

USING DIALOGUES TO TEACH THE INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

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Current reading response theorists, including Rosenblatt and Bleich, make persuasive cases for reading as a process of interaction between reader and text, and for what we call "meaning" as a product of such interaction. Within this framework, they argue that if readers' personal responses are a crucial component of this process of meaning-making, classroom practices which focus first, or solely, on the text, seriously inhibit students' ability to make meaning, to interpret literature. Similarly, composition theorists from Moffett to Britton, Flower and Murray, suggest that writing is also a process by which the self first discovers personal meaning and then expresses that meaning to others. They further suggest that the discovery of meaning is "dia-logical," to borrow a phrase from Moffett, because it involves interaction between a writer's self and a personal or public environment. Thus, current reading and writing theory both stress, at least implicitly, the idea that meaning-making is an interactive process: our interpretations of literature result from our interactions with texts, we explore our ideas by interacting with ourselves and others, and as we write we create texts with which readers then interact.

If the idea of interaction, or dialogue, is central to both the reading and writing processes, then it is a potentially powerful concept for shaping our classroom practice as we ask students to study and write about literature. That its potential is seldom realized was brought home to me by my experience in teaching *Walden* to a group of able high school students three years ago. The day we were scheduled to discuss the first chapter, "Economy," a chapter in which Thoreau attacks the

work ethic, the foundation of middle class values then and now, I entered a class full of angry, engaged students. They questioned Thoreau's stance (What made him so superior?), his assumptions (If everyone agreed with him, this country would fall apart!), and their own values (What's wrong with ambition and material success?). Delighted, I let them challenge Thoreau for the rest of the period; I have seldom taught a livelier class.

As I reflected on that class, I confronted two issues. First, reading theory told me that the class worked because we based it on the students' personal dialogues with Thoreau, but previous classroom experience suggested that if we remained with their personal responses, they might seriously misread the text, especially given Thoreau's dense and elliptical style. What reading theory didn't seem to provide was a way to integrate their personal responses with the text. Second, if I assigned the usual final paper: "In a thoughtful, well-developed essay discuss. . ." I would read, in two weeks, a set of papers which had all the characteristics of disengagement I had learned to dread: abstractness, voicelessness, superficiality, linear structure, and minimal interpretive content. But, if I asked for more personal response papers, I risked reading papers written for and about self, rather than about meanings discovered through interacting with the text. I had few strategies for allowing students to express their interpretations and still write public discourse, in this case, interpretive essays.

I suspect that I am not alone in confronting this dilemma: current response and discovery-based theories of reading and composing have both intuitive and practical appeal, but they do not seem, on the surface at least, to lead students toward the less egocentric thinking and writing for a public audience which we also expect them to develop. We need ways to bridge the gaps between the personal and the interpretive response to texts, and between writing about self for limited audiences to writing about discovered meaning for a broader, more public, readership. Writing activities which focus students on the dialogic nature of the reading and writing processes may be one such bridge.

I began exploring the concept of dialogues with my Thoreau students. They knew they had something to say to Thoreau; I was equally convinced he had something to say to them. So I decided to let them talk to each other. The next day, I asked them to write a ten minute journal entry in which

they discussed or debated a single issue with Thoreau. The only constraint I provided was that they were to give Thoreau equal time to express his point of view. Later journal assignments included dialogues initiated by Thoreau on either statements and ideas from their journal entries or on their world as he saw it as a time-traveler. These journal entries were lively and specific, and seemed to stimulate equally lively and specific class discussions. This experience led me to explore dialogues' potential as both means of developing students' personal, pre-analytic responses, and their producing final interpretations of works studied. I have found them a powerful teaching resource at two stages of the writing process: exploring/prewriting and expressing final interpretations. At the exploring stage, writing dialogues helps students integrate their personal responses with the text; at the writing stage, dialogues help students link their personal discovered meanings to the more public context of literary interpretation.

