Student Voice in the Polyvocal English Classroom

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Abstract: In this article, the authors discuss polyvocality, which is the equitable presence of multiple voices engaging in a humanizing dialogue, to facilitate literacy growth, nurture relationships, and build students' confidence in K-12 classrooms. Making classroom talk an integral component of small- and whole-group discussions allows students to hone their listening and speaking skills, which improves writing, creates a generative and supportive learning community, and prepares students to become powerful speakers. We draw on scholars such as Habermas (1962), Dewey (1938), Freire (1970), Banks (1988), and Ladson-Billings (1994) to highlight the importance of dialogue and emphasize the importance of developing multiple literacies; however, we stress our ultimate goal is to help all students to become mindful and empowered contributing members of families, communities, and the global public sphere. We offer specific ways to incorporate classroom talk into everyday literacy instruction to create a culturally responsive learning environment, and we conclude with concrete examples of students' multimodal projects and presentations, from classroom trials and debates to projects based on a novel (e.g., rap songs, short film, alternative final chapter) to ensure every student's voice is heard, valued, and celebrated.

Keywords: polyvocality, student voice, discussion, classroom talk, facilitate literacy

Why Student Voice Matters

It was early in the fall of 1993, Ernest's first year teaching full-time at East Bay High School in Northern California. His students were moving about the classroom excitedly as they were working in groups on an assignment, the writing of one-act plays that dealt with contemporary issues. The hum of classroom engagement was disrupted by a pounding on the classroom door. In the doorframe stood the imposing figure of one of the veteran teachers in the school, who happened to occupy the classroom directly below. "Where is your teacher?!" the voice bellowed as the students froze in silence. Ernest replied, just as terrified as his students, "I'm right here. The students are just working on a group assignment." The teacher flashed a smile. "Oh, I heard the noise and I thought you were gone." The veteran and the rookie teacher shared a good laugh before she headed back downstairs.

Even as we began our careers almost 30 years ago, a quiet classroom was considered a well-managed classroom. As an early-career teacher, Ernest found himself having to convince students, colleagues, and administrators that the noise in his classroom was both intentional and good! Humans are social beings who learn and experience joy and substance through dialogue and social connectedness. In this article, we use the term *polyvocality* to mean the equitable presence of multiple voices engaged in a humanizing dialogue (Morrell & Garcia, 2021). In today's classroom, every voice deserves to be cultivated and heard. Each student should be embraced as a valuable contributor. When teachers and students truly listen to one another, each person understands their voice matters. While we have witnessed significant changes in how students are regarded by their teachers from shocking examples in Ray Rist's 1970 article in which young children in a public school classroom were segregated and treated differently based primarily on skin tone and the teacher's assumptions about their intelligence and abilities, thereby mirroring class systems in the larger society, there still exists what Prudence Carter, Kevin Welner, and other leading scholars call an "opportunity gap" rather than an achievement gap (Carter & Welner, 2013, p. 2). Honoring the voice of every child in the classroom and ensuring their voice matters, recognizes and addresses the opportunity gap. In turn, we have a much greater chance of eliminating the "achievement gap," which continues to reflect existing class and racial systems in our society rather than what kids are capable of achieving when given equitable opportunities.

Classroom cultures that cultivate and honor voice nurture learning and joy; they encourage students to share ideas and to belong as contributing members of the community. In this article, we discuss student voice as responsive pedagogy with a focus on whole-class and small-group discussions, classroom debate, and multimodal presentations.

Student Voice as the Ultimate in Responsive Pedagogy

There is much talk these days about culturally responsive pedagogy and for good reason. As our classroom diversity expands while the world shrinks, our need to honor and leverage multiculturalism becomes our greatest strength. Yet, finding the right balance presents itself as a challenge when culturally responsive pedagogy is reduced to matching students to books based solely on what we perceive as their ethnicity, culture, or language. How do we *know* how students identify? How much of one group should students have access to in a completely homogeneous classroom? How much should we oversample when our classrooms are less diverse, but filled with students from nondominant backgrounds? What should the mix look like when the students are almost exclusively from a dominant culture? And how do we teach the texts we choose? Does the *how* matter as much as the *what*?

