

Voices in Classroom Talk: Author(ity) and Identity

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Abstract

In this paper we employ Bakhtin's concept of voice to examine the notions of authorship, authority and identity as these are played out in the context of collaborative talk in the classroom. We examine a number of episodes of student talk that were collected in a primary classroom that has (as its goal) a culture based on collaboration, collective construction of knowledge, and explicit negotiation of classroom norms and practices. We apply analytical tools (derived from Bakhtin) to show how students adopt different speaking voices that subtly reveal their shifting identities as speaker and the changing basis of authority in their statements.

Introduction

For a number of years we (Brown, 1994, 1997; Brown & Renshaw, 1995, 1996) have been exploring how to reconstitute everyday classroom practices in the upper primary school using a sociocultural theoretical perspective to generate new practices and to critically reflect on change as it occurred. One strategy we've used is "collective argumentation", a small group format that is designed to extend the range of speaking opportunities available to students in the classroom. In researching collective argumentation, we have employed aspects of Bakhtin's theory of language, which regards speech as being situated, concrete, and multivocal. In particular, we are interested in the way students in the classroom draw on, or adopt different voices in conveying their ideas during collective argumentation episodes. The notion of voice encompasses both "what" one is saying, the "way" one speaks, and the positioning of speakers in relation to the authority framework that exists within the classroom. That is, voice draws attention to the dynamic and shifting identities of speakers as they attempt to convince others to accept their ideas as relevant within the norms of the community.

Collective Argumentation and Voice

Collective argumentation is organised around a key word format - represent the task or problem alone, compare representations within a small group of peers, explain and justify the various representations to each other in the small group, reach agreement within the group, and finally present the group's ideas and representations to the class to test their acceptance by the wider community of peers and the teacher.

Applying voice to "collective argumentation", it can be seen that each step in the key word format challenges the students to adopt different speaking positions or voices. The initial step in collective argumentation of representing a problem alone, provides space for the personal voice to be heard - "my representation", and is useful in revealing diverse approaches to the task. Students become aware that different task interpretations and emphases are commonplace and that fellow students can have quite different but equally adequate ways of considering the task. The representations produced by the students even at this initial step of collective argumentation are not simple expressions of a personal voice. Each personal voice is already multivocal, since diverse experiences at home, at school, and from the media will be drawn upon in constructing the representations.

The small group processes that follow this individual work are designed to move students to an agreed representation (or set of representations) of the task. Here the speaking positions alternate between explaining or defending personal representations and moving towards a common view. There is a movement from "my ideas" and "your ideas" to "our ideas". In the process of collective argumentation, students are required to ensure that all members of their small group understand the common approach to the task. That is, each member of the group must have a sense of their shared authorship of the group's ideas. Finally at the last step of collective argumentation, where the small groups present their ideas to the rest of the class, the students have the opportunity to explain their ideas to a broader audience. The speaking position here is similar to that of the teacher, affording the students both the status of "expert" as well as the challenge to present and defend solutions to an audience of peers.

Shifting Voices in Collective Argumentation

To illustrate how collective argumentation can create a space for different voices in the classroom, a short extract from one episode is presented below where Angela is reporting her group's ideas to the whole class. The collective argumentation task had been to represent the idea of infinity. Prior to Angela's presentation, a number of other groups had already presented their ideas to the whole class - these consisted of drawings of lines, spirals, circles, and other closed geometric shapes which were meant to convey the idea of infinity as endless *space* and *distance* - with neither beginning or end. Angela's presentation of her group's ideas begins by focussing on a different dimension - *time*., and she uses the image of a clock with a very large array of hands to convey the idea of infinite *time*.

Angela: We drew a clock and we had, um, about, an infinite number of handles, because time goes on for an infinity. That's how we represented that, because time goes on.

Teacher: I didn't understand that phrase, could you say it again please.

Angela: Well, we drew a clock and we had an infinite amount of handles, the little things that go around, because time never stops. It just keeps going around.

[Teacher clarified with Simon and Angela the term for the hands of the clock, and then Angela continued]

Angela: Time has no beginning and no end like numbers. And we had the dictionary meaning which says this - infinity has the state of being infinite, infinity of the universe, infinity of space, time, quantity - so infinite space, so, it's so that you can't describe it. Um, (infinite) mass is the concept of increasing (mass) without volume. So we thought that we would make a meaning of our own. So we thought that infinity means everlasting number, object and the universe. So infinity is an everlasting thing.