Using dialogues as part of the exploring/prewriting process serves two related purposes. First, journal dialogues such as those my Thoreau students wrote, act as an intermediate step between purely personal responses to a text and formal interpretations for a public audience. Dialogues with the author's persona encourage students' awareness that a piece of literature exists as more than a stimulus for their personal feelings. In fact, an exploratory dialogue requires them to act out concretely, in writing, aspects of the transaction we hope is going on as they read. In addition, exploring texts in dialogue form encourages students' tolerance for the ambiguities of complex texts, freeing them to ask many questions of an author and to discover that there are many possible answers to those questions. The open-endedness of exploratory dialogues can go a long way to counteract what Mariolina Salvatori describes as students' need for consistency, their inability to tolerate the "indeterminacy" characteristic of early interpretations of complex texts, that leads them to "settle too soon, too quickly, for a kind of incomplete, 'blocked' reading" (661). Salvatori finds the same "blocked" pattern in students' writing about literature: "they lift various segments out of the text and then combine them through arbitrary sequential connections (usually coordinate conjunctions) — a composing mode that is marked by a consistent restriction of options to explore and develop ideas" (662). The following paragraph, written as an in-class free response by a tenth

grade student after an exercise on Frost's "Storm Fear" illustrates the linear quality Salvatori refers to:

In the poem Frost compares trying to make it through a storm to a similar experience as flying to escape a wild beast. He does this through a series of connections in the poem, or images and metaphors. He starts the poem with an image of "the wind works against us." This one image, of course, doesn't solidly prove any point but it sets up a mood. He follows this image a couple of lines later with one of how the wind whispers with a "stifled bark" for them to "Come out! Come out!" like a menacing cat trying to tempt frightened mice from their holes. He, of course, is trying to escape the stalker and he explains this by saying it took "no inward struggle not to go." While he is talking about how those inside are staying in with fear, he further refers to the storm as a creature, saying "the cold creeps" as the snow piles up and traps them further. And the longer they wait, the more they realize the more dangerous it gets as "even the comforting barn grows far away," signalling their inability to escape, and he finally concludes they might not be able to save themselves unaided.

While this paragraph may contain the seeds of a promising interpretation, right now it is scarcely more than a literal paraphrase; the writer's chronological structure severely restricts his exploration of implications and alternatives. If we compare this paragraph to the following dialogue, also written in class in response to the Frost poem, we see the same urge towards closure, but we also see a kind of creative incoherence, a healthy tentativeness in its discovery of possible problems and alternatives, that the preceding paragraph's structure does not allow for:

M: Mr. Frost, what were you trying to tell us about the world in your poem, "Storm Fear?"

F: What do you think? Try to get inside my poem, then tell me what you saw.

M: All right, I went in and found something pretty heavy.

F: Well, you are on the right track; I never write on the surface stuff, always deep, always deep.

M: Were you trying to tell us that everything that can

hurt or scare us is outside us (the world, I mean) and that if we stay unafraid and brave, we can bear anything?

F: Well, how do you see that?

M: I did a chain system of triggered thoughts and tried to connect all ideas or images in the poem. What I started with was the wind trying to get in, and I ended with the phrase "come out." Pretty coincidental, huh? Well, it's so contrasting that it has to mean something, right?

F: Well, right, but why don't you show me how you get from "get in" to "get out?"

M: O.K. I went from "get in" to "working against us," pretty basic, then to "pelting with snow," then the drifts piling from the pelting snow. Since the drifts build up the "barn grows far away" and with so much doubt, the "heart doubts" and with that one has an inward struggle (definition of doubt). When one is struggling he "counts his strength" and you gave us a concrete image of "two and a child." One sees another image of a "not asleep" child in the "lower chamber," who is "not asleep" because of the "whispering bark" and "creeping cold" of "the beast" who says "come out"; this makes one's heart doubt, and if one goes to sleep, one has to "arise with the day" and "roads ungraded" so you are "unaided" and thus cannot "come out." There, how was that?

F: Very interesting, but doesn't that make it so "the beast" by pelting you with snow makes it so that you cannot "come out"?

M: Well, wouldn't "the beast" be contradicting itself in its objective, by acting in such a way?

F: That could be true, but why don't you try to answer this one by yourself?

