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BAKHTIN AND THE DIALOGIC WRITING CLASS

ABSTRACT: *The writer proposes and describes a process by which teachers of basic writing can painlessly initiate their students into the complex world of meaning and text, encouraging them to understand their own texts with far more sophistication than habitually required of beginning writers. This article and this pedagogical approach stem from and elaborate on the discourse theories of M. M. Bakhtin. While relying on only those Bakhtinian concepts which are useful in creating a dialogic writing classroom, this writer manages to show how a sometimes arcane theory can be useful in the modern classroom.*

Working in relative isolation during the 1930s, in Kazakhstan, USSR, M. M. Bakhtin wrote his comprehensive theory of discourse. This "non-system" profoundly challenged and undermined the dominant discourse "systems" which attempted to account for the dynamics of language. Again and again throughout his 50-year writing career, his works were nearly "lost"; many were literally saved from extinction by a devoted friend or a dedicated Bakhtin circle. The works which survived were marginalized even in Russian academic circles. Yet, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, his writings and ideas have surfaced in the West.

While I have been surprised to see his name crop up in the popular American press (four times last year in my regularly read magazines), I am not at all surprised to hear Bakhtin's name in

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© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1992

composition studies. With increasing frequency, writing teachers and researchers have evoked or applied his ideas and concepts in diverse, provocative contexts. As more and more of us grapple with his theories and understand the complexity of utterance, we collectively gain insight into the magnitude of the problem we pose for our students. Bakhtin seems to be appreciated for just that—he deepens our understanding of the web of discourse and meaning. Most of the conference presentations and the growing number of articles on Bakhtin explicate his key concepts or interpret his ideas through the individual writer's philosophical or political filter. Yet, essentially, Bakhtin remains outside the writing classroom. Andrea Lunsford, in her 1989 keynote address to CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), defined our profession by citing five characteristics; one was, "We are dialogic, multi-voiced, heteroglossic. Our classroom practices *enact* what others only talk about; they are sites for dialogues and polyphonic choruses" (76). Bakhtinian theory not only helps us understand texts better but it also helps us "read" ourselves and what we do. In support, I will venture a nonhasty generalization: all effective writing teachers know instinctively (even if they have never heard of Bakhtin) that the writing classroom must be dialogic.

But what is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense? To answer this question, I need to provide an admittedly sketchy map of Bakhtin's universe of discourse. While inquiring into the peculiar nature of the novel and its discourse versus other literary genres, Bakhtin constructs an approach, or rather, a philosophical stance describing humans and their words. He understands language as primary in our lives: it connects humans to one another throughout history; it transforms reality; it shapes our experience; it claims ideas with utterance. The word "becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions" (*Dialogic* 293). Our discourse is ourselves. However, opposing forces are at work within human discourse, human society (perhaps human consciousness itself). One force (centripetal) moves to consolidate and homogenize a hierarchy of values and power into authoritative genres, languages, institutions, postures, people. The counter force (centrifugal) moves to destablize and disperse the impulse to seek authoritative, hierarchical values. Heteroglossia results from the struggle between these two forces. When this struggle is healthy and not lopsided, heteroglossic awareness is at its most potent. This key Bakhtinian concept—heteroglossia—is as important in the modern classroom as the modern board room (or war room, back room). Context prevails over text. All texts and parts of any texts constantly shift, slide, slither, and sluice their way toward meaning. Texts alter "meaning" along with social, physiological, psycho-

logical, historical, socioeconomical, religious, and other contexts. When heteroglossia survives and thrives, no word, phrase, sentence, genre, authority, can be canonized—"written in stone" as commandments. Heteroglossia is life lived; canonization removes that which is canonized from life. The dialogic imagination—dialogizing—is a manner of living which acknowledges our tentative and multivoiced humanity.

