The Disputatious Personality and the Value of Listening

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In the 1990s, my university career began with my appointment as assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. I also became involved in the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English (OKCTE), the state's affiliate organization of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). I served on their Executive Board, and during our planning of the annual convention one year, I thought it would be stimulating to invite a couple of people from different positions and perspectives to discuss and debate policy issues surrounding public education. I hoped that attendees would benefit from the exchange of ideas coming from people whose experiences and dispositions led to different understandings and approaches and that the discussion would prove stimulating beyond the confines of the conference.

I had two people in mind. One was Julius Caesar "J. C." Watts, a conservative Oklahoma Republican Congress representative. Watts had played quarterback for the Oklahoma Sooners, a position where he had to make immediate recognitions based on film study and coaching to note defensive tendencies and real-time speed-reads of a constantly changing, often disguised defensive formation. It's a smart man's position, and I admired Watts's intelligence and fortitude in becoming the first African American Republican US Representative from south of the Mason-Dixon Line since Reconstruction. I disagreed with him on just about every political issue, and so I thought he might make a good participant on a conventional panel.

The other person was someone I'd met through NCTE, Sheridan Blau. At the time, he was director of UCSB's South Coast

Writing Project (SCWriP) and a veteran of many policy wars in California over the teaching and assessment of literature and writing. Sheridan was, like Watts, a smart guy. He was famously well-versed in the issues and loved a good disagreement. He seemed the ideal person to match wits with Watts in a discussion about how to conduct schooling in the early 1990s, when the Culture Wars were kicking into high gear and education was serving as a principal theater for playing out ideological battles across US society.

But when I approached Sheridan about coming to Oklahoma to discuss education with Watts, he said something like, "Sorry, I don't want to debate another politician." My understanding of his reluctance, and his decline of the invitation, was that politicians don't engage with opponents' ideas. Rather, they argue to win or to assert an ideological perspective on reality rather than to learn from or to even listen to what their opponent is saying. Simply having two people state and defend opposing points of view without recognizing and addressing their areas of difference, and possibility for synthesis, is not a worthwhile debate. For an exchange to succeed in advancing understandings, the antagonists need to listen to one another. If they simply talk past each other, they advance neither their own position nor that of the people in attendance. Without good listening and an ego that accommodates growth over certitude and victory, such a debate would have little value.

Sheridan's point was substantiated in another debate I did successfully organize for the OKCTE convention. I persuaded people from two very different perspectives on the teaching of high school English language arts to talk about the profession's purposes and practices. One set of speakers consisted of teachers who voiced a classroom perspective grounded in their experiences with adolescents and the structural constraints of working within public schools. I matched them with a university English professor who believed that secondary school teachers weren't preparing students well enough for college studies. The session went about as well as Sheridan would have predicted: The teachers emphasized the challenges faced in public education, the professor spoke from the ideal perspective of the university, neither side listened

except to refute, and the hour ended with far more frustration than fruition. So much for my ability to plan for a compelling conference experience.

These stories help me reflect on the theme of this essay, the disputatious personality as exemplified by Sheridan and the value of productive dispute to the advancement of ideas. They also demonstrate how simply planning for idea exchanges based on the presentation of opposing views does not necessarily produce anything new, satisfying, or compelling. I next ground this dynamic tension in a construct that was central to the worldview of L. S. Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist whose short, mercurial career spanned the early 1920s through his death at age 37 in 1934 from tuberculosis. From there, I move to a review of dialectics, the engagement of opposing ideas to produce something new in contrast with the tendency for opposing views to clash and remain unchanged. I explore the role of productive disagreement and inherent contradiction in teaching English language arts, focused on teaching writing and literature. Each field has grown through the engagement of opposing views, a phenomenon that characterized the National Writing Project's challenge to formalist orthodoxies that have often followed from socialization processes. Teaching literature has also involved competing philosophies that position teachers in their midst, resulting in contradictory practices that appear relationally and situationally, often without resolution. I conclude with an argument that a deep immersion in contradictory environments, aided by a disputatious personality, requires listening to advance the field beyond irreconcilable differences and toward synthesis and progress (Smagorinsky, 2023).