M: For starters, I see that "the beast" makes it your decision whether to come out or not, and even so, relies on you to draw out your spirit to fight it off. One line really stuck out for me, it was so contrasting, well I really liked it. It was: "How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length." In other words, as the cold takes over, the fire dies. This wouldn't be parallel to the fact that as "the beast" creeps in and takes over, your spirit burns out and eventually perishes. You couldn't be saying that, could you?

F: Why not? Now, you have said a lot, some correct, some not. Why don't we tie it together and see what we've got?

M: O.K. 1) the beast wants you to "come out." So it is

outside of you. 2) It builds up barriers around you, thus making you inaccessible, in his effort to get at you. 3) If you brave it out and rely on your spirit, you are strong and safe. All right, how did I do?

F: Pretty well. Now, why don't we ask your teacher what she thinks? Well, how did she do?

Rough as this piece is, in fact, because it is rough, it allows for further exploration, for discovery of new meanings and possible connections between its writer and the poem. Exploratory dialogues thus integrate personal responses with the text in several important ways: students stay focused on their transactions with the text as they enter the writing process; their personal responses are shaped by textual material; their actual thinking/responding process gives form to what they write; they begin to discover problems in their initial responses in the text and complexities which demand further exploration.

The content of such exploratory dialogue assignments necessarily varies according to the text, the students' abilities, and the teacher's goals. While direct argument with Thoreau seemed most useful to me in one context, I have also used dialogues with authors' personae and with central characters, and have had students discuss significant events and more general thematic ideas, or even statements made in the course of class discussion. The most important thing is that students should be encouraged to write freely and to give the other participant enough space to respond in detail. Occasional "one-sided" dialogues, however, do not concern me greatly; they do suggest that students need to spend more time on their own responses before dealing with the text.

The dialogue form itself may also be a powerful alternative to the critical essay for expressing the fuller understanding students achieve after exploring a text. James Moffett first articulated the peculiar strengths of the dialogue form in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* when he pointed to the unique characteristic of dramatic discourse: that the speakers interact concretely as "I/you" rather than abstractly as in the "I/he, it" relationship which characterizes the essay (11-12). He further emphasizes that the "verbal collaboration" within the dialogue form, in which each participant hears, adapts, and elaborates on the other's statements, is accompanied by "cognitive collaboration," that the discussion is "dia-logical," with each speaker incorporating some of the other's ideas

into her own discourse. A major consequence of this verbal and cognitive collaboration is that the participants of necessity elaborate on their own ideas in concrete detail and focus on how individual ideas interrelate (72-73). Moffett discusses the dialogue primarily as a dramatic form, concentrating on the interaction between speakers within the dialogue rather than on the interaction between writer and an external audience. An effective dialogue as he describes it, however, should exhibit many of the qualities we expect from interpretive writing: the writer's engagement with content and audience, a sense of mind in process, the ability to elaborate on ideas concretely and to develop specific relationships among them. In addition, because a dialogue need not be constrained by the conventions of the literary essay, it can actually free students to concentrate on general issues of effective writing, rather than on the specialized concerns of the English major or literary critic. And by the very nature of its form, an interpretive dialogue encourages students to remain grounded in the text, although they sometimes have early difficulties with the idea that the other participant can quote herself. The following dialogue was written by an able eleventh grader assigned to argue against a critic of Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" as a means of building his own interpretation:

Q: Wait! I'm on a roll. My second point of support is that, in my opinion. Conrad did not expect or want us to pass off the murder lightly as many readers do. Instead, I think he meant the murder to show that yes, Leggatt did show admirable leadership qualities in saving his ship, but the problem was that he didn't stop there. He went on to strangle a man with his bare hands while in an uncontrollable, enraged frenzy. Conrad added this description of the murder to show to us that Leggatt is not perfect or ideal but in fact does show human faults that lead to errors, in this case a murder.

Cr: This may be true but you can't ignore the fact that the captain envied the way Leggatt handled himself while Archbold was on board the ship.

