however, the term is prone to conflate issues of structure, content, and style. Cherry (1988) comments that while the idea that writing can possess "voice" has become commonplace, assumptions underlying the term "have not been subjected to careful examination in either composition theory or composition research" (252).

For better or for worse, *voice* has come to stand for several disparate aspects of writing for which no adequate descriptive language exists. In fact, *voice* is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms such as *ethos* and *persona* (Cherry 1988), *authority* (Rose 1989), and *speech register* (Kamberelis 1986). Elbow equates voice with individuality, recognizable beyond characteristic variations in "style, tone, mood, or syntax" (1981, 300). Attempts at a structural, linguistic definition of voice in writing suggest that "multiple voices" may in fact be subsumed in a single text; Palacas (1989), for instance, contrasts the presentation of information in an objective style with the reflective: "voice of a reflecting self, the author reflecting on what he is saying" (125). The latter seems inherently more

personal in tone, and when it approaches direct address to the reader, it takes on a conversational or dialogical quality. Cherry suggests the underlying paradox: "There is a sense in which the [actual/historical] author does not, indeed cannot, appear directly in a literary text. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the author is in fact present" (261). Elbow goes as far as to claim that it possesses no distinguishing "outward linguistic characteristics" at all (1986, 312). For this very reason, critics point out that it is hard to have faith in such an amorphous concept (Hashimoto 1987; Palacas 1989).

Hashimoto (1987) calls into question the exaggerated, almost "evangelical" enthusiasm with which the property of voice, when vaguely defined, has been embraced by composition instructors and theorists. He points out how authorities in the field, such as Murray, appear at times so enamored of the concept that they privilege it above other qualities in student writing. Says Murray: "Voice is the quality, more than any other, that allows us to recognize excellent writing" (Hashimoto, xxv).

Others have judged the concept of voice subjective or impressionistic, too pliable to serve any analytic or pedagogical purpose. Even those who champion voice have been known to face a crisis of faith from time to time: Fulwiler, in an essay examining the nature of voice in both private journal and public published writing, observes that "if there is such a thing as authentic voice, it is protean and shifty" (1994, 162). Ultimately, Hashimoto critiques blind faith in what he deems a historically "mystical" conception of voice: little more than "a vague phrase conjured up by English teachers to impress and motivate the masses to write more" (1987, 77). Yet it is not my purpose here to take a skeptical stance, as much as it is to join those who have called for making explicit some of the complexity and analytic power latent in the term. Such critiques challenge teachers of English to address in an explicit sense that which constitutes "voice," how it is to be reliably recognized in literary works and, ultimately, how it might contribute to our understanding of how students interpret such texts collaboratively during discussions.

After all, as complex as the concept can become at the theoretical level, readers intuitively recognize and respond to voice when interpreting texts. Moreover, even children delight in echoing the characters from stories and picture books, assuming playfully and effortlessly the *voices of others*; this book argues that just such *dual-voicing*—as a natural part of literacy and spoken fluency—is a powerful and perhaps necessary tool for classroom discussion of literature. It is indeed startling to discover what a powerful interpretive tool voicing proves in the literature classroom during discussions, and just how frequently it is used. To reliably recognize how voice enters into the literature classroom, however, will require arriving at a single, explicit definition. For this, I turn to Bakhtin.

## Bakhtin's Theories of Voicing

Bakhtin's theories offer a valuable departure from conventional thinking about voice and suggest a theoretical framework well suited to examining classroom discourse. In Bakhtinian theory, the question of *whose* language is being represented is ultimately paramount, as Wertsch (1991) argues. Beyond the present speaker are a multiplicity of echoes and allusions, referring either explicitly or implicitly to the thought and language of others. As it turns out, Bakhtin's theories of polyphony in prose fiction and conversation alike offer a wonderful framework for reconceiving voicing during classroom discussion of literature.

Literary criticism, as we have seen, has thoroughly addressed distinctions between historical authors and textual narrators, certainly a *sort* of multivoicedness; yet, Bakhtin's theories of dual-voicing offer a far more versatile tool. In addition to characters narrating and "implied" authors, narrative incorporates additional "layers" of multiple voicing that Bakhtin dubs "dual-voicing" and "polyphony."

