# Conceptualizing a Whole-Class Learning Space: A Grand Dialogic Zone[1]

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*The two lead recipients of this year's Purves Award reflect on their work on "Teaching English in Untracked Classrooms" (2005) and look to the conceptual horizons of their ongoing work.*

> People's ideas change when they get new ideas or new information, or see somebody's perspective . . . My thinking has changed throughout the year . . . [it has] changed when I read people's logs, and when we had discussions in class. It's why I had so many embellishments.
>
> —Charlotte, Verda Delp's 8th-grade English student

Verda Delp asked her 8th graders, over and over again across the year, to read their writing and the writing of others, to embody and think and talk and write about their ideas and the ideas of others—to contemplate, to interpret, to re-interpret and then to add to what they had written, to "embellish" their thinking and their writing with newfound words and ideas. Like Charlotte, so too do we engage in these activities as we "embellish" our original thinking about teaching and learning in the untracked English classroom with our most recent contemplations.

We are grateful for this opportunity to return to our article, "Teaching English in Untracked Classrooms" (2005), and to think again about our ideas, to provide further reflections on our findings and our conclusions, and to portray how our thinking has changed over time. We are especially honored by the Alan C. Purves Award Committee's belief that our work will impact educational practice.

In this reflective essay, we will focus our attention on the whole-class learning space. Managing a whole-class space comprised of a diverse student population (and we would argue that all classes are diverse) raises many issues for teachers as they struggle to create opportunities for meaningful interactions for their stu-

dents. In the whole-class learning space, which ultimately is co-constructed by the teacher and the students, teachers must consider how to meet a range of student needs at once; they must consider how to meet those needs in an equitable and fair way; they must account for the coming together of many voices and for orchestrating how those voices can support one another; they must move the group forward, and support and structure and push further forward its individual members.

We have named this kind of whole-class space "a grand dialogic zone" (GDZ). The notion of a GDZ emerged as we examined our previous findings about Delp's teaching and her students' learning and as we tried to re-envision the classroom in terms of movement forward, not just of individual students, but also of the whole class.

The word "grand" leads us to focus on the ecology of the whole classroom. "Grand" also connotes for us the energy of a collective space in which the power of the community and the voices that comprise it come together to create and support opportunities for learning. Perhaps most important, though, is the "grand" nature of the ideas that hold the community together, ideas such as dignity, struggle, integrity, compassion, and respect. Delp introduced these ideas as part of a yearlong study of literature and writing, emphasizing, over and over again, their "grand" significance in relation to literary characters' lives and the students' own lives. Delp supported students' appropriation of these "grand" ideas through what are considered usual activities in the English classroom—almost daily interpretive writing about literary texts, reading and responding to the writing of others, talking informally, and participating in large-group discussions about literary texts. Delp's insistence on students taking on "grand" ideas and struggling with their meaning across time, texts, and activities, however, intertwined the activities and made them interdependent. Ultimately, the "grand" ideas served to construct, bind, reconstruct, and further bind the community itself.

The word "dialogic" signifies for us the fact that we do not focus on the individual alone but on the individual as part of a larger social matrix. Further, the concept of dialogism, with its inherent multivocality, helps us think about the ways students participate in the classroom, particularly how their voices come together and intermingle to organize and support learning. The concept of dialogism, and its echoes of Bakhtin's (1981) theories of ideas composed of multiple voices, also provides a way for us to think about the interactive struggles associated with learning, how to manage (but not necessarily resolve) the inevitable conflicts that arise as students struggle to make meaning. Moreover, the notion of dialogism reminds us to consider the positive power of many voices coming together, showing their different histories, perspectives, and points of view.

Finally, the term "zone" recalls Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), the space where a task can be performed only with assistance and

where the assistance leads to independent performance. The term "zone" focuses our attention squarely on learning as it transpires within the interweaving activities in the classroom. The "zone" encompasses the individual, the group, and the activities themselves, as they come together, interact, and change across time. The "zone" ultimately points us to a focus on how students gain access to the worlds of academic literacy, books, and ideas.

To push our thinking further, we now reexamine two key aspects of the GDZ: the relationship between the group and the individual, and the nature of the ZPD within the GDZ, including the roles the teacher and students play. After that, we turn to neo-Vygotskian and Bakhtinian theory as we situate our work in the context of activity theory and consider possibilities for future research.

