

Opening Dialogue

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE
AND LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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WITH

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CHAPTER 1

Dialogic Instruction: When Recitation Becomes Conversation

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Ms. Lindsay is writing on the board, trying hard to keep up with John, one of her students in this ninth-grade class, who has just read aloud his plot summary for a chapter from Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

"I had a lot of trouble," says Ms. Lindsay, "getting everything down [on the board], and I think I missed the part about trying to boycott." She reads from the board: "and tries to organize a boycott." Did I get everything down, John, that you said?"

"What about the guy who didn't really think these kids were a pest?" replies John.

"Yeah, okay," says Ms. Lindsay. "What's his name? Do you remember?" John shakes his head, indicating he can't remember.

Without waiting to be called on, Alicia, another student, volunteers, "Wasn't it Turner?"

Looking around the class, Ms. Lindsay says, "Was it Turner?"

Several students say, "Yes."

"Okay," continues Ms. Lindsay, "so Mr. Turner resisted white help. Why? Why would he want to keep shopping at that terrible store?"

John quickly answers, "There was only one store to buy from because all the other ones were white."

"Well," Ms. Lindsay objects, "the Wall Store was white too."

Another student, Tom, now addressing John, wonders, "Is it Mr. Hollings's store? Is that it?"

"No," John answers. "Here's the reason. They don't get paid till the cotton comes in. But throughout the year they still have to buy stuff—food, clothes, seed, and stuff like that. So the owner of the plantation will sign for what they buy at the store so that throughout the year they can still buy stuff on credit."

"So," Ms. Lindsay says, reading aloud what she puts up on the

board, “he has to have credit in order to buy things, and this store is the only one that will give it to him.”

Another student, Felice, speaks up. “I was just going to say, it was the closest store.”

Barely looking away from the board now, Ms. Lindsay replies while continuing to flesh out the paragraph building on the board, “Okay—it’s the closest store; it seems to be in the middle of the area; a lot of sharecroppers who don’t get paid cash—they get credit at that store—and it’s very hard to get credit at other stores. So it’s going to be very hard for her to organize that boycott; she needs to exist on credit.

“Yeah?” she says as she then nods to yet another student. Discussion continues.

In the 2 years that my colleagues and I visited hundreds of eighth- and ninth-grade literature classrooms, this brief excerpt of classroom discourse came to represent the most important qualities we found of instruction that works: that is, instruction that helps students understand literature in depth, remember it and relate to it in terms of their own experience, and—most important for literature instruction—respond to it aesthetically, going beyond the who, what, when, and why of nonfiction and literal comprehension (see Chapter 2). In this classroom, students were engaged, not merely “on task.” Unlike most, this class was not about the transmission and recitation of information, and the teacher’s role was not that of asking questions to see how much students knew and going over the points they did not yet understand. This session was about figuring things out—in class, face-to-face, teacher and students together.

Traditional teacher and learner roles here were reversed. Rather than lecturing or quizzing students about the main points, this teacher instead took notes from them about their ideas. There was no penalty for error in this class; feigning a lapse, the teacher allowed a student to help her with a character’s name. In this class, students as well as the teacher asked key questions, and in the end it was the students, not the teacher, who explained the main point.

Most instruction is about what is already known and figured out. Indeed, learning and being prepared for class typically mean reliably remembering what is already known. This class went further, and instruction here was ultimately about working collaboratively to understand what was not yet understood. Clearly this teacher took her students seriously, and clearly they knew it. Instruction of this sort is described inadequately by the main points in a lesson plan. Capturing instruction and learning of this sort requires constructing a narrative of unfolding understandings involving thoughtful interaction between and among teacher and students.

This kind of instruction, we also learned, is rare in American schools. The rhetoric and conceptual apparatus of current thinking about curriculum and instruction make it easy to be seduced into believing that instruction is improving. Big ideas and big names from sociocultural theory are alive and well at all the major conferences. Whole language and workshop approaches are more popular than ever as topics of presentations, articles, and books. Yet despite an apparent emerging consensus about the sociocultural foundations and character of literacy and classroom discourse, most schooling is organized, we found, for the plodding transmission of information through classroom recitation. Teachers talk and students listen. And the lower the track, we found, the more likely this is to be true.

American high schools are all too often “orderly but lifeless” (Goodlad, 1984; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985;Sizer, 1984). Teachers tend to avoid controversial topics, simplifying complex issues into bite-sized pieces of information distilled into countless worksheets and continual recitation. These teachers maintain control through dull, plodding coverage of content. In response, students tend to do their work but show little enthusiasm for learning, and their work is often superficial, mindless, and quickly forgotten. In the classes we observed, only about a quarter of the students participated in question-and-answer recitation, and actual discussion of the sort examined above occurred, on average, less than one minute a day. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 2, in the vast majority there was none at all. Almost all teachers’ questions, moreover, required students to recall what someone else thought, not to articulate, examine, elaborate, or revise what they themselves thought. Let’s consider an example.

In the following session, Mr. Schmidt reviews main points about *The Iliad* so that his ninth-grade students will have some basic understanding of plot, setting, and narrative.

“According to the poet,” Mr. Schmidt asks, “what is the subject of *The Iliad*?”

Mary’s hand goes up. “Achilles’ anger,” she answers when Mr. Schmidt calls on her.

But this is not the answer Mr. Schmidt is looking for. He pauses, then asks a more constrained question: “Where does the action of the first part of Book I take place when we enter the story?”

Mary does not raise her hand this time, but, after a long pause, Joshua tries, “On the Achaean ship?”

But this is not what Mr. Schmidt is after either. “Well,” he says, “they’re not on their ships. Let’s see if we can give you a little diagram.”

Corrine thinks she is catching on. “Was it on the shore?” she asks.

“Yes, it’s on the shore,” Mr. Schmidt says. “Let’s see if we can kind

of visualize where everything is here." He proceeds to draw on the board. "Remember that Troy is on the coast of Turkey—at the time called Asia Minor—so let's see if we can—okay—this is the scene, and all of the ships are anchored—a thousand ships are anchored here—Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships. So they are on the shore here, and this is the plains of Troy, a great city, and here's Troy, the great walled city. There's a big gate here. Now this is quite a few miles; it's a large plain. And the wall surrounds the city, and inside the city there are farms and whatever there is. The city can exist for a long time without ever having to go out. And periodically the Trojans come out and engage the Achaeans in battle. And at the end of the day, they go back home. They can't fight at night—they can't see anything; it's too dark. What's the point—you might be killing one of your friends—it's hard to tell one man from another. And very often if the Trojans don't feel like coming out to fight, they don't. . . . So the war has been going on now for how long?"

Hannah says, "Ten years."

Mr. Schmidt echoes Hannah, muttering "Ten years," and moves on. "You have to understand—the battle takes place only during the daytime." He then draws some more on the board. "So this is approximately what it looked like," pointing to his sketch. "Now the city is immense—much larger probably than what we consider the area of our own city; it could be as large as all of the county."

Lamar asks, "And the wall ran completely around it?"

"Yes," Mr. Schmidt says.

Joshua then asks, "Didn't they put a wall up in Ireland?"

"In Ireland?" Mr. Schmidt replies. "I'm not familiar with that."

Moving the class back on track, he continues, "So, let's take a look at some of the other questions. What's the story behind the quarrel—it deals with Achilles and Briseis and Agamemnon and Chryses and Chryses's daughter Chryseis and how Agamemnon takes Chryseis away from Achilles to replace the prize Chryseis, who has gone back to her father. What is the result of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles?"

Hannah has her hand raised, and Mr. Schmidt calls on her. "He's not going to participate in the battle anymore," she says.