Indeed, if we view spoken or written narrative through the lens of polyphony, we discover that it is populated by a variety of voices. In prose fiction, all voices—even attributed to characters—are ostensibly composed by the historical author. When student readers address the question of "what a text means to them," they sort out voices heard and the various perspectives expressed. Establishing who has uttered which words in a text and which characters subscribe to particular perspectives is of fundamental importance. Voicing during classroom discussions is, linguistically, the device that allows the sort of attribution necessary for interpreting not only narrative, but any text.

Bakhtin claims that all discourse, whether spoken or written, expressed or internal, interacts dialogically with its immediate social and broader historical contexts. He observes that such social dimensions of language had particularly significant implications in the classroom. In "Discourse in the Novel," he poses a central question regarding the range of ways in which students internalize and express the language of others.

> When verbal disciplines are taught in school, two basic modes are recognized for the appropriation and transmission—simultaneously—of another's words (a text, a rule, a model): "reciting by heart" and "retelling in one's own words" . . . retelling a text in one's own words is to a certain extent a double-voiced narration of another's words, for indeed "one's own words" must not completely dilute the quality that makes another's words unique; a retelling in one's own words should have a mixed character, able when necessary to reproduce the style and expressions of the transmitted text. It is this second mode used in schools for

> transmitting another's discourse, "retelling in one's own words," that
> includes within it an entire series of forms for the appropriation while
> transmitting of another's words, depending upon the character of the
> text being appropriated and pedagogical environment in which it is
> understood and evaluated. (1981, 341–42)

Though Bakhtin does not offer a formal typology for the ways in which speakers and writers represent the language of others, he explores the concept of "dual-voicing," that is when a single utterance is simultaneously attributable to more than one speaker. Taken together, the principles of dual-voicing, directionality, dialogue, and response underscore that *all* language use is social. Moreover, I believe that Bakhtin's general concepts of appropriation, voicing, and directionality offer a powerful theoretical framework for approaching the analysis of classroom language.

Barbara Johnson (1981), in the introduction to her translation of *Dissemination*, arrives at a startlingly similar realization in her account of how Derrida himself interprets and responds to text:

> The critique does not ask "what does this statement mean?" but "where is
> it being made from? What does it presuppose? Are its presuppositions
> compatible with, independent of, and anterior to the statement that
> seems to follow from them, or do they already follow from it, contradict it,
> or stand in relation of mutual dependence such that neither can exist
> without positing that the other is prior to it?" (xv)

Or, more simply, Johnson states "things have their history" (1994, 49). In classroom discussion of literature, the discourse history includes not only literary works read but what has previously been said. For when we assume that the entirety of a text can be directly attributed to its historical author, we miss the more interesting aspects of dual-voicing that Bakhtin intended: voices within a *single* utterance are attributable to multiple speakers—sometimes simultaneously.

Clearly, anything spoken or written is bound to interact with writing and speech that precedes it. In fact, spoken and written languages can readily be seen to "interact" with one another; one familiar instance is the case of reported speech in writing. Bakhtin (1986) argues that such connections are inevitable. Bakhtin recognized, in fact, a multitude of ways for incorporating previous speech. Appropriation, whether or not attributed, occurs frequently in speech as well as writing; echoings, of course, also occur between the two, as when a student alludes to class discussion in a written composition. Bakhtin recognized that while such borrowings occur in both writing and speech, each has its own conventions for marking the boundaries between one's own words and those of others.

In addition, when students discuss works they have read, they naturally refer to ideas and perspectives encountered in the texts. To do so, they often represent the language of authors and characters through direct quotation or invented paraphrase. Such attribution is frequently explicit, though occasionally inferred from context. In all cases, such echoing of textual language takes the linguistic form Bakhtin identified as dual-voicing (hereafter referred to in this study as *voicing*). Importantly, a student may use voicing either to illustrate or question the original utterance, a relationship that Bakhtin termed *directionality*.

While Bakhtin did not develop a typology for appropriation in writing, he called attention to the functions of attribution in characteristically *dialogical* terms. Specifically, Bakhtin focused on the purpose of the present speaker and its relationship to that of the attributed utterance, hence the term *directionality*. In effect, his concept of directionality provides a spatial metaphor for conceptualizing the dialogical relationship between present and previous speakers.

