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ABSTRACT

Proposing the meeting of student and curriculum as a dialogue, this paper explores that meeting as an active participation in which students both "hear" the voice of the curriculum and "speak" to it. The paper argues that for such a dialogue to occur, each participant's language must have not only ideas to share and questions to ask, but also spaces that invite the other to enter and contribute. It also suggests that a barrage of information and instructions from a teacher, the textbook, or another aspect of the curriculum might seem to the student to be more like an assault than an invitation to join in learning. The paper concludes with suggestions for ways that teachers can best participate in the dialogue between student and text. (FL)

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Phenomenology of Reading: When Child
and Curriculum Meet

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How do students and curriculum meet? What is the nature of the encounter between them? What happens when a child comes to school to be taught and to learn?

For example, what happens to Rodney? Rodney sits in his desk surrounded by all the clutter of his possession, books falling out of his desk, general confusion. When the teacher begins talking, the confusion for Rodney seems to be internal as well as external. Ideas are introduced, explanations are given, and Rodney is asked a question. He doesn't know. Someone else answers the question and Rodney says "Oh", blankly. Then the next assignment is given. Books come out with the usual classroom clatter, pencils are sharpened, and gradually quietness begins to settle as students get to work. At that point Rodney says, "I can't find my book. Somebody stole it." Somebody has always stolen Rodney's book or pencil. Eventually the teacher eyes Rodney's pile of books and says, "But Rodney, I see it from here. Second from the bottom." "Where? No. Oh yeah. I thought it was gone." Rodney grins, completely unabashed, as he pulls it from the pile. The next question is entirely predictable. Like waiting for the other shoe to drop, the teacher hears it coming. "What page?" At this point when Rodney is just about ready to begin to struggle with an exercise that appears to have little meaning for him, Terry finishes his work.

When the lesson began, Terry was smiling cheerfully, watching the teacher. When questions are asked, Terry can be counted on to know the answer, but the kind of questions he really likes are the difficult ones, those that make him think, that have no clear-cut "right" answer, that lead to an exchange between him and the teacher as ideas are further pursued. By assignment time, Terry, because he understood the lesson, seems to be anticipating the probable task. He is efficient and organized. Almost before the teacher has finished all the directions, Terry is under-way. His work is done rapidly and well.

What kind of encounter with the curriculum have these two boys had? Where is the real difference? For Terry it seems there has been some dialogue, and not only between him and the teacher. He has entered into a world of ideas. He has not just accepted any idea that has come his way, he has wanted to know why, to follow the logic, to "see" the point. He has asked questions and contributed his own ideas. Terry has been engaged in dialogue.

And Rodney? Rodney, it seems, speaks a different language from that of the curriculum. The only thing Rodney can find quickly and easily are his cigarettes - and they are forbidden by the school. Whatever it is that matters in Rodney's life, it's not taught in school. He and the curriculum, if they notice each other at all speak past each other. Each talks to a wall of incomprehensibility.

Why then does this meeting between student and curriculum turn into gibberish for Rodney and into lively dialogue for Terry? Let us examine a little further the experience of dialogue.

Dialogue

First then, the nature of dialogue experienced in daily life.

As the term suggests, the minimal requirement is a meaningful exchange, conversation, between at least two participants who experience some degree of interaction. There is no dialogue with a person who holds forth and refuses a captive audience a chance to speak. Or in another non-dialogue variant, we have no doubt all participated in those exchanges which claimed to be dialogues, but which were really just each person politely waiting for the other to stop talking so that I could have my turn again. And we know the emptiness when two people are not talking "to" each other, or "with" each other, but "past" each other. Such may be turn-taking, but it is not dialogue. In some conversations, the participants exchange ideas. This is the beginning of a dialogue; the words are now going to each other, instead of past. But genuine dialogue is much more than an exchange. Language opens up vaster and more intimate possibilities than the trading of ideas, like commodities at the market. Seeing together and sharing become vital. At the very least the speaker must have something to share and the listener must be open to new insights.

Further, the listener must "see" how the speaker engages with the world in a little different way (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). This requires a certain openness and vulnerability from each participant. "Genuine dialogue cannot occur without disclosing ourselves to each other, and without according the other, and finding from the other, recognition and acceptance of how we experience one another" (Laing, 1969, p. 3). Now not only an openness of myself is called for, but an acceptance of the other.

And the listening and speaking processes cease to be dichotomous. Merleau-Ponty (1964) suggests that, listening and speaking are both active, but there is no rivalry between them. Rather, listening becomes a matter of "speaking according to what the other is saying". Speaking is not the taking of initiative and listening the following of initiative, but rather we are continuing. And now I am tempted to think that this description applies only to an ideal conversation, whereas in reality the speaker does take the initiative. That thought is checked with the awareness of how much difference a listener makes, of how the quality of listening affects the speaker's inspiration. Merleau-Ponty goes further: when two people talk, what I understand begins to assert itself in the intervals between my saying things. I hear myself in the other person, who also speaks in me. "Here it is the same thing to speak to and to be spoken to" (p. 142). Thus, true dialogue ends the distinction between mine and not-mine, between me as subject and other as object. I and you temporarily became we.

