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Allowing Not-Knowing in a Dialogic Discussion

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Abstract

Inspired by Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's theories of learning, this project explores how "allowing not-knowing" is enacted within collaborative student-led seminar discussions. Earlier research on student reflections (Feito, 2002) suggested that in successful seminars, participants regularly acknowledge their lack of understanding, offer partial understandings, and collectively develop new meanings. This project tracks these phenomena within actual classroom discourse. A detailed discourse analysis of a small "Great Books" seminar session (N=16) describes how students construct a learning environment conducive to not-knowing and the open-ended construction of meaning. The students used discourse markers and sequencing to invite the recursive manipulation of ideas by the group. Breakdowns in the sense of shared validity engendered dead-end disagreements wherein students regressed to less collaborative forms of discourse and appealed to personal authority. Non-linear topic patterns and the deferral of closure cognitively challenged them to hold and reconstitute ideas over lengthy periods of time.

Keywords

M.M. Bakhtin, L. Vygotsky, Allowing not-knowing

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Allowing Not-Knowing in a Dialogic Discussion

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Abstract

Inspired by Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's theories of learning, this project explores how "allowing not-knowing" is enacted within collaborative student-led seminar discussions. Earlier research on student reflections (Feito, 2002) suggested that in successful seminars, participants regularly acknowledge their lack of understanding, offer partial understandings, and collectively develop new meanings. This project tracks these phenomena within actual classroom discourse. A detailed discourse analysis of a small "Great Books" seminar session (N=16) describes how students construct a learning environment conducive to not-knowing and the open-ended construction of meaning. The students used discourse markers and sequencing to invite the recursive manipulation of ideas by the group. Breakdowns in the sense of shared validity engendered dead-end disagreements wherein students regressed to less collaborative forms of discourse and appealed to personal authority. Non-linear topic patterns and the deferral of closure cognitively challenged them to hold and reconstitute ideas over lengthy periods of time.

Introduction

"The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing— to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts." – John Keats

Many of us remember seminal moments of learning that shaped our development as learners and subsequently as teachers. One of mine occurred as a college freshman in a Common Core social science seminar at the University of Chicago. One day my class was dutifully discussing Freud's essay "What is a *Weltanschauung*?" when I began to experience an uncanny sense of acceleration in the dialogue. I remember the students' voices and the teacher's responses all speeding up in an almost preternatural way. My internal dialogue seemed to mirror the effect. It felt as if my mind was making connections at a dizzying and somewhat disorienting speed. I heard myself blurting things out as quickly as they occurred to me and receiving immediate replies. It became difficult to parse which ideas were mine and which were coming from others. Before I knew it, I found myself catapulted into a thrilling "ah-hah" insight about Freud's central argument. And then I remember the instructor saying in her thick Russian accent: "Well, you have been so good today that it is all done early" and dismissing us before the hour was up. I sat there for a minute thinking "what just happened?"

And I haven't stopped wondering about it. Years later, when I encountered Keats' famous quote, it highlighted something important about my experience of learning back in that freshman classroom. My mind had been a very busy thoroughfare indeed. In fact, the thoughts had been galloping faster than I had ever seen them go; as if my mind was operating with heretofore unknown capacities. It turned out to be the first of many similar experiences which all had one common denominator – they all happened in open-ended seminar discussions with my peers. No doubt, they shaped my later preference for the seminar method in my own teaching. I have tried to facilitate the same kinds of experiences in my students. But although I am committed to discussion as pedagogy, I still recognize that I know very little about what constitutes excellent learning within this pedagogical

context. And I still do not know exactly what happened to me back in that freshman classroom so many years ago. Thus, my initial approaches to seminar facilitation were rather naïve ones, which begged for a more articulated understanding of the cognitive and social processes underlying this type of learning environment.

Over the past few years, my curiosity has led me down two complementary paths of investigation regarding the nature of learning within seminar discussions – a top-down theoretical exploration and a bottom-up, data-driven research program. The current project emerged at the crossroads between these two paths. In terms of educational theory, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) spoke directly to my tacit understandings of discussion pedagogy and elaborated upon them in generative ways. Vygotsky argued that meanings are inseparable from the social contexts in which they occur. He believed that thinking was not a characteristic of the person but of the person-in-social-activities. Thus his view of education focused on the socio-cultural system within which students learn; a system that is mutually and actively created by teachers and students (Moll & Whitmore, 1993). In many ways, the discussion seminar is the perfect exemplar and illustration of Vygotsky's social perspective on learning. Discussion teaching proceeds from the basic assumption that learning takes place when students interact within a social environment. However, Vygotsky went beyond this to argue that new thinking becomes real within social interaction before it becomes internalized in an individual's cognitive capacities (Daniels, 1996). Thus thinking and learning initially happen in social interaction, not within the minds of individual students. From this perspective, the social environment of the classroom doesn't simply facilitate good learning, it actually constitutes it. So if we want to understand this new learning, the place to look is in the actual speech present in seminars.

