One Student’s Many Voices: Reading, Writing, and Responding with Bakhtin

Nancy Welch

Sometime ago, a teacher came to me with the story of a student, Linda, who had brought to her first-year composition class a draft, the subject of which was herself as a child coming to name alcoholism as a force in her family. As we would expect in a draft, there was some awkward writing, some confusion in the creation of this world. As we might also expect, there was something very affecting about Linda’s story, and the teacher, much moved by it, was at a loss over how to respond. “How can I tell her, when she’s taking such a risk here, grappling with such a painful subject, that the opening is kind of flat or that the conclusion seems weak?” he asked. “How can I tell her that this painful memory can be improved?” In the end, he responded to her paper much as members of her small group did: “This must have been very difficult for you to write. Thanks for sharing it.”

This teacher’s story is hardly unusual. It’s one version of many that composition teachers tell, especially those who in the past decade have adopted a “workshop” or “whole-language” approach in their classrooms—with student-generated topics, peer groups, and an emphasis on writing as a process of meaning-making and remaking. When we ask students to create their own topics, explore the heuristic nature of language, and develop in the company of readers rich and complicated meanings, students often respond with writing that is personal and sometimes painful, writing that reveals more contradiction and uncertainty than it conceals. We worry then about being too intrusive in our responses to such texts, and we worry that traditional approaches to responding to students’ writing—focusing, for instance, on the ways in which uncertainty can be foreclosed—are inappropriate. We fear that a response to textual features in a story like Linda’s will trivialize her experience and its re-creation through language. At the same time, we know that the statement “Thanks for sharing” is hardly a response at all, since it abruptly ends the exploratory process the class’s very structure began.

What we face, in essence, is that old, stubborn dichotomy between content and form, or, in a different phrasing, between the authority of the student’s personal experience and the authority of her public presentation.
and examination of that experience. This tension between these poles of content and form, personal and public, led Linda's teacher to believe that he faced an unsatisfactory choice between responding to her experience or responding to her writing. This same tension is what has often led teachers into the dualistic response of "A/B+" or, less obviously, "What a powerful story you tell/Punch up the opening." Although composition studies in recent years has subjected these pervasive dichotomies to much-needed scrutiny (see Ronald and Roskelly), writing teachers continue to make what they feel are unsatisfactory and uncomfortable either/or choices when it comes to responding to students' writing.

It is not my purpose in this essay to argue for one side of this content/form dichotomy over another. Such arguments within the confines of that dichotomy have already been made. On the one side, theorists such as Robert Brooke argue that we must shift our attention "from texts to people": "The goal is to teach people to be writers, not to produce good texts in the course of a semester" (38-39). On the other side, theorists such as C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon advocate responding to "communicative effectiveness" through a reading that compares the text's "effect" with the writer's "intention" (166, 162). Both sides of this argument have their merits, but, like many others, I believe that this dichotomy we're caught within is a false one. I would like to argue that, along with Linda's teacher, we need to revise our approach to reading and responding to students' texts and move beyond the separation of experience and writing. We need to form an understanding of reading and writing that will allow us to see personal and public authority, content and form, people and texts, as interdependent and inseparable.

The means to form such an understanding can be found in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. In his "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin advances a view of writing not solely as the private reflection of experience and not solely as the public production of a fixed text but rather as the dynamic meeting of reflection and production: a complex and ongoing interplay among personal and public voices. "Form and content in discourse are one," Bakhtin says at the start of his essay, "once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon" (259). In this essay, I'd like to show how Bakhtin's understanding of discourse offers us a way of reading Linda's text beyond the boundaries of the content/form and personal/public dichotomies, a way that asks us to listen and speak back to a student's many voices as he or she searches for the means to form experience in the contentious social arena of writing.

