**‘Dialogue not Decoration’ – personal reflections on professional identity and practice in English teaching**

**Abstract**

In this article I reflect on the early formation of my professional identity and practice. I argue that much of my early practice was ‘decorative’ in that it masked dominant structures and discourses that often limited learning opportunities. I consider how a dialogic approach to school English is important for offering more authentic teaching and learning experiences within present circumstances. I end with examples of my current practice in a higher education context.

**Keywords**: Dialogism, Bakhtin, Freire, conscientization, reflection, reflexivity

**Introduction**

I have been thinking recently about my identity and practice as a secondary English teacher. This was provoked in the spring of 2020 when Barbara Bleiman used the social media platform, Twitter, to post a list of priorities that ‘mattered’ to her in English teaching. The list included things like exploration, thinking, talking, genuine formative assessment and collaboration. It sparked a fascinating online discussion about what English teaching is, has been, and could be, with many contributors lamenting the status of the subject in present circumstances. One item on Bleiman’s list in particular captured my attention – ‘dialogic classrooms are essential for many of the above’. In her subsequent book, *What Matters in English Teaching* (2020), Bleiman explores many of the priorities on her list and insists that what ‘matters’ in English teaching is equally, if not more, important than what ‘works’. As practitioners, it is important that we define the aims of the subject and dialogic practice is central in all meaningful classroom interactions. However, as Bleiman points out, in recent decades genuine dialogic practice has become increasingly difficult because of the existing ‘accountability culture’, along with many ‘curriculum upheavals and assessment pressures’ (2020: 25). Indeed, she foregrounds the period in which I started out as one in which many new teachers found themselves ‘doing things that didn’t make sense to them, for reasons they couldn’t understand, and in ways that were not necessarily effective for their students’ (2020: 25). The Twitter debate, and Bleiman’s priorities, encouraged me to think about my own practice and professional identity.

When I started in 1997, my first head of department stressed many of the same priorities as Bleiman: the importance of student-centred practice and learning through social interaction. I was encouraged to try things out and quickly established working practices that were interactive and promoted classroom talk. I prided myself on rarely beginning lessons with a text or ‘objectives’ as the starting point. Instead, I looked for interesting ‘ways in’ to a topic: anything from drama/role-play, critical questioning, discussions/debates, writing tasks, games/puzzles or teacher-in-role activities. The intention was to draw on student experience, to get a sense of how they conceptualised particular issues, contexts or developments before we went on to explore them through literature, language, media or whatever. And we had some fun along the way.

After three years of working in these ways, every student in my mixed-ability year nine class (with wide ranging backgrounds and abilities) achieved at least the minimum level five in their end of year SATs tests, with the majority getting the higher levels six and seven. No other class was near matching this, and at a subsequent team meeting, an older, more experienced colleague, asked me how I had ‘done it’. I did not know. I only knew I worked hard and planned what I thought were good lessons. Yet, while I was viewed as a capable practitioner by my colleagues, and the SATs results were a kind of accolade, the more I thought about this, the more disillusioned I became. I entered teaching with a commitment social justice and trying to improve students’ life chances. Many of the students I taught had similar backgrounds to mine (inner-city, working class). But when I searched for connections between the students’ experiences, much of the curricular content I was teaching, and their ultimate achievement, I had difficulty recognising many meaningful ones. I began to realise my professional identity was formed and mediated within broader structures, and I had constructed attitudes to practice that proved to be unsatisfactory.

The head of English was interested in learning and encouraged colleagues to explore different theoretical perspectives in a casual reading group that met occasionally. One text that challenged me was Dewey’s *Experience and Education* (1938) that had recently been re-issued. I struggled with it, but tried to relate what I read to my practice. Dewey argues that genuine learning experiences must change, to some extent, ‘the objective conditions under which experiences are had’ (1997: 39). For me, this suggests classroom experiences should allow learners at least some opportunity to critically reflect on how identities are situated within broader discourses and structures that often limit agency.