Vygotsky's theory shed an intriguing light on my own experience in my freshman seminar. There, I had experienced my "new thinking" as an emergent property of a particular social context. My phenomenological sense of acceleration included the entire social environment and not just my internal monologue. The new thinking occurred at the convergence point of many voices, both internal and external. This perspective naturally led me to questions about the nature of the particular social environment that constitute this type of learning: what really happens in these discussions? How exactly do the participants in a seminar discussion develop understanding together? A complementary strand of theorizing from another Soviet theorist, Bakhtin, helped me conceptualize this question more fully (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin's theory of dialogue describes how Vygotsky's social perspective on knowing translates into the intricacies of actual conversation. For him, social interaction was the foundation of all comprehension and meaning; understanding was a dynamic socio-cognitive event, rather than a discrete and internal set of cognitive representations. He used the term *dialogue* to refer to the ongoing collaborative construction of understanding within all human interactions. This process did not involve the transmission of knowledge from one person to the other, but rather the continual negotiation of meaning within the particular moment and context of its construction. Bakhtin emphasized the role of multiple, intersecting voices in the ongoing construction of this understanding (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997). At any point in a conversation, a speaker's utterance is never his own; it exists in the constantly changing play of meaning created by the particular social context in which it arises. This context includes very proximal factors such as the immediately preceding utterances and the interpretive opportunities they present. But it also includes more distal factors such as the different past experiences and frames of reference which each participant brings to that moment of interaction. Thus, as a conversation progresses there is a constant interaction between meanings, each new one having the potential of conditioning subsequent others. In Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, the participants do not simply sift

between competing meanings to find the correct one, but instead navigate a constantly changing and emerging hermeneutic environment.

Although he believed that this dynamic was common to all interactions, Bakhtin recognized that some social contexts maximized the potential for true dialogue while others tended toward a less generative "monologic" mode. Monologic conversational settings resist the unpredictable dynamism of dialogue by framing conversation as a simple dialectic between opposing truth claims (Barnes & Todd, 1995). In classroom conversations, this frequently takes the shape of privileging the teacher's authoritative grasp of knowledge. Some educators have attempted to facilitate deeper understanding in their classrooms by increasing the opportunities for more truly Bakhtinian dialogue. They have advocated for a "dialogic classroom" where students interact more freely with one another within a more egalitarian authority structure (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997; Wells, 1999). In a dialogic classroom, meanings and decisions are shared among the participants via discussion, rather than dictated by the teacher. Understanding is created by the group and does not follow any preordained path laid out in a teacher's lesson plan. This approach reflects a constructivist conception of education that "construes learning as an interpretive, recursive, building process by active learners interacting with the physical and social world" (Twomey Fosnot, 1996, pg. 30).

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and the ideal of the dialogic classroom offered me some intriguing theoretical lenses through which to consider teaching and learning within my seminar classes. Concurrently, I was investigating the social and cognitive environment of my seminar classes through SoTL research grounded within the actual experiences of my students. Prior to my encounter with the more detailed theory outlined above, I used the broad concept of "intellectual community" to guide my initial investigations into student learning within my seminar classrooms. I was curious to see how my students themselves perceived the relationship between the social environment and their own learning. I started by asking them to reflect on their experience of intellectual community within their seminars (Feito, 2001, 2002). This initial reflection project took place within the context of the Saint Mary's Collegiate Seminar Program; a four-semester undergraduate general education requirement based loosely upon the "Great Books" tradition of St John's College. These classes are exclusively committed to dialogic discussions where the participants explore the ideas and values evoked by a carefully selected primary text. A qualitative analysis of the students' written and oral reflections throughout the term produced a short list of cohesive themes. One of the more intriguing among them was the importance of "allowing not-knowing". A qualitative analysis of the students' written and oral reflections throughout the term produced a short list of cohesive themes. One of the more intriguing among them was the importance of "allowing not-knowing" (an expression borrowed from (Almaas, 2002).

Within this educational context, students realized that in order for their collective inquiry to proceed productively, the participants needed to be able to regularly acknowledge their lack of understanding, offer partial understandings, and collectively digest the resulting discourse. Basically, they had to be willing to say "I don't know" in some way. For instance, they mentioned offering genuine questions to the group (i.e., ones which they truly did not know the answer to), expressing an idea that they had not thought through completely, and even saying the actual words: "I don't know."

Whatever the form, they acknowledged the importance of expressing a genuine lack of understanding and enjoyed the freedom that it accorded them. During a group reflection session, one student addressed this issue after hearing others complain about an instructor who seemed to demand "correct" answers:

In our class, someone would go "I just do not understand this!" you know, and then we'd all talk to her and then there'd be better understanding. But it sounds like you guys [in the other class] are given a question and you're just supposed to answer it. See with me, I'd probably just sit there and go "I don't know" (sulking). When teachers ask questions, I don't want to answer. I don't want to get it wrong.

