

Title: Shaping the Literacy of Culturally Diverse Learners in Literature Discussion

Authors: Suzanne M. Miller and Vladimir S. Ageyev

Affiliation: University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Address: 245 Lamarck Drive
Buffalo, New York 14226

Email Addresses: smiller@acsu.buffalo.edu vageyev@acsu.buffalo.edu

Shaping the Literacy of Culturally Diverse Learners in Literature Discussion

BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK. Within the last few decades literature has been broadly recognized in many disciplines as a major way of knowing, a distinct narrative mode of understanding which can contribute to a keen and critical mind. By stimulating attention to dilemmas, alternative human possibilities, and the many-sidedness of the human situation, literature provides "the varying perspectives that can be constructed to make experience comprehensible" (Bruner, 1986, p. 37). Theoretical conceptions of the act of reading literature have also changed during the last century from New Critical approaches for getting static meaning out of a text toward constructivist approaches requiring readers' active making of meaning (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1978). Literature learning, in this view, involves creating and elaborating responses and interpretations within the constraints and resources of the text and classroom conversations--as a means of learning to enter into larger cultural conversations about interpretations and possible meanings (Applebee, 1996).

Research evidence, however, suggests that literature learning as taught in the secondary school has not generally supported such constructivist ways of knowing and thinking. In many classroom contexts, interactions about literature cut students off from their own responses and reflection—even teachers who believe they are holding "discussions" insist on their own "correct" textual interpretation (e.g., Applebee, 1996; Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1995; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Hynds, 1989). Such a stance toward literary texts marginalizes students as passive consumers of teacher-made interpretations (e.g., Friere, 1998; Scholes, 1985).

In contrast, engaging in open-forum classroom discussions where multiple perspectives on texts are invited can provide students with opportunities to examine individual interpretations in conversation with others (e.g., Bridges, 1979). In the sociocultural approach to mind, thinking originates in such collaborative dialogues which are internalized as "inner speech," enabling children to do later in "verbal thought" what they could at first only do by talking with supportive adults or more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1986, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky applied this idea to literature teaching

in his *Psychology of Art* (1971) where he argues that the effects of literature excite the individual reader aesthetically, but that the teacher must aim, further, to form reflective consciousness through "intelligent social activity" that extends the "narrow sphere of individual perception." Ethnographic research conducted over the past decade has examined the influence of open-forum class discussion on students' thinking over time. This work traces how teacher mediation for students' in open-forum discussion of texts can create a zone of proximal development—an assistive social space—through which students' learn with the teacher and other students both how to make meaning from literary texts and how to reflect on possible meanings. Using a framework integrated from Vygotsky's sociocultural psychology (1986; 1978), narrative theory (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1995), and sociolinguistics (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Gee, 1996; Hymes, 1974), in this presentation we synthesizes findings from studies of how constructivist literature study—particularly open-forum discussion—shapes students' knowing and thinking.

Further, we draw on modern cross-cultural theory and research, particularly dimensions of intercultural variability: issues such as collectivism versus individualism and high-context communication versus low-context communication (Alexander, 2000), we have found especially useful in understanding the dynamics of open-forum text discussion in culturally diverse classrooms. Specifically, a high-context communicative pattern is one in which "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 79). Thus, while "Low-context communication tends to be direct, precise, and clear, high-context communication tends to be indirect and ambiguous" (Gudykunst, 1998, p. 57). There are many perfectly logical reasons for being indirect in high context communication cultures and non-mainstream sub-cultures, including specific cultural conventions, like a generalized attitude of conflict avoidance and "saving face," ideological constraints, political pressure, and so on. This logic, though, may be evident and "logical" for the high-context individuals, only.