Obviously, this "non-system" of discourse moves into realms well beyond considerations of novelistic discourse, or the writing classroom for that matter. What of this philosophical stance can be productively used in the writing classroom? Given the unique, dialogic nature of the writing classroom and given the increasing awareness of Bakhtinian insights into the complex interaction of discourse and meaning, we should move the discussion of Bakhtin out from behind the closed doors of the academy to the more open doors of the writing classroom—at every level. We would profit from forming a Bakhtin Circle of writing teachers *and* students. To this end, I offer the following suggestions for using Bakhtin in the writing classroom.

My writing classes—both basic and freshman composition—are now structured to demonstrate the dialogic nature of all discourse. My primary focus in all the following classroom activities is to have my students discover the dialogic heart of written communication. I want them to experience the dynamic of language and meaning as Bakhtin outlines it:

> Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression. (*Dialogic* 354–55)

Although resistant to accepting this level of linguistic complexity, my students become better writers and thinkers when they come to understand language as a force constantly interacting with, shaping, reacting to both that which precedes and that which is still forming. At the beginning of the semester, the students' sensitivity to the power of words is virtually nonexistent, yet they need to build a respect for a word's singular force: "The word in a living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (*Dialogic* 280). In a larger context, dialogizing requires students to see everything as unfinished, relative, with many voices competing and intermingling, shaping

the texture of the idea being formed—but never fixed. I hope they see all human experience—their human experience—as double-voiced, interactive, tentative. Admittedly, most students reject the philosophical underpinnings and remain indifferent to the primacy of language which Bakhtin espouses, "It is not experience which organizes expression, but the other way around—*expression organizes experience*" (*Marxism* 85). However, they readily accept the notion that writing is an ongoing dialogue. So this is an easy place to begin. The more radical, philosophical concepts wait until the winds rise and it's time to trim the sails.

Upon first leaving the solid land of their old beliefs about writing, students need to acquire "sea-legs." They begin by learning to recognize and suspect writing which is monological, standard, pat, based on received modes of thought. In other words, they learn to reject what most had previously considered "good writing." My classes start with the question, "What is good writing?" Small groups explore the characteristics they believe define good writing, and each writes a group definition. Dissenting definitions are allowed, even encouraged. Group leaders read their definitions for the class to ponder; at this point, dissenters will frequently find a compatible new group (or, infrequently, remain alone). After some discussion of group definitions, they regroup and amend their definitions. Next class, they bring in samples—one or two paragraphs—which fit their definitions. Each group chooses the best of the samples and I xerox those for the next class period, when we discuss the samples and the corresponding definitions: this class is chaotic and contentious. After this dialogic "free-for-all," I ask the students to start keeping a dialectical notebook, focusing on the changes in their individual responses to the group's definition of good writing. This notebook, continued throughout the semester, records personal journeys into linguistic awareness.

These journeys begin when they reject their initial definition. Then the problem is to steer the journey, and this is where Bakhtin enters the class. His critical oppositions between Art and Life, between The Epic and The Novel have been my touchstone. His chapter "Epic and Novel," defining the salient features separating the two genres, showed me that my writing students were reenacting history. According to Bakhtin, throughout history, cultures have recorded and canonized only High Art while ignoring the lowlife, comedic genres which parody the seriousness and piety of the contemporary High Art. Only the features which the dominant class valued and thought worthy were passed down to us, and, Bakhtin claims, those features were remarkably consistent throughout the centuries. The culturally privileged features are epitomized in the Epic:

> By its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation. One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot look at it from just any point of view; it is impossible to experience it, analyze it, take it apart, penetrate into its core. It is given solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself. (*Dialogic* 16)

The epic is fixed, closed, received, removed from contemporary life. "It is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. . . . One can only approach the epic world with reverence" (*Dialogic* 17). From my students' early definitions of good writing, I gather they regard all written discourse much the same way Bakhtin observes our culture regarding the Epic and other forms of High Art: it is understood to be monologic, immutable, certain, abstract, received from a higher authority. This is canonized Art. My students were merely reenacting the cultural inclinations of the powerless. I, of course, want them to move from this consciousness and change their basic understanding of written discourse. I want them to see writing as part of life, not removed from it. I guide them to view writing as Bakhtin describes the essence of novelistic discourse: it is many-voiced, playful, detailed, tentative, fleeting, still—and always—becoming.