Her comment illuminates how "I don't know" can take on different meanings depending upon the pedagogical context in which it occurs. Most students are quite comfortable with offering the statement in response to a teacher's inquiry. In that case, they believe that they are operating within an evaluative context where there are only two possible positions for them: "I have the right answer" or "I don't know". If you are not sure you have the right answer, then "I don't know" is clearly your safest move. With it, you efficiently abdicate responsibility and effectively end the exchange. The instructor can only move on to repeat the fruitless process with another student.

Within the context of a dialogic inquiry however, "I don't know" could be the beginning of an interaction, rather than the end of one. It can invite the community to engage with a genuine question offered by one of its members. Furthermore, the participants are not restricted to the two positions available above; they can leap into the rich terrain which lies between these sterile poles. "Half-baked" ideas are grist for the mill of dialogic inquiry.

Taken within the context of Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's theories, the student reflections on not-knowing offer some promising avenues for further exploration of learning within these seminar classrooms. The notion of "not-knowing" resonates well with Bakhtin's conception of dialogue as a dynamic, recursive construction of meaning through conversation. Not-knowing may thus be more characteristic of dialogic discussions than of monologic ones based upon more oppositional modes of conversation. But if not-knowing is a truly meaningful dimension, then it should be realized within the actual utterances that comprise classroom conversations. Indeed, from Vygotsky's perspective, not-knowing should initially appear within student social interactions and only subsequently be internalized as an individual capacity. Thus the current research project seeks to move beyond student's own reflections toward a deeper consideration of how not-knowing is enacted within actual classroom discourse. The key research questions are

- How exactly do seminar participants co-construct an environment conducive to not-knowing?
- What types of discourse patterns and structures reflect a group's willingness to not-know?
- How does not-knowing relate to the depth of collaboration within a given segment of classroom discourse? (i.e. to its dialogic versus monologic character)

Method and Analytic Approach

The primary analytic focus was on not-knowing as a group capacity co-constructed within classroom discourse. In order to develop a richer description of this phenomenon, detailed digital audio recordings and transcriptions of selected seminar discussions were collected and studied using the method of discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis is a micro-analytic approach to understanding participants' own meanings within small segments of conversation. As such, it is well attuned to the theoretical framework from which the research questions originally sprang. The method proceeds from the basic understanding that language is social action (Austin, 1962). It moves beyond the propositional content of language to consider how a particular "speech act" functions within the social setting in which it appears. The focus is thus on what participants are *doing* with

their talk. Discourse analysis' objective is not to uncover universal laws or manufacture broad generalizations, but to understand language use in its functional specificity. That is, how do speakers use language to achieve particular social and communicative goals? In this case, how do specific utterances enact and reproduce not-knowing?

Working once again within the context of the Saint Mary's Collegiate Seminar Program, an hour-long seminar discussion on Garcia-Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was carefully transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis. This particular discussion took place in the 11th week of a 15 week semester. It was the fourth of six sessions devoted to the novel. The session was not chosen for its "high quality" or as a "best practice" but as an illustration of collaborative inquiry typical of this particular pedagogical context. The 16 participants were 8 men and 8 women, all juniors and seniors, from a wide array of undergraduate majors. All names in the transcript have been changed to assure anonymity. Each participant completed a consent form and the overall project was approved by the Saint Mary's College IRB. All related forms are on file with the author and available for review.

As a starting point for further analysis, the full discussion was parsed and coded according to Barnes' and Todd's basic typology of discussion moves (Barnes & Todd, 1995). These are relatively broad characterizations of the communicative intent of specific speech acts within a discussion. This general analytic framework provided a backdrop for discussing the more particular issue of the construction of not-knowing. This [annotated transcript](#) shows a one-minute segment of discussion coded and analyzed using this framework. Although the full hour-long discussion was analyzed in this way, this one-minute segment provides a very succinct demonstration of some important discursive phenomenon. The subsequent discussion will refer to this transcript for exemplars and illustrations. The reader may want to open the annotated segment in a separate window for reference while reading the analysis below. The [transcription and notation system](#) used in this paper and in discourse analytic research more generally are derived from the work of Gail Jefferson (Wood & Kroger, 2000). [Click here to listen to an audio recording of the annotated segment.](#)

The Findings

Discourse Markers

At the most explicit level, the session shows students using discourse markers to communicate the provisional and open-ended nature of their contributions. Discourse markers are words and phrases that bracket units of talk and communicate specific pragmatic or social intents (Schiffrin, 1987). The "not-knowing" discourse markers included in this sample were tag questions (e.g. y'know? isn't it? does that make any sense?), qualifiers (e.g. almost like, kinda like) and prefaces (e.g. I just thought, I was wondering if). The [annotated segment](#) contains highlighted examples of these markers e.g. the tag "y'know" (29), the qualifier "like" (30) and the preface "so I'm kinda wondering" (8).

