DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 560 CS 511 252

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TITLE Multigenre Writing and Bakhtin.

PUB DATE 2002-03-00

NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002). List of works cited is not included in ERIC version.

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Writing (Composition); *Written Language

IDENTIFIERS *Bakhtin (Mikhail); Composition Theory; Theoretical Orientation

ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of language and literature can illuminate the workings of multigenre compositions. Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and novelization are applicable because they are not genre dependent. As he says, they reach "beyond the bounds of the novel as genre" to reflect the ways all kinds of written language may mirror the dialogism of life. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is pertinent to the study of multigenre papers because one of their fundamental properties is that they do not pretend to be "original" but consciously borrow life situations and the words and genres circulating in those situations. Words in a multigenre paper do not conclude anything definitively but invite their conversation to continue. This paper shares some of the work its author is doing to connect Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of language and literature to multigenre writing. The paper states that working in a polyphonic novel or multigenre piece--rather than being subjected to the dictatorship of single genre production as often is the case in English classrooms--challenges writers to construct whole pieces of writing that all at once explain, describe, narrate, and argue for "real-world" purposes instead of artificially breaking these into separate "modes." To see how this polyphony works, it examines the dialogical "devices" Bakhtin says allow the languages of life to be represented in the novel in general and see how they apply to multigenre writing. (NKA)

# Multigenre Writing and Bakhtin.

by Michelle Tremmel

CCCC Paper: Multigenre Writing and Bakhtin

For my part of this session, I'd like to share some of the work I'm doing to connect M.M. Bakhtin's theories of language and literature to multigenre writing. Those theories put forth in such works as Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, The Dialogic Imagination, especially the essay "Discourse in the Novel," and Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics are exciting in that they can illuminate for us the workings of multigenre compositions. Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and novelization are applicable because they are not genre dependent. As Bakhtin says, they reach "beyond the bounds of the novel as genre" (Problems 270) to reflect the ways all kinds of written language may mirror the dialogism of life.

Bakhtin's dialogical theory of language says that words embody all their past and present uses, interpretations, and meanings, creating a constant internal and external "interaction" among them and potentially conditioning all other meanings (Dialogic 426). He rejects the commonplace idea of words as "neutral" building blocks of language that speakers and writers choose out of a kind of data bank to translate already formed thoughts into communicative speech. In contrast, Bakhtin repeatedly argues that words are anything but neutral and those we use belong not to us but to everyone. We are, he says, "not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" (Speech Genres 69). Instead, when we begin to speak or write, we take the words of others, shot through with their "alien" meanings and used for their purposes, and give them "expression" through our own "speech plan" (88). The words we claim as ours, then, have meaning residues from all others who have used them in the recent or distant past and in far or near places, as well as those of our own time and place.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is pertinent to the study of multigenre papers because one of their fundamental properties is that they do not pretend to be "original" but consciously borrow life situations and the words and genres circulating in those

situations. Multigenre writing recognizes the echoes of many voices and uses these for the deliberate purpose of exploring a particular issue, theme, or subject. Words in a multigenre paper do not conclude anything definitively but invite their conversation to continue. They are not static or twisted only to reflect a writer's singular intention. Instead, multigenre writing exhibits the sharing of language that goes on unconsciously and unintentionally all around and within us by its inclusion of others' words penetrated with various meanings, tones, nuances, intentions, misrepresentations, and so on.

Most prominent in multigenre writing is this dialogism of language. We can see in it the give and take among various voices, the references the writing makes to time and space outside itself, and the ideas of others given somewhat free rein and equal standing with the ideas of the writer. And throughout all this, new meanings and ideas are born as a multigenre paper evolves and participates in what Bakhtin calls the "dialogic imperative" that compels every utterance always to address or "tur[n] to someone" (Dialogic 426; Speech Genres 99). A multigenre paper shows clearly how voices of a moment are conscious of the impact they may have on, or response they may receive from, some audience, urging or constraining them as they formulate what they want to say, molding them "in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances" (89). Built on the foundation of the dialogical word, a multigenre paper's utterances are fluid and organic and resonate with the overall dialogism of language.