Of course, it all matters. But a curriculum that is just focused on which texts are taught may never necessarily become culturally responsive. We draw on multicultural education (Banks, 1988), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) to conceptualize a three-part framework for understanding the culturally responsive English classroom: 1) re-presentation, 2) intercultural understanding, and 3) student voice. By all means, we want a dynamic mix of dominant and nondominant voices in all classrooms, and we want diverse texts in terms of period, genre, gender, race, and perspective re-presented to students in a way that gives them some significant ownership over their readings of these texts. Elsewhere (Morrell & Morrell, 2012), we argue for multicultural readings of texts that are led by critical questioning. A multicultural reading of all texts means reading through a multicultural lens and questioning who has a voice, who is silenced, whether the author is promoting essentializing and stereotyping of certain groups, whether characters are represented authentically, and so on. A re-presentation of ALL texts can make them available for multicultural, intersectional, and critical interpretation. Second, a culturally responsive classroom should provide spaces for dialogue and engagement that increase intercultural understanding and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Not only do we see ourselves differently, but we learn to better situate ourselves within a larger network of humanity; hopefully in greater love and respect for that larger human family.

However, for us, the most important component of a responsive curriculum is honoring and cultivating critical consciousness and student voice. A responsive classroom should be defined not by what we give to students but by what we make it possible for them to say and do (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994). Unencumbered voice is, by definition, responsive. Students tell us what they believe, what they desire, and how they want to be impactful upon the world. Student voice manifests in all sorts of ways: allowing students to choose the books they read independently, creating spaces for community-action projects at the end of literary units, and promoting polyvocal modalities of communication in the classroom, as examples. It is this last component that we focus on in this article. In doing so, we place the polyvocal classroom at the center of a model of instruction that can be consciousness raising and culturally responsive for all students at all times.

The Power of the Polyvocal Classroom

The majority of our waking hours are spent listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through these language and literacy events, students develop identities, gain an awareness of others' perspectives, and ultimately become better members of families, communities, and the global public sphere. Scholars as diverse as Jürgen Habermas (1962), John Dewey (1938), and Paolo Freire (1970) highlight the importance of dialogue to the development of fully realized humans and a vibrant democracy. Even still, speaking and listening are seldom prioritized in contemporary literacy classrooms. We consider, here, how they can become more central to the work of responsive literacy instruction. We use the term *polyvocal classroom* to mean a place where many different interlocutors are able to share their voices powerfully and listen thoughtfully to the voices of others.

Classroom talk is critical to healthy community development. When students have opportunities to talk with one another, they share beyond bits of discrete information to share about themselves and see one another as whole, complex individuals. Communities often have shared values and beliefs, and this requires time and

space for candid consistent dialogue. Relationships are not built by being in the same space; rather, genuine interactions and conversations allow members to identify mutual interests and in this case, work toward common goals. We should also consider the importance of community in terms of belonging, one of the seven strengths discussed in Allyn and Morrell's (2016) book *Every Child a Super Reader.* They state, "For a child to flourish, she must know that she is a valued member of a community and that her unique voice is respected" (p. 32). When students are valued members of a community, they are invested and engaged because their ideas are taken seriously and their contributions matter. With opportunities to discuss their ideas with peers, their oral language improves. This is clearly evident for students learning English. They can listen to their peers modeling oral language, likely in multiple registers, which allows them to develop both conversational and academic English.

Classroom talk facilitates better writing. During a guest lecture in Jodene's preservice language arts course for elementary teachers, a high school English teacher shared how she required her students to talk through their papers with two different peers before writing. The process forced them to formulate and fine-tune their ideas, field questions from their partners, and consider elements that were missing or weak. She noticed significant improvement in students' rough drafts, which made editing and revising less overwhelming and produced clear and concise writing. Ernest's father, who was a high school history teacher in San Jose for many decades, had his students compose papers together, initially because of the overwhelming number of students in each class. He quickly discovered that by talking through their ideas and working together, they produced superior writing compared to when they worked alone without discussing ideas with peers. Through this process, they taught one another, learned together, and composed stronger papers.

The repetition of low-stakes opportunities for polyvocal classroom talk allows students to develop powerful public speaking skills and it enhances their identities as public intellectuals filled with confidence, courage, and hope. When they orate ideas to fellow students, confidence emerges. Students as audience hone listening skills needed to engage in thoughtful conversation and offer constructive feedback. There are numerous benefits to practicing public speaking as students transition from small-group and whole-class discussions to authentic communicative acts in their outside-of-school, everyday lives.

The remainder of this article focuses on four activity systems that are powerful generators of student voice: the whole-class discussion, the small-group discussion, the classroom debate, and formal presentations. Ernest homed in on these core activities while working with schools in New Jersey throughout the 2010s. One of the schools identified student voice and agency as areas they wanted to improve the most. Ernest, along with the English department teachers, identified these four classroom activities as the most promising to drill into. They created frameworks for measuring student participation and learning, they shared exemplary practice within these activity settings, and they shared these understandings in a professional learning community that met weekly to discuss innovative pedagogical approaches. It is no surprise that one of these schools, led by first-year co-principals, became one of the top five turnaround schools in the state. Needless to say, Ernest was hooked on the power of polyvocal English classrooms to improve student voice, student consciousness, student agency, and student achievement.