To nudge my students towards this altered consciousness about written language, I use (for want of a better word) Daffy Definitions. On this class handout, I oppose a number of creative, misconstrued definitions from *Harper's Magazine* with a number of straight definitions. Here is one example of what I mean:

acad e mate-v. (academy + accommodate): To imprison white-collar criminals in resort-like surroundings, a contradictory response containing aspects of both reward and punishment. "The Wall Street broker *academated* in Florida, where he served two sunburned years of hard tennis."	in car cer ate-v. (in + carcer = enclosed place): To put in jail. To shut in; confine.

After reading a number of these juxtaposed definitions, small groups consider the type of communication each definition accomplishes. I ask them to name that type of communication and

to list as many features as they can. Invariably, the names are Creative or Imaginative pitted against Informative. Granted, no breakthrough here. However, the opposing features are revealing. As the groups name the oppositions, I write the results on the board. Cleaning up the vocabulary and organizing the features as oppositions, this is the list we arrive at:

Daffy Definition	*Straight Definition*
funny/playful	boring/serious
circular/recursive	linear
multireferenced	single referenced
provocative	limits thought
connects new ideas	no connections made
open-ended meaning	settled, closed meaning
"becoming"	"received"
expansive	contractive
dialogue between ideas	monologue
reader brings meaning to text	reader distills writer's meaning

With this list (or one very similar to it) on the board, I ask the students to decide which list describes the characteristics of "good writing." They argue about diverse purposes and are reluctant to choose. (Imagine the cultural baggage a typical college student must overcome to claim, in an English class, that a dictionary definition is not good writing.) When I gently insist they choose, they all agree that the characteristics under Daffy Definitions better describe "good writing." The next question: Why? Someone eventually answers something like, "Well, it forces you to think and doesn't tell you what to think." The next question: Is that what good writing does? or should do? Good writing provokes rather than limits thought. There's recognition in the silence. Now I ask the original groups to reconsider their initial definitions of good writing. They always manage a rewrite which incorporates the features attributed to the Daffy Definition. As a group, they have forsaken their former, unexamined notions of writing, so reminiscent of Bakhtin's epic world: restricted, closed, serious, accomplished, respectful, on a distant valorized plane, removed from the chaos of life.

Once they alter their definition, and the accompanying perceptions, it is difficult (but not impossible) for them to return to their old automatic, pat, monologic habits of mind. However, this new awareness must be constantly and creatively reinforced. I will briefly describe a number of the follow-up exercises I use to keep students focused on the differences between dialogical and monological communication. Every day we begin class considering a student blooper which I write on the board. Here are a few

examples: "Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock," "Arabs wear turbines on their heads," "The family group consisted of three adults and six adultresses," etc. We talk about the student's intention and the intriguing, multireferenced error which resulted; we discuss the necessary dynamic between what the reader knows and the writer doesn't realize. Here, the reader dialogizes the writer's utterance. In another exercise, similar to Daffy Definitions described earlier, I pair a cartoon with a straight-forward, noncomic drawing. We discuss how one communicates dialogically, the other linearly. Also, I frequently use "paired" student texts, one illustrating dialogic treatment of an idea and the other monologic. Another reliable resource for examples is any Letters to the Editor section; this works best with "hot" local or student issues, but it's frequently difficult to find a dialogic voice. My classes eventually become adept at calibrating degrees of monological thinking (another advantage to these letters is the degree of hilarity in some of them). Also, we have an ongoing competition in "nailing" each other's monological and dialogical statements. This type of record-keeping is also fruitful during political campaigns or heated public debates. The students become adept at skewering public or authority figures for their monological statements.