Along with this dialogical resonance of utterances, also pertinent to a study of multigenre writing is Bakhtin's classification of stable utterances as either "primary" or "secondary." Multigenre papers combine primary and secondary genres that maintain their autonomy to some extent but whose "form and significance" are shaped by the new composition's content "plane" into a larger secondary genre similar to what Bakhtin describes as the dialogic novel (Speech 62). In this, what he says about novelistic discourse in general, and the "polyphonic" novel in particular, paves the way for multigenre writing. Bakhtin's ideas can help us understand how such writing instantiates

fully the concept of dialogism and participates in the kind of "polyphonic artistic thinking" he says "renounce[s . . .] monologic habits" (272). Such artistic thinking is evident in multigenre writing just as Bakhtin claims it is in the novels of Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky's artistic vision, according to Bakhtin, stems from his recognizing that the "multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon" cannot be reduced to a sequence or hierarchy but requires us, instead, to visualize its "contradictions and bifurcations" in a chronotopic way, "spread out in one plane [. . .] as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or [an] unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel" (Problems 30). Bakhtin claims that Dostoevsky puts this artistic vision into action by creating a complex utterance in which the voices of others invited into the text retain their own independent intentions but are also infused with the intentions of the author. Consequently, the various parts of his novels engage in "microdialogues" with themselves, other parts, the author, and the reader (40), creating a double-voiced discourse that although "finalized," also remains open. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky doesn't force the voices in his novels to merge with his own authorial one and doesn't totally objectify them so that they lose their original intentions. Instead, they continue to speak for themselves without being reduced to a Hegelian dialectic (26) that results in a synthesis expressed solely in the voice of the author. This open-endedness, in theory, allows the novel as utterance to join the ongoing universal conversation, adding its voices to the already complex living word.

In describing the possibilities for open-ended double-voicedness in novelistic prose, Bakhtin defines a novel subgenre, the polyphonic novel, which he calls the unifying of "highly heterogeneous and incompatible material--with the plurality of consciousness-centers not reduced to a single ideological common denominator" (Problems 17). Multigenre writing exhibits many characteristics of the polyphonic novel Bakhtin describes. In fact, if we didn't know Bakhtin was defining this type of novel, we could mistake his definition for that of a multigenre composition. At the center of this polyphony, and of multigenre writing, is an egalitarian presentation of "fully valid voices

within the limits of a single work" (34). In this presentation the author resists "fusing" represented consciousnesses with his or her own to make them only an authorial "mouthpiece" (51). And these "incorporated" consciousnesses refuse to be silenced by the author's pursuit of a unifying idea. Yet they don't completely take over the work, either, creating a kind of chaotic anarchy that can't hold together as an artistic utterance.

What happens in a polyphonic novel or multigenre piece is that the author becomes less an absolute ruler and more a mediator or orchestral conductor who, while not abdicating his or her authorial responsibility, executes that responsibility by maximizing the dialogue among voices. As Bakhtin puts it, "The author of a polyphonic novel is not required to renounce himself or his own consciousness, but he must to an extraordinary extent broaden, deepen, and rearrange this consciousness [. . .] in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousnesses of others" (Problems 68). He or she must be willing to share authority with the different voices brought in to create polyphony and make "the other person's discourse" stylistically integral to the text. In addition, the author musn't render such utterances invalid by subjecting them to what Bakhtin calls "the verbal and semantic dictatorship of a monologic, unified style and unified tone." In contrast, he or she must forge "vibrantly intense bonds between utterances, between independent and autonomous speech and semantic centers" (204). Achieving such bonding is the excitement of composing a polyphonic novel or a multigenre paper.

Working in these genres--rather than being subjected to the dictatorship of single genre production as often is the case in English classrooms--challenges writers to construct whole pieces of writing that all at once explain, describe, narrate, and argue for "real-world" purposes instead of artificially breaking these into separate "modes." Further, experimenting with polyphony helps writers understand the authentic discourses that circulate in various genres and the way they interact with each other. Polyphonic novels and multigenre compositions "contain no final, finalizing discourse that defines anything once and for ever" (251) but attempt to escape the kind of rigid artistic unity that

muzzles dialogism. To help us understand how this polyphony works, we can examine the dialogical "devices" Bakhtin says allows the languages of life to be represented in the novel in general and Dostoevsky's work in particular (Dialogic 358), and see how they apply to multigenre writing. These devices admit and "organiz[e] heteroglossia" through the techniques of character speech, first- person narration and skaz, stylization, and "incorporated genres" (320).

