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## Genres of Dialogic Discussion in High School English: A Cross-Case Study of Two Courses

Wendy Keyser  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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Genres of Dialogic Discussion in High School English:

A Cross-Case Study of Two Courses

A Dissertation Presented

by

WENDY KEYSER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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College of Education  
Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies  
Teacher Education and School Improvement  
Language, Literacy and Culture

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Maria José Botelho, Chair

---

Anne J. Herrington, Member

---

Denise K. Ives, Member

---

Christine B. McCormick, Dean  
College of Education

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I want to thank my colleagues at the school where I teach and where I conducted this research. My administration supported my studies by creating a schedule that allowed me to do the many hours of observation required for this project. The teacher participant in my study was generous and open in letting me see into her classroom in its daily variations. She gave me honesty without pretention; her deep interest in pedagogical reflection allowed us to work collaboratively in a way that was professionally engaging and fulfilling. Other colleagues supported my efforts through consistent, enthusiastic encouragement during lunch and carpool rides.

I thank my family for their long-lasting patience, supporting me emotionally and logistically.

## **ABSTRACT**

GENRES OF DIALOGIC DISCUSSION IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH:

A CROSS-CASE STUDY OF TWO COURSES

WENDY KEYSER, B.A., CARLETON COLLEGE

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Maria José Botelho

This cross-case ethnographic study examines genres of discussion in two public high school English courses to explore the interplay between dialogism, structure, and critical and collaborative thinking practices. Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and speech genres as well as Vygotsky's concepts of thinking and language and the zone of proximal development provide the theoretical premise of this research. Data sources included field notes, audio recordings and transcriptions, artifacts of the teacher's handouts and students' written work, informal conversations, and an interview with the teacher. I used discourse analysis and grounded theory to analyze the data, looking at both lively and problematic episodes of discourse. An honors 12th grade class is juxtaposed with a lower-level ninth grade class as a teacher's choices about meta-talk, degrees of structure, and genres of dialogic discussion are described. In the honors class, the teacher uses three genres of discussion: warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking. These genres create openings for dialogic discussion and invite students to participate in collaborative critical thinking practices. In the lower-level class, the teacher uses prereading instead of warm-up, and she uses a greater degree of structure and authority to invite students to use deeper-level thinking practices. This study finds that the use of structure may support or obstruct deeper-level thinking. Meta-talk differs greatly between the two courses, highlighting the negative impact of high-stakes testing as part of states' implementation of the Common Core State Standards and illustrating the impact of within-school ability sorting on classroom cultures. The study finds that dialogic talk can support critical and collaborative thinking practices with both levels of students; however, a fluid and responsive approach to structure is necessary to support students while providing them with flexibility to create their own paths of thought. Using genres of talk as part of a dialogic approach to teaching can communicate teachers' intentions for dialogism and critical thinking and teach students to learn through collaboratively building meaning. These findings suggest strategies and aspects of the teacher's stance that can support students as they learn to think critically and collaboratively.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM STATEMENT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Introduction

In the midst of the shimmer of technological capabilities, educational research on dialogue has turned towards online communication. Yet high school students tell me they spend so much time texting, they are losing their ability to talk in person. They mistake information retrieval for knowledge and thinking practices. While the buzz phrase “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” tantalizes educators with the promise of new routes to knowledge, I am reminded of our need for balance. Language, thought, and the pursuit of deeper meaning tantalize our minds in another way: dynamic processes that can engage all through participation and negotiation, while showing teachers so much about the learners as they take risks in the dialogue. Dialogue enables students to learn how to learn, to wonder, inquire, summarize, elaborate on, synthesize, rethink, and extend ideas, more than just to find answers.

Discussions about literature delight and energize us when we are fully present in the questions and the confusion, in the puzzling-through. As a researcher, I am drawn towards my research questions by experiences of exuberance and disappointment: the energizing nature of unexpected opening up of ideas in successful dialogic discussions; the deflation of moments when students seem overly focused on grades and shortcuts, learning how to “do school” more than how to think and discover through their own curiosities. My research questions are based on the premise that successful dialogic discussion is a place where learning occurs in a unique, valuable way. This premise stands in opposition to alternative views, such as: discussion is a place where facts are

transferred from teacher to student; it is a place for engagement without regard for learning; or it is a place to test prior knowledge or skills.

### **Statement of the Problem**

While dialogic discussions have been shown to positively influence student learning, engagement, and use of critical thinking practices, teachers predominantly avoid using dialogic discussions with their classes, opting instead for the more familiar initiate-respond-evaluate (IRE) method. Even teachers who profess commitment to dialogic discussions and undergo professional learning activities to enhance their practice often fall back upon IRE. Therefore, rather than merely showing the benefits of dialogic discussions or designing an alternative professional learning module, this research is designed to explore the micro-interactions within and surrounding successful dialogic discussions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework addresses the following three components: theory on dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981), sociocultural theory, and theories about critical thinking. Of particular interest are places in which these theories overlap, either explicitly or by implication. I have included both founding theorists as well as thinkers who have taken up the work of these theorists to extend and connect their ideas to the context of classroom talk.

## **Bakhtin's Theory of Dialogism**

In Bakhtin's perspective, we are always in dialogue, not just with one another, but also with the literary texts we read, which themselves are in dialogue with other literary and nonliterary texts from other time periods. This dialogue between and among texts is called intertextuality. Further, no meaning or idea stands singularly alone, because it is influenced by the historical and social features of the time. Texts occur within a chain of the history of texts and ideologies, building upon ideas and styles of other texts, sometimes with direct allusions, sometimes unselfconsciously touching upon motifs or structures that have been used before. Additionally, dialogue may occur between instances of a motif within a single text. The connections between instances of the motif work in concert to create meanings that go beyond that of any single instance.

In Bakhtin's model, meaning occurs between a text and its reader, so it is neither static nor fixed. Bakhtin identifies a pronoun for the intersection between people, the *we*, which characterizes the simultaneous individuality and interdependence of self and other (Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004). This space between people, this pronoun that is neither I nor you, creates a unique space for learning (Baxter, 2004). Bakhtin presents the idea that dialogue between people helps each to explore and develop a sense of identity. However, connection does not result in entire fusion.

Dialogism helps us to think about high school classroom discourse about literary texts. Discussion that is open-ended and exploratory positions readers as valuable participants in co-creating the meaning of the text with one another, and with the text, through talk. Within classroom discourse about literary texts, two types of dialogue are in play at once (in addition to intertextuality): dialogue between the text and each reader,

and dialogue between the readers themselves; thus the text “cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads... around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 76). As the dialogue between readers evolves, the dialogue between reader and text shifts as well.

The teacher’s role is to facilitate all three dimensions of dialogue, so that students discover meaning collaboratively. There is no one “truth” about a text, but there can be layers of interconnected and even paradoxical truths. Meaning is co-constructed within the conversation rather than pronounced by an individual, so that “the word in 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” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 76). The concept of multiple truths, however, does not mean that any interpretation of the text is equally valid. Effective discussions contain an element of exploration and inquiry, so that possibilities are proposed, challenged, sometimes discarded, and sometimes morphed into new ideas.

Bakhtin’s concept of speech genres contributes to the discussion of dialogism in action in the classroom. A *speech genre* is a stable set of types of speech utterances within a sphere of language use (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). These utterances reflect a compositional structure, style, and thematic content that relate to the speech goal as well as the setting in which the communication takes place (Bakhtin, 1986). Distinguishing speech genres from one another clarifies the different types of discourse that occur within one classroom and between classrooms. What one teacher calls a “literature discussion” may in fact be a different speech genre than what another teacher calls by the same name, involving a different stance expected of students and teacher, different goals for thinking

and learning, and different types of conversational interactions, both thematically and discursively. When students enter a new classroom, they anticipate the types of thinking and discussing that they will enact in that class based on the speech genres of previous school experiences. A teacher working to create a shift in the expectations of the speech genre of classroom talk creates dissonance for the students, a tension that can be resolved but must be recognized. Students need guidance to understand and implement the new genres of participation.

Speech genres are connected to beliefs about school and learning. The belief that the teacher holds information that should be discovered by students yields a speech genre that includes the initiation-response-evaluation pattern. The belief that there is one “correct” answer supports the speech genre of debate; a belief that multiple perspectives can coexist without disproving one another supports a collaborative meaning-making speech genre; a belief that “anything goes” in the interpretation of a text supports a speech genre devoid of interrogating ideas. Even within one classroom, a teacher shifts between speech genres to suit the needs of the students in response to their level of understanding of the text and their stage in examining it. Multiple researchers identify a difference between the initial stage of addressing a text, in which students get a general sense of the literature, and a later stage, in which they go deeper with inquiry and interpretation (Langer, 1993; Vine & Faust, 1993). These two stages do not have to be chronological and linear; rather, they will likely occur cyclically within dialogic discussions on a text as different elements of the text are considered and discussed.

## **Sociocultural Theory**

Cognitive sociocultural theory moves away from the psycholinguistic idea that language is set and holds a singular meaning, available equally to all. This assumption, “that we can discern and describe correct usage [of language] will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy” (Cazden et al., 1996). In sociocultural theory, participants use language to socially construct knowledge and meaning. Learning is a social process in which meaning is both transmitted and transformed. Instead of merely taking in meaning from outside of ourselves, we “are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning [and] designers of social futures” (Cazden et al., 1996).

Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development (1978) relates to the classroom practice of dialogic discussion, because it emphasizes the need for the teacher to assess and respond to the students’ level of competence, and then present educational experiences that meet the student at the edge between competency and challenge. Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). Students benefit not only from the teacher’s formative assessment and responsive teaching, but also from the social interactions with peers who demonstrate that next level of accomplishment. In dialogic discussion, the direction of intellectual exploration is flexible, so the teacher may adapt the direction of inquiry to fall within the zone of proximal development. If students misinterpret the text, the teacher can address comprehension, and then move back



towards critical thinking prompts and more open-ended topics. This structure differs from a pre-set list of questions that may not match the students' needs, either underestimating or overestimating the students' abilities and needs.

The zone of proximal development is created by social learning situations, because students learn from peers as well as from the learning activities designed by the teacher. Social learning “creates a zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). In a dialogic discussion about literature, students learn from the challenge of addressing the prompt; they also learn from thinking about how their peers think, and from entering into conversation in response to the comments of their peers. They can subsequently internalize these processes and translate them into independent practices (Vygotsky, 1978) of reading, writing, and thinking.

Dialogic discussions are also related to Vygotsky's connection between thought and language. While language was previously considered merely the vehicle for delivering knowledge, Vygotsky poses the idea that language actually develops, not represents, thought: “the use of the word is an integral part of the developing processes, and the word maintains its guiding function in the formation of genuine concepts” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 145). Therefore, giving students more time to use language to explore possibilities and questions in collaboration with others in a dialogic discussion is to give them more opportunities to learn how to think and create meaning.

Thought and language are combined with a third element, the affect, or the emotional experience. Vygotsky's term “sense” refers to one's understanding of and

relation to language and social situations, giving relevance “to the generative character of emotions and the subjective processes” (Rey, 2011, p. 42). This emphasis on the subjective response is a reminder that the social activity of discussion, as well as the internal associations and memories triggered by that discussion, evoke emotions in individuals. These emotions necessarily impact a participant’s sense of the topics at hand, and thus subjectivity impacts the contributions, the follow-up comments and questions, and the understandings which develop in the discussion. Emotional response does not preclude a thinking response; rather, emotions provide readers with indicators of their responses to texts which can then be analyzed using thought and language; this process is not sequential but overlapping, as the emotions are tied to thoughts throughout the entire process (Cai, 2008). Once put into words, these thoughts may be examined for subjectivities and for critical interpretations of the text.

Since sociocultural theory focuses on learning as part of a social process, participants’ identities and histories, and language use impact their interactions as part of a classroom discourse community. These identities are formed in part by their experiences prior to attending any specific academic class by their school, family, and cultural experiences, as well as by social identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Vygotsky’s term *vivencia* names another aspect of identity that clarifies that an individual is not just a passive recipient of experiences and contexts, that social conditions are mediated by psychological factors. While there is no direct English translation to this word, it is “a way of living [an experience] emotionally and cognitively, individually and collectively, biologically and psychologically” (Arias, 2011, p. 65); it is “through *vivencia* humans find sense in the

events in which they are involved” (Arias, 2011, p. 60). Vivencia points to the kernel of uniqueness in each person, and it is a reminder that students are not passive subjects of their experiences both inside and outside of school, but they interact individually with their experiences through vivencia. This uniqueness contributes to the unexpectedness which dialogic discussions embrace. Identities are not fixed and unitary, but multiple and shifting, adding another layer of unexpectedness; identities themselves may be open to change in a way similar to the way a dialogic discussion is open to possibilities (Fairclough, 1992). Dialogic discussions are both interpersonal and intrapersonal; these two elements contribute to the development of a discussion as well as to understandings and responses that participants carry away with them after a discussion.

Readers' lived experiences and unique sets of memories are part of the dialogism between reader and text as represented by Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional theory. "A reader's fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all" (p. 77), yet the interaction between text and reader is not relegated to personal connections; instead, there is an interplay between emotional and interpretive transactions with the text. "Some interpretations... are more defensible than others in terms of the text as a whole ... [and] sometimes more than one reasonable interpretation is possible" (p. 75). Dialogism and intertextuality both emphasize the weaving together of multiple texts, including lived, emotional experiences, the literary text on the page, and the texts of social discourses.

Identities are integral to dialogic discussions because they impact ways in which students interact in this context. Identity is related to vivencia, a student's sense of the meaning of the discussion in both thought and emotion, and broader social constructs. Power dynamics that are impacted by greater social structures play out within dialogic

discussions, and identity is also related to power and access to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Within discussion, power plays a role in a number of significant ways: students' willingness to take risks and claim airtime; students' access to established, tacit expectations about what counts as knowledge and what counts as a welcome and appropriate contribution to discussion; and students' willingness to contradict or question another discussion participant. Within a classroom culture, the teacher and students may reshape these expectations and shift or interrupt the balance of power; however, in order to do so, the teacher must acknowledge students' identities and how a history of classroom discursive practices and texts positions students and shapes how they participate in the classroom community.

### **Theories of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is the process of working in depth with questions and ideas rather than apprehending information for the purpose of later reciting it. While the specific applications of critical thinking vary by discipline, the primary qualities of this process are cross-disciplinary. In fact, development of the practices in one discipline has been shown to positively affect student abilities to apply them in another discipline (Housen, 2001).

Although varied definitions of critical thinking exist, and there is no clearly agreed-upon definition (Petress, 2004; Snyder & Snyder, 2008), the elements of thinking that Dewey (1910) outlines in the categories of *observation*, *suggestion of something not observed*, and *reflective thought* work well for the purposes of this study. "Observation is exploration, inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown" (Dewey, 1910, p. 193). Attentiveness to detail comes through looking at the

object multiple times, each time mentally bringing along previous observations but adding to, developing, and changing them. The suggestion of something not observed is “the possibility and nature of the connection between the object seen and the object suggested” (Dewey, 1910, p. 7). In this thinking strategy, an open mind is necessary to allow for multiple possibilities and interpretations, including those that have not been previously established by experts in the field or by the teacher. Flexibility in thinking, ingenuity, and insight (Fairgrieve & Walton, 1996) allow the mind to use observations to ponder possibilities. Using reflective thought, the reader evaluates the suggestion of something not observed to discover if the interpretations fit with the text as a whole.

Because educators so often use Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, as cited in Krathwohl, 2002) as a touchstone to evaluate critical thinking skills, a discussion of this taxonomy, as well as the revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), is included in this review. However, this framework is presented with an examination of its weaknesses; it does not cover aspects of critical thinking which are discussed in many of the research studies, and it does not distinguish between a superficial application of a thinking practice and a more in-depth one.

Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives and Krathwohl’s revised taxonomy add levels of thinking, from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills. The original taxonomy includes the following levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, of which the last three are considered to be the higher levels (Krathwohl, 2002). The revised taxonomy includes a variation in levels, as well as a shift towards expressing the categories as verbs rather than nouns: remember,

understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create (Krathwohl, 2002). Again, the order is expressed as a continuum from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills. However, presuming that types of thinking acts are inherently more higher-order than other thinking acts is flawed, because within this continuum, thinking acts are divorced from context, quality, intensity, and thoughtfulness. In context, one application of analysis might be insightful and detailed, while another might be superficial (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). Additionally, aspects of thinking are not as sequential and neatly bounded as suggested by Bloom's categories; thinking "is much messier, complex, dynamic, and interconnected" (Ritchhart et al., 2011, p. 8). Thinking is related to one's experiences and intertextual reference points as well as to the discursive social elements of the context, aspects not addressed in the taxonomy.

The research section of the literature review includes critical thinking practices observed in classroom discourse that were not included in either Bloom's or Dewey's sets of thinking practices. For example, researchers posited that *considering an idea from multiple perspectives* was a critical thinking practice on its own that also enhanced the use of other practices, such as *evaluating and revising one's own position* on an issue. Researchers also identified both teacher and student stances that led to stronger critical thinking practices; for example, *slowing down* was a stance that enabled students to enhance their abilities to observe closely with attention to detail. The additional contributions to critical thinking practices more fully examined in the research section of the literature review point to the need for further research in this area.

### **Purpose of the Study**

One purpose of this cross-case study is to look for those episodes of dialogic discussion with heightened levels of excitement; constructing of meaning; relevant, multi-faceted, exploratory connections; and leadership and collaborative idea-building among students. When does time seem to stand still and absorb participants in an engaging, deeper-level dialogic discussion? Using discourse analysis, I examined nuances in the teacher's and students' roles, participation and discursive practices, and relevant preceding activities or contextual factors that may have contributed to these exemplary and rich dialogic discussions.

Another purpose of the study is to consider the interaction between dialogic discussions and critical thinking practices, with an eye towards defining thinking practices in new ways that could not be easily checked off a list. Instead of defining thought as an individual's performance disconnected from context, this study defines thinking as an interactional, social activity that varies in response to context and participants. In this era of testing, with measurable skills at a political premium, we are in danger of losing invaluable, desirable goals of education: teaching students to think in creative, flexible, collaborative, insightful ways; teaching students to interrogate the tacit premises of a question; teaching students to extend the questions at hand with another layer of related questions. We need thinkers who will ask good questions, locate contradictions, and find solutions. Graduates of our schools need to go well beyond looking up answers, and they need to understand the limitations of those answers. This research provides an opportunity to find examples of these thinking practices in the context of high school English classrooms using dialogic discussions.

This study proposes to integrate observations about classroom, school, and community culture into an understanding of dialogic discussions about literature. In what ways can teachers create a classroom culture that invites students to co-create dialogic discussions which enhance and develop critical thinking practices? In what ways does the school culture support or obstruct this work? In what ways do students' cultural and linguistic practices, and the values and beliefs enacted through those practices, shape their participation in discussions within the classroom?

An additional purpose of the study is to extend the limits of our current definitions of critical thinking through examples that go beyond those definitions. The original Bloom's taxonomy, a classification often used in schools for interpreting cognitive learning behaviors, includes the following levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, of which the last three are considered to be the higher levels (Krathwohl, 2002). The use of Bloom's taxonomy as the sole indicator of critical thinking practices is problematic, as it neglects to consider quality or depth of thought within each domain, and it treats domains as isolated rather than interconnected. The design of this taxonomy lends itself to evaluating critical thinking as an individual, rather than a socially constructed, contextual set of practices. By setting up distinct, hierarchical, sequential categories, it limits our range of possibilities of critical thinking practices and how to use them. This research is designed to inquire into alternate definitions and views of the concept of critical thinking, and to reveal the limitations of currently used definitions.



### **Lived Experiences of the Researcher**

I was brought to this work from my 21 years of teaching high school English in a variety of settings, having worked with emotionally disturbed acting-out adolescents, Advanced placement and honors students, and students in danger of dropping out of high school because they had not yet passed the state-wide test mandated for graduation. In each of these contexts, I found joy in discussing literature and the ideas evoked by stories. As I relied on my intuition to develop my own discussion facilitation strategies, I was drawn to lively discussions propelled by the students' own ideas. When a student came to class declaring, "I have a topic for today!" before the bell even rang; when, after a bout of collaborative discussion, another student said, "We had a mind-meld there," these comments marked the kind of discussion for which I found myself striving to create a fertile ground. While these discussions centered around all forms of literature, I noticed that they were sometimes especially vibrant in response to poetry; students were naturally drawn to slow down, revisit the diction, and respond with examples from their own experiences when we talked about poems. As I researched the literature on dialogic discussions, I began to look more closely at my own teaching and attempt to carry over some of my facilitation approaches to discussions about poetry to my approach to discussing longer pieces of literature. I have continued to teach high school English throughout this study, and although the study focuses on another English teacher, I have found my own teaching has been influenced by my research. When I began this project, I saw the strengths in my own facilitation more than I saw the weak spots; as I learned more, the weak spots came into sharper focus for me, and I dove back into my own professional learning to try to overcome obstacles newly discovered. I gained a deeper

sense of humility about my own teaching as well as an appreciation for the growth that can come from this humility.

Another joy I find in my own teaching is informally collaborating with other educators. Walking out to the car, eating lunch together, topics of the day arise with the burning interest of lending or receiving some input that might solve a pressing teaching quandary. These dialogues are both helpful and satisfying. The research design of this case study, working closely in shared reflective dialogue with another teacher, allowed me to go more in-depth with the questions we addressed together. The opportunity to work closely with another teacher with sustained attention to the topic of discussion over multiple years allowed both of us to look at our own teaching more critically than we would have in the limited time afforded to informal pedagogical dialogue. We enacted aspects of dialogue with one another in professional conversation parallel to the literary conversations that we were trying to help our own students achieve.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since research already supports the connection between dialogic discussions, reading comprehension (Langer, 1993; Nystrand, 2006; Rogers, 1987), and critical thinking practices (Daniel et al., 2005), the goals of this study were to find and describe discussion and thinking moves that students used to develop critical thinking in the context of literary discussions and to examine the connections between activities surrounding discussions and the discussions themselves. The teacher's facilitation, discussion and thinking moves, including meta-talk about discussion and thinking, were

part of this focus. Cultural contexts of the classroom, school, and communities were studied for their relationships to student learning.

The teacher's facilitation tool of establishing genres of talk, including warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking communicated expectations for talk and thinking to students, so students were signaled to engage in and shift between genres of talk. While this is a useful tool, it is effective only when combined with established dialogic teaching practices, such as slowing down (Peskin, 1998; Vine & Faust, 1993) and revisiting the idea (Langer, 1993), scaffolding activities combining small group work or informal writing tasks with thinking to prepare for a discussion, and open-ended questions that lead to creating and evaluating interpretations of the literature. These genres may be used with both upper- and lower-level classes, although they may take on different forms with different groups of students according to their needs and the expectations of the assignment.

In working towards teaching deeper-level thinking and aiming for students' proximal zones of development, teachers will encounter episodes of talk in which students do not figure out the thinking problems presented. This seeming dead-end may be an indicator that the teacher has aimed beyond the zone of proximal development for these students; however it may also be an indicator that students are earlier in the process of appropriating a new literacy tool (Smagorinsky, 2011). Within any one group, students will each have different zones of proximal development, so while a task may fall outside of one student's abilities, it may fall within the abilities of another student. In the case of the lower-level class, students who participated in the discussion itself did not solve the thinking problem, but another student worked it through in her individual informal

writing directly after the discussion. Even in this scenario, the teacher refrained from solving the problem for the students. While it is already established that dialogic teaching involves allowing students to explore ideas for themselves rather than rely on the teacher for answers, it is a difficult choice in the context of students' failure to figure out a thinking problem to actually follow through and mute the teacher's own answer. This study reinforces the possibilities of this teacher facilitation move to allow a problem to marinate rather than solving it for the students.

Teachers' meta-talk on topics of dialogic discussion and critical thinking practices is important, as it indicates purpose and values. While learning is motivated by both external rewards (grades, graduation, college, and jobs) and internal rewards (curiosity, socializing, identity exploration), meta-talk that focuses on only the external may threaten rather than inspire students. In today's climate in which teachers are being evaluated in new ways connected to students' testing growth, this stress may lead teachers to inadvertently emphasize testing outcomes over learning goals. Just as Ms. Kisler was disappointed to learn that she had done just that, and that she had emphasized external rewards over internal rewards with the lower-level group only, this tendency may be happening with other teachers as they experience the pressures of evaluation and testing. Conscious attention on meta-talk, perhaps even planning it out ahead of time, may help teachers to decide purposefully on the balance of purpose-oriented values to share with their students. Attentiveness to equity in messages between upper- and lower-level students is important.

Additional significance of the study comes from the teacher and researcher's engagement in the research itself. Through the act of allowing me to observe her

classroom and record my observations, Ms. Kisler gained a new perspective on her teaching, her interactions, and messages that she consciously and subconsciously transmitted to her students. This perspective gave her a vantage point from which she could reflect on her teaching and make decisions about ways that she wanted to change. "It's really been very enlightening for me to think about this, and to think about how I teach, thinking about the positive things and also thinking about the things needing to move forward." She felt that the description of genres of talk "gives it a little solidity. "Reading it, here's what I'm doing– we're calling it something... it's putting a name to it, [so it] does make a difference." Likewise, she showed determination to rectify aspects of her teaching that the study shed a light upon: "I'm just so happy to have that [insight into the differences in her meta-talk based on levels and socioeconomic status], because I think it's really important, and I think it will affect my teaching." While the time commitment of this study would be hard to reproduce within schools on a wider scale, the act of teachers observing one another, taking copious notes to capture discursive choices and practices, and reflecting on these observations could be used more widely to help teachers deconstruct and reconstruct their practice.

### **Methodology Overview**

This research took the form of an ethnographical cross-case study. I observed Ms. Kisler's honors 12th grade English Literature class for four weeks, their entire unit with Jane Eyre (Brontë, 1847/1997). I observed her lower-level ninth grade Literature and Composition class for 13 weeks over the course of three literary units as they read "The Scarlet Ibis" (Hurst, 1998), Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare, 2004 version), and To Kill a

Mockingbird. Wissahickon High School operates on a block schedule, so each class period was 85 minutes long.

The demographics of the two classes were different in terms of race, socioeconomic status, experience with urban living, and class size. The 12th grade honors class had 16 students, all of whom were White, and one of whom had lived in an urban area. There were seven boys and nine girls. All of the students except for one identified as middle class with parents holding primarily middle and upper class occupations, such as doctors, a financial consultant, and a contractor/owner. The ninth grade class began with 25 students and went down to 23 students after two students were removed to join a program within the school with a greater degree of intervention. This class contained 25% students of color (three African American students, one Dominican student, one Moroccan student, and one White Latina student). There was a wide variety of families' socioeconomic status in this class, with parent and guardian occupations ranging from custodian to surgeon. In this class, two students lived in Trexton, a nearby urban area, and seven additional students had previously lived in Trexton.

As I observed the classes, I took field notes and occasionally interacted with the students, especially when I was joining a small group activity and they asked for my feedback. Field notes consisted of tracking speakers and comments, noting features of the classroom such as student work on the wall or teacher's notes on the board as well as the configuration of desks, and recording my initial responses to classroom events. I used an audio recorder to record all of their lessons and selectively transcribed discussions.

Although the analysis originated during my observations, I built on initial analysis by transcribing discussions that I had marked as lively in my field notes, and as the

pattern of genres of discussion emerged I catalogued examples of each discussion genre and transcribed at least two examples from each genre for each of the two classes. I coded the discussions for thinking moves, discussion moves, and facilitation moves using a combination of existing codes and codes that I developed through the process. These categories were permeable, as thinking and discussion moves overlapped. I constructed a theory of dialogic discussion, critical thinking, and genres of discussion using grounded theory (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

### **Overview of the Chapters**

Chapter two is the literature review, which synthesizes the research literature on classroom discussion, dialogic discussion, and critical thinking practices as related to discussion practices.

Chapter three presents the methodology of the study, the benefits of the ethnographic cross-case study methodology, and the relationship between the research questions and the methodologies. These connections are displayed in a matrix, which aligns research questions, theoretical constructs, data sources and data analysis. The research context and information about participants in the study are included. Data collection is described with attention to participant recruitment, ethics, and types of data collected. Data analysis is described with attention to methods and decisions related to sorting and transcribing the data and measures of validity and reliability. Limitations of the study are discussed.

Chapter four presents the findings from the 12th grade honors English Literature class. Transcriptions of selected discussions are paired with findings connecting genres of

discussion to teacher's expectations and student thinking practices. The genres of warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking are defined and explored through multiple examples. The teacher's meta-talk evincing her beliefs about motivation for thinking and learning is explored as well.

Chapter five presents the findings from the 9th grade lower-level Literature and Composition class with an emphasis on continuities and discontinuities between the two classes. In this class, the teacher's meta-talk was notably different than in the honors class. The discussion genre of prereading is defined and explored as compared to the warm-up genre; the absence of the book gossip genre is noted and explored; the teacher's use of scaffolding towards deeper-level thinking is examined with examples of the limitations and the opportunities of structure.

Chapter six presents a discussion of the study as a whole as well as its implications. Teachers' choices about meta-talk and motivational speech towards students at different levels reveal values that educators pass on to their students and therefore are worthy of careful consideration. Meta-talk is just one way that teachers reveal their beliefs about students based on level, and as such it is an indicator of broader issues in education. Genres of discussion, as part of a dialogic approach to teaching, can support students' understanding of dialogic talk and their use of it to collaboratively construct meaning and develop critical thinking practices. Chapter six includes implications for research and recommendations for further research.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The principle purpose of this literature review is to bring together research on dialogical discussions about literature in high school classrooms, looking at ways in which students learn critical thinking practices within those discussions. A larger purpose is to revisit questions to which we often assume answers. We build public policies, approaches to professional education, and teaching practices upon these answers. What do we want our students to learn? When we examine our working definitions of critical thinking skills, what has been neglected? Pedagogical critical thinking goals are more helpfully envisioned as multi-dimensional practices occurring with varying levels of depth and insight than as a decontextualized list of skills.

The investigation of dialogic discussion intersects with the goal of rethinking assumptions about critical thinking. Educators rely on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Krathwohl, 2002) as the set of definitions of the elements of critical thinking practices. One flaw in the use of this taxonomy comes about when it is used as a binary system, when the objectives are treated as either met or unmet. This causes problems when an objective is met but does not occur within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), so it does not further a student's level of understanding. For example, a teacher who asks a group of 11<sup>th</sup>-graders to rewrite plot elements from The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925) in the rhythm pattern of the children's book Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin & Carle, 1992) meets Bloom's objective of synthesis, which is defined as a higher-order thinking skill in which students bring

together different ideas or structures. However, the practice in this context engages students but does not push them beyond their zone of proximal development, because it does not lead to deeper levels of comprehension of The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald, 1925). This critique also applies to definitions of critical thinking practices outside of Bloom's taxonomy as well, illuminating the broader problem with oversimplifying the application of any critical thinking practice. Instead of asking whether a critical thinking objective is met or unmet, we need to ask *how* it is met in relation to the needs of the students in a particular context.

Relying solely on Bloom's taxonomy also limits our range of possibilities of critical thinking practices. This literature review includes studies that refer to traditional definitions of critical thinking practices as well as studies that define practices outside of those definitions. These newly defined critical thinking practices include the practice of looking at an idea from multiple perspectives and the practice of slowing down and revisiting an idea to gain a depth of understanding.

This literature review brings together research which makes a case for the place for dialogic discussions in classroom discourse with research that shows how infrequently these discussions actually occur. Case studies describing teachers already proficient in facilitating dialogic discussions focused on aspects of the discussions, teacher and student moves. However, teachers motivated to learn to facilitate dialogic discussions often have difficulties making changes to habitual teaching practices.

The final purpose for this review is to determine areas for further research. Two areas emerged through the review process, focusing on the role of the teacher and the student. Within the sphere of the teacher's role, more research is needed that looks

closely at the facilitation elements of dialogic discussions that were taught in professional learning environments but were not carried out by teachers subsequently in their classrooms: developing students' ability to build on one another's responses in a variety of discussion moves; and developing their own and students' abilities to cumulatively connect their own and each other's ideas into "coherent lines of thinking and inquiry" (Alexander, 2008, p. 105). Within the sphere of the student's role, research focuses on the general stance that supports a dialogic discussion, but more research is needed on students' use of specific moves and ways that teachers can create an environment in which students develop these moves.

The review of existing research addresses research on dialogic discussion, primarily in high school literature classrooms. The most broad-reaching research asks the question: *What goes on in English class?* and more specific research examines the workings of discussions themselves. Most studies were chosen for their relevance to whole group discussions about literature in high school classrooms; however, some studies have been included for their relevance on all but one criterion.

### **Definition of Dialogic Discussion**

This study uses the construct "dialogic discussion," but other writers use the terms *conversation* (Applebee, 1996), *authentic discussion* (Nystrand, 1990), *dialogic spells* (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2001), *exploration* (Langer, 1993) and *exploratory talk* (Barnes, 1993; Bickmore, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2005) to describe discussions which are open-ended and promote collaborative construction of meaning.