Once again, Mr. Schmidt echoes Hannah, "He's not going to participate in the battle anymore," and then moves on, "What's the common custom of Greek warfare and prizes?"

Without raising his hand, Thomas begins to say, "That the prizes that they get. . .," but Mr. Schmidt goes on before he can finish. "What is Achilles' heritage?" he asks. "How does he use that power?"

There is no answer. Mr. Schmidt tries again: "How does he use the power that his mother is a goddess?"

Once again, there is no answer. After a few moments, he asks insistently, "What is the relationship between gods and men in the *Iliad*?"

It is Joshua this time. "Gods usually have power over the men no matter what."

"Okay," Mr. Schmidt acknowledges. "What else? What are some other parts of this relationship?"

Mary raises her hand. "When men give offerings when they pray."

"Okay," Mr. Schmidt says, indicating that the class is making progress, "a close, kind of a cause-and-effect relationship—you know if I do this for you I expect you to do something for me. What else? Do gods intervene in human affairs?"

"Yes," say both Hannah and Lamar.

"Specifically," replies Mr. Schmidt. "Where is an example?"

What is most striking about this recitation is the extent to which the teacher controls the discourse. Although the term *recitation* usually refers to students' oral presentation of previously learned material, this excerpt demonstrates how completely the teacher can do the actual reciting. The students play a minor and supporting role in what gets said here, mainly by responding with an occasional word or two to the teacher's periodic questions. Not always knowing whether their responses will be acceptable, they frequently hesitate; they develop no ideas of their own; they do a lot of guessing. This is a tightly scripted lesson; we get the impression that the teacher is working from a highly wrought list of topics and questions, covering particular points in a particular order (and perhaps preparing students for a test); that he has done so in the past and will do so again in the future; and that the makeup of each class affects the script very little. There is minimal interaction here between teacher and students.

It so happens that Mr. Schmidt's lesson eventually went on to something more interpretive soon after this episode. After class, he explained to us that he had deliberately quizzed students on these details of *The Iliad* as a way of "getting the facts on the table" so that the class could engage in an intelligent discussion of more interesting questions. This was his lead-in to discussing "what picture about life on Mount Olympus emerges from Book I." Many teachers in fact use recitation in just this way, and much classroom discourse, as we will examine in Chapter 2, manifests a rhythm of recitation and lecture, and sometimes includes more open-ended discussion. Most does not, however, and discussion was remarkably rare in the many classes we visited.

Recitation is by far the predominant mode of classroom discourse in American secondary schools, where it has been an idiosyncratic part of

schooling for well over a century. In a 1908 study contrasting American and European pedagogy, Burstall (1909) found that European teachers mainly used lecture to “build up new knowledge in class,” whereas American teachers, more focused on textbooks, tended to serve as “[chairmen] of a meeting, the object of which is to ascertain whether [students] have studied for themselves in a textbook” (Burstall, 1909, pp. 156, 158). The Americans prided themselves on their belief that recitations were more “democratic” than lectures because they potentially gave every student a chance to participate in lessons.

As we can see from the example above, this participation is carefully constrained. The teacher asks a series of typically unrelated questions in order to assess how much students know and do not know, as well as to check completion of assigned work and to reinforce key points. Student responses often are abbreviated and tentative—as often as not questions are answered with questions—as students try to figure out what the teacher is thinking or what someone else thought, not what they themselves think. The essential purpose of recitation, along with seatwork and study questions, is to transmit information to students and review it with them. Therefore, the teacher rarely follows up on student answers except when they are wrong, and 20% of all questions require only yes/no answers (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 14).¹ When recitation starts, remembering and guessing supplant thinking.

Listless classrooms are sometimes attributed to problems of motivation, methods, and curriculum, and no doubt many are. Yet for too long now, debates about curriculum and instruction and mental life in classrooms have been polarized by debates about which is better: teacher control or student control, direct instruction or collaborative learning. Indeed, a long tradition of research and polemic pitting of teacher versus student as the appropriate theoretical center for understanding curriculum and instruction has precluded our understanding that more basic than either teacher or student is *the relationship between them*. Lifeless instruction and reluctant student engagement and thinking may be viewed as fundamental problems of instructional discourse—of the kind of language that defines students’ interactions with their teachers, peers, and texts. Instruction is “orderly but lifeless” when the teacher predetermines most of its content, scope, and direction.

In other, far fewer, secondary classrooms—like Ms. Lindsay’s—teachers engage their students in more probing and substantive interactions, and the talk is more like conversation or discussion than recitation (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a, 1991b). In these classrooms, the teacher validates particular students’ ideas by incorporating their responses into subsequent questions, a process Collins (1982) calls “uptake.” In the give-and-take of such talk, students’ responses and not just teacher questions shape the course of talk. The discourse in these classrooms is therefore less predictable and repeatable because it is “negotiated” and jointly determined—in character, scope, and

direction—by both teachers and students as teachers pick up on, elaborate, and question what students say (Nystrand, 1990a, 1991a). Such interactions often are characterized by “authentic” questions, which are asked to get information, not to see what students know and do not know; that is, authentic questions are questions without “prespecified” answers (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a). These questions convey the teacher’s interest in students’ opinions and thoughts. Hence, in contrast to the “test questions” of recitation, or what Mehan (1979a) calls “known information questions,” they indicate the priority the teacher places on thinking and not just remembering. These “instructional conversations,” as Tharp & Gallimore (1988) call them, or “substantive conversations,” as Newmann (1990) calls them, engage students because they validate the importance of students’ contributions to learning and instruction. The purpose of such instruction is not so much the transmission of information as the interpretation and collaborative co-construction of understandings. In this kind of classroom talk, teachers take their students seriously (Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992).

Of course, instruction often falls somewhere between these two extremes of recitation on the one hand and discussion on the other. It is not uncommon for teachers to review essential points of information as a way of establishing a topic or issue that can then be discussed more interpretively. Discussions can sometimes “downshift” into review as this becomes necessary. We must be careful, too, not to define pedagogical engagement in terms of either how much students actually talk or how much time they spend on a given task, that is, time-on-task, a frequent measure of student engagement. The usefulness of such talk or time can be assessed only when the nature of the talk or task is considered. On the one hand, lectures can be useful when they respond to, anticipate, and/or engender curiosity and important student questions. On the other hand, many lively discussions are not really so free-formed but, like recitation, can be orchestrated by “right” answers, hidden agendas, and pre-ordained conclusions. All of these complications make it clear that, in the final analysis, the key features of effective classroom discourse cannot be defined only by identifying particular linguistic forms such as question types, or even the genre of classroom discourse (lecture, discussion, etc.).² Ultimately the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher–student interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious epistemic roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understandings.

DIALOGISM: A FEW PRELIMINARIES

The work of early-twentieth-century Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin is useful for understanding how verbal interactions shape the understandings

and thinking of the conversants. Bakhtin was a philosopher and literary theorist whose work recently has become a focus of great interest to researchers in language, literacy, composition, literature, and many other fields. Together with colleagues, including Vološinov, the “Bakhtin Circle” focused on how dialogue shapes both language and thought, and the perspective inspired by him (still very much under development) has come to be called *dialogism*.³ Utterances were interesting to Bakhtin because he saw that they respond to previous utterances at the same time that they anticipate future responses. In this view, discourse is continuously woven into a “chain of speech communication” by one speaker’s “responsive position” relative to another’s. For Bakhtin, even long texts such as books are ultimately parts of extended dialogues involving perhaps other texts but always other voices of all kinds. In other words, Bakhtin’s utterance is akin to what we now call a conversation turn. (Goodwin, 1981; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

Any utterance—from a short (single-word) rejoinder in everyday dialogue to the large novel or scientific treatise—has, so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end: its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others, and its end is followed by the responsive utterances of others. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 72)

Yet discourse is dialogic not because the speakers take turns, but because it is continually structured by tension, even conflict, between the conversants, between self and other, as one voice “refracts” another. It is precisely this tension—this relationship between self and other, this juxtaposition of relative perspectives and struggle among competing voices—that for Bakhtin gives shape to all discourse and hence lies at the heart of understanding as a dynamic, sociocognitive event.

