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Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning

Edited by **Arnetha F. Ball and Sarah Warshauer Freedman**

Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive and Computational Perspectives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. 272. Hardback \$60.00, paper \$28.99. ISBN 0521831059 (hardback), 0521537886 (paper).

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Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher and literary critic who lived from 1895 to 1975. His ideas, which share concepts with the social constructivist school of thought, were unknown to the West until first French, then English translations were published after his death (Wikipedia). However, interest in his work, especially in the world of education, has grown tremendously in the last 20 years; after I began reading this book, I came across references to Bakhtin in two or three other works, which whet my appetite to know more and inspired me to persevere through chapters which are less applicable to literacy and linguistic fieldwork.

Although the intended audience for this work appears to be researchers and educators working in formal contexts, mostly at the university or secondary school levels, fieldworkers in non-formal, non-US contexts will find a few articles which should provide food for reflection on practices, especially in those half-dozen articles which include case studies from other countries. Those interested in ESL, in bilingual education, or in the impact of technology upon literacy education will also find pertinent articles. An additional group who will find this work worthy of attention is sociolinguists, as the impact of language on thinking and identity is a major theme.

Overview

This volume is a collection of articles which explore concepts developed by Bakhtin. The editors' purpose is to seek to know "how effective communication leads to the development of language, literacy, and learning" in the context of a world with mass migrations (p. 4). It is divided into four parts: Ideologies in Dialogue: Theoretical Considerations; Voiced, Double Voiced, and Multivoiced Discourses in our Schools; Heteroglossia in a Changing World; and A Closing Thought on Bakhtinian Perspectives. The first three, in keeping with Bakhtinian philosophy, end with an essay-style response to the articles in the section as well as to e-mail conversations with their authors entitled "Voices in Dialogue."

Most authors describe the Bakhtinian concepts upon which their research is based. These include dialogism (in the Bakhtinian sense), heteroglossia, voicing, social languages, and authoritative vs. internally persuasive discourses. Many describe case studies in which these concepts are applied, either in the construction of the project or in its analysis. The New Literacy Studies approach to literacy undergirds the research of several of the articles.

Ideologies in Dialogue

The first article (“Ideological Becoming: Bakhtinian Concepts to Guide the Study of Language, Literacy, and Learning”), authored by the editors of this volume, seeks to elaborate a research agenda for Bakhtinian theorists, one which would “focus more directly on how people can and do communicate across” various divides. The basic ideas of Bakhtin are described. In seeking to understand how people develop personal worldviews, or in Bakhtinian vocabulary “ideologies,” researchers need to seek ways to help educators and policy makers see diversity as a resource, understand the mechanisms for growth and change, and understand how tensions and conflicts inherent in learning are creatively managed. Two international research projects, one set in both Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina and the other in South Africa, illustrate the importance of such research.

The next article, an essay, is entitled “Dewey and Bakhtin in Dialogue: From Rosenblatt to a Pedagogy of Literature as Social, Aesthetic Practice.” Dressman compares and contrasts first Dewey’s views with Rosenblatt’s use of them in literature education, then Bakhtin’s conception of literary reading with Dewey’s conception of literature experience. He finds several points of congruence between Dewey and Bakhtin that support his plea for a pedagogy of literature in U.S. secondary schools that unites an individual’s reading pleasure with his comprehension and with the historical and social implications of the work.

The author of “Intertextualities: Volosinov, Bakhtin, Literary Theory, and Literacy Studies” is a researcher and teacher of composition and rhetoric. Bazerman explores supportive notions of Volosinov and Bakhtin regarding the non-independence of any text from other texts, and offers the dimensions of intertextual studies he believes most useful for students who must read and write for academic purposes. These dimensions include how a text is deployed in another text as well as the relation of all other texts to the one being read or written.

“The Teaching of Academic Language to Minority Second Language Learners” by Valdés is a call for teachers of English language learners to dialogue with professional communities beyond their own, to include regular classroom teachers as well as ESL teachers at each level (elementary, secondary, university), in order to determine both a common definition of “academic English” and an effective strategy for teaching it. I highly recommend this one for anyone working in second language learning.

