Secret Threads: Considering Dialogical Approaches in the Classroom, on the Court and in Collaborative Literacy Research

by Dr. Dawan Coombs, Brigham Young University

An author once explained that the books we find ourselves drawn to are "bound together by a secret thread" of meaning that can be difficult to identify (Lewis, 1955, p. 134). In my own experience, some of these secret threads connect not only to books, but also ideas and philosophies within research, writing, and life. But only recently have I discovered the thread that binds two of my seemingly disparate passions—Duke basketball and literacy research.

Every spring as the brackets come out and the better part of the nation falls victim to an ailment commonly known as "March Madness," my academic productivity suffers ever so slightly at the hand of my inner basketball enthusiast. My family's commitment to the Duke Blue Devils often leads to high hopes and too often to heartbreak (with the exception of the 1991, 1992, 2001, 2010—and most recently—2015 seasons, of course) as we watch Coach Krzyzewski (better known as Coach K) lead his team through the triumphs and tears of the tournament.

At this point JoLLE readers unfamiliar with Coach K may be skeptical of the connection here, but Coach K sees himself primarily as a teacher who espouses principles of dialogue as central tenets of his team's success. On the court Duke's basketball team is notorious for its constant chatter between players. They call shots, they warn one another about screens, they holler out positions on the court—the talking has been known to drive other teams crazy. But besides annoying their opponents, this constant dialogue also allows them to work together, to develop their strategy, and to execute plays successfully.

Similarly, over the past few years as I have engaged in literacy research in local schools with principals, teachers, and students, I am continually reminded that, "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" (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110). Essentially, no one person, school of thought, or ideology holds a monopoly on truth and that truth is always in flux. It is only together, in dialogue that people discover and learn. Paulo Freire (2005) explained, "Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection." Like meaning, the making of individuals occurs at the intersection of words, in dialogue with others, in dialogue with their work, and in reflection (p. 88). Dialogical exchanges contribute to the mutual shaping of knowledge as teachers, students, and other stakeholders construct ideas and consequently, one another.

At the heart of the dialogical approaches that govern winning basketball strategies and dialogical research exists an inherently social process where people work towards a

mutually constructed goal, value unique differences, and grow together in the pursuit of something larger than them selves. But this dialogical thread took on extended meaning as I reflected on ways the principles of dialogism that apply on the court and in the classroom can also help teachers, researchers, students, and stakeholders as they engage, as a true research team, in collaborative research.

Recent educational research efforts emphasize the importance of dialogue among stakeholders and involving multiple entities. The National Center for Literacy Education—a collaborative venture itself among over 25 different professional organizations and foundations—highlights the work of literacy teams comprised of teachers, administrators and researchers working collectively to improve literacy learning and efforts (NCLE, 2015). Similarly, university-public school partnerships provide opportunities for superintendents, principals, teachers, university teacher educators, and researchers to engage in dialogue about their shared interests (Wangemann, Black, & Baugh, 2006) and in some instances, to unite new and practicing teachers through clinical sites that allow them to learn both on campus and in the schools (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004) and in professional development schools that bring teachers and researchers together in common places to educate new teachers and improve instructional practice (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008).

In the spirit of these approaches, I echo this call for increased collaboration among those interested in working together to solve literacy challenges. Drawing on examples from one of my most recent research projects, I briefly discuss the benefit of a research team and how principles of dialogism used by educational theorists and Coach K help navigate tensions and lead to understanding and learning for all parties involved.

Collaboration

For the past year my colleague Jon Ostenson and I have been examining the use of iPads in a high school reading class. Our research, initiated at the request of the principal, involved a semester of observations and interviews with students in the reading class and with their classroom teacher concerning their perceptions of reading and technology use. A grant from our university made it possible to invite four undergraduate preservice teachers to work as research assistants. Besides the findings from the study itself, Jon and I were struck by the way collaboration—among one another, the teacher, the principal, and our undergraduate research assistants— enhanced the research process and nuanced our understandings.

First, working with this varied team of researchers reminded us of the value of different perspectives and the unique contributions a team of researchers added to the project. Bakhtinian perspectives of dialogue advocate for the suspension of hierarchical order and for shifted outlooks that reveal "a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 34). Such a multi-voiced approach to school-based research is essential, because, as one research team wrote, "Classrooms and professional development settings are most often characterized by monologic forms of discourse, participation structures … that deny learners roles and valid voices in these settings" (Greenleaf & Katz, p. 175, 2004). The

JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Scholars
Speak
Out

May
2015

voices of teachers and students are often absent from the research on schooling and from the legislation that influences teaching and learning. For this reason, considering the voices of those participating in the dialogue, particularly the voices of those most intimately impacted by the results, plays a central role in the research process.

On Duke's team, the voice of every player is valued—to the extent that even freshman are expected to speak up and be a part of the conversations that impact their team (Bergeron, 2010, n.p.). In a similar manner, the student research assistants in our project contributed unique insights as they assisted in the data collection process and strengthened understandings and highlighted nuances in data. They asked follow-up questions in the interviews that brought significant details to the forefront of the interviews and their questions about how to code and analyze data required us to pause and question our own understanding the processes before we taught these processes to them. In addition, the mentor teacher and principal shared insights and observations about the adolescent students in the study that even our constant presence at the school missed. These unique insights supported more meaningful interpretations of the data.

Coach K once explained, "While we are teaching our players, we can also learn from them. If you're a good teacher, you know that the arrow goes both ways. You give to the group. The group gives back to you" (2000, p. 214). Although the research assistants and the classroom teacher came to the conversation with little, if any, research experience, questions they raised as they learned about conducting research caused Jon and me to revisit and expand our own understanding of the methods and approaches we used. Ultimately their participation reminded us that regardless of position and experience, in research, too, each voice matters and all learn from each other.