Vygotsky: Very Disputatious, Very Stimulating

Vygotsky argued with a lot of people through deep engagement and disagreement with the ideas of his day, often those of the era's most respected and titanic figures. He took on Freud, Pavlov, Piaget, and many others, disagreeing with a chutzpah that in a sense was shocking for a young man born and raised within the lowly social position limited to the Jewish people on the margins

of Tsarist Russia. Vygotsky and other Jewish people had been confined to the Pale of Settlement in Belarus, both to preserve the Christian purity of Russia and to make them easy targets for the deadly pogroms of the era.

Vygotsky survived the antisemitism of his day and region and the obscurity of his origins to rapidly ascend the ranks of psychology in the newly formed Soviet Union. He did not do so by being quiet and compliant. Even as a young outsider, he took on any idea he found inadequate. He led a movement that forced psychology to be more comprehensive in its scope, to become more historical in understanding the social conventions framing human development, to attend to the cultures produced by historical activity and how they shape societal and individual frames of mind, and to see any individual mind as situated within the contours provided by societies and communities.

Vygotsky typically presented his understandings in contrast with those of a contemporary giant. He would begin by reviewing someone's account of a psychological phenomenon in painstaking detail, engaging carefully, analytically, and thoughtfully with their stated understandings. From there, he enumerated the flaws in the conception to build an alternative based on what he considered better research. In doing so, he implemented a way of thinking typically ascribed to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a Prussian philosopher who lived from 1770–1831.

Hegel was a major influence on Karl Marx, who in turn provided the critical foundation for Soviet society and psychology; ironically, the Soviets in short order shut down dialectical thinking, imposing instead state dogma. What is often known as Hegel's dialectical formulation relied on the union of opposites, with a thesis-antithesis-synthesis process for development of productive human conceptions. Hegel never actually used the three terms in this fashion, leaving Marx to popularize them in his name (Benson, 2003). I next turn to dialectical materialism to illuminate the value of how I see Sheridan Blau's disputatious personality serving to advance understandings rather than, as is often the case in a polarized society, to leave two opposing camps shouting into the night and only producing more noise. Being disputatious does not mean someone is disagreeable or unpleasant. Rather, I use the term to characterize those who, like

Blau and Vygotsky, see disagreement as stimulating and formative in the development of their own perspectives. It is a quality that, channeled through productive discourse, advances not only oneself but potentially a field of scholarship and endeavor.

Dialectics

Dialectics involves the logic of change. The universe is not a static place but is always in flux. Not only is the material world continually shifting in relation to natural elements and human activity, but ideas are always evolving through the influence of volcanic cognitive eruptions, the erosion of established understandings, shifts in the ideological winds, and other factors. These environmental changes challenge the notion that knowledge is fixed and ready-made for people to accept wholly and without contestation, as claimed by those who assert that their positions are based on "settled science" (e.g., Stukey et al., 2019), a claim that is easily debunked by reading the history of any science as it has evolved over time.

Rather, the mind is always in action, along with everything else (Wertsch, 1999). Engels, Marx's intellectual companion, pithily states the issue when he characterizes dialectics as "nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought" (quoted in Miller, 1982, p. 106). There might be moments of apparent equilibrium and stasis, but these conditions are temporary lulls in the general turmoil of change and development, illusions that suggest greater stability than has ever actually occurred. One needn't be a Marxist in other respects to accept this axiom.

With nothing fixed and everything in motion, multiple ideas and realities can exist at the same time. They might appear in conventional argumentation or in narratives and their counternarratives. This multiplicity of perspectives provides the dynamic tension upon which dialectic materialism is coiled. Often, the ideological basis for contradictory ideas provides for more head-butting than interpenetration of minds. The Soviet insistence on the superiority of socialistic/communistic national means of economic organization and the Euro-American insistence on

the merits of capitalism have rarely come into true dialogue. Rather, the two positions' adherents argue that there is a forced choice between two incommensurate opposite conceptions. The merits and ideals of each are juxtaposed without engagement or respectful acknowledgment, at least among those voicing ideologies. This type of oppositional thinking, absent engagement, tends to reinforce ideologies rather than allowing them to evolve. Opposition remains firmly in place with each side seeking total victory.