Dialogic discussions have a balance of open-endedness and purposeful focus. These discussions rest on the expectation that students have comprehended the text, so the discussion focuses on interpretation. Dialogic discussions are open-ended, meaning that the teacher has no set list of ideas to “cover.” Inquiry is essential: teachers and students pose questions that they truly wonder about, and they explore together possibilities that might solve the questions, or discover even more questions. Dialogic discussions may take tangled routes, sometimes stopping back by earlier topics to re-examine them in light of new understandings or new text selections. Students learn from the teacher and from one another; they address each other with follow-up questions and comments that extend another’s train of thought. The teacher is the primary facilitator, although students may also facilitate. The teacher does not necessarily provide answers to students’ questions, but instead helps them to figure out their own answers. However, the teacher may step in and out of this role as needed, scaffolding at selected moments. The concept of scaffolding implies that the teacher understands and provides the appropriate support to guide the student to a deeper level of understanding; however, scaffolding is more complicated. A teacher's guidance and structure may support learning or it may also inhibit learning by narrowing the field of thinking too restrictively. Since each student has a different zone of proximal development, a teacher working with a large group may provide helpful scaffolding for some students but not others. Also, sociocultural theory emphasizes the social aspect of learning; it is not only between the teacher and the student, but also involves the students' interactions with one another and their experiences outside of the classroom.

## Literature Review

I identified patterns and gaps in the research as it connected to the question: in what ways do teachers and students use discussions of literary texts to develop critical thinking skills? This literature review includes research from 1984 until the present; most of the research on classroom discourse begins in the early 1990s, but there are a few studies published in the 1980s that merit inclusion in the literature review. For the purpose of this literature review, I focused on large-group discussions and excluded small-group or individual activities and discussions unless these activities were used in conjunction with large group discussions or closely connected to researching critical thinking practices in response to literary texts. In reviewing the research, I considered researchers' data collection and analytical practices as well as their findings.

The theoretical premise of this literature review is that thought and language are interconnected (Vygotsky, 1986). For organizational purposes, critical thinking practices and discussion practices are presented in different sections. However, the two are linked; research on language contains implications about thought, while research on thought contains implications about language.

Three bodies of research address the relationships between classroom discussions about literature and critical thinking practices. One set of research is primarily descriptive, categorizing teacher and student discussion practices and measuring how much time is spent on each category. A second set of research evaluates approaches to discussion as generally helpful or unhelpful in guiding students' learning. Researchers in this second set use a variety of evaluation tools, focusing either on discussion practices or on students' depth of comprehension of literary texts. Some evaluation studies set up

comparison studies, examining two approaches to discussion side by side in order to discover which the more effective teaching practice was. Others use standardized testing measures of comprehension; still others specify elements of dialogic discussion, including authentic or open questions and follow-up moves, and evaluate discussions against these criteria.

Researchers agree that dialogic attributes of discussions connect to the development of students' thinking skills. It follows, then, that the third set of research investigates professional development: how can teacher educators pass on practices in facilitating dialogic discussions to both new and experienced teachers? The findings of this third set of research are mixed: some studies report success; some report that teachers said they practiced approach, but did another. Another (Alexander, 2008) separates dialogic discussion leading skills into those attained by most teachers in the professional learning group and those learned by only a few teachers, postulating that a small group of teachers is more able to acquire this more sophisticated set of facilitation skills.

It follows, then, that one area for further research lies in looking more closely at these facilitation practices and episodes of classroom discourse that are less frequently mastered by teacher participants. What skills and strategies surround these episodes of talk? If researchers can work closely with teachers who facilitate these discussions, perhaps teacher educators can learn ways to integrate their approaches into professional learning opportunities. However, the Alexander (2008) study also has policy implications. On national and state levels, those who seek to strengthen the quality of our schools need to make the profession of education appealing to the types of teachers who will apprehend this set of desirable discussion leading skills. Professional learning

modules based on the premise that anybody can teach, combined with the widespread use of “foolproof” curriculum guides, project the message that the most talented, innovative thinkers should look elsewhere for employment. Both school administrators and preservice teacher educators need to consider the stance they take towards would-be teachers. While the public schools operate on the expectation that all students can learn, it may be detrimental to the education profession to extend that expectation to preservice teachers. Low expectations for the profession could result in average, rather than exemplary, classroom experiences for our students— our future problem-solvers and inventors— and the ways they are taught to think. Preservice teacher education programs should require the same thinking practices that these future teachers will eventually use with their own students, going beyond assimilating information to creating and exploring ambiguous questions without straightforward answers.

### **Descriptive Research on Classroom Talk**

In the broadest examination of classrooms, the body of quantitative and qualitative descriptive research compares class time spent in discussion to time spent on alternative tasks and activities. In hundreds of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, discussion takes less than one minute per day. Within those discussions, almost all of the questions are recall (Nystrand et al., 1997). In a study of high school literary anthologies in which the types of questions are categorized into recitation (recall) or authentic (open) questions, the mean of authentic post-reading questions was 29 percent and the mean of post-reading recitation questions is 71 percent (Applebee, 1991). Teachers who follow the textbook as a guide for discussion facilitation are asking primarily recall questions,

which encourage students to remember information rather than to use critical thinking practices. In a more recent study of textbooks that appear to situate knowledge more dialogically, Friesen (2013) concludes that these books present "an illusion of engagement in paradigmatic originality [and not] any authentic construction [of knowledge]" (p. 506). For example, a psychology textbook asks, "Have you ever found yourself reacting to something as one of your biological parents would... and then wondering how much of your personality you inherited?" (p. 504), seeming to invite the reader to construct an individualized, personal response. However, the question is phrased to elicit a certain type of response that will conform to the textbook authors' purposes.

As teachers' resources and classroom practices are evaluated for dialogism, classroom talk is seen as ongoing and connected rather than as a series of disparate conversations. Dialogic discussions do not happen independently of one another, but build upon one another. Applebee (1996) names the layering of discussions the *curricular conversation*, which "comprises a series of [dialogic] discussions taking place over time— weeks or semesters or even years... [Student] contributions will grow in scope and complexity... their discoveries help them construe and reconstrue the domain as a whole" (Applebee, 1996, p. 44). Research and theory about dialogic discussions must explore the temporal development of discussions, even as we focus on specific interactions in specific classes (Applebee, 1996; Mercer, 2008). Since this literature review takes a sociocultural approach, looking at ways in which students and teachers create knowledge together through social interactions, each conversation has both a dynamic and a historical aspect (Mercer, 2008), both of which demand our attention.



### **The Initiate-Respond-Evaluate Pattern**

Examining discussions, researchers next most broadly categorize discussions into IRE, describing the teaching pattern of initiate-respond-evaluate, (Mehan, 1985) and more dialogic formats. In IRE, the “initiate” refers to the teacher’s initiation move of asking a question or delivering a prompt; “respond” refers to the student’s answer to the prompt, and “evaluate” refers to the teacher’s positive or negative evaluation of that response. This pattern originated in catechism, a pattern of talk in religious education in the medieval era in which students memorized and recited answers in the form of oral performance (Friesen, 2013). However, this division between IRE and dialogism creates a false dichotomy; while some teachers remain in the IRE frame for most of their discussion time, those who use a dialogic approach include a variety of facilitation moves, incorporating IRE as part of a larger approach. At its best, discussion facilitation does not neatly fall into two categories, but contains a sophisticated layering of multiple moves.

The format of discussion reveals a teacher’s beliefs about who holds interpretive authority. Teachers who use the IRE format claim authority through the “evaluate” aspect of the pattern, and this format is reported to predominate discussions in schools. Teachers, including those who claim to practice a more open format of discussion facilitation, lead discussions with a majority of IRE moves (Alexander, 2008; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Marshall et al., 1995; Nystrand, 2006). "Leading" is a more subtle version of holding interpretive authority, a facilitation move in which a teacher purportedly lets students figure out their own interpretations of a text, yet the design of

the discussion leads students to discover the teacher's pre-determined answer. Because of its surface-level difference from the IRE approach, the teacher who is leading may believe that he is in fact facilitating a dialogic discussion (Bickmore et al., 2005).

Qualitative descriptive research that focuses on the styles of discourse and types of questioning used in classrooms generally promotes a move away from IRE and towards more open-ended questions leading towards discussion with unexpected meanings and multiple possibilities. Dialogic discussion shifts the cognitive work that the teacher claims in the IRE format to the responsibility of the student. Teachers using IRE build upon student answers with their own voices, doing the work of elaborating, generalizing, analyzing and synthesizing, thus depriving students of cognitive action that these skills require (Watson & Young, 1986). The premise that the teacher knows the only right interpretation of a text closes down the discussion, negating well-founded interpretations only because they come from the students rather than the teacher (Blake & Lunn, 1984). Teachers operating in the IRE format are seen as “actively inhibiting learning” by responding to student comments with either approval or disapproval, and by refusing to acknowledge other, equally valid points besides their own (Watson & Young, 1986).

Facilitating discussions requires a set of nuanced practices developed over years, not garnered in a workshop with follow-up. Therefore, the predominance of IRE discussions is not a problem to be stamped out entirely, although it is to be used with caution. When used as the only facilitation move, IRE deprives students of a range of thinking practices that they could learn through dialogic discussions. Instead, IRE is one useful facilitation move that should be used when it best suits the needs of the discussion,

but when it is used in isolation, the shallowness of its offerings deprives students of the critical thinking skills they can learn when they participate in dialogic discussions.

English teachers do not have to choose dialogic discussion to the complete exclusion of the IRE format. In order to discuss open-ended authentic questions, students need a common understanding of the text. A teacher noticing a lapse in comprehension could detour from a dialogic format to solidify comprehension through IRE, and then return to dialogic format. In addition, not all teacher responses labeled “evaluate” are equally narrowly evaluative. Substituting the concept of “follow-up” for “evaluation”, we can consider teachers to use “IRF” (initiation-response-follow-up), including follow-up as a component of dialogic discussion. Follow-up includes the teacher evaluating responses, but also adding a comment that extends the discussion, or asking a question encouraging a student to do so (Wells & Arauz, 2006), which overlaps with the dialogic discussion facilitation move of uptake or extension. The concept of follow-up combines IRE with dialogic discussion, reminding us that discussions do not fall into two neatly bounded, distinct camps. In a realistic dialogic discussion, a teacher taps into students’ textual understanding in the midst of open questions.

### **Dialogic Facilitation and Participation Moves**

Building on the idea that facilitation of discussion does not fall into merely two categories, either IRE or dialogic, this section discusses specific dialogic discussion moves, or categories of contributions, facilitation strategies, and responses within dialogic discussions. Teachers’ facilitation stance is inextricably linked to their discussion approach and to their moves, so the beginning of this section discusses this

connection. While it is important to consider the facilitation and participation moves of both students and teachers, most researchers focus on the role of the teacher. This gap provides an opportunity for further research that examines more specifically the moves that students can make and ways to teach students these moves.

### **Teacher's Stance**

The teacher's stance, her view of her role and her level of interpretive authority, translates into her facilitation approach and micro-interactions with her students. A teacher who sees herself as a literary expert leans towards monologic instruction, while one who sees herself as a fellow reader leans towards dialogic teaching and a partner in inquiry; however, teachers moved between these roles, instead of choosing one and staying permanently in it (Appleman & Hynds, 1993). Teachers purposefully teaching poems with which they were unfamiliar purposefully reduce their level of authority over the text and foster greater levels of dialogue than those teaching poems with which they are familiar (Smith & Connolly, 2005). Even when teaching familiar texts, a teacher's use of uncertainty markers such as "I'm not sure," while sharing her own wonderings about a text, models her expectations for her students' participation in dialogic discussions (Townsend, 1993). Through directly naming a student as "the chairperson" and asking him to call on his peers, a teacher could signal a transfer of authority to that student for an episode of talk, increasing student agency and learning engagement (Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010).

However, taken to the extreme, the role of fellow reader could lead to a facilitation stance of "anything goes;" in a study comparing classroom talk between seven

countries, the stance of American and British teachers creates “a climate of sometimes extreme relativism [in which] any ‘version’ of knowledge might be accepted whether or not it made sense and all answers might be deemed equally valid” (Alexander, 2008). The American and British teachers use a conversational tone rather than a dialogical tone, while the Russian teachers use a stance that distinguishes dialogical classroom talk as more formal and substantial (Alexander, 2008). Therefore, teachers leading dialogic discussions need to perceive the role most apt for each part of a discussion and move accordingly along a spectrum of possible roles and different degrees of authority.

Just as a teacher does not have to choose between IRE and dialogism and stay firmly in one position, neither does she have to choose a facilitation stance that fit every aspect of every discussion. A teacher’s role may take on greater and lesser degrees of authority in relationship to the purpose of the segment of the discussion at hand. These choices draw on the teacher’s presence of mind to connect with an awareness of the evolving shape and purpose of the discussion.

Dialogic discussions are unscripted; therefore, teachers leading dialogic discussions use the overall mindset of awareness of the larger goals and possible directions of the discussion to make multiple decisions about the direction of the discussions. Teachers decide in the moment when to use each move, and when to transition between approaches to the discussion. In doing so, teachers model for their students the ability to think and interact in response to the contributions of their peers, rather than deliver one’s previously developed thoughts. A teacher leading a series of dialogic discussions in which students reposition themselves from disengaged readers and writers to engaged and capable readers and writers is a “sophisticated navigator of

improvised interactions... that shifted in unexpected directions” using open-ended questions, playful language, and connections to student interests (Vetter, 2010). A teacher's openness to unexpectedness is also called "reflection in action" in which a teacher "entertains ideas for action that transcend the lesson plan" with a focus on understanding that responds to individual students' needs (Schön, 1984, pp. 332-333).

Boyd and Markarian (2011) argue that the teacher's overall dialogic stance is more indicative of the type of learning and talk that is expected of students than are particular types of questions or comments used by the teacher. In analyzing a discussion that began with closed questions from the teacher and succinct answers from students, they traced how the teacher's stance of attentive listening and following the students' purposes, ideas, and reasoning led to dialogic talk.

### **Teacher's Pace**

Pacing affects the types of thinking that teachers expect from students; when students approach literature while slowing down their thoughts rather than quickly jumping to conclusions about theme and meaning, they come away with more in-depth, well-founded interpretations, and their thought processes more closely mirror those of experts (Peskin, 1998; Vine & Faust, 1993). Revisiting a text multiple times supports the mindset of slowing down. Students use a first reading to get a general sense of the text and then revisit the text to ask and answer questions that require a more attentive consideration of the text. This process supports a mindset of exploration rather than recitation, giving students the definition of literary understanding as an “ever-changing horizon of possibilities” (Langer, 1993). To create the opportunity for a slower pace,

teachers who make space for dialogic discussions in their classes allocate extended amounts of time for discussions and allow time for silence and thinking (Ritchhart et al., 2011). Discussions that foster elaborated explanations rather than short answers lead to better comprehension and reasoning on the part of students (Soter et al., 2008), so a slower pace contributes to the expectation that students elaborate.

### **Teacher's Questioning**

The types of questions asked by the teacher indicate the types of thinking they expect students to perform, and the types of interactions for which they set the stage. Within IRE, teachers ask “test questions”, testing whether students could deliver predetermined answers; here, “remembering and guessing supplant thinking” (Nystrand et al., 1997). In dialogic discussions, teachers ask open-ended or authentic questions, questions with multiple possible answers rather than pre-determined answers. The questioning style of uptake (Nystrand, 1990), also called extension (Wells, 1999), is a move in which teachers or other students take an idea from a student comment to shape a new question or comment that follows the line of thought originated by that comment. This move contrasts with the evaluation move within IRE because the teacher's response extends the thread of thought or inquiry rather than placing closure on the student's idea. When teachers validate student responses and use them to further the discussion, they increase the chances of sustained dialogic discussion (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001).

Teachers who practice the strategies of asking authentic questions (with no pre-determined answers) and using uptake do not necessarily ignite a dialogic discussion. Rather, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) conceptualize these teacher actions as *dialogic*

*bids*, meaning that the teacher creates the opening for a dialogic discussion to be taken up by students, an opening which could alternately fail to produce a discussion. However, as the teacher makes more dialogic bids, the chance of a dialogic discussion including multiple student voices increases (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). One type of uptake is the teacher move of *revoicing*, or saying back to the student what the teacher interprets the student to have said; this serves to connect the comment with previous contributions to the discussion as well as allow the student to agree or disagree with the teacher's characterization of the comment (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996). Further, teachers work to encourage students to respond to one another without a teacher comment or response following each student contribution (Langer, 1993; Watson & Young, 1986).

### **Teacher's Feedback**

While feedback could be used to extend discussion, it could alternately be used to praise and encourage without evaluation or uptake, a move found frequently in American and British classrooms (Alexander, 2008). The downfall of praise is that it can falsely give students the idea that any contribution is equally valid, regardless of the thinking practices used, the level of fluency of expression, or the level of preparation. A student habit of sharing anything that occurs to them, regardless of how closely it connects to the train of thought of the discussion, may be reinforced by the blanket application of praise. In contrast, Russian teachers give specific feedback to comments with the intent to inform, rather than praise, their students (Alexander, 2008). In the United States, teachers do attempt to inform students when they frequently direct them to attend to the text and relate their comments back to the words of the text (Knoeller, 1998). Teachers emphasize



a textually centered interpretation, rather than presenting students with a number of theories, which could be used concurrently or in overlapping ways.

### **Students' Moves Towards Coherence and Collaboration**

The type of feedback used by teachers contributes to a more general aspect of discussions, coherence, determined to be important in discussion competence in peer discussion groups as well. Student moves of revisiting old topics, making links between topics, and embedding topics within one another all contribute to coherence. Student groups using these strategies develop and increase their use of the strategies over time. Student groups who spend their time instead on meta-talk, talking about their discussion practices rather than discussing the topic itself, are less proficient at discussing literature (Almasi & O'Flahavan, 2001). Students build on one another's ideas in a collection of moves that contribute to the bigger concept of "constructing knowledge in collaboration with others" (Wells, 2001, p. 176). A move that contributed to this larger idea of collaborative meaning-making is called "voicing" (Knoeller, 1998) when students appropriate one another's words to make their own points or to develop the ideas already in discussion.

### **Students' Contributions**

Student-initiated questions and comments are more potent at starting discussions in which multiple students participate, compared to teacher-initiated topics (Nystrand, 2006). Students who contribute to dialogic discussions use the move of expressing "wondering" (Townsend, 1993) or "puzzlements" (Ritchhart et al., 2011). Wondering

means that students share ideas that they are curious about but unsure of, thus inviting other students to join into the dialogue and help to figure out the puzzle. Teachers also model this move by sharing their own wonderings (Townsend, 1993).

### **Students' Engagement and Identity Construction**

Although this literature review will not delve deeply into the topic of identity construction, several studies pose the connection between dialogic teaching and students' constructing their identities (Fecho & Amatuucci, 2008; Vetter, 2010). Both studies suggest that the teacher's stance of inviting student selves into the discussions of literature creates a space for those students to explore, share, and reshape their own identities. Identity construction connects with the concept of discussion speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) because students' conceptions of acceptable and unacceptable participation correlate to their understanding of their permissible experienced classroom identities. Dialogic discussions set the stage for identities that include more opportunity for initiating and directing academic conversations, rather than merely accepting, reiterating, and responding to the conversation agenda set by the teacher. Examples of students constructing their identities stand in contrast to the trend of students who learn how to "do school" instead of learning at school. When these identities are "literacy identities" that connote a students' beliefs in their abilities to succeed in reading and writing tasks (Vetter, 2010), these identities translate into their willingness to take risks and to attempt more challenging literacy tasks. This element of the research validates the importance of using dialogic discussions with all learners, including "struggling readers" who are often given fewer open questions. Students' identities and lived experiences are

validated by teachers who invite students to make disconnections with literary texts rather than solely connecting with or affirming the messages expressed in literature (Jones & Clarke, 2007).

### **Critical Thinking Practices in Dialogic Discussions**

Research in this section examines student participation in dialogic discussions for evidence of critical thinking practices. For the purpose of this literature review, a range of terms is grouped together to signify critical thinking practices, and then the specific practices are identified with a closer examination of the research. The broader set of terms includes: critical thinking skills; reasoning; cognitive processes; and high-level thinking.

This section divides research into two categories: research that aligns critical thinking practices found in dialogic discussions with previously identified critical thinking practices; and research that identifies new practices outside of the theories on critical thinking from Bloom's taxonomy and Dewey's reflective thought. However, the division is not always cleanly separated, because the new practices connect with concepts from these two theories even when they do not directly reiterate specific thinking categories from the theories themselves.

Why create a section of newly defined ideas? Creating a space for newly defined ideas showcases them, validates their use in classrooms, and encourages students and teachers to spend time learning these practices. Considering critical thinking practices as an open category rather than a closed, narrow category recasts Bloom's taxonomy. Rather than evaluating a lesson's ability to develop critical thinking practices by aligning it with

Bloom's taxonomy, this recasting requires that educators reflect on the quality of thinking practices and search for new ones outside of the familiar list: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Krathwohl, 2002). Creating a section for newly defined ideas affirms the importance of innovation; it is an open category and an area for further research. Innovation is a form of dialogism between the existing list and emerging ideas and definitions.

### **Traditional Critical Thinking Practices**

A number of traditionally defined categories of critical thinking skills are linked to students' participation in dialogic discussions. Adult inmates show the following thinking elements in their discourse: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference (Boghossian, 2006). Elementary students show the following thinking elements: elaborations, predictions, and use of evidence to support an idea (Chinn et al., 2001). Discussions designed to promote reasoning in elementary school students teach them how to use premises and conclusions, and how to weigh arguments on both sides of an issue (Chinn & Anderson, 1998). In a study of classrooms using authentic discussion strategies comparing student performance between fall and spring of one school year, a combination of high academic demands and authentic discussion about important academic topics leads to students internalizing the knowledge and skills to take on challenging literature-based thinking activities independently (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003).

Dialogic discussion has a positive impact on reading comprehension. A discussion environment in which students are making meaning (an "epistemic"

environment) is more effective at developing reading comprehension than a scripted (IRE) environment (Langer, 1993; Nystrand, 2006; Rogers, 1987). When students participate in IRE rather than dialogic discussion, they tend to guess answers rather than think through their answers (Nystrand et al., 1997). Reading comprehension is enhanced by whole class discussion of texts in 18 studies (Nystrand, 2006). Strong effects for student learning are enhanced by the following four factors: time devoted to discussion in which there is open exchange of ideas between students (Nystrand, 2006); a higher proportion of authentic (open-ended) questions (Nystrand, 2006; Soter et al., 2008) ; a higher proportion of uptake, follow-up questions and comments, (Nystrand, 2006; Soter et al., 2008); and, with the strongest effect of all, student-initiated questions (Nystrand, 2006). Additionally, elaboration of utterances by students, and affective connections between readers and texts are also linked to greater levels of comprehension and high level thinking (Soter et al., 2008). Students participating in dialogic discussions over a year show an increase in the abilities to specify ideas, make inferences, make judgments, and use creative thinking to transform and evaluate ideas and meanings (Daniel et al., 2005).

### **Newly Defined Critical Thinking Practices**

The following critical thinking practices stand out from this literature review: slowing down and revisiting ideas; extending and elaborating; and considering an idea from multiple perspectives.

Slowing down allows students and teachers to consider ideas more deeply. While this concept is discussed in the “Dialogic facilitation and participation moves” section

above, it is an example of the intertwined nature of thought and language. Language is not merely a vehicle that delivers thought, but instead it is a process through which thoughts develop. This connection is what Vygotsky calls “meaningful speech— a union of word and thought” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 212). Revisiting selections of text multiple times, using each reading to go deeper into the text (Langer, 1993) allows for an interaction with the text that yields more insights and interpretations more aligned with those of experts in the field (Peskin, 1998; Vine & Faust, 1993).

Extension (Wells, 1999; Alexander, 2008) and elaboration are further examples of the intertwined nature of thought and language. Extension is presented as a conversational move in which a discussion participant builds on another’s contribution. Elaboration (Soter et al., 2008) is presented as a conversational move in which the speaker, often at the invitation of the teacher, expands on a comment. Both of these are simultaneously critical thinking practices and discussion moves. Students using language to build on either their own or others’ spoken ideas develop the critical thinking practice of extending and elaborating, using the group’s expressed ideas as a starting point to creatively develop related ideas not previously expressed within the discussion.

Considering an idea from multiple perspectives relates to Dewey’s idea of observation defined as “inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown” (1910, p. 193), yet this is not an exact replica of the idea and takes its own place in the array of critical thinking practices. By considering an idea from multiple perspectives, thinkers develop the capacity for creative thought. They also break away from the habits of debate that involve defending one’s position without listening for the merits of another’s points, and move towards collaborative discussion, which involves

putting the idea in the center, rather than centralizing either the students or the teacher (Palmer, 1998). In fact, through dialogic discussion, students develop the ability to cite problems with their own positions, and the ability to reformulate ideas and arguments to address these problems (Thompson, 2006). Students who bring up and explore their own concerns and possibilities about the text develop the practice of exploring and imagining characters' intentions and actions from multiple perspectives; this skill corresponds with the practice of building on their own initial impressions and on one another's ideas as they thought through aspects of a text from multiple perspectives. Other studies of dialogic discussions show that students develop the ability to consider an idea from multiple perspectives through participation in these discussions (Chinn & Anderson, 1998; Chinn et al., 2001; Thompson, 2006; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

This practice is possible because the teacher does not position herself as the authority about the text (Langer, 1993). Listening skills are required for students to integrate multiple perspectives with their own ideas (Daniel et al., 2005). Likewise, essays written by students who have participated in reader-based discussions about a text show the ability to consider the story from multiple perspectives, while essays written by students who have participated in a teacher-presented unit allowing for less initiative by students reflect a narrower range (Newell & Johnson, 1993). Considering a question about a text from multiple perspectives is supported when a text provides a depth of richness or ambiguity, combined with open-ended questions that invite responses with multiple perspectives (Townsend, 1993; Townsend & Pace, 2005). Expressing and listening to differing perspectives does not necessitate the immediate next step of working to resolve these differences. In fact, delayed resolution, or allowing the different

ideas to coexist for a period of time, may depend upon refraining from directly addressing the contradictions when they first arise (Howe, 2010).

### **Professional Learning**

Since dialogic discussion benefits students' development of critical thinking practices, yet at the same time it is less commonly found in classrooms than other formats of discussion, a number of researchers investigated professional development approaches to help teachers learn to integrate dialogic discussions into their teaching practices. Reports vary: some glowingly assert substantial success; some report minimal success; others report a mixture of success and failure. Taken as a group of studies, it seems fair to gather that creating professional learning on this topic is not straightforward, short term, or simple. Even when approached with nuance, mentoring, motivation, and long-term involvement, some teachers do not successfully make a shift from eliciting recitation towards leading dialogic discussions.

The facilitation moves and approaches that teachers use to set the stage for dialogic discussions are divided into two sets: more accessible skills that many motivated teachers acquire, and less accessible skills requiring a higher level of teaching expertise that fewer teachers acquire, even with the help of intensive training and supplemental mentoring support (Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlan, 2004). The strategies that teachers adopt with professional learning and support are: using uptake, asking open questions, adopting a slower pace, modeling elaborations (Adler et al., 2004), and using dialogic tools, such as structured activities that invite participation (Caughlan, Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Kelly & Fine, 2013). The strategies that students use in classrooms after



professional development and support are: talking to one another rather than directing their comments towards the teacher; taking the initiative to comment or ask their own questions; and offering elaborated, extended responses to teacher questions (Alexander, 2008). Teachers show the ability to position themselves as learners, which helps students view talk as a means towards unraveling meaning of complex texts *with* their teachers rather than *for* their teachers (Sutherland, 2006).

Fewer teachers adopt facilitation practices of responding to student comments beyond minimal, evaluative comments. Even within a group of teachers who voluntarily participated in professional learning and received ongoing mentoring support, many teachers do not develop students' ability to narrate, explain, instruct, question, build upon responses, analyze, speculate, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, reason, justify, and negotiate; and judge when each form of talk is most appropriate. Teachers and students for the most part do not demonstrate the practice of cumulative talk, or building on their own and one another's ideas and chaining them into lines of thought and inquiry (Alexander, 2008). Some researchers (Chinn et al., 2001) question whether teachers who primarily use IRE are likely to make significant changes to their style of discourse, noting that they tend to resist change.

One suggestion to deal with the difference in response to professional development is to acknowledge it: break up teachers into two groups, teaching the beginners to work on the "ethos" of dialogic discussion facilitation and the "most talented" (Alexander, 2008, p. 112) to work on the aspects of facilitation that are less frequently absorbed by teachers in professional learning opportunities (Alexander, 2008). It is noteworthy that the professional development literature focuses on in-service

teachers, so the emphasis is on teaching them to change current practices. Different approaches may be successful when working with preservice teachers. Because dialogic discussion is a layering of practices, including the teacher's own reading and critical thinking practices, and discussion facilitation practices that require an awareness of mind and a flexibility of direction, teacher education in the area of dialogic discussion cannot be undertaken with a short-term approach. If it is to be included in a preservice education program, it would best be introduced at the beginning of the program, reiterated over a series of courses, and taught with support in practicum experiences. Teacher education in all elements of dialogic discussion, but especially those elements that fewer teachers adopt after professional development, is an area for future research.

### **Conclusion**

I was drawn to research dialogic discussion from my position as a high school English teacher, because of the spark of a great discussion, the joy and excitement that a student's question could ignite within a class and within me even as I revisited a text I had taught before. A life question, such as: "Can't we retain our purity even as we grow up?" in response to Adrienne Rich's poem "Bears" asked authentically by a student in my poetry class got students fired up to discuss their own views on life and their own vivid internalized meanings of loss of innocence. This question arose out of the class's examination of language and ambiguity of meaning, student puzzlements and wonderings. I wanted to investigate discussions simply because I enjoyed them, and they felt important. I witnessed flashes of thinking as a teacher does, but I wanted to find out

what researchers would find when they examined discussions from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

The research in this review supports a strong connection between critical thinking practices and dialogic discussions. One area for further research lies in continuing to define critical thinking practices, opening up our definitions so that we can open up our practices. These practices are not binary, either occurring or not, but can occur on a range of meaning and depth. We need to examine ways to invigorate our use of critical thinking practices so that teachers are using them with meaning and depth, rather than superficially checking them off of a list of requirements. Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Krathwohl, 2002) is not a sufficient framework from which to create and evaluate educators' critical thinking practices. In addition to newly defined critical thinking practices already going beyond this taxonomy, new practices have yet to be discovered and named. By naming them we create a sense of value, which allows us to shift practice. The very quality of dialogic discussions that makes them so alluring also makes them somewhat unfathomable; they are mysterious, unexpected, and they resist concise definitions. As researchers and teacher educators, we must resist the pull to oversimplify something, which is, in its nature, not simple, or we will lose its essence.

The second area for research lies in the paradox that while dialogic discussions engage students and strengthen their skills, teachers continue to predominantly use recitation techniques to the exclusion of dialogic techniques. Research on teacher education has come up with mixed findings, showing that there is a need for approaches to teacher education that will help teachers integrate dialogic discursive practices into their teaching mindset and methods.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction and Overview

This cross-case ethnographical study examined two high school English classes taught by the same teacher, Ms. Kisler: one upper-level honors 12th grade class, and one lower-level ninth grade class. As both a researcher and another teacher in the school, I observed one class each semester. My professional relationship with Ms. Kisler had spanned the previous nine years, during which we had collaborated on developing courses and talked almost daily about teaching dilemmas and strategies. I had conducted a pilot study and a longer comprehensive research project with her and her classes. My position in the school and my history as a peer of Ms. Kisler's gave me a broader sense of her teaching philosophy and stance as well as of the school's culture and community. Nonetheless, this study yielded surprising data and findings.

This research was in the form of an ethnographic cross-case study in order to look at classroom, school, and community culture in two settings that differed by academic level. Discourse analysis, with close attention to both teacher's and students' use of language within literary discussions, in meta-talk about discussions, and in surrounding activities that related to the discussions, was used in conjunction with grounded theory to interpret the data. Grounded theory led me to use coding and recursive readings of transcripts of the classroom talk to track patterns, to look closely at episodes of lively talk, and to look for discussion and facilitation moves surrounding talk that demonstrated critical thinking practices. Episodes of problematic talk— discussions that did not achieve

participation or show evidence of critical thinking practices– were explored as well in order to develop a theory of dialogic discussion and critical thinking.

### **Ethnography**

The ethnographic approach fit the study both in the sphere of the classroom and in creating an understanding of cultural contexts beyond the classroom. Within the classroom, I focused on the social interactions of dialogic discussions, and the interpersonal patterns and innovations in speaking within a group about texts.

Ethnography can be used “to describe how people ... through their face-to-face interactions, create recognizable social and cultural practices and what interactional obligations and opportunities ... these... practices have for participants” (Bloome & Clark, 2006, p. 230). How the teacher elicited interactions and set the stage for discussion, how she contradicted or supported students’ expectations about the dynamics of a discussion, and how students contributed to creating conversational moves within discussion are dimensions of classroom culture. Who gets to talk, when, for how long, and what kinds of conversation contributions were expected and acceptable? These questions point to a shared construction of classroom culture that shifts over time in response to participants’ choices, actions and interactions.

Culture can be defined as “a set of shared and learned standards (expectations) for acting, feeling, believing, using language, and valuing; a set of shared ‘models’ of how the world works and how things mean” (Bloome, 2011, p. 8), so my research attended to these expectations, their trajectory of change, and the ways they were embodied in classroom interactions. In addition to identifying the tacit rules of the classroom culture, I

looked at ways that the culture changed in response to shared experiences, facilitation of the teacher and interactions initiated by the students. I looked at the use and form of the material aspects of the space, such as the organization of desks and chairs, the use of the computer and printer, and decorations and posted messages on the wall, some of which were mandatory in this school.

I included observations about school culture, community culture, The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, as well as, where pertinent, aspects of the national public conversation on teaching and learning. When students expressed values or beliefs, these reflected not only their personal experiences but also related to aspects of their cultural belief systems. When the teacher and students referenced life experience as a lens through which they evaluated or understood characters' choices, they revealed community cultural values, which, in turn, influenced their understanding and interpretations of literary texts. Students' belief systems and expectations for interactions were simultaneously affected by family, local, sociopolitical, and historical factors, all of which influenced the dynamics within the classroom.