At first glance, these markers may seem to reflect a disturbing tentativeness or lack of confidence among the participants. This conclusion assumes that the markers are direct *expressions* of an individual's internal state and not *communications* about the social intent of the utterances they bracket. Within this context, the markers may be more productively viewed as pragmatic devices – performing a social function rather than directly reflecting an internal reality. Their pragmatic intent is to communicate that an utterance is open to modification, transformation and qualification by the group. The markers thus help construct an ongoing discourse that allows not-knowing and encourages the recursive manipulation of ideas.

A closer look at the examples from the [annotated segment](#) illustrates these social functions (discourse markers are in blue text). Karen's first initiation sequence contains three instances of prefaces based upon the verb "wonder": "so I was wondering" (6), "so I'm kinda wondering" (8) and "I was wondering" (13). It may be that she is indeed wondering about these ideas (the propositional content of the utterances) but her repetition of the construction also performs the social function of inviting others to respond to what is clearly the initiation of a new topic. Anna uses the common marker "you know" in two places (21, 29) to invite others to respond to her idea with affirmation or qualification. The second use (29) is particularly clear in this regard as it comes at the end of her turn. Rick's response (30) is prefaced with a double dose of the common marker "like" to emphasize the open-ended nature of his extension of Anna's idea.

The use of these markers ebbs and flows over the course of the larger discussion. They are least evident in sections where the students are embroiled in contentious disagreement and most frequent when they explore a new topic. The full transcript shows a particularly abrupt transition between these two modes about 22 minutes into the class. The previous 8 minutes include a contentious discussion of how parents impact their children; they contain very little use of prefaces and although the use of "you know" continues, the marker tends to demand affirmation rather than invite speculation. (We will return later to the relationship between not-knowing and disagreement.) After the 22 minute mark, the students begin a completely new topic in a much more exploratory manner. They offer multiple conjectures for consideration and their speech displays a high concentration of all of the discourse markers associated with not-knowing. Since these markers can be used in many different ways across a long span of conversation, these larger scale patterns are difficult to adequately quantify. So these generalizations must be considered speculative.

Collaborative Talk and Shifting Epistemologies

On a more subtle level, not-knowing was embedded within the discourse structure itself. Bakhtin argued that "every utterance is oriented towards a response" (as quoted in Barnes & Todd, 1995). That is, every utterance sets the stage for certain types of responses in the future and closes the door on others. Through a surprising variety of linguistic forms, the students communicate that they do not expect definitive answers to their questions or immediate evaluations to their contributions. The first initiation sequence in the [annotated segment](#) contains a good example of this. Karen's initiation move ends in what appears to be a yes/no question (13-14); exactly the kind of question that many researchers have characterized as "closed" and thus less generative within a discussion (Gall, 1984; Wilen, 1982). Upon closer consideration however, it is apparent that although it is formally a yes/no question, it is not oriented towards a simple yes/no response. Within this context, a simple "yes" would seem like a blatant rejection of the initiation. In fact, the question does not ask for any definitive answer (yes, no, or otherwise). By prefacing her question with "I was wondering if...", Karen indicates that she is seeking other ideas to lie on the table beside her own in an open-ended field of inquiry. She does not invite a final answer but an ongoing negotiation (and that is exactly what she gets.)

Along with others, Anna takes up the initiation (17-18 in pink text) and extends Karen's idea further in a move typical of dialogic collaboration. Even more revealing, however, is her later same-turn "self-repair sequence" (27-28) (Schegloff, Sachs, & Jefferson, 1977). Within her turn, she revises the content of her move, clearly indicating that she is creating knowledge on the spot rather than reporting on a previously considered knowing. Other students displayed similar repair sequences. In the two examples below, the self-repairs are italicized:

1. **Greg:** I think that might be a good example of what we were talking about earlier because like.
2. I think most people (° I mean . yeah °)
3. *maybe not most people* but like a lot of people..."
4. _____
1. **Cynthia :** I was thinking cuz he is from Latin America
2. maybe he was writing about with the bananas and the plantations
3. about like Guatemala *or maybe not at that time*
4. but a lot of indigenous people from Latin America were destroyed...

Cynthia uses the preface "I was thinking" (1) and the qualifier "maybe" (2) to indicate the provisional nature of her comments. Greg and Cynthia both use "maybe" (3,3) to mark the beginning of their self repair. Similar to the earlier example of Karen's "wondering", Cynthia's "thinking" preface serves a social pragmatic function in addition to conveying its propositional meaning (that she is literally thinking.) It actually seems likely that these students are in fact "thinking" out loud for the group. At times, their speech is quite explicit in this regard; for example when Rob prefaces a later statement with "When I kinda think about this I think of uh like...".