Soviet architect Vladimir Lenin (1914/1965) characterized the dialectic approach as "the doctrine of the unity of opposites." Vygotsky (1999) described this union of opposites by saying, "great genius develops with the help of another great genius not so much by assimilation as by clashing. One diamond polishes another" (p. 121). The sort of unity available through the engagement of opposites has rarely been achieved in ideological conflicts, which often produce more wars than understandings. These wars might be armed conflicts or might be the sort of Culture Wars that undoubtedly led Sheridan Blau to assume that it would not be possible to have a productive exchange with a politician of contrary ideology, one whose discourse community is driven by winning more than learning, a problem not confined to any political party. As my own experiences can testify, it's also often the case among academics and educators to take hard and fast positions that confirm their expertise and support their egos rather than to engage thoughtfully with people they see as antagonists. As a result, the field has Reading Wars, Culture Wars, Math Wars, Science Wars, and wars for pretty much everything else that happens in school, often accompanied by the claim that one perspective is based on "settled science" that wins the day for its adherents. This sort of victorious stance represents the kind of disposition rejected by dialectical thinking.

Few of these conflicts create space for nonbinary thinking. The Reading Wars tend to align antagonists according to either a nature position or a nurture position (Yaden et al., 2021). The "Science of Reading" camp is largely biological, studying the brain to determine how to teach reading. The sociocultural camp is largely environmental, looking outside the human head to consider how to shift settings to better enable reading.

Advocates of both perspectives tend to talk past rather than with each other, resulting in binaries from which the wars are launched and conducted. Meanwhile, both the brain and the environment continue to matter in how people learn to read.

Polarized ideological positions too often do not provide the paradox available in dialectics that allows for contrary perspectives to coexist in a synthetic formulation. Not all perspectives, I should note, require careful listening and respectful attention. If you approach me with the argument that the earth is flat because it sure seems that way to you, then I will refer you to someone else for a discussion, because I've seen photographs, and the earth is round. The opposing perspective needs to have merit in order to provide the basis for a synthesis, and decisions about merit are often subjective. These perspectives might be fortified through argumentative moves, with evidence such as a photograph from space sustaining a position. They might be fortified with experiential stories whose resonance demonstrates a point, including anecdotes, thought experiments, and other narrative means. What matters is putting different reasonable understandings in dialogue to emerge with something more complete than either is alone.

The decade of the 2020s is deeply divided, suggesting that no middle ground—or more ideally, no new ground built on the shifting foundation of the old—is possible. A society rent by binary positioning cannot manifest the unity of opposites in either the material or the ideological world. If anything, it is designed to produce a winner whose scorched-earth tactics obliterate the enemy, allowing for no contrariness or dissent and creating the illusion of permanence. The world of the 2020s provides little space for growth in schools or society. It is an era of entrenchment from which little positive development is available. What follows is likely a continued state of stasis, albeit a temporary holding pattern that inevitably will shift as the environment changes its currents and contours over time.

The thesis-antithesis-synthesis is, in contrast, productive. Dialectical thought requires an understanding of both the thesis and the antithesis, the contradictory points in play, no matter what genre they appear in. It also requires practical evidence to support claims, which may come from conventional argumentation or

the force of a narrative presentation. Thinking thoughts alone is insufficient for promoting change; change requires activity in material contexts. Vygotsky (1987) was adamant on this point, while also valuing the abstraction available through education and other means of formal learning. But without practical application and empirical validation, abstract thinking is hollow and useless. At the same time, without abstraction, everyday conceptions are stuck in the context of their learning, with no way of extrapolating to new-but-similar circumstances. Both "scientific" (academic) and "spontaneous" (everyday) conceptions can guide life, especially when they work in tandem, in a dialectical relationship.

Vygotsky (1997) held views that no doubt run against some current conceptions but that fit with his emphasis on the unity of opposites and his understanding of the process of human development. For instance, he asserted that learning should not be too easy but rather benefits from overcoming impediments: "it is necessary to take care to create as many difficulties as possible in the child's education, as starting points for his thoughts. . . . If you would like a child to learn something well, take care to place obstacles in his path" (pp. 174–175). Contrast this view with the breezy understandings of the zone of proximal development in which teachers make learning smooth and direct via "scaffolding," Bruner's term for structuring learning activities to produce increasing independence after initial support (Wood et al., 1976; see Smagorinsky, 2018, for critiques of ZPD misinterpretations). To Vygotsky, however, overcoming obstacles is an important part of learning.