[Teacher recalled the key ideas from Angela's presentation.]

Angela: Infinity can(not) be determined or explained over a vast amount or period of time, because it is an everlasting idea. And I made this up. I think the word infinity is similar to life. No one can fully explain it and just like infinity it has many definitions. We can't really explain life and we can't really explain the word infinity.

Angela's presentation to the class shows an explicit awareness that particular ideas are related to the stance or position of the speaker - notice how Angela uses "we" "I" "you" and "no-one" to signal her adoption of a series of different speaking positions, as shown below:

- (a) the authoritative voice of the dictionary, (*"And we had the dictionary meaning which says this"*) ;
- (b) the voice of her group (*"so we thought that we would make a meaning of our own"*) ;
- (c) a personal voice (*"..And I made this up. I think the word infinity is similar to life."*) ;
- (d) the generalised voice of an expert (*"No one can fully explain it and just like infinity it has many definitions. We can't really explain life and we can't really explain the word infinity"*).

"No one" and "We" convey Angela's intention to speak authoritatively not on behalf of her small group, or personally, but generally on behalf of humankind.

Angela's presentation reflects the social practices and dispositions that we (Brown & Renshaw) had envisaged in initially designing "collective argumentation", namely, that students be made aware through the social practices of the classroom that knowledge is always constructed from a particular viewpoint and that the same idea can be expressed in many different ways depending on the context, the audience and the speakers own goals.

Revoicing - A Social Practice in Collective Argumentation

Our observations and analysis of students' talk in this classroom has shown that the effort of students to translate ideas into their own words, to make sense of the concept of infinity, did not happen by chance. It was scaffolded over many months by the teacher as he introduced them to the practices of Collective Argumentation. There was specific evidence of this scaffolding process in Angela's talk where she used the word "so" which appeared to be a

ventriloquation of the teacher. The teacher often prefaced his transformations of student contributions (summarising and rephrasing) with the word "so".

Summarising and rephrasing have been referred to by O'Connor & Michaels (1996, p 76) as "revoicing", and like us, they have noted the use of "so" as a salient marker of revoicing as it occurs in the classroom. Teachers within collaborative classrooms are likely to employ revoicing quite often as they attempt to incorporate students contributions into whole group discussions. A student whose contribution has been revoiced by the teacher or another student, is positioned to make a judgement regarding the relevance and acceptability of the revoiced utterance. By revoicing and naming a particular student as the author of an idea the teacher also positions the student in relationship to other participants in the discussion. In this way students acquire shifting identities within the discourse as they are required to either assent to or challenge ideas or stances accredited to themselves or other speakers in the class.

Revoicing also raises dilemmas about the individual and collective authorship of ideas. To revoice another's contribution without reference can be seen as copying, as illegitimate appropriation. In a previous paper Brown (1998) noted the sensitivity of students to reconstituting ideas that had previously been accredited to others. In the particular episode analysed by Brown (1998), a small group of students were presenting their solution to a task when one of their classmates asked them if they had "copied" the idea from someone else. They replied that they had not copied it, but had remembered the idea from a previous session and had employed the idea as a solution to the current problem. Why did the classmates challenge the authorship of the idea being presented? The challenge demonstrates that these students were sensitive to the authorship of ideas and that they interacted within a specific set of 'ground rules' that required ideas to be referenced to their original source where possible. This indicates that revoicing is not an isolated phenomena within a set of pedagogical practices, but is embedded within a set of implicit norms which govern the authorship and sharing of ideas within a knowledge building community - a set of norms which relate students ideas to each other and to the content of the lesson in a manner constitutive of authority and student identity.

Authority in Collective Argumentation

Collective argumentation is based around a set of social practices and shared norms that challenges the traditional authority framework of the classroom where the teacher is assumed to be in control and where students are expected to listen and comply with teacher directions. The practices and shared norms of collective argumentation take time to establish and requires the teacher to constantly embody a different stance to issues of authority. There are times, however, when both the teacher and students may revert to more traditional voices or stances. Below we explore one such instance when the teacher's attempt to influence the direction of a group's thinking is strongly resisted by one of the students. This episode is particularly interesting because it is the student who remains within the norms of collective argumentation and who resists the teacher's momentary adoption of the traditional authority space.