Whole-Class Discussions

Whole-class, teacher-led, student-centered discussions remain the centerpiece of the polyvocal classroom. During whole-class discussions, the teacher models the confident, yet reflective interlocutor while also allowing for students to develop their critical thinking, speaking, and listening skills. Specifically, we help students learn how to think out loud, how to share ideas that are still baking in the oven to solicit feedback and refinement. We also provide scripts, specific language for how to clarify and synthesize ideas and how to disagree by acknowledging differing points of view in a respectful way. We suggest working on these scripts with the class and posting the agreed-upon language in the class.

With the support of the teacher, students develop as active participants with critical communication skills that are essential to life in a polyvocal classroom. First among these are critical listening skills since students spend 95% of the time listening in the whole-class discussion. They also become better questioners and more thoughtful participants who understand how to take appropriate turns by jumping into and out of conversations. In a well-running, whole-class discussion, students will take multiple turns building from each other's arguments while the teacher will facilitate with an occasional interjection. Students will also learn to reflect on their own participation in whole-class discussions, and they will develop a sense of the skill sets they need to develop. We suggest having spaces at the end of units for students to reflect on their own learning and participation; this would include asking them to evaluate their participation in whole-group discussions. Over the course of the year, we would expect them to acknowledge and address areas that need improvement (e.g., addressing others in the classroom by name, leaning in as a listener, making points succinctly, soliciting feedback, and being willing to introduce unpopular arguments, etc.).

Small-Group Discussions

We find that the biggest variable in classrooms is the amount of time spent in small-group discussions. Powerful polyvocal classrooms set aside a substantive proportion for these small-group encounters. They provide an opportunity for more students to speak, they allow the teacher time to work with a smaller number of students, they increase student agency, and they allow students to get to know one another more intimately in larger classroom settings. Often, small groups are abandoned because students may not have been taught properly how to thrive in these environments. We consider the abandonment of small-group discussion time to be a huge loss. We believe there needs to be more of a focus in English classrooms on how to make the skills and sensibilities that maximize this student-led, student-centered space more transparent.

In a small-group discussion, students need to understand how to get in formation, similar to a huddle in sports. The formation is important, because it signifies that the group is cohesive, intimate, and focused on collectively producing knowledge. The formation also connotes that unnecessary items be removed from the circle or cluster, and that students lean into one another so that they can better listen and communicate. Some classrooms are already structured in table groups and these may be fine, but the cluster of chairs or even having students seated on the floor or standing makes for better cohesion. This formation also reduces the noise in the classroom so that other groups are not disturbed or distracted.

There are two ways we form small groups. One assigns a group leader who will facilitate the conversation and the other allows for co-facilitation, where all students are responsible for maintaining the culture of the group. Whether sole-facilitating or co-facilitating, it is our responsibility to help students learn how to be responsible for one another in small groups. We should talk to them about strategies for how to pull someone into the conversation if they're on the outskirts. We should discuss as a class how to politely push someone back if they're dominating the conversation, how to bring synthesis or how to agree to disagree (it is important that they come to understand the value of productive tensions). Over the course of a school year, we can help students to develop a collective aesthetic of small-group life, we can help them to develop the skills they need to be effective interlocutors in small groups, and we can provide spaces for them to reflect on their participation in small groups while identifying their strengths and areas for growth.

One way to model a respectful and productive small-group discussion is with a "fish bowl." A small group of student volunteers create a circle of chairs in the center of the room and the rest of the students create a concentric circle. The small group is given a topic that everyone can speak about and they discuss the topic. The teacher interjects and provides commentary, highlighting positive aspects (e.g., turn-taking, active listening, building on others' comments) and offers suggestions (e.g., using peers' names, inviting others to say more). This quick activity can be done repeatedly and focus on different aspects of small-group discussions to constantly improve interactions and learning.

Classroom Trials and Debate

While they may not dominate the structure of our classrooms like large- and small-group discussions, we believe trials and debates have an important role to play in the polyvocal classroom. We have written extensively over the years on the power of classroom court trials and forensic debate (e.g., Morrell, 2003), quite simply because we love these activity settings! They are engaging, students have strong oral skills that allow them to shape powerful arguments, they build teamwork, and they help students to understand that there are multiple sides to an argument and very intelligent people can come to reasonable, if opposing conclusions while analyzing evidence.