**Negotiating Among Personal and Public Voices**

Composition teachers frequently talk about encouraging students to find and develop their individual voices and about the diversity of voices within a classroom. But Bakhtin, who says writers make meaning not within an isolated linguistic system but against a cacophonous background of other
utterances on the same theme, tells us that diversity also exists within each
student, among the voices of a single writer. Bakhtin writes, "The word in
language is half someone else's. . . . It exists in other people's mouths, in
other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there
that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (293-94). To make the
word one's own, the writer enters into "a dialogically agitated and tension­
filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents," and the
writer seeks to negotiate that tension through "selectively assimilating the
words of others" (276, 341). Instead of merely "reciting by heart" the static
language of remote authorities (what Bakhtin calls "authoritative discourse"),
the writer seeks to create a discourse that is "internally persuasive" for both
writer and readers through listening to, selecting, and orchestrating words
that are half his or her own and half another's (341-43).

But this movement from "reciting by heart" to "retelling in one's own
words" is not simple and smooth (341). Bakhtin notes that there is often a
"sharp gap" between "the authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the
word of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc.)" and the "internally persua­
sive word that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is
frequently not even acknowledged in society" (342). It is through a continued
dialogic and dialectical struggle between these two categories that the gap is
bridged and the alien word is made one's own.

In other words (a phrase I use deliberately), Bakhtin tells us how we can
view writing as a process of negotiating between personal and public author­
ity and of orchestrating those voices that speak both within and outside of our
own contexts. When a student writes, he or she enters into an arena that
reverberates with the voices of others. The student's words are shot through,
as Bakhtin would say, with a polyphony of other viewpoints, nuances,
contexts, and intentions, and it is by orchestrating—not by repeating, not by
silencing—that polyphony that the writer makes meanings heard. And since
these words are born in dialogue and shaped through interaction with other
voices, what the writer creates through language is not a single voice but many
that he or she attempts to guide toward serving his or her own intentions.

One Student's Many Voices: Reading "The Power of the Word"

To see how Bakhtin's understanding of discourse challenges the notion that
we respond to either form or content, and to investigate how we can read
students' writing as dialogic interplay and orchestration, I want to introduce
a slightly condensed version of Linda's text, aptly titled, "The Power of the
Word":

Childhood is a time in life when a person sees their parents as models of perfection. My
childhood ended at age six. I remember the exact moment clearly. Seated at the kitchen
table for dinner, I stared at my empty plate. The plate was white with a green flower print
and I noticed several knife cuts marring the print. My mother had just left the room
carrying a coffee cup which I thought was odd because she never drank coffee in the
evening. I glanced over at my father for reassurance but his face was hidden by his hands.

Forgotten meals were to become a repeated ritual along with sleepless nights due to slamming doors and above all, avoidance of the basement where it lived three days out of the week. Without ever having been told, we all knew that the thing most affecting our lives was also a forbidden topic. Only once did I dare discuss it. My sister Karen and I were sitting on the old mattress in the basement with our arms around one another's shoulders. This week we were best friends, last week I pushed her into a bush. Our discussion revealed that she had even less of an understanding of what was happening than I, but on one thing we agreed—Dad was not at fault.

As I got older, it seemed to get stronger and interfere with my life more. Still, I seemed to remain passive and regard it as a mere inconvenience until my eighth birthday. It was tradition in our family that on your eighth birthday you were thrown a party. We sent out invitations, bought balloons, and decided which games were to be played. This was to be the last time I ever invited friends over, for on the planned day, it appeared. My friends had to be called and told not to come, this taught me the meaning of hate. It seemed to sense my hate and rewarded me with name calling and bruised cheeks. I was told I was "lazy" but when I cleaned the kitchen I was "showing off." I "acted too good for everyone" but "wouldn't amount to anything." I was somehow made to feel that it was my fault it acted the way it did.

One night I was awakened by loud arguing. I crawled out of bed and started making my way toward the noise. Halfway down the hall I met Karen coming out of her room and without a word, we proceeded. At the kitchen door we stopped and peeked in. Then I heard the word. It heard the word too and was angered by it for it picked up a knife and leaped toward the person who had uttered it. The force with which the knife had been thrust caused the hand to lose its grip on the handle and slide down the blade. The fingers were sliced open and the tendons severed, permanently disfiguring the hand. What kept going through my mind though was not the scene but the word. Guilt was suddenly lifted and some meaning given to all the madness by the simple utterance of the word alcoholic. Karen and I retraced our steps to our rooms, never a word being spoken.

