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DIALOGIZING RESPONSE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM: STUDENTS ANSWER BACK

ABSTRACT: *While informed teachers of writing have moved toward more dialogic approaches, "we" still have colonial tendencies when responding to student writing. While students are addressed by the teacher, they are not generally expected to answer back, except in the form of "better" writing, and certainly not to talk back. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gay suggests that if we are going to help students understand the dialogical nature of language, then perhaps they should take up our words as we take up theirs. Based on her observations of students' initial reactions to teacher commentary, Gay suggests an activity that invites students to talk back to the teacher-reader as a means of helping them move more effectively toward revision. Dialogizing response, however, requires teachers to become dialogized. Gay wonders how many will take the risk: teachers may be more resistant than resilient.*

Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.
> M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel."
> *The Dialogic Imagination*

Any utterance — the finished, written utterance not excepted — makes response to something and is to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances.
> V.N. Voloshinov/M.M. Bakhtin,
> *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*

Informed teachers of writing have moved toward ever more collaborative/dialogic approaches; however, we still have colonial tendencies when assigning and responding to student writing—to students, to them. While we have progressed more in responding to writing (through multiple drafts, writing workshops, and portfolios) than

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we have in assigning, which is still largely viewed as the teacher's sole responsibility, we still have a ways to go.

Students write in response to an assignment. They "answer" (to use Bakhtin's term) in writing, and teachers frequently answer back in the form of written commentary. Teachers expect an "answer" to their remarks in the form of "better" writing. Sometimes before this writing is produced, there is a conference in which a student seeks some clarification or further direction. A student may even argue a point or express feelings caused by the teacher's commentary. The teacher acts or performs her role as someone who must "answer" student writing, and the student reacts to the teacher's action.

More often than not, however, teachers do not know how students have answered or responded to their comments beyond the writing that students subsequently produce. Sometimes we look at their writing and wonder whether they even read our comments or whether they misread them. Sometimes we joke about all the time we spend on commenting and how useless this work seems. We imagine students crumpling our words and tossing them into the wastebasket. We also know students talk to each other about teacher responses to their writing. WHAT IF students answered back to the teacher in the classroom space rather than behind her back in the institutional hallway?

Classroom Scenes

[Writing workshops] are, like any social situation, multifaceted, shifting scenes full of conflicting and contending values and purposes, played out by a cast of unique actors — students, teachers (and observers). These performers view the ongoing scene from their own shifting perspective within it, as they negotiate their identities amid the cacophony of voices and social roles around them.
Joy Ritchie "Beginning Writers" (153)

Scene 1

Lisa's students looked disgruntled while reading through her remarks to what must have been at least a second draft. I was puzzled. Lisa was a state-of-the-art commenter. After listening to the sighs, groans, and silences, I encouraged everyone to begin writing back to Lisa. I noticed that the rough-typed drafts ran about five pages. Students had done considerable work. This particular assignment was also difficult, involving quite a process before writing and then rewriting. The assignment required them to locate two different news reports of the "same" event and then examine how choices of language and of material to include or exclude in each report biased their reading.[1]

"I worked so hard on this," one student shook her head, ignoring

the encouraging remarks in the commentary and instead focusing on the questions she raised. This student wanted to be done with her work. She didn't want thoughtful commentary. She didn't want to revise any more. Another student grumbled, defending her point of view and arguing with Lisa, though already beginning to surrender to The Teacher as she had undoubtedly been conditioned to do through her years of schooling.

What seemed most important, especially given the difficulty of the assignment and the late-draft stage, was for the students to be given some "vent" or reaction time. I shuddered to think what their revisions would have looked like without going through a process of reaction to revision. What would have happened if their drafts had been returned at the end of class and they had been left on their own, as is most often the case in classes across the curriculum?