I eventually realised that what I had done with my year nines was ‘teach-to-the-test’ (what ‘works’ or what ‘matters’?). My activities, and my ‘ways in’, while perhaps enjoyable for some students, were simply ‘decorative’ ways of maintaining the status quo. By ‘decoration’ here I mean ‘covering up the cracks’. My working practices might have produced positive results, but they allowed dominant structural issues remain hidden. My attempts to draw on student experience did not pay enough attention to it, or the narratives and ideological perspectives that emerged from it. Our collective ‘achievement’ was actually a process by which various kinds of social power relations were reproduced. That is, I had uncritically prepared students to meet external standards, without any consideration of what we were doing, why we were doing it, or how any of it was relevant. I recognised a contradiction between what I thought I was doing and what I actually did.

In the rest of this piece, I want to consider some of the tensions I began to recognise in my own practice and professional development, between the teacher I wanted to be and the ways that this was mediated by various discourses and structures. These are tensions that Bleiman highlights. And the responses to her tweet suggest they are experienced by other practitioners in present circumstances. Critical reflection on what we do seems to be a timely and worthwhile activity. The purpose of the piece, then, is to document my own journey and attempts to become a more dialogic practitioner. I draw on my own experience to suggest dialogic, rather than ‘decorative’, ways of working through the illustration of examples of changing classroom practice. I consider theoretical perspectives that might underpin a dialogic approach to practice. I also consider transcripts from an English lesson I taught, ending with a reflection on my current practice in a higher education context.

**What theory might underpin dialogic practice?**

As suggested, the kinds of contradictions I discovered in my own practice might be similar for other practitioners. Indeed, Dunn (2018) discovered a number of contradictions in her conversations with a pre-service teacher who struggled to negotiate the competing demands of the curriculum, professional expectations, the dialogic practice promoted on her training programme and her own ideas about teaching. From the beginning of a career developing dialogic practice is a complicated process. Dunn suggests it requires ‘listening and responding to the ideas of others to build knowledge’ and to develop a kind of talk that ‘contrasts talk that merely displays something that is already known and instead serves to help students come to know something new’ (2018: 137). I agree. And I want to consider theoretical perspectives that might underpin these processes – specifically, the ideas of Paulo Freire and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Some scholars highlight both convergence and divergence between Freire and Bakhtin (Benade and White, 2015; Bowers, 2005; Rule, 2011; Stewart and McClure, 2013). Yet despite differences of interpretation and application, there is agreement that dialogic theories foreground the social construction of meaning and understanding, mediated by social and cultural circumstances. It is inevitable that the ideas of others permeate an internal dialogue that ultimately influences our ways of talking, attitudes and perspectives. Our internal dialogues are also populated by dominant discourses and structures, meaning that all our utterances emerge from a struggle to represent ourselves through a complex web of potential meanings, ideological perspectives and power relationships. Dialogic theories can unmask these processes and Freire’s work is particularly useful. He distinguishes between ‘education as an instrument of domination and education as an instrument of liberation’ (1976: 225). The former is characterised by education for conformity through the transmission of knowledge, to be received by learners in a passive way – Freire’s (1970) ‘banking’ concept of educational processes. The latter, however, is the unceasing, collective process of ‘becoming’ more human:

It is not a situation where one knows and others do not; it is rather the search, by all, at the same time to discover something by the act of knowing which cannot exhaust all the possibilities in the relation between object and subject. In other words, education for liberation tries to make history – not just receiving or reading history. (1976: 225)

From this perspective, practice in English teaching might be conceptualised as a collective, relational and reflective process: the collaborative, critical and creative act of constructing knowledge and agency within a range of competing historical, cultural and ideological contexts. And new knowledge and understandings should continually emerge from this process for participants to ‘become’ more human. For Freire, becoming authentically human means relentlessly confronting custom, tradition and language in transformative ways to generate alternative possibilities. For practitioners, this means challenging our intentions and actions within existing material circumstances. Freire insists ‘the oppressor dictates the image of the oppressed’ (1976: 226). By teaching-to-the-test with my year nine class our achievements were considered to be successful within particular structural limitations. But what I had done was position my students, and myself, more securely into patterns of conformity demanded by dominant structures and discourses. This process was perhaps made more palatable by my ‘decorative’ approach, giving the illusion that active and relevant learning was taking place, but actually masking the reproduction of social power relations.