This thinking aloud pattern highlights an important epistemological shift for the students involved in these discussions. Their discourse patterns implicitly embody a view of knowledge as co-constructed and negotiable, rather than discrete and given. From this perspective, knowledge does not accumulate in the group like dollars in a bank account (to use Paulo Freire's famous metaphor) but is constantly renegotiated and co-created, a process rather than a product (Freire, 1970). Although the students might not consciously articulate this epistemological stance, their classroom discourse clearly reflected it.

The kinds of tacit collaborative dynamics discussed above are relatively common within the transcript. Less frequent are the more explicit pairings of not-knowing and co-construction apparent in concessions and latching. Only once during the hour-long class, did a student explicitly describe the ongoing revision of his ideas. When a fellow student elicited a clarification from him, Rob responded with: "at first I was saying that there won't be anywhere else to exploit, but then I changed my mind." Although this was the only explicit concession of this type, it is clear that the participants were continually revising their ideas within the context of the unfolding discussion; they simply did so without taking special note of it.

Latching involves two or more students creating a hybrid utterance in a very explicit expression of the co-construction of meaning. Students "finish one another's sentences" at various points during the discussion. Two examples:

- **Celia:** I just think that with time I guess you do have to like live life fully in order to like understand it =
Nancy : = because the change is so small
- _____
- **Linda:** it's not tainted with =
Cynthia: = right with the technology that's coming through
(= *indicates that there is no interval between the utterances*)

It would probably be more accurate to say that they are creating sentences together since there is no guarantee that, for instance, Linda would have completed the sentence above as Cynthia chose to. As with concessions, latching only formed the most visible tip of the

iceberg of collaborative meaning making; less obvious expressions of the phenomenon were much more common.

Disagreement and Critique

The earlier student reflection data suggested that not-knowing was predicated upon a relatively non-judgmental classroom atmosphere (Feito, 2001, 2002). Acknowledging a genuine lack of understanding and offering partial understandings can place one in a vulnerable position (see also DeRoma, Martin, & Kessler, 2002). If students believe that they are being continually evaluated on the "correctness" of their contributions, they find oral participation to be a daunting pursuit (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Many of the student reflections indicated that a positive and inviting socio-emotional climate was an important prerequisite to their willingness to not-know.

A non-judgmental atmosphere is not the same as a non-critical one, however. The transcripts do not reveal "brainstorming" discussions where no direct evaluation ever takes place. In fact, there are frequent instances of criticism and challenge within these seminars. The following segment offers a useful illustration:

1. **Rob:** even if you don't really think of it as repeating, it is
2. (2.8 sec pause)
3. **Greg:** I think it isn't, it isn't really
4. Like I think like the act or like the like the cycle is technology but not like the exact
5. like the.
6. you know what I'm trying to say right
7. (3.6 sec pause)
8. ° I don't know °
9. **Rob:** I gh I know what you're saying but I think the drive behi:nd
10. **Greg:** right
11. **Rob:** like what you're trying to do is the same
12. **Jack:** wait, what were you trying to [say]?

At line 3, Greg directly challenges Rob's suggestion (1) but then peppers his subsequent move (4-5) with the qualifier "like", indicating the provisional status of his formulation; indeed he is clearly developing his idea as he speaks. He ventures to disagree with Rob even though he is unclear on the exact nature of his disagreement. At line 6, he elicits support and understanding, followed by a long pause, and then a quiet but explicit expression of his not-knowing (8). In effect, he is asking Rob to help him clarify his own point of disagreement. Rob affirms understanding and attempts to qualify the disagreement (9). Then Jack elicits clarification at 12 and the discussion continues from there. Here, thinking aloud has become a group process rather than simply the reporting of one student's internal monologue.

One of the most striking aspects in this brief exchange is how not-knowing can alter the dynamics of a disagreement. This exchange would not be typical of a debate where the participants are motivated to support their own view in contrast to another's. Greg presents his disagreement as part of an ongoing development of ideas rather than a completed or polished refutation. Moreover, Rob accepts this frame and continues to develop the idea with Greg's subsequent affirmation (10). Thus, in the context of not-knowing, the disagreement is a natural and generative part of the overall dialogic process. Indeed, Bakhtin theorized that conflict is an intrinsic component of true dialogue. His central concept of *heteroglossia* accentuated the irreducible play of multiple, competing voices within all discourse (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997). In their work with elementary school science

discussions, Barnes and Todd noted that “the expression of a dissident opinion, provided it is understood as a qualification and not as a dismissal, plays a crucial part in advances in understanding.” (Barnes & Todd, 1995) The danger is that heteroglossia may break down into futile and sterile opposition if the participants fail to acknowledge the “shared validity” of each individual's contributions (Barnes & Todd, 1995) .

The present data set contains a telling example of a dead-end disagreement of this type. In order to understand the context of the disagreement, we will need to outline the discussion content in more detail. In the first 15 minutes of the class session, the students grappled with the novel's theme of circularity and repetition. They focused mainly on the text's depiction of events and people in order to understand what Marquez hoped to convey about the human condition. At minute 16, Rick takes exception with the claim that wisdom does not accumulate over generations, that children do not come to know more than their parents. This begins a heated and relatively chaotic 7 minutes of overlapping talk with little evidence of the collaborative meaning making previously described. Rick stays at the center of a back-and-forth participation pattern – the other students all focusing their attention on him.

