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ABSTRACT

Few empirical studies have focused on how composition students draw on classroom interactions to develop as writers. For instance, when students disagree fundamentally in their interpretations of what they have read, how are the range of voices reflected in their subsequent writing? The student-led format for discussions proves conducive to participation with often more than 90% of students speaking during such sessions. Case studies: (1) refute the assumption that a student has to participate in classroom discussions to benefit from them as a writer; (2) lead students to accept the idea that multiple interpretations of texts are permissible; (3) help students recognize that classroom diversity leads to productive difference of perspective; (4) point out that the essential ingredients of mutual respect and willingness to listen in a discussion can influence students to write papers that are springboards for introducing topics and raising questions during discussions; and (5) help students understand that both discussing and writing are occasions for rethinking. The interaction of oral and written language is underscored by the wide array of ways students draw upon each other's words and ideas when they are writing about books. Student-led discussions allow renegotiation of authority in the classroom with the aim of allowing students to effectively (and independently) engage each other and the text. Above all, students themselves view student-led discussions of literature as a welcome alternative to school-as-usual--one that transforms how they view themselves as readers talking and writing about texts. (SAM)

Re-negotiating Authority in Composition:

Student-led Discussions and the Interpretation of Text

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Re-negotiating Authority in Composition:
Writers negotiating the interpretation of text
in the social context of student-led discussions

Writing, viewed in its social context, is inevitably a response to the language and ideas of others (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Hull & Rose, 1988; Ritchie, 1989). Surprisingly little is known about how composition students draw on classroom interaction to develop as writers. There have been few empirical, classroom studies investigation how student writing can be influenced by talk and particularly alternative lesson structures such as the student-led discussions of literature that I analyze. When students disagree fundamentally in their interpretations of what they have read, for instance, how are the range of voices reflected in their subsequent writing?

Today I will report on an empirical, observational study (drawing on my doctoral dissertation at UC-Berkeley, as well as my article in the April issue of IRA's *Journal of Reading*). The composition course I report on, taught by a teacher with over 25 years classroom experience, was designated "open enrollment," resulting in heightened diversity not only in terms of ethnicity but also previous academic performance. In this instructional setting, I examine the re-negotiation of authority, specifically through the use of student-led discussions of readings, as well as the consequences of such instructional strategies for individual students as writers negotiating the interpretation of text in the social context of the classroom. What are the potential benefits of a writing pedagogy that links talk and writing, one that accommodates differences during discussions and thereby encourages students to integrate a diversity of perspectives in their writing.

Studies of classroom language suggest that the way teachers structure lessons profoundly affects not only the amount but the character of student

talk. In high school English classes, for instance, the ways students approach interpreting text is shaped in important ways by *how* a teacher conducts class (Marshall, 1988). Moreover, how a teacher conducts class shapes and sometimes limits the ways students approach interpreting text; teacher centered instruction often emphasizes textual scrutiny at the expense of personal response (Applebee, 1988). Nonetheless, many composition classes are conducted in relatively traditional, teacher-centered formats (Cazden, 1988). What is at stake are the kinds of questions that are legitimized in the discussion of literature, and the role students are enabled to play in the social negotiation of interpretation.

Are there productive ways then that not only reading lists but discussions themselves can be reconceived? Are there ways to renegotiate authority in the classroom to ensure that all students have a greater opportunity to participate fully and, moreover, help shape the course of their own learning?
Student-led discussions offer one promising alternative to more conventional instruction. One obvious benefit of student-led discussions is that students have the opportunity to participate more fully by talking more. For instance my own dissertation research, for instance, showed that the student-led format proved conducive to participation: often, 90% or more students spoke during such sessions (Knoeller, 1993). Given diverse student populations, ways of teaching that heighten student participation are doubly important.

In student-led discussions, there is also the potential for students with different perspectives to interact, negotiating interpretations of text with relatively little mediation by a teacher. Interestingly, the identity of authors, including ethnicity, appears to influence which students speak most--and who speaks for particular authors (Knoeller, 1993). Student-led discussions

also reveal patterns of participation along gender lines: Female students proved especially inclined to speak for Virginia Woolf, voicing her words and perspectives.

Allowing students to lead discussions often transforms how students themselves view the classroom. When confronted with different interpretations ventured by classmates, students are challenged to substantiate and, at times, to rethink their own. Above all, , student-led discussions actually allow students to redefine themselves as readers and writers.