Critical reflection on experience is crucial for understanding how it might be transformed into knowledge and social action. Freire insists we must ‘attack our own culture’, to see it as always ‘problematic and to question it without accepting the myths that ossify it and ossify us’ (1976: 226). Problematising culture and experience can expose the ways in which identity and action are mediated, sometimes irreconcilably, by dominant structures. It is then possible to act back on these conditions in the process of becoming ‘conscientized’. That is, by adopting ‘a permanent critical approach to reality’ we can recognise and unmask the various ‘myths that deceive us and help to maintain the oppressing dehumanizing structures (1976: 225). This is achievable only by deliberately confronting dominant structures and ‘announcing’ alternatives:

Conscientization implies that in discovering myself oppressed I know I will be liberated only if I try to transform the oppressing situation in which I find myself. And I cannot transform that situation just in my head – that would be idealism, a way of thinking which believes that conscience can transform reality just by thinking. In this instance the structures would go on the same and my freedom would not begin to grow. Conscientization then, implies a critical insertion in the praxis and the process of historical change’ (1976: 225)

Developing a critical understanding of social reality is important, but alone it is insufficient. Implicit in the term dialogue is social interaction, but it goes beyond that to incorporate the fluidity of identity, culture, representation and consciousness. Dialogue makes it possible to explore and challenge existing thoughts, actions and values, to trace these to social origins and develop new ways of thinking and acting. Conscientization means becoming critically aware of social reality through reflection and action – praxis – and of challenging authoritative discourses, focussing attention instead on urgent and relevant concerns. In my early practice, dominant structures dictated the kinds of classroom interactions that took place. The ways in which we studied ‘texts’ were themselves mediated by broader texts – assessment objectives, achievement levels, external standards. These might be important. But the most significant texts, the ones produced by me and my students through our classroom interactions, were neglected. Dialogic classrooms should provide opportunities for participants to critically reflect, collectively, on the texts they produce. This means analysing classroom narratives.

To complement Freire, I want to consider Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) conceptions of dialogism and speech genre. Bakhtin insists we are in constant dialogue, with all thoughts and verbal utterances containing ‘echoes’ of others’ voices. Every utterance is dialogic because of the inevitable interplay of meaning and context, which sees individual utterances merging with, challenging and re-shaping others’ utterances, with the ultimate aim of determining the ‘active responsive position of the other participants in the communication’ (1986: 69). Through social interaction we learn, negotiate and inherit verbal templates that enable us to operate in different social contexts. Bakhtin calls these templates ‘speech genres’ which,

…organise our speech in almost the same way as grammatical…forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others’ speech, we guess its genre from the very first words’ (1986: 78-79)

But guessing the genre can be difficult. Bakhtin distinguishes between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ ones. Primary genres relate to immediate social relationships, to everyday conversations and the ‘direct utterances of others’. Secondary genres, however, are intensely ideological forms of ‘highly developed and organised cultural communication’ (1986: 62), which can be particularly influential in the construction of identity and social action. Secondary genres can ‘absorb and digest’ primary ones to create the illusion that dominant perspectives represent social reality. But this is far from the truth. Once absorbed, this orientation towards authoritative discourses sees primary genres ‘assume a special kind of character’, which can influence individuals and groups to speak and behave against their own best interests. Secondary genres are often deliberately intended to provoke particular kinds of attitude and behaviour and can produce a ‘silent responsive understanding…with a delayed reaction’, in anyone exposed to them. This delayed reaction will ultimately ‘find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener’ (1986: 69). It is necessary then, to consider how ‘any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of utterances’ (1986: 69). This means reflecting carefully on what we, and our students say, and tracing back our ways of talking and thinking to existing or antecedent discourses and structures. My own professional identity and behaviour were influenced by a conflicting combination of primary and secondary genres – the progressive, student-centred ideas I inherited from my first head of department, and the authoritative genres and structures I worked within.