Perhaps it is self-evident that individuals are selective and discerning, testing the ideas of others against their own experience and judgment. What distinguishes Bakhtinian theory is that it posits a rather straightforward linguistic principle: Speakers can express affinity with or resistance to what they have heard and read. As simple as this concept may first appear, it yields, as we will see, insight into how students collaboratively interpret texts during discussions. In fact, representing the ideas of others through informal attribution—or alternatively expressing dissent—proves truly central to classroom conversations about literature. Or, more concisely, "We find our voice . . . among the voices of others, in a dialogic relation (Freisinger 1994, 271). Bakhtin's directionality provides an analytical framework for examining classroom language and accounting for how individual perspectives are fashioned and expressed with reference to the language of others.

Speakers and writers routinely appropriate the language of others to concur with another's ideas to articulate and support their own claims; Bakhtin terms such dual-voicing *uni-directional*. On the other hand, one may also use another's words to serve a new purpose, even to contest them outright; this Bakhtin termed *vari-directional*. Bakhtin also examined instances in which dual-voiced language seemed to "resist" or undermine the intent of the present speaker, terming this case *active*. It is "passive" dual-voicing, however, that calls attention to the ways in which the present speaker frames represented language to signal the speaker's stance toward the voiced utterance. While it is possible to conceive of a continuum between the two (Bakhtin himself did not), the uni-directional case occupies one end point and can be differentiated categorically from vari-directionality of any degree (Morson and Emerson 1989).

While we can echo the words of others consciously, marking them as such, appropriation can also take far more subtle forms. In the case of paraphrase and other indirect reporting, Bakhtin claims that even "the slightest allusion to another's utterance gives the speech a dialogical turn" (1986, 94). Moreover, as Duyfhuizen (1992) observes, whenever another's words are "transmitted," they are, in Bakhtin's view, inevitably colored by the second discourse context and the present speaker's purpose:

> Bakhtin sees "transmission" as inextricably linked with interpretation— one can hardly pass on another's words verbatim. . . . Transmission, ulti- mately marks both the appropriation of another's discourse and the attempts to recontextualize that discourse so that it produces effects other than those originally intended by the [cited] speaker or writer.

Characteristically, Bakhtin tied the idea of appropriation to the dialogic principle, arguing that reported speech inevitably reflects in its retelling a relationship or response to other speakers. He questioned how discrete "turns " in conversation actually are in the first place if defined as the change of speakers, since speakers and writers routinely appropriate each other's words and ideas.

Within this framework, Bakhtin (1981) claims that speakers recall not only *what* others have said, that is, their words, but also who said them and to what effect, aspects of discourse that might be termed *pragmatic*. Speakers internalize, beyond the words of others, such pragmatic "interre- lationships." Moreover, such relationships are readily internalized and reflected afterward in writing; accordingly, subsequent writing can be seen to contain vestiges of "interrelationships" between speakers since it, like speech, often entails response.

"Dialogue" is defined by Bakhtin as the relationship of one turn to the next, as in conversation, which he characterizes as, "an intense interac- tion . . . a process in which [one's own and another's word] oppose or dia- logically interanimate each other" (1981, 354). Moreover, dual-voicing signals the speaker's response, thereby elevating dialectic, or the relation- ship between logical arguments, to dialogue among speakers and perspec- tives (Bakhtin viewed the two as quite distinct). In effect, dual-voicing foregrounds *whose* perspectives are being represented and thereby places arguments within a social context. Such interaction is by no means limited to conversation; the same might be said for other sorts of discourse, such as group discussions and even successively written texts. For example, a speaker might signal agreement, objection, or sympathy with the ideas of others, as well as anticipating such responses in return.

Theorists of language development define dialogue more narrowly, lim- iting the concept to spoken interaction. Vygotsky, for instance, views it as

"a chain of reactions," restricting his definition to utterances that are "immediate," "unpremeditated" (1962, 242) and, presumably, *spoken* rather than written. The possibility of writing as response to spoken language or even constituting a turn in "conversation" remains beyond the scope of Vygotsky's argument. However, Vygotsky argues that what begins as social interaction is "internalized" and added to the individual's cognitive repertoire. Classroom observations of social aspects of composition suggest that relationships between spoken interaction and writing bear out socially based theories of language learning such as those offered by Vygotsky (Hardcastle 1985).