"The two news reports weren't that different," one writer told me after her initial reaction. Taking this statement as a signal that she was ready to move toward revision, I asked her to read to our small group her findings. She had detailed very well the different choices of language in each account and a number of differences in what was selected for inclusion, helping me see these news reports as quite different. This writer, however, hadn't backed away from the close work of her research to look from a new, informed perspective. In this draft, the writer had spent much time, head down, scrutinizing the news reports. Understandably, she wanted to be rewarded for this effort. While Lisa had praised this student for her work, she had also pushed her to consider how the inclusion and exclusion of information affected a reader's reading of the news. After venting her frustration with sighs and complaints and taking another look at her instructor's commentary, this writer was able to move to another level of revision. Sitting and listening to her and members of the group interact, I felt I had witnessed an important development in this struggling writer's life, and as a teacher, I learned from her the importance of engaging students in response.

Scene 2

I learned still more when I visited another TA's class. Laura was having some problems with several students who were basic writers. After talking several times about the increasing resistance of her "problem" students, Laura asked me to visit her class so that I could see for myself. In a memo to basic writing instructors for discussion at our next meeting, I wrote the following:

> If you make written comments on drafts and ask students to revise, try asking students to write back to you during class when you return these drafts and comments. No matter how

good you are at commenting, students (who are not confident writers, remember) will probably balk at some of your comments. They may get upset because they worked hard "and look at all these comments!" They may get defensive ("She doesn't understand. I wasn't saying that. I—"). They may get angry and slam their papers down. They may feel discouraged, perhaps thinking they were done and now they have to write more ("I don't see why I have to—"). You will be surprised I think at how students respond to our written comments and how they perceive "us." I think it's best to have students respond to the written responses immediately upon receiving them so they can react first and then you can help them move toward revision. I would be glad to visit your class when you try this out and work with you.

Laura suggested we try out this activity. As in Lisa's class, I would sit with the resistant students (who always grouped together). I would see close-up how they were engaging with her through their response to her written commentary.

Laura returned the second drafts of the "Reading the News" project, the same assignment Lisa's students had been working on, and she gave the same instructions. Initially everyone in all three groups began talking rather than writing, but my group resisted writing the longest. When I urged them to begin, several reluctantly began writing. "I'm just going to follow what she says," the student to my right said to me, as if this were a waste of time. "I find her comments helpful. I don't mind," another student piped up. A student across from me sputtered, "This looks like a Christmas tree" and let a computer printout of her draft decorated with comments fall dramatically over her desktop. Once again this response seemed surprising given that, like Lisa, Laura wrote thoughtful commentary. If anything, she was perhaps too considerate and accommodating. I knew that she had spent a long time reading and reflecting on each draft, writing helpful comments and questions in the margins and a final, brief, personal letter aimed at helping students revise.

Tanya, the student to my left who had estimated that the teacher spent ten minutes reading and commenting on her draft, was busy writing. Across from me another student stared, not even attempting to take out a pen or find piece of paper to write on. I broke her stare: "Do you need a piece of paper?" I asked matter-of-factly. "I don't have a response," she shot back. "That's a response," I replied, handing her a pen and paper. "Write that." And she did. When it was her turn to read aloud to the group, she read, "I don't have a response." When I questioned her about why she wrote that, she explained that the teacher had a different interpretation of an article: "I just see it

differently," she shrugged, reminding me of the students who defend their work with "That's just my opinion." I knew, however, that this student hadn't explained her viewpoint well, that Laura was prodding her to do so, and that Laura would not impose her viewpoint on a student. Still, this student read the teacher as arguing for "her" opinion. What was going on? I wondered.

When Tanya's turn came to read her response, she burst out with how upset she was about her mid-course portfolio evaluation. She had gotten an "A-" and she wanted an "A." She wanted all "A's" in college: "I WANT A's," she announced loudly. She was very frustrated about writing: "I write and rewrite and it's never good enough. There's always more, more. I go to the Writing Center and they don't fix anything. They try to help me find my own mistakes. I don't have time. I'm happy with this draft," she exclaimed, slapping the palms of her hands down on her paper. "I don't want to read all these comments after I did all this work. It's frustrating. I hate writing. I hate this class!"

During this scene, the student to my right was reading over her teacher's comments and making notes. The Student Who Had No Response was writing a "P.S." to her response to this teacher and making an appointment to see her. I looked at the draft of the angry, frustrated student.