The ideas I have been discussing can provide a theoretical base for dialogic practice that enables practitioners and students to collaborate to ‘become’ more critically alert to their own narrative constructions of reality – to re-imagine these and construct alternative narrative accounts that might correspond more authentically with their own experiences, missions and values.

**How might these ideas be applied in practice?**

I want to consider whether my ‘decorative’ approach might have provided more authentic experiences for students if I had applied the ideas discussed above. Below are two short transcripts from a year eight English lesson. For a half term we worked on a poetry project involving lots of reading, presenting, discussing, performing and writing. A few lessons focussed on narrative poetry, considering various examples, how stories were told, form, character and so on. One activity was for students to write poems in small groups that would be presented/performed to the class. Students self-selected their working groups and I sent them away to record their initial conversations, to use these as starting points for their collective writing. Here are two extracts (these recordings were made in 2002 as part of the everyday business of the classroom. All names have been anonymised):

**Text A:**

**Sally** - So, school may seem like a bore…

**Stella** - Each day you learn more and more…

**Lorna** - Yeah! Each day . . .

**Sally** - Oh, but it has to be the fact that later in life you, you have got the opportunities, you’ve got the . . .

**Lorna** - I’m in college now . . .

**Sally** - You’ve got goals, (to Lorna) well no, it has to rhyme with . . .

**Lorna** - Even though school may seem like a bore.

**Sally** - In the end . . .

**Stella** - We’ve got more and more (general agreement)

**Sally** - In the end you’ll *get* more.

**Lorna** - No, in the end . . .

**Stella** - In the end you’ll have more, yeah.

**Chantelle** - Yeah, but have more *what*?

**Sally** - Because that’s the point, you’ll have more and more (pause) *life* . . .

**Stella** - Of everything.

**Lorna** - Just write it down quickly.

**Sally** - Even though education isn’t everything, it’s the fact that you’ll get a job, you know, there will be . . .

**Lorna** - Yeah.

**Sally** - You’ll be able to live, live a basically . . .

**Stella** - A better life.

**Lorna** - Yeah.

**Sally** - Even though school may seem like a bore, what was it I said?

**Stella** - In the end you’ll have more.

**Text B:**

**Holly** - Ok so this is what we’ve got so far . . . (reciting)

How I hate my life,

it’s a really big bore.

It makes me want to go to bed

and snore and snore and snore.

Mum and Dad have gone

and Mary won’t stop crying.

God! I fed her yesterday,

she can’t be dying.

**Charlie** - I think it should be *so* she can’t be dying.

**Holly** - Ok.

**Charlie** - It makes the rhythm a bit more . . .

**Holly** (writing) - *So* she can’t be dying.

**Charlie** - Yeah, that’s good.

**Holly** - I don’t think it should be God either. I think it should be flip.

(There is a short pause)

**Charlie** - No, I think it should be God.

**Holly** - No, that’s *bad*.

**Charlie** - It’s not bad!

**Holly** (shouting but flippantly) -It’s a *sin*!

(There is general laughter)

**Charlie** - But it *sounds* good. (Pause) ‘Cause she’s, you know, this person’s a teenager so it’s…

**Holly** - So it should be fuck!

(More laughter)

**Chloe** - Yeah.

**Charlie** - This isn’t on is it? (Laughter)

**Chloe** - Yeah.

**Holly** - Ok, let’s carry on. So is there anything else you want to change to that?

These extracts highlight much about the students’ understanding of poetry and their interpretation of the tasks they were set. One way of making sense of them is to consider the discussions in the context of a set piece of work, undertaken by students already explicitly and implicitly alert to the ‘teaching’ of poetry and the expectations of response woven into this. For the purposes of this piece however, I want to set these concerns to one side, and concentrate instead on the ways in which the student discussions illustrate the points I have drawn on from Bakhtin.