Bakhtin wrote that "One's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible" (1981, 345). Moreover, in language use of every sort—spoken, written, or even thought—there are "a significant number of words [that] can be identified that are implicitly or explicitly admitted as someone else's" (Bakhtin 1981, 354). Extrapolating from spoken interaction, then, Bakhtin viewed even "understanding" itself in terms of polyphony.

The notions of dialogue and polyphony have gained currency for precisely this reason: establishing voice involves negotiation. Student writers interact with teachers, texts, and classmates, not to mention the institution of school itself. Even an individual writer's cognitive process has been viewed in terms of the metaphors of conversation and dialogue, both with oneself and "internalized others" (LeFevre 1987).

I believe Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and response suggest a new way of approaching classroom discourse, one that can encompass relations between oral and written language. While Bakhtin bases his linguistic theories primarily on the study of literary texts, similar principles can operate in language generally, including student discussions. In fact, Bakhtin (1981) specifically addresses the social nature of language in schools. What is striking about his account of learning is how it highlights the role of language, particularly appropriation. He distinguishes, importantly, between merely reporting the words and ideas of others and, alternatively, appropriating them in service of original thought or argument. Clearly, one can draw on the language of others in myriad ways. This suggests that systematic analysis of spoken and written language in the classroom, and the *interaction* between them, could reveal much about the role of language in learning.

When discussing literary works with one another in class, students must come to terms with a range of perspectives expressed, and perhaps others that have been silenced. Talking about books, readers discover things about themselves and one another, in addition to addressing richly polyphonic texts that are themselves socially situated. Underlying assumptions

are well worth considering, including (1) readers opinions are bound to dif-
fer; (2) alternate "readings" may prove beneficial to consider; (3) an English
classroom is an ideal venue for modeling such an approach to textual inter-
pretation; and (4) negotiation of differences of perspective is in itself a cen-
tral benefit of literary studies.

What I term *voicing* during such discussions is when students explic-
itly attribute language—whether by verbatim quotation or invented para-
phrase—as a vehicle for assigning specific perspectives to particular
individuals or groups. I will argue that such voicing is central to interpret-
ing text collaboratively. Though a largely untutored skill, appropriating the
words of others is an essential component of such discussions, and quite
possibly a *necessary* one. The rhetorical power of such borrowing, of course,
stems precisely from the fact that language has been attributed to someone
else. In exposition, writers routinely appropriate the language of others to
express ideas that concur with their own as well as use another's words to
serve a new purpose, or even to contest them outright. Viewed as multi-
voiced, an utterance—whether spoken or written—becomes *internally* dia-
logical when another's language is expressly incorporated. Such voicing
foregrounds *whose* perspectives are being represented and thereby places
arguments within a social context.

Bakhtin, of course, is keenly interested in the mechanics of attribution
and appropriation, distinguishing between direct, indirect, and quasi-
direct quotation. He found distinctions between the linguistic structures
for representing the language of others especially productive in the study
of written text, primarily narrative. Among the ambiguities that bedevil
the narratologist are the cases in which, as Booth (1988) describes, "bor-
derlines between author's voice and character's voice are deliberately
blurred . . . as if the author became simply one of many characters, one
voice among many." It is no accident that Bakhtin arrived at his theories of
dual-voicing in relation to prose fiction: Narrative is a veritable polyphonic
playground, yet the same linguistic principles can plainly operate, as I will
argue, in classroom discourse during discussions of text.

The richness of interpreting works collaboratively—especially in a
decentered lesson format such as student-led discussions—is the intertex-
tuality introduced by voicing the words and perspectives of others. Class-
room dialogue reaches its fullest consummation when students feel
licensed to not only speak their own minds, but respond openly to the ideas
of authors and classmates. To do so effectively, they naturally refer to the
words of others—and necessarily so; this is precisely why voicing is such a
fundamental and profound aspect of instructional conversation about liter-
ature (Knoeller 1994).