The ethnographic present tense will be used to describe observations made in the classroom and at the school of the study. This convention of language expresses the nature of the ethnographer's presence in the field and her active construction of the experiences in the field. It is a literary device to capture the persistence of elements of a culture even when events have become the past (Hastrup, 1990).

## Cross-Case Study

The case study approach fit the research questions because it provided “a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). The research questions went beyond general descriptions of dialogic discussions or generalized benefits of them. The case study provided rich, thick description in order to examine phenomena within their social context; in this study, the phenomena were discussion and thinking moves, and the social context included interactions within and surrounding the classroom episodes of discussion.

A case study was well suited to position the researcher to “discover new and unusual interactions, events, explanations, interpretations, and cause-and-effect connections” (Hays, 2004, pp. 218-219). My research questions aimed to describe new interactions, defined as discussion and thinking moves, in classroom discourse as well as to describe ways these new interactions related to those already defined in the research literature. While the research on dialogic discussions tends to group conversational moves into a few categories, the attentiveness to detail required of both the case study methodology and discourse analysis allowed for discoveries of additional and subcategories through an emphasis on specificity and an in-depth understanding of particular discussions as they were situated within the broader contexts of classroom and school. This aspect of the case study fit well with an ethnographic stance, which emphasizes “how people interactionally construct specific events building on each other’s interactional behavior as they adapt extant linguistic and social practices to create new meanings, new social relationships, and new social accomplishments” (Bloome & Clark,

2006, p. 230). These social accomplishments can include accomplishments in thinking within dialogic discussions, because this study considered thinking a social act.

The use of a two-case study, in which each case was a different group of students with different ability levels, allowed for an examination of the element of student resources and obstacles in the context of dialogic discussions. The two-case study allowed the researcher to note patterns, thinking moves and conversational moves which occurred in both cases as well as those that only occurred in one. The difference in grade level between the two cases presented a limitation to the design of the cross-case study. Due to logistical reasons, I was not able to observe an upper- and lower-level class from the same grade. Comparing both the teacher's facilitation and the students' participation across grade levels introduced an additional difference between the classes. Ninth grade students were new to high school itself and were acclimating to the expectations of high school, and 12th grade students had almost four years of experience in the high school and were looking towards life after high school, including college.

Although the information represented by case studies is not designed to be immediately generalized, researchers can counter this limitation in several ways. By situating the findings in the literature and connecting them with other research, case studies can strengthen their findings (Dyson & Genshi, 2005). The use of multiple forms of data can “establish converging lines of evidence to make the findings as robust as possible” (Yin, 2006, p. 115). Lastly, the specificity itself can serve to strengthen assertions about the phenomena studied, as the “details might be pivotal in allowing readers themselves to generalize” (Dyson & Genshi, 2005, p. 115). Educators considering this research with their own experiences in mind can use the research as a way to think



about their own teaching in new ways, leading to experimentation in teaching approaches.

### **Research Questions**

My primary research question was: within dialogic discussions about literary texts, what qualities of discourse, facilitation, and participation contributed to high school students engaging in critical thinking practices? Dialogic discussions were studied with attentiveness to their sociocultural context and the interactions between participants. Given that students may apply critical thinking practices in varied ways, some instances showing more complexity and depth of thought than others, what qualities of dialogic discussion contributed to high school students' more in-depth, complex use of critical thinking practices?

Supporting questions identified student and teacher practices, with the purpose of naming types of interaction and discursive practices that fostered critical thinking. What facilitation and discursive practices used by the teacher elicited the use of critical thinking practices from her students? What qualities of student participation aided in their engaging in critical thinking practices? Specifically, what conversational moves by both teacher and students facilitated a discussion in which students were actively using critical thinking practices? Specifically, what thinking practices were in use in these discussions?

Another aspect of discussions is the cultural norms, beliefs, values, and practices surrounding the discussions themselves. I looked at ways in which elements of the cultural context interacted with the teacher's facilitation and students' discussion and thinking practices. In the context of a cross-case study examining a lower-level and a

higher-level class, the cultural contexts of these two classes varied substantially, providing vastly different backdrops for the teaching and learning in the two classes.

I looked at ways that the teacher, students, and the school administration created a classroom culture. This culture was communicated through the material set-up of the room, the ways that the teacher expected students to participate in class, and the expectations placed upon teachers themselves from the administration. The teacher's own beliefs about how people learn and demonstrate their learning, and the definition of knowledge and how it is constructed impacted this culture. Students' experiences in education and their own beliefs about these topics came into play as well. What aspects of classroom culture supported, obstructed, or otherwise impacted dialogic discussions and student learning through these discussions? What elements of school culture influenced the goals, rewards, and pressures on the teacher, and how did these influences impact her teaching? What cultural elements of the students' communities impacted their interactions with peers and teacher, and their responses and interpretations of literary texts?

The following matrix shows the research questions in relation to the theoretical constructs, data sources, and the methods of data analysis.

Table 1: Research questions and data collection matrix.

Data Analysis Chart			
Research Questions	Theoretical Constructs	Data Sources	Data Analysis
<p>Within dialogic discussions about literary texts, what qualities of discourse, facilitation, and participation contributed to high school students engaging in critical thinking practices?</p>	<p>Sociocultural theory (Cazden et al., 1996; Vygotsky, 1978); zone of proximal development, thought and language, vivencia (Vygotsky, 1978); dialogism, speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986).</p>	<p>Observation notes, teacher's resources and handouts, use of physical space, student work, recordings and transcripts of recordings of classroom talk</p>	<p>Discourse analysis, grounded theory</p>

<p>What facilitation and discursive practices used by the teacher elicited the use of critical thinking practices from her students? What student approaches aided in their engaging in critical thinking practices? What conversational moves by both teacher and students facilitated a discussion in which students were actively using critical thinking practices? What thinking practices were in use in these discussions?</p>	<p>Sociocultural theory (Cazden et al., 1996; Vygotsky, 1978); zone of proximal development, thought and language, vivencia (Vygotsky, 1978); dialogism, speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986).</p>	<p>Observation notes, teacher's resources and handouts, use of physical space, student work, recordings and transcripts of recordings of classroom talk</p>	<p>Discourse analysis, grounded theory</p>
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<p>What aspects of classroom culture supported, obstructed, or otherwise impacted dialogic discussions and students' critical thinking practices through these discussions?</p> <p>What elements of school culture influenced the goals, rewards, and pressures on the teacher, and how did these influences impact her teaching? What cultural elements of the students' communities impacted their interactions with peers and teacher, and their responses and interpretations of literary texts?</p>	<p>Sociocultural theory (Cazden et al., 1996; Vygotsky, 1978); zone of proximal development, thought and language, vivencia (Vygotsky, 1978); dialogism, speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986).</p>	<p>Observation notes, teacher's resources and handouts, use of physical space, student work, recordings and transcripts of recordings of classroom talk, student survey, Common Core State Standards, school district professional development and expectations of teachers</p>	<p>Discourse analysis, grounded theory</p>
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### **Data Collection**

The data collection took place over the course of one school year, from Fall 2012 to Spring 2013. The participants included all students from two English classes and the teacher. My overlapping roles as researcher, employee at Wissahickon High School, and peer to Ms. Kisler gave me the benefits of long-standing relationships with the school community and with Ms. Kisler. I had also taught some of the students in the honors class in prior years. While it could be possible that students would view me as a teacher rather than a researcher, they did not seem to view me as an authority figure, although at times students in the lower-level class requested my feedback and support on academic tasks. Overall, I felt accepted into both classes by both the teacher and the students, and it seemed that most participants were willing and interested to share their thoughts with me.

### **Access to Site**

Since I was teaching at Wissahickon High School and known to administration and Ms. Kisler, I was easily granted permission to conduct my research study at the school in her class. Both administration and fellow teachers were supportive of my work. At times, I was called out of the room to meet with special education teachers or the assistant principals to follow up on issues of my own students, but I was usually able to spend the entire 85-minute class observing each day. Issues with scheduling arose, cutting short my weeks of observation with the honors class to four weeks, but I was able to extend my observations to 13 weeks with the lower-level class. I observed for a total of 17 weeks.

The time that I spent in the honors class was cut short due to a scheduling issue that arose over the summer before I was to begin my data collection. When another English teacher needed to take a semester of sick leave, all of our schedules got changed and the day before school was to begin, I discovered that I no longer had a planning period aligned with one of Ms. Kisler's classes for my observation time. My administration and fellow teachers worked to help support my study although they could not change my schedule with such late notice. I was able to exchange classes with a Social Studies teacher, creating an interdisciplinary unit between American History and American Literature and also freeing up my schedule for four weeks of observations of Ms. Kisler's class. Although this period of time was much shorter than I had proposed (six to eight weeks) I did observe this class for their work from beginning to end with one literary text. My previous studies of Ms. Kisler's classes had also been with upper-level groups, so this background helped to counteract the unexpectedly short duration of this part of my study.

I had more flexibility with the second semester observations of the lower-level class because my planning period was aligned with the class I was observing, so I observed that class for 13 weeks, more than I had initially planned. This ability to lengthen the observation period was especially helpful because I encountered a problem with the second text studied by the class. During the teaching of Romeo and Juliet Ms. Kisler structures the class time around small group work reading and responding to the text and practicing performances in small groups. There are no periods of coming together after the small group work, so while I observed and recorded these sessions and they contributed to my overall understanding of classroom talk, the data were not helpful

with my focus of whole-group dialogic discussions. I was able to stay for their work with the following book in order to observe more instances of whole-group discussions.

### **Setting and Participants**

The setting for this research is two public high school English classes at Wissahickon High School, a regional high school serving students from two neighboring communities with a combination of suburban and rural settings in the Northeast of the United States. Students live in suburban subdivisions, condominiums, or more rural housing. Some students live in large, newly constructed homes at the top of a mountain. These towns are nearby the urban center of Trexton, but many of them routinely express fears about going there. Some students at Wissahickon High live in Trexton and attend this school as "school choice" students.

Wissahickon High School uses tracking, with advanced placement and honors classes at the top level, level one at the next level, level two at the next level, and "multilevel" (an euphemistic misnomer) at the lowest level. Ninth graders do not have the option to take an honors or Advanced placement course; these are only offered for grades 10 through 12. For the purpose of a comparative case study, one of the two classes was selected from the top tier (an Honors English Literature 12th grade class); the second was selected from the bottom tier (a level two 9th grade class).

The teacher was selected for her interest and practice in facilitating dialogic discussions about literature in her classes. This teacher had worked with me for a pilot study and my comprehensive research study, and we had developed a friendly, frank, collaborative working relationship.



All participants were given the decision whether or not to participate in the study. I described the purpose and design of the study and the procedures of pseudonyms for the school and all participants in order to protect their identity. The school and the names of towns in which students lived were given pseudonyms as well, and the region of the country was described in general terms. All participants received and signed the informed consent form, and students' forms were signed by a parent or guardian. (See Appendix A for the research proposal presented to participants and Appendix B for the informed consent form.) During the study two of the lower-level students were removed from the class, so their participation did not last for the entire observation period.

### **Sources of Data**

I planned to research each class for the duration of their study of two literary texts; however, the teaching schedule was changed in late August when another teacher had to take a medical leave for the semester. I made special arrangements to change my teaching schedule through collaborating with the Social Studies department and exchanging my American Literature class for an American History class for one unit. Therefore, I was only able to observe the upper-level class for four weeks, the duration of their study of one literary text, Jane Eyre. I observed the lower-level class for 13 weeks for their study of three texts: the short story "The Scarlet Ibis" (Hurst, 1998); Romeo and Juliet; and To Kill a Mockingbird. The total observation time for the cross-case study was 17 weeks.

The primary sources of data were observation, field notes, and audio-recordings of class discussions and teacher presentations. During and outside of the class meetings, I

held informal conversations with the teacher and some students. I collected student writing and teacher handouts, as well as source materials, such as books, articles, and websites, which the teacher used in preparation for teaching. In addition to observing discourse and interactions, I made observations about the physical setting of the classroom and any other spaces in which teaching and learning occurred, looking at the arrangement and use of space and overt and implied messages about expectations for student and teacher participation. Field notes are more fully described in the data analysis section, since they represent an initial phase of analysis.

Observations were based on my daily presence in the class for the entire period, unless outside demands such as special education meetings required that I leave the room. Each day, I would enter the class along with the students, take out my audio recorder and my field notes, and begin observing the space, the interactions, and the dialogue. I was not an invisible observer, in that students recognized me as another English teacher; some of the 11th grade students had been in my previous classes and the 9th graders may have expected that they would have me as a teacher in later years. At times, Ms. Kisler would leave the room and ask me to "watch the class," which subtly affected my role for a few minutes. However, outside of these times the students did not seem to regard me as an authority figure. The 9th graders saw that I witnessed them breaking Ms. Kisler's rules, such as eating in class, without telling her or reprimanding them; they saw me writing down their off-topic conversations and sometimes even pointed out that I was doing so, but after making this observation they continued their line of discussion regardless. When I observed small groups, students sometimes asked me to clarify the meaning of a word or passage to help them understand the meaning of the text, and I complied. My goal was

to convey a lack of judgment and an interest in what was actually happening, as opposed to a teacher's goals which involve shaping the events of the class.

I selected portions of the classroom discussions for their relevance to the elements of dialogic discussions with a focus on lively episodes, problematic episodes, and episodes which represented patterns or continuums of interactions within and surrounding discourse. In observing the classes, I listened for episodes when the discussion seemed to liven up, when students got excited, when I myself get excited by their ideas, and when they got involved in responding to one another rather than primarily interacting with the teacher. The first indicator that a lively episode was starting was an electric feeling in the room coming from emotional engagement and vivencia. Additionally, during these sections of discussion, more students participated, more ideas were elaborated, and the ideas focused on one topic, following a thread of thought rather than introducing a string of unrelated topics.

However, liveliness was not the only indicator that talk was meaningful or supported critical thinking practices. Another indicator of relevant talk was the recursive appearance of and development of an idea over time. When students and the teacher referenced earlier conversations, that act demonstrated a larger, ongoing conversation in which meanings were revisited, co-constructed, and modified over an extended period of time.

I also attended to problematic episodes and patterns, the context and possible contributing factors to the problems, and the ways that the teacher and students attempted to teach and learn in the face of obstacles. I examined ways that students benefited from avoiding academic engagement in discussions as one aspect of these obstacles. At times,

students appeared not to be academically engaged, but contradicted this appearance through their demonstration of understanding and spurts of motivation.

I collected artifacts produced by the teacher and students. Teacher-produced artifacts included a daily agenda that Ms. Kisler projected onto the whiteboard each day, handouts with questions for students to answer in groups or individually, written descriptions of writing practices, and reading quizzes. Student-produced artifacts included their composition books, which were required but not graded, written responses to quizzes, responses to small group questions written on large pieces of paper and attached to the wall, and literary essays.

Data about the broader context related to aspects of school culture, the culture of the two communities served by the school, and the ways that the national conversation about public schools and education shaped the school and classroom cultures. Reports and statements issued by the school itself, including the 2011 National Association of Schools and Colleges self-study report, were drawn upon to describe context and culture. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (Common Core State Standards Initiative), which began to be implemented in 2012-2013, was used as a document that reflected curricular expectations placed on all of this state's public schools. Additional data sources included: the physical context of the classroom and the school itself, school-wide and departmental goals and initiatives, and comments and observations of the teacher(s) in the study. In my dual role of researcher and teacher in the school, I included observations about school culture evidenced by expectations placed on teachers and patterns of administrative, teacher, student, and parent practices and from my own experiences as a teacher in this and other settings. As a

participant observer, I brought my experience as a teacher to my field research, observing Ms. Kisler's practices with reference to my own. Interactions within the classroom that indicated student perceptions of their community and school culture were noted. Data about the national conversation on education came from mass media sources, with particular attention to ways that these sources were referenced by members of the education community.

### **Data Analysis**

The first stages of data analysis overlapped with my collection of the data. Most of my field notes record the name of a speaker and the direct speech or gist of each comment, along with copying notes from the board and taking notes about the physical space. Some initial analytical responses to the data are recorded in my field notes notebooks, from a simple symbol of a star designating a discussion that I thought had potential for transcription, to comments such as "berating speech about expectations" to "cool idea."

In the second part of the study, while I was observing the lower-level class, I began writing more in-depth analytical notes each weekend as I reflected back on the week of observation. These included comments such as "In the discussion about 'white trash' students think 'these people' are ignorant of their status ... this comes after a school-wide 'spread the word to end the word' initiative with a big paper on the wall that everyone signed to stop using the n-word." Writing these weekly notes allowed me to combine observations about the school culture with initial analysis of classroom events and discussions.

Discourse is a combination of multimodal (spoken, written, visual, and kinesthetic) texts; discursive practices; and social practices (Fairclough, 1992, p. 73). In addition to representing social relationships and larger social structures, discourses also construct them (p. 3). Therefore, analyzing discourse includes analyzing social practices, and social identity is an integral aspect of discourse. Discourse also contributes to the construction of knowledge and belief (p. 64). Discourse analysis, then, involves analyzing the texts of spoken and written language; the contexts and ways in which these texts are produced and received; and the social practices and structures both contributing to and constructed by the discourse.

My approach of using field notes to make choices about which episodes of talk to transcribe influenced the analysis. Such choices cannot be neutral, and yet cannot be avoided. In selecting episodes of talk, I looked for lively episodes, episodes that included students speaking directly towards one another, and episodes that fell into patterns of genres of discussion once those patterns had emerged. I was seeking dialogic discussion practices that supported collaborative meaning-making and critical thinking practices. I was not, however, attempting to paint a glowing picture of either class that left out dynamics or contextual elements related to the discourses in the class. I was also interested in problematic episodes: places in which the conversation fell flat, students did not take up the dialogic bids, or times they attempted critical thinking practices but did not fully comprehend the written or multimodal texts.

In addition to the choice of episodes to transcribe, the act of transcription was another aspect of analysis. I selected discussion episodes, chosen for their relevance to dialogic discussion and their perceived levels of heightened engagement and intensity,

revisiting of topics, and problematic patterns. Listening to these episodes repeatedly as I strove to accurately transcribe each word while referring back to my observation notes, the rhythms and intonations of the talk became recorded in my mind so that I would hear the sounds, emphasis, and pauses from the speech from memory when I read over the transcripts.

Transcription itself represents a series of choices, which compound to influence the analysis and the effect of the data on the reader. Because the transcript records spoken language, it foregrounds verbal over nonverbal behavior (Ochs, 1999, p. 172); my choice to use minimal transcript notation that would show rising and falling voices, degrees of loudness, and drawn out or clipped syllables means that the reader has little sense of intonation. I made this choice for ease of reading, and I did include underlining to mark words spoken with emphasis as well as language in parenthesis to indicate tone of voice or laughter when it seemed vital to understand meaning.

Transcription necessitates filtering and selection for usefulness and clarity; however, the researcher must be conscious and purposeful about this process (Ochs, 1999, p. 168). Choices about where an episode of transcribed talk begins and ends leave out the preceding and subsequent talk. In some episodes of warm-up talk in which the teacher consistently called on every student who spoke, I omitted the teacher's nominating turns of talk to allow the reader to quickly scan the students' responses. For some of the additional episodes of discussion genres, I selected and abbreviated answers but provided a complete as an appendix. I indicated these omissions at the beginning of the transcription. Pauses and verbal markers of hesitation, such as repeated words and filler words (like or um) can be helpful to include because they show slowing down and

searching for words, and they can also be distracting to the reader who want to find out the eventual message of the speaker. I attempted to preserve such markers where they seemed to capture the act of searching, and I omitted them where they seemed more of a habit of speech. Again, my goal was to strike a balance between clarity, accurate representation, and ease of reading. To preserve the original discourse, I did not smooth over or change wording to make discourse more palatable to the reader, but I added explanation in brackets when the reader might not follow the intended meaning. Member checking with Ms. Kisler was another important aspect of confirming that the presentation of dialogue felt true to another person besides myself as a researcher.

After creating the transcripts, I coded them for specific conversational moves and specific critical thinking moves using a combination of codes developed by Wells (1999) and codes that I devised to represent conversational and thinking dynamics and patterns. Examples of codes adopted from Wells include: claim, request support, contradict, support, and extend. Codes I devised in response to speech turns that did not fall within these codes include: student-initiated topic or question, teacher-initiated topic or question, revise, refine, request contradiction resolution, refers to a quotation, and requests evidence. (See Appendix C for a complete list of codes).

While codes help to name and organize patterns, “interpretation goes well beyond the technical categorization and description of the data... The real work of analysis and interpretation lies precisely in those intellectual operations that go beyond the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 154). The danger in implementing codes is that they may oversimplify or decontextualize the discussion; the act of coding takes away the context and detail from the thinking or discussion move for the purpose of categorization, but this



reduction may dilute the essence of what made the conversation insightful and noteworthy. The words used in discussion “are completely contaminated and unstable. They are not brute, waiting for interpretation” (St. Pierre, 2011). Therefore, coding is too narrow to represent the work of making sense of the data in isolation. I strove to depict the context, include details from my memories of observation, both those indicated from my field notes and others held in my experiential memory, and to think and write about each episode of talk as part of broader understandings of discourses in the class. Through close attention and microanalysis of discursive texts, I looked for explicit and implicit messages about knowledge, identity, values and beliefs, and social relationships as well as the interactions between these messages.

Grounded theory was used to develop a theory of dialogic discussion and critical thinking practices (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The construction of theory requires creativity that is open-minded while it is also responsive to the relevant literature in theory and research. Since I observed and transcribed the honors class before the lower-level class, I developed an initial theory that addressed the dynamics in the honors class. I then questioned to what extent that theory applied to the lower-level class, and additionally looked at the lower-level class individually as its own group. This process is reflected in the data analysis chapters; both the honors chapter and the lower-level chapter refer to the other case, but the lower-level chapter goes more in depth discussing the similarities and divergences between the two cases.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Internal validity of the study was established from the ethnographic case study approach, the pairing of cases, viewing the research in the context of other research, and

the use of member checking. The ethnographic approach to this study required that I spend long periods of time with the participants in their natural setting (the classroom within the school) and observe them with attention to that context. Because of the long duration of observation time, I was able to analyze the data as I went along and then compare initial and intermediate interpretations to new data as I collected it (Merriam, 1998). I did not spring to generalizations based on only one or two discussions; although I did not transcribe every discussion word-for-word, I did record all discussions in my field notes so I could read over the breadth of data before selecting the episodes of talk to transcribe and code. In posing interpretations of episodes talk I looked for recurring patterns and, when relevant, added supplementary examples of the patterns in tables to demonstrate that conclusions were not being drawn from isolated instances.

Pairing two cases, one from an honors level class and one from a lower-level class, contributed to validity so that generalizations were not made about all students that pertained only to students with a set of academic strengths or weaknesses and social or cultural norms. The disparity between both facilitation and participation in the two classes was helpful in ensuring that I did not leap to conclusions since I compared analyses between the two cases. Presenting the findings in the context of the body of research on dialogic discussions and critical thinking skills gives credence to findings that align with findings and data from numerous other studies.

A benefit of working as a peer English department member with Ms. Kisler, and eating lunch with her and a small group of English teachers each day, is that I was able to consistently hold informal conversations with her about teaching and the classes observed both during the time of the data collection and afterwards as she continued to reflect on

dialogic teaching. I used triangulation by referring to multiple sources of data, including audio recordings of class events, artifacts produced by the teacher and students, school-wide events and documents, field notes, informal conversations with the teacher, and formal member-checking with the teacher.

For member checking, Ms. Kisler was given working versions of the chapters and asked to comment on them through confirming, responding, or adding a different perspective to the findings. After she read the chapters and documented her analysis in the margins, we had an extended conversation in which she described her responses to the analysis and presentation of the data in terms of accuracy as well as insights that she gained as a result of reading the representation of her teaching and ways that she plans to shift her teaching given those insights. She said, "It is a good big picture. It does feel true... It's really been very enlightening for me to think about this, and to think about how I teach, thinking about the positive things and also thinking about the things needing to move forward." Her responses will be depicted in more depth in chapter six.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study could come from my dual roles as researcher and member of the school community. Having taught at the school for nine years, I may have grown accustomed to certain cultural norms, values, and expectations within the community, so it may be difficult to notice these as part of the ethnographic inquiry. However, the benefit of working within the community is that I have a background of experience and social networks to reference and draw upon in order to discern cultural practices within the school.

As with all case studies, the data were highly specific to the setting: the teacher, the students, the school, and the text. This close connection to context can be an impediment in using the study to generalize about leading discussions in a way that will be instructive to educators. Rather than seeing this aspect of the study as a shortcoming, I see it as a strength in the way that it emphasizes the particularity of teachers' interactions with their classes. The art of leading a dialogic discussion that targets students in their zones of proximal development as well as in a collective zone of proximal development with an awareness of the range of needs in a class, in which the teacher is open to multiple possible directions of thought and inquiry, is not a practice that is easily or quickly packaged. It takes a teacher who reads and thinks on deeper levels, who recognizes that multiple pathways lead to understanding, and who has experimented with and practiced a range of conversational, thinking, and facilitation moves within discussions.

The subtleties of creating a dialogic classroom culture include overt facilitation and micro-interactions that contribute to the culture as it evolves over time, as well as attempts to redirect the arc of its development. These practices are by no means an exhaustive list of elements of dialogic teaching. A teacher's understanding of students' literacy experiences and mindful attention to continually modifying her approaches to teaching are other factors that serve as reminders of the possible aspects of teaching that can elicit lively dialogic discussions and active, creative thought. A case study, with its fine-grained attention to specificity, was a methodology that allowed me to add to the description of dialogic teaching practices.

Thus the specificity of the case study can be helpful in its closeness to the particular as it examines contextualized events in relationship to broader patterns. While a case study does not isolate a quickly learned format for educators to reproduce, it does provide specific, detailed examples for educators to reflect upon as they develop their own discussion facilitation practices.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher, my combination of social identities, experiences, and interests affected my research questions, which episodes of talk interested me, and what I noticed. Additionally, I began this study with beliefs about dialogic discussions and critical thinking practices coming out of previous research as well as my own style and philosophy of teaching. One bias I held particularly strongly was that regardless of level, students can rise to the expectations of dialogic talk and it can provide a fertile ground for thinking. At one point during the study, when students were performing so poorly in their small groups as they read Romeo and Juliet, I began to question this assumption. This questioning was helpful for me to suspend my bias and attempt to allow the findings to emerge from the data rather than from my own beliefs. While I cannot erase my biases, I can acknowledge them and willingly ask myself, "What if my beliefs need to change?"

I am a middle-class White woman with great interest in issues of social class and race. Having taught at schools which were much more diverse than Wissahickon High School, I have taken an interest in the experiences of students of color and poor and working-class students in this school since they are such a small minority of the students. For this reason, I was especially drawn to episodes of talk that addressed issues of social

class and race. It seemed important to consider students' cultural, social, and racial identities as they participated (or did not participate) in these conversations. Notably, there were no students of color in the honors class, but 25 percent of the lower-level class was students of color.

### **Conclusion**

The ethnographic cross-case methodologies fit the research questions because these questions required prolonged attentiveness to micro-interactions within the context of classroom and school culture. Discourse analysis, based on a definition including multiple discourses of the class beyond the spoken dialogue, was a useful method of analysis because it allowed me to revisit discussions both to confirm or re-work my initial impressions and to examine micro-interactions within the discourse to investigate the relationships between written and unwritten texts, teacher and student identities, contextual elements, and collaborative and critical thinking practices. While the data are filtered through selection and presentation, all research—quantitative or qualitative—includes the limitations of the questions asked and the research methodologies used. In any research, some data are included while others are excluded. Reliability comes from member checking and triangulation, but also from the researcher's transparency about positionality and openness about data collection and analysis practices.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS FROM THE HONORS COURSE

#### Introduction

In Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, ostriches in a dream sequence rush up to a woman and soundlessly open and close their bills, delivering messages she cannot understand. "They are ... talking to her all at once, vehemently, insistently, aggressively, because there is nothing more important than what they want to tell her" (Kundera, 1978, p.145), although their messages are merely a collection of banalities about themselves: how they have eaten, what woman they have seen, how they have slept. I keep this image of chattering ostriches in my mind when thinking about class discussions about literature as a reminder that eager and intense student talk does not always indicate deeper-level thinking. Instead, using procedural display, "teachers and students ... [display] to each other ... interactional behaviors necessary to get through a lesson without... engaging the substantive content of the lesson" (Puro & Bloome, 1987, p. 29). The large birds ignore one another as well as their audience, they do not select important topics (or passages), and they do not build upon one another's ideas. Literacy reaches beyond the acts of reading, writing, speaking and listening to qualify these acts with thoughtfulness, going deeper than first impressions and inclinations.

As a proponent of discussions about literature, I want students to explore multiple perspectives, revisit the text, and interrogate, build upon, and tinker with one another's ideas. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) state: "high school graduates will depend heavily on their ability to listen attentively to others so that they are able to build

on others' meritorious ideas while expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (48). It is easier, however, to describe the end product than it is to achieve it with a classroom of unpredictable teenagers, some of whom may be tired, distracted, unprepared with the reading, or relying on Spark Notes to get them through the day.

In the case I describe in this chapter, I observed a senior Honor's English Literature class throughout all of their discussions about Jane Eyre in order to identify teacher and student practices that contributed to discussions with critical and collaborative thinking. I transcribed, coded and revisited these discussions to look closely at the ways that the teacher and students used language as a tool to participate and learn. I identified both a larger recurring structure of genres of talk verbally marked by the teacher to indicate thinking and discursive expectations for different discussion genres as well as a discursive/thinking move of refining an idea, both of which I will describe in this chapter. I also examined instances of meta-talk in which the teacher directly spoke about the purposes for talk, thinking, and interpretation of literature. I used meta-talk to examine the ways that the teacher, Ms. Kisler, described the motivations for and purposes of learning.

Because this case is part of a cross-case study, this chapter will focus on the upper-level class, and the same questions will be addressed about the lower-level class in the next chapter: what were recurring genres of talk? How did these genres communicate expectations for thinking and learning? What student discussion and thinking moves supported critical thinking? What practices obstructed deeper-level thinking? In both this chapter and the chapter analyzing the data from the lower-level class, I will explore ways that school and community culture may have impacted the participation, talk, thinking,



and learning that happened in very different ways in the two classes. I will address differences between the two classes as part of that chapter, including the differences in the classroom cultures and how these differences played out in students' thinking, classroom talk, and academic performance; the teacher's facilitation; and the interplay as the students and teacher responded to one another's academic practices.

For the purpose of this chapter, I will look closely at one class discussion as representative of a pattern that Ms. Kisler uses repeatedly, and I will provide tables with further examples of these genres to demonstrate varied iterations of the pattern. The specifics of text and participation illustrate an approach that worked much of the time to support students in the practice of speaking and thinking collaboratively, moving from initial thoughts to more refined ideas.

While I identify specific teacher and student practices, these discursive practices are not a recipe for good discussions. They are the prevalent practices I observed in dialogic discussions in which students thought critically in response to literary texts. Identifying genres of talk may support dialogic discussion practices and signal thinking and discussion expectations to students, but the success of genres of talk in supporting critical thinking goes beyond this structure. Genres of talk used in coordination with other tools and understandings for facilitating dialogic discussions may enhance the success of these classroom conversations. Understandings include the teacher's awareness of student identity, relationships and ways that classroom culture supports collaborative thinking through relationship and *vivencia*. If teachers were to rely on a formula for success, they would neglect to attend to elements of the learning and cultural contexts. Micro-interactions within each genre, including opening questions and tasks and follow-up

questions and comments, supported by teacher and student stances are essential to the quality of discussion.

Dialogic discussions offer unfolding unexpectedness— and naming this virtue also points out that discussions are ultimately uncontrollable. Because the meaning of texts occurs in interaction with the readers and social and historical contexts, it is neither static nor fixed (Bakhtin, 1981); thus, every discussion about a text has potential to open up in new and unpredictable directions. An awareness of this lack of stability invites the critical thinking practice of considering an idea from multiple perspectives (Chinn & Anderson, 1998; Chinn, et al., 2001; Thompson, 2006; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

As an English teacher, I can teach students to discuss and set up a climate that invites discussion, but I cannot know which discussions will flourish with which student groups on which days. Discussions are also influenced by experiences beyond what happened the night before, when teacher and students read or re-read the text. These experiences include what Applebee (1996) calls the “curricular conversation,” a series of conversations over time, through which students develop their thinking and discussing practices (p. 44). Discussion participants prepare overtly for discussions, but a teacher’s preparation is a vast, ongoing experience rich in reading, wondering, thinking, and academic conversation. A teacher's level of experience, both in leading discussions and in interpreting literature, impacts the quality of discussion. Similarly, the depth of thought and insight of students' contributions may depend on a peer role model in thinking, speaking and listening, so the presence or absence of such a model can make the difference in depth of talk.

The cultural context also plays a large role in discussion practices: what speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986) have these students been socialized to use? How much do students' families and peer groups "buy in" to the beliefs that school is a place to work hard, learn valuable skills, and benefit from doing so? Even within one class, a teacher shifts between speech genre expectations, so the communication of the shift and the students' understanding and acceptance of each new speech genre impact the effectiveness of episodes of talk. In sharing this case, I hope to name and describe the complexities of these practices and contextual factors shaping their enactment. I will begin to address the social contexts of the class in this chapter, but I will continue to develop this line of exploration in future chapters, which bring together both cases.