The echoes of various secondary genres can be detected here. Listening to the recordings at the time however, we concentrated on the poems rather than the students’ conversations that led to their construction – these should have been part of our discussions. Instead, we focussed on secondary concerns (the ‘decoration’?) – form, structure, vocabulary, rhythm, rhyme. Of course, these are important and necessary aspects to consider in English lessons and crucial skills to develop. And the then National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999) asserted that students, ‘should be taught…linguistic and literary forms when composing their writing’, and develop the ability to,

…exploit the use of language and structure to achieve particular effects and appeal to the reader…use a range of techniques and different ways of organising and structuring material to convey ideas, themes and characters. (1999: 37)

But in foregrounding these aspects, we missed opportunities to examine the verbal texts that were produced in ways that might have been more authentically relevant. The interactions above provide examples of how quite often through our collective, social utterances we uncritically reproduce authoritative secondary genres. There are common themes here – teenage rebellion, delayed gratification, challenging authority. But the conversations also contain echoes of religious, meritocratic and consumerist discourses.

For example, in text A the students reproduce secondary neoliberal genres around individualism (opportunities ‘you’ might create for yourself), competition (education might provide a competitive advantage) and consumerism (having ‘more’). The discussion centres on the perceived frustrations and benefits of formal education. Sally and Stella dominate the content, presenting education as a means to an end – material wealth. Stella’s initial focus on ‘learning more and more’ constructs education as potentially fulfilling, but this is quickly replaced with the idea of ‘getting’ or ‘having’ material success. The most pertinent contribution might be Chantelle’s solitary one, when she asks ‘but have more *what*?’. This challenge to the perceived orthodoxy is dismissed when Sally suggests that enduring the drudgery of school might offer ‘more life’ later. She and Stella strengthen this position when they collaborate to claim their ‘boredom’ now can lead to ‘a better life’ in the future. For Susan, ‘education isn’t everything’, but it might lead to ‘a job’. The future is also perceived differently, with Sally and Stella imagining independent adulthood, while Lorna’s concerns are more immediate, stating ‘I’m in college now’. Again, this valid suggestion is dismissed because it did not ‘rhyme’. These interactions support Bakhtin’s claim that authoritative genres eventually emerge in our ‘subsequent speech or behaviour’. The students’ narrative accounts of reality did not emerge solely through these short interactions. They have taken on the voices of others, in conversations with family, friends, teachers. In turn, those personal interactions are mediated by the secondary genres evident in the students’ discussion here.

In text B we are presented with more of the poem, about the group’s experiences of caring for younger siblings. Initially, it is a tale of neglect and abandonment: ‘Mum and Dad have gone’, the baby last ‘fed yesterday’. The final version of the poem however, sees the absent parents return, restoring the equilibrium of the nuclear family. This is interesting when we know that two of the three students here were living in single-parent families at the time. The students’ social realities appear to be subordinated to dominant conceptions of family – the utterances they produce assuming ‘a special kind of character’, orientating them towards this perspective. This group’s interactions are perhaps more nuanced than the previous one. They appear to disagree about religious discourse, with Holly and Charlie debating the appropriacy of the word ‘God’. This follows Charlie’s suggestion that ‘so’ would improve the scansion in the following line. Holly seems pious, suggesting they replace ‘God’ with ‘flip’ because it is ‘bad’ or a ‘sin’. But when Charlie insists ‘it sounds good’ because the ‘person is a teenager’, Holly reveals her mock piety by suggesting ‘it should be fuck’. Here, Chloe is drawn into the boundary breaking by answering ‘yeah’ to Holly’s suggestion, and to Charlie’s acknowledgment that ‘this isn’t on’, knowing that I would hear the recording.

More could be said about these transcripts. But I want to concentrate for a moment on how the narratives are mediated by authoritative genres. Both texts contain echoes of previous conversations, and while it is impossible to trace these to ultimate origins, we can imagine that some of the concerns have been discussed previously, with parents, siblings, friends, teachers? The interactions we have are internalised to form interior dialogues. Thinking involves dialogic encounters with previous conversations through which we try to respond, make sense of different contexts and adopt voices that we project into future interactions. In this sense, consciousness is never really truly our own, it is formed in dialogue. Bakhtin argues that individual consciousness is always in an ‘intense relationship’ with another consciousness. This process has significant influence on the construction of identity and ideological orientation: the ‘ideological becoming of a human being…is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others’ (1981: 341). This makes it necessary to consider the complicated process of ‘becoming’ more human and its influencing factors.

