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## **Dialogic Conversations in an Embedded Literacy Assessment Field Experience**

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In recent decades, assessment has been at the forefront of literacy research and education. In some instances, assessment focuses on a static collection of facts which are passively learned through drill and practice and over-specified learner outcomes (Altwerger, 2005; Wolf, Bixby, Glen & Gardner, 1991). Quantifying literacy ability has been used for gatekeeping to move on to higher levels or the next stage of education (Hargreaves, Earl & Schmidt, 2001). In this view, the decision-making power resides with the assessor (Torrence, 1995). In other instances, assessment is understood as a dynamic process of inquiry which requires teachers to gather and analyze diverse forms of information in an ongoing and daily process. The purpose of assessment is to create classrooms, schools, and communities that are “centers of inquiry where students, teachers, and other members of the school community examine, individually and collaboratively, their learning and ways to improve their practice” (NCTE, 2009). Assessment as dynamic inquiry builds on a conception of literacy as social practice that extends through interaction with others and stands in sharp contrast to positivist assessment methods that quantify literacy ability.

Preservice teachers often come into teacher education programs with a positivist view of assessment, which may have developed during their own schooling experiences. For this reason, purposefully constructed course work and field experiences must be offered to enable them reframe their conceptions of literacy assessment and to complicate the assessment practices that

have become most familiar to them through their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, p. 61). In the teacher preparation program described in this paper, the aim is to intentionally counter the positivist testing culture and invest in helping pre-service teachers come to understand assessment’s potential to disrupt the positivist, standardized, one-right-answer culture. The goal is to help preservice teachers understand assessment as a multi-faceted, dynamic process of inquiry, which requires teachers to understand the primary purpose of assessment: to improve learning and teaching and to recognize assessment as an on-going process of collecting and analyzing diverse forms of information (NCTE, 2009).

This investigation considered how preservice teachers developed their views of assessment when engaging in responsive teaching pedagogy (Mills & O’Keefe, 2007; Owocki & Goodman, 2002; Stephens & Story, 1999) and ethnographic views of assessment (Taylor, 1995). Underlying these assessment practices is the purposeful and systematic use of qualitative data to understand children’s literacy learning. Through collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and then discussing what they found, preservice teachers deepen their understandings of literacy and reconstruct their beliefs and assumptions about literacy assessment in ways that ultimately impact their instructional decisions.

In order to find out how teachers’ views of literacy assessment developed, four university instructors collaborated in a self-study of an elementary literacy assessment course designed for preservice teachers. Through the course of one semester, preservice teachers transformed their perceptions of assessment and teaching. The study question was: How do preservice teachers develop an understanding assessment as a dynamic process of inquiry?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1962) informed the study. In this view, learning is understood as being inherently social, with students learning through interaction with others and by drawing extensively upon their backgrounds and linguistic knowledge to construct new understandings. Social interactions such as group learning engagements and discussion allow students to collectively construct new understandings. The connection between language use and learning Halliday (1975) requires time for students to talk with one another and reflect on their experiences. Instruction is planned to facilitate new learning at the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) based on careful observation of students.

Dialogism is an epistemological approach to understanding language and learning that describes a process of internalizing new concepts as ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981). Juzwick (2004) described it as a process of negotiation among contested positions, ideologies and social languages. Through this process, meaning is achieved in the context of struggle. Bakhtinian dialogism is an epistemological approach to understanding language and learning. Reframing established conceptions is a difficult process and must proceed through experience and dialogue. Students must have opportunities to engage with new ideas and be given time to work out the concepts through dialogue with others. Preservice teachers must engage with assessment as inquiry because “it is in the dialogue that arises from inquiry and is realized in ‘knowing together’ that individual understanding is most powerfully enhanced” (Wells, 2007, p. 271).

## **Methods**

Sociocultural learning theory and Bakhtin’s ideological becoming are congruent with self-study in teacher education. Learning is constructed, imbued with meaning, and related to social contexts. Learning is dialogic, taking place within a larger historical context of other learners and

teachers and through a process of ideological development which necessitates self-reflection.

Therefore, this qualitative study engaged the tradition of self-study in teacher education (Zeichner, 1999, 2007) and action research methods (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). Samaras and Freese (2009) state that self-study is characterized as research that:

- focuses on improvement on both personal and professional levels, builds on the personal processes of reflection and inquiry, and makes these open to the public for critique;
- requires collaboration for building new understandings through dialogue and validation of findings;
- requires openness and vulnerability since the focus is on self; and
- is designed to lead to the reframing and reconceptualization of the role of the teacher (p. 5).