Figuring out the relationship between the individual and the group is a challenge. Many previous studies using a Vygotskian theoretical frame looked only from the point of view of the individual, for all practical purposes not considering the dynamic of the whole class or the practices that constitute it. As Cazden (1996) concluded, "To my knowledge [and also to our knowledge], Vygotsky does not discuss assistance to learners' ZPD's in a group context" (p. 175). We noted this problem in "Teaching English in Untracked Classrooms" (2005), as we observed that many studies "focus on dyadic or small-group interactions (see Cazden, 1988, for a review of studies of this sort)" (p. 69).

In our 2005 article, we described the building of the classroom community in some detail, and we focused on ways Delp's whole-group structure, with common activities for all students, equalized opportunity for the individual members. We paid attention to how individuals "latched on" to the whole-group activities in their own ways and how Delp helped them challenge themselves to move beyond what they could do alone. In her recently completed dissertation (2005), Delp reflected on how she envisioned this interplay:

> Each day when I stand before my students, I struggle to keep in mind what it is I want to have happen for the class as a whole and what it is I want for each of my students as individuals. I also try to hold on to—and to communicate—my belief in the good intentions of my students, my expectation that each of them will come along with me on this literary journey of ours, and that each of them, in the discrete ways that reflect their individual academic, socio-cultural and historical ways of being, will create a place for him or herself in our academic classroom community. These concerns of mine for both the individual and the group imbue every aspect of my thinking about my teaching and my students' learning. These ideals guide us on our complicated meaning-making journey together in the classroom. (p. 18)

As a teacher, Delp focuses both on the group and on the individuals that comprise it. She is concerned with individual learning and, as part of that, with each individual being able to "create a place for him or herself in our academic class-

room community." That place will be related to the student's "academic, sociocultural, and historical ways of being." Importantly, Delp has faith in all of her students' "good intentions" and in the fact that each of them will participate, or in her words, "come along with me on this literary journey of ours." In "Teaching English in Untracked Classrooms," we showed how the power of the community functioned to move its members forward.

As we have continued to reflect on the multiple and complex interactions within Delp's whole-class learning space, we have come to think of it as multilayered, consisting simultaneously of interacting individuals and also of this more difficult-to-define whole-class interaction. This multilayered complex—this GDZ—was dynamic and ever-changing, both in response to the diachronic forward movement of the group and to the synchronic voices within the group at a given moment in time. Individual students functioned within the whole-class space—responding to it, constituting it, shaping and reshaping it, and influencing Delp's ongoing structuring of it.

Embellishment of log writing, an almost daily activity in Delp's class, provides an illustration of how students participated in activities as individuals and how those interactions layered one upon another to create the forward movement of the group. For this activity, students revisited their logs to write about new ideas they had gathered from others—from reading and responding to other students' logs, reading and listening to comments from other students and Delp, and informal discussions with Delp and other students. Their new thinking, in this case as it was represented in individual students' embellishments, became a part of whole-class discussions, further log writing, map making, and on and on across activities. Across time, these synchronic moments came together in multiple layers to move the group forward.

Considering this dynamic complex of interacting activities prompted us to think further about the meanings of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, particularly the role of the teacher and learners in these teaching-learning interactions. In our 2005 article, our observations led us to complicate usual applications of Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD. In line with our observations of learning in Delp's whole-class context, we focused attention on how she supported individuals to move forward during whole-group activities:

> She assumed that students would find the zone where they would be challenged and that they would work within that zone, with her support and encouragement. She further assumed that no other person, not even she, could know the learners' ZPD as precisely as the learner. (p. 120)

Unlike most characterizations of teaching within the ZPD that place responsibility for knowing the ZPD on the teacher, Delp understood that she had to organize her whole-class context and her curriculum so that the students could "assume the

responsibility of finding their own ZPD" (p. 120). She believed that through interactions with other students, the curriculum, and herself, her students would find ways to create opportunities for themselves that would allow them to work within their ZPDs. When Delp asked her students to embellish their logs, as we explained earlier, she placed them in a position to create such opportunities for themselves and receive the help they needed. Delp saw her role as organizing activities, creating curriculum, and providing opportunities over time to enable her students to take hold of the curriculum. In this way, she created a learning space where each student and the group could move forward and join with her to reconstitute the space in increasingly complex and diverse ways. Individual students negotiated within the GDZ, and Delp supported them as they challenged themselves. As we wrote in our 2005 article, teachers need to provide the structuring of meaningful curriculum and then "[w]ithin the activity system, teachers can provide needed tools, offering a range of appropriate opportunities to the group and working with individuals to challenge themselves and then supporting them as they work through the struggles they encounter" (p. 120).