English classrooms provide an ideal environment for all participants to reflect critically on these processes. The poem-writing activity forced the students to negotiate and make sense of the voices available to them. The narratives that emerged are permeated by authoritative secondary genres around meritocracy, family, competition, consumerism and religion. In other words, they are orientated towards dominant ideological perspectives. But what about the ‘life’ that Sally and Stella imagined for themselves? Their ways of talking reveal a ‘received’ history that they project into a potential future. I am not suggesting their aspirations are unimportant. But what happens if our imagined futures do not materialise as we hoped? In these circumstances, the ability to imagine alternatives is crucial. A dialogic, not ‘decorative’, approach would have seen us exploring these processes and attempting to uncover their inherent power relations.

**A more dialogic approach?**

I currently teach on an education studies programme in a higher education context. I am aware that, unlike many English teachers in present circumstances, I have the luxury of designing and implementing a curriculum. The modules I teach extend beyond English teaching and in all of them I incorporate critical, reflective activities. I want to focus on two modules here: English Studies in Education, and Values in Education. Many of our students aim to pursue Initial Teacher Education programmes following graduation and the English studies module provides them with opportunities to consider how they might teach the subject, to design schemes of work and lesson plans. It is the early sessions of the module, however, that are the most important. We explore Bakhtin’s dialogic theories and try to apply these to our own circumstances and ways of talking. Students consider their own uses of language and attempt to trace back significant aspects to potential origins. They design their own ‘language tree’, and try to connect different ‘branches’ of their personalities, identities or ways of thinking to various roots – family, education, political discourse. They produce posters (or sometimes video diaries) that they present to the group in an atmosphere of collective exploration and discovery. This process helps students to think critically about the kinds of practitioners they want to be.

The intention behind these personal, reflective activities is to encourage students to understand how their constructions of identity are mediated by a variety of social and cultural factors. I introduce dialogic theories not only to help students reflect personally on their autobiographical histories, but also pedagogically so that, as practitioners, they might develop their own praxis. These activities are not only about the potential benefits of personal introspection and reflexivity, but about encouraging practitioners in using theoretical tools to create authentically dialogic classroom experiences.

In the values module we consider, among other ideas, Freire’s notion of ‘conscientization’. Part of the assessment requires a number of critical, reflective journal entries. Students identify and define key values, again attempting to trace these to social origins. As they share and discuss their own sense of what is important, some common themes emerge – family, religion, satisfying work, having a decent standard of living (themes that correspond with the year eight discussions). By reflecting on their perceived values, students often make powerful connections between their upbringing, early education or employment patterns and the influence these might have on their current sense of identity and agency. I encourage them to re-locate these identities back into the various public arenas they operate within, to consider how their cultural resources might influence action, response and interpretation of broader discourses and structures. Students often begin to uncover how their attitudes and actions are mediated by what turn out to be dominant discourses around the nuclear family, consumerism, hard work and so on. This reflective process helps students to untangle the complicated relationship between their identities and broader material circumstances. In some examples, students foreground how difficult this struggle is, with one reporting back that she ‘loved and hated’ the module in equal measure, because,

I feel like every time I come in here, if my identity was written on a piece of paper, it’s as if it’s ripped up into small pieces and thrown in the air in front of me. It makes me think about who I am.

I am not claiming this kind of reflection changes people’s lives. But it has transformative potential and it provides students with opportunities to consider alternatives that might help fine-tune their ideological orientation. Another student highlighted the ‘racist, sexist and homophobic views’ he thought he had inherited. Through critical reflection on these perceived inherited narratives, and in collaboration with students from a range of social and cultural backgrounds, he felt he was now more ‘open minded’. He had a range of alternative narrative accounts he could draw on that were leading to a developing sense of ‘conscientization’.

