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Reflections on Dialogism and Doing Community in the L2 Classroom

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While group work is commonly discussed as an important aspect of communicative language teaching, its configuration is usually considered to be small groups of students rather than an entire group of course participants. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1984; Holquist, 2002), this paper explores a view of group work as potential community building activity in the L2 classroom through the use of a group reflection tool involving the whole class.

The topic of group work is a major focus of communicative language teaching. From this perspective, groups are designed primarily as a mechanism for discussion (Savignon, 2001). Suggestions are commonly provided in the literature about ways to promote interaction within pairs or small groups of students, such as providing structured tasks with clear outcomes and assigning particular roles within the group (Lazaraton, 2001; Richards, 2006). In this view, talk is good – something we all want our students to do.

Talk *is* good, and group work is a vital component of any language course. However, if we wish to extend our view of group work beyond small configurations of individuals to a whole group of classroom participants, there are fewer models promoted in language education readings. What topics might be useful to explore in our classrooms with the goal of community building in mind? What kinds of activities can encourage a sense of belonging in a class? How might we draw upon theory to ground our design of this work?

As the community college English as a Second Language classes that I teach are part of a learning community program, it is part of my job to consider what *doing community* might look like. Learning communities enroll students in common courses and often integrate material from the different disciplines (Smith et al., 2004). The organizational structure of shared coursework gives faculty members on our campus opportunities to treat our time with a cohort of English language learners as a collaborative enterprise. In our ESL learning community linked with speech and psychology classes, we design our work around a common theme of Resilience. Students examine the psychological concept of resilience, apply this concept as they explore works of literature, and give speeches based on these readings and writings. At the end of the semester, learners showcase digital stories with each other and their professors that incorporate images and their own voices, highlighting their understandings of the meaning of resilience based on their readings and experiences. Students often walk away from our learning community reporting that they feel part of a family after participating in the program.

To build these strong ties it takes more than simply enrolling language learners in the same set of courses and in recent years, and with increased urgency in the isolation of online instruction, I've been working to be more intentional about community building. It is in classes

with a strong sense of “groupness” that individual students appear to see the greatest English language progress. And there is a different energy in these classes: we all seem to enjoy teaching and learning together.

The language scholar, literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin is inspiring me to deepen my community building work. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism has been described as an “ecological model of social life” (Kostogriz, 2013, p. 193) that celebrates humans as interdependent beings and provides a vision for a world where people share with one another on equal terms (Marchenkova, 2013). Bakhtin did most of his writing during the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union and lived through horrors including revolution, exile, and famine (Holquist, 2002), but under these harshest of conditions he was passionate about the capacity for human agency and creativity (Lin & Luk, 2013), and the belief that “no one has an exclusive right to articulate the final meaning” (Kostogriz, 2013, p. 194). Bakhtin’s writings have been hailed as opening up new opportunities for advocacy and change (Bauer & Jaret McKinstry, 1991), and I have seen this ring true in my attempts to cultivate a sense of community in my classrooms and, more recently, on Zoom.

One way I have been working to apply Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism is through group reflection activity. Bakhtin’s work points to a “blind spot” that each of us experiences in relation to ourselves (Holquist, 1985, p. 227), and emphasizes our need for others to develop our own consciousness and self-awareness. While we are able to see others as completed in time and located in space, Bakhtin understood the self to be always “inside its own unfolding” and never completely known to itself (Holquist, 2002, p. 31). This gap in our vision is not to be mourned however, for through our everyday contributions to dialogic events we are provided with new self-understandings and meanings as one consciousness steps outside of itself and connects with another in a new space of cobeing (Holquist, 1985; Kostogriz, 2013). This dialogic space gives us the perspective of outsidership needed to see others fully and complete their views of themselves, and develop knowledge of ourselves as subjects through others’ eyes (Holquist, 1985; Kostogriz, 2013; Roberts, 1994). Through group reflection, I aim to create a meaningful space for cobeing with the language learners in my classes.