A by-product of these activities is the students' increasing, healthy skepticism; Bakhtin calls this "radical scepticism toward any unmediated discourse and any straightforward seriousness" (*Dialogic* 401). Another unfailing result of these activities is classroom laughter. Bakhtin believes laughter is a powerful intellectual as well as historical force:

> It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought up close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into the zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation. (*Dialogic* 23)

Virtually all of the classroom exercises I incorporate to reinforce the students' sense of the dialogic involve laughter. This emphasis

evolves naturally. Laughter helps students escape from the Epic frame of mind and into the dialogic uncertainty of the novel, of life. Through these exercises of recognition, the students become sensitized to the distinctions between monologic thinking/writing and dialogic thinking/writing. Once they know that "good writing" embraces uncertainty and double-voicedness, they naturally prefer the intriguing playfulness of the unfinished dialogue.

At this point, they are almost ready to write, but, before they do, I try to establish two additional Bakhtinian ideas: the first concerns all written discourse as ongoing dialogue and the second concerns the primacy of language in our lives.

I urge my students to understand all written discourse as unfinished social dialogue. Through using groups of essays discussing different sides of the same issue, I hope my students discover the actual writing situation to be interactive and interpretative—beyond or outside of rhetoric. (I am aware of, indeed intend, the "rashness" of this statement and hope to argue it fully another time.) Over my years as a writing teacher, I have interminably discussed the elements of rhetoric with my students. Both the textbook and I would elaborate on the rhetorical modes, the rhetorical triangle, the rhetorical square, the rhetorical situation. All the clear, amply illustrated explanations never seemed to sink in and take root, probably because of the sheer artificiality of the construct (perhaps the voice of the academy failing again to affect, positively, students' writing behavior). At best, the study of rhetoric taught students to dissect arguments of others, but it was unhelpful in the students' own writing. In discussing the essential differences between novelistic and rhetorical discourse, Bakhtin describes three branches of rhetorical discourse—legal, political, publicist—and then generalizes:

> Rhetoric is often limited to purely verbal victories over the word; when this happens, rhetoric degenerates into a formalistic verbal play. But, we repeat, when discourse is torn from reality, it is fatal for the word itself as well: words grow sickly, lose semantic depth and flexibility, the capacity to expand and renew their meaning in new living contexts. (*Dialogic* 353–54)

The power of the word to mean is lost when it is captured in a rhetorical construct because "it is not fertilized by a deep-rooted connection with the forces of historical becoming" (*Dialogic* 325). Bakhtin argues that rhetorical purpose is unitary, single-referenced, unrefracted, polemic, and only artificially double-voiced, hence lifeless.

While students are eager to reject rhetoric as artificial, they are suspicious of the primary role which Bakhtin assigns language and downright hostile, at first, to the idea that our lives are dominated by the language of others. They learn that "in real life people talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people's words" (*Dialogic* 338). This is a key Bakhtinian concept:

> In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varying degrees of accuracy and impartiality. The more intensive, differentiated and highly developed the social life of a speaking collective, the greater is the importance attaching, among other possible subjects of talk, to another's word, another's utterance, since another's word will be the subject of passionate communication, an object of interpretation, discussion, evaluation, rebuttal, support, further development and so on. (*Dialogic* 337)

In class, we discuss the nature of internalized dialogue—our own interpretations of other's words and our own ideas—and find minuscule the number of ideas which can claim any degree of originality. Predictably, students are shocked. They want to believe in the independence of, at the very least, "the great thinkers" (if not themselves). Now, instead, they come to understand the complex interrelated reality of the ongoing social dialogue that they had so easily, in the beginning, agreed existed. But, beyond this, they begin to understand the dynamic of language and its operating principle in their lives. At this point in their journeys, I introduce the following passage:

> Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the border between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (*Dialogic* 293–94)

We puzzle out this dynamic and find illustrations before accepting it. Understanding this idea of language, the students move well

beyond the typical novice writer's idea about "using" (or misusing) sources. They begin to perceive the interplay between their own ideas and words, and others' as existing "not in a mechanical bond but in a chemical union" (*Dialogic* 340). Utterance itself is dialogic.