Primary data sources are the collaborative discussions among four teacher educators, focus group interviews with pre-service teachers, and course materials. These were analyzed to build new understandings and to validate the findings. The collaborative nature of self-study was a means to look both within and across the contexts of learning environments to reflect on practices. This collaboration supported and challenged the ways in which ongoing instructional practices supported preservice teachers as they constructed understandings of literacy assessment. In describing the benefits of teacher research, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) state, “When teachers redefine their own relationships between teaching and learning, they often begin to reconstruct their classrooms and to offer different invitations to their students to learn and know” (pg. 52). Such methodological approaches support systematic and intentional inquiry and allow teachers and/or teacher educators to study their own practices in order to improve their teaching.

Publication of research findings, self-study, and action research add to understandings about instructional approaches and classroom experiences at the K-12 and university levels.

### **Study Context**

A semester long inquiry into teaching an elementary literacy assessment course is the context of this paper. The course was the second of two literacy courses for undergraduate elementary education majors. *Literacy Instruction II*, a two-credit-hour fall course, focused on reading and writing assessment. In support of a sociocultural stance, the literacy courses are elementary school site-based and offer university students one-on-one work with an elementary student for approximately 30-45 minutes each week in support of course assignments linked with data-driven instruction. Of the four instructors, an urban elementary school fourth-grade class, a rural elementary school third-grade class, and two different suburban elementary school second grade classes were represented.

During the fall semester, the pre-service teachers also engaged in a separate field experience under the supervision of an elementary classroom teacher and a field supervisor. This field experience, *Internship I*, provides preservice teachers extended time in an elementary classroom for observation and teaching. This is an opportunity for preservice teachers to engage in lesson planning and teaching that spans several days, giving them the chance to apply what they learn. It is their first opportunity to engage in lesson planning and teaching that extends across multiple days. The preservice teachers were concurrently enrolled in other methods courses such as math, science, or social studies required for elementary certification.

### **Data Collection**

The following forms of data were collected: study group transcriptions, an assessment questionnaire, focus group interviews with pre-service teachers, field notes, and course materials.

**Study Group.** The four instructors met for two hours weekly after class to engage in oral inquiries (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1994). Each instructor by turns led a discussion of an artifact or topic from teaching that week. Examples included a class-constructed list related to assessment, notes from a class discussion on assessment, and an assessment questionnaire completed by students. The study groups followed a systematic procedure of data collection across the course sections that included 13 study group sessions, which were audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Assessment Questionnaires.** Preservice teachers completed pre- and post-course questionnaires. The pre-course questionnaire explored their understandings of assessment on the first day of class. Post-course questionnaires were given to explore patterns of thinking that indicated a shift in understanding and for the instructors to reflect and plan the content of course assignments for future semesters.

**Focus group interviews.** Two focus group interviews of preservice teachers were conducted. One focus group consisted of students from sections one and two, and the second focus group consisted of students from sections three and four. All students in each section were invited to attend the focus group session, and at least three representatives from each section were present at one of the focus groups. Two course instructors were present at each focus group. The instructors facilitated and video recorded the interviews. Using video elicitation techniques (Tobin, 2009) participants were shown a video recording of a teacher leading a guided reading lesson. Participants were asked to respond to this video recording in a semi-structured manner. Initially, participants were asked for their responses to the video, then were led through a series of open-ended questions. The focus group questions included:

- Where did you see assessment in this video?

- Why do you think we chose this video to show you?
- What would you do to find out more about this child/children?
- Of the tools you saw used in the video, what do you think is most useful and why?

Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours.

**Course Materials.** A variety of student coursework was collected across the semester. Weekly written artifacts such as exit slip reflections, written responses to readings and assignments, and lesson plans were collected as a part of the specific section requirements. Additionally, each student completed a final, culminating project which was a case study of one child. In the case study, participants demonstrated how they would use assessment data collected on one learner to inform their instruction.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using qualitative coding and memo techniques. First, transcripts of oral inquiry sessions and focus groups were coded during two collaborative sessions. The focus of these two coding sessions was to discuss and come to a common understanding of the external codes for the initial coding. These external codes came from the research questions and included: theories which undergird pre-service teachers' instructional choices and how teacher educators support preservice teachers.

