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Fostering Sense-making through Dialogic Interactions in Unfolding Classroom Events

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A number of years ago, when I was teaching a graduate level methods course, a male student in my class suddenly stood up and started shouting at the other students. He was quite angry about what some of the other students had said. At that moment, I didn't know what to do. I froze. But then I began to make sense of what was happening. I knew that this student was a Vietnam veteran. I also sensed that he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that can lead people to become momentarily angry. I asked him to step out of the classroom to talk with me in the hallway about the reasons for his anger, shared sense-making that led to a return to his usual, friendly demeanor.

In this commentary, I propose some ways to examine sense-making processes in these often unpredictable, unfolding classroom events. My purpose is to demonstrate that students can benefit from engaging in sense-making through collaborative, dialogic interactions in classroom events. Rather than assume that sense-making resides solely *in* people's minds, the focus of sense-making is on the meanings constructed in the interactions *between* people, as was the case with the interaction between my student and his peers and between the student and me.

To illustrate this analysis, I focus on Stephanie Jones (2013)'s description of an event in her literacy methods course. In that course, she engaged her students in a round robin reading activity to demonstrate the limitations of using this method to teach reading. To have her students experience round robin, she enacts a prototypical version of it as reifying the embodiment of teacher authority:

> In the round robin activity, I spontaneously perform the bodied moves of many of my own reading teachers of the past: smooth walk, calm voice, careful surveillance of the

> text being read, an overall unwavering presence of power and authority. I control who speaks and who reads. All anxiously await the possibility of their turn... Round robin reading is embedded in the body. (p. 527)

Communicative activity types

Making sense of an event initially involves posing the question, "What's going on here?" related to framing or contextualizing events as a certain "communicative activity type" (Linell, 2009, p. 75), activity types such as debates, job interviews, school assemblies, wedding ceremonies, drama productions, political rallies, video game play, etc. By determining some shared, mutual understanding of "What's going on here?" participants then know how to act in certain ways consistent with participating in similar activity types (Schatzki, 2010).

In her enactment of a round robin event, Jones is "double-voicing" (Bakhtin, 1986) prototypical versions of the round-robin activity consistent with her and her students' familiarity with that activity type. By emphasizing certain embodied actions constituting teacher authority, she's inviting her students to adopt a critical inquiry stance concerning a teachers' authoritative stance as to how students should mimic their teacher in the reading aloud of texts.

"In-between" meanings

Making sense of events also entails the collaboratively constructed "in-between" meanings in "talk-in-interaction" (Linell, 2009, p. 29) *between* Jones and her students . This shared, collaborative understanding unfolds over time as an open-ended, "never-ending process" given that meaning can "be further developed and specified, often in the dialogue with the other" (Linell, 2009, p. 224). This collaborative sense-making is evident in events in which people spontaneously line up in a queue in front of a theater either through talk and/or embodied communication.

These "in-between" meanings in "talk-in-interaction" are created through use of "languaging" as actions involving anticipating and being open to potential future responses from others (Cowley, 2011; Cuffari et al., 2015). How others respond depends on their adoption of certain ethical stances or ways of valuing self and the other associated with building supportive, caring relationships (Bloome & Beauchemin, 2016). Analysis of 4th and 5th graders' collaboration video productions identified four types of interactions related to fostering supportive relationships: "co-operative, collaborative, conflictive, and listless" related to participation in authoritarian versus democratic contexts as well as acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors and interactions (Jurich & Meyer, 2014, p. 238). The collaborative interaction was more likely to be constituted by collaborative interactions and acceptable behaviors while the listless interaction was more likely to be constituted by authoritative interactions and unacceptable behaviors.

Tensions in interactions related to power and control

The fact that meanings reside in the "in-between" is evident in descriptions of interactions as "tense," "conflicted," "distanced," etc., associated with tensions constituted by issues of power and control. Participants may experience tensions in interactions when there are deviations from expectations associated with participation in an event, particularly when an event doesn't make intuitive sense or is perceived as senseless, leading participants to wonder, "Why would anyone believe or do that?"

In adopting what Bakhtin (1986) describes as an "authoritarian discourse" as "languaging" enacting the round robin activity, Jones was anticipating emerging tensions evident in her students' use of a "practiced tone, pace, and expression and others with too much pausing and telling quick and quiet (apologetic) jokes about not knowing how to say a word in their passage" (Jones, 2013, p. 527). The students' joking about difficulty with their pronunciations in round robin reading aloud reflects some

emerging tensions as a disruptive "wobble" (Fecho et al., 2016) in the interactions. Coping with these tensions triggers the need for a reflective stance as to why these tensions occur in an event—why is it that students' self-consciousness about reading aloud in a certain manner is problematic in terms of reading instruction?

Embodied emotions

In her description of the round-robin event, Jones (2013) noted how she employed certain embodied emotions to enact her position of teacher authority as someone who is in "control or who speaks and who reads…I feel it in the moment—the taller neck, the slow and steady pacing about the room, the intent gaze on the text in my hands and the brief look at the next student to read" (p. 527).