A dialogic perspective on discourse and learning starts with the premise, then, that discourse is essentially structured by the interaction of the conversants, with each playing a particular social role. Instructional discourse is shaped by classroom participation structures and authority relationships (Gutierrez, 1992, 1993; Schultz, Erickson, & Florio, 1982) and by the extent of reciprocity between teachers and students (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a). This is why Ms. Lindsay initiates something far more intricate and reflective when she says, “Did I get everything down, John, that you said?” than what ensues when Mr. Schmidt asks his class, “According to the poet, what is the subject of *The Iliad*?” Mr. Schmidt’s “faceless” test question is unaffected by who is attending class, and the class’ superficial participation, as evidenced by their hesitant responses, is no doubt related to the underlying premise in this class that the content of literature is autonomous, “in the text,” and unrelated to students’ efforts aside from their correctly decoding “it.” By contrast, Ms. Lindsay’s question focuses the thinking of one particular student, but his engagement spreads to peers, who chip in their own ideas to help figure out

why Turner kept shopping at “that terrible store.” Her class operates on the premises (a) that the content of literature is not autonomous but has to be constructed by readers in engaged encounters with the text, and (b) that understandings are focused by struggles over meaning. Mr. Schmidt explains the text; Ms. Lindsay coaches her students in how to read and interpret literature.

Lotman (1988) claims that all language can be treated both dialogically and “univocally.” When utterances are treated univocally, as in recitation, focus is on the “accurate transmission of information”; when they are treated dialogically, as in discussion, they are used as “thinking devices.” Wertsch and Toma (1990) argue that the key instructional issue here is not whether language can ever be inherently dialogic or univocal, but rather whether teachers treat source texts, students’ utterances, and their own statements as either “thinking devices” or a means for transmitting information. In other words, what counts is how teachers organize instruction. According to Barnes (1976; Barnes & Schemilt, 1974), transmission-oriented instructors like Mr. Schmidt view their function as providing information to students, whereas interpretation-oriented instructors like Ms. Lindsay view their function as stimulating students to go beyond right-and-wrong answers, especially in ways that gesture toward students’ experience beyond the classroom. Wells (1993) defines the issue in terms of “the equality of participation by teachers and students in the processes of text creation” (p. 33).

The roles we establish as teachers and the interactions we undertake with our students, through our questions, responses, and assignments, inexorably set out the possibilities for meaning in our classes and, in this way, the context of learning. This is a fact of social organization. Whether we are teachers or students engaged in instruction, parents reading to our children, children teaching games to each other, motorists stopped by police, lovers sharing intimacies—whatever we say and think in these roles is shaped significantly by the social organization of the discourse and the respective roles of the conversants. A given utterance cannot be understood, Bakhtin/Medvedev (1985) writes,

outside the organized interrelationships of the [conversants]. . . . The crux of the matter is not in the subjective consciousness of the speakers . . . or what [the speakers] think, experience, or want, but in *what the objective social logic of their interrelationships demands of them*. In the final account, this logic defines the very experiences of people (their “inner speech”). (p. 153; emphasis added)

That is to say, our relations with the significant others in our lives shape our consciousness—how we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us.⁴ Even our most private thoughts—stream of consciousness, cryptic dialogues with ourselves, the ones that keep us awake at night—are ultimately reviews of and rehearsals for conversations with others. As Sperling (1991)

eloquently writes, "The cognitive drama of one's composing processes is crowded with the often fleeting shadows of others" (p. 159).

Dialogism, then, is more than a theory of interaction. Because it offers insights into human interaction as a foundation of comprehension, meaning, and interpretation, it is of special interest to educators. What is special about Bakhtin and Vološinov is the way they derive an epistemology from a conception of social interaction, relating how people make sense of things to how they interact with each other. Bakhtin believed that the meaning we give to an individual utterance always emerges in our response to and anticipation of other utterances; utterances relate to each other in much the way that questions and answers reciprocally reflect each other. As Wertsch (1985) explains, "The actual meaning of [Bakhtin's] 'word with a sideways glance' is always partially determined by the voice it is answering, anticipating, or even striving to ignore" (p. 65). A dialogic perspective on instruction highlights the role that intersecting multiple voices play in individuals' learning and the development of their understandings.

Social theories of discourse often emphasize the stable, shared meanings that bind and inform the behavior of individual members of groups. Learning is frequently characterized by such theories as the socialization of novices into these shared values and beliefs. Bakhtin's account of discourse differs from such theories by stressing interaction and the role of conflict, focusing on the dynamic processes whereby meanings unfold in the interaction of two or more conversants.⁵

THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF RECIPROCITY AND THE CONTINGENCY OF UTTERANCES

At the heart of Bakhtin's social logic is a reciprocity of roles: that is, the roles of teacher and learner (and parent and child, writer and reader, cop and speeder, lover and loved, etc.) each respectively and mutually entail those of the other, the one in effect defining the parameters of meaning and communication of the other.⁶ Social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967) regards this reciprocity as a transcendent social fact, explaining it by saying it is "assumed that the sector of the world taken for granted by me is also taken for granted by you, and even more, that it is taken for granted by 'Us'" (p. 12). This is why ostensibly individual acts such as mailing a letter (Schutz, 1967), writing (Nystrand, 1986), reading (e.g., Tierney, 1983; Tierney & LaZansky, 1980), and learning and cognitive development (Bruner, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979, 1985) are nonetheless social; each is premised on appropriate and respective acts by reciprocal others (postal workers for letter writers, readers for writers, writers for readers, teachers for learners). As

Brandt (1990) puts it, "Literacy is not a matter of learning to go it alone with language but learning to go it alone with each other" (p. 6).

In these terms, what we think and how we understand our experience always depends on how we respond to others at the same time that we anticipate their responses.⁷ For Vološinov (1973):

[W]ord is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. . . . I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. . . . A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee. (p. 86; emphasis in original)

This concept of discourse is fundamentally different from the common view that utterances are the independent expressions of thoughts by speakers, an account that starts with thoughts and ends with words and verbal articulation. Rather, because they respond to at the same time that they anticipate other utterances, they are "sequentially contingent" upon each other.⁸ Thoughts, Bakhtin contends, are never simply "garbed," or wrapped in words, by an active speaker/writer for expression, transmission, and reception by a passive listener/reader. Rather, understandings evolve—are co-constructed—in "the unique interaction between author and reader, the play of two consciousnesses" (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985, p. 128).

Since learning is significantly shaped by learners' interactions, plus the responses they anticipate from teachers, peers, and texts, a key issue concerns the dialogic potential of different kinds of instructional discourse for learning. Is all instruction equally dialogic? In recitation, for example, the teacher's voice is so dominant that such instruction seems arguably far more "monologic" than dialogic. Teachers in recitation often change topics abruptly as soon as they are satisfied with students' mastery of a particular point, and they follow up student responses mostly to evaluate them, not to elaborate student ideas. By contrast, discussion is defined by the character of its tightly interlaced comments and responses.