I asked Tanya to read one paragraph aloud to the group along with her teacher's suggestions for rewriting. She had made a point and then given examples. Her teacher had praised her for what she had done and then tried to push her to use the examples to argue her point. Angry, Tanya explained to me what she was trying to say in this paragraph and how and why she was using these examples. "What you've said is what you need to put in your essay," I replied. "That's an 'A.'"

Teacher Commentary

Most students, perhaps because of years of following teacher directives, tend to read teacher commentary as monologic or what Bakhtin refers to as "authoritative discourse," not to be questioned (or answered). In fact, Bakhtin's only reference to teachers is as spokespersons of authoritative discourse. The teacher's "utterance" is not usually treated as provisional or open to response (See Hunt 259; Klancher 93; Welch 500). Although audiences, even captive audiences, as Leith and Myerson explain in *The Power of Address* (1989), are seldom, if ever, inactive participants, most students do not speak back/up. They are addressed by the teacher but are not expected to answer back and certainly not to talk back. (One possible exception is a dialogue begun by

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a student's reflection letter to the teacher-reader that accompanies a portfolio. As with any tool, however, the use of portfolios does not assure authentic dialogue.)

What prevents students from being active participants, particularly from "talking back"? The work of Leith and Myerson can offer us insight into the context that makes establishing authentic dialogue difficult, namely when they discuss "performance." While the term "performance" tends to evoke the theatre or concert hall or even the lecture hall, Leith and Myerson take a rhetorical view of performance as a speaker addressing an audience: the lecture is "framed" in a distinct arrangement of space such as the lecture hall in which students gaze at the lecturer. Framing can occur, however, in other situations. Even in a workshop setting, teacher commentary, as performance, is usually viewed as markedly different from student or peer commentary. The teacher, as Paulo Freire has continually pointed out, is still the teacher. There is a shared expectation that the teacher will, more or less, direct.

Performance, Leith and Myerson continue, may also be seen as "privileged acts of utterance, ones which . . . attract a level of attentiveness not accorded less focused kinds of interaction" (6). Part of the privileging, they argue, derives from the status of performers themselves. Teachers, for example, are cloaked with institutional authority. Even if a teacher uses state-of-the-art commentary (e.g., comments that are written in response to students' letters about their essays), teacher power remains merely disguised unless students find an authentic way to really answer back, unless there is some genuine to-ing and fro-ing.

When we write or speak, generally we expect to be understood, or we wouldn't even attempt dialogue. We imagine, at least for the moment, that we are going to be understood. We imagine, according to Bakhtin, a higher-order or ideal response. (When we comment, we perhaps have in mind a "Yes, Socrates"-type dialogue.) We seek what Bakhtin calls "responsive understanding": "Every dialogue takes place . . . against the backdrop of the responsive understanding of a present but invisible third entity hovering above all the participants in the dialogue (the partners)." (See Todorov 305-6). This "super-receiver" absolutely understands. Rather eerie, isn't it? Perhaps our dialogue is a little more crowded than we thought.[2]

Dialogizing Response

How can we turn students into speaking subjects whom the teacher actually hears, who, in turn, increasingly authorize their writing performance? How can we dialogize teacher/reader-student/

writer response and move students out of the hostile receiver role to become active, willing participants? How can we address each other?

Kathyrn Evans (1995) has proposed a model of communication that capitalizes on "interpretive difference" as a learning opportunity. For example, a teacher confronts a student with a problem. Teacher: "Please indicate your sources." (You will have a "better" paper.) But, as it turns out, the student's fear of plagiarism prevented her from using sources. (That's really the problem.) The teacher and student then discuss this problem. Usually, however, we are not even aware of what's going on (in the absences and silences). That's the real problem.

The model Evans proposes would replace the "problematic" model of communication that (1) views moments of interpretive difference as "aberrations, failures, or stopping places"; (2) bases the "success" of our response primarily on whether or not the student has "understood" our intended meaning; (3) has no way of monitoring whether students have received our intended meaning; and (4) blames students for not "understanding" or applying what we tell them. Furthermore, this model assumes that we have received the student's intended meanings and thus have correctly identified the student's "problem," which brings "us" back to the colonizing "What's their problem?" Our response practice, Evans argues, should be based on a more productive model of communication in which we see moments of interpretive difference as "normal" and we don't assume that students receive our intended meanings and that we receive theirs. We need to become aware of interpretive differences and then to account for the differences.