Dialectic Thinking in the English Language Arts

This excursion into the role of dialectic materialism comes in the context of my reflections on Sheridan Blau's career. Sheridan has always been a ready disputant with a challenging stance in high-stakes discussions. The field has often embraced cooperative and collaborative approaches under the assumption that they are nicer and more affirming than sharply argued counterpoints or challenging counternarratives. They are also prone to the

manipulations of people who know how to operate in groups while maintaining a patina of collegiality, but that's another story.

Sheridan is not uncooperative, but he is argumentative, and that's a good thing. He made his most important contributions by questioning conventional wisdom and the passing fads of education. He left this legacy both in his interpersonal engagement with people and on the pages of books or articles (e.g., Blau, 2003). Such a disposition can be destructive to groups when the argumentative sort is a poor listener with an ego too great to create space for accommodation and respectful disagreement. When ideas clash, when iron sharpens iron or diamonds polish diamonds, they can't simply collide and bounce back to their points of origin. They need to emerge all the better for the confrontation via a new understanding grounded in a synthesis. I think that Sheridan has succeeded in policy discussions because he is both assertive and open-minded in considering whether a unity of opposites might be possible, pushing hard against received wisdom to see how it manages when under stress. As a literary scholar, he was conversant with both argumentative and narrative modes of ideation. They needn't be considered mutually exclusive, as Bruner (1986) positioned them. Rather, they often work in tandem, with argumentative evidence provided by stories and stories implying arguments.

Teaching Writing

I suspect that Sheridan was attracted to the field of English education because of its practical nature. Like many people of his generation, his doctorate and early scholarship were in the area of literary analysis, dissertating on "Texts and Contexts: Studies Toward a Reading of George Herbert." People are often surprised to find that George Hillocks, Charles Bazerman, and other writing researchers of their era had no formal training in writing theory and research. Rather, they did conventional critical studies of literary texts and authors in graduate school. When I got my master's degree under Hillocks in 1976–77, I was often treated to his views based on his 1970 dissertation, "The Synthesis of Art and Ethic in Tom Jones," the novel by Henry Fielding.

To generate a field of composition theory and research, these scholars and teachers had little precedent. There was such a dearth of formal research that, until 1963, it had never been organized into a comprehensive body of work. At that point, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer combed through widely scattered writing studies, many of which were unpublished dissertations, to draw conclusions about the research base and to create a foundation for a formal field of study. Virtually all writing research to that point had been conducted on the teaching of writing in schools and first-year composition courses in college. The pioneers of writing theory, research, and practice launched their antithesis against the thesis of formalism, the dominant approach to that point that emphasized the imitation of models, instruction in rules of grammar and usage, and other formalist values underlying much school instruction. The process movement that emerged in the wake of Braddock et al. included both formal research that relied on experimental studies and methods adapted from anthropology, communication, and other fields; and teachers' "lore" (North, 1987) based in experiential knowledge, working from testimonials, narratives, and inquiries to challenge the assumptions and norms of formalism.

The launch of the National Writing Project in 1974 was among the largest and best-networked efforts designed to challenge the dominant orthodoxy of the era. It was practitioner-driven, urging teachers to become one another's critical friends and colleagues in identifying effective ways to teach writing. If anything, university-based people were marginal to this effort beyond orchestrating sites within which teachers were elevated to the status of the most knowledgeable and respected authorities about how to teach writing. At the time, experimental research dominated the investigative world, and Graves's (1979) admonition that "research doesn't have to be boring" characterized how many classroom teachers felt about the sterile tone of the research reports, which seemed stale and lifeless in contrast with the teeming, fecund vitality of classrooms. These tensions were among many that emerged when I began teaching in the mid-1970s, and many remain in play a half-century later.

The formalist monolith provided the established base that needed to be displaced in order for students to become liberated

from the constraints of correctness and rigid, mimetic roles. Both traditions and teachers themselves were considered the problem to be overcome. Elbow (1973) argued that students might be better off without teachers, writing themselves into their own process instead of following instructional dictates. Graves (1983) described himself as damaged by negative feedback from his teachers. Emig (1971) described teachers as "neurotic" practitioners of the five-paragraph theme and other strict forms (p. 99). They were among many who questioned both the traditions governing the English language arts and the people who taught it as they sought alternatives to the stultifying effects of the formalist emphasis. Their general solution was to emphasize "the writing process"—only one—consisting of a series of steps that writers go through regardless of the task or setting. These views became part of the new orthodoxies developed within the National Writing Project and among its advocates, the antithesis to the formalist thesis.