Within this more contentious segment of discourse, the students become very concerned with being “heard”, both literally and figuratively. The following utterances all took place within a 4-minute span of this section:

- **Rick:** that's what I'm saying I don't agree
- _____
- **Rob :** that's not what I'm saying
- _____
- **Rick :** That's what I'm saying
- _____
- **Rick :** That's why I'm saying I agree with them
- _____
- **Curt :** that's what I'm saying
- _____
- **Greg :** Well, no but I'm saying

These repeated references to what “I'm saying” all imply that the speakers are skeptical that others are listening to their words and acknowledging their value. In other words, they highlight a breakdown in the sense of “shared validity” that Barnes and Todd found so essential for constructive dialogue. These particular kinds of speech acts do not appear anywhere else in the transcript. Here, the participants become more concerned with recovering the sense of shared validity than with actually co-constructing new knowledge. Towards the end of this section, Nancy attempts to mediate the ongoing dispute by explicitly acknowledging what each person is “saying”:

1. **Nancy :** No but he's just saying...
2. there are certain things that RG is right and
3. there are certain things that you are
4. **Rick:** That's why I'm saying I agree with them to a certain extent
5. but I don't agree fully with what he's saying

The disagreement has effectively been framed as one wherein people are clearly “right” and “wrong”. This represents a momentary shift to an epistemology less focused on co-construction and more concerned with immediately competing truth claims. In Bakhtin's terms, it has become more monologic than dialogic. Within this context, Nancy attempts to resolve the problem by serially acknowledging the truth of the statements made by the multiple contenders. *[That the mediator in this exchange is a female suggests an analysis of*

the disagreement pattern as the simple expression of a sex difference in speech style (e.g. Goodwin, 1980; Maltz & Borker, 1983) . I agree with Thorne (1986) that "the sex difference approach tends to abstract gender from its social context, to assume that males and females are qualitatively and permanently different." As such, it is alien to the functional and context-sensitive approach used here. A full treatment of this theoretical controversy is beyond the scope of this paper.]

This epistemological shift coincides with a transition to argumentation based upon personal authority rather than a more abstract interpretation of a neutral text. At Rick's instigation, the topic shifts from Marquez' beliefs about generational change to Rick's experience of surpassing his own parents' knowledge. The other students quickly follow his lead into the realm of personal experiences. Consider the following utterances:

- **Doug:** That's just part of life cause I mean
- Think about it
- You your parents try to tell you stuff
- They try to
- _____
- **Rob:** I'm talking about life though
- _____
- **Rick:** But I know I know things now that my parents don't know...
- Like this whole college experience my parents don't know anything about
- _____
- **Linda :** I have I have a little nephew he's nine years old...
- _____
- **Rob:** I'm talking about like experiences

When appealing to personal experiences, the participants are much less willing to accommodate multiple perspectives and make room for not-knowing. Personal authority trumps any speculation or open-ended discussion. As Rick succinctly put it: "ya gotta trust me my cousin grew up as single...". We have to "trust" his claim to truth because it derives from a personal experience. This stance effectively negates the possibility of not-knowing and by extension, the ongoing construction of knowledge. The resulting "monologized" discourse fails to incorporate the complex interplay of voices and instead sets up competing either/or monologues of understanding (Bakhtin, 1986).

For college students, the polarized argument from personal experience may be a more familiar model for discussion than the more dialogic process characterized by not-knowing and shared validity. When surveyed regarding their attitudes towards discussion, Trosset (1998) found that the grand majority of Grinnell college students preferred to engage in discussion on topics on which they already held strong opinions.

The main reason students gave for wanting to discuss a particular topic was that they held strong views on the subject and wished to convince others. Likewise, not having a strong view - or finding an issue difficult - was often given as a reason for not wanting to discuss a subject (Trosset, 1998, pg. 44).

Particularly relevant to our present discussion, this advocacy model also privileged personal experience as the only source of legitimate knowledge. Furthermore, the students believed that knowledge based upon personal experience was somehow unquestionable and could not be legitimately challenged or qualified.

Trosset's data offers a useful frame for our exploration of disagreement and not knowing. When Rick shifts the discussion's emphasis to personal authority, the other seminar participants quickly follow his lead into a more familiar adversarial discourse structure. An open-ended dialogue characterized by not knowing may be a more difficult and unfamiliar venture for many of them; one that is easily derailed into the more common adversarial mode of discussion. In fact, they may imagine that the adversarial or "agonistic" discourse mode is the true academic ideal (Tannen, 2000, 2002) . This might help explain one of Trosset's more unsettling findings – that students' preference for discussion as advocacy increases over their tenure in college.