Navigating Tensions
In dialogue, tensions in language pull individuals together in shared meaning and apart across differences. Doubled and tripled in meaning, words bump up against one another in the messy "process of living interaction" with an "elastic environment" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 276). The constantly changing and expanding nature of words parallels the challenge faced by diverse groups and individuals interacting with one another, trading meanings and messages, understandings and ideas, in a community where all voices are valued. Such challenges are inherent to work that involves researchers, advocates, and others (Shdaimah, Schram & Stahl, 2011), and the varied interests and perspectives of the different parties can complicate interpretation and the process. Also, sharing the "good, the bad, and the ugly" uncovered by research can damage relationships with and the reputation of the site if any stakeholders feel misrepresented in the final write-up. As such, dialogue among different parties remains key to the ongoing development of schools conducting research.

In our research, discussions with the principal and classroom teacher throughout the research sometimes revealed these tensions as our different understandings of motivations, rationales, and solutions came to a head. But framing the project with dialogical assumptions also posited all of us together, examining questions and issues of shared concern, trying to find solutions. During discussions with the administrator, she

JoLLE@UGA®
Journal of Language & Literacy Education

Scholars
Speak
Out

May
2015

listened openly to findings and concerns. She wasn't under the illusion that the situation was working perfectly, nor that we were accusing the school of wrongdoing. Our desire to address a shared concern helped us navigate through the tensions that resulted from different perspectives and interpretations.

Coach K explained that in dialogue, "We can't always take the nice polite way of saying things to each other." On a team, people need to communicate in very direct ways. However, this can only happen "if we learn to tell the truth, to trust each other, and to understand that we're not trying to hurt each other with our words—even if someone on the outside might think our words are destructive" (Krzyzewski, 2000, p. 40). Potentially problematic issues can be assuaged by personal relationships built on the foundation of open dialogue and an attempt to achieve a "fusion of horizons," to borrow a phrase from the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1975), where individuals' frames of reference meet, not necessarily in agreement, but where both gain a wider perspective by understanding the position of the other.

Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) explained, "Schoolpeople must have the occasion to engage in democratic discourse about the real stuff of teaching and learning," so that rather than being informed by policies that "encourage rather than bypass participation by stakeholders in assessing and reshaping their own schools," the work of those people with the most intimate knowledge of schools can inform those policies (p. 336). In other words, the perspectives of all stakeholders play central roles in creating solutions to challenges faced by teachers and students.

Conclusion

Once the confetti fell and the nets were cut down after Duke won its most recent championship on April 6th of this year, Coach K said the following about working with his team, "When you have believers, you're happy all the time...When you can be creative instead of trying to figure out attitudes, it's so much easier" (O'Neil, 2015, n.p.). Although "happy all the time" might not describe the dispositions of those working towards solutions to combat literacy challenges, these people are certainly believers who use creativity to try and meet the needs of students and the people who serve them.

In principle, Coach K has it right again—dialogue ceases when overshadowed by egos and attitudes, but with a shared belief or goal as our motivation, teams of stakeholders can achieve great things. Dialogical perspectives help facilitate opportunities for researchers, teachers, stakeholders, and even students to work collaboratively and collectively as they engage with new ideas and with others who give voice to new perspectives. Participating in collaborative research with university researchers enhances the practices of teachers and researchers while simultaneously broadening the perspectives of all parties. Recognizing the power of dialogue to create learning and research communities where hierarchies are minimized brings out all voices and strengthens the work of all parties involved. Only then can this collective search for truth, whether in literature, on the court, or in life, take place.

References

Bakhtin, M.M. (1993). *Towards the philosophy of the act*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1984) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and trans. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press.

Bergeron, E. (2010). "Will Duke Ever Shut Up?" *ESPN Magazine*. November 2010. January 27 2011.

Boyle-Baise, M. & McIntyre, D. J. (2008). What kind of experience? Preparing teachers in PDS or community settings. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser & D. J. McIntyre (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (pp. 307-330). New York: Routledge.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M.B. Ramos Trans.) New York: Continuum. (Original work published in 1970).

Gadamer, H.G. (1960/1975). *Truth and method*. New York: Continuum.

Greenleaf, C. & Katz, M. (2004). Even newer ways to mean: Authoring pedagogical change in secondary subject-area classrooms. In A. Ball and S. Freedman (Eds.). *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning*. (p. 172-202). NY: Cambridge University Press.

Goodlad, J., Mantle-Bromley, C., & Goodlad, S. J. (2004). *Education for everyone: Agenda for education in a democracy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Krzyzewski, M. with Phillips, D.T. (2000). *Leading with the heart: Coach K's successful strategies for basketball, business and life*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.

Lewis, C. (1955). *The problem of pain*. NY: The MacMillian Company.

O'Neil, D. (2015). Duke, Coach K figured out how to rule a new world. *ESPN*. Retrieved from http://espn.go.com/mens-college-basketball/tournament/2015/story/_/id/12635334/duke-blue-devils-mike-krzyzewski-adapt-s-win-national-title

Shdaimah, C. S., Schram, S., & Stahl, R. W. (2011). *Change research: A case study on collaborative methods for Social workers and advocates*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wangemann, P., Black, S., & Baugh, S. (2006). *The spirit of renewal*. Orem, UT: Prologic.

Dawan Coombs is an assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah where she works with students in the English Teaching Program. Her research interests include dialogical pedagogy, adolescent literacy, and teacher education. Her work has been published in *English Journal, English Teaching: Practice and Critique, the ALAN Review*, and *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*. She is also the editor of the *Utah English Journal.*