Observing a composition class, I discovered the power of student-led discussions for textual interpretation: During such discussions, students could interact with text and each other relatively unmediated by the teacher. Startling is how what is termed instructional conversation helps serve to interpret works. Yet how do students themselves view student-led discussions as a resource for their writing? The following case studies illustrate how five focal students viewed the re negotiation of authority in the classroom and, specifically, how student-led discussions benefited them as readers and writers. The focal students are distinct in terms of background and participation; moreover, each viewed--and responded to--student-led discussions differently.

Case One: Lou

Lou seldom spoke, and then almost inaudibly, yet he often wrote with specific reference to things he had heard during discussions. A Chinese American--Lou pointed out, "I'm the only Chinese in this class"--he nonetheless reflected a growing presence of Asian-American students at the school. His teacher considered Lou an exceptional student, so exceptional, in

fact, that still a high school senior, he had begun attending the University of California, Berkeley concurrently.

If any student refutes the assumption that one has to actively participate in student-led discussions to benefit from them, it is Lou. Nonetheless, Lou believed in the value of discussing books and, despite his own silence in class, expressed in interviews his unequivocal preference for the student-led format. Though he had spoken infrequently, he listened keenly to his classmates and often relied on their readings of text, especially when a work had left him confused or uncertain. While he concurred with his teacher's view that every reader is entitled to a personal interpretation, Lou found the perspectives of certain classmates such as Vera, particularly compelling. Moreover, Lou's writing demonstrated that he considered class consensus during student-led discussions the best test for establishing credible interpretations. It was just such points of consensus--or perceived consensus--that Lou frequently recapitulated in his compositions. Indeed, Lou's claim that discussions had been beneficial was amply substantiated by the degree to which his writing drew upon them.

Case Two: Byron

Byron, a willing reader, reported, "I don't mind reading a deep book at all, I just don't know which ones are good." In fact, Byron could become enraptured with assigned works and read them cover to cover weeks before necessary. Byron, who is white, is so soft-spoken that his motions to gain the floor during student-led discussions often went unheeded; still, he had confidence enough to be one of the few students in the room to speak out on behalf of African-American authors.

"I am normally a shy rather quiet guy so I have had to push myself to participate in class," Byron wrote of himself late in the year adding, with good reason, "I'm proud of my input into the discussions." Like Lou, Byron differentiated between those works he felt confident to discuss and those he did not. In an interview, Byron claimed that student-led discussions were particularly well-suited to formulating a personal interpretation of works read.

Byron lauded student-led discussions, singling out a specific aspect as crucial to their success: the assumption that multiple interpretations of text were permissible. Moreover, Byron personally reported weighing the perspectives of his peers as a primary means of rethinking his initial impressions of several works. While he occasionally contributed to student-led discussions points that he had previously raised in writing, Byron seemed, like Lou, more inclined to develop in subsequent compositions issues that had already arisen in class. Like Vera, Byron generally held to his own perspectives both during discussions and when writing; nonetheless, he frequently supported his written arguments by drawing on discussions. In fact, when writing Byron often appropriated ideas from discussions for his own purposes. When written in response to student-led discussions, Byron's compositions gained complexity. Importantly, Byron's writing did not merely reiterate but expanded upon and responded to what had been said and, moreover, often addressed specific episodes during discussions in which Byron himself had participated. Byron seemed especially mindful that writing allowed ongoing dialogue with his classmates. In a sense, Byron's writing allowed him the last word.

Case Three: Helen

Helen, who is also white, was quick to recognize how class diversity led to differences in perspective, claiming that background influenced a person's "views" and, in fact, overall "outlook on things." Helen perceives herself as a serious student--and a straight shooter. She recalled becoming impatient with classmates who were reluctant to speak their minds.

Helen is an avid reader, though she admits to craving a steady diet of romance novels: "When I read, I read, I don't know how you would classify them, like, like a book called Almost Paradise. I don't know who the author is. Just like, what would you call them? Like the books you'd buy in the grocery store." Nonetheless, she readily became engaged with the more demanding titles assigned and arrived in class prepared to talk and, if necessary, to argue for what she believed.

Helen, like Byron, was one of five students who had volunteered to lead the discussions of The Autobiography of Malcolm X. In her self-evaluation, Helen characterized her participation during discussions succinctly: "I never had a problem speaking aloud in class. I also like to sit and listen." Yet she expressed frustration that certain students would at times "dominate," making it more difficult for her to get a word in.