### **Setting and Social Context**

The students in this 12th grade honors English class show a familiarity with and acceptance of a set of classroom expectations generally associated with compliant students who believe that success in school found through adhering to both academic and behavioral expectations and generally pleasing the teacher will benefit them. They give Ms. Kisler attention when she talks, do not engage in disruptive behaviors such as loud pencil sharpening or excessively distracting side conversations, and for the most part, participate when requested to do so. They perform this set of practices with an outward cheerfulness, and in addition they show a seemingly genuine affection towards Ms. Kisler. They seem to enjoy their time in this class, which is confirmed by surveys taken at the end of the observation period. This stance seems easy and natural to them, a sign that

they have learned and internalized these practices from previous school experiences and possibly family literacy practices.

Although they may not do all of their reading assignments, they value their grades as well as giving Ms. Kisler a positive impression of themselves as on-task and diligent. In the lower-level class, I frequently see Ms. Kisler call a student over to her desk for an individual conversation in which she points out missing work and creates an "exception" for that student to allow for its late completion. The student frequently follows through and brings in the homework. In the upper-level class, I do not see this interaction even once. In the lower-level class, students do not seem especially interested in creating a facade of competence or of being on task if the opposite were true, but in the upper-level class, I see students monitor their student personas. For example, when working in small groups one day, Susan does not offer any ideas in the small group discussion, making it appear as if she has not completed the reading. When Ms. Kisler comes over to see how the group is doing, Susan reformulates her peers' ideas and says them to Ms. Kisler as if she has been a leader in the group discussion.

There is an element of friendly joking both among students and between the students and the teacher. Both students and the teacher share relevant vignettes from their lives in the context of conversation, and often students engage Ms. Kisler in informal dialogue before the class begins. For example, students share ideas about whether dreams could be premonitions, and they notice when she has gotten her hair cut.

As students in 12th grade, these class members have already experienced three years of high school, at least three high school English classes, and they are acculturated

into high school academic and social expectations. They are applying to college and contemplating which careers they will pursue beginning next school year.

All of the students in this class are White, and all but one student identify as members of the middle class. Parents' and guardians' occupations are primarily in professional positions as medical practitioners, educators, and financial consultants. At times when social class issues arise in conversation, vocal students in the class seem unfamiliar with the social inequities, hardships, and stresses associated with poverty. One student in this class, Lynn, does not fit this class profile and comes from lower socioeconomic circumstances than the others; she also shows signs of social discomfort such as sitting separately from other students and working on her own even when students are told to work in groups. She is the only student to leave the survey question on parent/guardian occupations blank. In this way the honors class fits the research that within-school sorting significantly separates middle and high school students by race, ethnicity, poverty status and achievement; "Black, Hispanic, poor, and low-achieving students are more likely to... have lower achieving and less advantaged classmates compared with White and nonpoor students in their grade at their school" (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013 p. 313).

### **Meta-Talk**

Ms. Kisler sometimes interjects her own thoughts about why students should think more deeply about ideas. In her perspective, deeper-level thinking is not just academically required but leads to a more fulfilling life. Below is an episode of meta-talk in which she explains her goals for their final essays with a personal example of the

interchange between her life experiences, a book she is reading, and the ways that the book makes her reflect on her own life.

In one sense, her meta-talk expresses her views about the dialogism between a reader's experiences and a text. In another sense, she posits herself as a role model reader and thinker, someone who consistently rethinks her life in light of new ideas. She ties this rethinking to her own social relationships with her lunch friends, her husband, and her Saturday night dinner friend. She also ties it to the prestige of the highly regarded college she attended, reminding students that she has achieved the very goal that their parents want for them; therefore, she is a legitimate role model. Her tone in this speech is open and relaxed, as if she is letting the students in on an important, personal aspect of her life. She mentions her age and her social activities out of school. Rather than using either a morally or academically imperative register, she gives the sense that she is letting the students in on a bit of wisdom that they might not yet know about.

Ms. Kisler: I want you to have an essay where you're thinking and you're having new thoughts. That is the goal. The goal is new, so put in big letters at the top of your rubric: NEW and FRESH. I really want you to think about the topic you choose as it relates to you on an individual level, personal level, what your thinking is. So I told you about my book that I'm reading— did I tell you about that?

Student: Yeah, you did.

Ms. Kisler: I started reading on Friday night, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria... by Beverly Tatum ... She's a psychologist who studied the development of ... racial identity. So when I was at Hazleton College, she was at Hazleton, and I was so stupid I never took a class with her. I'm mad at myself for that. But anyway ... we were talking about this book with my lunch people that I eat with a little while ago, so I picked it up and I started reading it.

So as I'm reading it, I'm thinking, she gives the definition of racism, she talks about how kids develop racial identity, she talks about that concept of White privilege. ... As I was reading it, I started thinking, "Gee, how is my identity? How do I fit into this as a teacher? Do I believe her ideas of racism? Do I believe her definition?" She has a very distinct idea of racism. "Do I believe that I fit into that profile? When did I start thinking about race? When did I think about racial relations within education?" I started thinking about all these things.

I talked with my husband about it, I went out on Saturday night with my friend Beth, who is in a master's program, becoming a social worker, and so we talked about— she was bringing up this term "white trash," and we had this whole conversation about it. So all these things are in my life: my conversations with my husband, my teaching ten years.

So, when I look at my thoughts about the idea of race and the idea of white privilege, I am 40-something years old, 41, so I have had 40-something years of experience, and I have had conversations, and I have

seen movies, and I have been raised by my parents, I have heard my father use racial slurs– I have had all of this experience, and I have attended training sessions at Wissahickon here, all of these things have helped my understanding.

So what I want you to do with this essay is, think about these issues and how, how other things in your life including these books help you understand your topic and how they help you make sense of your world. So ... this is my example of all the things in my life that lead up to my thinking about racism. So I want you to ask the question, and how you would answer that and how you see the text working in your life with that question.

In this monologue, Ms. Kisler emphasizes the reasons to think as personally enriching, socially important, and ties to her experience going to a prestigious liberal arts college. She uses herself as a model for the type of thinking that connects the personal to the academic. She instructs the students to "think about the topic you choose as it relates to you on an individual level, personal level, what your thinking is." She does not overtly tell them that they should learn to think so that they could pass state-wide tests, get into college, or get middle- or upper-class jobs. By leaving these goals out, she lets students know that she already expects them to have these goals, and that these are not enough if they do not lead to a reflective way of going about life. This omission contrasts with Ms. Kisler's meta-talk with the lower-level class, in which she emphasizes testing and jobs. Although she does not explicitly state that they should value literacy as a means to



achieve the goal of participation in college, she implicitly accesses that goal as an expected internalized value by naming her college and associating it with a well-regarded author and academic.

In another case of meta-talk, Ms. Kisler starts with a focus on grades and reprimands students for not attending to ungraded in-class assignments with diligence. She uses grades as a motivation for them to be attentive in all class activities, but then she moves towards pointing out the connections between the assignments and their learning to do close reading. She wants them to realize that informal activities give them practice at the skills on which they will be evaluated. Although she ends this talk with an emphasis on skills, she uses grades as the motivation for developing skills, in contrast to the prior episode of meta-talk when she emphasizes worldly awareness and self-fulfillment.

Ms. Kisler: The whole thing is that when I give you the in-class writes that we do, I pull passages out for you to look at them and write about them closely. This is a similar thing I'm asking you to do but you're not being graded on it. So the more diligently you attend to this stuff, and seriously you take these small things even though they're informal, the better you end up doing, the more practice you're getting, the better you end up doing on the in-class writes. Right? The more diligently you pay attention to this, the better it is. And the more diligently you pay attention to the discussion we have, and analyzing, and kind of following these threads, the better you're gonna also do on those. Right? I mean, how are the two related?

Frank: They're not.

Ms. Kisler: They're not. So nothing we do in class is ever related (*in a sarcastic tone*).

Matt: Well, the in-class writes reference the discussions, and to points that we made.

Ms. Kisler: Yes, that's content related. That's from a content perspective. How else are they related? Ricky?

Ricky: Well, when you give us a passage on the in-class write that refers to our reading, we explain it. And the other way, is we have the thing and we have to find the passage.

Ms. Kisler: It is kind of in a way, the reversing. But what are the skills that are similar? What are the skills I'm asking you to do right now? What's a skill? Think about skills versus content. What are those in-class writes testing you on as far as your skills go? Mike.

Mike: Close reading. Looking at the words that are involved, and the meanings of them, as opposed to just the plot.

Ms. Kisler: So, are you doing any close reading now?

Mike: Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, and what do you think the next step is when I ask you to find a passage, Evan? When I say, “Substantiate your idea with a passage,” what should the next step be?

Evan: Find a passage.

Ms. Kisler: Once you've found a passage, what is the next step?

Evan: Look at the words.

Ms. Kisler: You look at the words. So the more you do this, the more you practice, the better you become. That's why I have you do this, look at the passage. So there's an interconnectedness. Why am I even bringing this up?

Jill: We did poorly on the in-class writes.

Ms. Kisler: I feel like there's a slackiness right now. Are you guys slacky right now?

Frank: Slacky?

Ricky: Are we doing bad on the in-class writes?

Ms. Kisler: No, you didn't do – actually I, the in-class writes are corrected, I did them last night, so I'm done. I want you to know the connections that we're doing, and you don't just wake up one day and all of a sudden know how to do a close reading. It's not gonna just (*laughs*) come to you. You have to practice it diligently. And so when I ask you questions and I want you to be writing in class, I want you to be writing the full time, and I want you to be really thinking and really doing it, not just kind of chilling out. That's why I'm asking. That's it.

In this instance of meta-talk, Ms. Kisler shows an expectation that students see the relationships between their various learning activities, and that they consistently put in effort regardless of whether those activities are to be graded. She ties the motivation to put in this effort both to grades and to development of skills, two areas which overlap. While students interpret the reprimand to mean that they have not done well on the graded assignments ("in-class writes"), in fact Ms. Kisler is responding to an apparent lack of effort during the ungraded assignments. When they ask if they did poorly on the

in-class writes, she does not answer the question except to say that they are corrected. While she asserts that "slacky" attentiveness could lead to poor grades, she does not follow through and say that their grades have been poor on this most recent assignment. Her focus is for them to improve their diligent attentiveness to all class activities towards the goal of developing better close reading skills.

### **Genres of Discussion**

By using language that designates three genres of discussion (warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking), Ms. Kisler invites students to participate and delineates clear expectations for different types of thinking and discussion. Each genre name comes from Ms. Kisler's own designation when facilitating discussions with this honors class. While this structure may seem like the default for literature teachers, the genre of deeper-level thinking is most frequently neglected, as shown by teachers using a majority of Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) moves even when claiming to facilitate open or dialogic discussions (Alexander, 2008; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Marshall et al., 1995; Nystrand, 2006). Most teachers hold the interpretive authority of a text for themselves rather than supporting students in developing interpretations that may diverge from those of the teacher.

Although she primarily withholds from evaluating student responses in the warm-up and book gossip genres, teacher-student talk in these first two genres involves rapid nomination of students, students directing their answers towards the teacher, and very few instances of a comment opening out into a peer-to-peer interaction. Therefore, the format is essentially I-R (initiate-respond) without the evaluation. Students do not

question one another or build on one another's ideas in the warm-up genre, and they only do so to a small extent in the book gossip genre. The teacher nominates students to assure that all students participate in these two genres of talk.

By contrast, in the deeper-level thinking genre, the teacher poses a more open question, requires students to find, reference, and read directly from specific passages from the text, and she expects students to evaluate, refine, and re-think initial ideas. The teacher counteracts student claims by asking follow-up questions and asking students to respond to one another. She uses the metaphors of "peeling" and "layering" to signify that she expects students to identify the connections between their interpretive claims and tacit assumptions within their thinking or within the text. The teacher does not nominate every student in this genre, so rather than every student taking an equal but short turn at talk as they do in the warm-up and book gossip genres, some students participate more frequently and for longer intervals than other students. These more varied responses allow students to hold sustained dialogues with one another and with the teacher, to elaborate on their ideas and to return to, develop, and rework previous points.

The designation of "critical thinking" does not only represent moving beyond the surface features of the text, but also doing so without following a teacher's lead towards a pre-determined interpretation of the text. Socially constructed meaning brings together the teacher's expertise with the students' experiences and ideas as they interact with one another; meaning is both transmitted and transformed (Cazden et al., 1996). Considering an idea from multiple perspectives is a critical thinking practice that helps group members to collaboratively construct meaning through talk (Chinn & Anderson, 1998; Chinn et al., 2001; Thompson, 2006; Townsend & Pace, 2005).

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy state that students must “take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations,” described as “a range of conversations and collaborations... building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (48). Conversations lie on a spectrum between accessible and challenging, and students learn by participating in a variety of conversational opportunities along that spectrum. In addition to range, variety within the category of deeper-level thinking is important because it stretches and encourages students’ creative response to unexpected tasks.

### **Warm-up**

Towards the beginning of their reading of Jane Eyre, Ms. Kisler starts the discussion by asking, “Who would you rather have lunch with: Elizabeth [from Pride and Prejudice (Austen, 1813/1995)] or Jane (from Jane Eyre)? She calls on students rapidly, expecting spontaneous “off the top of the head” answers from each student. While the word “lunch” evokes positive and familiar associations of socializing and fun, adding to the perceived ease of answering this question, there is not a lot of variation in student responses partly because of the rapid pace of talk and partly because of the narrow scope of the question. Students are directed to choose between two possible answers (Jane or Elizabeth) and then briefly explain. Students sound confident and do not hesitate to formulate a complex thought or work through an explanation. They do not check their books or look back at sticky notes. They do not express doubt or self-questioning. The absence of these qualities of discourse which accompany the deeper-level thinking

discussion genre emphasizes both the low stakes of the warm-up genre as well as its limitations for facilitating critical thinking. Among student answers, I hear:

Steve: Jane, because Elizabeth would make me feel stupid.

Mike: Elizabeth. Jane asks too many questions.

Lynn: Elizabeth.

Susan: Elizabeth is wittier and would be more fun.

These answers are quick and brief, although some lead to student comments and follow-up questions. Ms. Kisler includes her own opinion and is asked by students to explain her reasoning. (She worries that Jane might be too “good of a person.”)

Ms. Kisler does not always use warm-ups, but this recurring event seems light and easy and gives students the message that everybody’s voice is expected. By responding to accessible questions, students rehearse sharing their ideas with the group and experience interactive talk as a non-stressful event. This practice creates the groundwork for the next level of participation which sets slightly higher stakes.

Warm-ups have a variety of uses within the genre. The above example prompts the practice of thinking intertextually between novels read for the class and their lived experiences. Considering a character from Pride and Prejudice in contrast to a character from Jane Eyre, both female protagonists, introduces the possibilities for interpretation



that arise through juxtaposing the two texts. Additional examples of warm-up talk are used for the purposes of teaching students about Romanticism, checking in with students about their experiences of reading, and checking in personally with students. Within these examples, Ms. Kisler uses social language and references events from the linguistic domain of home in addition to the domain of school, practices which welcome students' social and home selves as into the classroom. These examples are presented in the tables below. (See Appendix D for complete transcripts.)

Table 2: Warm-up for background lesson on Romanticism. [In response to projected image of The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12: 1-4), a painting by William Blake projected on the whiteboard. See Appendix E for an image of the painting.]

**Context:** Students are to begin reading Jane Eyre for homework that night. To present the ideas of Romanticism, Ms. Kisler projects a series of artistic images from the Romantic movement. After students discuss these paintings, they view a video introduction of the Romantic movement. She then gives them four Romantic poems and asks them to answer: "In what ways is this poem a manifestation of Romanticism?" in small groups. Prior to this activity, the class has gone on a field trip to an art museum so they have practice with a process Ms. Kisler explains as "we're going to treat this like I treat literature" in responding to art.

**Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler: Word associations in response to the painting. If you can't see, come up and look.

**Selected Responses:**

(students nominated by Ms. Kisler)

Lynn: Fear.

Matt: Steroids.

Justin: Strange.

Pam: Evil.

Amy: Like a bug.

Gail: Vein-y.

Stephanie: Disgusting.

Although word association seems to be a fairly accessible activity, the painting itself is evocative of sexual domination and is therefore emotionally threatening to discuss. The back of an overly-muscular male with horns, wings, and a tail suggestive of a powerful devil stands with legs apart looking down on a cowering female lying on her back. The students do not point out these connotations but Ms. Kisler comments, "sexual undertones?... dominance, he's over her" and evokes a student response on that topic before moving on to point out the wings. The students' avoidance of this topic because it is uncomfortable or improper to bring up in school highlights the dynamic of student choice to withhold thoughts for a variety of reasons, including social norms and pressures. In contrast to the awkwardness of this painting selection, the other paintings in the group do not evoke such personally difficult topics and the students participate the entire time.

Their observations about the paintings lead into the introduction to Romanticism, which introduces them to the concept of the intertextuality between a literary and artistic movement and the art or literature itself. The elements of Jane Eyre do not only reflect Brontë's authorial vision and choices, but also exhibit the influence of Romanticism on literature.

The combination of students' making meaning from analyzing artistic works and receiving information from a video is an example of the interplay between different types of learning. Student construction of meaning (interpreting art) can be supported by direct instruction (viewing the video) and can lead back into construction of meaning with more background knowledge (interpreting the poetry in light of information about the Romantic Movement).

Table 3: Warm-up for reading check-in.

<p><b>Context:</b></p> <p>In the first few days of students reading <u>Jane Eyre</u>, Ms. Kisler asks them to share how their reading is going.</p>
<p><b>Prompt:</b></p> <p>Ms. Kisler: Let's just generally talk about the book, our reading experience– give me a couple sentences about how the reading is going and what you think about it. Do you like <u>Jane Eyre</u> more or less than <u>Pride and Prejudice</u>?</p>
<p><b>Selected and Abbreviated Responses:</b></p> <p>(Ms. Kisler's statements nominating students and requesting have been removed; some of Ms. Kisler's follow-up comments have been removed. See Appendix D for complete</p>

transcript.)

Matt: Maybe a little better. More happens.

Justin: Pretty much the same as Joe. I think it's definitely better than Pride and Prejudice.

Just 'cause I just didn't like Pride and Prejudice that much.

Matt: At the beginning, I thought it was gonna be about nature, like there is a lot of nature references, but then it got into like, with, who's that boy? John, who's the boy that's Mrs. Reed's son? Then it got into him, and that was interesting.

Sherry: I feel like in Pride and Prejudice, there were a lot of characters who were just—annoying? And I don't get that in Jane Eyre, so that's what I like.

Evan: I like it better than Pride and Prejudice, but-

Ms. Kisler:- Well, you were a hater of Pride and Prejudice-

Evan: -so that's really not saying much. It's not too bad, sometimes I wish there was a little bit more from the characters, like at the beginning of the chapters, there's usually a little bit of discussion from Jane's thoughts.

Ms. Kisler: So you would like to hear more from the other characters.

Evan: Yeah, a little bit. And it seems like sometimes she's addressing the reader directly.

Stephanie: Um, I guess I like it, but there are good things about Pride and Prejudice.

Hannah: Um, I like it a little bit better. I agree that there's definitely more happening.

There's a lot more description in this book. It was describing the first day at the boarding school, and that was really boring. It was describing the whole day, when she went to class, and when she ate, and that was really boring.

Ms. Kisler's casual, approachable tone in this warm-up session creates a sense of comfortable friendliness. She uses the term "hater" which is used in popular culture and teen dialect more than with adults, signaling that this is more of a conversation among peers than a verbal check to be sure they had been reading. By appropriating a high school student vernacular word, she uses dialogical heteroglossia, Bakhtin's term for "plurality of relations" as expressed through multiple voices (Holquist, 1990, p. 89) or "ventriloquation" in which "the word is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention ... when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-234). By adopting the students' vernacular term "hater," Ms. Kisler uses social language to signal that she is moving her stance closer to their social world simultaneously to asking them to join her in the world of literary language. Thus she creates a linguistic bridge that makes students feel accepted and welcomed into the conversation.

By inviting students to evaluate the book from a personal perspective, Ms. Kisler chooses not to reinforce the idea that literature in the canon should be enjoyed only by those who are educated and literate. Rather than restricting dialogue to personal and intertextual connections to the literary text, she invites disconnections as well, a strategy that shows respect for student identity and experiences and emphasizes critical rather than passive engagement with a text (Jones & Clark, 2007). She creates room for students to distance themselves from the text rather than only pointing out its strengths or admiring the author's work. This conversation does not look at the text in depth, but this opportunity to distance themselves as readers sets the stage for what is acceptable and expected in more in-depth discussions.

However, students and teachers can never entirely leave their roles behind, and teachers do evaluate students while students aim to achieve positive evaluations. While this conversation seems to be fairly low-stakes, there is the possibility that some students are behind on their reading or have been using Spark Notes to find out the main events of the book; depending on their level of preparation, this conversation could be experienced by students as either relaxed or slightly stressful. Some student comments could be made without reading the book, such as Justin's comment, "I think it's definitely better than Pride and Prejudice. Just 'cause I just didn't like Pride and Prejudice that much," but most of the other comments include a basis for their evaluation and leads that could be followed up on to extend the conversation.

Table 4: Warm-up for personal check-in.

<p><b>Context:</b> It is the last day of school before Thanksgiving break.</p>
<p><b>Prompt:</b></p> <p>Ms. Kisler: First, we're going to talk about Thanksgiving, and I want everybody to identify their favorite Thanksgiving food.</p>
<p><b>Selected Responses:</b></p> <p>(Ms. Kisler's statements nominating students and requesting have been removed; some of Ms. Kisler's follow-up comments have been removed.)</p> <p>Stephanie: Green bean casserole or sweet potatoes.</p> <p>Sherry: Yams. I love yams.</p> <p>Evan: Oh, God! I love yams. You don't want me near your yams, trust me.</p>

Amy: Bread. Yeah, I really like my favorite, bread.

Ms. Kisler: That's un-American (*students laugh*).

Pam: Mashed potatoes.

Steve: I got it. My mom makes this really good rice pudding. It's yummy.

Matt: Either turkey or my grandma's cream cheese brownies. Yeah, it's a cookie-

Ms. Kisler: -Is it a cookie or a brownie?

Matt: You put the cookie dough on the bottom of the pan-

Ms. Kisler: -Chocolate chip cookie dough?

Matt: Yeah. And then put the cream cheese mix, whatever it is, in the middle, and then you put the cookie on top. You should try it; it's really good.

Jill: Stuffing.

Frank: The turkey, slash mashed potato combo, with gravy.

Ms. Kisler: With the gravy. Ricky, did you give yours?

Ricky: No, but turkey.

By asking students to share a specific food they enjoyed on Thanksgiving, Ms. Kisler accesses the linguistic domain of home in a setting that usually calls on the linguistic domain of school, since linguistic practices are social but "there are different literacies associated with different domains of life" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 11). When Ms. Kisler accesses the "permeability of boundaries" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 11) between these domains she evokes emotions associated with home, family, and celebration. By acknowledging and inviting the students' multiple domains of experience

through literacy, she creates social connections and lets them know that she values them holistically rather than just as students. This conversation creates unity by emphasizing a holiday that most Americans celebrate, and it allows students to express personal taste and share a detail about their family.

This is the type of conversation that can be seen as community building because it loosens up participants, showing that they are interested in one another as human beings and not just in their academic roles. Even in this conversation, however, Lynn never shares her favorite Thanksgiving dish, saying "I don't know" when Ms. Kisler calls on her. This abstention reveals that she does not feel comfortable in the group opening up about something personal from her home life. She prefers to keep her home life separate from her school life in this context. Her resistance could relate to an overall discomfort that she feels with this group of students, regardless of the invitations for connections extended by Ms. Kisler. Social dynamics from outside of the classroom follow students inside, and the students contribute to class culture both consciously and subconsciously. This activity may serve to enforce a sense of community already present without necessarily breaking down social barriers if they are already in place.

### **Book Gossip**

Ms. Kisler uses this term to represent surface level talk about the book, reactions that readers want to share with each other. "Warm-up" flows seamlessly into "book gossip" because in both genres ideas are openly welcomed rather than interrogated; there is no wrong answer; and all students are expected to participate. Book gossip contains more sustained conversation about particular events in the text, so it works well as an



intermediate genre between warm-up and deeper talk. Students participate in book gossip in a relaxed, easy manner, and do not usually resist or say “I don’t know” to these questions. However, in book gossip, students show more evidence of preparation with the reading; and they elaborate on their answers and sometimes field follow-up questions, in contrast to the quick response warm-up activity that begins the class. The designation of “gossip” used in contrast to “deeper-level thinking” shows students that there is more to come, that this is not the ultimate destination of the discussion.

To transition from warm-up to gossip, Ms. Kisler asks, “Any other favorite parts, or memorable parts? Just gossipy kind of warming up stuff. Anything that stuck out to you that you were particularly interested in, or happy about, or unhappy about, any emotional reaction?” This question embodies dialogic teaching through the placement of authority and the type of question (Reznitskaya, 2012). While she retains authority over the genre of talk, Ms. Kisler gives authority of topic selection to students through an open question.

In response, students introduce the topic of the harsh conditions of Jane’s Christian boarding school when the headmaster, Mr. Brocklehurst, orders the girls’ heads shaved. Ms. Kisler comments in response to their talk, but she lets them direct the topic. Her response asking “why?” requests that students elaborate on their answers, supporting their collaborative construction of meaning.

The prevalence of laughter is an indicator of the tenor of the conversation as relaxed, at least among the participants. Ms. Kisler starts with teasing Matt about a prior comment he has made about the excitement in the book generated by the “abuse” of the girls at the boarding school, taking it out of context to make him seem mean-spirited in a

joking way. By referencing comments from both Matt and Sherry, Ms. Kisler shows the class her intention to highlight students' contributions and direction of the conversation rather than addressing her own agenda. Her introduction to the warm-up conversation follows:

Ms. Kisler: Favorite part? We already know Sherry's favorite part. And we know that Matt likes the abuse. (*Jill bursts out laughing.*) Any other favorite parts, or memorable parts, or-? Again, just gossipy warming up stuff. Anything that stuck out to you that you were particularly interested in, or happy about, or unhappy about? Any emotional reaction?

In the students' response to the prompt, Frank shows that he is comfortable exploring an episode that stands out to him from the book even though he forgets the characters' names. In this move of requesting character names, Frank shows that he trusts that the class community of teacher and students would prioritize his interpretations of the text over his recall of specific details such as names. This request, then, shows the climate and class cultural norms over what type of discourse is important. The culture values critical thinking and exploratory thinking over recall. Similarly, he thinks that Mr. Brocklehurst had a "low" position at the school when it is actually a powerful position; his mistake prompts laughter from the teacher and the class, and he takes on a humorous tone of voice. Even with these two mistakes, he continues sharing his observations.

Frank: When Mr., what's his name?

Student: Brocklehurst?

Ms. Kisler: Brocklehurst, yeah.

Frank: I kind of forgot his name. When he gets there, the school kind of changes. When they put him down to, it's not low, but I think he had an economic position or something-

Ms. Kisler: I think he's the treasurer.

Frank: Oh yeah, the treasurer. (*Ms. Kisler and class members laugh.*) But he still does a lot, he still plays a main part in the business end of the school, but at the same time.

After Frank introduces the character of Mr. Brocklehurst for discussion, Matt takes up this topic and selects a scene that stands out to him and strikes him as funny, when Mr. Brocklehurst shaves the girls' heads. Although Ms. Kisler's response is emotionally opposed to Matt's, that this event is "horrible," he continues to feel and express his amusement through words and laughter. While this laughter is on a new topic separate from the earlier humor provoked by Frank's mistakes in recalling details from the text, the good-humored mood in the room carries throughout the conversation. Matt's

freedom to laugh even when the teacher interprets this scene differently shows a classroom culture within the genre of warm-up talk that allows for divergent views, again emphasizing the teacher's stance of giving students interpretive authority.

Laughter is a window into the emotional tenor of the conversation; emotions are not just a backdrop to the conversation but an important component of one's understanding of and relation to language and social situations (Rey, 2011). Vivencia, the Vygotskian term for the act of living an experience both emotionally and cognitively, both individually and collectively (Arias, 2011), emphasizes students' individual interactions with their experiences as well as with the texts they read. While students are always responding individually to texts, a classroom that puts authority of textual interpretation in the hands of the teacher will discourage students from valuing or accessing their individual experiences of a text while encouraging them to detect and echo the teacher's experience and interpretation.

Giving students room to experience a text through vivencia supports the development of the critical thinking practice of considering an idea through multiple perspectives. It also supports the thinking practice of suggesting something not observed, "the connection between the object seen and the object suggested" (Dewey, 1910, p. 7). The emotional reaction to a scene in a book is not seen, but suggested, and the variation between readers' emotional reactions allows for them to explore multiple possibilities and interpretations.

Matt: Did [Mr. Brocklehurst] shave the girls' heads with curly hair? That was absurd. (*He laughs.*) It was funny. (*He laughs again.*)

Ms. Kisler: I think that is so horrible. (*Matt continues to laugh.*) He did, he ordered them— what was striking? Did anything strike you about that?

Matt: I thought it would go more into that. I thought it was going to be a big ordeal and then they never mentioned it again.

Ms. Kisler takes up Matt's introduction of a topic— shaving the girls' heads— although it is not a topic she has planned for the students to discuss. In the following dialogue, Ms. Kisler shows that she is not completely familiar with that part of the text. Rather than the teacher, it is a student, Jill, who demonstrates expertise on the events of the text. Ms. Kisler's willingness to ask a text-specific question because she does not remember the answer rather than as a test question for students shows that she is taking on a collaborative stance and again conveys that details can be found in the text but that participants in the discussion, including herself, should not allow the lack of recall to inhibit their willingness to explore a topic.

Ms. Kisler: Wait a minute. Did they actually do it?

Matt: I don't know if they did.

Ms. Kisler: I don't remember a big description-

Matt: -They never mentioned it.

Ms. Kisler: -I don't remember-

Frank: I don't think they did because after that they-

Ms. Kisler: -Well, I don't remember it because is there a big description of that happening?

Matt: No, it never-

Ms. Kisler: (*pages through her book*) Sorry...

Jill: (*reading from book*) Jane said, "They shaved our heads."

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. But they don't, um, there wasn't a big description, I don't remember. How nasty and horrible that was. He would make all these girls cut their hair? How horrible. Um, okay, so no other-

Frank, who joins in the discussion to help ascertain whether the girls' heads are actually shaved, extends the scope of talk to point out the hypocritical juxtaposition between Mr. Brocklehurst's eliminating the students' curly hair and giving his own daughters fake curly hair. He introduces his idea by checking his understanding of the text and then

quickly moves towards sharing his interpretation of the irony of the situation. In response, Ms. Kisler supports his development of his idea by affirming it and inviting him to elaborate on it. It also seems that in this episode students who have already spoken earlier, regardless of the accuracy or quality of their previous comments, are warmed up to continue speaking as they propel the conversation from initial observations to the suggestion of something not observed: Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy.

Frank: Um, those girls, that come in with him, were those his daughters?

Ms. Kisler: Yes.

Frank: Okay. I found that ironic-

Ms. Kisler: I found that ironic too. Why? Why? Go ahead.

Frank: They were dressed elegantly-

Ms. Kisler: -Yeah-

Frank: -with curly hair, really curly hair.

Jill: Fake curls.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah-

Frank: I kind of- that's funny-

Ms. Kisler: It says that they have beautiful curls, you know? That are fake, yeah, so, I mean, I wonder, do you think Mr. Brocklehurst was consciously thinking about that? Do you think he was like, "Oh look, here are my pretty girls who are all dressed in silk and satin with their fake curly hair, and then I'm going to-" do you think he's aware of that? Or he's unaware of that? 'Cause that's what struck me most about that passage too. What do you guys think?

Frank: I think he's aware of it. I thought it was funny. I think he does it on purpose.

Ms. Kisler: Why?

Frank: Um, because, well, does he get any financial benefit out of the school?

Ms. Kisler: Yeah.



Frank: Okay, because like he gives them bare bones and everything, and then he kind of has that money for himself. That's how I thought about it.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, any other thoughts about that? So you think he's kind of pilfering money?

Frank: Yeah.

As this conversation develops, Ms. Kisler uses uptake (Nystrand et al., 1997) to frame an open question based on the students' observations of Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy: "Do you think he's aware of that? Or is he unaware of that?" Answering this question necessitates going beyond observations of the text to draw a conclusion based on individuals' world views and their overall conceptions of Mr. Brocklehurst's character. Frank poses an additional suggestion, that Mr. Brocklehurst is keeping money for himself that he gains through depriving the students of their essential needs, giving them "bare bones... and then he ... has that money for himself." Ms. Kisler does not evaluate this interpretation; she reformulates it inadvertently slightly changing the meaning to "pilfering."

This shift in the conversation from focusing on curly hair to considering money prompts Ricky to enter the conversation and consider the financial position of teachers, particularly Miss Temple. This practice of revisiting of the text multiple times buttresses an understanding of the characters' relationships with one another and with their financial context: Miss Temple's relationship with the school as an institution, Mr. Brocklehurst's

responsibility for her financial situation as well, and Miss Temple's generosity with the students in the context of her own limited resources.

Ricky: Do the teachers get paid?

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, they do— Fifteen pounds.

Matt: -Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, because she leaves for thirty, right? Or double? But they're certainly not living the life.

Matt: It seems like they're living, much more, not luxurious, but better than the girls, though, because when Mrs. ...

Ms. Kisler: Temple.

Matt: Temple? Brought them in her office, she is like, "Oh, have some tea, some bread," she is feeding them.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, she did, but she didn't have a lot. But at the same time, though, she asked that question, "Can I have more?" and the housekeeper

was like, "No!" so yeah, she had a little stash, they did, but they seemed to suffer with them too, a little bit.

At this point in the conversation, Ms. Kisler ends the book gossip talk by bringing up a different topic that she says students have indicated they wanted to talk about.