Deferring Closure

Another striking characteristic of the discussion segments characterized by not-knowing is that they often follow non-linear topic patterns. The group veers "off topic" and then returns in an unpredictable but often cyclic pattern. The participants manage the discussion topic cooperatively without necessarily moving toward closure on any given thread. There is very little in the way of explicit consensus seeking . For instance, summary statements are basically non-existent; the participants may avoid them as "chairperson" moves that might be interpreted as presuming too much authority. Here, the decentralization of authority characteristic of dialogic classrooms helps facilitate not-knowing through an attendant deferral of closure.

Phillips (1988) found a similar phenomenon in his research on classroom discussions among 11-year olds. He noted that:

These non-linear exchange patterns make it appear that speakers are wandering off the point, and are not making logical connections between contiguous parts of the argument. In fact, what is happening is that the speakers are making their connections across a much wider span, and are holding several ideas or hypotheses in mind at once until such moments as they may naturally merge to create a new idea or offer proof of the hypothesis. Each 'point' is arrived at a much later moment in the discussion than in other forms of argument, and knowledge itself therefore remains arguable for longer. (Phillips, 1988, pg. 80)

This pattern was also quite pronounced in the present data set. The [annotated segment](#) provides an excellent illustration of the demanding nature of this discourse when Anna elicits assistance (22-23) in order to correctly reference a comment made some 10 minutes earlier in the discussion. The students commonly refer back to previous sections of the day's discussion, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. In one case, a student references an idea from a previous class session:

1. **Rob:** I forget what book it was that we read
2. I think it was towards the beginning but
3. When we talked about like the bum or the homeless are the only people that
4. Escape our capitalism and everything
5. **Linda:** Walking [a reference to Thoreau's essay read earlier in the semester]

Similar to Anna, Rob requests the group's assistance in correctly referencing an idea discussed earlier – in this case, seven weeks earlier! This particular dynamic underscores the inherent difficulty of maintaining fluency in all of the open-ended threads of a semester-long discussion; a difficulty spawned from the continual deferral of closure in evidence here. The cognitive demands associated with this process may encourage more elaborate processing of information as students hold, review and reconstitute ideas over lengthy

periods of time. Using a variety of experimental designs, Donald Dansereau and his colleagues have found that increased cognitive elaboration improves individual student performances in collaborative learning environments (Larson et al., 1985; O'Donnell et al., 1985). In particular, the frequent elaboration of descriptive information (similar to the repeated informational references the students requested above) significantly enhanced recall for course material. This may be one explanation of the traditional (but inconsistently validated) claim that discussion facilitates better retention and understanding of course material (McKeachie, 1994; Slavin, 1996). Dialogic discussions which encourage not-knowing and its associated deferral of closure may stimulate a kind of elaboration that leads to more complex cognitive processing.

Conclusion

Not-knowing revealed itself as an emergent property of this particular seminar discussion. Through a variety of discursive means, these students collectively created a learning environment which embraced the open-ended construction of meaning. Particular segments of conversation enacted not-knowing through the use of discourse markers and regular invitations to collectively digest the class material and unfolding discourse. In Bakhtinian terms, these segments were more dialogic; embodying the group's ability to genuinely collaborate, hold divergent perspectives, and defer closure. In Keats' terms, the students agreed to "make up their minds about nothing" and their resulting conversations became a true "thoroughfare for all thoughts".

The group's ability to allow not-knowing was not a seamless or complete achievement, however; it fluctuated in relation to some specific aspects of the ongoing discussion. Our analysis of disagreement highlighted the role of "shared validity" as an essential prerequisite for allowing not-knowing. Not-knowing may defer any preemptive decision about the correctness of an opinion but it still rests upon a tacit agreement that all opinions are valid contributions. When the students perceived a breakdown in this agreement, they attempted to restore it through various means, skillful and unskillful. In the specific case analyzed above, the students made repeated appeals to the authority of personal experience in an effort to reestablish the lost sense of validity. In the process, they temporarily retreated from the more dialogic mode of collaboration. As Barnes and Todd (1995) put it: "The egocentric desire to display knowledge is frequently in effective opposition to the wish to collaborate in constructing knowledge" (pg. 60).

The idea of not-knowing may thus offer us a useful theoretical lens for conceptualizing discussion-based learning more generally. Our analysis suggests the beginnings of a potential model. A group must endorse and enact a minimal sense of shared validity in order for not-knowing to even be possible. If this sense of shared validity breaks down, then the group may move to reinstate it before being able to once again allow not-knowing. Shared validity is certainly not a monolithic phenomenon, however. It may exist to various degrees within the minds of the participants and within the actual discourse that they produce together. One or two students may temporarily lose it and withdraw from the conversation without a noticeable impact on the collaborative process of those still engaged. If, however, a critical mass of students drop out, then the entire dialogue may stagnate. At other times, one very vocal student may dominate the floor in an effort to regain a perceived loss of shared validity (as we saw in the example of Rick above.) As long as shared validity is being renegotiated and recreated, not-knowing cannot emerge to fuel a more dialogic inquiry process.