How can we uncover interpretive differences? Evans suggests we actively solicit information. Why do we think what we do? Why do students think what they do? What's really going on? One way to find out, at least to some extent, is to invite students to initiate a discussion of their writing by asking them to write an accompanying letter. They write about their specific goals, their own views about the quality of their writing, some evaluation of their writing process, and what they'd like the teacher to focus on in response. Indeed, as Evans recognizes, this practice, especially with the increased use of portfolios, is not uncommon. What Evans is advocating, however, is a model of communication that informs practice: "Not just any kind of conferencing, cover letter, etc. will be optimally effective. Less effective will be response sessions informed by the implicit assumption that communicative problems are rooted in interpretive difference itself, rather than in lack of awareness of interpretive difference." She suggests finding ways of giving students a chance to respond to teacher commentary, such as writing responses to teacher responses.

Let's return then to the Student Who Had No Response from

Classroom Scene 2. You'll recall that she believed her teacher had and required a different interpretation. You may also recall, however, that it soon became apparent from her response in her small group that she was frustrated by the amount and kind of work she was actually being required to do in college, especially with regard to writing. That is quite a different problem, one crucial to uncover not only for her development as a writer but, even more important, for her survival as a student. This seemingly defiant student is caught in a struggle about more than her writing and about more than competing and colliding voices. It appears that she is trying not only to construct her "own" evolving voice (to authorize herself) but also to negotiate (navigate?) the voices she hears (and the teacher's voice is powerful) while she is struggling to enter a relatively foreign academic culture. No wonder she feels at sea.

As Andrea Lunsford put it in her opening address at the (1995) NCTE Conference on Assigning and Responding to Student Writing, "We've got to start looking at the 'between'—the relationship between teacher and student. . . . We need more inclusive and expansive ways of responding to student writing, ways not so easily commodified." [3] We need to find various ways of dialogizing response—of de-privileging, as best we can, teacher commentary—we need to find more ways of making the process of revision more interactive. [4]

Ewald (1993) argues that it is our responsibility to introduce dialogism into our classrooms. "To be answerable" within Bakhtin's concept of addressivity, explains Ewald, requires us to consider the other," "to be aware of the differences between our responses . . . and those of others" (342-343). Teaching writing within a framework of answerability could include some articulation of what's going on behind our responses to student writing. We could put our words side-by-side and talk back and forth with our students rather than "hold forth."

How can we as teachers find ways to provide "talk-back" opportunities for our students? For some students (first-year, and basic writers in particular) we might include some means of reaction (some reaction time) as one movement toward revision. Based on my experiences working with Lisa's and Laura's students, I created the following "talk-back" assignment. [5] It appears here in the form of a handout to students.

Students could use this "talk-back" form as a guide for talking with their teacher-reader and peers about their writing-rewriting process. Student responses could be used for in-class discussion or follow-up conferences or a combination of the two. My students now publish their work on the Internet, and commentary (teacher and peer) can be attached to drafts. I ask students to e-mail me back a response to my comments and then we talk further. As an exercise, I asked

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Responding to Teacher Commentary:
Talking Back to the Teacher-Reader

Directions: (1) After reading my comments on your draft once-through, write a few lines describing your overall response. What's going through your mind? What is your first response? Write openly what you are actually thinking and feeling and saying to yourself, not what you might say in a conference in the teacher's office a day or two later.

(2) Respond to each response. Copy the remarks or marks and set it up as a script or dialogue.

    <u>Example</u>
    Overall Response:

    Teacher:

    Student (Use Your Name):

    Teacher: & so on.

What kind of responses? Respond as you actually do when reading each mark or remark by the teacher. Here are some possibilities:

VENT	Vent your feelings (frustration, excitement, anger, and so on) and explain why.
COUNTER	Argue a point/defend. Raise questions, con-cerns.
QUESTION	Ask for clarification, information, or for further direction.
EXPLAIN	Explain why you did or didn't do something-or your different understanding.
NOTE	Note something that you need to look up or remember or that you want to think about more before you rewrite.

graduate students in a "Teaching Writing" course to find an old paper with comments that they would like to have addressed and write a letter to the teacher (just to air in class, not to send). I don't know why I was surprised by the strong responses of these graduate students — teacher commentary is powerful. These teachers never knew how these students felt and what they had to say back.