Looking at this example of the book gossip genre emphasizes the dialogic nature of the open exploratory talk driven by the students bringing up and elaborating on ideas, supported by the teacher asking uptake questions and demonstrating receptive, interested involvement in the conversation. The students bring up a seemingly trivial event, but instead of merely judging Mr. Brocklehurst's cruelty, they hone in on his hypocrisy— he demands that the students at his charity school express Christian humility by removing their beautiful hair, although he allows his daughters to beautify themselves by adding fake curls to their tresses. Although there are not high demands from the teacher in this part of the discussion, students nonetheless bring together multiple parts of text to make a claim about a character. The willingness of both the students and Ms. Kisler to expose their lack of recall of text specifics shows that the classroom culture creates room and trust for exploratory talk that is collaborative rather than evaluative.

The word "gossip" itself connotes the guilty pleasure of talking about people behind their backs, making judgments about them that would not be acceptable in conversation were that person there. Gossip brings people emotionally close as they share the secret thoughts that they must usually censor. Were this genre alternately called something like "initial thoughts" it would not sound as social, fun and appealing. Because the book gossip genre is relatively accessible, Ms. Kisler's role in some ways is more that

of a peer reader than an academic authority. In this role, she contributes her personal observations rather than her literary interpretations. This atmosphere of social talk is reinforced when Ms. Kisler jokes, "not that I have servants..." (see Table 5) and is teased by Frank with feigned surprise, "No servants?!" The friendly, easy atmosphere invites students to let down their barriers and share the ideas that pop into their minds. Most students are in the habit of censoring their thoughts with the requirement that their answer be "right" in response to their familiarity with the IRE speech genre and their natural avoidance to being evaluated as "wrong." The gossip genre does not include evaluation, so it may break down the student's inner censor.

Labeling this genre "book gossip" is helpful in conveying thinking and discussion expectations to the students. Much of this genre consists of recall and initial or personal responses to the elements of the text. Book gossip evokes a spontaneous response, which can open up closer examination of the text; book gossip is effective because it is paired with critical thinking. Rosenblatt addresses this interplay when she writes, "A spontaneous response should be the first step toward ... mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment, and ethical and social understanding... [It initiates] a process through which the student can clarify and enlarge his response to the work" (1995 ed., pp. 71-73).

While book gossip makes the recall of text specifics engaging and fun as it encourages students to interact socially around the topics in the text, it may also include critical thinking on a deeper comprehension level. The deeper-level thinking here is initiated by the students rather than structured by the teacher's question, prompt, or assigned task. Ms. Kisler's request of the students is that they respond to the text, and she

invites a wide range of responses: "Anything that stuck out to you that you were particularly interested in, or happy about, or unhappy about? Any emotional reaction?" This openness and connection to the readers' emotions supports motivated, engaged talk. Although the teacher does not push students to analyze the text in this genre of talk, they move in that direction and show a familiarity with applying literary insight to the text in addition to sharing their initial spontaneous responses. This familiarity with the deeper-level thinking genre shows that they have practice in that genre to the extent that they have internalized it and taken authority over using it, rather than only using that genre at the teacher's direction.

In the deeper-level thinking genre of talk, Ms. Kisler takes more authority in posing thinking problems for students to figure out. In this genre she frequently introduces a topic such as religion or an additional text such as a literary theory to support students' critical thinking practices. Verbally designating the next section "deeper-level thinking," Ms. Kisler indicates that she will challenge students to solve conceptual problems, explore ambiguities and nuance, consider and critique social implications of the text, and (at times) use literary theory to interpret the text.

Table 5: Additional examples of book gossip prompts and responses.

(See Appendix F for complete transcript.)

**Book Gossip Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler has passed out index cards and asked students to write what they would like to discuss on the cards. She says the following as she reads through the stack:

Ms. Kisler: Based on what I'm seeing, we have lots of wondering about Grace Poole ... all right, so first thing we're gonna do is just kind of answer some questions about Grace Poole. What is Grace Poole's job in the house? What does she do? What do we know about her factually? So let's start with that.

**Selected Responses:**

Ricky: She's like a servant, isn't she?

Ms. Kisler: She's a servant. What other details can you give about her?

Ricky: Um, they don't really... I don't know. Mr. Rochester blamed the incident on her.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Did he, okay. Um, did he really blame it on her? I don't know. I don't know that he did. I think we might assume that it's her.

Ricky: Assume. Yeah, okay.

Ms. Kisler: Jane at one point speculates about her. What is Jane speculating about her?

Do you remember?

Frank: I don't know, but I noticed that they kind of like ignore her: things she does, actions. Like she sets the curtains on fire.

Ms. Kisler: Well, but do we know that she does?

Frank: No, but it's like implied. They just kind of ignore it.

Ms. Kisler: So what can we take away from that? For example, if there was a fire in my house last night, we would all be up in arms; I mean not that I have servants (*chuckles*).

Frank: No servants?!

Ms. Kisler: But if I did, they would be up in arms too. You know, so what does that tell

you? Susan, what do you think?

Susan: I thought it was weird that, it seemed that everyone in the manor kind of knows about Grace, except for Jane— I thought that was weird that she's part of the manor but they still won't tell her what's going on.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. At one point she overhears the servants talking, and they say, "Oh, she doesn't know?" right, and so it's like, "What does she not know?" There's something there that we don't know. You're not going to find out this weekend, unless you want to read ahead. So you will find out after: what is her role in the novel?

**Book Gossip Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler: What might her relationship with Rochester be? Do you have any thoughts about that? Let's just throw it out there, whatever you think.

**Selected Responses:**

Jill: Maybe they have some secret.

Ms. Kisler: What could the secret be? Were they lovers?

Student: *(suddenly audibly intakes breath, whispers)* "Oh!"

Ms. Kisler: Lynn, what do you think?

Lynn: Um, she could possibly know something about him.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, and that's why they're saying that. He could be paying her to keep quiet.

Frank: Paying her to cover up for someone.

Ms. Kisler: I don't know– who knows?

Frank: Okay, what was the French singer's name? She's actually his wife, I'm going that way. I'm saying that right now.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Get it out there. The French lady's his wife?

Frank: His daughter, Adele, what's her mother's name?

Ms. Kisler: Celine?

Frank: Yes. That's who she actually is.

Ms. Kisler: So Grace Poole– is actually Adele's mom. Okay.

Frank: I'm just going to go out there.



Ms. Kisler: Why not?

Frank: Me and [nickname for Ricky] came up with that.

Matt: I don't really— agree with Frank's theory (*students laugh*).

Ms. Kisler: So ... we've clarified what we know. We know what we don't know. We're not going to really find out for like a couple readings, which is okay. So it keeps the mystery alive. Are you curious? Are you wondering?

Matt: Can't you just tell us?

Ms. Kisler: No. No. You need to read and figure out.

Jill: (*to another student*) I'm not telling you.

Ms. Kisler: Nobody's allowed to tell anybody. You just read on your own, and let everybody figure it out. So this is the part mystery, there's a little bit of a gothic element, we don't know what's going on in the book, we know that she laughs funny, we know that she is related to the attic, we know that there are all these dark passages, adding to the mystique of the novel, keep us hopefully wanting to read.

## Deeper-Level Thinking

In this section of talk, critical thinking practices are expected, and Ms. Kisler pushes students to go beyond familiar and comfortable thoughts. After giving students a passage and a focus question, Ms. Kisler guides them to collaboratively work with the complexity of an idea before moving on to a different topic. In this section, ideas are interrogated rather than good-humoredly and unequivocally accepted. The deeper-level thinking genre requires revisiting ideas, making complex claims and then refining, critiquing, and reworking those claims to be sure that they are supported by the text. Students look closely at diction and connotation, and Ms. Kisler often brings in an external topic or theory in order to interpret the text. For example, she asks them to examine a cultural issue (religion or education), a genre from a period (Romanticism), a theory (Kohlberg's theory of moral development), or a literary theory (Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, feminism, or historical analysis).

In the discussion we have been following, Ms. Kisler transitions into this genre by saying, “We’re done with our gossipy section, moving into a little bit more of the serious, textual stuff. Talking about religion.” She continues by reading an excerpt from Jane Eyre that students have been asked to identify on a quiz the previous day: ‘It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you, and besides the Bible bids us return good for evil’ (Brontë, p. 58). So we’ll use that as our launching pad to talk about religion.”

### **Focus Question**

The focus question initiates and guides the dialogic discussion. This question opens dialogue with multiple perspectives, invites connections with other texts or other parts of the same text, and elicits a layered answer.

After the students identify the context and speaker (Helen Burns) of the quotation, Ms. Kisler poses the focus question: “If you had to describe [Helen’s] religious philosophy using this quote ... how would you describe it?” As the discussion progresses, Ms. Kisler asks students to do the same for Mr. Brocklehurst and Jane and to compare and contrast these philosophies.

The focus question Ms. Kisler uses on this day opens the way for dialogic discussion because the characters in Jane Eyre present choices and beliefs that stem from contradicting religious philosophies while Brontë does not explicitly state these philosophies, so readers have to make inferences and piece together different parts of the book to address the question.

### **Dialogic Talk**

The focus question is often paired with a writing activity, either formal writing on a quiz or informal writing in composition books. In this case, the students have written on this topic in response to a quiz question the previous day. Dialogic talk starts with their answers but develops their ideas beyond the original ideas in their writing. This talk gives them the opportunity to bring their ideas together and elaborate upon them. As the dialogue between readers evolves, the dialogue between reader and text shifts as well. In this conversation, students reevaluate some of their answers in light of ideas that arise in

the discussion. After presenting students with the focus question and opening up the conversation to dialogue, Ms. Kisler propels the discussion through the use of uptake questions and comments, requests for elaboration, and posing possible contradictions in their ideas. Students extend one another's ideas, contradict one another, and revise their own ideas. Together, the teacher and students maintain the topic of discussion for an extended amount of time.

Ms. Kisler: If you had to describe [Helen's] religious philosophy using this quote ... how would you describe it?

Matt: ... She's really committed to her religion; she's a firm believer. And even when she was on her deathbed, she was content with dying, saying, "God's gonna take me." She's gonna go to heaven.

Ms. Kisler: ... so would you say she's a firm believer in what? In God? In faith?

Frank: Good morals.

Sherry: Yeah, that's what I wrote about yesterday. Mr. Brocklehurst [tells] people they have to read the Bible and it's the only way to live your life, but he doesn't practice what he preaches, he doesn't embody his values. But [Helen] doesn't [say], "You have to read the Bible more."

Here, Ms. Kisler follows up with Matt's response by requesting an extension (Wells, 1999, p. 338) to the initial answer, which involves Frank in the discussion. Frank's comment, in turn, sparks Sherry's extension of Matt and Frank's ideas based on her writing from the previous day. Sherry also refers back to the concept of Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy from the book gossip genre of talk. This moment in the discussion reveals that it is part of the larger curricular conversation of reading, discussing, and writing about literature in this class, developing students' literacy both in the context of this discussion and over a larger span of time.

At this point, Ms. Kisler requests an additional example from the text. By referencing passages that students marked, she points out the integration of students' thoughts about the passages prior to class and the collaborative discussions held in class. Ms. Kisler's phrase "that you marked" combined with the student response to the request reinforces the practice of marking passages both from a teacher's expectation and a peer's follow-through with that practice.

Ms. Kisler: Are there any other places in the text that you can think of, or any other passages about [Mr. Brocklehurst] and his religion that you marked?

Stephanie: I thought one of the parts was on page 34. [Mr. Brocklehurst] asks [Jane], "What can you do to stop going to hell?" and she answers right away, "Keep in good health, and not die."

Ms. Kisler: I thought that was awesome.

Stephanie: Yeah. And then he just shoots her down ... and tells her to read the scriptures. He's definitely negative ... using God as fear, to control the girls. Helen, I thought, she was just like a good spirit who believed in God, but not like He was this person to fear, but like when you go to Heaven, your body is like, you take the sin out of it, you're in this place that's not an abyss, or Hell; it's just this Heaven where God accepts you,-

Ms. Kisler: Mmhhh.

Stephanie: So, hope versus fear.

Over the course of the student discussion of Helen's religious philosophy, the initial answer from Matt ("She's a firm believer") is extended, refined, and reconsidered in light of multiple passages. "Belief" becomes more multi-faceted. Rather than "belief" being regarded as a static, uniform value that a character either holds or does not hold, students come up with a set of ideas that are (or are not) the subject of characters' beliefs (for example, Helen's beliefs in accepting maltreatment without complaint, or Mr. Brocklehurst's beliefs in the virtue of telling the girls to read their Bibles), and those ideas are then fleshed out for both Helen and Mr. Brocklehurst. This opening up of the definition of "belief" is an example of dialogically co-constructing meaning based on the Bakhtinian idea that there is no one "truth" about a text, because a text is in "living

conversation" with readers' ideas which are neither static nor fixed (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 76). Students are not asked to accept the beliefs presented by the literary text as natural or morally correct; the invitation to explore disconnections (Jones & Clarke, 2007) instead of only connections serves to elicit multiple perspectives. The full discussion includes thoughts that extend beyond the scope of this excerpt.

### **Facilitating Dialogic Talk for Deeper-Level Thinking**

Deeper-level thinking within discussion is supported by explicitly naming this genre of talk. However, creating a climate for deeper dialogic discussion relies on more “moving parts” than the first two genres do. In this example, Ms. Kisler references prior activities, both in class (the quiz responding to the quotation) and their daily homework of reading and marking significant passages. Building on these ongoing activities, she requests that students introduce additional passages. A focus question is central to the prospect of dialogic discussion: too obvious, and there is nothing to say; too abstract, and it is out of reach of the students. The example in this discussion works well because students can climb aboard at a relatively accessible point, noting the intensity of Helen’s belief, but they can also explore the complexities of the topic.

It is well worth noting what Ms. Kisler does not do in facilitating the discussion. Once students begin answering the focus question, Ms. Kisler does not give an affirmation followed by a different question on another topic. Rather than asking students to field a breadth of questions, she asks them to plumb the depths of one question. Ms. Kisler’s follow-up question asks for more specificity about an answer, revoicing student’s wording (O’Connor & Michaels, 1996, p. 71), or adopting the language that the student

himself has used (“she’s a firm believer in what?”). This response shows that she is listening to the student’s idea and wants to know more, rather than rushing to evaluate its merit.

Through a focus question with potential for deeper-level thinking and follow-up that encourages students to build upon their ideas, Ms. Kisler guides her students to follow a thread of thought for an extended time, using the critical thinking practice of observation, "exploration, inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown" (Dewey, 1910, p. 193). Just as looking at a painting for an extended time helps art students to notice more details, revisiting passages from a literary text and encouraging students to select their own passages introduces a greater amount of observation, which yields more complex, nuanced understandings of the text. Art and literature students alike benefit from practice with observation and a familiarity of other visual or literary texts that contribute to an understanding of each text within the intertextual web of similar textual attributes such as style, characteristics of an artistic or literary movement, or characterization.

Table 6: Additional examples of focus questions and deeper-level thinking.

**Focus question**

*Small-group writing task followed by presentation and whole-group discussion:*

"Write an internal monologue from Rochester's perspective that provides some explanation for his behavior and emotions towards Jane. Get into his head and try to figure out where he is coming from and why he acts the way he does. Consider what he says and why, how he acts and why, how he feels, what drives him, what his next moves



might be."

**How it invites deeper-level talk**

Students are asked to use evidence from the book to develop claims about a character's motivations and unspoken thoughts and feelings. The act of rereading passages leads to higher quality interpretations (Langer, 1993). Through writing creatively and collaboratively in small groups, students use the critical thinking moves of slowing down (Peskin, 1998; Vine & Faust, 1993) and socially develop coherence of ideas (Wells, 2001).

When small groups present their ideas to the class, the audience is asked to identify and respond to student claims in a whole-group dialogic discussion; while the dialogic discussion demands deeper thought, the thinking and talk is enriched by the surrounding activities of small group re-reading, collaborative talk and creative writing.

**Excerpt from discourse**

Mike: (*reads from group work*) "Who is this girl who comes and stays in my house? She is not qualified for this position. Who is she to criticize me when I am the one to pay her? I am a much higher class, and yet she is still disrespectful. Her character is confusing. ... I tell Jane all about my personal life and Adele, and this is what I get in response? She doubts that I can change myself and correct my flaws, but I know my goals in life are right. I try to be vague, but I tell her much about Adele because I am secretly attached to her because she is my child. I don't want to be too secretive, but I can't release too much information about my personal life."

Ms. Kisler: All right. What is this group capturing?

Sherry: Um. He's really secretive. He didn't want to reveal too much.

Gail: Well, at the beginning he seemed like he was saying that like she was unqualified for the position and stuff like that. But then he seemed to like change his mind about it, during the course of the monologue, about Jane?

Mike: We kind of are, just cause we talk in the beginning about her not being qualified.

Frank: Um, I noticed that they mentioned class in his monologue.

Ms. Kisler: So we've got class, we've seen... with Jane, annoyed with her, he's recognizing the class at this point. So it sounds like he doesn't— there's no attraction to Jane at this point. So are we thinking there's no, there's no attraction to her at this point, and that he's more annoyed with her? I'm getting a sense of Rochester's mad.

Mike: Yeah, at this point we really feel like he doesn't have any emotional attachment to her. Cause she has such smart responses to him, and Rochester called her dumb.

Ms. Kisler: Well dumb, in that context means what? Not able to speak, like deaf, dumb, blind. So he's not calling her stupid in that moment.

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**Focus question**

*Small-group writing task followed by whole-group discussion:*

Organize the characters in the book into a hierarchical structure according to [social] class. What are the expectations associated with each group? How is the order determined?

*Follow-up question:* Does Jane move between social classes?

**How it invites deeper-level talk**

The prompt asks students to overlay an understanding of social class onto their understanding of the book. This activity leads to students' exploring the ambiguity Jane's social class due to contradicting factors. Her foster family's social class is different than her birth family's; her role as governess means that she is educated yet she is still employed by an upper-class individual as servants are.

**Excerpt from discourse**

Ms. Kisler: Oh my gosh— did Jane move classes?

Gail: Not really.

Frank: No.

Gail. Cause she wasn't really with the Reeds. She was an orphan. So she was always pretty low.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. So what I want to know is: did she move up?

Gail: I think it's just: kids don't really, aren't as big of a factor. I think she just started

working. She was expected to, and that just was where she wound up.

Ms. Kisler: Is it different— she got an education though.

Frank: She was treated badly, though, because she was with a really high class family, and she was not high class. It's not like she was really poor, but they looked down on her because she's not upper class.

Ms. Kisler: So say that again. She used to be with the Reeds-

Frank: -and they looked down on her, not because she was poor, but they were the top of the line, so they'll look down on anyone.

Ricky: To go along with what Frank said, the Ingrams still look down on her, like when she's there.

Ms. Kisler: Was she ever looked well on?

Frank: At the school.

Ms. Kisler: At the school she was.

Frank: Yeah, she was respected, because she was the same class.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, that's interesting.

Frank: Except by Brocklehurst.

Ms. Kisler: Um, I want you to make some conclusions. I'm going to write some conclusions on the board.

**Focus question**

*Students do independent writing based on the prompt:*

Ms. Kisler: I want you to pinpoint the conflict Jane is experiencing regarding "should I stay or should I go?" And get a passage. What's her conflict? Be prepared to say that passage. Identify a couple of things, and that's what's going to start our conversation. ... If there's two sides, figure out what's going on. And figure out why she's going, and what her rationale is, and find some text to substantiate that. ... and then if we personally agree or disagree.

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Ms. Kisler: *(opens the discussion)* What is at the heart of Jane's conflict?

**How it invites deeper-level talk**

Students explore multiple perspectives that include social norms and expectations, true love, morality, Mr. Rochester's deception of Jane, power dynamics between Jane and Rochester, equality between men and women within marriage, social class, and religion. When should social rules be superseded by qualifying circumstances? The lenses above, all related to Jane's inner conflict, yield contradicting conclusions and require more nuanced thinking than merely stating either-or possibilities. Students are naturally drawn

to include the follow-up question of what they think Jane should do, enriching the discussion with personal investment on the matter.

**Excerpt from discourse**

Ms. Kisler: I want to just do a quick show of hands before we start this. Raise your hand if you think Jane is doing the right thing, and you think she should leave. Raise your hand if you think no, she should stay, be with him. Okay. (*The class is split about half and half*). So getting back to: what is her beef? What is her conflict? What is the argument about all of chapter 27? And this is what I asked you to write. And let's talk passages. Pam, what do you think?

Pam: One thing I think even if his wife is incapable of love and everything, that they're still married under God's laws. That's something that's important to Jane. On page 318 she says that "Do as I do, trust in God and yourself, believe in Heaven, hope to meet there again."

Ms. Kisler: So what's going on here?

Pam: Even though he has a horrible life, he's already married to her in this life; he wants to marry [Jane] and be happy in this life, but she's saying he's already married, so they just have to wait until Heaven.

Ms. Kisler: So you're throwing God into it. Is that what her struggle is? Is it all about God?

Pam: I'm not sure if it's all about God, but it's a factor in trying to decide what to do.

Ms. Kisler: What is she telling him to do? What does it mean, and does it remind you of any other portions that we've read? Matt.

Matt: It reminds me of the scene with Helen when she was dying. I don't really know what it means. I think it just means trust yourself, don't commit sins.

Ms. Kisler: When are they going to be together, Steve?

Steve: When they die.

Ms. Kisler: She's being like Helen. What else shows her conflict? What else is it about?

Conflict is an argument— what are those two sides about?

Jill: She loves him and he loves her, but then the other side is God and herself, like we just talked about, the religion part, kind of conflicted.

Ms. Kisler: So what does that mean? She has a conflict with God, or with herself?

Justin: She knows that she can never be anything more than his mistress, so that's her biggest conflict.

Ms. Kisler: What do you mean by that? She doesn't-

Justin: -She loves him and wants to be with him, but she wants to be married to him; she doesn't want to be another mistress of his.

Ms. Kisler: Why not be a mistress? That sounds like a pretty good deal.

Ricky: She's not about that.

Matt. And when Mr. Rochester described his other mistresses, he blew it off like it wasn't a big deal. He didn't care about anyone. She doesn't just want to be forgotten like that.

Ricky: He didn't care about them; he didn't like them, because they only wanted him for his money.

Frank: Or he could be just saying that, because he could just be moving on to the next one.

Ms. Kisler: I'm lost. What are you talking about?

Frank: He could be trying to get her to stay.



Ms. Kisler: Do you think he's lying to get her to stay?

Frank: Exaggerating the truth.

Ms. Kisler: What do you mean?

Frank: Well, he wants her to stay. He could be exaggerating the truth. He could have said that exact same thing to his other mistresses.

Ms. Kisler: Do you think she's thinking that?

Frank: It's definitely going through her mind: I could end up like another one of those girls.

Ms. Kisler: She does, on page 314 in my book. She says, "I don't like you so well as I have done sometimes as I did, sir. Did it not seem to you in the least way wrong to live in that way? First with one mistress and then another? You talk about it as a mere matter of course." So she's critical of him in that sense.

## **Interplay of Genres of Talk**

Ms. Kisler's use of three genres of talk, warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking, serves to communicate expectations about the practice of dialogic discussion. The accessible and fun warm-up genre in which all students answer an opinion question such as "Who would you rather have lunch with, Jane or Elizabeth?" contributes to a class culture in which most students talk, a useful starting point. The book gossip genre allows students to freely choose and investigate a topic such as Mr. Brocklehurst shaving the students' heads at the boarding school with one another, with little direction from the teacher. Although they are not required to do so, they use book gossip to think critically about the text after they share spontaneous emotional responses to it. The deeper-level thinking genre demands that students evaluate their responses and use a greater amount of textual support. More emphasis is placed on accuracy in the deeper-level thinking genre of talk than on the other genres.

While Ms. Kisler routinely uses these genres as phases that progress from demanding less to more critical thinking practices, she does not adhere to this progression at all times. In the middle of a deeper-level discussion, she sometimes asks students questions about their lives outside of school or opinion questions in order to ground students in a personal or emotional connection with the text and then return back to the deeper-level thinking genre of talk. For example, before asking students to describe the factors contributing to Jane Eyre's inner conflict between staying with or leaving Rochester, she asks them to raise their hands to indicate if they think she does the right thing by leaving. This movement into the warm-up genre and back to the deeper-level thinking genre demonstrates that the genres are not exclusive or impermeable; while they

can be used as phases, they can also be used fluidly to activate a variety of interactions between the students, the text and the teacher.

Genres of discussion and dialogic teaching practices rely on the relationships within the classroom, which are connected to relationships and social identities and experiences outside of the classroom. Lynn, the student who resists participation, is a useful reminder that genres of discussion do not necessarily reach every student. Lynn consistently resists participation throughout this class, although I know from having taught her in another context that she is more participatory and open with another group of peers that includes her friends. Students carry with them social and cultural observations and understandings; these can support but also complicate efforts towards dialogism.

### **The Higher-Level Case within the Cross-Case Study**

Focusing on a higher-level group presents the question of how transferable the teacher's strategies are to a lower-level group. Students who have experienced more situations of academic failure and social discomfort in school, students who do not regularly hold themselves responsible for doing (or appearing to do) homework, and students even more accustomed to speech genres which do not welcome their opinions but rely on transmission of knowledge may not respond to the genres of talk or the task of refining an idea as these honors students do.

In the second case in this cross-case study, I observed Ms. Kisler's work with a lower-level class. She encounters the obstacles named above, and she shifts her approach to include less overall time spent in whole class discussions. Within the significant

changes made between classes and over time in the lower-level class, Ms. Kisler continues to hold the expectation that students co-construct meaning rather than find and retrieve it. There is more variance in students' response to these expectations: some students embrace the concept and strive to achieve it, others detach themselves from the expectations and reject the challenge, and others waver in the middle, sometimes challenging themselves to think in new ways but other times focusing on completing written tasks regardless of understanding. These students have a harder time with comprehension of the text, they are more easily distracted from class activities, and they are less interested in presenting a semblance of compliance than the honors class is. By examining the two cases together, questions of ability, identity, and dialogic approaches to learning can be understood more fully.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS FROM THE LOWER-LEVEL COURSE

#### Introduction

This chapter explores the micro-interactions within and surrounding dialogic discussion in a lower-level ninth grade English class taught by the same teacher, Ms. Kisler, as the 12th grade honors class discussed in the previous chapter, with the same goal of dialogically challenging her students to use deeper-level thinking. The lower-level class differs from the honors class in grade and ability level, typical classroom participation, and in the extent of the teacher's use of structure. The purpose of this case study was to describe and analyze episodes of dialogic discussion with heightened levels of engagement; collaborative construction of meaning; and relevant, multi-faceted, exploratory connections, as well as problematic episodes. Using discourse analysis, I examined the teacher's and students' roles, discursive practices, and relevant preceding activities or ongoing patterns that contributed to dialogic discussion.

The research question used with the honors class takes on new dimensions in this context. The literature review and the previous chapter show that dialogue enables students to learn how to learn, wonder, inquire, elaborate on, rethink, and extend ideas (Langer, 1993; Nystrand, 2006; Rogers, 1987). In this lower-level ninth grade context, dialogic teaching practices help students improve their reading comprehension, but they do not always help students to reach deeper levels of thinking and interpretation. In this chapter, I will analyze specific learning activities in response to literature, the discourse within those tasks, and the ways in which the structure and qualities of the discourse and

context both supported and inhibited student learning. I will examine similarities and differences between the honors class and the lower-level class with respect to discourse, genres of talk, and teacher's meta-talk.

A keystone of dialogic discussion is unexpectedness: the possibility that students will interact in ways that bring up, refine, dispute and develop ideas not pre-determined by the teacher, the belief that these speech acts develop and strengthen their critical thinking practices. Yet this case study brings an unanticipated unexpectedness for me as a researcher, which was a prevalence of students' obstacles, frustrations, and incomplete lines of thought in this lower-level ninth grade class. My goal is to find episodes of lively, productive dialogic talk; I find episodes of off-topic talk, talk based on misinterpretations of the literary text, and discourse prematurely ended before deeper-level thinking took place. Tangential conversations, including the teacher's behavioral reprimands and directives and students' social interactions, create static behind academic conversations much of the time. In one of the three units I observed, the teacher does not even run whole-group discussions. However, I also find examples of lively talk, *vivencia* and dialogic talk that supported critical thinking practices. Because the teacher provides much more structure in this lower-level class than in the honors class, I examine the use of structure and the ways it both supports and inhibits dialogic talk and critical thinking.

Speaking genres in the lower-level class appear at first to differ almost entirely from those in the upper-level class. My research question— in what ways does dialogic talk contribute to students' critical thinking practices?— seems at one point as if it might be answered with a simple *no, in no ways*. However, one constant between the two classes is the teacher's motive, Vygotsky's term for the "overall purpose of action even if

it might be contested, ignored, abandoned, or otherwise eschewed by some" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 21). In both classes, Ms. Kisler's assignments and questions display a motive to push students to think on a deeper level about literary texts. In the ninth grade class, students show more difficulty with reading comprehension and visualizing literary events. While more tasks provide scaffolding for lower-level students to comprehend the literature, these are followed with discourse tasks that encourage students to learn within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and practice ways of thinking that they cannot achieve without teacher support. Although students do not always successfully solve thinking problems even with teacher support, they tackle thinking challenges with attempts. While the motive of deeper-level thinking may seem to reflect the goal of education generally, it contrasts with motives that these students encounter in other lower-level class settings. Other lower-level teachers expect students to apprehend and recite text events and interpretations that are initially presented by the teacher. Ms. Kisler's expectation that students develop, propose, re-think, and explore their own interpretations is for at least some of these students a new and different motive from what they have previously encountered.

Students' detachment from progressing towards critical thinking goals in small group situations qualifies the idea that social learning generally promotes academic growth. While students do learn through exposure to modeling from more experienced peers, sometimes the more experienced peers are lured into social chatting sessions by their less experienced peers and do not engage in academic practices. When the questions given to the groups refer to passages from literary texts with a large amount of unfamiliar words and syntax such as Romeo and Juliet, some students take to copying down the

answers of their peers without a pause to stop and evaluate the quality of those answers. One student suggests an idea in response to a question, and rather than discuss the idea or measure it against the literature, all group members write it down and move on to the next question. Other times they persist in trying to figure something out, but even with dedication they do not have the background knowledge or the familiarity with the language to evaluate their answers.

However, all of these unsuccessful patterns occur while students are working in small groups, without a teacher moderating the discussion. When students introduce a faulty understanding of a text in a large group discussion, Ms. Kisler clarifies the meaning before they base other ideas on that misunderstanding, but in a small group she is not always there to intercede. For example, in the honors class a student takes Mr. Rochester's comment that Jane is "dumb" to mean he calls her stupid, when he is instead referring to her muteness; Ms. Kisler clarifies the meaning before students evaluate his attitude towards her based on this word. This ninth grade group has less exposure to literary texts and to the types of questions that high school teachers generally ask about them, because they are in their first year of high school as ninth graders. Having fewer reference points to draw upon, they are even more likely to need teacher support. Their very placement in a lower-level class means that they have fewer experienced peers to draw on.

This study focuses on dialogic discussion in the whole group, and although these whole-group discussions do not occupy the majority of class time and most of them include more teacher-student talk than student-student talk, these discussions foster deeper-level thinking. Dialogic teaching is in fact in play, because the teacher— despite all



of the obstacles— persists in asking students to come up with their own interpretations of the literature rather than discovering hers.

In this chapter, I revisit the genres of talk identified in the higher-level class and the ways that these genres translate (or do not translate) into Ms. Kisler's discourse with the lower-level class. In contrast to her facilitation speech in the honors class, in which she names warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking genres of talk, Ms. Kisler does not verbally mark genres of talk with the lower-level class. Instead, she identifies the activities that students will complete without designating them with indicators about the type of thinking or talk that she expects of them.

I look not only at whether these genres occur but at how they occur and their relationships to student thinking. I look at explicit and implicit expectations that Ms. Kisler places on her students' thinking through talk, the scaffolding she uses to bring students towards her expectations, and what approaches are effective and ineffective in supporting students' development of critical thinking practices. Since teachers of lower-level classes typically do not challenge their students with critical thinking questions, focusing instead on lower-level comprehension topics, I explore the successes and obstacles in Ms. Kisler's goal of contradicting the norm for these students.

### **Setting and Social Context**

I observed the ninth grade lower-level English class for approximately three months over the duration of their study of three literary texts: the short story "The Scarlet Ibis" by James Hurst (1998), the play Romeo and Juliet, and To Kill a Mockingbird. The class is made up of 25 students to begin with and then decreases to 23 when two students

are removed to join the substantially separate classroom within the school due to behavior issues.

Because this class is made up of students who are new to the high school experience, they are in the midst of a transition towards acclimating to high school culture and literacy practices, unlike the 12th grade class who have over three years of high school experience. For ninth graders, the prospects of graduation and a search for college or career opportunities are a distant prospect in contrast to the importance the post-high school future holds for the 12th graders.

The racial makeup of the students and their towns of residence is different than that of the honors class. While everyone in the honors class comes from either of the two towns in the school district and only one student from that class has previously lived in Trexton, a nearby urban center, in the lower-level class two students currently live in Trexton and an additional seven students have previously lived there. Thus 36 percent of this class has experienced urban living, in contrast to the honors class in which only one student has done so. While the honors class is made up entirely of White students, the lower-level class is made up of 19 White students, three African American students, one Dominican student, one Moroccan student, and one White Latina student; approximately 25 percent of this class is made up of students of color. The lower-level class has an experiential resource in relation to certain topics relevant to some of the literary discussions, such as race and social class. The class is composed of nine boys and 16 girls.