Yet can we validly claim that some instruction is more dialogic than others? After all, isn't the fundamental premise of dialogism that *all* language is dialogic, even discourse we might be inclined to call monologic? Even in recitation, aren't students responding to teachers' questions? Isn't this interaction? Bakhtin addressed this issue first in his discussion of authoritative, official discourse. During the 1930s, when the Writers' Union announced that all Soviet writers were expected to write "fixed-form," "party-minded" social-realist novels (see Clark & Holquist, 1984), Bakhtin published *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), contending that novels by definition can have no

fixed form since they are quintessentially novelists' orchestrations of competing voices, demonstrating what he called "heteroglossia" (many voicedness). More generally, he argued, the language and discourse of any given time and place are continuously shaped and pulled in different directions by interacting forces of stability and change. On the one hand are the "centripetal" forces of stability and canonization—rules of grammar, usage, "official genres," "correct" language, privileged ideologies; on the other hand are the "centrifugal" forces of life, experience, and the natural pluralism of language. Hence, established public "authoritative discourse" is perpetually in conflict with the "innerly persuasive discourse" of the individual; to varying degrees they resist and subvert each other. The history of language and literature, he claimed, is replete with regular efforts to resist, censor, and suppress the forces of heteroglossia in the interests of stability and canonization; as an example, he cited the Russian Orthodox Church seeking to impose a "single language of truth."⁹ Such authoritative, official discourse monologically resists communication, seeking to extinguish competing voices and all differences between the group and the individual. "Monologism, at its extreme," Bakhtin (1984) writes,

denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities. . . . Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force. . . . Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*. (pp. 292–293; emphasis in original)

Holquist (1990) characterizes such discourse as "totalitarian"—"autism for the masses" (p. 34). Yet such efforts to impose a contrived monologism, Bakhtin argued, inevitably must fail since discourse is inherently dialogic.¹⁰

STRIVING FOR MONOLOGISM

Although classroom discourse, like novels, can never be truly monologic, it can be organized and treated as though it were. Teachers regularly strive for monologism when, for example, they "prescript" both the questions they ask and the answers they accept, as well as the order in which they ask the questions. Furthermore, teachers control discussions by the topics they allow to be formulated and the "off-topics" they ignore (Eder, 1982). Recitation is tightly structured according to a pedagogical contract that Mehan (1979b) calls IRE, for teacher *initiation* (question), student *response*, and teacher *evaluation*. By evaluating student answers rather than responding to student comments and ideas, teachers effectively thwart dialogue by "control[ling] or curtail[ing] the nature of audience participation in any ongoing exchange" (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 27). Through this "banking" method of instruc-

tion, Freire (1970) claims, teachers seek to "fill students up" with all the "essential" points and all the "right" answers, and it is this content that defines the authoritative discourse of the classroom. Like all official discourse, of course, such instruction inevitably fails to mute the inherent "multivoicedness" of the classroom, which continually resists the authoritative to varying degrees. As Dyson (1989) shows, students' unofficial voices assert themselves through glances and notes, and as Daiute and Griffin (1993) point out, students frequently construct "innerly persuasive" narratives to digest what they learn. Kachur and Prendergast (see Chapter 3) treat what is commonly characterized as "off-task" student behavior as a subversion of the authoritative, official discourse of the classroom. The dialogic in such classrooms persists despite the fact that instruction in such classrooms, like the efforts of the Soviet Writer's Union of the 1930s or Bakhtin's example of the Russian Orthodox Church, is monologically organized.

Composition instructors inculcate monologism to the extent that they promote the idea that written texts are "autonomous" documents having meaning apart from both the writer and readers. Historically, teachers have done this by defining sentences as statements of "complete ideas" and by promoting an objective (third-person) diction eschewing references to both the writer (*I*) and the reader (*you*). In his influential paper, "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing," David Olson (1977) perpetuated this fallacy by arguing that the meaning of written texts, unlike spoken utterances, resides entirely in texts independently of both writers and readers. Texts are "like Popeye," he claimed: They "*say* what they *mean* and *mean* precisely, neither more nor less than, what they *say*" (Olson, 1981, p. 108; emphasis in original). Arguing for a kind of strict constructionism of text meaning, he went on to contend that, because texts, unlike utterances, are inherently "explicit," readers should only passively "decode" them, not actively interpret them; if readers allow any part of their prior knowledge or personal experience to give meaning to the text, "we charge . . . the reader with misreading the text" (Olson, 1977, p. 272).

This attempt to control text meaning by excluding the reader—and in the classroom, of course, this means students—from any role in its meaning represents an extreme monologism. It is also a premise whose validity has been soundly refuted over the last 2 decades. The reading process now is commonly understood, for example, as readers' active construction of meaning from text cues (Smith, 1971), and anyone who might read without making critical and strategic use of prior knowledge is treated as having either a basic reading disorder or a deficit in cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987), or both. From research on writing (e.g., Nystrand, 1987), we know that explicitness and elaborateness of text are totally unrelated to fullness of meaning, which is why cryptic texts such as STOP and EXIT signs are usually more explicit than

painfully elaborate IRS documents and life insurance policies. For both writing and talk, moreover, meaning is equally and critically dependent on the context of their use—this is true not only for EXIT signs, which make sense only next to doors, but also for essays, which make full sense only when read in the context of a particular debate or forum of inquiry. As I have previously argued, a text is explicit not because it says everything all by itself but rather because it strikes a careful balance between what needs to be said and what may be assumed: The writer's problem "is not just being explicit; The writer's problem is knowing what to be explicit about" (Nystrand, 1986, p. 81). Brandt (1990) shows how texts are as much about reading as they are about content: "Texts talk incessantly about the acts of writing and reading in progress. . . . What they refer to is not an explicit message but the implicit process by which intersubjective understanding is getting accomplished" (p. 4). Indeed, even Olson (1991) has abandoned all defense of his doctrine of autonomous texts, recently arguing:

Now, finally, is textual meaning really autonomous? I would acknowledge that it is not. Texts are always open to re-interpretation. . . . Not only do their meanings change as contexts change but also the textual or sentence meanings change as cultural conventions change. So there is no absolute meaning of a text. Nor is there one true intention of which a text is a fragmentary expression. (p. 19)

If a new consensus among researchers affirms that all discourse—not just conversation but also writing—is categorically dialogic, the message has largely been lost on the schools, however. Cazden (1988) argues that schools continue to focus on decontextualized skill exercises and engage students in writing tasks independent of any actual communicative context. How are we to explain this discrepancy between what seems to be the case about discourse and what seems to be the case about instruction? The only way to understand this paradox, Cazden contends, is to view the doctrine of autonomous text as a prevailing myth: a contention of dubious validity that nonetheless sustains and "justifies decontextualized exercises for the practice of generic skills of explicitness" (p. 120). In short, although all discourse is inherently dialogic, it can be treated—and regularly is—as though it were monologic. This is how many teachers—whether in recitation or in the doctrine of autonomous texts—strive for monologism in the classroom.

In monologically organized instruction, the main loss is that, when teachers make no public classroom space for student voices—no "ample space for 'unofficial worlds'" within the "official world" of the school, as Dyson (1993, p. 19) puts it—they miss many "teachable moments" by not responding to their students in timely, fortuitous ways. As Rosen (1992) argues, "It is necessary to insist again and again on the need to disrupt the authoritative voice with the unheard voices of our students, to help them engage in the diffi-

cult struggles . . . to articulate, develop, refine and advance their meanings as against the mere reproduction of words of the textbook, the worksheet, the encyclopedia and the guides" (p. 127, quoted in Cazden, in press). For example, in monologically organized instruction, the textbook and teacher's voice are the main voices, whereas in dialogically organized instruction, teachers make some public space for unofficial student voices; consequently, the discourse is more balanced so that the teacher's voice is but one voice among many, albeit a critical one.