Building reflective and collaborative tasks like these into English lessons, underpinned by the theory discussed in this piece, offers the potential to develop critical dialogic practice. These kinds of activities can never produce a consensus of opinion. But they can help to develop mutual understanding of various developments, discourses and structures that students will respond to in their own ways. Working in these kinds of ways is easier said than done however, not only because of curricular restrictions or external standards, but also because dominant, historical conceptions of English as a school subject are so potent. Davison (2011) argues,

For a century, a dominant version of the subject has prevailed, which with the exception of a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s has been, for the most part, accepted rather than challenged. (2011: 177)

This dominant version of the subject is characterised by canonical literature, notions of ‘correctness’ in language, Standard English grammar, and an appreciation of ‘great’ thinkers or writers. Davison argues the enduring continuity of this model means that it has become accepted as the ‘very nature of “English” itself’ as if by some ‘universal right’ (2011: 177). These aspects of the subject might be important. But what this dominant conceptualisation often fails to consider are the social and cultural backgrounds of learners and the kinds of experiences and ideological perspectives they bring with them into classrooms: the very resources that students rely upon in their interactions with their peers, teachers and the work we set them. Like Davison, I think this dominant version of school English should be ‘interrogated to determine the underpinning value systems’ (2011:177). These value systems often position students’ lives and experiences as secondary considerations, immune to broader discourses and structures. In dialogic classrooms, a consideration of students’ cultural resources, and the ways that these enable them to demonstrate their abilities, ought to play a significant role in the interactions that happen and the content of lessons.

**Dialogue not ‘decoration’?**

Dialogic practice is important for its own sake. Practitioners, if inclined, can reflect on professional identities in ways that uncover ideological tensions between practice and the broader structures they work within. It is equally important for students, at all levels, to have opportunities to consider, collectively, how and if the content of their learning corresponds with their own experiences and concerns. And crucially, dialogic practice might provide all participants with a heightened sense of critical consciousness and agency. In writing this piece I have become alert to the potential of this type of dialogic approach in relation to the ownership of English – not only on the personal, individual level of allowing students and teachers to deconstruct their language and identity in authentic ways – but also at a more overarching public level in terms of ownership and understandings of school English.

But why work in these ways? In present circumstances, the need to develop critical dialogic practice seems urgent. For example, in September 2020, the UK Government published guidance to ‘help school leaders plan, develop and implement the new statutory curriculum’ (Gov.UK, 2020). This ‘guidance’ requires head teachers to ‘forbid’ students from engaging in or discussing ‘partisan political activities’. It is equally clear that schools should not engage with, or explore ‘non-democratic political systems’, or positions that demonstrate a ‘desire to abolish or overthrow democracy [or] capitalism’.

This ‘guidance’ itself seems, well, non-democratic. The intentions are clear: to stifle debate or criticism of interests that might be seen to be under threat. But teaching and learning do not exist in a vacuum and issues that affect lives should be integral to any kind of education worthy of the name. As Freire argues, lives cannot be considered as ‘abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world [or] that the world exists as a reality apart from people’ (1970: 62). ‘Authentic reflection’ though dialogue, foregrounds the construction of consciousness by ‘people in their relations with the world’ (1970: 62). Yet this ‘guidance’ is intended to make it difficult for practitioners not to succumb to what Freire calls a ‘fear of freedom’: that is ‘seeing a threat, even in talking about it’ (1976: 226). It is important, as Goodson and Rudd argue, to develop conceptual understandings that,

‘…make visible that which is masked or concealed within predominant language, rhetoric and narratives, map the origins of its social construction, and develop alternative language, discourse and narrative capital to diffuse the symbolic violence and power being exerted and construct viable alternatives. (2012: 5)

English classrooms, with their fundamental focus on all forms of language, are ideal environments to explore these kinds of processes in dialogic, rather than ‘decorative’ ways. The potential benefits of developing mutual understandings that cut through dominant discourses are seductive. And this has to happen organically, through classroom discussion and the attention we give as English teachers to individual and group deconstructions and reconstructions related to authentic experience. Awareness of the theoretical ideas discussed in this piece might provide English teachers (at all stages of their careers) with the confidence and tools to justify this kind of learning.

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