Identifying the socio-economic makeup of the class is based on self-reporting, so in some cases student identity is unclear. Most students self-identify as middle class.

However, guardians' occupations range from postal worker and copier repairman to realtor and preschool teacher to lawyer and surgeon. Based on guardians' occupations, students represent a wide range of social economic statuses about evenly spread out, with slightly fewer guardians' upper class careers represented.

Another aspect of context is the time of day for this class. It occurs after the lunch block for this class and during the lunch block for other classes, which means that students enter the room with the buzz of social events as the most recent experience, giving some of them incentives to discuss these events. It also means that some students are curious about the goings-on in the other lunch block and that at least one student, Orchid, sometimes either skips class or leaves the room with a misuse of a hall pass to go socialize with others in lunch. I discover this dynamic because Orchid returns to the room and shares news from the other lunch with her friends. The classroom context is "nested" (Cazden, 1988) within the context of school, within the community, and within the overlap of the social events of lunch. The social learning events of the classroom demonstrate the influences of the wider-reaching contexts. For example, after Ms. Kisler disciplines Orchid about a general school rule in the hallways outside of class time, Orchid begins to make more resistant comments about the class itself.

From Ms. Kisler's perspective, a group of students in this class is lacking in "manners." From my perspective as a participant observer, students make choices that resist Ms. Kisler's rules, some of which she does not see or acknowledge and others of which she addresses. Students may purposefully choose to not-learn in resistance to the institution of schooling (Kohl, 1992) and their experiences of being controlled without the benefits of affirmation and academic success. Students try to leave the room more

frequently than those in the honors class do, and Ms. Kisler often tells them that they have to wait. Other examples of redirected behaviors include loudly sharpening a pencil while Ms. Kisler is talking and holding side conversations both with nearby students and students in another part of the room. Examples of behaviors not always addressed include: excessive socializing during group work time, use of foul language, and eating. While some of these instances of rule-breaking seem impulsive, others seem antagonistic towards Ms. Kisler. Orchid, the apparent ring-leader of excessive socializing, writes: "I hate her class. The only reason I come is because of my friends and I need to pass."

Some students are moderate and subtle with their rule-breaking, and other students do exhibit what Ms. Kisler would call "manners." Some of these students express disapproval for the behaviors of the disruptive students. In response to a survey question, Karen writes, "Some people just don't even care how they present themselves for school and dress and act out of the 'norm.' But I do not share this with them." Earlier in the semester Karen has approached Ms. Kisler to tell her personally that she does not approve of or support the way that other students are behaving in the class and to let her teacher know that Karen thinks she deserves better.

### **Structure of Class Time**

I begin the data analysis in this chapter with a section on the structure of class time, because Ms. Kisler's facilitation of activities provides an explicit set of expectations for her students. Rather than verbally marking genres of discussion as warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking, Ms. Kisler directs students to participate in a variety of types of activities. In this class, students do engage in the discussion genre of pre-reading,

which is similar to but not exactly the same as warm-up talk. They do not engage in book gossip. Although Ms. Kisler does not introduce a discussion genre by indicating a purpose of deeper-level thinking, she does use a dialogic stance to find openings for deeper-level thinking episodes of talk and invite students to engage in this genre of talk. This talk is not clearly introduced and bounded in the same way it is in the honors class; rather, she introduces deeper-level talk as an improvised tangent to another task or conversation that she has more explicitly facilitated.

For each of the three texts Ms. Kisler predominantly uses a different structure for class activities, although she consistently adheres to the motive of developing critical thinking practices. She acknowledges that her frustration increases over the course of the semester, frustration with some students' classroom behavior, with their failure to complete homework and required reading, and with their difficulty with reading comprehension.

In working with "The Scarlet Ibis," Ms. Kisler uses a combination of whole group discussion and individual work. Motifs from the story are listed on the side board, and Ms. Kisler begins the unit with a whole class discussion and definition of those motifs as they relate to students' lives, then refers back to them in whole class discussions responding to the story, and finally students are expected to write an analytical essay about one of the motifs. This structure most closely matches the whole-group discussion structure used with the honors group, and the dialogic discussion, while conducted in a very different classroom context, goes through the warm-up and deeper-level thinking genres of talk, similar to the progression of discussion used in the honors class.

While students are reading Romeo and Juliet class time is divided between: Ms. Kisler's telling of the story, small group guided responses to selections of text, viewings of excerpts from the film, and small group preparation for a performance of a scene. Students are not required to read the entire play. There are no whole class discussions about Romeo and Juliet, and the focus is on developing an ability to understand Shakespearean language rather than on examining motifs and themes of the play or taking stands on issues in the storyline. Homework assignments include putting sections of the play into their own words and memorizing their lines.

The approach to this text exemplifies a greater focus on lower levels of comprehension, understanding events from the text through answering literal questions and retelling the story, rather than higher levels of interpretation such as "merging thinking with content" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009) or thinking critically about the play. In most of the small group activities related to this text, students are positioned by the teacher as passive recipients of knowledge, and at times they position themselves as resisters of these practices and by extension, resisters of the text itself. In the small group activities, one student expresses curiosity about reading about Romeo and Juliet's sex scene, but Ms. Kisler omits this part of the play when she abridges their readings.

In her interview, Ms. Kisler explains her decision to focus on understanding Shakespeare's language: "I think I'm approaching it from a perspective of, if you want to talk about the meaning you have to understand the language." In reflection, she questions this choice and expresses an intention to discuss the ideas in the text with the students: "But that's not necessarily true [that students have to understand language before meaning]. They can still have a conversation about the meaning."

The class activities related to Romeo and Juliet do include interpretation through planning and acting in dramatic performances. Although students do not overtly discuss varied interpretations of the text and mostly focused on tackling difficult language, in order to plan and perform a scene with other students, they make decisions that reflect their interpretations of a scene. Performances exhibit a range of engagement with these decisions, some students showing depth of insight and others barely delivering their lines.

During class time working with To Kill a Mockingbird, students participate in whole-group discussions on prereading topics that will become topics of study and essay-writing. Text-based discussions on these topics take place in small groups separated by topic, and then these small groups present their ideas as supported by quotations from the text to the whole class. They write their essay in a computer lab during class time at the end of the unit. In this unit, students enter into whole class dialogic discussion during the small group informal presentations of their topic analyses. While this discussion seems less fluid than either the "Scarlet Ibis" discussion or the honors class discussions and needs more prompting from the teacher for the presenters and the responders (the rest of the class), it shows evidence of deeper-level thinking as a result of the teacher's use of uptake to create an improvised transition into a deeper-level thinking episode of talk.

Ms. Kisler uses an extended prereading discussion with qualities of warm-up talk that takes multiple class periods for each of the three texts, but she does not use warm-up in quick daily segments to lead into text-based discussions. She refrains from using the book gossip genre, possibly because of issues with students not completing reading homework assignments, and transitions to a combination of lower-level comprehension questions and deeper-level thinking questions for each text. Students address these

deeper-level questions within a whole class discussion with the short story "The Scarlet Ibis," but they address them in small groups with the two longer texts. While students work in small groups, Ms. Kisler moves around the room, supporting each group through discussing with them. As a researcher, I join a small group each time the class moves into this formation and recorded their discussions. When students show confusion in reading a text or ask me directly for help, I provide it.

During one small-group work session, I notice Ms. Kisler animatedly talking with a few small groups, but she never makes it over to my section of the room, where students are talking off topic and some have even migrated away from their assigned groups to talk with their friends. Students are off task without being redirected by Ms. Kisler. After class, she tells me that she has decided to put more of her energy into the students who are actually following her instructions and attempting to complete the tasks she gave them. I could see her point: if she were to reprimand all of the students who are off task, she would be so distracted from the students doing the work that she would not be able to give them high-quality feedback on their work.

In this context, students have autonomy with regards to the amount of effort they put into the task, and they receive more teacher support when they show their own initiative. But what if the students who are off task are demonstrating their difficulties with the assignment? If so, the teacher's choice to ignore them allows them to fall even further behind. Another factor in this situation is class size; the more students in a class, the more distracting they can potentially be and the less time and energy the teacher has to assist each individual. The lower-level 9th grade class has 23 to 25 students, while the honors 12th grade class has only 16 students.



### **Meta-Talk**

Ms. Kisler uses meta-discourse to discuss explicit expectations for student behaviors within discussions and to explain the purposes for their learning. While the genres of talk are similar between the honors course and the lower-level course, the meta-discourse is different. While Ms. Kisler movingly shares a personal-growth, citizen-of-the-world purpose for the honors group to investigate deeper-level thinking about literature, she repeatedly uses the inevitability of assessments, both in the form of class assignments and standardized tests, as a motivating force for the lower-level class. While she also mentions the personal growth aspect of learning, it is subordinate to her reminders of assessments. However, she shows her investment in the lower-level class's investigation of citizen-of-the-world topics and an interest in their connecting these topics with their own lives through her in-depth prereading discussions touching on topics of race and social class as they affect students' experiences.

I examined discourse for both the honors class and the lower-level class in which Ms. Kisler talks to the class about the purposes of their learning or directly describes expectations for their learning activities. While she shows both classes through her use of relevant and engaging prereading questions that she values the connection between reading literature and examining one's life, beliefs, and values, Ms. Kisler does not directly state this connection to her lower-level students. Rather, she attempts to motivate them by pointing out upcoming assessments for her class and for the state-wide standardized test.

In an impromptu conversation spurred by Ms. Kisler's annoyance with students asking an inordinate amount of questions when she gives them a quiz, Ms. Kisler references the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the new version of the state-wide test for graduation based on the CCSS, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the virtues of using rigorous texts and high standards for thinking as preparation for the job market. She also mentions an enriched life as a result of academic challenge as a side note.

### **Common Core State Standards and High-Stakes Testing**

Ms. Kisler emphasizes the increased level of expectations of the CCSS as her school is expected to implement it in its first year, and she directly connects these expectations to the new version of a high-stakes statewide test that students must pass in order to graduate from high school. Although she says, "I don't want to scare you guys," the possibility of not graduating is inherently frightening to ninth-graders. Given the timing of her speech about the test, right after she has directly expressed annoyance at the students' lack of independence in following directions, she uses this threat as a means to correct behavior and to emphasize that her level of expectations for them is in line with national expectations. Referencing the test adds credibility to her argument that they need to shift patterns of behavior in her class, specifically the pattern of asking questions to which they can find the answers on their own.

The school-wide shift to using the CCSS and the accompanying staff trainings also affects Ms. Kisler's thinking. She has attended a teachers' training the previous day in which English teachers have read through sample questions from the Partnership for

Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test, and teachers are told that the state will move to using this test instead of the current high-stakes state test. The reading comprehension and essay questions are significantly harder than those of the current state-wide test. In another recent meeting, Ms. Kisler has received more stringent directions for proctoring the state-wide test, including the directive to only read the directions one time even if students request a second reading.

Ms. Kisler: We have something called the Common Core, which the whole country decided on specific things you guys are supposed to be taught. This is a little harder than it used to be. They want you guys to be reading at a freshman level; they want you to be reading complex texts. And it just jumped by two or three grades for you guys.

Why am I telling you this? Here's how it's gonna directly affect your life. You know how you guys are taking the [statewide test]?

Students: Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: Well I just looked at [the PARCC assessment] yesterday–

Student: Is it harder?

Ms. Kisler: Way harder.

Student: No!

Ms. Kisler: I don't mean to scare you, but I looked at it– I felt a little panicky, because it's going to be harder. You guys may get the first hard one next year. So in one sense, Nick, it's annoying, but it's good, because we want to give you guys a good education. So ever since I looked at that first test, in September, that new [state] test, I've been teaching differently all year. When we give the [state] test, it's going to be a little stricter. The content of the text is going to be a little harder and a little challenging, which ultimately is a good thing, because we want to compete globally.

Passing on her recent experiences of educator trainings on new, tighter administration standards for the statewide test and of sample test items from the PARCC, Ms. Kisler uses the looming PARCC test as a motivator to shift student expectations both for academic challenge and for individual responsibility for learning. Some students consistently show the pattern of asking questions instead of reading directions or thinking through the assignment to figure things out for themselves, and Ms. Kisler is concerned about reinforcing their learned helplessness. The students' questioning irritates her. She also uses the CCSS as an authority to counter some student beliefs that her expectations are too stringent; she has received several parent emails that complain she is holding students to too high of a standard. One of the parents who has emailed her is so abrasive that the administration has forbidden the parent from contacting Ms. Kisler directly any more– she has to contact the administration directly instead.

These dynamics reveal the impact of a classroom culture on both teacher and students. Although students do not fall into two clearly disparate groups, students who follow Ms. Kisler's expectations for work completion and classroom behaviors clearly disapproved of those who do not, students who do not follow expectations (and some of their parents) seem unapologetically committed to their approach to school. Perhaps Ms. Kisler tries to shift the class culture by connecting her choices to authorities beyond herself which would impact students' graduations and future financial situations: the CCSS, the PARCC test, and the job market.

However, the anticipation of the PARCC does not only frighten students; it also threatens Ms. Kisler as a teacher. While the PARCC, CCSS, and the new teacher evaluation tool are technically separate, these three new mandates are rolled out simultaneously as part of the Race to the Top federal education grants and are tied together. The test will evaluate students' achievements on the standards, and the students' growth in achievement levels will be used to evaluate teachers. According to editors at Rethinking Schools, who used ten years of data on No Child Left Behind nationwide testing, the more rigorous PARCC test is poised to be an "engine for potential disaster" that "instead of targeting the inequalities of race, class, and educational opportunity reflected in the test scores, ... threatens to reproduce the narrative of public school failure that has led to a decade of bad policy in the name of reform" (Rethinking Schools, 2013, p. 2). Charlotte Danielson, the creator of the "Framework for Teaching" that is used in multiple states who is a strong advocate for the CCSS, also views the PARCC test as a dangerous move. In an interview with *Education Week* she stated that the assessments were so challenging that she worried that "in some schools we'll have 80 percent or some

large number of students failing" and called the assessments "a train wreck" (Rebora, 2013, p. 4). Thus Ms. Kisler's statements that the PARCC would be "way harder" and it makes her "a little panicky" are not merely exaggerations used to correct students' understanding of academic expectations, but in fact accurate representations of her newly heightened perceptions of the upcoming testing that will reflect back on her by way of a teacher evaluation.

### **Preparation for the Job Market**

In response to Tobin's question, "Why does it matter" for students to be able to compete globally, Ms. Kisler draws a connection between learning problem-solving skills, performing well on the test, and students' future ability to get a job. This part of the conversation is clearly shaped by the experiences, backgrounds and beliefs of the students in the lower-level class as they contrast with the profiles of students in the honors class. The honors students carry the unshakable belief in the uplifting capabilities of a social ladder that begins with high school performance, leads to success in the college selection process, and ends with eligibility for "good jobs." Rather than the teacher pointing these connections out to them, the upper-level students frequently make comments to that effect. An upper-level student would not ask "Why does it matter?" For this reason, when Ms. Kisler talks about motivation to achieve literacy goals, she implicitly reinforces these values by dropping the name of her prestigious college into the conversation. However, in this lower-level class, Ms. Kisler leads students to make the connection. She talks with them as if they do not yet believe that college and career

readiness are valuable, showing them that their actions fall short of leading them in that desirable direction.

Tobin: Why does it matter?

Ms. Kisler: Great question. Why does it matter? Why care? Why might we want to care?

Steve: Competing for jobs.

Nathan: They want the smarter people, so if other people are smarter than us, then they'll pick them.

Ms. Kisler: Correct, if one of them is a little bit better– you're gonna want to hire somebody who has a better education, and someone who is able to figure out stuff. So that's our goal– to figure out stuff, to be a problem solver.

When Ms. Kisler says, "Great question," she performs the typical teacher move of putting the question back on the students so they will deliver the expected answer. She uses the IRE format, initiating by asking "Why might we want to care," and evaluating Steve and Nathan's answers with "correct." She holds a high level of teacher authority through using this genre of talk. The answer is over-simplified, since some high school

dropouts become successful in running their own businesses while other college graduates are unemployed. As she says to students earlier in the conversation, Ms. Kisler is "annoyed" with behaviors, which reflect a culture of not taking responsibility for their own learning, instead placing the responsibility on the teacher to tug them along. Since they do not seem to be motivated by the external reward of grades (as honors students are) she attempts to bring up weightier external consequences. When she is irritated with the honors students, she reprimands them by tapping into their value on grades, pointing out the connections between graded and ungraded work; when she is irritated with the lower-level students, she works to galvanize their understanding of the importance of grades. However, she is probably responding to her impressions of the group's values by interpreting and generalizing from the choices of only some of the people in the group.

### **Problem Solving**

Ms. Kisler moves from the external motivating factor of getting a job to the inherent values in thinking, problem solving, independence, and enriching one's life. However, she does not linger on the topic of personal well-being and almost treats this comment as a brief tangent. She returns quickly to the topic of test performance and the importance of following directions. The difference in degree of emphasis on personal satisfaction and external rewards between the lower-level class and the honors class is significant.



Ms. Kisler: There is a difference between memorizing and thinking about things. You don't want to just grow up and do what everybody wants you to do. You want to think about things, think of new inventions, and new ways of thinking to enrich your life and have a better life. But I want to get back to the testing for a minute.

Bottom line is, you're gonna have a harder test this year. When I proctor your test, when you come in to take your [state test], I'm only allowed to read the instructions to you one time, and then you take the test. You're not allowed to have water, you're not allowed to have food, you're not allowed to have anything on you. It's a very strict environment. So when I do tests with you in practice, I'm trying to get you ready for that.

So how I'm preparing you is I'm going to give you more passages and try to help get you ready for that. Instead of just asking a generic question, I'm trying to enhance your critical thinking. It'll be better, teaching will be better, and it'll help you out in the long run. But it is hard and you should be prepared for it.

Everything we do is supposed to be getting you ready for that. If I don't prepare you for that, you're used to asking 800 questions when I pass something out to you instead of just doing it on your own, then I'm not doing you any favors. I'm not thinking you're going to fail it, but I should be thinking about preparing you better for it, and trying to be a little tighter and a little stricter.

By stating that she is "trying to get you ready for that," Ms. Kisler speaks as if she too were under the control of state-wide expectations. Rather than emphasizing that the state standards support her philosophy of teaching, Ms. Kisler states that her approach to teaching is to prepare students for taking high-stakes tests related to these standards. In the episode of talk above, Ms. Kisler uses the name of the test, the word or root "test" or a pronoun with the word "test" as its antecedent 13 times, while she only uses the word or root "think" or a pronoun with the word "think" as its antecedent to describe a student goal five times.

As indicated in other conversations with Ms. Kisler, she clearly holds strong beliefs about student learning that she is determined to pursue regardless of the rigor of state standards. By explaining herself otherwise, she reveals a level of defeat with combating perceived student attitudes about learning based on her own authority alone. While she states the virtues of thinking, independence, and creative problem-solving, she does not seem to think that these virtues will persuade students to change their behaviors as much as external rewards and threats will.

Overall, Ms. Kisler's register when delivering meta-talk is significantly different when speaking with the honors students and the lower-level students. She speaks to honors students as a humble yet wizened mentor, using social language that refers to her personal life outside of school (her age, husband, lunch friends, and friends she sees on the weekends). She uses a more authoritative tone that emphasizes real-world consequences for not learning, rather than the rewards of thinking about one's life and society in new ways; there are no references to her personal life in this discussion, although she does give personal examples in the warm-up discussions used as prereading.

### **Dialogic Discourse for Teaching and Learning**

Although Ms. Kisler uses different motivational meta-discourse for the upper-level and lower-level classes, she consistently works to facilitate critical thinking practices through dialogic discussion in both classes. She uses warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking genres of talk within a class period's discussion with the honors group; with the lower-level group she uses prereading talk similar to warm-up talk that stimulates student knowledge and experiences of topics presented in the text, and she moves towards deeper-level thinking in varied ways. Rather than explicitly marking a deeper-level thinking genre of discussion with this class, she uses a dialogic stance to respond to students' discussion contributions and invite them into deeper-level thinking practices at opportune moments. Thus her use of the deeper-level thinking genre is more unstable and less explicit in the lower-level 9th grade class.

For the short story "The Scarlet Ibis" (1998) deeper-level thinking is expected of students in the context of a whole-group discussion, but for the longer, more complex text To Kill a Mockingbird she uses structured small-group discussions, writing and student presentations to scaffold deeper-level thinking discourse. In the structured small-group discussions for To Kill a Mockingbird, students choose a motif in the text and find passages in the text, then form claims about their motif drawing on their passages. For Romeo and Juliet she uses warm-up questions and structured small-group discussions focused more on understanding Shakespeare's language and less on creating responses or claims about the text.

### **Prereading, not Warm-Up**

Ms. Kisler's initial unit questions parallel warm-up prompts used with the honors class to an extent, but they are substantively different. While warm-up questions with the honors class such as "How is your reading going?" are check-ins that do not require much insight on the students' parts, her prereading questions for the lower-level class elicit prior knowledge about topics in the text in order to prime students to engage in the text and prepare for discussion and analytical writing. While the questions do not rely on text comprehension or familiarity, they require thoughtfulness and reflection. Prereading talk involves responding to teacher-generated topics with experiential examples and personal opinions. The teacher selects topics that she anticipates will help students to connect with and understand the literary text they are about to read. While warm-up talk sometimes touches on elements of the literary text itself, prereading talk does not refer to the text at all. Students prepare for prereading talk with informal writing, and they elaborate on their ideas and occasionally respond to one another's ideas. Answers are more thoughtful and less rapid than warm-up talk responses. In this way, the lower-level group's warm-up discussions are more demanding and often more multi-faceted and in-depth than the honors group's warm-ups.

For example, in preparation for reading "The Scarlet Ibis," Ms. Kisler creates a list of topics on the side board that remains there for reference throughout the unit. The list consists of questions, and class definitions are constructed and recorded on the board as prereading questions are addressed. The board reads: "What is a miracle? An event that appears unexplainable to the laws of nature and so is held to be supernatural or because of God. What is faith and hope? What does mind over matter mean?" and the

question addressed in this episode, "How much does your environment affect your personality?" Students have begun discussing this topic the day before in class, and they have been asked to extend yesterday's discussion by writing two pages for homework.

Ms. Kisler opens with asking students to circle a sentence from their homework to share with the class. Ms. Kisler nominates students and follows each student comment with either an affirmation and a nomination of another student or a follow-up question or comment, sometimes through reformulating or repeating back/ revoicing (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996) the student's words. In the transcript below, I omit the affirmative comments and keep some of the revoicing to show how this teacher facilitation move leads to student elaboration.

Amelia: I thought about how the environment could determine the personality. I gave the example that if someone lived in a strict environment with tight rules and little room for fun, that person would rebel against that, and have a complete personality that's opposite to that.

Michele: I said your values shape what you do and how you act around friends.

Orchid: Some people are stronger than others because some people fall into a bad environment or childhood while other people choose to go against what they are used to seeing in their environment.

Ms. Kisler: So some people are stronger than others and some people choose to go down a bad path.

Orchid: It's not even stronger. People have choices. You can allow your environment to shape who you are or you can choose to go a different way. It's not your environment– it is your choice.

Ms. Kisler: Is the strength where you are able to rise above?

Orchid: Yeah, it's not a good environment or a bad environment; it's who you are.

Amy: I noticed about most people, if they start hanging out with somebody way too much they eventually start talking like them and acting like them.

Ms. Kisler: That's a great observation. Jill's all over that.

Jill: That's really true.

Ms. Kisler: It is true, it's totally true. Okay, what did you write?

Jill: Some people do have the power to change their environment and if not, at least their behavior.

Ms. Kisler: Some people do have the power to change their environment-

Jill: -Like you can, but if you can't, you can at least try to change your behavior.

Ms. Kisler: To match your environment? Or to rise above your environment?

Jill: To rise above.

Tobin: If someone lives in a rich environment, they act different than someone who lives in a not-wealthy environment; like if a rich kid gets something, he doesn't think it's that important, but if someone who doesn't have a lot of money gets that, it will mean a lot more.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, so for example it might not be a big deal for me to get a new phone if my parents get me a new phone every couple of months. But if I never had a phone, or there was an issue of affording a phone, then when I got that phone, I might treat it differently or think differently about it. So you're saying environment in that case is like money.

Karen: For example, if a child is raised in an unstable house, and the parents are never there, then when they grew up they'd always have the fear of abandonment.

Stacy: I said some people act differently around a group of friends than around a group of strangers.

For the most part, there is no talk directly between students, except when Ms. Kisler elicits it by picking up on body language, as when Jill looks supportive of Amy's comment and Ms. Kisler states, "Jill's all over that." This prereading discourse, because it entails reading from writing, is an overlap between reporting and dialogue. However, students elaborate on their thoughts and, at one point, respond to one another.

To wrap up this episode of talk and transition to a new topic, Ms. Kisler highlights the connections between student topics, comprehension of the text, and a future writing assignment. She lists the topics on the side board to remind students how the prereading discussion students have just held fits into their larger process of prereading, reading, and writing about the story.

Ms. Kisler: All right, so here's the bottom line. You're going to think about these issues. ... and why I'm bringing this up, the author of "The Scarlet Ibis" is talking a little bit about miracles, he's talking a little bit about faith



and hope and mind over matter, he's showing us a little bit about your environment, and he's showing us about pride and what it means to be normal. So those are the topics, this is your initial thinking about the topic that you're doing, and maybe it'll expand and change as you go. Keep this in the back of your mind. You may be writing an essay on this as it relates to the story; that's why we're doing this. So I want you to think about these ideas.

By scaffolding prereading activities with the use of defined topics and informal writing, Ms. Kisler evokes a variety of insightful responses from her students. In contrast with the honors group's warm-up talk, this prereading talk reveals opinions that students are invested in explaining and elaborating to the class. In contrast to the question, "Who would you rather have lunch with, Elizabeth or Jane?" in which many students echo thoughts of others in the honors class, students in this discussion each voice a different idea. This difference could be because students take the step of writing about their idea before talking, or it could be due to the openness of the question posed to the lower-level group. In the lower-level group, these prereading responses are built upon in later conversations when the class returns to the motifs that Ms. Kisler has selected for them as a basis from which to understand and interpret the story.

Ms. Kisler uses similar warm-up questions towards the beginning of the Romeo and Juliet unit. First she tells the entire story of the play to the students in her own words, and then she breaks them into groups to translate one of the first

scenes in the play when Lady Capulet, interrupted by the Nurse, attempts to ask Juliet if she would be ready to marry. After these two activities, she projects the following questions on the white board:

(a) If your parents had to choose a mate for you, do you think you'd be happy with their selection? Why or why not?

(b) Does your family have any influence over who you hang out with? In what way do they? In what way do they not?

(c) Is it more realistic or more unrealistic to think that families might have feuds like the ones I described in Romeo and Juliet?

Students respond to these questions in a whole-group discussion sharing initial reactions to the questions with a willingness to revisit their initial ideas and change their minds. For example, they initially think that feuds would not happen currently because "families don't kill each other" and "there are no swords," but then they begin talking about families disliking one another and students begin sharing examples of feud-like situations in families, saying "people do argue a lot," and pointing out that "my parents don't like the neighbors and I'm not allowed to talk to them." These connections help students consider dynamics in their own lives being represented in the text.

## **Interplay Between Structure and Dialogism**

Ms. Kisler gives this lower-level class a great degree of structure, but she also departs from the structure to support their critical and collaborative thinking practices. In the first example, the structure hinders students from creating ideas that logically make sense with the text as a whole; by suggesting that students work with the list of prereading motifs, she limits their range of responses and they are left guessing more than making meaning of the text. In the second example, the structure opens up into dialogism as student presentations lead into whole class dialogic talk and the class contributes to collaborative meaning-making. Structure may be used to support dialogic and collaborative thinking, but it can also serve as an obstacle. To use structure well, teachers need to use reflection-in-action to decide if the structure is serving their purposes and adjust their teaching responsively.

After students read "The Scarlet Ibis," Ms. Kisler gives them an in-class quiz that requires they write about details from the story to prove they have read and then make some inferences from those details. After the students write their paragraphs in response to the quiz question, Ms. Kisler opens the whole class discussion with the questions they have been given. However, when the students bring up their own topic, she follows their lead and explored that topic with them. The quiz question is: "Doodle says, 'Brother, Brother, don't leave me, don't leave me'. First explain what is happening when this is said, then explain why Brother is leaving him and how it is important to the story."

### Teacher's Openness to Dialogism

Ms. Kisler reads the question aloud to the class and then invites them to share their thoughts. At one point, Fred moves the direction of the conversation into a new direction, comparing the character Doodle to a scarlet ibis, which has drifted off course from its usual flight path into the family's yard, lit in a tree, and then died. Ms. Kisler follows the class' lead and devotes the rest of the class period to this line of thought. They find multiple possible connections, but do not take those connections further to infer meanings about the story.

Fred: It said when he died he looked like the bird, like it reminded him of something.

Ms. Kisler: (*reads from the text*) "'Doodle! Doodle!' I cried... he lay very awkwardly, with his head thrown back, making his vermillion neck look long and slim. The tear-blurred vision looked very familiar. I began to hold him ... sheltering my fallen Scarlet Ibis from the heresy of rain."  
What are we saying about the bird?

Fred: He kind of looked like him when he died, like it reminded him-

Ms. Kisler: In what way?

Fred: The bird died awkwardly, with his neck like an S, and he kind of died-

Ms. Kisler: You're right, you're totally right. Fred, will you find that passage for me?

Rob: I have it.

Ms. Kisler: Thank you, Rob.

Ms. Kisler: Go ahead. What's the passage?

Rob: "At the moment, the bird began to flutter, but the wings were uncoordinated, and amid" (does that say amid? What does that mean?) "much flapping and a spray of flying feathers, it tumbled down falling through the limbs of the bleeding tree and landing at our feet with a thud. Its long graceful neck jerked twice into an S and then straightened out and a white veil came over the eyes and the neck unhinged. The legs were crossed and its fallen feet were delicately curved at rest."

Ms. Kisler: What are the similarities between that and this?

Roshanda: A long neck.

Ms. Kisler: The neck. What else?

Roshanda: The legs.

Ms. Kisler: In what way?

Roshanda: They both are fragile and look weird.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, what else?

Nick: Maybe the Brother is kind of like Doodle, 'cause when the ibis died, wasn't Doodle wicker sad and buried it, so maybe the Brother is going to bury Doodle.

Ms. Kisler: That's a nice thing, though— Doodle: loves bird, buries bird.

Brother: buries Doodle?

Tobin: Yeah!

Fred: Wouldn't he tell his parents?

Nick: Why doesn't he bury it with the bird?

Ms. Kisler: Rob, what do you want to say?

Rob: Well, back to what they were saying, before, how the bird's related to Doodle. In this passage it says, "Sadly, we all looked at the bird. The scarlet ibis, how many miles it had traveled to die like this." So it's like what they were saying, how Doodle worked so hard to try to become kind of normal, we were saying, and died kind of like-

### **Teacher's Move Towards Deeper-Level Thinking**

At this point in the discussion, Ms. Kisler praises the students for the connections they have noticed, but she pushes them to go deeper and investigate the implications that these connections have for the overall meaning of the story. She encourages them to write informally to address this question, and she offers the prereading topics as a starting place.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Wow, so you guys are pulling out some really cool stuff. But here's what I'm wondering about: what the heck does that mean? You've made some really nice connections between Doodle and the Scarlet Ibis, but what is that telling us? What can we infer from it, or what conclusions could we draw?

This is really cool; Nick, you were talking about: Doodle buried the bird, now Brother's gonna bury Doodle. Which he kind of is, right? Doodle took care of the bird, and Brother kind of loves [Doodle]. And Rob, you just brought up a really good passage here– the ibis traveled many miles, and Doodle worked hard. These are like parallels, they are similarities. And Roshanda, you are talking about they're both fragile. You're totally right– there's a lot of good connections here. What can we conclude from that? What're we supposed to think about that?

Here's what I want you to do. I want you to take two minutes to jot down a couple sentences about the similarities– think about the answer to that question. You just pointed out all this stuff– what is it showing us?

So here's the question. You showed these similarities; what does it mean? We want to go beyond just saying, "Hey look, Doodle and the ibis are alike." You showed me that. ... What can we learn about– maybe one of these things [the list of prereading topics on the board]? Jot down some ideas and we'll talk about that.

After the students name a number of connections (the awkward position, the neck, the fragility, the struggle), Ms. Kisler asks them to use these connections to explore possible textual meanings that relate back to topics on the board from prereading writing and discussion. She reformulates the connections made by class members, mentioning students by name, both to remind students about the ideas generated and to give credit to discussion participants.



Similar to Ms. Kisler's move from book gossip to deeper-level thinking in the honors class, Ms. Kisler challenges this class to take their ideas to a new level of meaning-making that builds upon the ideas they had generated so far. The students attempt to use her suggestion of tying the similarities in with one of their prereading topics, but neither suggestion that comes out of these attempts succeeds in holding up logically. However, Ms. Kisler refrains from evaluating the responses herself and allows other students to evaluate the responses. She also frames their talk as in-process thinking, saying, "What we're doing is we're trying to throw out ideas," emphasizing the importance of suggesting ideas over the correctness of the ideas. First, Nick tentatively suggests a connection to the idea of pride, but upon follow-up questioning, his idea unravels and he changes his mind about his suggestion.

Ms. Kisler: You just identified some similarities. So the big question on the table is, what do the similarities show us? I said you could use some of those topics as a way to think about it. Did anyone use any of those topics in your thinking? (*Nick raises his hand.*) All right, so Nick, what did you come up with?

Nick: Oh, God (*groans*).

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Go ahead, Nick.

Nick: Um, I said pride.

Ms. Kisler: Okay! How is pride connected to all that stuff?