The fundamental issues in a dialogic conception of instruction concern the scope of public classroom space for student voices and how various teacher roles and moves enhance, constrain, and otherwise affect the interpretive roles and therefore the learning of students. Key questions include:

- How does classroom discourse define what counts as knowledge in a given class?
- How does the public arrangement of classroom discourse establish and sustain epistemic roles like remembering and thinking, and how in turn do these affect learning?
- How do students manage these roles?
- What characterizes the chains of understanding that teachers initiate and sustain with their students?
- How can teachers organize classroom discourse to enhance their students' learning?

Questions such as these are the central focus of the study reported in this and the following chapters.

CLASSROOM CONTRACTS AND THE TERMS OF LEARNING

As we examine the organization of instruction, we discover that pedagogical "contracts"—what Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) call "treaties" between teachers and students, and what Gutierrez (1991) calls "instructional scripts"—vary greatly and that their character significantly affects student learning. These instructional arrangements, Gutierrez (1992) shows, determine discourse patterns, rules of participation, and the nature of classroom interaction. In too many classrooms, Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) tell us, teachers essentially agree not to demand too much, and students more or less agree to comply. As we have seen, such classes typically are devoted to the accurate transmission and recall of information and are largely characterized by lecture, recitation, seatwork, worksheets, study questions, and tests. In recitation, the teacher, following a prescribed checklist of questions, in-

formation, and concepts, sticks closely to a preplanned list of test questions rather than responding to the substance of what students say (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a). Students typically give short, frequently tentative answers (Nystrand, 1991a). Topic shifts can be abrupt as the teacher moves down a checklist of important points, as it were, making sure students remember them. As a result, the discourse frequently is choppy and lacks coherence—it is “the oral equivalent of short-answer questions and filling in blanks” (Nystrand, 1991b, p. 7). Carlsen (1991) speculates that teachers control discourse topics and student participation by manipulating the pace of questioning and the time they wait before asking subsequent questions, keeping discussion “on target,” for example, through fast-paced questioning. The participation structure in these classrooms, so completely dominated by the teacher and text, is one-sided and monologic. Students respond to teachers’ questions, but teachers, more often than not, respond only by moving on to the next question. Indeed, the very structure of recitation effectively serves to thwart dialogue by “control[ing] or curtail[ing] the nature of audience participation in any ongoing exchange” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 27). As Heath (1978) and others note, student participation is mainly procedural (see also Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989; Moll, 1990; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991a).

The contract underlying this unique three-part exchange, which exists only in instructional situations—including parent-child interactions in middle-class homes (Heath, 1983)—has several key provisions. First, knowledge is a given, and its source is the teacher or textbook, never students: The teacher prescripts and monitors all the answers. The teacher initiates all topics of discussion and determines what is worth knowing (defined as remembering). Knowledge is treated as fixed, objective, autonomous; for students it is given, transmitted, and received—what Rommetveit (1974) terms “stable concepts and referents” derived independently of students prior to class and typically compiled in lesson plans and curriculum guides. The epistemic role of students under the terms of such contracts is limited to remembering what others, especially teachers and textbooks, have said, not figuring things out (aside from which answers are correct) and not generating any new knowledge.

If students are to become substantively engaged, they must do more than comply with the procedures of classroom interaction. Freire (1970) claims that this happens best when teachers pose problems that students can, through critical thinking, relate to their own experience, in dialogic terms weaving their learning into a chain of utterances emanating from their lives. The result is “substantive engagement,” a sustained commitment to and involvement with academic content and issues. In classes characterized by such engagement, recitation becomes something more like the conversation in Ms.

Lindsay’s classroom, where teachers and students explore issues in depth. In dialogic instruction, there is more give-and-take between teachers and students, particularly concerning the substance of discussion. This is reciprocity. Students not only answer questions; they also make points and contribute to discussions. “In a good conversation,” Britton (1970) once wrote, “the participants profit from their own talking . . . , from what others contribute, and above all from the interaction—that is to say, from the enabling effect of each upon the others” (p. 173). Compared with recitation, dialogic instruction involves fewer teacher questions and more conversational turns as teachers and students alike contribute their ideas to a discussion in which their understandings evolve. Unlike recitation, dialogic instruction is less prescribed since the actual conduct, direction, and scope of the discussion depend on what students as well as teachers contribute and especially on their interaction. As a result, dialogic instruction is more coherent, more sustained and in-depth, and more thematic than recitation.¹¹

The terms of discourse contracts in these classrooms significantly involve thinking and grappling on the spot with new problems, including some the teacher may not have considered yet. Students may be sources of knowledge. Knowledge is something generated, constructed, indeed co-constructed in collaboration with others. Students figure out, not just remember. The teacher’s role is to moderate, direct discussion, probe, foresee, and analyze the implications of student responses. Whereas knowledge in recitation is prescribed, knowledge during discussion unfolds, a process that values personal knowledge and accordingly promotes student ownership.

This is not to say that recitation is noninteractive. As noted earlier, the teacher asks questions, students make responses, and the teacher often evaluates the responses (see Lemke, 1988; Wells, 1993). Nor can we claim that such interactions are totally lacking in reciprocity. A more useful characterization is Heath’s (1978) distinction between *procedural display* and *substantive engagement*. In procedural display, reciprocity is limited to classroom rules and regulations, and students seem mainly to be “doing school”; such instruction is characterized by choppy discourse and tentative, truncated student responses. Compared with the substantive engagement of discussion, which consists of conversation-like exchanges between the teacher and students and among peers, however, the interaction of recitation is superficial and procedural: Merely going through the motions of school, students quickly forget what they’ve learned. If we distinguish dialogically organized instruction as somehow more fully interactive than monologically organized instruction, interaction must be understood as more than a behavioral sequence or procedure in which one turn follows another. Such interaction between teacher and students also must configure (intermingle) or reconfigure the respective

purposes and perspectives of the conversants; it must *effect a transformation of shared knowledge* (Nystrand, 1990b). That is, rather than filling students up with what they don't know, the focus is on starting with and expanding existing understandings. In these terms, recitation fails the test of dialogicality since it is based not on teachers and students actively sharing knowledge but rather on teachers reviewing the status of previous student knowledge. Discussion engenders discourse; recitation elicits a performance.

In its emphasis on reciprocity, contracts, and intersubjectivity, dialogism sometimes is misunderstood as a philosophy of untroubled egalitarianism in discourse — an “I’m okay — you’re okay,” happy, hopeful world where the conversants inevitably put aside their differences to revel in synch in an orgy of cooperation, mutuality, and untroubled assent. Yet Bakhtin teaches us that it is conflict, not harmony, that fuels response: The struggle of multiple, competing voices is the irreducible social fact of all discourse.¹² This is why monologically organized instruction, by seeking to suppress this diversity, risks disengaged, off-task students. As teachers, we know (as do our students) the inevitable dead end of assignments requiring students to explain things we already know — all those things our dialogically astute students know we know. Good students play along, of course, so that we can tell that they know that *we* know that *they* know what we know! Perfectly shared understanding precludes the need for authentic discourse; it is precisely this kind of lifeless, inauthentic discourse — dances with teachers, we might call it — that characterizes the most ineffective classrooms (Nystrand, 1993).