When Jones asked her students to reflect on their emotions associated with the event, they "report sweating, feeling hot, noticing their heart rate speed up, shaking legs, and fearing humiliation and being perceived as incompetent" (p. 527), as well as being "'so stressed out'" and fearful: "'I was so afraid you were gonna call my name to read out loud. I hate to read out loud'" (p. 527). Through identifying and reflecting on each other's embodied emotions, Jones's students recognize how their embodied emotions influence their interactions and also the limitations of creating stressful events for their own pupils.

"Eventness" of events constituting significance

A final key component related to analyzing sense-making in events involves what Bakhtin (1986) calls making sense of "eventness." This is defined in terms of the *significance* of an event associated with uncertain potential possibilities or consequences—that an event may be highly significant for participants given that they may not know the potential possibilities or consequences of that event.

Jones's round robin event was pedagogically eventful given that her students could and did respond in unpredictable ways. When one student noted that "You just taught us a reading lesson!" (p. 527), a response that deviated from her peers' experience of a stressful event, other students inferred alternative meanings—that the use of the round robin is not necessarily effective reading instruction.

Implications

Given that classroom events do unfold in unpredictable ways, teachers are concerned about events where anything could happen that challenges their familiar, predetermined scripts. In her critique of what she defines as "comprehension-as-outcome pedagogy" (p. A2) and "comprehension as procedure pedagogy" (p. A4), Maren Aukerman (2013) notes how these approaches frame and limit students assuming agency in classroom events in terms of having to conform to the achievement of certain outcomes or the adherence to certain procedures. Noting that teachers need to develop plans for classroom activities, she advocates for adoption of "pedagogy of sense-making," that is, supporting students' collaborative, open-ended exploration of alternative possibilities or scenarios, as opposed to simply conforming to a teacher's predetermined framing of classroom events.

Teachers can support students' collaborative sense-making consistent with "pedagogy of sense-making" (Aukerman, 2013) by:
- *sponsoring classroom events* that allow students to assume agency in shaping the direction of those events. Students could be asked to write their own questions and responses prior to a discussion so they can then guide a discussion with minimal teacher facilitation. This includes valuing students adopting tentative "I'm not sure about this" stances or hunches with the uptake of inviting peers to collaboratively explore these stances or hunches;
- *building positive, supportive relationships* with and between students through giving them choices of text selections or topics for discussion so they engage in collaborative sense-making about what and how they are

learning as co-learners with teachers as opposed to simply complying with a teacher's predetermined agendas (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016) (for resources and activities on fostering relationships, see *http://tinyw.in/2mZI*);
- *recognizing the limitations of labeling students* according to their perceived abilities as individuals as evident in the use of "struggling reader" categories, so that the focus is "not on the students, the teachers, and other adults who are positioning the students as struggling readers, nor the texts. Rather, the 'in-between' unit of analysis would be how the students are 'in-struggle'" (Freeman & Vagle, 2013, p. 729) in classroom events, fostering supportive interactions designed to limit students' "struggle" through enhancing their sense of agency through these interactions;
- *engaging students in dramatic inquiry activities* in which students collaboratively address challenges in dramatic-inquiry events (Edmiston, 2014), as did Jones's students in their recognition of the limitations of the prototypical use of round-robin activities. In these drama activities, for example, creating a company to assist and interact with homeless people in a neighborhood, teachers or facilitators interject complications and what-if possibilities requiring students to continually revise their sense-making processes, leading students to interrogate the attitudes and presuppositions they bring to their interaction in an event;
- *creating events based on coping with an actual problem or challenge* facing a school or community that can serve to motivate students given the need to address these problems or challenges. For example, 21 young people from throughout the United States filed a complaint in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon asserting that in causing climate change, the federal government has violated the United States Constitution by denying them rights to life, liberty, and property, and that the government has failed to protect essential public trust resources, resulting in a judge's favorable ruling in April 2016 (Our Children's Trust, 2016). The success of these young people's legal efforts emboldened them to continue to addressing an unfolding event affecting their future; and
- *fostering students' reflection about their sense-making processes* in an event in which they identify in retrospect the choices they made given different possible options and reasons for making those choices over others.

Learning to reflect on their participation in events can then transfer to making sense of subsequent similar events.

In summary, adopting "pedagogy of sense-making" (Aukerman, 2013) prepares students for living in a world rife with "indeterminacy [that]…is an inherent feature of human activity generally (Schatzki, 2010, p. 185). Through participating in unfolding, unscripted classroom events, students acquire sense-making practices essential for being open to and flexible about coping with the inevitable indeterminacy of daily life. Fostering unpredictable, unfolding classroom events requires teachers to have the confidence that in the long run, their students will benefit from engaging in dialogic sense-making of these unfolding events. (For further readings on topics in the Commentary, see *https://goo.gl/LqEKWk*).

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