First, character voices in a dialogic novel or multigenre composition work to establish a context that encourages ideas to function as what Bakhtin calls "a live event, played out at the point of the dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses" (Problems 88). This speech is "represented and not merely expressed" by characters (51), functioning as more than simply objects that can be bandied about as another extension or version of the author's voice. As representational and participatory in a "dialogic communion between consciousnesses" (88), character voices in a dialogic novel or multigenre piece retain some of their own intentions and self-direction, functioning as more than just a "compositional convention" (198) or rhetorical tool used solely to help an author craft his or her point. Rather, the writer cultivates a willingness to resist any inclination to solve the inconsistencies, tensions, and conflicts that the clash of ideas in character speech introduces (51).

Second, in addition to characters and their speech, polyphonic writing also makes use of the narrator's voice, which when "orient[ed] toward another's discourse" infuses dialogism into novels like Dostoevsky's, according to Bakhtin. This may be achieved through common first-person narration or, when also emphasizing oral speech patterns, through the "analogous" skaz, a Russian term meaning "narrator's narration" (Problems 193). As double-voiced discourses, first-person narration and skaz contain both the created narrator's voice with its own intentions and the author's intentions for this voice as a vehicle for communicating the work's overall ideas. In this way the author's "refracted" intentions penetrate the words of his narrator so that the narrator's words are

the words not only of the "other" but also of the author.

In skaz the difference between the narrator's and author's voices is even greater than in first-person narration because the author makes a definite attempt to create a style uniquely the narrator's own and not simply an extension of the author's style (Problems 8). Yet the two interact with each other internally in the narrator's words, which the author evaluates and interprets to serve larger novelistic purposes (195). Huckleberry Finn is a striking example of this uniqueness. The narrator in skaz is a kind of oral storyteller, whose speech serves as an "intersection [. . .] of two voices and two accents," his or her own and the author's (192), and contributes to the multivocalic quality of Dostoevsky's novels that Bakhtin describes .

Such a creation of a persona so distinct from the author that it can interact with him or her in a kind of internal dialogue is scarce if not nonexistent in most school writing. The author and the writing voice of an essay or "traditional" research paper, for example, are virtually identical and both, perhaps, are constrained by the teacher who as assignment giver may be considered the real author of the piece to the student's narrator. However, though multigenre writing in a school setting cannot totally escape the power of the teacher assigner/evaluator, it provides enough freedom to see the concept of skaz operating. For example, in composing a multigenre paper on the issue of welfare, one of my college freshmen--a white, politically conservative middle-class woman--chose to create as a kind of narrator the character of a liberal African American male case worker, someone with a different set of values, experiences, and feelings about welfare and welfare recipients, with a distinct voice who expressed different perspectives on the issue and whose narration reflected a double-voiced tension between the narrator's more sympathetic attitudes and the writer's admittedly more disdainful ones.

Related to this double-voicedness of skaz is a third technique: "stylization," which Bakhtin calls "[t]he clearest and most characteristic form of an internally dialogized mutual illumination of languages." It differs from "style," he says, in that the "linguistic

consciousnesses" of the author (the "stylizer") and the words of another being stylized or "represented" don't merge. This occurs in multigenre writing when the speakers of separate genres are allowed to have their say without being totally appropriated by the author voice as he or she enacts the composition by combining genres. In such stylization, a writer gives a new context to the "free image of another's language" that changes its original "meaning and significance" (Dialogic 362). The words of the stylizer and the stylized "penetrate one another" authentically representing, according to Bakhtin, the dialogism of the living word (266).