What then is the analogy to the meeting of child and curriculum? Can there be a dialogue of the sort just described?

Of necessity. The curriculum must become a voice, a participant, which reaches out to the child, not in order to dictate or to "tell", but to invite the child to enter into dialogue and hence into learning. If the curriculum merely imposes itself upon the child, it may become a burden to be carried about or a veneer to be cracked and shed at the first opportunity. If this is not to happen, the child must be invited to question the curriculum, to present personal views and ideas for the curriculum's consideration, to debate and reflect, to be not passive recipient but active participant - in short, to dialogue with the curriculum.

To return for a moment to our two boys:

Rodney is not so much passive recipient as passive rejector. The curriculum presents itself to him as a barrage of information which is of no significance to him and which he ignores without comment. Rodney does not hear it asking for his views or giving any indication of caring what he thinks and wants to talk about. And he in turn does not care much what it wants to say.

Terry hears and is heard. He does "disclose himself and speak according to" what the curriculum is saying. This curriculum-speaking occurs as the curriculum reaches out to the child through the whole learning environment with teacher, other students, and the written word. As an example of the dialogue between child and curriculum, let us consider further the encounter between student and written text.

The Reading Dialogue

Do readers find the text to be a voice with which they converse? A book clearly is an object. It is held in the hands, used to prop open a window, talked about in terms of the quality of its binding and the price for which it can be bought. But a text is words, language, communication. Can words prop open a window? What amount of money is paid for language? A human being has written words on paper, ideas have been formed and a text created. The medium of print allows a voice to speak over infinite time and space, but it is still a human voice reaching out to others. When we are searching for a misplaced text, we say, "Where is that book?" and rightly so. It is the object for which we seek. But when we open the book, we no longer are interested in this object "book" which we hold in our hands. It is the story, the ideas, the information - in short, the human contact, which engrosses us.

The text comes to us as a human voice "that asks to be heard and that requests a response" (Sardello, 1975, p. 275). The text not only speaks, it also listens for a reply. The text is a seeker of the way to truth and asks the reader to journey along and participate in the search. The text in that sense is incomplete. Sardello describes all creative works as incomplete. The text presupposes a reader who will establish a dialogue and supply the other half of the conversation. But that is not a matter of filling in blanks, like sticking missing pieces into a jigsaw puzzle or making necessary inferences. The reader helps to shape and guide the flow and direction of the conversation just as a good listener influences and responds to a speaker.

As in any genuine dialogue, the participants influence each other. The dialogue depends upon the contributions of each partner. And the nature of each person affects the relationship, and hence, the conversation, between them. Ken and Cathy are both good friends of mine and my life is richer for each of them. Both share my academic interests and enjoy talking at length about them. But the conversations are not the same, since they are two quite different people. Cathy reads novels, Ken gardens. Cathy battles constant illness and is exhausted by a walk across campus; Ken is disgustingly lean and healthy, an inveterate jogger. They think differently. Both are sensitive and mature personalities, but they foster different conversations. Just so, each reader influences a given text and carries on a somewhat different dialogue with it.

In oral conversation, we interpret the listener's response to us by the facial expressions we see and the comments made in reply. But in reading, how do we know if the text hears us and is responding to our

contributions? "In reading a text I can tell if my partner understands my paraphrasing if the answer which is discovered in my continued reading is indeed an answer to what I have said" (Sardello, 1975, p. 278). Just as the continuity of an oral conversation indicates a shared direction of thought, so in the encounter with text. If we have anticipated appropriately and find the continuing text answering us, we have joined with the text in creating the views and interpretations.

This necessity that the reader be able to move into text is shown facetiously by Tristram Shandy, who after alluding to some strange characteristics of his uncle adds:

"What these perplexities of my uncle Toby were, 'tis impossible for you to guess; if you could, I should blush; not as relation, not as a man, nor even as a woman, but I should blush as an author; inasmuch as I set no small store by myself upon this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing. And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page, - I would tear it out of the book" (Sterne, 1940, p. 80).

As Sterne knows very well, this thinking along with or ahead of the text is exactly what readers usually do. If Tristram Shandy's suggestions were to be followed literally by authors, reading would be quite impossible!

The entrance of the reader into the text's development does not imply that reader and text are in agreement. The dialogue can be a debate or an argument just as well as a shared viewpoint. But there must be agreement not only on the issue under consideration, but on the trend of the dialogue.