By this point, the students have experienced the complexity of discourse as interactive, continuing, multivoiced dialogue. Now they are ready to write with a dialogic imagination and—for the most part—they are up to the task. I initially used pairs of essays about controversial issues readily available in any number of anthologies. But I soon found how easy it was to assemble my own materials; these "homemade" issue packages can be tailored to student interests and newly developing ideas in our social dialogue. I will describe two of the issue packages I use to illustrate the continuing social dialogue.

For basic skills and freshman composition classes, I first begin with two companion articles from a newspaper: these pieces disagree about the ethics of capturing dolphins for a newly built Baltimore aquarium display. Their respective headlines pinpoint the crux of the debate—"Confining dolphins won't save them" and "Aquarium display can make man their ally." Along with these readings, I supply brochures from a swim-with-a-dolphin park in the Florida Keys and a number of newspaper reports: the decreasing dolphin population in the Atlantic, beached dolphins and rescue efforts, restrictions on the tuna-fishing industry, the rescue and later release of a dolphin by Orlando's Sea World, and a dolphin's "miracle save" of a sailor. Together, the materials in this package illustrate the unfinished, still-becoming, multivoiced dialogue about our human fascination with dolphins. The students see this issue debated by well-meaning, earnest professionals who are sometimes monologic, sometimes dialogic in their thinking. After chewing on this issue for a number of days, the students write their responses to an audience of their own design (Sea World, Greenpeace, the Baltimore Aquarium, the swim-with-a-dolphin park, the local newspaper). They enter the ongoing social dialogue and attempt to present their position dialogically. For the most part, these essays have something to contribute: they are thoughtful, lively, disdainful, some impassioned, others sarcastic. But because they have witnessed the heteroglossic, many-sided issue, these student writers seem aware that their position about this matter is, in fact, of only partial consequence and still evolving—one voice among many; therefore, their writing is rarely certain, self-contained, monologic. By changing their thinking about writing they change their writing.

My second sample issue package, used only in freshman

composition, revolves around the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This sequence begins with a *Time* essay written on the 40th anniversary of the event; with perfect hindsight, the essay reviews the reasons why we dropped the bomb. The next three essays were written contemporaneously: one is an eyewitness account of the bombing mission itself by a science writer for *The New York Times,* "Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki Told by a Flight Member"; the second is John Hersey's recounting of the moment of impact on the lives of six survivors, "A Noiseless Flash"; the third is an *Atlantic Monthly* article, "That Day at Hiroshima," which reports an official White House task force visit to the bombed out city. These contemporary voices—one focused unblinkingly on ground zero at impact, another officially reporting the aftermath, and still another looking on from above, an aerial viewpoint—present so dissimilar a description of the same event that the students are jarred into seeing the multivoicedness of history. History is never finished, a closed unit or system. It is merely written about the past, but it is not passed; history is with us in the present, with us in the future. By studying this issue package, my students, I hope, may succeed in reading these historical bombings as a multivoiced, unfinished event in *their* lives. This writing project encourages the students to explore the dialectical refraction of their individual perception and the historical event. At this point near the end of the course, "the relativizing of linguistic consequence" has, at very least, begun: "the inevitable necessity for such a consciousness to speak indirectly, conditionally, in a refracted way—these are all indispensable prerequisites for an authentic double-voiced prose discourse" (*Dialogic* 326).