Yesterday's antithesis becomes today's thesis. The assumptions behind both formalism and the mimetic tradition, and the new orthodoxies about a single writing process, provided the thesis that I was educated to question through my studies with George Hillocks (1986; 1995). George was concerned that this general teaching approach was insensitive to the specific demands of tasks such as argumentation, narrative, and other genres (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992). Like the NWP architects, he believed that an exclusive emphasis on formalism was somewhere between ineffective and damaging to writers. Where he departed was in his view, which he developed as a junior high school English teacher in the 1950s and 1960s in Euclid, Ohio, that one general process does not take into account the particular strategies that benefit writers engaged with a writing task like personal narrative or extended definition. Simply knowing "the writing process" formula of prewriting, drafting, etc. was inadequate to specific tasks. This insight became the basis for my own doctoral dissertation (Smagorinsky, 1991).

This brief historical review suggests how in the field of writing theory, research, and practice, movements have developed in dialogue with prior movements. More recent challenges to the perspectives developed in the 1960s–1980s, regardless of which

process theory one followed, would emphasize such factors as social positioning, racialized means of engagement with ideas, cultural discourse conventions, gendered ways of experiencing schooling, and other issues that originate outside the building and surface in classroom life. The hegemony of classroom instruction as the focus of writing studies, designed to find "what works" in writing instruction regardless of context, further encouraged the study of writing in the professions, in communities, in everyday activities, and in other settings. The assumption behind this expansion of sites for writing research was that knowing how people write outside school should help direct writing instruction in school (Smagorinsky, 2006).

Since the 1990s, various semiotic conceptions have shifted attention away from writing altogether and toward other sign systems, especially but not limited to those afforded by technology. After a few decades in which the seductive lure of multimodality took over composition studies, a refocus on verbal writing has emerged, as indicated by a 2022 communication from the Writing and Literacies Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association in which the leadership encouraged their membership to pay more attention to writing. Each of these shifts has served as the antithesis to an established thesis, helping to produce a new synthesis that provides a provisional state of stability awaiting the next challenge and development.

The National Writing Project and the Challenge to Orthodoxy

Sheridan Blau played a key role in the emergence of the National Writing Project through his founding and directing—with his colleagues Carol Dixon, Stephen Marcus, and Jack Phreaner—the South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP) at UCSB in 1979. It was among the original sites in what became a national network of writing teachers. Like other NWP sites, SCWriP challenged the orthodoxies of the day, a task well-suited to the eminently argumentative Dr. Blau. One doctrine of the day was that expertise resides in university professors, with teachers positioned as empty vessels waiting to be filled with the nectar of university research.

The investment of authority in teachers was a major departure from that historical set of relationships, and Sheridan's role in this shift suggests his interest in and ability for crossing boundaries and building communities, along with an emphasis on practical application of the abstractions and ideals that typify university thinking. The hierarchy placing universities above schools diminished teachers' knowledge and experience. This arrangement was predicated on the assumption that the best information about classrooms comes from detached outsiders with formal research training who drop in to study them, then drop out and rarely return to share their findings or have them validated by those whose work produced them. Spending time in schools after the data are collected carries no reward in the university evaluation system. Prestige and promotions follow from publications, so there's no reward-incentive to motivate a return to share and discuss findings with the people whose teaching and learning enabled the study and to get insights from the people responsible for the data.

NWP sites further contested the instructional dominance of formalism, replacing it with a process model associated with Elbow (1973) and others who argued against teacher direction and for uninhibited student-directed composition available through "the writing process." These centerpieces of NWP workshops and institutes even reached the contents of writing textbooks, which began including some attention to brainstorming, drafting, response, revision, and publication while maintaining a foundation of formalism to satisfy the dominant tradition. The two often rested together uneasily, but the insistence by many in the profession that formalism was insufficient provided one avenue toward breaking up its monopoly. The synthesis available in textbooks, and no doubt classrooms, was a bit lumpy, but it was a start.