Nick: I said, maybe the Brother felt proud of Doodle at the end, how he could run and learn how to do all this stuff, even though he wasn't supposed to. He was supposed to just like, die, kind of like the bird, so it's related.

Ms. Kisler: I hear you. That makes total sense. Older Brother: proud of Doodle for learning to walk. Where I'm not seeing the connection is: how's that like the bird?

Nick: 'Cause Doodle felt the same way about the bird.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, in what way? Why was Doodle-

Nick: -I don't know.

Jill: Why was he proud of the bird?

Nick: I don't know; the bird is related to the title.

Ms. Kisler: You're right; the bird is related to the title. I can see that you're trying to figure it out. Does anyone have any answers for Nick? You're making a nice connection because before, you said this: Doodle takes care of the bird, you said that already, and Brother cares for Doodle. So now you're bringing pride into it, so I'm not sure, so is pride connected to all this?

Roshanda: I think it is, but not in that way.

Ms. Kisler: Is Doodle proud of the bird?

Roshanda: No.

Nick: I think Doodle is proud of the Brother.

Ms. Kisler: Is he?

Nick: I don't even know— I don't think Doodle's proud of anything. I don't think he knows what pride is.

Ms. Kisler: You don't think he knows what pride is?

Nick: No.

Ms. Kisler: So pride– Doodle– Doodle isn't proud of the bird now. So you're changing it a little bit. Maybe he's not proud of the bird.

Jill: I feel like what he's trying to get at is: he has a little bit of pride, like he's proud that he buried it and did the right thing to help it, but I don't see how he could be proud of it otherwise.

Ms. Kisler: So maybe it's not the pride; it's something else.

In the episode above, Nick attempts to connect the concept of pride with the parallels between the scarlet ibis and Doodle. First, he makes a suggestion (Brother is proud of Doodle) that works for the relationship between Brother and Doodle but does not work for the relationship between Doodle and the bird. Then he suggests that Doodle is proud of Brother, which is not supported by the text. Nick flounders, making guesses, because he cannot figure out which of the topics on the board will go along with the analogy between Doodle and the bird. While this episode of talk allows Nick to explore his thoughts, and Ms. Kisler helps him to save face by bringing up his earlier good points, he does not end up figuring out a connection between a prereading topic and the similarities between Doodle and the bird.

The class as a whole struggles with the expectation that they find a deeper meaning that relates to one of their topics and connects with the similarities between

Doodle and the bird. Romero suggests the topic of hope, but runs into problems similar to Nick's. While five more students volunteer to either share their ideas or respond to others' ideas, the class does not end up with a meaningful interpretation that is supported by the text. Ms. Kisler allows them to work through their suggestions and discover that they are not supported by the text, and she does not present an alternative or right "answer" at the end of the discussion.

An evaluation of this episode of discussion depends on whether it is evaluated for process or product. In a way, this discussion seems like a failure because it does not end up with an insightful, text-supported, logical idea as the outcome. However, students are collaboratively thinking, they are posing suggestions even if they are not sure they are right, and they are willing to publicly change their answers. In this conversation, students are supported in dialogic discussion practices and they experience an emphasis on process over product.

To figure out why this discussion goes awry at the last step of trying to propose a deeper meaning beyond noting similarities between the bird and Doodle, I ask myself how I would answer the question. I would explore the idea that the bird is perfect for its native environment, but having gotten blown off course it is beautiful but unfit for survival and worthy of deep compassion. I would then ask if these qualities apply to Doodle. I might propose that Brother learns that his own brother is not so much an "invalid" to be fixed through physical training as a perfect, yet out-of-place, person. I might propose that Doodle's touching compassion for the scarlet ibis is an inspiration for Brother, and it is only after Doodle's death that he achieves a feeling of acceptance and compassion for Doodle. However, none of these interpretations relate back to the list of

topics on the board (miracles, pride, hope, mind over matter), so when Ms. Kisler prompts students to look for deeper meaning by "maybe" connecting the ibis-Doodle connection to those topics, the students follow her lead and find themselves unable to make a meaningful deeper-level interpretation. In this episode, the teacher's use of structure actually misdirects students. While the warm-up prereading talk primes students to engage with the story, it gives them the false impression that those topics are the best and most reliable ways in to interpreting the story.

To close the discussion, Ms. Kisler instructs students to "make a list of between five and eight things or ideas that we talked about today. There was a lot of writing and a lot of questions, and we didn't get to everything, but we're going to continue this on." Through asking students to record ideas from the day's discussion, she validates their thinking despite the fact that it has not ultimately been "right." This brief writing assignment emphasizes a timeline for thought that goes beyond one class period and looks towards their final essay on the story. Here, she shows trust that they will eventually figure out meaningful insights without her needing to either tell them or lead them to those insights. This level of trust and this ability to grant thinking independence to students, especially lower-level students, runs counter to English teacher's usual practices of relying on the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate approach (Alexander, 2008; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Marshall et al., 1995; Nystrand, 2006).

Writing also provides an opportunity for students to enter into the dialogue in response to spoken conversation in a quiet, private way. Students may take in and extend the ideas of the discussion without sharing them with others. Amelia's written response to Ms. Kisler's prompt demonstrates this written extension of dialogue. Although Amelia

does not speak in this discussion, she writes in her composition book a number of connections that solve Ms. Kisler's request to create meaning based on, but going beyond, the physical similarities between Doodle and the ibis. She writes:

Once the Scarlet Ibis had given up/lost hope it died just like Doodle.

Brother was ashamed of Doodle for not being 'normal' because he was physically weaker and more delicate.

The bird traveled so far just to die exactly like Doodle had worked/gotten so far to die.

The overall meaning I am getting from this story is to love what you have and to be happy with someone even if they don't fit the definition of normal.

Amelia's first statement follows Ms. Kisler's suggestion to use the ideas on the board, and it is the least feasible of the ideas, since there is no evidence that the bird gives up hope. However, when she departs from the teacher's list of ideas on the board, she comes up with her final idea "to love what you have and to be happy with someone even if they don't fit the definition of normal." While the idea is slightly cliché, it answers the teacher's question "What do the similarities show us?" even though this question is never answered aloud in the discussion.

The process of attempting a thinking problem without successfully solving it relates to the social constructivist idea of levels of appropriation. These levels include the following designations, increasing in depth of understanding: lack of appropriation, appropriating a label, appropriating surface features, appropriating conceptual underpinnings, and achieving mastery (Smagorinsky, 2011). Using this concept as a gauge, students in the above episode demonstrate mastery in the task of finding and describing similarities between the bird and Doodle, but they demonstrate the ability to appropriate the surface features of the task of using those similarities to propose deeper-level interpretations of the text. They select key concepts and attempt to link Doodle with the bird to those concepts. They evaluate whether the links make sense, and they decide that they do not make sense. Appropriating surface features means that "a person learns some or most of the features of a tool yet does not understand how those features contribute to the conceptual whole" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 34). In this episode of talk, students appropriate some of the features of the practice of connecting explicit observations about a text to an implicit meaning of the text, but they do not fully appropriate the conceptual underpinnings or demonstrate mastery with that task. Considering their work in this paradigm suggests that they have begun appropriating a practice that they may complete appropriating at a later time. In fact, when reading the next text, To Kill a Mockingbird, students develop message statements related to motifs and write literary essays that explore implicit meanings.

### **Small Group Reporting Opening into Dialogic Discussion**



Not all dialogic discussions fall short of yielding insightful ideas upheld by the text. When the students read To Kill a Mockingbird, they also work with topics (insiders/outside, stereotypes, innocence, social class, and justice) that are introduced in prereading and followed through the reading of the novel. Students work in small groups focused around a topic, first finding passages related to their topics, then later developing and vetting claims based on those passages. They copy out the passages on big pieces of white paper and write their claims on big pieces of green paper, then tape these rectangles of evidence and interpretation to the closet on the side of the classroom. In the discussion episode that follows, groups report on these claims.

Because this discussion is highly structured, it does not fit some aspects of a dialogic discussion, in that students only infrequently respond to or built off of one another's comments. Instead, they present two outcomes of small group work: the context of a passage and the passage itself; and the connection between the passage and their selected topic. The teacher prompts and responds to student talk, so there is little direct talk between students. The teacher directs students to take notes during the discussion, which may dissuade them from verbally responding to their classmates.

Other significant aspects of this discussion, however, are dialogic. Because students select their own passages, they direct the focus of the discussion. The teacher does not rely on teacher-selected passages or pre-planned questions particular to the group's motif. Because students write and post their interpretations on the wall before the discussion begins, they develop claims with minimal influence from the teacher.

At one point, two students outside of the presenting group offer additional interpretations of the passage in response to a follow-up question from Ms. Kisler. This

part of the discussion illustrates the possibility for moving from a structured reporting format to a more open discussion that invites unplanned collaborative talk.

The discussion structure includes prompts from the teacher to report the context, read the passage previously selected by the small group, and draw a connection between the passage and the topic. The teacher responds to student answers through affirming, reformulating and extending student answers and posing alternative interpretations. Listening students are prompted to take notes. This pattern repeats for each passage, so the questions become more predictable over time. The teacher stands by a side wall on which student contributions are posted. In response to one of the passages, students from outside of the presenting group extend the interpretation of the passage. The teacher invites participation with a follow-up question, and students show engagement in sharing and elaborating their ideas.

Since this episode differs from the rest of the discussion the dialogism is not the norm, but it shows the potential for a transition from a predictable structure to a more open dialogic discussion. In addition to creating enthusiasm, the dialogic shift supports students in revisiting a passage to find multiple meanings. Through explaining and elaborating on their thoughts, students think more deeply about the passage. The episode of talk is broken up into several sections to define student and teacher moves and to illustrate the transition towards dialogism.

### **Student-Selected Passage and Claim**

Students use markers and white paper to copy down passages from the text, and they use green paper to write down claims about those passages. With masking tape, they

affix a cluster of textual references and claims on the side wall. Ms. Kisler then calls on each group to explain their thinking to the rest of the class. She asks the same questions for each group: what is the context of the passage, and what is your interpretation of the passage? Most groups merely report to the class and respond to follow-up questions from the teacher, but this group's presentation evokes vivencia and inspires other students from outside of the group to get energetically involved. This group's presentation moves from a predictable presentation speech genre to a more dialogic, deeper-level thinking speech genre.

Ms. Kisler: What is the context to: (reading from card) "'Don't you believe a word he says, Dill,' Calpurnia said. 'That's n. talk.'?" Is that yours to talk about, Orchid?

Orchid: Yeah. I said that it stereotypes Black people because it means putting colored people in a category of how they talk.

Orchid, a Black student, consistently shows passion and interest in discussing issues of race with the entire class when it comes up as a topic. Her selection of a topic and passage builds on her establishment of identity and an emotional connection to the text. She likely feels compelled beyond the academic requirements of the class to investigate this passage and its implications.

### **Teacher's Follow-Up Question**

The teacher asks an initial leading follow-up question with only one possible answer: "What is ... ironic about the fact that Calpurnia is the one saying it?." But she follows this question with a second, related question open to multiple interpretations: "[Calpurnia] is stereotyping herself too... How do you explain that?" This second question invites students to think collaboratively with each other.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, it is [a stereotype] to say, "Don't talk like that in public."  
Calpurnia says it. What is kind of ironic about the fact that Calpurnia is the one saying it?

Orchid: She's colored.

Ms. Kisler: She is a Black woman, so why is that ironic?

Orchid: Because she's calling her own-

Ms. Kisler: -She's saying, "Don't talk like that, that's not the way we talk... so she is stereotyping herself too. Doesn't that seem weird to you? How do you explain that? Isis, what do you think?

Although Ms. Kisler asks a question with one answer in mind, "What is ... ironic about the fact that Calpurnia is the one saying it?" she does not end the conversation when Orchid answers the question. She reformulates Orchid's answer, signifying that she

agrees with it, but she also rephrases the question multiple times, emphasizing the need for more explanation. Students outside of the presenting group are eager to tackle the question.

### **Broader Student Participation**

At this juncture, students outside of the presenting group get enthusiastically involved. The question brings up race-related stereotypes and judgments, topics that have interested students in previous discussions. Michelle, Isis, and Tobin show engagement by volunteering to participate, persisting in participating even when initially ignored by the teacher, adding affirmations to the teacher's reformulation of an idea, and responding directly to another student. Student racial identities most likely intensify the emotions behind this discussion. Orchid and Isis are Black, Michelle is White and Latina with a Black boyfriend, and Tobin is White and does not socialize with the Black students in the class. Orchid, Isis, and Michelle are friends.

Tobin: She takes herself as a White person.

Ms. Kisler: (*responds to hearing Michelle talking quietly to the side*)

Michelle just said she's probably excluding herself from the group. What do you mean by that?

Michelle: She probably stereotypes the type of Black people. She probably doesn't think she's in that group.

Ms. Kisler: One of "those kind of people?"

Michelle: Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: So she is separating herself. She's like-

Michelle: -Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: -"here's another group. I am not like that, you are not like that."

Tobin: What if she kind of said she counts as White people because she,-

Isis: -Just say it (*with agitation*).

Ms. Kisler: Let him finish. And then you can comment.

Tobin: -She's treated nicely. Most of the other [White] people treated Black people like crap, they didn't show respect-

Ms. Kisler: Say it again. I'm trying to figure out what you mean.

Tobin: She is treated nicely, respected by the Finches, all right?

Ms. Kisler: Yes ... she's like a member of their family. She's still not treated, you know, perfectly.

Tobin: But most of the other [Black] people are treated differently, so maybe she's thinking she is, I don't know, different.

Ms. Kisler: So you're extending what Michelle was saying. She might be putting herself in a different group ... and separating herself a little bit. At the same time, she's reinforcing [the stereotype].

As this discussion progresses, students show an emotional investment and ability in addressing a complex, nuanced question. They respond to the follow-up question and to one another's comments. Student engagement and motivation are enhanced by the personal connection between the topic, the text, and their social identities. Students' racial identities, formed through experiences outside of class in both their school and community (Lewis et al., 2007), affect their lived, emotional experience of a discussion simultaneous to their logical, thinking experience of a discussion in what Vygotsky terms *vivencia*, and it is this overlap through which students create meaning (Arias, 2011). A "dialogic zone," a dialogic context in which learning occurs in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), flourishes when it deliberately invites multiple perspectives and diverse experiences, when genuine interest is shared between teachers and students (Enciso & Ryan, 2011).

In supporting the students' pursuit of figuring out the complications of Calpurnia's racial identity, Ms. Kisler supports their interests by continuing the conversation in response to a passage selected by Orchid, welcomes multiple perspectives even when they evoke conflict, and notes their convergences. These dynamics lead to a lively conversation in which a problem is both identified when Ms. Kisler asks, "[Calpurnia] is stereotyping herself too... How do you explain that?" and tackled in collaboration between multiple students. Therefore, this discussion occurs in the dialogic zone.

In this episode of talk, the context of the social makeup of Wissahickon High School is important. The school is primarily White, and most of the Black students and other students of color come to the school as "school choice" students, meaning that they live in a neighboring community rather than inside of the district. They have not grown up with a group of students who have mostly known each other for their entire lives, and they travel from a racially diverse home community to a fairly homogenous community for school each day. For both of these reasons, students of color (as well as White school choice students) may experience being regarded as outsiders by staff and other students at the school. Nine of the 25 (36 percent) students in the lower-level class either presently or previously live(d) in the nearby racially diverse urban center of Trexton, a city about which local students consistently express fear and stereotypes of crime and danger. While these comments are not made in Ms. Kisler's class, they are regularly made in the school community as a whole. An extension of Vygotsky's observation that minds and texts are social suggests that "literacy educators should develop a keen understanding of the cultural resources that inform students' thinking and forms of expression" (Enciso & Ryan, 2011, p. 136). Black students bring to their understanding of Calpurnia a fund of



knowledge (Rodriguez, 2013) about multifaceted racial identities based on their experiences travelling between contexts; drawing on this fund of knowledge brings together the text of their experience and the text of To Kill a Mockingbird, yielding insight. As a side note, the honors class only has one student who has lived in Trexton.

This context gives some explanation for Isis' bristling as Tobin attempts to put his ideas about Calpurnia into words. When Tobin says, "she said she counts as White people," and Isis agitatedly breaks in with "just say it," the tension likely connected with Isis' experiences in the school community. Just as Calpurnia travels from the Black community into the White community for work each day and experiences the tensions in her identity for this reason as shown in the scene when she brings the Finch children along to her all-Black church, so Isis and her friends experience the negotiations in identity required by travelling to a mostly White, rural-suburban school each day.

The vivencia palpably present in this discussion about race enhances the quality of the discussion because students are able to contribute to collaboratively build an explanation for Calpurnia's comments about racial groups, and this collaboration includes students from multiple social groups within the school. This episode is an example of talk that might make a teacher nervous (What if someone says something racist? What if anger erupts?) and some teachers might steer away from the topic to avoid possible tension. But in this case, Ms. Kisler steers through the topic, encouraging students to explore nuance while bringing together emotion and intellect. She regards students' cultural identities and differences as resources rather than as deficits (Pacheco, 2012).

## Discussion

This case in the cross-case study suggests that, while lower-level English students have obstacles (such as unfamiliarity with meanings of words and literary constructs) to thinking critically about texts, they can be engaged and challenged to do so within dialogic discussions. The genre of prereading can stimulate students' interest and prime them for reading a text; instances of the deeper-level thinking within dialogical and structured discussions can support students in engaging in critical thinking practices.

In reading and responding to this chapter, the section that impacts Ms. Kisler the most is the transcript of her meta-talk about learning. This speech is delivered without planning, and it reveals her use of threats of testing and detriment to career readiness if students do not become more independent. She expresses the goal of treating both upper- and lower-level classes similarly when discussing the reasons to learn, and she says that she is using this research as an impetus to be more attentive to the meta-talk she shares with her students at any level. She does not want to reproduce social class stereotypes in the way she treats her classes, and she recognizes that the meta-talk transcribed in this chapter does so.

At the same time, she points out that the difference between ninth and 12th grade students is an additional reason that her meta-talk differs between the two classes. Ninth graders need more teacher direction in acclimating to the academic and cultural expectations of high school, and 12th graders are looking towards expectations beyond high school that they will encounter the following year, imagining themselves as college students or beginning careers. Therefore, she was more inclined to refer to her own

college experience with the older group and more inclined to reference expectations with the younger group.

This study also illuminates the fine line between openness and structure, in which too much structure may create an obstacle for students to create meaning by shutting off possible ideas. In the episode of talk in which Ms. Kisler encourages students to use established topics to answer an open-ended question, it turns out that alternate topics actually work better with that question and this directive misleads students.

However, giving students multiple thinking problems to solve while trying to determine their zones of proximal development means that a teacher needs to discover those problems that students cannot yet reach and begin to build critical thinking practices so they can reach them in the future. An awareness of students' degrees of appropriation, understanding that they do not apprehend new strategies on the first try, but gradually go from superficial understanding to achieving mastery (Smagorinsky, 2011), is a reminder to consider the process of learning as prolonged and evolving, with some thinking practices taking longer to appropriate than others.

A more successful blend of structure and openness is presented in the episode of talk about To Kill a Mockingbird, prefaced by an activity in which student groups choose passages and develop initial claims linking their passage to a significant idea in the text. This activity requires students to collaboratively create meaning from the text, an important component of both critical thinking practices and dialogism. The pre-discussion activity is defined as a "dialogic tool" in that it serves as a "mechanism a teacher uses ... that helps scaffold students into talking to learn" (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heinz, 2013, p. 35). Such tools have been found to increase the

likelihood of dialogic talk and to correlate with additional teacher moves of uptake and authentic (open-ended) questions (Juzwik et al., 2013).

The teacher's facilitation creates opportunities for students to build on one another's ideas and to think through explanations and elaborations of their own ideas. Specifically, the teacher's use of reformulating student ideas for clarity to the whole class, combined with follow-up questions with multiple possible answers, supports students in thinking through dialogic discussion. Topics such as race and stereotypes, which are relevant to students in their daily lives, building on previous "real life" discussions about these topics, increase student engagement and evoke *vivencia*.

This study emphasizes the importance of dialogic discussions as one way for students to collaboratively develop meaning about literary texts. The research shows that students who struggle with reading comprehension can, with scaffolding and teacher support, develop claims and respond to unpredictable follow-up questions to think more deeply about implications of a passage. The concept of scaffolding itself also comes into question as a teaching practice that may over-structure student learning and limit their pathways to solve thinking problems. The study considers teacher facilitation practices in the pursuit of creating opportunities for them to engage with literature and use dialogism to think critically: presenting students with open writing prompts to prepare them for a discussion, reformulating student talk, and posing questions with multiple possible answers. Speaking, listening and writing are literacy practices which are important aspects of learning to read and think critically about written texts.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Introduction

The cross-case study, in juxtaposing an honors and lower-level class, provides a richness of contrasts in classroom culture, teacher's approach to dialogic teaching, and students' struggles, strengths and learning. Because the honors 12th grade group follows expectations for classroom participation set out by the teacher, consistently appears to do their homework, and produces high-level work; because of the friendly and positive atmosphere in that class compared with the lower-level ninth grade group, it may be tempting to view the teacher's dialogic approach in that class as more successful. However, it is more helpful to examine successes, tensions and dilemmas in each as a way in to look at the other. In general, Ms. Kisler provides more open-ended questions and topics to the honors group and more structured teaching to the lower-level group. Neither approach is uniformly better, or even better for a particular audience. Dialogic teaching benefits from the flexibility to move from structure to openness and back in response to student needs and the nature of the learning goals for each lesson.

Dialogic talk has been shown to help students improve reading comprehension (Langer, 1993; Nystrand, 2006; Rogers, 1987)) and critical thinking practices (Soter et al., 2008). This study both reinforces and complements these research findings. The teacher's structure of using genres of talk to create a multi-step process towards deeper-level thinking can be a useful dialogic tool. Students who are asked to go directly into deeper-level thinking may disengage, feeling overwhelmed. Warm-up, book gossip, and

deeper-level thinking genres serve to acclimate the students to talk, lower their inhibitions, and then challenge them with rigorous thinking problems. This approach works with both upper-level and lower-level classes, although it may look different in each context.

This cross-case study also provides nuance and qualifiers to theories of critical thinking, dialogism and sociocultural theory due to the focus on micro-interactions and ethnographic context. Sociocultural theory asserts that people learn through interactions with peers, especially more experienced peers (Vygotsky, 1978). This study gives specific examples of students learning through peers especially when supported by the teacher's use of dialogic practices and certain structures. It also gives a clear example of scaffolding gone awry– at times too much guidance can inhibit students' sense of autonomy and hence well-founded development of meaning. Examples of peer interactions that spiral into off-topic conversations show that peers can draw one another away from academic engagement rather than consistently supporting one another's thinking.

### **Implications for Teaching**

This study suggests that dialogic teaching is a useful approach to help students learn critical and collaborative thinking practices. Genres of discussion can signify teacher's intentions for the types of thinking and language use that will help students learn. While dialogism is viewed as openness, it can also work in conjunction with structure; in fact, structure may provide openings into dialogism. However, at times

structure that is too restrictive may prevent students from exploring their own thoughts and in those situations must be reduced to provide for a more dialogic classroom. In this study, Ms. Kisler herself, in collaboration with me as the researcher, embodies aspects of thinking defined by Dewey: observation and reflection. Observation, "exploration, inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown," (Dewey, 1910, p. 193) creates space for her to notice aspects of her teaching that she wants to revise to better meet the students' needs and align with her values about teaching. Through reflection and flexibility, she treats her teaching practices as a work in progress, showing an interest in revising her meta-talk and considering her balance between structure and openness.

### **Revisiting Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural theory is based on the idea that learning is a social and interactive event; naturally, this theory supports dialogic discussion. Yet the relationships between social learning situations and individual appropriation of thinking practices are more complex. This study both supports and qualifies the application of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56). Ideally, teachers should target thinking problems for this area, because it is through imitation and guided practice that students learn what they have not already mastered. In the discussions in this study, students from both the honors and the lower-level classes tackle problems they could not solve independently:

the honors class delineated the difference between Mr. Brocklehurst and Helen Burns' religious philosophies; the lower-level class explored Calpurnia's nuanced views on race.

The theory of the zone of proximal development also adds perspective to seemingly failed teaching attempts, episodes in which the teacher presents a problem that students do not figure out in the length of the class period or the semester. For example, when Ms. Kisler asks students to extend their thinking about the connections between Doodle and the scarlet ibis and they end up rejecting all of their own suggestions, this "failure" can be recast as an introduction of a thinking problem type that students will at some point in the future apprehend. Rather than learning or not-learning within the binary options of achievement or failure, students are more likely somewhere along the range of appropriation of new ideas and practices. The zone of proximal development emphasizes the spectrum of growth as well. "The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 56).

But how is a teacher (or a researcher, a student, or a parent) to know if an attempt to solve a problem without success is the bud of a future flower, or if it is so far beyond the student's reach (outside of the zone of proximal development) that the learner is not yet ready to begin appropriating it? Amelia's written response to this discussion, "The bird traveled so far just to die exactly like Doodle had worked/gotten so far to die. The overall meaning I am getting from this story is to love what you have and to be happy with someone even if they don't fit the definition of normal," reveals that some students in a group may be operating within their zones of proximal development while other students may be outside of it.



Although this study focuses on oral language interactions, spoken and written language work together in students' thinking: low-stakes thought-writes contribute to discussion; discussion contributes to writing; this writing contributes to formal writing, such as essays. All of these practices contribute to a student's ability to read and understand written texts. A student's realization or idea may find expression in writing rather than in speech, or it may remain unspoken within the student's mind in the form of quiet participation in a discussion. Ms. Kisler does not collect and read that written response, so she never gathers the information that some students do develop their thoughts in response to the problem. For Amelia, the discussion "awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people in [her] environment and in cooperation with [her] peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). She benefits just as the theory describes. Yet at the same time, other students rely on the strategy of guessing answers to see if they might hit on a correct one, and they do not succeed. Only one student from the class addresses the similarities between the bird and Doodle in their final essay of this unit, and this student does not go beyond stating the similarities to write about their implications.

### **Interactions Between Individual and Group**

Students not only contribute to the classroom cultures of their respective groups; their contributions are also shaped by the classroom cultures. Thus, individuals participate and learn based on the group of students in their class. As a researcher who also teaches English at Wissahickon High School, I have personal experience with this

phenomenon. In the year following the observations, two of the students (one girl, one boy) in the lower-level class choose to move up to an upper-level class for 10th grade and happen to be placed in a class that I teach. I informally observe the differences in their actions and academic performance between the two classes; even taking into account their growth and maturity, it is clear that the change in classroom culture influences each student's participation.

The tenth-grade girl self-selects to sit in the middle towards the front of the class, and she is much more vocal and participatory in the upper-level class. While she is respectful towards peers and adults in both settings, her increased participation reveals that she feels more comfortable acting as an academic leader in the class where outward expression of academic success is the social norm. Unlike the lower-level class, the upper-level class contains fewer peer messages of disengagement from academics, such as direct comments and behaviors of detachment from academic tasks. There are also fewer distractions and temptations to socialize from her peers. Considering the social nature of learning and reflecting back on her lack of outspokenness in the ninth grade class, both the experienced and less-experienced peer miss learning opportunities due to a classroom culture in which disengagement is the social norm. What if she had spoken up more in whole class discussions about literature in ninth grade? Receptive peers would have learned from her thinking process, and she herself would have learned from voicing her ideas and receiving additional feedback from class members.

The tenth-grade boy chooses to sit in the back beside a few friends. Although he often holds side conversations with these friends during whole class activities and discussions, most of the time these conversations either extend the literary discussion or

address a question about the academic task. At times the conversations are playful banter. This student is caught plagiarizing on an essay early in the semester, which leads to a zero that causes his grade to plummet. He is thus more motivated to earn good grades to counteract that one, and he shows dedication, literary insight, and finesse with writing in these later assignments. For this reason, it is hard to claim that his improvements are merely a result of classroom context. His in-class interactions, however, do undergo a shift that supports his learning and that of his peers. He is respectful and generally on-task in the ninth grade class, but his side conversations that I hear are social without commenting on the literature or figuring out the assignments.

I share these two profiles to explore the symbiotic relationship between individual and group. The relationship is much more complicated than described above. However, the stereotype that this difference generally separates lower-level from upper-level classes leads many parents at Wissahickon High School to encourage their students who need more teacher support to enroll in upper-level classes, despite the school's Program of Studies, which lists defining features of upper-level and lower-level students emphasizing that the only difference is independence versus teacher support for each expectation. The generalization is incorrect: many lower-level classes do not contain the degree of distractions and detachment from academic expectations that Ms. Kisler's ninth grade class does. When parents of quiet students who usually follow teacher directions select these upper-level classes for their students despite their need for extra teacher support, their beliefs become self-fulfilling. An equitable system-wide solution would be to cap all classes at smaller numbers, thereby decreasing distractions and giving the teacher time to provide more individual attention to each student.

Just as dialogic talk complements less dialogic talk, suited to the learning goal and task at hand, the benefits of social learning do not preclude the helpfulness of independent exploration. There are not only two types of talk, dialogic and non-dialogic, just as there are not only two types of thinking. Even though alone, quiet, methodical thinking feeds quicker, interactive, spontaneous thinking, the reverse is true as well. When a person is alone, thinking through ideas and even coming up with "new ideas," these too are influenced by others' thoughts through reading or internalized social interactions.

### **Dialogism and Relationships Between Structure and Openness**

Purposeful fluidity between structure and openness can support dialogic teaching and learning. In the lower-level group, the structured assignments for small groups lead up to formal talk, which in turn leads to open discussion. The honors group similarly researches literary theories in small groups, uses these theories to interpret Jane Eyre, and presents back to the whole class, which leads to open-ended discussions in some of the presentations.

Ms. Kisler uses less openness in the lower-level group, which leads to the question: how would more openness affect this group? In the genres of talk, Ms. Kisler uses playful, low-risk questions for warm-ups with the honors group but not with the lower-level group. This practice serves to warm up the class for the more demanding genres of talk, which are higher-risk and more closely evaluated by the teacher. The warm-up sessions give the honors students a chance to share bits of their lived experiences and to build classroom social identities that add personal detail to their

academic performances, including details such as their favorite Thanksgiving dishes. The omission of this genre with the lower-level class reinforces a greater divide between the personal and academic lives of the students— and some of these are the students who already feel personally separated from academics, indicated by a desire to hold off-topic conversations and leave the room to visit with friends in the cafeteria during class.

Although Ms. Kisler does not use the warm-up genre, at times students are invited to share personal stories. As a lead-up to reading "The Scarlet Ibis" (Hurst, 1998), students share examples of tricks their sibling played on them, and Fred shares that he and Nick have gone fishing over the weekend. Students engage more avidly in discussions when their personal insights based on experience and knowledge are drawn upon, as shown with writing and discussion about social dynamics in school and the discussion about racial groupings in To Kill a Mockingbird.

I avoid using the term "scaffolding" to present Ms. Kisler's use of structure with her teaching practice because this term connotes the more experienced teacher or peer guiding the less-able students towards understanding. While this metaphor seems to work in coordination with the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) it neglects the aspects of the teacher's listening to and collaborating with the student. Dyson suggests the alternate metaphor of weaving to represent the goal of the teacher's interaction with students that includes both receptivity and introduction of new ideas (Dyson, 1990). The weaving metaphor acknowledges the social elements of teaching and learning, the interactions within relationship. Weaving supports working with the zone of proximal development because the teacher must use formative assessment to determine the

learning needs of the student and to experiment with individualized approaches that are understood and accepted by the student.

The other way to think about openness and structure relates to interpretations of a text. Bakhtin emphasizes that there is no one "truth" about a text, but there can be layers of interconnected and even paradoxical truths. Meaning is not discovered but created (1981). In observing the lower-level class exhibit a greater level of difficulty with comprehension, this idea of multiple truths seems unhelpful in some ways. The character Doodle in "The Scarlet Ibis" (Hurst, 1998) dies at the end as a result of over-exertion and a weak heart. When Fred thinks he dies by getting hit over the head with a tree, Ms. Kisler makes sure that the class revisits this part of the text and clarifies what has happened. However, this example does not show that texts have only one truth; rather, it shows that some questions or ideas are open to multiple interpretations and some are not. Even within open questions, multiple possible interpretations are significantly different from all possible interpretations. When readers— students or teachers— pose questions they truly wonder about and attempt to answer them, evaluating possible answers, they explore these possibilities. Again, a fluid approach to the range of structure and openness allows a teacher to respond to each question or comment with the corresponding degree of openness.

### **Revisiting Theories of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is the process of working in depth with questions and ideas rather than apprehending information for the purpose of later reciting it. Combining the goals of critical thinking with the idea of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky,

1978) means that teachers need to construct thinking problems that challenge students to think deeply with teacher and peer support in ways that they cannot do on their own. This task is a balancing act; just as a skier who gives it her all will sometimes fall from overreaching, so too will a teacher who attempts to teach in the zone of proximal development sometimes present tasks that are too hard in the effort to meet the students' needs; likewise, she may give students too much support when they need more of a challenge. The next step is the important one: how does the teacher assess whether the degree of scaffolding was appropriate for students and adjust as necessary?

Ms. Kisler gives students opportunities to practice critical thinking moves in both activities surrounding discussions and the discussions themselves. Dewey's three thinking acts are expected of both classes: observation, "inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown" (1910, p. 193); the suggestion of something not observed; and reflective thought. These three acts all take place in the deeper-level thinking genre of talk and writing. When Ms. Kisler asks lower-level students to write about the culture of their school with regards to gender expectations, she is asking them to observe their surroundings, make a claim about the culture by suggesting something that goes beyond surface observations, and to think again about their claims. The honors class is expected to suggest something not observed when they apply literary theory to Jane Eyre.