In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, dialogically organized instruction provides public space for student responses, accommodating and frequently intermingling teacher–student voices representing differing values, beliefs, and perspectives, and ideally including the voices of different classes, races, ages, and genders. Dialogically organized instruction is fueled by such pluralism and heteroglossia, and the extent of social interactiveness clearly shapes both instruction and learning. Monologically organized instruction such as the recitation in Mr. Schmidt's lesson occupies the low end of this dialogic continuum, whereas discussion and conversation-like discourse like Ms. Lindsay's occupy the high end. Recitation involves interaction that is superficial and procedural since it typically fails to affect the substance of the discourse, which is prescribed by the teacher. In dialogically organized instruction, teacher–student interaction extends to the substance of the discourse, so that multiple perspectives offered by teacher, students, and course readings all affect the shared understandings that the class collectively negotiates. Table 1.1 summarizes these distinctions between monologically organized and dialogically organized instruction.

Table 1.1. Key Features of Monologically and Dialogically Organized Instruction

	Monologically Organized Instruction	Dialogically Organized Instruction
Paradigm	Recitation	Discussion
Communication model	Transmission of knowledge	Transformation of understandings
Epistemology	Objectivism: Knowledge is a given	Dialogism: Knowledge emerges from interaction of voices
Source of valued knowledge	Teacher, textbook authorities: Excludes students	Includes students' interpretations and personal experience
Texture	Choppy	Coherent

HOW DISCOURSE SHAPES LEARNING

Let us return to the examples of classroom discourse at the start of this chapter to examine more closely how teacher–student interaction is related to student learning. A given discourse begins when the first conversant initiates a mutual frame of reference. In doing so, the initial conversant seeks to establish not only the topic of discourse but also her relationship with the other conversants and the scope of talk.¹³ For example, Ms. Lindsay's initial question, “Did I get everything down, John, that you said?” establishes John's interpretation as the topic of discourse, and her role as coach in procedures for interpreting a literary text. Mr. Schmidt's initial question, “According to the poet, what is the subject of *The Iliad*?” establishes basic information about *The Iliad* as the topic of discourse, and his role as expert examiner.

The character of discourse in these lessons then unfolds as students respond to the respective questions and teachers respond to the students in turn. In Ms. Lindsay's class, student understandings become elaborated and fleshed out. In Mr. Schmidt's class, the monologic character of recitation precludes such development; no student ideas are elaborated. Students respond to his questions, but he does not follow up on anything they say. Indeed, when Mary replies that *The Iliad* is about “Achilles' anger,” he responds by rephrasing his question to avoid anything so interpretive. “Where does the action of the first part of Book I take place?” he asks. Yet understandings develop, Bakhtin shows us, only when responses are sequentially contingent — teachers responding to students, not just students to teachers. Too often in recitation, the teacher moves on to the next question just as soon as a student demonstrates what she knows. This is one of the ways monologic instruction consistently short-circuits the development of ideas (Nystrand,

1991c). Depth of understanding requires elaboration of the learner's, not the teacher's, interpretive framework, and it is the important purpose of dialogic instruction to promote just such development. When teachers ask authentic questions—encouraging individual interpretations—they open the floor to student ideas for examination, elaboration, and revision. When teachers help students read literature on their own terms and values, reading also becomes authentic and helps students examine, elaborate, and revise their ideas. In Smith's (1971) terms, comprehension is enhanced when the teacher encourages students to work from a store of personal knowledge; in so doing, students are able more easily to predict the information of the text. Literature especially offers such possibilities since, as Rosenblatt (1938) shows, literature potentially enhances the fullness and quality of interactions between the world of the reader and the world of the text (see also Langer, 1995).

In the first example at the beginning of this chapter, Ms. Lindsay clearly establishes the dialogic character of instruction. She does this by taking notes from a student rather than, as is the more usual format, by making the points that students are expected to take down in notes of their own. It is precisely her responsiveness to John's ideas that permits their elaboration. Unlike typical recitation in which the teacher assesses how much students know, this lesson is more a discussion in which the teacher guides the students' investigation of a particular character's motivation. Hence, the teacher's evaluation of John's response here is high level and student centered. This is evident when Ms. Lindsay says, "I had a lot of trouble getting everything down [on the board], and I think I missed the part about trying to boycott. . . . Did I get everything down, John, that you said?" Here, the teacher's evaluation, implicit in her acting as class secretary for John's ideas, which she writes on the board, is high level because it validates John's ideas and puts them into the play of discussion. High-level evaluations often follow authentic questions; both are thinking devices by which teachers dialogically open the floor to student ideas.

In these ways, Ms. Lindsay and her students proceed to make sense of a topic—"the guy who didn't really think these kids were a pest"—that a student, not the teacher, has established. With classmates' help, this person is identified as Turner, and the teacher then moves to examine Turner's motivation for "shopping at that terrible store." John first suggests that "there was only one store to buy from because all the other ones were white," but the teacher objects that "the Wall Store was white too." After examining additional claims, the class finally arrives at an expanded understanding of this event.

Teachers often follow up student responses by elaborating important implications they see. Teachers sometimes turn some of these elaborations into didactic or instructive elucidations—little set pieces—of important points in

a prescribed lesson plan that students should not miss. Others are more serious explorations of lines of inquiry opened up by students. When the latter occur, we may say that teacher evaluation is high level: The teacher notes the importance of a student's response in shaping a new understanding, and the course of interactions changes somewhat because of what the student has said. That is, evaluation is high when a student contributes something new to the discussion that modifies the topic in some way, and is so acknowledged by the teacher. Specifically, high-level evaluation consists of two parts.

1. The teacher's certification of the response (e.g., Ms. Lindsay: "I had a lot of trouble getting everything down [on the board], and I think I missed the part about trying to boycott.")
2. The teacher's incorporation of the response into the discourse of the class, usually in the form of either an elaboration (or commentary) or a follow-up question (e.g., "Did I get everything down, John, that you said?")

For level of evaluation to be high, the evaluation must be more than "Good," "Good idea," or a mere repeating of the student's answer. The teacher must push the student's contribution further, validating it in such a way that it affects the subsequent course of the discussion. When a teacher's evaluation is high level, the student really "gets the floor," as John does. Hence, high-level evaluation, like authentic questions, directly affects the dialogicality of teacher-student interaction.

In contrast to recitation, dialogic instruction results in mutual understandings worked out through class interaction. These discussions are often unique, reflecting the particular views and convictions of the mix of teacher and students in a given class; this is the reason teachers are sometimes surprised and puzzled to find they cannot repeat the same "hot" discussion with subsequent classes.¹⁴ Although such discussions can seem at times highly inefficient ways of teaching—after all, couldn't Ms. Lindsay simply have explained quickly why Mr. Turner continued to shop at that same awful store?—dialogic instruction treats such interaction as an essential prerequisite to learning.

The following transcript of a ninth-grade English lesson on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provides another example of dialogic instruction. In this review session, Ms. Turner elicits student responses to a series of questions about racism in the novel.

"Can you recall things from *Huck Finn* that, um, seemed racist to you?" Ms. Turner asks.

She calls on Tasha, who says, "Miss Watson's . . . that guy she's always calling 'Miss Watson's nigger.'"

"Okay, Jim?" Ms. Turner says.

"Well," he says, "they sell the slaves. . . . Also, they said in one part, 'Fetch in the nigger!'"

"Yeah," Ms. Turner says as Jim continues, "and it's like, you know, it's like you're saying to a dog, 'Here, boy!'"

"Right," Ms. Turner says, now recalling Twain's words: "'We fetched in the niggers to have prayers' — yeah, that's in probably the first couple of pages. Good. Sam?"

"Isn't [Twain] being historically accurate when he says 'those niggers'?" asks Sam.

"Oh, yes, absolutely," replies Ms. Turner.

Sam quickly asks, "So why is it racist?"