There is a danger when new orthodoxies emerge. Egotism, consulting fees, fame, and other benefits become available to those who propound the new truths. But those truths are not always so self-evident, and they benefit from skepticism from a committed, disputatious sort of person. Sheridan Blau never got too comfortable with the doctrines that replaced the straightjacket of formalism. I always admired the way he

was intellectually restless and didn't rule out a perspective just because of the location of its source. This disposition no doubt helped him to elevate teachers in the SCWriP to the highest levels of authority. But that didn't lead him to reject other sources of knowledge, including university writing researchers. He went to the conferences and didn't just bask in his own celebrity but stuck his head into the mouth of whatever lion he thought might be worth a closer look. I first met him at an annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a place far removed from the task of teaching writing and engaging with literature with adolescents in public schools. He went because it was a site where ideas came into contact, where engagement with contrasting views permeated the program and conference hallways, albeit with various orthodoxies in the air that stunted rather than stimulated new thinking.

Socialization and Orthodoxy

Pushing forward can require questioning accepted wisdom, including your own and that of your tribe. I once introduced George Hillocks by reflecting on a principle from his teaching, "Always examine assumptions, especially your own." I was socialized into Western conventions for argumentation derived from the Age of Reason and its presumed enlightenment via rational, scientific thought. This tradition valorized logical argumentation at the expense of narrative modes of thinking, even as literary study tends to involve both. My own socialization in university studies, however, emphasized formalism, first the New Criticism permeating the Kenyon College faculty and then the neo-Aristotelian formalism of the University of Chicago department of English, whose courses I took as a master's student (Smagorinsky, 2024). I brought this value into my initial teaching before broadening my appreciation for other ways of engaging with literature, even as I'd been taught by Hillocks other ways of engaging with literature: writing alternative endings to stories, rewriting a literary narrative from another speaker's perspective, producing a parody of an author, and so on. Socialization can run pretty deep in one's soul.

I learned argumentative conventions within the tradition captured by Toulmin (1958), who formulated argumentation as involving claims that something is so, data that supports the claim, warrants that render data into evidence for the claim, backing that supports the warrant, a modality that establishes the certainty of the argument, and the rebuttal of counterarguments. The idea of rebutting counterarguments might fit with the dialectical value of listening, depending on how a counterargument is treated. If it's summarily dismissed, then the speaker or writer is probably less interested in listening and more interested in winning, and a synthesis will be sacrificed to the need for the rewards following from victory.

I relied on Toulmin, who influenced Hillocks (e.g., Hillocks, 2011), when I taught argumentative writing to students. Toulmin's claim-data-warrant model is built into the American Psychological Association (APA) text structure (Bazerman, 1988) and has provided the basis for major studies of the teaching of argument in schools (Newell et al., 2015). It is the general means by which I've mounted scholarly arguments in my career, at least when writing for journals and book publishers. But it's not how every culture engages in argumentation, a problem when a cultural approach to persuasion is considered un-Toulminian and therefore dubious in logic. As is often the case, the nondominant culture is at the mercy of the gatekeepers of the institution, and other ways of being are considered intellectually weak.

Although I tend to avoid gross cultural generalizations, I have been persuaded that African American discourse genres do not necessarily follow the conventions of Western academic knowledge displays. I will use what I know of this genre to illustrate the notion that not all groups of people do things the same or according to dominant culture traditions, even as ethnocentrism often produces the assumption that my people and I represent the crown of creation. African American argumentation outside the academy may involve different procedures from those described by Toulmin. Lee (1993; cf. Gates, 1989) relates how one such tradition involves signifying, the exchange of ritual insults, a way of making a point that violates the culture of politeness that governs US schools and is considered by some as a form of bullying (e.g., Rivers & Espelage, 2013). Kochman

(1981) found that in public forums involving Black and white community residents, Black speakers were more passionate and considered the more reserved white speakers to lack commitment; in the same discussions, white speakers were more detached and interpreted the more emotional Black speakers as being illogical. Majors (2015) found that in community settings, Black speakers tend to justify their beliefs through personal narratives of their experiences, call-and-response patterns originating in Black churches that include others as participants, the signifying practices described by Lee and Gates, performative presentations of views and narratives, and other aspects of African American cultural norms.