Importantly, learning activities in Delp's class were not individualized in the traditional sense of each student doing his or her own project. Such forms of individualization limit opportunities for interaction while Delp's goal was to expand such opportunities and help individuals participate in the forward movement of the group.

Further, we would not characterize Delp's classroom as student-centered in the traditional sense of students making decisions about what they will learn. Instead, we think of her classroom as both teacher-centered and student-centered (see Freedman, 1994, pp. 101, 215-218 for a further explanation of how a similar concept played out in British classrooms). It was teacher-centered in that Delp provided a rich curriculum and the needed tools for learning. She carefully chose literary texts to engage students in a year-long study of thematic ideas—for example, "grand" ideas such as "dignity," "compassion," and "integrity." She taught her students to assume an interpretive stance and set up the official activities of log writing and responding and note-making during class discussions about literary texts. She engaged students in common activities, which, besides reading the same literary texts, included participating in the same whole-class discussions and completing the same interpretive writing assignments about the literature they read and about themselves. And she upheld high standards and expectations for individuals and the group. Delp (2005) writes further about the critical roles that she, as teacher, played:

> I think of my teaching and my students' learning as a year-long journey—a year-long, thematic study of literature and writing. I envision my part in this journey as the one who is responsible for creating a thoughtful offering of many and varied opportunities

> for my students to think and write about their ideas and the ideas of others. I see myself as the one who guides and supports my students, and challenges them as well, as they journey to make meaning for themselves. I also endeavor to keep in mind the kinds of freedom[s] that must exist for the individual within the structures imparted upon the group. (p. 17)

Even though students were not the main conceptualizers of the activities within the GDZ, students played crucial roles in creating the movement that occurred within the zone as they shaped and reshaped it through their dialogic relationships. They essentially created the forward movement of the GDZ by interacting within it over and over again. Delp's position allowed her to respond to the students and understand and support them in meaning-making.

Our thinking has been influenced not only by our further reflections on the GDZ in Delp's class but also by neo-Vygotskian and Bakhtinian theories. We want to take this opportunity to situate the GDZ in the context of current writing about the intersections of activity theory and the ZPD. We conceptualize the GDZ in Delp's class as an "activity system," which Leont'ev (1981) defines as "a system with its own structure, its own internal transformations, and its own development" (p. 46). We further conceptualize the activity system, as it is instantiated in Delp's class, as a GDZ composed of interacting utterances. Bakhtin (1981) writes eloquently about their nature and function:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 276)

In our continued study of the GDZ and the "thousands of living dialogic threads" that constitute it, our goal is to account for both the utterances themselves and how they work together to construct the activity system of the GDZ.

To help us further consider these interacting relationships, these "dialogic threads," we turned to Engestrom's (2001) history of activity theory, in which he traces its evolution in Neo-Vygotskian theory. The first generation, led by Vygotsky, introduced the idea of mediation, breaking down the barrier between the individual and the social world and showing how social interaction within the ZPD can lead to learning. As Cazden pointed out earlier and as Engestrom notes, in spite of recognition of the role of the social, "[t]he limitation of the first generation was that the unit of analysis remained individually focused" (p. 134). Engestrom explains that in the next generation, Leont'ev "explicated the crucial difference between an individual action and a collective activity" (p. 134). Leont'ev "turned the focus on complex interrelations between the individual subject and

his or her community" (pp. 134-135). This generation has been criticized by Cole for "a deep-seated insensitivity . . . toward cultural diversity" (p. 135). Engestrom places himself in a third generation, which is attempting to account for diversity. He focuses on interacting activity systems and charges future theorists to "develop conceptual tools to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems" (p. 135) and "to include minimally two interacting activity systems" as a unit of analysis (p. 136).