All of these previous techniques (character dialogue, first-person narration and skaz, and stylization) can be seen in a multigenre composition since the writer creates various utterances all with their own speakers who retain enough individuality to allow them to interact in various ways with the author's voice and intentions. However, the technique I see as most directly comparable between the dialogic novels Bakhtin describes and multigenre writing is a fourth technique, the idea of "incorporated genres," relatively separate individual generic pieces inserted into a larger work. This, Bakhtin believes, is one of the most positive and prominent aspects of a polyphonic novel, and I see it as the unique defining quality of multigenre writing. As examples of genres borrowed from other contexts, Bakhtin identifies both those of an "artistic" nature like "inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, [and] dramatic scenes" and "extra-artistic" ones like "everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, [and] religious genres" (Dialogic 320). This genre incorporation, in contrast to other polyphonic techniques, results in chunks of discourse that are not totally integrated into the larger composition, with generic boundaries retained for the most part and the pieces often set off visually from the rest of the text. Thus the separation in this case between the incorporated genres and other aspects of the novel is greater than between narrative material, character dialogue, and other stylized speech since, as Bakhtin says, the "genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence, as well as their own linguistic and

stylistic peculiarities" (320). For example, the incorporation of a letter from one lover to another is more noticeable than dialogue between the two since as a recognizable genre outside the context of a novel, a letter stands out because of its generic conventions, its obvious beginning and ending boundaries, its use of the persona of lover-as-letter-writer, and so on.

Though inserted into the larger work, a smaller genre, like a love letter, retains both its status as a genre in its own right and the residue of its uses in other contexts. However, because the author's intentions now infuse it, it becomes double-voiced and also engages in new interactions with other voices in the piece, contributing to the multivocality of the complete novelistic utterance and in some cases playing a structuring role. This structuring role is especially evident in multigenre writing, where incorporated genres themselves constitute the "story" and are not deposited into a narrative frame. Individual genres in a multigenre composition function more like links (in that each is essential to forming a polyphonic chain that tells the story of a subject) than like blocks dropped into an already formed narrative container.

This polyphony that attempts to stay connected to language-in-life provides a contrast to expository prose, which, Bakhtin says, is too constraining by its need to leave no linguistic loose ends. Exposition divorces language from life and moves too far away from discourse as "raw material," feeling a need to refine it, "to neutralize or somehow structure [the] excess" in order for it not to be "an obstacle" to a particular unifying conceptualization (Dialogic 379-80). Unlike the dialogical "messiness" that Bakhtin encourages and that multigenre writing nurtures, expository writing too single-mindedly tries to resolve the fits and starts of discourse and silences voices when they don't coincide with a writer's intention. In exposition, excess material, Bakhtin says, is "ordered on the template of convention, smoothed out, straightened, polished, touched up" so that the result is "no more than an empty euphony [. . .] an empty ease of manner, a smooth finish, [. . .] an [. . .] empty rhetorical complexity [and ultimately] a reduction of

semantic polysemy to empty single meanings" (380).

In a number of ways, multigenre writing provides an alternative to the emptiness of single meanings into which exposition may reduce itself, and, in contrast, it may be considered "a novelistic hybrid," defined by Bakhtin as "an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another" (Dialogic 361). Multigenre papers, like polyphonic novels, create themselves out of smaller chunks of utterances, relatively autonomous speech genres or generic parts "filled with dialogic overtones" (Speech Genres 92). These come into the multigenre "frame" and form what Bakhtin calls a "chemical union" rather than a mere "mechanical bond" (Dialogic 340), thus creating a layering and building of dialogic echoes.

Unlike polyphonic novels, however, the pieces in a multigenre composition may stand on their own with little or no authorial connective material. In other words, if we remove inserted genres from a novel or another type of non-multigeneric piece, the text as a whole--though inevitably altered--remains intact. On the other hand, if we remove inserted genres from a multigenre piece, the whole disintegrates because the composition is its parts to a great extent. Each stands there speaking, and the larger work exists as a tapestry or mosaic with individual colors and sections contributing to the overall design. It is a chorus with separate voices and vocal sections having their own distinct parts but blending in various ways to create a more or less harmonious song that, though complete, reverberates beyond the last note.

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