Dialogizing response requires not just recognition of interpretive differences but a more complex recognition and "admission" of multiple voices, the multiple voices of our many selves and of the many "others" who are audience to our texts. Thomas Recchio (1991) recommends we do a Bakhtinian reading of student writing "with an eye toward locating the multiple competing and/or intersecting discourses" in order to help students negotiate the claims of each "as they work toward developing a consciously critical point of view on what they read through what they write" (447). Nancy Welch (1993) asks us "to listen and speak to a student's many voices during 'the complicated process of making the word one's own'" (497). She suggests having students keep writing logs in which they reflect not only on their writing but also on their readers' responses.

Robert Schwegler (1995) recommends we make students aware of our many voices when we respond and that we curb the urge to unify our responses as teacher authorities. No utterance, to draw on Bakhtin again, is single-voiced, including the teacher as reader. Helping students realize that there are differences not only between readers, as they discover in a writing workshop, for example, but also within a reader can help with the ongoing process of becoming writers.

Let's look at another developing writer at work. Student writer Ricardo Sewell wrote a narrative about several incidents of violence he witnessed on Easter in New York City.[6] At the end of his account, I imagine he paused and listened to some teacherly voice: "You need to write a conclusion now. You need to sum this up." He then wrote the following:

> Easter just isn't the same anymore in the city. It is not a religious holiday anymore. I don't look forward to Easter anymore like I used too. Now I wish they will just get rid of the holiday completely in the city. Maybe if they get rid of it some of these innocent people won't get robbed or killed. This is one holiday that I won't ever enjoy again.

Of course, there are other voices at play here. There's the voice of Ricardo growing up and looking back to his childhood: his life isn't the same. There's also the voice indicating Ricardo's awareness that

life everywhere isn't the same. Not only Ricardo's world but the greater world has changed: religion isn't as powerful a force as it once was, and violence has increased. I imagine still another teacherly voice intruding and Ricardo's reply: "I must offer some solution to the problem I presented." But how can Ricardo possibly write a tidy conclusion? As Lester Faigley asked me in the margins of an earlier version of this essay, how can he accomplish what American society has failed to accomplish?

Both the student-writer and the teacher-reader might (to quote Welch again) "hear the authoritative voice that says all essays must come to a neat and complete close and the internally persuasive voice that says this is an experience and an expression of it that are not so easily ended" (498). A Bakhtinian reading, Welch explains, encourages "both teacher and students to listen and speak back to their dialogically-charged words" (498). A Bakhtinian dialogue can begin with the teacher asking a genuine question, which, Welch qualifies, is "not a prescription masquerading beneath a question mark" (498), such as "Ricardo, how could you improve your conclusion?" Rather, a genuine question "has the heuristic power to awaken new words and evoke response: it also highlights writing, reading, and responding as communicative activities and points to the kinds of confusion, interest, and desire for further thinking and discussion that accompany the act of communication" (449).

I could then respond to Ricardo's conclusion by making him aware of the competing voices I myself hear. I might sympathize with his dilemma and pose the problem of tidying up what can't be tidied. Then he could answer back. Perhaps the move away from writing a "school" conclusion to engaging with a genuine reader would enable him to converse with his own many voices and eventually to authorize his experience:

> [I]f both teachers and students use descriptive, dialogic responses — sharing reactions, asking questions, dramatizing the complex and evocative interplay between reader and text — they construct an internally persuasive discourse that is creative, communicative, and productive. Through such conversations with a number of readers, students can begin to resist and revise the belief that the teacher's voice is the only voice that is backed by authority and must be obeyed. (Welch 500)

Welch also brings up the problem of what we mean by "improvement" or "better" writing, a problem we have addressed off and on in composition studies and one we need to keep talking about. Ricardo's revised conclusion is likely to be unfinished and may even be more contradictory than his first draft. He may even let in (or out) more

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voices. Should we teach him to conceal this dialogic tension, cover up contradictions, and fake coherence? Or should we encourage him to keep going (read: growing)? "It is through this continuing dialogic and revisionary process," answers Welch, "that students grow as critically aware writers, readers, and learners" (501).