Voiced, Double Voiced, and Multivoiced Discourses in Our Schools

Landay looks at “Performance as the Foundation for a Secondary School Literacy Program: A Bakhtinian Perspective.” This is a case study of a program in which understanding of texts is voiced through the dialogue of the performing arts. She shows how the Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) of the performance ensemble enhances accountability and receptivity to new ideas.

In “Double Voiced Discourse: African American Vernacular English as Resource in Cultural Modeling Classrooms,” Lee describes a case study in which two different “social languages” (in this case, standard English and AAVE) are used, in dialogue, in order to help students develop literary reasoning. Sociolinguistic issues of power and identity are also addressed.

Knoeller examines the role of dialogue in generating rethinking in “Narratives of Rethinking: The Inner Dialogue of Classroom Discourse and Student Writing.” The case study describes a classroom in which students write, discuss, write, discuss, and write about the text they’ve read. He shows how students change their mind about literature over time in response to classmates’ views and how they articulate in writing and discussion their ‘rethinking’.

Professional development is the focus of Greenleaf and Katz's article "Ever Newer Ways to Mean: Authoring Pedagogical Change in Secondary Subject-Area Classrooms." They examine how Bakhtinian concepts of authoring and dialogism explain the transformations which took place within teachers and their classrooms when they learned to give responsibility to students for their learning, largely through encouraging their dialogue with classmates and literature as well as teachers.

Heteroglossia in a Changing World

Mahiri seeks to show how web-based instruction enhances dialogue among the community of pre-service teachers and positively influences their thinking about urban education in "New Teachers for New Times: The Dialogical Principle in Teaching and Learning Electronically." He argues that not just new pedagogical tools but new pedagogy is essential for the future of education and believes that Bakhtinian principles can guide the development of such a pedagogy.

In "Is Contradiction Contrary?" Sperling shows how teachers, in their thinking about student engagement and achievement in reading and writing and about assessment of the students' work, often hold contradictory positions. She invokes Bakhtin's perspectives on dialogue and heteroglossia to show that this should be expected and normal, and therefore part of the "conceptual frameworks" used by researchers in literacy education.

Kalman gives a thought-provoking "Bakhtinian Perspective on Learning to Read and Write Late in Life." Using a case study from Mexico, she demonstrates that learning to read and write involves a transformation in how adults see themselves as they dialogue with themselves, with the world around them that has always perceived them as having little worth, and with the written word. Thus, they not only learn new skills, but new ways of positioning themselves in relation to the world around them, and of constructing a new self-identity.

Gee, in "New Times and New Literacies," focuses on mediated identity issues. He describes the differences in knowledge and literacies required by commodity-based economic systems (the 'old times') versus knowledge-based economic systems (the 'new times'). The latter requires the construction of multiple identities for success, which may be done through dialogue with established authorities from culture and history as well as through interaction with others simultaneously creating meaning.

Closing Thought on Bakhtinian Perspectives

Moroson draws together the perspectives of this volume in "The Process of Ideological Becoming." The development of human beliefs and thought processes, or 'ideological becoming', occurs as students – and other people – dialogue with the authoritative discourses of their home culture, with each other and with literature. Schools and teaching methods need to be transformed, as demonstrated in other articles, in order to facilitate this process.

Final thoughts

While not all the concepts (e.g., chronotope) discussed in this book are likely to impact basic ways of thinking about literacy, language learning, or literature, many have potential for impacting the way we look at what goes on in classrooms, no matter where in the world they are found. Dialogue with others: how important is it to include, not only in school classrooms, but also in adult literacy centers, in order to ensure that thinking, not just skills, are taught? Have we thought about how acquisition of literacy influences conceptions of self as well as of the wider world? Fieldworkers need to move beyond traditional conceptions of literacy to the idea of literacy as a way of being and maneuvering in the world: let's dialogue about how to get there.

References

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