Arguments in this sense don't follow Toulmin's reliance on detached analysis but value passionate, performative, story-driven, experiential expression of a perspective on social issues. In school, this means of argumentation tends to be viewed as irrational, overly emotional, and inappropriate, such that students from outside the dominant culture are obligated to check their socialization at the door and act like a different sort of person in order to be recognized as academically sound. This structural bias is built into schools and society and is among the means by which white ways are reified and other ways are penalized, another example of the institutional racism that puts students on unequal footing in school (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

If Western conventions are the thesis, and the African American discourse genre is the antithesis, is a synthesis available? Not in current times, when white supremacy is reinforced through the national uprising against Critical Race Theory, the Diversity-Equity-Inclusion movement, the presence in libraries and curricula of books that present a Black perspective, and other challenges to the established hierarchies that have long governed schools. This problem illustrates the ways in which entrenched battles between polarized positions work against the sort of synthesis that characterizes a dialectic society in which growth and change are understood as normal, and stasis is mistaken for established knowledge or eternal truth or settled science that must not be violated.

Two issues emerge from this contrast. First, it's very challenging for a nondominant perspective or set of practices

to make headway against an established culture's orthodoxies, making it difficult for these African American discourse practices to be valued and rewarded in school. That is, a deeply embedded thesis may be difficult to challenge in institutions with a viable antithesis offered by a minoritized population. Second, without that challenge, conventional wisdom can never be questioned, rather serving as the only option within a doctrinaire system. How one argues or how one narrates is a point to be argued, and by listening to a perspective that ran contrary to what I had been taught to value, I broadened my understanding of educational and societal processes through which advantages are maintained and alternatives rejected. My synthesis from listening has, I hoped, broadened my mind and opened me to ways of being that schools have rarely endorsed or rewarded.

Teaching Literature

A major tension in the teaching of literature has long bedeviled the field. It is typically represented as a binary choice between strict formalism, as available in New Criticism and its emphasis on close reading of the technical structure of a work, and reader-response theories that make the reader's subjective experiences the most critical factor in a literary reading. Studying form is regarded by many as passé, an artifact of the days of structuralism and formalism's hold on school and university literary teaching. The reader-response alternative in its most radical forms makes the text almost incidental to the more important processes occurring when readers look inward to explore their feelings, stimulated by something in the text (e.g., Bleich, 1975). The polarity has often produced an imperative to make a choice between analyzing the text and analyzing the self. This tension has produced in many teachers and readers a contradiction: They believe in the reader's need to personalize readings while simultaneously pulled by the gravity of tradition to emphasize conventional readings based on the arrangement of textual signs and structures so as to understand the author's intentional orchestration of features (Rabinowitz, 1987).

What is a teacher to do when forced to choose between seemingly incommensurate options positioned as polar opposites? In practice, they typically do both, with or without a formal resolution. In the 1990s, I was part of a project in which such inconsistency was characterized as "doubleness," with the suggestion that such inconsistencies indicated a dim mind, a bad compromise, almost a moral failure (Marshall et al., 1995). Teachers who emphasized conventional readings while also saying that they valued open-ended, student-generated responses in the constructivist tradition appeared to be unreflective, professing to honor two conflicting paradigms at once, often without recognizing the contradiction. Rather, we assumed, it was more responsible to teach in one way or the other, preferably in student-centered, constructivist ways.

That was then. This is now. I see it differently these days after spending several decades studying how teachers account for their instruction and reading more extensively in various fields taking a cultural-historical approach (synthesized in Smagorinsky, 2020). Those experiences have taught me that human contradiction is to be expected, not criticized. Walt Whitman wrote in "Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself;/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)" As do I, and as do you. People are contradictory, not because of intellectual feebleness but because they are immersed in contradictory social and ideological environments. Evolutionary biologists Dutton and Heath (2010) conclude that

> multicultural individuals are able to shift between multiple cultural frames depending on which one is cued by their current situation. Interestingly, even monocultural American individuals shift their self-construals, value endorsements, and social judgments depending on situational cues . . . . [I]t is computationally impossible for an individual to ensure complete coherence among any reasonable number of elements. (pp. 60–61)

Cultures, they argue, are always in flux, producing shifting environments that cue a variety of responses that may not be consistent with one another, no matter how principled a person might try to be. This acknowledgment of the inevitability of

human contradiction in the face of multiple environmental forces is available through Bakhtin's (1986) notion of heteroglossia, the streams of discourse that infiltrate people's minds and shape their thinking without being consistent. It is also aligned with the assumption in dialectical materialism that the world is always in flux and that it is possible for more than one thing to be true at the same time.