We frequently think that as readers we approach a text with questions and look to it to provide answers. But it is equally so that we approach the text with answers and it questions and challenges us. It may ask us to reconsider or even reject something we thought we knew. Or it may ask why we reason or believe as we do, and in that very asking raise doubt about our certainty. Willingness to read implies acceptance of being questioned.

"When we speak of a text in this manner, reading becomes an experience we undergo rather than an experience that we control" (Sardello, 1975, p. 280). To accept the text as a voice and to open ourselves to the encounter with it is to give up control of the situation. We can no longer toss the text easily aside like an unwanted object. The other side of the coin of openness and trust is vulnerability. If the text challenges our views and thinking, then we as readers must be open to change. To be closed minded is to make reading a complete waste of time. What can be the point of sitting with a text if we have already decided that we know more than it does or know all we wish to know on the topic it raises? No dialogue can possibly then occur unless the text can break through our certainty. Then the confrontation of the text must be so sharp as to pierce the armour of bias, and make us willing to consider its point of view. In the encounter of text and myself an altered self is being shaped.

And so, on the one hand the text gives guidance to the encounter and acts of comprehension are set in motion by the text, but the text is not the product nor does it control the outcome of the encounter. On the other hand, the reader also does not exert control. To do so is to risk mere delivery of a monologue. What emerges in genuine dialogue is not the statement of either partner but a joint interpretation that exceeds the view of either.

The Silence in the Text

Just as in conversation it is possible to carry on too long and to say too much, so a writer may say too much. What is left unsaid can be very important since it provides an opening for the reader to enter into the conversation. Without those entrances, the reader is not permitted to speak and the text becomes a monologue. But what is left unsaid urges us toward a filling in, toward wholeness in the dialogue.

An analogy that may be helpful here is that of the bonsai artist who shapes dwarf trees. One way of looking at the artist is to see him as a person who shapes nothingness. He shapes branches, removes them so that there will be an appropriate relationship between a thing and a not-thing, the branches and the not-branches. Why are we attracted to the bonsai? The attraction is not only the curves of the branches and so on, but also the shape of the spaces, the relationship between the material that is there and the supposed emptiness. The arrangement provides openings, an invitation to enter. To be artful is to invite others to participate in the creative act. There must be space to walk into, or else all we can do is try to receive.

For example:

Under cherry trees
The soup, salad, fish and all
Seasoned with petals.

In such a poem, the reader is invited in. The welcoming space is there. The poem gives enough of the picture to invite a filling in. What is the event? A picnic? What is the season? Cherry blossoms are very beautiful. But perhaps only as long as they stay in their place.

Falling into the food reduces their appeal. Given the agriculturalist's definition of a weed as a plant out of place, are these petals bordering on being regarded as weeds? There is amusement in the incongruity of the beautiful blossoms becoming the source of irritation, of the two kinds of beauty, lovely flowers and good food, somehow being at odds with each other, of the blossoms being unpalatable now but a direct link to delicious fruit in several weeks.

The specifics of the interpretations readers make will differ, but each reader will have to move into the space in one way or another if an interpretation is to be made and any understanding is to occur.

It is these gaps in the text that allow the reader's imagination to become active and participating.

"If one sees the mountain, then of course one can no longer imagine it, and so the act of picturing the mountain presupposes its absence. Similarly, with a literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of the text gives us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination" (Iser, 1974, p. 283).

Otherwise, the dialogue has become a monologue. The text is refusing to give me my turn to listen and respond.

Tristram Shandy notes this in his inimitable style:

"Writing when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company would venture to talk all; so, no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would assume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself."

"For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own" (Stearne, 1940, p. 108).

The reader must expect to do some of the work and by making an interpretation share in the pleasure of the creative art.

Merleau-Ponty (1964) suggests that the sorrow of language is that to speak is to be unable to say everything. And of course, that is so. How familiar is the sensation of having many ideas, some only half-formed running around in our heads, but being able to express only a few, only one at a time, and sometimes not even to be very clear or cogent in expressing that one. As soon as we start to express one, others get crowded back and some are forgotten. (Sometimes that's just as well.) In addition, there are those which are in the form of tacit knowledge and therefore are known but inexpressible. However, if the sorrow of language is that not everything can be expressed, the opposite is equally true: the joy of language is that to speak is to be able to communicate something, to share.

But is this limitation truly a sorrow? Do we really want to say everything? In our society we often seem to be trying and as a result we complain about information overload, a mountain of paper to push and massive computer print-outs. But the corollary of the attempt to say everything is necessarily that much that is said is rubbish. The coin of language, like any other coin, is debased if over-produced. The listener or reader feels assaulted by the barrage and asks for relief from the verbiage and for silence in which to think and imagine and space in which to respond.