This body of research provides evidence, as Vygotsky argued (1978, 1986), that what begins as purposeful social interaction in discussion moves inward to become students' psychological tools (see also Kozulin, 1998). These tools of the mind appropriated by students vary depending on students' cultural funds of knowledge and the interactional context, but include, for instance, new social languages (Bakhtin, 1981) and specific context-bound meaning-making strategies. Literature discussion plays, we argue, a central role in developing students' self-conscious reflection on possibilities for meaning. In the presentation, we will first provide a short historical overview of the theoretical and research bases for approaching the literature curriculum as conversation (Applebee, 1996), focusing on the perceived problems and tensions of the teacher's role. Then, we turn to a series of ethnographic classroom studies which provide evidence that (1) students' participation in open-forum discussion is initially shaped by cultural differences in communication patterns and ways with words (Heath, 1979); (2) over time diverse students develop specific habits of mind when teachers play a mediational role in literature discussions; (3) students learn qualitatively different habits of the mind and heart in contexts in which teachers mediate discussion of texts from multiple cultural and

critical perspectives; and (4) students carry these ways of thinking into meaning-making contexts in other school subjects.

METHODOLOGY. In each of the ethnographic case studies, innovative secondary-school English teachers (i.e., those teaching students ages 13-18) were chosen through a process of progressive focusing in each study. To begin, observed teachers who were recommended by colleagues as using open-forum discussion in their classrooms: this was an essential stage, since what teachers mediate and students learn in such discussion contexts was the phenomenon of interest. In general, each case study involved weekly audiotaped observations in the classrooms over the course of a school year, transcriptions of semi-structured interviews of teachers and focal students, descriptive field notes, class artifacts, and, sometimes, student writing. Throughout each study continued annotation and recursive analysis of emerging data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) provided triangulation of different data types and sources and identification of salient themes or categories relevant to student engagement in thinking for each focal student. These were taken to students and teachers for verification or disconfirmation, including stimulated recall sessions with discussion transcripts. Through descriptive-narrative accounts tracing the developing thinking for each focal student and each class, pattern explanations of how supported opportunities for thoughtful discussion develop students' thinking were created. We will focus on key issues that emerged within and across studies, emphasizing the findings which contribute to our understanding of (1) how cultural ways with words promote and hinder discussions and (2) how teacher-mediated literature discussion can create a zone of proximal development that shapes students' new habits of mind.

FINDINGS. Vygotsky argues (1978) that the zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be determined by comparing what a student can do alone and what she can do during "problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In classrooms, then, "functions which have not yet matured" can become the focus of instruction only in the context of collaborative problem solving. To create such an activity context, teachers need to transform much that has been traditional in schools: the roles they and their students play, the purposes for their talking, and the stance toward knowing and understanding.

In the Critical Thinking/Discussion study (Miller, 1988, 1990, 1992) two teachers successfully transformed classroom ways of talking by constructing a classroom epistemology where texts were open to multiple interpretations and ways of knowing. In all classes students at first were both inexplicit and unable to listen. In classes where teachers mediated discussions, creating a zone of proximal development in discussion by providing meaning-making strategies at the points of need for interpreting written and oral texts together. Over time students appropriated socially useful assistance from teachers and other students to solve perceived problems of meaning. In two classes the change to new intellectual dispositions was evident in students' conscious use of the mediated social and cognitive strategies for creating explicit understanding. The process of engaging in discussion and learning the strategies for providing explicit support for proposed meanings unfolded more slowly for students from high-context communication cultures (e.g., the Chinese students in the class) and for working class students, whose

language use tended to be more indirect, as compared to their middle-class peers (Finn, 1997).

The Literature Discussion Study (1991a, 1991b; 1999) focused on an English teacher who carefully "read" the needs of her students to figure out how to assist their performance. Sharon Legge mediated students' narrative modes of thinking in multiple activities, but particularly through text discussions. She saw that to engage students in the "at-risk program," she needed to provide more instructional assistance than in her college-bound class. As students in both classes resisted and then took up her invitation to share their thinking and feeling responses to literature, she provided narrative strategies at points of need, including heuristics to help students (1) notice narrative gaps, (2) pose narrative dilemmas, and (3) speculate on possible intentions behind human actions by drawing on their own lived experience. The working-class students in the at-risk class needed more support and additional time to learn the strategies for these direct, explicit meaning-making strategies.