A Borderline Conclusion

Language . . . lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's.

M.M. Bakhtin,
("Discourse in the Novel" 293-4)

We've come a long way in responding to student writing since the colonial (products-only) period, and we've come along since the early "process" days in the late 1970s. A teacher's response will probably never be just another response or voice. However, if we are going to help students understand the interactive, dialogical nature of language, to develop what Comprone (1989) calls "dialogic literacy," then perhaps they should take up our words as we take up theirs. We need to encourage a new kind of student resistance that challenges, interrogates, and interrupts the flow to tidy closure in the ongoing struggle for power.

"The change," Ewald warns, "will not come easy." Echoing Mina Shaughnessy (1977), Ewald writes, "Simply reconfiguring seating arrangements, introducing interactive activities into syllabi, and promoting a classroom environment that fosters collaborative learning will not necessarily alter the monologic patterns of discourse used in the large circle, the small group, or the peer team." Ewald continues, sounding now more like bell hooks ("there are always colonizing tendencies"): "Indeed, students (and instructors, for that matter) may simply repeat old patterns of monologic discourse in these new settings. Teachers may find it difficult to break out of the old molds, even when they want to do so (344).[7] And even if classroom communities open up to dialogic uses of language, how prepared are teachers for this change?

Opening up our classrooms to multiple voices may not produce the "hum" of heteroglossia that Ritchie (1989) imagines. While, as Ritchie says, "the tension students experience as they attempt to articulate their ideas in the midst of conflicting and complementary values ... provides rich opportunities for growth and change," this tension, this after all, dialogic tension, may be unsettling not only for students but for teachers as well.

To dialogize response requires teachers to become dialogized, which means, as Klancher (1989) put it, exposing ourselves "to the risk

and surprise of heteroglot encounter" (93). But how far are teachers prepared or willing or even able to go? Are we fully prepared to dialogize response and lose all privileges? We may find that teachers are more resistant than resilient.

Notes

1. They were working on the "Reading the News" project from my textbook *Developing Writers: A Dialogic Approach* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995).

2. Robert Schwegler (1995) points to a possible further complication. He suggests that the teacher-reader responds to an inferred author based on a reading of not only the immediate text but on memories and perceptions of previous student texts. What writers do we infer when we read? What kind of a writer/author is this? a teacher, consciously or not, might ask when reading student writing.

3. In her keynote address at the 1996 Commonwealth Women Writers' Conference in London, Susan Bassnet also stressed the importance of "in-between" as a location. "The discourse of colonialism ignores the threshold. There is no pause in the crossover," she said. What if we viewed "between-ness" as a liminal space and a desirable place to be?

4. "One strategy for encouraging thoughtful responses to feedback is to require students to write a revise-and-resubmit letter, analogous to what scholars produce when they submit a revised manuscript to a journal after receiving reviews. In such letters, writers systematically review the feedback they have received, explaining how they have addressed the readers' comments and why they may have disregarded some of them" (Ferris 331).

5. This activity is similar to "inkshedding," a strategy I first learned about at a poster sessions at the 1995 Computers and Writing Conference in El Paso, Texas. At the 1994 conference, after listening to a speaker, the audience was invited to respond informally in writing immediately afterward. These responses were shared at the moment, then photocopied and made available for further discussion, and later discarded. Interestingly, when I asked why inkshedding wasn't being used again, I was told that some of the presenters had found it upsetting. Hunt (1994) has also written about this strategy as a way of getting students "to use written language in dialogic ways" (248). Hunt believes, incidentally, that the word "inkshedding" is originally from Carlyle but says he owes the word to his colleague Jim Reither. There's

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even an annual Inkshed conference! according to Hunt. I use computer-networked discussions as variations of what I can now call "inkshedding."

6. His essay "New Easter" appears in full in *Developing Writers: A Dialogic Approach* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995).

7. See Bleich's critique of the monologic classroom that fixes the roles of teachers and students *"by not allowing language use in the classroom to change the class"* (his emphasis), cited in Ewald's essay. David Bleich. *The Double Perspective.* New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

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