Next, the remaining data was analyzed for emerging patterns. A variety of systems were used among the instructors in coding transcript data; reading multiple pages and writing memos, color coding with highlighter during reading, and using word processing during reading to code. Coding methods, patterns, and internal codes were discussed in subsequent study group meetings. From these discussions, categories were established. These included: discussing, thinking, participating, observing, processes, methods, sociocultural factors, and ways of being.



Written artifacts and field notes were integrated with transcript data into analytic memos, which helped deepen insights into the data. The memos were read against the questionnaire data and the video transcriptions in order to understand better how preservice teachers developed their views of assessment.

## **Findings**

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue emerged as central to the study group process. Instructors stressed the importance of dialogue among pre-service teachers as well children in the elementary classrooms as in this example of a study group transcription.

**Instructor 1:** One of the things I made note of when I listened to my students talk today was that they seemed to need help understanding the difference between a conversation and just sharing...Some of my groups need instruction on what does it mean to have a conversation. You know, when you turn and talk...

**Instructor 2:** And not raise your hand...

**Instructor 1:** It's not just read what's on your paper. It's talk.

Dialogic conversations were a key pedagogical feature that was developed among the pre-service teachers. Conversations about academic content had to be demonstrated and practiced in order for pre-service teachers to discuss course readings. Dialogic conversation was elicited first through whole class discussions. For example, students developed a theory of assessment, through whole class and small group discussions. One instructor noted:

Some of the things that came from that [discussion] was that assessment has to be relevant to what is being learned. Brad's example was that assessment has to be

about participation. He talked about in football, he was assessed as a quarterback from the first day. His coach didn't just give him a test or anything, his coach ran him through some drills that were similar to things he would be doing as quarterback to assess his skill level and how he thinks about strategies.

The whole group discussions provided insights into current thinking and led to understanding that assessment must be related to what is being learned and that participation could be a form of assessment.

### **Conflicting Theories**

Responsive teaching is a process of closely observing student behavior, then planning instruction based on what students already can do and what they are ready to learn next.

Responsive teaching was used practiced by pre-service teachers in their prior literacy methods course and throughout the assessment course. Many students had internalized this discourse before the literacy assessment class had begun. For instance, in a pre-questionnaire, one student wrote: "I strongly agree that observation is a valid form of assessment because you are able to see first hand if the students really understand the material. You can take notes while observing the students and go back over the notes to see what you need to focus on."

In the assessment course, preservice teachers became more receptive to the notion of generative forms of assessment, yet this conflicted with prevailing discourses of standardized assessments used in the schools. Preservice teachers observed standardized testing in their field placements, yet in the assessment class they were learning about responsive teaching. One preservice teacher expressed this conflict during a focal group discussion.

We've got all of these tools and we know how to help children, but I feel like sometimes wherever you're placed, wherever you teach, it's going to be a struggle

to do what you want to do. Maybe you are going to have to have Accelerated Reader at your school or they are going to make you do leveled groups. I don't know how to fight that but I know that I don't believe in it either.

Field placements and the assessment class provided two authentic, yet different contexts each week for the pre-service teachers. The discourses from field placements, their other method classes and other sources of knowledge brought topics into the assessment course conversations. This excerpt from a final case study reveals the discourse of assessment associated with the preservice teacher's field experience.

In my practicum class I work with lower-level students. The class is a "Renaissance" class, which means the students tested lower and need extra assistance. These students need more hands-on learning and group work because it engages them and motivates them to learn. All of the students in our class except two tested as BR or beginning reader.

This reveals the stance toward assessment in a school where a standardized assessment is relied upon to label students for placement into a remedial classroom environment. Aspects of this discourse included phrases such as, "Renaissance class," and "BR," which were understandable to others in the school as ciphers for "needing extra assistance," and "beginning reader." In contrast, in the assessment course, pre-service teachers were learning to consider multiple methods of assessment including anecdotal notes and miscue analysis to think about placements in terms of flexible groups within heterogeneous classrooms; groups that are formed based on students' zone of proximal development and current instructional needs.

At times, the pre-service teachers grappled with the literacy learning process. For instance, one instructor described a preservice teacher, Meg, in the following way.

From what I know about Meg as a whole, [responsive teaching] has been a big thing for her. Really all she says is, “the brain” – their brain. For her, it's about worksheets and tests, and concrete right answers and wrong answers. That's how she was last semester. That's why she was struggling so much last semester. Because, Meg, give her a test; I bet she does wonderfully. Ask her to explain her process and ... I think she was just struggling with this idea a lot. I feel like she's trying to bring these things together in some way. She's trying to make sense of them. We have never, ever in class, talked about the brain.