I suppose it is time to confess. I think I was a Bakhtinian before I even read him. I used to experiment and try to accomplish much the same thinking/writing goals as I have just described. But since struggling through and with Bakhtin's works, I have a more evocative vocabulary and certainly a more cogent system for holding together all the separate spinning worlds which comprise writing, thinking, meaning. Since I started using Bakhtin's sense of language and his dialogizing thoughtfulness in my writing classes, my students—at all levels—have become better thinkers and writers. They learn what good writing entails, and, more importantly, they learn to value dialogized, multivoiced thinking as they struggle to produce "good writing."

What makes writing good? Even teachers of writing have an ongoing dialogue about this question. We seem only to agree on the abstractions (organization, development, sufficient evidence, and so on). Lester Faigley capsulizes the contents of a 1985 book, *What*

Makes Writing Good (Coles and Vopat). The authors had asked 48 of our most illustrious colleagues to submit a sample of their best student essays and to briefly describe what made their choices "good writing." Faigley surveyed the results and found that 30 out of the 48 writing specialists agreed about the essential ingredient of good writing—authentic voice. The number agreeing surprised me, but the ingredient they agreed upon dismayed me. While I agree that authentic voice is desirable in writing, and clearly preferable to the poorly constructed, wooden persona typical of beginning writers, where is it taught? How is it learned? I can hear my students complaining, if they ever got wind of this "finding," about the unmitigated perversity of writing teachers to designate the most important feature of good writing as the one thing not covered in writing texts. I believe their outrage would be justified.

But, for my part, I harbor a far more primal fear. To me, the idea of authentic voice sounds too single-voiced, too self-contained, too monologic. What is authentic voice? One coherent consciousness communicating a unitary, unique, possibly unrefracted plunge (somewhere). This seems contrary to a dialogized view of the social, heteroglossic reality of our lives in a language community reading other communities. In his article, Faigley seems similarly astonished by this settling on—"canonizing"—authentic voice and pursues the subsequent political implications. In constructing his own argument, he gives voice to my fears:

> To ask students to write authentically about the self assumes that a rational consciousness can be laid out on the page. That the self must be interpellated through language is denied. It is no small wonder, then, that the selves many students try to appropriate in their writing are voices of authority, and when they exhaust their resources of analysis, they revert to moral lessons, adopting, as Bartholomae has noted, a parental voice making cliched pronouncements where we expect ideas to be extended. (409–10)

A "canonizing" focus on expressive, personal writing, striving for an authentic voice, may actually impede our students by encouraging grand illusions about the hallowed "self." Authentic voice for professional writers is certainly a requisite component but still a most difficult concept to define, control, even find. Inquiring into this problem of voice, Toby Fulwiler concluded, "I have come to believe that I have a recognizable public voice, both embedded within and yet distinctly apart from others who inhabit the same community" (219–20). The voices of professional writers are

dialogic. Such writers have learned the realities of academic and other discourses. Our students have not.

The social reality the vast majority of our students "know" is the 1980s. In a speculative leap, I am going to suggest that this agreement on authentic voice is indicative of the Reagan decade, of Hirsch and Bloom. In the place where we have most recently been, what constituted "good communication"? One consciousness talking to passive receivers. Voice, style upstaging content. Bakhtin maintains that content is style; the two cannot be separated. Writing in the 30s and 40s in backwater Russia, Bakhtin "described" the more open-ended, uncertain world of the 90s. What makes communication good today? I hope I am not being naive, but I believe we have exhausted the simultaneously playing monologues of the recent past; we are witnessing, perhaps, a renaissance of dialogic thinking and communicating.

Bakhtinian ideas are a natural for the writing classroom, and we writing teachers could profit by directly using these notions of language in our classes. Understanding Bakhtin's theory of discourse has helped me answer the first question I require my students to answer: What is good writing? Good writing is good dialogue—always mixing, changing, incorporating, answering, anticipating—merging the writer and the reader in the construction of meaning. Good writing speaks with the playful double-voicedness with which we, as living, breathing individuals, approach the reality of our lives, the uncertainty of our existence.

When students learn dialogizing as a habit of mind, more than their writing improves.

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