On one level, the mediated strategies for making sense of texts in the previous studies were varied. From another view, however, many of these sense-making strategies required students to work primarily with the text to interpret it, rather than questioning the text to critique its assumptions. An important question thus arises—Which habits of mind do teachers mediate through literature discussion? (Miller, 1996a). Sociocultural theorists who focus specifically on social uses of language as markers of identities and group membership, suggest that the worldviews of texts must be part of what we teach. For example, Gee (1996) suggests that to develop powerful literacy students need to learn to critique the dominant or mainstream cultural discourse, with its worldview, through the lens of a secondary discourse. This notion is congruent with Bakhtin's formulation that only through "interanimation" of different social languages can one engage in critical thinking by becoming conscious of such languages as perspectives and actively "choosing one's orientation among them" (Bakhtin, 1981)

The long-term problem for the Integrated English-social studies class--composing a coherent personal vision of The American Dream--served as a guiding inquiry for students (Miller, 1996b, 1996d, 1998b). Ron and Sharon's dialogic pedagogy (Miller, 1993) offers a conversational vision of schooling through which it is possible to teach and learn not only critical-narrative thinking, but also to promote the possibility of such social "habits of the heart" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985).

Potentially, the habits of the heart and mind learned in literature discussion could play a role in student learning and meaning-making in other disciplinary contexts. To examine this possibility, in a four-year longitudinal ethnography (e.g., Miller 1994, 1998c) I examined what role teacher-mediated open-forum discussion in English classes played over time in developing students' thinking. Of particular interest was how ten students moving from class to class and teacher to teacher made sense of the reading, writing and talking they encountered in classes during their high school years, what thinking they engaged in, and whether they used ways of thinking developed in literature

classes in their other school experiences. Intercultural variation among this group of students, again, suggests the importance of helping students from non-mainstream cultures to move from indirect to direct communication patterns as a means for achieving academic success. Special, and sometimes significant effort need to be made to help the high-contexts communication individuals' speaking and writing become more direct, explicit, linear, and precise.

A few important factors in creating these open-forum discussions as ZPDs emerged across studies and warrant emphasis.

First, the personal and relational aspects of teaching in the zone cannot be overstated. All of the many students who I interviewed, pointed to their teachers as deeply respectful of them as human beings who were capable of tackling challenging problems with support; in short, teaching in the ZPD requires personal/emotional relations with students, not simply cognitive attention. In particular, students from high-context communication groups needed this classroom context more than other students in order to learn the direct communication strategies.

Second, associated with this issue, the students over time came to refer to themselves as a group--as a "we"--working together on what perplexed them. This re-envisioning of a class of individuals as a collective, as a learning community, came about through discussion and, sometimes, happened only through the teacher's persistent efforts to transform roles and purposes for talking.

Third, turning points came in discussions in ALL cases when students felt empowered and perplexed enough to pose their own burning questions to the class. This finding also supports Dewey's argument (1933) that it is puzzlement which prompts reflection.

Fourth, the use of multiple cultural texts and stories, in itself, did not prompt critical-narrative thinking in the Integrated literature-history classes. Diversifying the literature curriculum with voices of many cultures is important, but lasting contribution to students' thinking and their democratic orientations came from how the teachers treated students, authority, controversy—particularly their openness to cultural critique (see Miller, 1998a; Miller & Trzyna, 2000 for more on this issue).

Finally, whether students used the varied ways of talking and thinking learned in these literature classes in other school contexts, depended on whether those contexts opened social spaces for constructing knowledge through dialectical activity.

SIGNIFICANCE. Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to mind, Bahktin's dialogicality, and cross-cultural theory, taken together, provide an explanatory framework that contributes to our understanding of what inclines students consciously to think and make meaning in classroom contexts. This framework further explains how specific forms of discourse in open-forum literature discussion define specific text stances and literacy practices—potentially opening dialogic spaces for critical-narrative reflection and cultural critique or closing off such habits of heart and mind.