Q: Yes, it is true that Leggatt used every opportunity he had cunningly to escape Archbold but so did the captain! You spend too much time concerning yourself with Leggatt. If it was not for the captain's excellent acting job, and overall quick-witted thinking Archbold would have suspected what was going on and, in my opinion, Leggatt

would have been flushed out. It took some extremely fast thinking to play hard of hearing and to decoy Archbold away from Leggatt while at the same time remaining calm so as not to reveal him through his nervousness. Conrad intended us to see Leggatt and the captain as equal in this situation. And if they are equal, Leggatt certainly cannot be a god-like figure to be idolized.

Cr: Are you saying that Leggatt is always on an equal level with the captain?

Q: No, that is not what I'm saying at all. In some situations, such as the scene with Archbold, the two men act on a relatively equal basis. In many other instances, Leggatt shows a higher ability to control himself than the captain has. But just because he is better at some things doesn't mean that the captain idolized him. Respect yes, but idolize, no. . . .

In this dialogue, the writer is obviously writing for a public audience, using specific references to the text and explanatory comments to clarify meaning; at the same time, the writer expresses ideas in a natural, engaged voice, responding directly and personally to another individual. In addition, the dialogue's structure seems governed by the need to respond to another's reasoning, rather than by the "arbitrary, sequential connections" Salvatori finds characteristic of "blocked" interpretations. Examples such as this have convinced me that, because the dialogue form keeps students close to their own response processes, it enables them to produce more vital writing about literature than would the conventional critical essay.

Because literary dialogues can exhibit the major characteristic of the conventional critical essay (a writer expressing a logical, analytical interpretation of a literary text) and because they additionally encourage students to remain close to their own response processes, to discover more personal voices and a form inherent in their material, they can be substituted for the critical essay at some levels, especially for high school students and for those college students not intending to major in English. Students can also turn those dialogues into conventional essays with relatively little difficulty. I have often asked students to develop essays from previously graded dialogues. When I do so, I assume that their previous dialogues already contain a central idea which can become the focus for the essay and that their developing material ei-

ther has, or can be arranged to have, closely related “chunks” which form the basis for paragraphs. We have also, perhaps, read several expository or critical essays, each of which exhibits a somewhat different method of development, so that students are familiar with the general essay form but have not internalized a formula for writing.

I have discovered that essays developed from dialogues retain the strengths of voice and process which characterize the dialogues. In the first place, with no rules or formulae to fall back on, students must address real questions about form and content: What is my role here? What process am I and my audience going through? Should I be more specific? where? how? Second, students already have an organic reasoning process which can shape the movement of their essays. And Rochelle Smith’s discussion of paragraph coherence as the “product of the dialogue between the writer and the reader” (9-10) suggests that writing dialogues may actually help students achieve coherence in their essay writing. Using Mishler’s description of spoken dialogue as three part exchanges, consisting of a question, an answer, and a confirmation response from the original speaker, Smith suggests that the confirmation response is the device used by both speakers and writers to signal that the audience’s response has been heard, that a dialogue unit is complete (11). For example, in the student dialogue above, we can easily see examples of simple, explicit confirmations (“Yes, it is true that. . . .” “No, that is not what. . . .”) and of more complex indirect acknowledgments by ‘Q’ of ‘C’s’ ideas. According to Smith’s model, these statements function not only as natural outgrowths of the conversation in progress, but also as signals to the reader that, a unit of dialogue being complete, the reader must actively make the connections to previous units and to previous implied questions that are necessary for coherence. In formal essays, Smith argues, this confirmation is often implicit and the writer uses the paragraph break to “signal the end of a dialogue unit” (13); this, in turn, signals that the reader must create coherence by her own response. Smith concludes by suggesting that if “we want to teach students to move beyond the five-paragraph. . . essay to a more sophisticated type of paragraph development, we must teach them to conceive of writing as a form of dialogue and the paragraph as a unit of implied dialogue” (21). It would seem logical, then, that asking students to write dialogues, at the very least before they write essays, might allow them to practice the skills necessary

for the more sophisticated kinds of coherence Smith discusses.