A concept that captured Bakhtin’s imagination as a celebration of cobeing was the carnival collective (Bakhtin, 1984), and I have been exploring this concept as I work towards deepening the practice of group reflection and community building in the classroom. Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival collectivity was grounded in his dialogic view of the self as being in active coexistence with others. Everyone participated in carnival, regardless of their position in society. This open form of engagement created possibilities for relationships among individuals who were usually divided. Experiencing new ways of being with others, the carnival activity also honored the unfinished development of its participants (Holquist, 1982). Stepping outside of their everyday roles and becoming part of the collective allowed participants to knowingly, if temporarily, oppose the structural norms and stasis of the everyday world and experience the “unofficial truth” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 91) of their cobeing – the dialogic reality that “I, in my most fundamental aspect of myself, *still am not*” (Holquist, 1985, p. 228). Far from being a free-for-all, through their joint contributions to the communal space participants were actively recognizing life as a continuous process of becoming. The language of carnival reflected this dynamic, with free and informal speech, and laughter, marking the event.

Evoking the spirit of Bakhtin’s carnival, there is a sense of liveliness in the group reflection sessions of our learning communities. Inviting learners to step outside classroom practice and examine their educational experiences within the shared circle of the group often produces shared storytelling and laughter. Our reflection work can take different forms but, inspired by a Peer to Peer Reflection Protocol designed by learning community scholars

Malnarich et al., (2014), usually involves five phases through which participants are invited to: 1) write in response to one or more aspects of community learning based on their own ideas and experiences, 2) share examples from their written responses as part of a listening round, 3) make connections between one another's ideas, stories, and/or themes 4) raise questions about their observations, and 5) offer suggestions for future activity based on our discussion.

I like to begin and end our ESL class with a group reflection activity, and have introduced some of the phases at other points of the program term as well. During the first week of class, the concept of collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) is the focus of our exploration. We read about the meaning of collaboration from a sociocultural perspective on the course syllabus, and discuss how an understanding of learning as a social process guides the learning community program model and our ESL course curriculum. I then ask students to write about this educational principle based on their own understandings and backgrounds. Do they believe that learning is a shared experience between individuals with different capabilities? Why or why not? I write alongside the students, and we move our chairs into a circle where each of us briefly shares an insight or example from our writings as part of a listening round. I then encourage students to make connections between contributions they've heard, and to raise questions about any common threads they identify. The session is brought to a close as group participants are invited to predict the kinds of activities they might expect to participate in within our learning community based on our discussion, and to offer any suggestions they might have for this future activity.

At the end of the semester, we revisit collaboration and other ESL program principles with a focus on evaluation. Did students' experiences in our learning community reflect the beliefs about education undergirding the program? Students write about their understandings of the program principles, and examples of ways they might have seen these ideas play out in practice. I invite other program faculty who taught the same students to this session, as well as a member of the administration from the broader college community, and we all write too. A group reflection based on these writings follows. To conclude this session, I encourage an extension of the discussion about work in our learning community to future scenarios of possibility (Heath, 2000, as cited in Kramsch, 2009, pp. 195-196; Kramsch, 2009, pp. 196-199). What problems might students expect to face as language learners in new college classrooms? Other higher education classes? Career settings? What actions might they take to solve these problems? How might students draw upon what they have learned about themselves in our ESL program to confidently face their futures?