Helen referred to discussions when she wrote and, like Byron, often drew upon discussions in order to achieve her own rhetorical ends. Unlike Byron, however, Helen acknowledged in her writing, by way of concession, perspectives expressed during discussions which differed markedly from her own. Additionally, like Lou, she occasionally mentioned in her compositions specific classmates by name to whom her writing responded. Interestingly, Helen also noted in her writing topics germane to the works discussed that, she pointed out, the class had somehow overlooked. Like Byron's, then, Helen's writing allowed her to extend her conversation with classmates in

directions of her own choosing. Moreover, Helen's writing succeeded in coupling ideas derived from multiple sources, oral and written, as well as drawing on several discussions at once. In her written compositions, Helen incorporated yet subordinated perspectives from discussions which differed her own and, moreover, harnessed them for her own argumentation. In this she differed from Lou, who was generally content to report perceived consensus, and Byron, who reported selectively elements from discussions that supported his own perspectives.

Case Four: Vera

Her teacher claimed that Vera had been responsible for introducing methods of literary analysis to the class. Moreover, her senior year in high school, she already had decided on a career in education. Vera expressed a distinct preference for books by African-American authors, "cause I think that's the type of literature I enjoy reading most: Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker." In terms of ethnic background, Vera's father is African American and her mother is white.

Since she was viewed as an outstanding participant by her teacher and classmates alike, it is of particular interest how Vera herself viewed student-led discussions. In an interview, she highlighted two aspects of discussions that in her view had enabled the class to address even sensitive subjects: mutual respect and a willingness to listen.

Vera held a unique place in student-led discussions. Vera's classmates and teacher spoke of her as a model to emulate. Above all, they admired--and, in the case of students, imitated--Vera's instinct to focus attention on the actual language of pertinent passages in the text. The ease with which she did so bespoke not only familiarity with individual works but with the tenets of

"close reading." Though always self-assured when participating in discussions, Vera believed that her interpretations of works by or about African Americans in particular were especially trustworthy. This special credibility was attributed by both Vera and her classmates to the insights made possible by ethnic solidarity with the authors. Yet Vera's persuasiveness during discussions also stemmed in part from her persistence at substantiating interpretive claims by referring to the text. Curiously, Vera's writing revealed outright her agenda for the student-led discussions: to persuade if not "educate" her classmates. Conversely Vera also viewed discussions as a way of arriving at deeper understanding of the works herself which, she claimed, had improved her writing. Yet Vera, like Eva, found few occasions to write with explicit reference to discussions, and then generally reiterated in the composition her own contributions in class. On the other hand, she frequently used her own writing as a springboard for introducing topics and raising questions during discussions.

Case Five: Eva

Eva was also perceived as a driving force during discussions, which she often volunteered to lead. While several students felt Eva could be overpowering, making it difficult for them to speak, other classmates viewed her as a model. Eva herself exuded confidence describing her academic history in gifted programs and honors classes. Though prone to show emotion during discussions, Eva also recognized the importance of interpreting the work itself--in her words, "to keep in touch with *this is a book.*" Yet Eva, who is of Italian descent, often sided with "minority" perspectives during discussions. Eva viewed both discussing and writing as occasions for rethinking.

Eva believed that student-led discussions are the best way to interpret text. Always a ready participant, she relished the breadth and flexibility of sessions devoted to talking about books. Eva impressed her peers with her apparent lack of inhibitions when it came to airing her views. In fact, Eva approached discussions, like Vera, as a forum for expounding ideas derived from her own, previous writing. Again and again, she prevailed when introducing during class topics of personal interest, often echoing the language of her compositions in the process. As an active participant during discussions, like Vera, Eva continually spoke her mind and, with surprising regularity, made claims that coincided precisely with what she had written.

Eva routinely drew on her previous writing when she spoke in class, she also incorporated both the logic and the language of the discussions in subsequent writing. Eva occasionally echoed recognizable elements from discussions in her compositions, despite a penchant for originality in her writing ("I like to think that this is my own thought and I made this up myself"). In fact, a close look at what Eva said and wrote reveals how elements derived from discussions contributed to shaping written argument. In the following case, her overall argument is a narrative of rethinking. During the first discussion, Eva explained how her response had changed in the course of reading the book:

> When I read the epilogue, my feelings about him kind of changed because you see him as a much more human person.... And by the end, I mean in the epilogue you really see him as more of a human person. You kind of, yeah, and there are a few white people that he respects. But it's hard to say whether he completely changed because his practices I don't think changed that much when he came back.

When Eva wrote about the book afterwards, she drew directly on her own language from the first discussion:

> After I read the epilogue, I started to like Malcolm X. He seemed much more human...I admired him for being able to change a bit. He saw that he was wrong but his practices didn't change that much.