Our detailed discourse analysis draws attention to some specific student discursive practices that embody the ethos of not-knowing and its prerequisite sense of shared validity. If we choose to embrace these values as educators, then the emerging model of dialogic inquiry

may help focus our attention to relevant processes within our classrooms. In practical terms, the first step toward fostering not-knowing is our ability to recognize it when it happens. Although the above analysis is certainly not exhaustive, it does highlight some typically unnoticed aspects of student discourse. Since completing this research, I have found myself regularly tracking the vicissitudes of not-knowing within my own seminars. This new conceptual lens has brought one aspect of the complex flurry of student discussion into productive focus for me. It has alerted me in real time to momentary changes in how my students allow or disallow not-knowing. With that awareness, I can sometimes quickly intervene to help restore a faltering sense of shared validity or reinforce an acceptance of not-knowing. Frequently this takes the form of modeling the exact discursive processes revealed above. By recognizing a group's overall tendencies with respect to not-knowing, I can also design more formal interventions aimed at facilitating open-ended inquiry and strengthening the dialogic processes that I value in my classroom.

A group's discursive enactments of not knowing and shared validity may clearly ebb and flow over the course of a discussion. However, their potential base rate could be predicated upon students' tacit endorsement of particular classroom interaction norms. Research on classroom climate indicates that many students have distinct beliefs about what their peer's might consider appropriate classroom behavior in a given setting (Fassinger, 1995a; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002; Weaver & Qi, 2005) . These perceived peer norms can significantly restrict and shape overall student class participation. Many students report fear that their peers might disapprove of their contributions. Moreover, that self-reported fear has a large negative correlation with their actual rate of classroom participation (Fassinger, 1995a, 1995b; Weaver & Qi, 2005) . In many cases, the most commonly cited reasons for non-participation were "the feeling that my ideas are not well enough formulated" and "the feeling that I don't know enough about the subject matter" (Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996) . In other cases, the most cited reason for discomfort with class participation was the fear that "I will be considered stupid by other students" (Hyde & Ruth, 2002) . It is reasonable to speculate that these types of beliefs would be particularly inimical to participation grounded in not knowing. If students, rightly or wrongly, believe that their peers expect only polished and sage contributions, they may effectively hold back from contributing the open-ended comments that invite dialogic collaboration.

The norms of any particular discourse community are ultimately shaped by the beliefs and behaviors of its members. What students do in discussion and what they believe about discussion impact one another in a reflexive manner. Thus, students' belief systems offer us another locale for influencing the unfoldment of not-knowing within actual classroom discourse. Through commonly used reflective practices, we can invite our students to consider the role of not-knowing in their classroom discussions. We might design reflection assignments targeted to reveal students own classroom interaction norms related to not-knowing. Metacognitive activities could also help students reflect on the role of not-knowing within their own internal thought processes. In some classroom settings, it might even be feasible to tape brief discussions and have students analyze them with an eye to tracking not-knowing (e.g. Pace & Standiford, 2003) . Taken as whole, these reflective practices could more actively engage students in the shared enterprise of sustaining a truly dialogic classroom discussion.

If we hope to develop productive habits of mind in our students, we must recognize that these habits are formed within unique social contexts. As Kenneth Bruffee puts it:

Any effort to understand and cultivate in ourselves the kind of thought we value most requires us to understand and cultivate the kinds of community life that establish and maintain conversation that is the origin of that thought. To think well as individuals we must

learn to think well collectively – that is, we must learn to converse well (Bruffee, 1984, pg. 640).

Future research might productively address the obvious question left deferred by the present analysis: how is the group phenomenon of not-knowing related to individual student learning? Vygotsky argued that development occurs first within social interaction and is only later internalized as a cognitive capacity in an individual person. If he is correct, then allowing not-knowing should ultimately integrate into the thinking of students regularly participating in these types of dialogic discussion. The challenge in exploring this hypothesis will be to find a method for conceptualizing and measuring not-knowing on an individual level.

Concepts such as not-knowing and shared validity may be difficult to quantify, but this does not invalidate their theoretical or practical utility. The conceptual model presented here can have significant pedagogical utility without the necessity of precise quantification. Although a discourse analytic approach does not lend itself to broad generalizations, it does offer a generative framework for framing questions about teaching practices within discussion classrooms. At times, the above analysis may seem almost myopically local, but the emerging “vision of the possible” has applications to discussion learning in many different educational contexts (Hutchings, 2000). Not-knowing can be seen as an important foundation for the collaborative meaning-making so central to broader constructivist visions of the discussion classroom.

Hopefully, this research constitutes one step towards building a more articulated model of seminar processes and their relationship to student learning. How to cultivate a better discussion seminar remains an enduring question in liberal education. But before we can begin to answer it, we must continue to deepen our understanding of what really happens when our students discuss together.

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