Students are also encouraged to evaluate and revise their own positions on an issue. The honors class revises their ideas about the morality of different characters' religious stances in Jane Eyre; the lower-level students revisit their ideas about a motif in To Kill A Mockingbird.

Dialogic discussions about literature give students the opportunity to practice critical thinking moves in a setting other than essay writing, so they get more frequent practice and more immediate peer and teacher feedback to their ideas than if they only practiced these approaches in their writing. Teachers routinely expect students to base their literary essays on claims and support their ideas with evidence; pairing these writing expectations with a recitation speech genre in class discussions gives students practice with deeper thinking only in the context of a summative assessment. By practicing developing and exploring claims and deeper-level thought in the ungraded learning situation of a dialogic discussion, these thinking practices become more habitual and internalized. When students are willing to explore ideas that might be "wrong," they can explore multiple possibilities, developing critical thinking practices. They are more likely to experiment with ideas that might be wrong in an ungraded dialogic discussion in collaboration with peers than in an evaluated, independent assessment.

Teachers who teach dialogically are willing to follow a thread of thought in new and unexpected ways, so they are liable to make teaching mistakes just as they ask students to take the risk of answering a question in a way that might be wrong. These mistakes, rather than signaling that dialogic teaching is the problem, are an improvement over the problem of a teacher giving the same questions and lectures every time a book is taught. While the latter may be more predictable and well-rehearsed, it is not lively, it does not draw upon *vivencia*, it does not connect to a larger ongoing curricular conversation (Applebee, 1996) with students, and it does not give students a voice in helping to direct the conversation in a way that interests them. It is stale, no matter how well it is performed.



This study highlights problematic conversations in addition to those that show student thinking and growth. In retrospect, it is easier to analyze a problematic discussion than it is to trouble-shoot it in the moment. Therefore, part of dialogic teaching must be to accept mistakes, dead-ends, and poorly worded questions because they represent an important part of the process. Ms. Kisler confuses her lower-level students when she asks them to revisit a list of motifs about "The Scarlet Ibis" to answer a question that do not relate to those motifs; most of them do not figure out a workable answer. Ideally, she would not have pointed them to that list. However, by not answering the question for them, she gives them the message that they are the ones expected to make meaning from the text and to evaluate those meanings. She does not teach them to guess at an answer until the authority (the teacher) reveals it.

### **Implications for Policy**

Ms. Kisler's meta-talk reveals some of the unintended results of within-school sorting by academic ability. While this research is not primarily focused on the practice of sorting, it does reveal a connection between sorting, teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about groups of students, and the way these beliefs infiltrate their dialogic interactions with their students. Teachers may become more mindful of their beliefs and speech, but Ms. Kisler's meta-talk indicates elements of the school culture beyond her own classroom.

The other policy implication of this study involves the CCSS. While the written standards themselves support speaking and listening as well as critical and collaborative thinking practices, the pairing of the CCSS with high-stakes tests that impact both

students and teachers serves to counteract the learning standards themselves. Since speaking and listening are not practices evaluated by a standardized test, teachers do not tend to value them as highly as practices that can be measured on these tests. Although speaking and listening develop practices that actually do improve students' overall thinking and therefore their performance on tests, the connections seem more tenuous and less direct. High-stakes tests place the threat on schools of portraying goals of measurement over goals of thinking and learning.

### **Meta-Talk and Levels**

The teacher's meta-talk varies notably between the upper-level and lower-level class. When I share this observation with Ms. Kisler, she reacts with surprise and an immediate intention to remedy the disparity. Through reading the transcript of her speech to the students, Ms. Kisler realizes that she treats the levels differently and reinforces the alignment of social class and levels in our school: upper and middle class students have a tendency to take upper-level classes, and working class and poor students tend to take lower-level classes. While this pattern is not an absolute, the classes in this cross-case study follow the pattern overall. The upper-level class contains a group who self-identify as middle class except for one student; the lower-level class contains 11 out of 25 (44 percent) whose parents or guardians hold working class jobs.

Ms. Kisler's monologues addressing motivation and purpose relate to expectations for a particular assignment with emphasis on a change that she wants students to make. In the case of the honors students, she wants them to connect their academic thinking to their reflection about their own lives and their identities. While these students are all

academically successful, she perceives that they are at times unaware of their privileges and the way these privileges shape their thinking and attitudes. She wants them to become more reflective, especially in regards to the way they think about students other than themselves. In the case of the lower-level class, she is simply frustrated with their lack of independence as learners. She wants them to take more responsibility in figuring out what is expected of them, to be more active and less passive.

Ms. Kisler's stance during the meta-talk sessions is more friendly, confiding and sociable with the honors students and more firm, businesslike, and severe with the lower-level students. This difference in stance is likely in response to the web of relationships that builds up over the course of the semester. She feels respected and liked by the honors class, and she experiences disrespect and dislike from both some of the students in the lower-level class and their parents. Ms. Kisler explains:

[That behavior] gets in my way of wanting to engage with them, because I feel personally offended....The seniors enjoyed being in my room, and I enjoyed having them in my room. They liked me. I have other [ninth grade] kids coming in, and [I'm] looking out, and they're rolling their eyes at [me]. It's demoralizing....I feel almost immature saying it, but it's demoralizing, and I feel like I put so much energy and love into what I do, when I'm sitting there talking about something that I think is important to me and you're like [she imitates a student giving a melodramatic sigh] and that's not nice.

Ms. Kisler feels more relaxed when she is not interrupted by people talking to their friends, sharpening their pencils, and rolling their eyes at her. This more strained relationship means that she cannot easily take on the position of a role model and mentor, because she feels that some of the students do not view her in this way, and she protects herself against the emotional risk of sharing personally meaningful ideas and experiences with them. Just as students may resist the institution of schooling to preserve a sense of self, teachers may resist social interactions that they experience as demeaning (Raider-Roth, Stieha, & Hensley, 2012).

However, in reading the transcripts of her meta-talk, Ms. Kisler shows resilience to her disconnection from the students in asking herself to consider the origins of their resistance. "But I think again, looking at some of these kids, and thinking why they are doing it, and thinking maybe they just don't know, and that's why I get frustrated with them, because I can't see them. I can't see who they are, or what's underneath it." In embracing an intention to see her students for who they are, she shifts dynamics that interrupt the relationship between the teacher and students.

However, comparing these two instances of talk does not give a full picture of Ms. Kisler's relationships with her two classes. In other situations, she does take on a more friendly and sociable stance with the lower-level class. When they are reading Romeo and Juliet, for example, she asks them if they would like their parents to choose their spouse. When they are all shocked at the prospect, she describes how she steers her own children away from peers with whom she does not want them to develop friendships. The friendly, open atmosphere of telling personal stories primes the students for understanding Juliet's situation with her suitor Paris.

Ms. Kisler's message to the honors students is to reflect on their own lives and circumstances just as they reflect on literature— that this practice would make their lives fulfilling, help them to self-actualize, and give them interesting topics for social conversations. Her message to the lower-level students is to increase their independence and their quality of work in order to pass state-wide tests required for graduation and to get a good job. By addressing these groups differently, Ms. Kisler inadvertently emphasizes external, material rewards for the lower-level students and internal, psychological rewards for the honors students. As she reflects on this difference, she realizes that she wants to motivate lower-level students through pointing out internal psychological rewards as well. Student motivation is influenced by family, peers, and culture as well as by the teacher's meta-talk. If educators want students to express curiosity and internal motivation, meta-talk should be aligned with these goals rather than focused on grades, testing, graduation, and employment.

In response to her meta-talk emphasizing testing and getting jobs as a reason for lower-level students to perform in school, Ms. Kisler comments:

And the whole idea of the social class system fitting [into the level groupings], and it's just like a little social class system and I'm reinforcing all that, which is the biggest thing that was so sad to me... I think I definitely need to change. I'm reinforcing the structure in my treatment of them. That's not right, that's horrible, the threatening thing, the jobs thing... I was like, "Oh my god, I'm reinforcing social class and oppressive practices."

However, she also makes the observation that stereotypes about students based on level happen frequently in teacher-to-teacher talk.

I don't think it's just me, but if you listen to the way we [teachers] talk about the different levels is disgusting. Like if someone does something wrong, "that's not what [an upper-level] kid does." That's horrible. I think that translates into teaching, an attitude towards [students based on level].

It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think these kids are going to be good— it's like a white-collar crime. They are, well, they're sitting there nicely, but they're cheating their asses off, but the lower-level kids are more out there with "I'm [not] doing it."

Ms. Kisler highlights the impact of teachers' (including her own) attitudes towards upper-level students based on their following social guidelines for appearing to comply with homework and directives from teachers and from their placement in upper-level classes. In making the connection between upper-level students cheating on their work to white collar crime, she points out the unfairness that upper-level students do not get in trouble as much because they use a procedural display of appearing to do the work even when they are cheating, but when lower-level students outwardly resist doing the work their choices are viewed as problematic.

Such resistance may serve the purpose to protect a student's sense of self or oppose an institution that has perpetuated experiences of oppression (Kohl, 1992). A

stance of resistance may indicate a cultural fund of knowledge, which can be a resource rather than a detriment in learning (Pacheco, 2012). Ms. Kisler points out that the honesty of the choice to openly resist guidelines is actually more respectful to teachers than the dishonesty of pretending, but that teachers and administrators reward the less respectful choice.

Ms. Kisler indicates that she is committed to using these insights to shift her attitude and speech directed towards lower-level students. "I have been thinking about the whole socioeconomic thing, and it's sitting with me and I'm thinking about it and thinking about it, and I'm just so happy to have that, because I think it's really important, and I think it will affect my teaching." She expresses her goal to use motivational talk to express the value of personally connecting to reading to lower-level students this semester as a conscious shift she makes after having read this research: "I started talking about The Bluest Eye (Morrison, 1970) and how it really changed my perspective on race. And I was talking about Kite Runner (Hosseini, 2003) and how it was really eye-opening to me that people are still living like this today, and how it was really personal." In these examples, she takes the aspect of meta-talk that is present with the upper-level students and missing from her talk with the lower-level students, and she makes a conscious shift to include the motivations of personal understandings and engagement with the lower-level group. This meta-talk replaces an emphasis on grades and testing, which she views as threatening.

### **The Common Core State Standards and Dialogic Discussion**

Recently, I taught a master's level Methods of Teaching English class session on the topic of leading discussions about literature. At the end of the session, a student raised her hand and said, "These ideas and strategies are great, but I am not sure how I will find time to do it along with all of the other things I have to do, getting ready for the [state-wide test]." I was, naively, shocked. Dialogic discussions about literature build students' abilities to read and comprehend texts, to develop and evaluate claims, and to consider ideas from multiple perspectives. All of these critical thinking practices do, in fact, help students in testing situations that involve comprehension and writing. However, teachers under pressure for their students to perform well on tests may respond to this pressure (or be directed by their administrations) and revert to drill-type worksheets that are labeled as test preparation.

This reflex is exacerbated by new requirements for teacher evaluation that measure students' growth by looking at test performance. Accordingly, Ms. Kisler emphasizes test performance in her motivational meta-speech to students on the class day after two professional development sessions related to new standards. She has been introduced to a more rigid protocol for administering the state-wide test, and she has read sample questions from the new, tougher test that the state would be using in upcoming years. She has been reminded that her performance evaluation will be, in part, based on the improvement of the students in her class as measured through both "district determined measures" and standardized tests. She herself has worked with a small committee (including myself) to develop the English department's district determined measure the previous summer. While Ms. Kisler is a thoughtful teacher who consistently



reflects on how she can best help her students learn to her own expectations, these factors associated with the CCSS still affect her interactions with students.

The CCSS explicitly require that students learn and practice dialogic discussions. However, teachers' experience of the CCSS is focused on testing and evaluation, muddying the waters. The Speaking and Listening strand includes the following goals for ninth and 10th grade students in the Comprehension and Collaboration category, continued for 11th and 12th grade students as well:

- *Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions* (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; *explicitly draw on ... preparation by referring to evidence from texts* and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- *Propel conversations* by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and *clarify, verify, or challenge ideas* and conclusions.
- Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their

own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012, emphasis added).

These speaking and listening standards bring national validation to the educational goals and benefits of dialogic discussion. The standards are not, in themselves, an obstacle to dialogic teaching, but in fact a gateway; paradoxically, teachers may respond under pressure to the evaluation piece of educational initiatives while ignoring the standards themselves.

In an interview, Ms. Kisler herself makes the point that the parts of the CCSS that get evaluated on the standardized tests are the ones that teachers concern themselves the most with, and the Speaking and Listening strand is not measured by a standardized test. "PARCC isn't asking us for discussion. We ourselves know the value of it, but we're not really evaluating it. I put more weight on papers. I think that's a mis-focus or something. It's like 'it's an extra.' It doesn't nearly carry the weight." Ms. Kisler clarifies the way teachers often prioritize: by what will be measured, not by what is in the writing of the CCSS. Standardized testing creates externalized pressures and motivation for teachers that require a balance of teachers' reflection and internally motivated choices to improve their own practice; however the stakes are so high that this "inner core" (Michalec, 2013) is not given its due weight and teachers are pressured towards teaching monologically (Krashen, 2014) even though this approach is in opposition to the speaking and listening standards identified in the CCSS documents themselves.

### **Implications for Research**

Collaborative research, in which the teacher reflects alongside a fellow researcher or teacher, can be an inroad to teacher's taking authority over their own professional learning through the observations of a participant observer. Documented, thorough observations of classroom discourse allow Ms. Kisler to reflect on her teaching practices in new ways, despite her habitual attentiveness to reflection-in-action. Although the genres of discussion are a pattern she routinely draws upon in her practice and identifies with consistent language of warm-up, book gossip, and deeper-level thinking, she says that she had not realized that she uses these patterns prior to reading this research. This greater level of awareness will allow her to draw upon the resource of discussion genres more purposefully. Similarly, she says that she had not realized the possibility that structure could be an impediment to student thinking practices, and she plans to make decisions incorporating more openness into her teaching of lower-level classes. Her awareness of her use of meta-talk is the most prominent shift, prompting her to include more examples of personal growth and learning and fewer references to high-stakes testing. While the research is supported by data collected over the course of one school year, it does not capture the entirety of Ms. Kisler's teaching practices, because she is using the process of the research itself to further inform her trajectory as a teacher. Additionally, the accumulated conversations that the two of us held over the course of the study, combined with those we had for the pilot study prior to that, have influenced both of us in our awareness of elements of teaching and choices shaped by that awareness.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research can explore dialogic talk as it relates to critical and collaborative thinking practices in a variety of settings. One area of further study is research focusing on balance between and choices about openness and structure as a continuum that relates to dialogic teaching; another area of further study is engaging student resistance and disconnections as an educational resource within dialogic teaching. A collaborative study with teachers on the topic of meta-talk alone, particularly ways in which they consciously or subconsciously vary their meta-talk with students from different levels and cultural and social identities, is another area for further research. As the CCSS take hold in schools, it will be important to research ways that school systems and educators stay true to educational ideals, including the benefits of dialogic teaching and facilitation of critical and collaborative thinking practices, rather than get pulled into the values of test performance. As students engage in increasingly more of their personal interactions over digital devices, they need even more the experiences offered by extended dialogic discussions in classrooms. Here they learn to listen, contribute, rethink, and collaboratively solve problems.

## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH PROPOSAL ABSTRACT PRESENTED TO PARTICIPANTS

Dialogic Discussions about Literature in High School:  
Redefining Critical Thinking Practices through Classroom Talk

While dialogic discussions have been shown to positively influence student learning, engagement, and use of critical thinking practices, teachers predominantly avoid using dialogic discussions, opting for the familiar initiate-respond-evaluate method. Therefore, rather than merely showing the benefits of dialogic discussions, this research is designed to explore the micro-interactions within and surrounding successful dialogic discussions. This ethnographic multi-case study proposes to integrate observations about classroom, school, and community culture into an understanding of dialogic discussions about literature. In what ways can teachers create a classroom culture that invites students to co-create dialogic discussions which enhance and develop critical thinking practices? In what ways does the school culture support or obstruct this work? In what ways do students' cultural and linguistic practices, and the values and beliefs enacted through those practices, shape their participation in discussions within the classroom?

The setting for this research will be two public high school English classes in a regional high school which serves students from two neighboring communities with a combination of suburban and rural settings in the Northeast of the United States. For the purpose of a comparative case study, one of the two classes will be selected from the top

tier, and the second of the two classes will be selected from the bottom tier. The teacher(s) will be selected for their interest and practice in facilitating dialogic discussions about literature. I will research each class for the duration of their study of one to two literary texts. The approximate time spent on a text in these classrooms is three to four weeks, so the total observation time will be between 9 and 16 weeks.

Through classroom observation and field notes, and the use of audio and video tapes, I will select episodes of dialogic discussion with heightened levels of excitement; constructing of meaning; relevant, multi-faceted, exploratory connections; and leadership and collaborative idea-building among students. Using discourse analysis, I will examine nuances in teacher's and students' roles, participation and discursive practices, and relevant preceding activities or contextual factors that may contribute to these exemplary and rich dialogic discussions. Transcripts of selected discussion episodes will be coded for specific conversational moves and specific higher level thinking moves; grounded theory (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) will be used to develop a theory of dialogic discussion and critical thinking practices. I will consider the interaction between dialogic discussions and critical thinking practices with an eye towards defining thinking practices in new ways. Participant interviews will supplement observational data.

I will look at ways that the teacher, students, and the school administration create a classroom culture, and ways that this culture may influence the teacher and students with respect to dialogic discussions. Data for this aspect of the study will include: the 2011 National Association of Schools and Colleges self-study report, the Common Core English Language Arts standards, school-wide and departmental goals and initiatives.

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### Informed Consent Form

Name of Researcher: Wendy Keyser

Dates: September 2012 – June 2013

Contact at: Wissahickon High School: 413-596-9011    [wkeyser@whs.org](mailto:wkeyser@whs.org)

Title of Project: Dialogic Discussions about Literature in High School: Redefining  
Critical Thinking Practices through Classroom Talk

I am an English teacher at Wissahickon High School, and I am also a student in a doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst called Teacher Education and School Improvement. I am interested in studying the ways in which classroom discussion about literature can help high school students develop critical thinking practices. I am looking at: teacher's facilitation of discussion, students' participation in discussion, and the relationship between discussion and other aspects of class and school. I would like to observe your class to research these areas. I plan to use: my notes from observing the class; audio and video recordings and photographs of class activities and discussions; materials provided to the students; samples of student work; and interviews with the teacher and students. The information gained from these sources will be used for my dissertation. I may choose to use this data for future research or publication. You and

your school will be identified by your characteristics, but your name will be confidential. It will be coded during research and changed in any published written material.

You may benefit from this study through the opportunity to reflect on your own education and learning. The only risk you face is the possibility of discomfort from having an observer in your classroom.

You are free to participate or not without prejudice, which means that your grade and your relationship with your teacher will not be affected by your agreement or refusal to participate in this study. By participating, you will help me to form and evaluate ideas about literature discussions. If you agree to participate, you have the right to withdraw from part or all of the study at any time. You also have the right to review data collected from your participation or from work you produce.

You have been given two copies of this informed consent form, both of which should be signed if you are willing to participate. One copy should be retained for your records and the other will be returned to me for my records. Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided, willingly agree to participate, and may withdraw your consent at any time.

You may contact me using the contact information above.

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to participate (signature):

\_\_\_\_\_



Parent or Guardian's name (if child is under 18), printed:

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I agree to allow my child (name above) to participate (signature):

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### TABLE OF CODES

*Codes for Conversational Moves*

code	description
<b>codes developed by researcher</b>	
SIQ	student-initiated topic or question (interpretation, not recall)
TIQ	teacher-initiated topic or question (interpretation, not recall)
TEXT EVENT QUESTION	question about an event from the text
TEXT EVENT ANSWER	answer about an event from the text
AGREEMENT	verbal affirms
NVA	nonverbal affirms
UQ	uptake question (Nystrand et. al, 2001)
UC	uptake comment
REFORMULATE	reformulates another's comment
DE	description of text event
QUOTE	reads from text
QUOTE REF	refers to quote from text without quoting exactly
RP#	requests page #
TP#	tells page # (directs students to this page)
INTRO	introduces the focus of discussion
REPORT	reports on previously written/researched ideas
CHECK UND	check for understanding
OPEN	open question for additional thoughts on topic
SPEAKS FOR GROUP	attempts to represent the entire group's ideas
<b>codes from Wells (1999)</b>	
CLAIM	makes a claim interpreting the text
RECAP	recaps another's claim
REQ. FE	requests further explanation
REQ. SUPPORT	requests support (evidence, ideas, "test the theory")
EXTEND	extends previous contribution
NOMINATE	nominates next speaker
REQ. OPINION	requests opinion
REQ. REPEAT	requests repetition
REPEAT	repeats previous contribution, own or another's
CONTRADICT	contradicts claim
SUPPORT	supports claim with evidence or ideas

*Codes for Thinking Moves*

code	description
<b>codes from Dewey (1910)</b>	
OBS	OBSERVE : “exploration, inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown”
SUG (something not observed)	SUGGEST: “the possibility and nature of the connection between the object seen and the object suggested”
REFL	REFLECT: evaluation of the suggestion to discover if the interpretation fits the text as a whole
<b>codes from Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy, higher levels (Krathwohl, 2002; language from original taxonomy in parentheses)</b>	
ANALYZE (analyze)	ANALYZE: selection of parts and detecting the relevance of their relationships to one another
CREATE (synthesize)	CREATE: creation of new meaning through connections between these parts
EVALUATE (evaluate)	EVALUATE: critique or check of the creation
<b>codes developed by researcher</b>	
REVISE	Revise previous claim
OFF TOPIC	does not contribute to a thread of thought
REFINE IDEA	clarify, refine previously stated idea
REQ. CONTRADICTION RESOLUTION	requests that a contradiction be resolved

## APPENDIX D

### COMPLETE WARM-UP TRANSCRIPTS

**Warm-up Prompt:**

[In response to projected image of *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (Rev. 12: 1-4), a painting by William Blake on the white board]

Ms. Kisler: Word associations in response to the painting. If you can't see, come up and look.

**Selected Responses:**

(Students below have been nominated by Ms. Kisler.)

Lynn: Fear.

Matt: Steroids.

Justin: Strange.

Pam: Evil.

Amy: Like a bug.

Gail: Vein-y.

Stephanie: Disgusting.

**Warm-up Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler: Let's just generally talk about the book, our reading experience— give me a couple sentences about how the reading is going and what you think about it.

**Follow-up question:**

Ms. Kisler: Do you like Jane Eyre more or less than Pride and Prejudice?

**Selected Responses:** *Clarification of question:*

Joe K: Content, or like writing style? Or just-?

Ms. Kisler: Whatever.

Matt: Well, it's all right. I don't know.

Ms. Kisler: Are you liking it better or less than Pride and Prejudice?

*Response and follow-up to question:*

Matt: Maybe a little better. More, uh, more happens.

Ms. Kisler: Plot, more happens-

Matt: -as opposed to just gossip.

Ms. Kisler -Anybody else, thoughts on that?

Justin: Pretty much the same as Joe. I think it's definitely better than Pride and Prejudice.

Just 'cause like, I don't know, I just didn't like Pride and Prejudice that much.

Ms. Kisler: Okay.

Matt: At the beginning, I thought it was gonna be about nature, like there is a lot of nature references, but then it got into like, with, who's that boy? John, who's the boy that's Mrs.

Reed's son?

Ms.K: John.

Matt: Then it got into him, and that was interesting.

Ms. Kisler: Okay, all right. Um, Sherry, what do you think?

Sherry: I feel like in Pride and Prejudice, there were a lot of characters who were just—annoying? And I don't get that in Jane Eyre, so that's what I like.

Ms. Kisler: So you're not as annoyed by the characters. Okay. Who else, what do we think? Evan?

Evan: I like it better than Pride and Prejudice, but-

Ms. Kisler: -Well, you were a hater of Pride and Prejudice -

Evan: -so that's really not saying much. It's not too bad, sometimes I wish there was a little bit more from the characters, like at the beginning of the chapters, there's usually a little bit of discussion from Jane's thoughts.

Ms. Kisler: So you would like to hear more from the other characters.

Evan: Yeah, a little bit. And it seems like sometimes she's addressing the reader directly.

Ms K: Yes.

Evan: Like she knows someone's reading about her life and I find it a little-

Ms. Kisler: -Well, it's like an autobiography.

Evan: Yeah.

Ms. Kisler: Well, okay, it's not. But it is. It's like, um, she refers to her own writing as being autobiographical; it's not Charlotte Brontë 's autobiography, although there are similarities, but she's writing it as Jane Eyre's autobiography. You know what I mean? Stephanie, what do you think?

Stephanie: Um, I guess I like it, but there are good things about Pride and Prejudice.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. Gail?

Gail: Yeah. Same as what everybody else is saying. Like more is happening than in Pride and Prejudice. So, it's more interesting.

Ms. Kisler: Hannah.

Hannah: Um, I like it a little bit better. I agree that there's definitely more happening.

There's a lot more description in this book. It was describing the first day at the boarding school, and that was really boring. It was describing the whole day, when she went to class, and when she ate, and that was really boring.

**Warm-up Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler: First, we're going to talk about Thanksgiving, and I want everybody to identify their favorite Thanksgiving food.

**Selected Responses:**

Hannah: Mashed potatoes.

Gail: Green beans.

Ms. Kisler: Is it like a green bean casserole?

Gail: No.

Steve: Can you come back to me?

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, Evan.

Joe B: Turkey.

Ms. Kisler: The turkey. Lynn.

Lynn: I don't know.

Ms. Kisler: I'm coming back to you.

Stephanie: Green bean casserole or sweet potatoes.

Sherry: Yams. I love yams.

Evan: Oh, God! I love yams. You don't want me near your yams, trust me.

Amy: Bread. Yeah, I really like my favorite, bread.

Ms. Kisler: That's un-American. (*Students laugh.*)

Pam: Mashed potatoes.

Steve: I got it. My mom makes this really good rice pudding. It's yummy.

Matt: Either turkey or my grandma's cream cheese brownies. Yeah, it's a cookie-

Ms. Kisler: -Is it a cookie or a brownie?

Matt: You put the cookie dough on the bottom of the pan-

Ms. Kisler: -Chocolate chip cookie dough?

Matt: Yeah. and then put the cream cheese mix, whatever it is, in the middle, and then you put the cookie on top. You should try it; it's really good.

Jill: Stuffing.

Ms. Kisler: Stuffing, yeah. Frank.

Frank: The turkey, slash mashed potato combo, with gravy.

Ms. Kisler: With the gravy- Ricky, did you give yours?

Ricky: No, but, turkey.

Ms. Kisler: Turkey, Um, Lynn?

Lynn: *(no answer)*.

Ms. Kisler: You don't have a favorite?

Susan: I like everything. I like it that way 'cause then I don't have to pick.

Ricky: Steve got a haircut.

Matt: Steve got it Friday.

Steve: Friday afternoon.



**APPENDIX E**

**THE GREAT RED DRAGON AND THE WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN**

**(REV. 12:1-4)**



(Blake, 1805)

## APPENDIX F

### COMPLETE BOOK GOSSIP TRANSCRIPTS

**Book Gossip Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler has passed out index cards and asked students to write what they would like to discuss on the cards. She says the following as she reads through the stack:

Ms. Kisler: Based on what I'm seeing, we have lots of wondering about Grace Poole ... lots of wondering about Grace Poole, which is legitimate, you know, I think that's a common question. Um, Grace Poole, Grace Poole, Grace Poole, all right, so first thing we're gonna do is just kind of answer some questions about Grace Poole. What is Grace Poole's job in the house? What does she do? What do we know about her factually? So let's start with that.

**Selected Responses:**

Ricky: She's like a servant, isn't she?

Ms. Kisler: She's a servant. What other details can you give about her?

Ricky: Um, they don't really... I don't know. Mr. Rochester blamed the incident on her.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Did he, okay. Um, did he really blame it on her? I don't know. I don't know that he did. I think we might assume that it's her.

Ricky: Assume. Yeah, okay.

Ms. Kisler: But I don't think he blamed her. What else do we know about Grace Poole?

Gail, what do we know about Grace Poole?

Gail: I would say something about her making more money.

Ricky: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ms. Kisler: How much more money is she making?

Frank: Five times more, right?

Ms. Kisler: Five times more. She makes a lot more money. Jill,

*(Jill is giggling).*

Ms. Kisler: What? What do you know about Grace Poole?

(boy): She read ahead.

Jill: I didn't read ahead.

Ms. Kisler: Oh, God. Did you see the movie? *(Jill laughs.)*

Ms. Kisler: Okay, raise your hand if you've seen the movie or read ahead and know what the story is.

Jill: I didn't remember seeing it, until I was reading it a couple of days ago, and I was like, oh my goodness, I remember what happens *(still giggling)*.

Ms. Kisler: You people will be the first ones I go to when I find out people know. So don't tell anybody. 'Cause it is kind of— are you wondering about the story? Are you a little bit interested in the mystery?

Frank: I saw it was on TV recently, but I didn't watch it.

Ms. Kisler: Jill, why are you so giddy? Tell us about Grace Poole. What do you know about her? Other than— don't give it away. But what do you know?

Jill: Um, Did it say in the book that she came down once a day to get food and then went back up?

Ms. Kisler: She does. What else do you know, Hannah, do you know anything, or are you curious about her?

Hannah: Well, Jane would talk to her, and she wouldn't really reply.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. She cackles a little bit.

Frank: She has a weird laugh.

Ms. Kisler: She has a weird laugh. Okay, so she makes more than them, she's a servant in the house— Jane at one point speculates about her. What is Jane speculating about her? Do you remember? What is she speculating about Grace Poole?

Frank: Um, I don't know, but I noticed that they kind of like ignore her: things she does, actions.

Frank: Like she sets the curtains on fire.

Ms. Kisler: Well, but do we know that she does?

Frank: No, but it's like implied. They just kind of ignore it.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. Why do we think nobody is arresting her.

Student: That's not understood.

Student: Yeah, I don't understand that at all.

Ms. Kisler: Susan, what do you think?

Susan: Well, I was remembering this one part, from when I was watching this movie when I was really young, and I kind of forgot about it, and I feel like I-

Jill: -It's the same thing.

Ms. Kisler: It's the same thing, you guys, from a long— okay. So what does that tell you, if no one else is acting crazy about this, there's a fire, what does that— what can we take away from that? For example, if there was a fire in my house last night, we would all be up in arms, I mean not that I have servants (*chuckles*).

Frank: No servants?!

Ms. Kisler: But if I did, they would be up in arms too. You know, so what does that tell

you? Susan, what do you think?

Susan: Um, I guess just clearly, to them, it's not a big deal. I thought it was weird that, it seemed that everyone in the manor kind of knows about Grace, except for Jane— I thought that was weird that she's part of the manor but they still won't tell her what's going on.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah. At one point she overhears the servants talking, and they say, "Oh, she doesn't know?" right, and so it's like, "What does she not know?" There's something there that we don't know. You're not going to find out this weekend, unless you want to read ahead. So you will find out after, what is her role in the novel? She's a servant, she gets paid more than everybody else, she might be lighting fires, you know, we think that there might be something going on. Do we have any speculation about what's going on? Let's speculate for a minute. What might be really going on? Gail?

Gail: I don't know; it was weird.

**Book Gossip Prompt:**

Ms. Kisler: What might her relationship with Rochester be? Do you have any thoughts about that? Let's just throw it out there, whatever you think.

**Selection of Responses:**

Gail: I don't know, I don't know, it could've— I don't know, I'm not sure.

Ms. Kisler: Hannah, speculations?

Hannah: She could not like him (...)

Jill: Maybe they have some secret.

Ms. Kisler: What could the secret be? Were they lovers?

Student: (*suddenly audibly intakes breath, whispers*) "Oh!"

Ms. Kisler: Lynn, what do you think? Lynn: Um, she could possibly know something about him.

Ms. Kisler: Yeah, and that's why they're saying that. He could be paying her to keep quiet.

Frank: Paying her to cover up for someone.

Ms. Kisler: I don't know– who knows?

Frank: Okay, what was the French singer's name? She's actually his wife, I'm going that way. I'm saying that right now.

Ms. Kisler: Okay. Get it out there. The French lady's his wife?

Frank: His daughter, Adele, what's her mother's name?

Ms. Kisler: Celine?

Frank: Yes. That's who she actually is.

Ms. Kisler: So Grace Poole– is actually Adele's mom. Okay.

Frank: I'm just going to go out there.

Ms. Kisler: Why not? So there's something

Frank: Me and [nickname for Ricky] came up with that.

Matt: I don't really – agree with Frank's theory (*class laughs*).

Ms. Kisler: So a lot of you guys were asking questions about– I mean, we know. We've clarified what we know. We know what we don't know. We're not going to really find out for like a couple readings, which is okay. So it keeps the mystery alive. Are you curious?

Are you wondering?

Matt: Can't you just tell us?

Ms. Kisler: No. No. You need to read and figure out.

Jill: *(to another student)* I'm not telling you.

Ms. Kislser: Nobody's allowed to tell anybody. You just read on your own, and let everybody figure it out. Okay? So this is the part mystery, there's a little bit of a gothic element, we don't know what's going on in the book, we know that she laughs funny, we know that she is related to the attic, we know that there are all these dark passages, adding to the mystique of the novel, keep us hopefully wanting to read. And we think she might be lighting fires, but she's getting paid for it, so our answers aren't really there. We don't really ... but most of you asked questions about Grace Poole. We don't know that she's the one who lit the fire, but we think that it's implied that she's the one who did it—that's what we're getting at.

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