Debates can be quickly put together. Ernest would ask a question or present a topic and divide the class into two groups. The groups would have a period of time to develop their arguments, decide who would present in the short rounds, who would rebut, who would gather evidence, and who would record notes that could be used in closing arguments. All of this could happen in one extended class period. Following is an example of debate rounds in a 60-minute classroom period:

Opening Statements

- 10:25-10:30 – Team 1 makes an opening statement stating their position
- 10:30-10:35 – Team 2 makes an opening statement stating their position

Round 1

- 10:35-10:40 – Team 1 chooses one person to give one particular example
- 10:40-10:43 – Team 2 rebuts the position

Round 2

- 10:43-10:48 – Team 2 chooses one person to give one particular example
- 10:48-10:53 – Team 1 rebuts the position

Round 3

- 10:53-10:58 – Team 1 chooses one person to give one particular example
- 10:58-11:01 – Team 2 rebuts the position

Round 4

- 11:01-11:06 – Team 2 chooses one person to give one particular example
- 11:06-11:09 – Team 1 rebuts the position

Closing comments

- 11:09-11:15 – Teams regroup to prepare closing arguments
- 11:15-11:20 – Team 2 (or 1) gives closing comments
- 11:20-11:25 – Team 1 (or 2) gives closing comments

Of course, this is just one suggestion for a format, and times can be lengthened or tightened depending on the class period, but it is possible to have great debates in a limited amount of time!

Court trials take longer, but they can also be great fun. The trials usually lasted two weeks and followed an elaborate format that developed over time. At the culmination of the literary work, students were given the trial assignment and the class would be split into two groups. The teams would have a few days to prepare, and each group would have specific tasks. They would select students to play the witnesses. They would also select their attorneys. Attorneys were allowed only to question or cross-examine one witness, providing more agentive roles. Each side also chose lawyers' assistants who would perform background research and help to prepare witnesses for cross-examination from the opposing side. With the large number of roles, everyone in a class of 30 to 35 students could meaningfully participate as a witness, an attorney, or an attorney's assistant.

Improving Multimodal Presentations

The ultimate manifestation of voice in the polyvocal classroom features students as public intellectuals and disseminators of knowledge. Whether giving a short research report, a book talk, reciting a poem, or acting out a student-produced play, there are many opportunities to present to peers and the larger community. To be successful, students must have ample practice speaking in whole groups, small groups, and debates, and they must understand the three elements of Aristotle's rhetorical triangle: ethos (speaker), pathos (audience), and logos (message). For multimodal presentations, they need to consider *what* they say as much as *how* they share their work—meaning, how they use their voice, speak from the diaphragm, and employ positive body language. These skills must be explicitly taught and practiced. Ernest would introduce vocal exercises that were as simple as having students stand up and say their name and their favorite color. Students would also practice their posture and how to speak from notes and slides while not turning their back to their audience. The more students practice voice, posture, and blocking, the more confident they feel when making formal presentations and speaking to larger audiences.

As a literacy specialist, Jodene worked with a group of sixth-graders who were supposed to be reading *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994) with their class but had read ahead and finished. As a group, they voted to read *Stowaway* (Hesse, 2000) and created projects aligned with the book. Each student submitted a plan outlining connections to the novel, materials, a timeline, and their own rubric. The final projects included a rap song, PowerPoint presentation, script and videotaped play, scrapbook with photographs and captions chronicling the book, and an alternative final chapter. The students participated in one another's projects, created a presentation script, and presented their projects to the three sixth-grade classes, family members, and faculty. For weeks, they revised project plans, wrote scripts and chapters, read about the novel's time period, learned how to make a short film, and wrote lyrics. Each student also wrote a final reflection about their process and product. The volume and energy in our classroom were high, and each student linked their passion (e.g., film, rap, scrapbooking) to their multimodal projects, improved their public speaking skills, considered their audience, engaged in meaningful dialogue with peers, and wrote extensively. They exhibited the excitement, motivation, and engagement we want to see every day in our classrooms.

Conclusion

The 21st century English classroom is quickly becoming a space of multimodal production and polyvocality. When we open up spaces for students to speak truth, to listen carefully, to produce new meanings, and to wonder collectively, we will have the responsive and engaging classrooms we want and need. We are on our way. Our discipline has a powerful tradition of pushing pedagogy in ways that center students and that privileges critical questioning and the power of language. Making ubiquitous the culturally responsive polyvocal classroom is our next step on this beautiful journey.

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