We enter the dialogue where the students are attempting to find the area of an eight-pointed star enclosed within a square, and the teacher has joined the group to review their progress. Annie has employed a conventional representation to successfully move towards a solution to the problem. However, her partner, Allan, has adopted an imaginative, but inadequate representation which requires viewing the figure as two equivalent rectangles. Annie is exploring Allan's idea to see if it can be successfully adapted to solve the problem. Annie's attempt to work with Allan's idea demonstrates that revoicing can have an explicit instructional purpose. O'Connor & Michaels (1996) make the point that the 'revoicer' of a

speaker's contribution often sees more significance in the ideas than the speaker was aware of. This clearly occurs in the following episode where Annie sees potential in Allan's idea where neither the teacher nor Allan had seen any. In fact, the teacher demands that Annie cease her attempts to co-construct a response to the problem, and comply with his directions.

Teacher: You've turned the eight-pointed star into two rectangles, but you're no longer measuring the eight pointed star.

Annie: So what we did. I found the area of these little triangles and it was twenty-four centimetres squared. So I got that idea off mine and took it away from Allan's answer.

Teacher: No, that's not going to work. You just can't make things fit together. Okay? You can't get two different ideas and make them fit together.

Annie: No, I just knew that . . .

Teacher: Stop arguing and listen to me for a moment. You can't take his ideas and take your answer away from his answer. He's coming at the problem from a completely different perspective to what you are. You have to work with your ideas and convince him that your ideas are accurate.

Annie: I didn't take my answer away from his.

The teacher and Annie re-visit the calculations evoked by her representation of the problem space, confirming Annie's response that the area of the star is 40 square centimetres. The teacher then re-visits the calculations evoked by Allan's representation and compares the two results.

Teacher (To Allan) See you haven't got the eight pointed star there. You got this section here which is not part of the eight pointed star (points), you've taken this which is not part of the eight pointed star (a triangle) and put it here. So those two sections don't belong to the eight pointed star. Your idea is brilliant, it's a beautiful idea, but to find the area of the eight pointed star it doesn't work. So can you work the next one out (the next problem on the sheet) on this (Annie's) idea.

In the above sequence the teacher engages a voice uncharacteristic of previous student-teacher interactions. Statements like "stop arguing and listen to me" and "can you work the next (problem) out" using Annie's idea, imply that the teacher has adopted a new position within the discourse of the group - that of the traditional teacher.

In response to the teacher's statement that "You can't get two different ideas and make them fit together", Annie maintains the argument that she is not simply subtracting her answer to the problem from Allan's answer ("I didn't take my answer away from his"), but combining his ideas with her ideas to solve the problem in a novel way ("So I got that idea off mine and took it away from Allan's answer"). This contradiction of the teacher's voice is not an act of defiance by Annie, but an example 'wise restraint' - where a mathematical point of view is not changed wantonly, without serious examination. In this way, Annie's mathematical voice

resonates with the confidence of the knower, struggling to represent what she knows and to connect that to the knowledge of others - an emotionally risky resonance, but necessary to developing authority of voice (Kutz, 1990). Annie wants all participants in her group (Allan and the teacher) to integrate the group's existing ideas to co-construct a solution. She persists with this goal in the following sequence:

Annie: Okay, let's go with your idea.

Allan: No.

Annie: Yes.

Allan: We don't have time.

Annie: No, we're going to fix up your idea. We're going to find out where you went wrong.

Allan: But it (the work-sheet) is wrecked.

Annie: Allan, we'll do your idea. Can you draw that shape (the figure) please on the back (of the sheet)? On the back of this and we'll fix up your idea.

(Allan commences to draw the problem figure on the back of the work-sheet. Teacher approaches the group.)

Teacher: How are we going?

Annie: I know where he went wrong.

Teacher: It doesn't work!

Annie: I know, but I think it can.

Teacher: I'll get you another sheet.

(Teacher gives the children a new problem sheet and leaves the group.)

In the above sequence, Annie first recruits Allan's participation in the co-construction of a solution by expressing confidence that his idea can be 'fixed' and by organising their work-space so that time can be used efficiently (working on the back of the work-sheet). Annie then recruits the teacher's tacit participation by her confidence ("I know where he went wrong"), affirming the teacher's argument that the idea does not initially work ("I know . . ."), and expressing faith in the status of the idea as being an important element of a co-constructed response ("I think it can"). Annie's confidence and her authority derive from the norms of the collective argumentation classroom.