If we read "The Power of the Word" with Bakhtin, we can see how Linda, instead of creating a single voice, attempts to orchestrate a range of voices that surround her themes of childhood, family, and alcoholism. Consider, for instance, her use of the words "ritual" and "tradition" in this text. These words are far from neutral; they reverberate with cultural and ideological overtones. At the very least, readers can hear on the contours of these words suggestive overtones about the joining of people, the formation of community, the sometimes mysterious and sometimes stifling creation and continuation of belief, order, and culture. At the same time, when we think of tradition and ritual in the context of family, we may think of such specific activities as having pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving or watching the evening news after supper. Linda, however, raises these voices in readers' minds in order to speak against them. When she writes about the ritual of "forgotten meals" and "slamming doors" and the last-minute cancellation of the "traditional" birthday party, she creates a world in which ritual and tradition divide rather than bind, destroy rather than create any sense of family and continuity.

We find here what Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse, the positing of two distinct consciousnesses within a single word (324-25). Readers hear within Linda's words not one voice but many: those voices that define family
Responding with Bakhtin 497

tradition and ritual as positive forces of unity and continuity, and those voices that define these words as negative forces of repression and control. Linda neither ignores nor silences this range of voices. Rather, she uses them as a background, a necessary tension against which her meanings can resonate more fully. Her text resounds with such instances of double-voicedness as, for example, near the end when she describes the injured hand. Though she gives no explicit commentary, we can hear her words speaking not only about a disfigured hand but also about a disfigured family where “reward” means “bruised cheeks” and where speech brings permanent, physical consequences.

These are just a few of the moments that show how “The Power of the Word” might work to move readers such as Linda’s teacher, and these are moments that readers can recreate for Linda, responding to her orchestration of diverse and contradictory voices and affirming that she is indeed one who has the power of the word. At the same time, there are voices in Linda’s text that seem not yet to serve her intentions, voices that may frustrate a reader’s attempt to form a single consistent, coherent meaning. We might be tempted to view these moments as matters of form in need of correction—or, as Knoblauch and Brannon say, “uncertainties that cause failure in communication” (166). But it is also possible to view these moments as arising from the interaction of authoritative and internally persuasive voices, as a necessary step in the complicated process of making the word one’s own.

For instance, we can read Linda’s first two sentences as “flat”—an instance of mishandled form—or we can read these sentences as very vividly marking that “sharp gap” between the authoritative and internally persuasive word. As Linda leaps from “Childhood is a time in life . . .” to “My childhood ended at age six,” I hear her giving voice to the tension between a teacher’s authoritative directive to always begin a composition with a broad statement that applies to all readers, and her own sense, backed by no authority, that the experience she seeks to form resists such generalization. Read in this way, the first two sentences are not flat and toneless; they reverberate with noisy, contentious voices, revealing what Joy Ritchie calls the conflict between “the unique histories” students bring to writing and the “assumptions about the requirements and conventions of ‘school writing’” that students also carry (156). In these first two sentences, then, we can see the very beginnings of the negotiation between personal and public authority, of the interplay between private reflection and public production.

Likewise at the essay’s end—an end that readers may find disturbingly silent—we can hear the echoes of conflicting voices. In opposition to Linda’s assertion that naming the family member as alcoholic “lifted” guilt and “brought” meaning, we find in the last sentence the surprising silence of the two girls in wordless retreat. We could respond to the surprise and agitation we feel here by saying it undercuts the essay’s message about the power of naming. We could, like Linda’s teacher, call this a weakness. But if we resist the charge of weakness for a moment, we can return to that final sentence and
hear within its unsettling silence a cacophony of voices—the most strident of which may be the voice of “it,” alive and strong, insisting that this topic still remain “forbidden.” We might also hear the authoritative voice that says all essays must come to a neat and complete close and the internally persuasive voice that says this is an experience and an expression of it that are not so easily ended.