The following excerpt, for example, taken from an essay version of the dialogue with a critic discussed earlier, retains its fluency, sense of audience, and its organic structure. Interestingly, the writer also uses the confirmation signals which grew naturally out of the dialogue in the original to signal paragraph closure here, implicitly inviting the audience to relate the content of individual paragraphs to his overall question: "Is 'C's' interpretation of the Leggatt/Captain relationship valid?"

. . . Curley also passes off the murder much too lightly for me. He calls it "unfortunate" (p. 80) and blames the murder not directly on Leggatt, but on "instinct" (p. 80). In my opinion Conrad did not expect us, or want us, to pass off the murder as lightly as many readers do. Instead, I think he meant the murder to show that yes, Leggatt did show admirable leadership qualities in saving his ship, but the problem was that he did not stop there. He went on to strangle a man with his bare hands while in an uncontrollable, enraged frenzy. Conrad added this description of the murder to show us that Leggatt is not perfect or ideal but, in fact, does show human faults that lead to errors, in this case murder.

Curley uses the scene with Archbold, Captain of the *Sephora*, as proof for his thesis that Leggatt is on a higher level and an ideal. For paragraphs, Curley goes on and on about how cunningly and assuredly Leggatt acts in evading Archbold. Obviously, it is true that Leggatt used every opportunity he had to escape Archbold, but so did the captain. Curley spends too much time concerning himself only with Leggatt. He totally disregards the captain's actions. If it were not for the captain's excellent acting job, and overall quick-witted thinking, Archbold would have suspected what was going on and, in my opinion, Leggatt would have been flushed out. It took some extremely fast thinking to play hard of hearing and to decoy Archbold away from Leggatt while at the same time remaining calm so as not to reveal him through his nervousness. Conrad intended us to see Leggatt and the Captain as equal in this situation. And if they are equal, Leggatt certainly cannot be a godlike figure to be idolized.

Although Mr. Curley's essay is well supported and his evidence is well presented, I think he looks at this critical relationship in a very one-sided manner. He uses evidence that deals with Leggatt's positive qualities to show his supposed superiority, while at the same time ignoring evidence to prove that the two men are not so widely separated. This does not go to say that the captain and Leggatt are on the same level. An example of this is the matter of the search by Archbold, as I explained before. Also, there are times when Leggatt shows a better grasp of the situation. The clearest example of this would have to be when Leggatt saved his ship from the storm. The fault, of course, was the murder. In other words, many times Leggatt shows that he can control himself better than the Captain. But just because Leggatt is better at certain things doesn't mean that the Captain viewed him as the ideal being or idolized him. Respect, yes, but idolize, no. . .

As with exploratory dialogues, the focus and content of a final dialogue is limited only by the teacher's imagination in relation to the class. I have, so far, had students write dialogues with the psychiatrist in *Equus* about what happened to him as a result of his experience; with Bronte about a thematic complexity in *Wuthering Heights*; with Orwell about how his ideas in *1984* apply to the contemporary United States. In all cases, students begin with their own responses, use interaction with the text to modify and articulate their responses, and express the meanings they discover in a form which reflects the nature of the interaction process itself. These formal writing assignments have, in general, been stronger, more substantive in content, and more flexible in structure than papers written by equally able students in a more conventional form.

My work with student dialogues so far has encouraged me to explore further both their classroom and theoretical implications. I am eager to use variations on these assignments to enable less sophisticated students to see that their personal responses to reading are, in fact, responses to a text. I might begin by asking them to write what they would like to say to an author or character, then later ask them what the author or character might respond to them. Writing dialogues can also be a simple way to introduce students to important critical thinking skills involved in argumentation, without us-

ing the abstract conceptualizations about formal argument which many students find difficult to grasp.

At the theoretical level, dialogues which emphasize exploring ideas offer students a way to make concrete and accessible the "second self" Murray sees as essential to a writer's ability to think about her own writing (142-143). And, because written dialogues link the common elements in the reading and writing processes, the process itself and its dialogic nature, they may offer one way to achieve "the integration of literature and composition work as a joint means toward developing students' writing, reading, thinking and interpretive abilities" (464) which Bruce Petersen has identified as a significant implication of current work in reading and composition theory.

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