Like Cole and Engestrom, we too are trying to account for diversity, defined broadly. Delp's classroom situates us in a world of many kinds of diversity, in particular, social, cultural, and academic. Rather than taking interacting activity systems as our unit of analysis, we focus on the many planes of interaction that comprise the GDZ of Delp's classroom. We agree with Engestrom that it is useful to study student learning by examining interacting activity systems, most especially those from students' families and communities as they interact with the activity system of the classroom. However, we also argue to study student learning by focusing on the interactions among the utterances that comprise the activity system itself. Further, we find that in the classroom these utterances are manifest within particular activities, such as log sharing and literature discussions. Within and across these activities, we use a focus on the utterances to show the dialogues and struggles that lead to learning.

With this focus on utterances and activities, one can see in Delp's classroom, for example, how learning new vocabulary interacts with students' struggles to understand abstract concepts. Or one can see how this new vocabulary structures the social functioning of the community, or how the activities of creating maps, writing essays, and writing logs relate and how these activities connect to developing literary understanding.

We recognize that it is always the case that both the interacting activity systems that enter the classroom and the interacting activities within the activity systems mingle to shape classroom life. It is in this way that the GDZ functions to provide space for students to bring forth their academic, socio-cultural, and historical ways of being.

In our ongoing work, we hope to find increasingly precise ways to portray how a GDZ can effectively support an array of voices coming together. Gutiérrez's research, for example, offers useful tools for analyzing classroom data. Her characterizations of a "responsive-collaborative script" (1993; Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) show how interacting activity systems in the bilingual elementary classrooms she was studying can be effectively incorporated as they create what she labeled a "third space." Currently, Gutiérrez (in press) is analyzing the language associated with interacting activity systems in a program that provides transformative experiences for students from migrant farm worker backgrounds to help prepare them for university matriculation. As we progress with our work, we

hope to uncover linguistic interactions associated with interacting activities and utterances as well, so that we can contribute further to understandings of students' learning and teachers' teaching. We are particularly interested in language that is appropriated from others and how newly appropriated language is used by individuals over time and in varied contexts within the grand dialogic zone of the classroom.

In our 2005 article, we presented a comprehensive view of teaching and learning in Delp's class and questioned past recommendations for teaching in untracked classrooms. We further raised issues about applications of Vygotsky's ZPD to the classroom. When we think about next steps for our work, we believe a more detailed analysis of the language of the GDZ in Delp's class could help us better understand how her integrated and dynamic curriculum works to promote learning for different students.

Recently we have been working to help beginning English teachers develop a theoretical understanding of the functioning of a GDZ. Using Delp's classroom as an exemplar, we are trying to teach them how "grand" ideas can grow over time as part of a year-long, thematic study of literature and writing; how meaning-making is necessarily "dialogic" and benefits from the input of the varied voices in the classroom; and how the teacher can provide the kinds of opportunities that enable students to take hold of the curriculum and challenge themselves to work within their "zones" of proximal development. Developing this theoretical understanding seems to us to be a necessary condition for coming to understand that students must engage in the inevitable struggles that are a part of meaning-making.

To begin to establish this theoretical frame with students in a methods class for the Multicultural Urban Secondary English (MUSE) credential and MA program at U.C. Berkeley, Delp offered the Bakhtinian concept "the co-creativity of those who understand" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 141) on the first day of class. With this image of the dialogic nature of meaning-making, Delp was trying to help these beginning teachers see that students do not make meaning by themselves but, rather, by working together with others. She wanted to help the teachers understand their important roles in structuring and supporting ongoing dialogues while also envisioning the opportunities that arise for students to create understanding when they encounter such dialogic relationships in the classroom. She wrote to the MUSE teachers, "It is this image of 'the co-creativity of those who understand' that I would like to borrow from Bakhtin and offer as a way to name what it is I aim for with my students, what it is I try to create in my classroom to help bring about such hoped for moments for my students." Once these teachers have a firm theoretical base, Delp then works with them to develop strategies for enacting the theory in their own classrooms.

We began with the words of Delp's student Charlotte, who felt that she benefited from such "co-creativity" as evidenced by her comment, "People's ideas

change when they get new ideas or new information or see somebody's perspective." As we work with beginning teachers, we hope they too will come to conceptualize and structure a whole-class learning space in which their students, like Charlotte, learn from the struggles they encounter as sometimes cacophonous and sometimes harmonious voices come together in the grand dialogic zones of their classrooms.

## NOTE

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