If one assumes that all language including classroom discourse is
inevitably polyphonic, then the grounds for discussing voice shift dramati-

cally, recognizing the ways in which students appropriate the language—spoken and written—of others in their "own" thinking. While writing teachers have tended to encourage qualities such as self-expression and ownership in student writing, Faigley (1989) argues that there are various definitions of the "self" that correspond to voice as a distinctive way of speaking, writing, thinking, and believing. Importantly, some contemporary formulations of self emphasize language and interaction: "Human beings are constituted in conversation," writes one theorist, "and hence what gets internalized in the mature subject is not the reaction of the other, but the whole conversation, with interanimation of voices" (Taylor 1991, 314). Of course, in the context of the literature classroom, the "whole conversation" is a richly woven tapestry of "texts," spoken and written: discussions, readings, and writings building on the complexity of reference from one class session to the next.

Various aspects of difference have been annexed by the "multicultural" ethic of many educators, including, but not limited to, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, language, nationality, age, and disability. Clearly, any of these factors can profoundly affect an individual's attitudes and beliefs. To speak of difference so inclusively is to suggest that *every* classroom is in some respect "diverse." To invite explicit expression of such differences in the context of discussing literature inevitably involves licensing students to not only speak openly but honestly consider the perspectives of others. As one English educator working in the American Southwest concludes, "Students become aware of and are encouraged to express differences in historical, cultural, ethnic and even personal realities while simultaneously challenging the primacy of any and all categorical positions" (Laing 1996, 224). This statement distills, I believe, a high-minded and genuinely democratic ideal.

Moreover, allowing students to lead their own discussions in response to literature constitutes a clear shift in instructional strategy away from conventional, teacher-centered classroom discourse (e.g., Mehan, Cazden, Marshall). Perhaps it is more: a leap of faith based on great respect for the ability of students to take on new levels of responsibility for their own learning. The rewards of extending such trust are documented by the insightful narratives of many teacher researchers (e.g., Atwell 1987; Cone 1994; Oliver 1996).

Educational research has begun to view the dynamics of interaction and identity as essential to the discussion of literature, and to address them in terms of voice: "Confidence in writing [and speaking] in one's voice, and empathy and sympathy for the life experiences and language of those coming from backgrounds vastly different from one's own, are important requisites for full membership in American society in the twenty-first century" (Cook and Lodge 1996, xii). Such heady aims entail several important

assumptions: (1) that diversity (of students and texts) is an asset in the English classroom; (2) that differences (e.g., of ethnicity or philosophy) are natural and to be honored and, perhaps most importantly, (3) that the purpose of English studies includes engendering dialogue across perspectives. The discussion of literature thereby becomes a natural forum for developing communication rooted in the philosophy of honoring difference.

In light of social constructionist views of knowledge, students are elevated to the role of making meaning through language. Needless to say, such an approach suggests a sea change in approach from traditional literature teaching in several respects:

1. *Honoring diverse perspectives*: conceiving discussion of literature as a social and incremental process, examining a range of sometimes divergent possibilities present in a text;
2. *Structuring lesson formats*: allowing students to interact collectively with texts through sustained instructional conversation; and
3. *Selecting literary texts*: expanding the conventional canon along the lines of authorship (considering, for instance, gender, ethnicity, language, nationality), genre, and period.

Once couched in the language of "relevance," and more recently discussed in terms of "diversity" and "representation," matching the authorship and subject matter of literary works to students' backgrounds and interests has long been a concern of English educators. Such approaches have been validated by reader response theories of interpretation that emphasize the active role a reader plays in responding to—indeed *creating*—meaning in a work. One recent formulation of these philosophies reads as follows:

> Validating students' experience and prior knowledge must not be underestimated. To understand literature, students need to portray their own feelings and to connect incidents and decisions in their own lives to those in literature they read. In doing so, they become engaged in constructing meaning from text and then in articulating those meanings to others through the filter of their own cultural and ethnic heritage. (Cook 1996, 175)

Clearly, this is where the richness of diversity kicks in: for beyond "constructing" and "articulating" textual meanings, students *negotiate* differences in perspectives and interpretations. Among the dividends of holding discussions of literature are—beyond understanding specific works or becoming more skilled at textual interpretation generally—(1) developing an appreciation for the perspectives of others, (2) accommodating alterna-