The human world is thus contradictory, and people are inevitably involved in competing theses about the most fruitful way of understanding human action, both as individuals and as part of cultural groups and their histories and traditions. Teachers of literature might take comfort in this fact, given that they might have been exposed to a number of critical traditions that suggest very different ways of engaging with texts, each providing its own lens and assumptions. They are also caught amidst competing settings, such as the tendency for their university training to emphasize progressivism and constructivism and their school environments that tend to require formalism and conventional interpretations of texts. It's common for school mission statements to state the importance of recognizing individual differences while imposing rules that require conformity. It's not fair, I think, to criticize teachers who are caught in these ideological clashes for doing contradictory things. It's computationally impossible for them to do otherwise.

Vygotsky (1971) provides additional insights that suggest contradiction is not simply a byproduct of heteroglossic conflicts but a fundamental property of literary art (cf. Smagorinsky, 2011). Traditionally, he argued, critics had sought to explain "the harmony of form and content" in artistic works, as formalists do in resolving tensions. In contrast, Vygotsky argued that "form may be in conflict with the content, struggle with it, overcome it" to produce a "dialectic contradiction between content and form" that provides an inherent paradox, the "inner incongruity between the material and the form" (p. 160). This internal contradiction is what produces conflicting emotions in the reader. A work of art produces to Vygotsky "a state of emotional and philosophical complexity which does not succumb to rational analysis" (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 28).

This very early scholarship by Vygotsky—his dissertation on *The Psychology of Art* with an emphasis on literature—relies on the thesis-antithesis-synthesis formulation to account for two seemingly contradictory issues at once. First, he attends to the formal structure of a text, without which there is no art from which to generate a response. The task of the reader is not so much to resolve contradictions between content and form or within content or form. Rather, it is to experience emotions that follow from these contradictions and to have an emotional experience he calls a *catharsis*, which follows from the ways in which a person generalizes from personal emotions to higher human truths; it is different from Aristotle's construct of a cathartic purge or purification. "The emotions caused by art," Vygotsky says, "are intelligent emotions" (p. 212). The formal properties of a text are critical factors in producing this emotional response.

Catharsis involves "an affective contradiction, causes conflicting feelings, and leads to the short-circuiting and destruction of these emotions" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 213). This emotional response produces "a complex transformation of feelings" (p. 214) and results in an "explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions" (p. 215). Art, he asserts, "complements life by expanding its possibilities" (p. 247) as one overcomes, resolves, and regulates feelings through a process of generalization of those feelings to a higher plane of experience.

Teaching literature is thus an inherently contradictory act. Texts are internally contradictory, which provides them with the potential for elevating a reader's emotional response and producing "intelligent emotions." Teachers may have been socialized to respond to multiple competing traditions that produce tensions in how to teach properly. They may be under pressure to teach toward formalism for standardized assessments and to teach toward constructivism to serve the ideology of progressive organizations and other sources. Policies and practices designed by different people produce different influences on teachers' work with students. People with no stake in actual school teaching but great interest in selling products and consultations need to promote their own services by caricaturing other approaches as foolhardy and counterproductive. Teaching consistently within such an environment is likely to be virtually impossible.

A disputatious personality can serve this conundrum in different ways. Those who argue to win are likely to occupy polarized ground, making little effort to listen to and engage with opposing ideas. Rather, they tend to identify a potential weakness and use it as the synecdoche for the whole of an opposing position. What remains is a thesis and an antithesis, with no synthesis possible because nothing new is sought; the goal is to win, not to enrich a perspective. In such a case, there are only winners and losers. When educators butt heads only to bounce back from one another to their original positions, the field gets stale. The disputatious personality who listens and sees argumentation as a means for both persuasion and personal development—traits I admire in Sheridan Blau—has a much better possibility of advancing knowledge, their own and that of others.

Sheridan's legacy is indebted to his ability to hold multiple views at once, to embrace contradiction and interrogate it, to recognize the merits of seemingly incompatible traditions, and to emerge from contentions with a clearer understanding. We could all benefit from such a disposition. I'm glad to have had Sheridan as an inspiration to try to develop it in myself.

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