Meg's instructor noted how Meg drew upon multiple discourses and voices about teaching and learning in the process of constructing new understandings. Through class discussions and experience, she made meaning through multiple texts and contexts in the process of reframing her concept of literacy. Meg was engaged in a process of participation, engagement, and discussion in order to assimilate new ideas.

Dialogue around multiple discourses of literacy continued throughout the semester and emerged in focus group interviews, one preservice teacher articulated this struggle.

And that's a lot of what I am learning this semester. I would be used to taking a standard and writing out a lesson plan and being like, “Okay, that's what we are going to do in our classroom.” But now this semester, we're gearing it towards one child. We take her, the things that she's not strong in, like retelling, and gear a lesson towards that. I've never done that before.

Previous courses had focused on a standards-based approach to lesson planning. A responsive teaching approach clearly was a new concept that this teacher was assimilating into her way of thinking about teaching and learning.

These examples illustrate the internal conflict between theories of learning that preservice teachers grappled with throughout the semester. The literacy assessment course included an imbedded field experience and preservice teachers had a concurrent field experience at another school. These experiences caused ideological conflict, which in turn provided for ideological becoming. The internal conflict prompted by different theories of learning were debated and sometimes resolved during dialogic conversations in the classroom. In this assessment course, preservice teachers had opportunities to apply in practice what they learned about in their previous literacy course as well as a time and place to debrief these experiences with their peers and instructor.

### **Discussion**

In this literacy assessment course, preservice teachers had time to talk about their experiences and perceptions. A dialogic pedagogy allowed for the development of preservice teachers' understandings, and the children's understandings. Talk, interaction and engagement played a necessary role in constructing and reconstructing understandings, as preservice teachers each developed their own discourse of literacy assessment. Observing, reflecting, thinking, and discussion are embedded in a sociocultural approach to reading. This must be reconciled with the discourse of standardized testing in the national discourse of literacy. Responsive teaching as a way of talking about assessment required practice and discussion for preservice teachers to assimilate this stance and to implement responsive teaching thoughtfully.

Dialogic pedagogy requires that multiple voices are heard. Teacher educators must open up spaces for these voices and point our students to new ways of seeing. Both teachers and children can learn in more profound ways through listening to students and encouraging them to lead the way in class discussions. The process of learning for both instructors and preservice

teachers was a process of becoming something new; something more than before meeting one another.

### **Teacher Education as a Process of Becoming**

The idea of "becoming" has been well-articulated by Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) who described ideological becoming as "the process of selectively assimilating the words of others." Each member of a classroom community has individual understandings which shift as each engages with others to create new ways of thinking. Discussion is essential to this process, allowing teachers and students to develop common ways of using words and concepts such as "kidwatching" (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) and "standardized assessment." In a teacher education course, multiple perspectives from the syllabi, textbooks, and personal experiences will be brought to class each week. In the process of dialogue, some ideas and words are accepted and others are rejected. When many voices come together, each person must decide which words to reject and which to accept as part of their expanding view of the world. A person's initial stance or ideology goes through a transformation through dialogue with others and one constantly renews oneself ideologically (Halasek, 1999). This process is what Bakhtin saw as "becoming." The preservice teachers and instructors engaged in the process of becoming as they began to see their future selves through interaction with one another.

### **Future Directions**

Experiences such as imbedded field experiences and external field experiences are necessary for the ideological becoming of preservice teachers. Discussing and sharing perspectives on these experiences allows for internally persuasive discourse. It is also important to be aware of potential issues that may arise from course readings, student experiences, political, and historical events and to be prepared with questions that will elicit deeper thinking and raise the level of

awareness regarding these issues. Preservice teachers are exposed to many new ideas and experiences in a semester and they need time and a venue for internalizing new ideas. Otherwise, they may simply rush through the semester, focusing on completing assignments without using the experience to grow into the role of an intentional and reflective teacher.

### **Limitations**

This study revealed the importance of discourses and dialogic pedagogy in teacher education as a process of taking on new ideas through ideological becoming. The study was limited because practitioner research is inherently descriptive and does not generalize across settings. Other instructors may consider replicating this type of inquiry in their own classrooms to discover the discourses of assessment in other settings. Further research into responsive teaching at the university level will help instructors make instructional decisions based on the needs of their particular students and course content.

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