Pausing briefly, Ms. Turner says, "Well, this, that's kind of what I was trying to bring out on the first day, is that Twain is really just trying to mirror the society, and especially the society of . . . Missouri . . . at the time . . . but Twain is using the word rather sarcastically. I mean, you're right, he's being historically accurate, but he's also trying to make a point, um, about the different people who are saying things like that. How did that make you guys feel, I mean what was your gut reaction to all that? Linda?"

"Ashamed," says Linda.

"In what way?" asks Ms. Turner.

Linda continues. "That the one that it was for was . . . wanted to believe that it was something else."

Ms. Turner nods to Cassie, who has something to add. "Everyone claims it's so historical, you can find that anywhere . . . 'nigger,' you know, you just hear that . . . and people always think . . . it's so historical."

"Like, oh, we wouldn't do that anymore," Ms. Turner suggests.

"Yeah, like oh, we're not primitive," continues Cassie. "You know, and it's not, I mean, everybody does that, all the time. Well, not everybody, but people, people do that . . . people can't get in[to] apartment buildings because they're black."

"Um-hm," says Ms. Turner.

"They can't go to certain stores because they're black," Jim continues, "or they're arrested because they're black . . . you know, it's just, I mean, everybody is always saying how historical it is, and it's right here, and it's right now. . . ."

In all of the excerpts of ninth-grade literature instruction we have examined, the teachers seek to help students understand an important but complicated facet of the work they are teaching: Ms. Lindsay works on charac-

ter motivation in *Roll of Thunder*, Mr. Schmidt teaches students details of Achaean-Trojan battle and the relationship of gods and men in *The Iliad*, and Ms. Turner focuses on racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Each session elicits student recall.

Beyond this, however, Ms. Lindsay's and Ms. Turner's sessions differ from Mr. Schmidt's in important ways. Unlike Mr. Schmidt's test questions, the two women's questions are often authentic. Whereas Mr. Schmidt's first question is, "According to the poet, what is the subject of *The Iliad*?" Ms. Lindsay's first question concerns John's interpretation of character motivation, and Ms. Turner's first question is, "Can you recall things from *Huck Finn* that seemed racist to you?" In the last case, the teacher establishes the topic of discourse (racism in *Huck Finn*) and encourages students to treat it in their own terms. Hence, while the topic is the teacher's, many of the elaborations are the students'. The shared understandings that the latter two teachers achieve with their students are negotiated in the unfolding discourse of the class session. This dialogic process of co-construction is clearly evident in the fact that Ms. Lindsay's and Ms. Turner's students, unlike Mr. Schmidt's, are very active: Whereas the average student response in Mr. Schmidt's class is only about 5 words in length, responses in Ms. Turner's class average nearly 17 words.¹⁵ Mr. Schmidt shifts topics with almost every question, whereas the other teachers sustain topics throughout the responses of several students; hence, topics in the latter two sessions receive multiple elaborations. Compared with the choppy nature of Mr. Schmidt's lesson, the other two lessons are far more coherent.

Mr. Schmidt's questions emphasize what Lotman (1988) calls the "univocal" function of *The Iliad*; hence, his main concern is reviewing basic information with students, who will need to recall it. The other two lessons, by contrast, have a more conceptual orientation (focusing on character motivation in the first, racism in the second), which is why Ms. Lindsay and Ms. Turner emphasize the dialogic function of their questions as well as student responses, treating student responses and comments in turn as "thinking devices," to use Lotman's (1988) term. Mr. Schmidt keeps students on a tight leash, as it were, holding them to "the facts." By contrast, the other teachers deliberately go out of their way to elicit and probe sustained student responses — indeed, this is precisely Ms. Turner's central purpose — and, by the end, each class's understanding of the respective novel is a co-construction. Instead of focusing on information to be received, encoded, and stored, Ms. Lindsay and Ms. Turner "take an active stance toward [what their students say] by questioning and extending [their utterances], by incorporating them into their own . . . utterances" (Wertsch & Toma, 1990, p. 13). For example, when John asks, "What about the guy who didn't really think these kids were a pest?" Ms. Lindsay turns the questions back on the class ("Yeah, okay,

What's his name? Do you remember?"). Ms. Turner, when asked if Twain wasn't "being historically accurate when he says 'those niggers,'" notes, "Well, this, that's kind of what I was trying to bring out on the first day, . . . that Twain is really just trying to mirror the society. . . ." Both Ms. Lindsay and Ms. Turner go to greater lengths than Mr. Schmidt to integrate students' responses into an unfolding understanding.

This is not to say, of course, that the discussions are totally freewheeling and unguided by the teacher. The teachers all move classroom talk in particular directions. Nonetheless, even when Ms. Turner alludes to points she made in previous classes ("That's kind of what I was trying to bring out on the first day"), it seems done less for the purposes of transmitting information (this session doesn't seem to be a review for a test) than to probe and elaborate an understanding of racism in *Huck Finn*.

If, in Mr. Schmidt's lesson, it is students who do little more than periodically chime in on cue to help him make his points, it is the other teachers who prop up and shepherd student elaborations into the mainstream of an unfolding discourse. The focus of Mr. Schmidt's lesson is a set of points he has prepared to make; the focus of the other classes is the process of interpreting the text and giving it meaning. For Mr. Schmidt, the meaning of the text is fixed and precedes the class hour; in Vološinov's (1976) terms, it is "finished off" independently of the students whose main task, in the view of the teacher, is to figure it out or, more accurately in this case, take it in as he explains it to them. Bakhtin (1984) specifically called such discourse "pedagogical dialogue."

In an environment of . . . monologism the genuine interaction of consciousness is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well. In essence idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousnesses: someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and a pupil, which, it follows, can only be a pedagogical dialogue. (p. 81)

Epistemologically, knowledge in such pedagogical dialogues is treated as a given—completely objective, existing apart from the knowers (students) and prior to class.¹⁶ Ms. Lindsay and Ms. Turner, by contrast, view reading as a meaning-making event in which students do not simply discover the meaning of the text but rather must interpret it in light of their own personal experience and expectations. They skillfully use classroom interaction not as a way to see whether students know the right answers, but rather as a way of instructing and rehearsing students in processes of interpretation. Instruction in these classes is based on the premise, as Bruner (1981) puts it, that actual meanings emanate not from abstract concepts or dictionary definitions but

rather from an unfolding chain of references "whose last link is the present speaker" (p. 170). Knowledge here is partly what Polanyi (1958) called personal, involving investment in and commitment to valued beliefs and truths. Here the meaning of the text unfolds; it is not yet "finished off." By posing problems, these teachers act as midwives facilitating processes of interpretation. When a student says, with considerable hesitation, "Everyone claims it's so historical, you can find that anywhere . . . 'nigger,' you know, you just hear that . . . and people always think . . . it's so historical," the teacher helps by rephrasing, "Like, oh, we wouldn't do that anymore." Then a student, in turn, continues, "Yeah, like oh, we're not primitive. You know, and it's not, I mean, everybody does that, all the time. Well, not everybody, but people, people do that . . . people can't get in[to] apartment buildings because they're black." At this point, the discourse becomes fully conversational.

The contrast between these monologic and dialogic lessons is clarified still further when we examine the roles of the conversants in the discourse structure of each exchange. Consider, for example, the respective roles of teacher and students in initiating discourse topics, or what is talked about, and sustaining their elaboration. Mr. Schmidt's session is essentially a monologue, with the teacher responsible for both topics and elaborations; student comments are largely peripheral. By contrast, as noted above, the other two are more like conversations, with students elaborating a sizable share of the commentary; teacher and students share control over the discourse. The teacher's questions and comments frequently depend, moreover, on student responses, and vice versa. What particular students say affects the course of Mr. Schmidt's class very little, if at all, whereas the shape of the other two depends significantly on what students in those classes say.