Annie's stance continues to give direction to the discourse as the other participants (Allan and the teacher) take up reciprocal positions relevant to the norms of collective argumentation. The teacher's attempt to enforce his authority by adopting the traditional teacher voice has been successfully resisted by Annie's maintenance of the voices of collective argumentation. In the sequence below it is the teacher who now tries to follow

Annie's definition of the task and grants her the status of the 'knower', beginning to work with her as a co-participant.

Annie: Okay. Talk to me. Talk me through what you did.

Allan: I went Oh! and got this here (a triangle) and put it here (points). Then I went Oh! and saw there was another one there and another one (both children reconstitute Allan's original representation).

Teacher: But if you keep putting the parts which are not part of the star onto your rectangles, are you finding the area of the (indicates the area of the whole figure)? You've got a big problem with the middle anyway, because it overlaps (shades in the middle square that overlaps both big rectangles).

Annie: Ah ha!

Allan: What are you doing?

Teacher: But that can be solved by finding out the area of that square and taking it away once. That problem can be solved.

Annie: So you've got to find the area of the square . . .

Teacher: Yeah, we're not interested in that at the moment. But the question you have to ask yourselves is by putting these bits (the triangles) of the square which are not part of the star onto the end of this rectangle, are you finding the area of the star?

Allan: No.

Teacher: Or are you finding the area of the whole square (the figure)?

Allan: We're kinda finding the area of the whole square.

Annie: I'm not particularly worried . . .

Teacher: You are, you're finding the area of the whole square. Aren't you?

Allan: Because we've got all these parts (the triangles) which were the square, on the end.

Teacher: In other words you've turned the square into two rectangles. You've got the other problem here . . . that these two rectangles overlap here.

Annie: So we've got to take this square here (the overlapping square) away from our answer.

Teacher: So if you take that square there away from your answer you should get the area of the square which is sixty-four square centimetres. See if it works.

In the above sequence, it is the teacher who is learning to master the children's definition of the situation. For example, as we pointed out earlier, the teacher has often prefaced his scaffolding of student ideas (paraphrases and summaries) in this classroom with the word "so" and students have signalled their appropriation of this scaffolding by using "so" to preface a transformation in their mode of thinking. As can be seen in the above sequence, it is Annie who prefaced her scaffolding of the teacher's contributions with the word "so" - "So you've got to find the area of the square . . ." and "So we've got to take this square here (the overlapping square) away from our answer" - and it is the teacher who signals his appropriation of Annie's mode of thinking by prefacing his contribution with the word "so" - "So if you take that square there away from your answer you should get the area of the square which is sixty-four square centimetres. See if it works". Clearly, Annie and the teacher share a symmetry of authority rarely seen in primary classrooms (Edwards & Mercer, 1987).

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored issues of identity and authority in the classroom using analytical concepts derived from Bakhtin's theory of voice. We have attempted to show how identity and authority are shifting and dynamic aspects of classroom practice. In the *infinity* episode, Angela explicitly adopted different speaking positions that simultaneously involved changing identities and changing bases of authority. Her speaking identity varied from a spokesperson for her group ("so we thought . . .") to a spokesperson for human kind ("no one can . . .") and at the same time her utterances drew on different authority bases that invited her classmates to vary the criteria they employed in evaluating her ideas.

A second issue of interest in this paper has been the occurrence of *revoicing* as an integral aspect of collaborative talk. The teacher's use of revoicing in this classroom places students on a more equal footing by allowing them the opportunity to evaluate other interpretations or extensions of their utterances. By revoicing a student's utterance the teacher assigns authorship and authority to the student in a manner which encourages the co-construction of ideas and the formation of identities congruent with the culture of collective argumentation. Students' revoicing was shown to occur in relation to their classmates contributions as well as in relation to the teacher's utterances. In the interaction between Annie and Allan, Annie's revoicing of Allan's ideas went beyond his initial understanding and revealed a hidden potential in his ideas - a clear case of instructional dialogue within the ZPD. We also demonstrated that unacknowledged revoicing appears to break the norms of a collective argumentation classroom, as shown when classmates asked one group whether they had copied an idea. While copying is unacceptable, acknowledged use of others' ideas is valued.

These analyses are part of our on-going research program and commitment to create new spaces in the classroom where a diversity of speaking positions is made available to students on a regular basis, and where authority and authorship are spread among the members of the classroom rather than held by the teacher alone.

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