The language of Eva's oral arguments preserved in writing, if only a phrase at a time, reveals an intertextual trail. And yet, since they were her own words, there was clearly no need to attribute them. Sometimes, discussion essentially served the purpose of oral rehearsal. Eva later wrote that the first discussion of this work had become a turning point in her interpretation: "In the discussion, I realized how much I disagreed with him....[since] after Malcolm X went to Mecca, he kept contradicting himself." Her response to the discussion, then, had precipitated fundamental rethinking that would underlie her second composition as a whole.

In one instance, Eva actually drew from two discussions at once to address a single thesis: Malcolm X had been admired for his willingness to reconsider his positions This point had in fact been returned to repeatedly over the course of both discussions of the book. Eva argued that while Malcolm X had once blindly accepted the dictates of his religion, including racial intolerance, he later demonstrated an open-mindedness that she admired. Although Malcolm X seemed inconsistent to them, the students had concluded their first discussion by expressing admiration for his capacity to reconsider his beliefs. Eva generalized to claim that students, herself included, benefit likewise from rethinking: "We had to keep trying to figure out who Malcolm X really was. His changes in the book were a new

experience to all of us....This book's tone changed before our very eyes and our feelings, in turn, changed as well."

She actually expressed a strong preference for discussions (as opposed to writing) as a forum for working out the interpretation of books because discussions were, in her estimation, more suited to addressing a wide variety of topics spontaneously. She stated unequivocally that, "Discussions are the best way to understand a book." While Eva drew upon discussions as she wrote, she generally summarized or appropriated the ideas of others without explicit attribution to the language of individual speakers. It is telling that Eva consciously strove for originality in her writing:

> If we have a discussion, and then afterwards I have to write a paper, I don't want to write the same things that came up in the discussion because I feel, you know, we already did this, why I am writing about it again. Once I really should not, I should write it down, because, you know, then it'll be good. But, I don't know, I like to bring up new things all the time....Because I feel like it's my own thought. Because if I bring out something from the discussion, or something, somebody else might have brought it up. And it's totally valid and maybe now I understand so I should write it, but, but I don't like to do that. I like to think that this is my own thought and I made this up myself. And that's why I can put it down on paper.

Yet it is clear that Eva also understood that it is not only permissible but potentially advantageous to incorporate insights of others in her writing, yet she was still extremely reluctant to do so. To her credit, Eva associated creativity--the breaking of new ground--with successful writing. Eva's

commitment to originality and ownership may account in part for why she seemed more inclined to draw on her own writing when speaking, than to draw upon discussions as she wrote; for Eva drew upon her own writing frequently when she spoke.

The interaction of oral and written language is underscored by the wide array of ways in which students drew upon one anothers' words and ideas when writing after talking about books. Beyond demonstrating the efficacy of student-led discussions as an instructional model for composition studies, this study suggests the importance of considering alternative lesson formats as well as illustrating the potential benefits of renegotiating authority in the classroom. Such a pedagogy adds up to a new view of the potential role of classroom discourse in the discussion of literature and the teaching of composition.

Indeed, student diversity can give rise to dialogue which in turn is internalized, text-like, and reflected in writing: evidence of the social process by which students learn to interpret text, to write, and to situate themselves in a public discourse.

While licensing students to engage in instructional conversation of their own making through *student-led* discussions, a teacher can maintain his or her role in helping to define the object of study. In fact, she elevated particular aspects of text, whether thematic or structural, to the place of central interpretive issues, whether advocating close reading of text or, alternatively, reflecting response-oriented theory.

The student-led format for discussions opened the door to rich interactions among students as they negotiated the interpretation of text in the social context of the classroom. What then is the role of classroom discourse in the discussion of literature *and* the teaching of composition? The classroom can become a forum for

the meeting--and rethinking--of interpretations and of perspectives. Ultimately student writing can then incorporate what are essentially "readings" of the *discussions*, metaphorically speaking the "text" of the talk, that is, the language and ideas of their classmates (Knoeller, 1993).

Student-led discussions allow renegotiation of authority in the classroom with the aim of allowing students to effectively--and independently--engage each other and the text. The benefits of this approach, as we have seen, are many. First, serving as discussion leaders, as most did at one time or another, students were deputized to new levels of authority for their own learning and, in particular, textual interpretation. Responsibility for coming to terms with the challenging texts the class read had been transferred to the students themselves. Consequently, they were remarkably motivated: in interviews students describe vying passionately for the floor.

The sophistication of talk about text is clear from the language students used to discuss books, especially the ways they incorporate the voices of others to substantiate interpretations. Above all, students themselves view student-led discussions of literature as a welcome alternative to school-as-usual--one that transforms how they view themselves as readers talking and writing about text.

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