We do not all find this silence in the same place, but most of us can name an author who has particular evocative power for us, who seems to leave the gaps exactly where we need them. This is some subtle combination of suggesting ideas and images that catch and fuel the imagination so that it does not merely follow the text but moves beyond it temporarily, then returns to sustain the conversation.

Like trying to peer through a gap in the hedge at an old stately house hidden there, the fascination of the gaps is the partial sight, the flash of something uncertainly seen, the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't experience. Readers are intrigued by the need to make inferences, the necessity of figuring out if the text is really saying what it has not directly said. There is the sensation of, "I think this has to be what is indicated, but is it really?" Similarly, when a story can make us race ahead keen with suspense, is the suspense not born from our forecasting the various outcomes, especially the catastrophes, that might occur? The text has not told us they will, but we have moved into the story and seen possibilities, some of which we hope for and some we hope against. If we would not anticipate and would not care about the outcomes, there could be no suspense. The creation of a particular sort of gap in the text, that invitation to guess, and our entry into the gap, together bring about suspense.

The silence in the text can take a variety of forms and can appeal to us at different points, but we must be able to find it in order to have opportunity to respond to the voice of the text and to translate the message into our own experience.

Student, Text and Teacher

In the child-curriculum encounter, then, reading is a vital aspect. But in addition to the experience of reading as we have been considering it above, there are in school-based reading some interesting potential differences that may affect the reader-text dialogue.

For instance, both teachers and required schoolbooks can easily deliver monologues. That is, teachers are apt to talk too much. And textbooks, constrained by printing costs, usually present information very compactly so that anyone who is unfamiliar with it must read quite laboriously. The approach of both teacher and textbook can seem to the child to be more barrage than invitation. The child may be unable to find the needed silence and gaps.

Also the child is a more captive audience than a reader usually is. When the teacher makes the reading "required", the student is no longer free to stop if the dialogue with the text breaks down. Being pressured into an encounter is different than voluntary participation.

And as a further complication, the assigned text may be speaking to a level of knowledge or maturity that the child does not yet have. The child cannot answer, cannot sustain the dialogue, except perhaps in fragmented bits and non-sequiturs, because it is too difficult. Or conversely, the text may be simply repeating what the child already knows and hence the child sees no reason to continue.

While schools are necessarily places of activity and interaction, a certain quietness is desirable for reading. None of us likes to carry on a conversation which is constantly interrupted or in which it is necessary to shout at our partner. The reading dialogue is encouraged in a calm and quiet setting - including the teacher's quietness.

We commonly experience the feeling of knowing something but not quite knowing how we know it or how to express it. That body of tacit knowledge, while difficult to draw upon, is nonetheless a very real part of our knowledge and experience. But tacit knowledge is not valued in school. In the classroom typically if you can't explain something, you don't know it. To be a student is to struggle to understand and to understand more fully. Along the way there is likely to be considerable tacit knowledge - which can contribute to the reading experience, but not likely to the class discussion. Add to that tacit knowledge dimension the realization that teachers may speak when they please but students must first be recognized and the relatively greater articulateness of the adult teacher over the child student, and it is small wonder that children sometimes seem so mute in curriculum encounters.

A final factor is that in the teaching of reading the language used may put constraints on thought. As some of the more mechanical aspects of reading are taught, a child may develop a very limited picture of what reading is and see it, not as dialogue but as decoding, for example. A child who cannot read a sentence may nevertheless know what an initial consonant is and what sound to make for the symbol "t" (maybe even "th"). That child's vision has been too much narrowed by the teacher's language in presenting reading.

However, in each of the aspects just mentioned, the teacher is able to come to the child's assistance. Certainly the teacher is part of the child's broader encounter with the curriculum. But if the teacher also chooses to enter into the child's dialogue with the text and serve as a kind of translator between them, many of the potential difficulties disappear. For example, when a child finds the text too compact or too

demanding, the teacher can talk with the child before, during or after the reading, can ask questions which guide the child toward the line of reasoning the text is taking, or can provide activities that may stimulate the insights needed in the reading.

In the reading encounter, the teacher's intention is to participate in the dialogue whenever it is in danger of breaking down in confusion or misunderstanding, but as much as possible to let the child carry on the conversation, and finally, while remaining available when needed, to step back quietly and allow the child an independent and personal reading experience. The teacher is able to be a guide to the child because the teacher is also a student and an interpreter of text engaged in personal text dialogue. Thus, the teacher is for the child an example of a student.

Both are on the same road, but the teacher having travelled further reaches back to give help over the rough places and share the joy of the journey.

When child and curriculum meet under the wise eye of a teacher-guide, there is potential for a rich encounter and real growth toward wisdom - perhaps for teacher as well as child.

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