The well-developed stories that emerge on the reflection floor, and the positive messages in these stories, seem to demonstrate and develop a sense of community in the group. Notably, students have highlighted challenging moments they have faced as immigrants and language learners, and their triumphant emergence from these moments. At the beginning of the term, in response to our examination of the collaboration concept, one student shared that she works all night and comes home very tired, but in the morning, instead of going directly to bed, she will go into her child's room and read her a book in English. Another student said that because his high school in Uzbekistan emphasized memorization, he felt unprepared to do an original project with peers described on the syllabus, but would do the best he could. At the end of the semester, students have also reflected on the failure of their native countries to prepare them for college-level work in the United States ("they don't push us to read...we don't even have the word *plagiarizing*"), and highlighted their determination to persevere in their college coursework despite this lack of readiness ("now we like the stories that we read and we enjoy reading"). Students have provided examples of various ways their professors help them and they help one another succeed in their learning community classes

(Kahn et al., 2016), and of ways they have felt lost in classes they took outside of the community, but not letting this go by unnoticed. One student told a story about hearing the word “harmony” used in a psychology class related to family problems, and felt confused based on her understanding of the meaning of the item as a musical term. She spoke up, and other students in the class made fun of her. But the student defended her right to ask the question as an ESL student, and with the professor’s support, continued to put herself out there to develop her vocabulary in English. Reenacting the voice of her professor who had come to expect her persistent queries in class (“she’s like okay Sonia...today...next question!”) elicited laughter from the group – another feature of participants’ positive orientation to one another during group reflection activity. Their narratives often unfold with supportive contributions from one another, including laughter.

Laughter has also emerged during group reflection sessions around the address of particular language forms. One learner elicited laughter from the group when she told a story from one of her college classes that included a word unknown to her at the time: “squirrel.” In naming the word, she elongated its sounds in a humorous way, prompting other students to chime in with their attempts to pronounce the item accurately with my assistance. Students have suggested and made corrections to their own and one another’s language forms during our sessions, and reflected on the value of working with their more advanced peers as models for their developing abilities in English. In one group reflection, students raised the idea of extending the learning community model into later semesters as they spoke about the importance of not being shy and seeking help from their classmates in order to do well in their future majors and careers.

I can’t help but wonder whether a setting that honors the contributions of everyone in the group towards a meaningful shared goal points participants towards the use of optimistic language. Students are welcome to share as much or as little as they wish about their experiences as language learners during our reflection sessions, but in the exploratory communal activity space they time and time again appear to seize upon the opportunity to be active contributors as storytellers and audience members. They often demonstrate a strong sense of agency as protagonists of their stories, with codas that show them to be committed to their education despite any obstacles that might stand in their way. Narrative comprehension is retrospective, with narrators’ stories taking shape through their present interpretations of past outcomes (Polkinghorne, 2005). It seems that the reflection activity, with its hopeful aim of creating a shared vision for learning in community, may encourage group members to present the best versions of themselves, and to support others in doing the same.

Perhaps the hopeful language that I have seen come out of group reflection in my ESL classes is rooted in how the activity makes shifts to traditional classroom practice in carnivalesque ways. Bakhtin’s exploration of the liberating language and laughter of the carnival collective is an example of his understanding of the transformative relationship between self and other, and the insights we might gain together about the potentialities that may be concealed beneath the realities of our daily lives (Gardiner, 2004). Stepping outside of the boundaries drawn in the world and between people and creating a meaningful space for cobeing, Bakhtin’s promotion of carnival collectivity points to new possibilities for change within group activity that aims to shake up established structures and norms.

While our language curricula are usually presented to students as predetermined by us, and classroom roles understood to be fixed within a static framework with the teacher on top, the activity seems to say: *Let’s pry open the experience of language education a bit and view it from the outside. Let’s play with our assumptions about where its locus of control resides and experience its dynamic rhythms. Let’s commit to pooling our resources to do it well.* From the perspective of outsidership, we

become able to challenge dichotomies such as Self versus Other (Kramersch, 2021). Reflecting on the theory and practice of our second language teaching and learning helps build our community as we see ourselves, one another, and our activity in new ways with each other, and understand our group to be a central actor in this work. Like Bakhtin's carnival, the act of group reflection seems to tap into a truth worth celebrating about the unfinished nature of our development and "the processes through which we continually (re)create our worlds" (Hall, 1995, p. 226). Group activities that create space for cobeing like those Bakhtin envisioned are just what we need in our schools today.

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