In short, Mr. Schmidt's lesson differs from the others entirely in the respective roles of teacher and students. In his class, the teacher makes all the substantive points, while students' roles are limited to the procedural requirements of recitation; when called on, they try to provide the correct answers. By contrast, students in the other classes are expected to provide thoughtful answers based on their own experience, including their reading of the text. If recitation is organized to identify and correct what students do *not* know, dialogic instruction starts with what students *do* know or intuit (e.g., their understanding of racism), and progressively modifies and/or expands this understanding. As Bakhtin (1984) writes:

The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*. . . . Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (p. 110; emphasis in original)

Whereas monologically organized instruction seeks to transmit information, dialogic instruction works by cultivating knowledge—transforming understandings through reflection and talk (Bickard, 1987).

Gutierrez (1991, 1992, 1993) argues that these different patterns of teacher–student interaction, which she calls “instructional scripts,” define significantly different instructional contexts affecting (a) rules and rights of lesson participation, (b) the social hierarchy and relationships among teachers and students, and (c) epistemology, that is, whether knowledge is “pre-cast” and transmitted by the teacher or dynamically co-constructed through classroom interaction. Gutierrez (1993) sums up the respective features of monologic recitation and dialogic exchanges, which she calls “responsive-collaborative script,” as follows:

Recitation

Gutierrez (1993) summarizes the following features of recitation:

- Classroom talk follows strict IRE discourse pattern.
- Teacher selects student speakers.
- Teacher shows little or no acknowledgment of students’ self-selections.
- Teacher initiates subtopics.
- Teacher discourages or ignores students’ attempts to introduce other subtopics.
- Student responses tend to be short (one word/phrase); teacher does not encourage response elaboration, and there is minimal expansion of students’ responses by teacher.
- Teacher initiates test-like questions for which there is generally only one correct answer and indicates implied goal is to contribute specific “right” answers to teacher’s questions. (fig. 1)

Dialogic Exchange

Gutierrez (1993) discusses the following features of dialogic exchange, or, in her words, “responsive-collaborative script” (pp. 12–14):

- Activity and discourse boundaries are significantly relaxed with more student responses between teacher initiation and evaluation; also student responses occasionally build on previous responses (chained) and contribute to the construction of shared knowledge.
- Teacher frames and facilitates the activity and can respond at any time, but keeps utterances and intervention to a minimum.

- There is minimal teacher selection of students: Students either self-select or select other students.
- Teacher and students negotiate subtopics of discussion.
- Teacher indicates implied goal as developing shared knowledge, but still includes a preference for correct information.
- Teacher and students initiate questions for which there are no specific correct answers as well as questions that are constructed from students’ previous responses.
- Teacher sometimes acknowledges students’ topic expansions as well as teacher’s and other students’ incorporation of these expansions into the ongoing lesson.

Looking at teacher–student interaction in this way enables us to build on well-established findings that preschool children’s language and cognitive development are conditioned by the language and social environment of their families. In research on preschool (emergent) literacy, for example, many studies have documented the indirect effects of a rich home discourse environment on developing literacy skills. These studies have examined the role of bedtime stories in the emergent literacy of young children (Heath, 1980); the contexts in which preschoolers explore interests in writing and reading (e.g., Bissex, 1980; Gundlach, 1982; Scollon & Scollon, 1980; Teale & Sulzby, 1986); the traditions and messages that parents transmit to their children about the uses of print (Heath, 1983); and the game interactions of parents and children (Wertsch & Hickmann, 1987). In school itself, we know that learning is readily undermined when some groups of students are marginalized by the academic life of the school. Consider, for example, the plight of urban Black students whose teachers often conclude from their African American English vernacular—fallaciously regarded as “ungrammatical” (Labov, 1969)—that they are unintelligent and unmotivated, and who are inauspiciously placed in remedial classes and vocational tracks as a result. Or consider the special difficulties that Mexicanos/as (immigrants raised in Mexico and now living in the United States) experience as they encounter and accommodate the expository language forms indigenous to middle-class American academics (Farr & Elías-Olivares, 1988). These many studies affirm that, in order to track and understand the path of writing development in individual children, it is not enough to track the evolution of written forms, norms, and textual features. Beyond these, researchers must focus more comprehensively on children’s interactions with others, which is to say, on the social context of their learning, which sanctions their reading and writing and consequently promotes values and expectations that are essential to literacy.

WHY INTERACTIVE DISCOURSE PROMOTES LEARNING

Why, then, should dialogically organized instruction promote learning? First, both the character and tone of classroom discourse set important expectations for learning. As a genre of classroom discourse, for example, sustained classroom discussion validates students as important sources of knowledge and stimulates modes of cognition (thinking and not just remembering) that differ from those of recitation. Furthermore, when teachers ask questions about what students are thinking (and not just to see whether students have done their homework), and when they ask questions about students' previous answers, they promote fundamental expectations for learning by seriously treating students as thinkers, that is, by indicating that what students think is important and worth examining. Hence, the quality of classroom discourse is important because it establishes a suitable climate for learning and communicates teachers' expectations for their students' thinking.

Good discourse facilitates learning, moreover, by promoting students' engagement with their studies. When teachers ask students to explain their thinking and not just report someone else's, they treat each student as a primary source of information, thereby giving the students an opportunity to deal with things in their own frames of reference. Cognitive psychology has long known that learning is promoted when students can relate what they must learn to what they already know (Miller, 1956; Wittrock, 1990). It follows then that effective instruction will help students make the best use of what they already know. This is merely a way of saying that students learn best when instruction is coherent. Cognitively, this coherence benefits students because it increases the degree to which information is "thematized" and thereby promotes "chunking" of information (Miller, 1956), which, in recitation, too often tends to remain disparate and unrelated. Wittrock (1990; Wittrock & Alesandrini, 1990) shows that students' retention of new information is enhanced when they are able to relate it to their personal experience and especially when they do so in their own words. Pressley and his colleagues (Pressley, Wood, Woloshyn, Martin, King, & Menke, 1992) show that understanding and retention also are promoted by opportunities for self-generated elaborations. Discussion and interactive discourse promote learning because they elicit relatively sustained responses from students. By helping students weave various bits and pieces of information into coherent webs of meaning, dialogically organized instruction promotes retention and in-depth processing associated with the cognitive manipulation of information.

We may usefully categorize instructional discourse—writing, reading, and classroom talk—according to the extent to which it engenders a dialogue between new and old, encouraging students to digest what they do not yet know (the new information and skills they must learn) in terms of the famil-

iar—their unofficial worlds, experience, and values. Certain kinds and features of classroom talk and writing assignments (e.g., discussion, authentic questions, journals, drafts, "learning logs," as we shall see in Chapter 4) afford far more opportunity and flexibility than others (e.g., most exams and essays used for examining purposes) for students to contextualize and assimilate new information. These particular kinds of instructional discourse are therefore potentially engaging.

In short, how students think—indeed the extent to which they really need to think in school—and consequently what they can learn depend a lot on how their teachers respond to their students' responses. This is the most fundamental way that classroom discourse shapes student learning: Specific modes or genres of discourse engender particular epistemic roles for the conversants, and these roles, in turn, engender, constrain, and empower their thinking. The bottom line for instruction is that the quality of student learning is closely linked to the quality of classroom talk. If we are to understand the structure of discourse in our classrooms and its relationship to our students' learning, then, we must look closely at the interactions and exchanges that constitute what Cazden (1988) calls "the language of learning." The insights we gain will enhance the learning potential of our instruction. The following chapters examine these ideas in empirical terms, focusing on the role of classroom and school discourse in student learning by contrasting the respective effects of monologically and dialogically organized instruction on learning.