We could go on to other places in Linda's text that show the orchestration of and struggles among a range of personal and public voices: Linda’s shifting voices as she moves back and forth between the perceptions of the adult reflecting on this experience and the perceptions of the child enmeshed in these events; the tension readers feel as “it” resists being positively identified as Linda’s father or mother. But my aim here is not to offer a “complete” reading of Linda’s story, nor do I want to suggest that a teacher must or should respond to every voice a Bakhtinian reading enables him or her to hear. Rather, I want to show through this partial reading how, once we step out of the limited roles of validators of content or correctors of form, we can step into the role of readers. We can allow ourselves to read students' texts as we would a novel, a short story, or a letter from a friend—negotiating and orchestrating, reflecting and revising. From this position we are able to respond to our dialogic and dialectical experience of reading and its relation to the dialogic and dialectical experience of writing.

From Authoritative to Internally Persuasive Responses
Encouraging both teachers and students to listen and speak back to their dialogically-charged words is what a Bakhtinian reading seeks. But before we can consider how a teacher might respond to the voices in Linda’s text—what might be written in the margins, what might be discussed in a conference—we need to return to Bakhtin’s distinction between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse and look more closely at what this distinction can reveal about the discourse of teacher response.

Bakhtin defines authoritative discourse as the word of the father, of distant and inflexible authorities, and, significantly, of teachers. This language is static and sure, demanding “our conditional allegiance” (343). It is with this voice of authority that teachers often speak back to students’ writing. Even when we qualify our judgments about a text by saying that the opening is “kind of flat” or that the conclusion “seems weak,” we still speak from a distant position of authority that allows us to make judgments and issue prescriptions without explaining where in our reading they come from and without openly reflecting on and questioning that reading. Thus, the problem with such a response as “seems weak” isn’t simply that it responds to form alone. It isn’t only that this is a generic response that, to use Nancy Sommers' term, could be “rubber-stamped” on a dozen student texts. Rather, the real problem lies in the pretense that the text and the teacher's response to it are single voiced and fixed, concealing the dynamic interplay among
many voices that occurs as we write and read. Such a response denies that anything like the creation, communication, and questioning of meaning occurs through the activities of writing and reading. It fixes teachers in the limited roles of validators or correctors.

In contrast to the authoritative word, internally persuasive discourse does speak to and promote that interplay of voices as it arises from and leads to continued dialogue. “Its creativity and productiveness,” Bakhtin writes, “consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words ... and does not remain in an isolated and static condition” (345). The creativity and productiveness of a story like Linda’s is that it awakens words within us—as we respond to those sentences about ritual and reward, as we speak back to “it” who scolds and slaps the confused, silent child. By responding with the words that a student’s text awakens, we promote an understanding of writing as interaction among a range of voices, including the voices of readers. And, through internally persuasive responses, we can draw a student into dialogue with—rather than allegiance to—our words.

A Bakhtinian dialogue can begin with the teacher asking a genuine question. A genuine question is not a prescription masquerading beneath a question mark (“How might you punch up the opening?”). Rather, it arises from our efforts to create meaning from a text’s many voices and reflects the Bakhtinian view that writing takes place within a social dialogue, as statements and questions are formed from and evoke other statements and questions. The genuine question has the heuristic power to awaken new words and evoke response; it also highlights writing, reading, and responding as communicative activities and points to the kinds of confusion, interest, and desire for further thinking and discussion that accompany an act of communication. At the conclusion of Linda’s text, then, I would likely describe the confusion and engagement I feel as I consider the tension between naming and silence. Then, I might ask, “What happened after this night? To what extent did naming ‘it’ as alcoholic make discussion and action possible? To what extent did alcoholism remain a ‘forbidden topic’?”

Even less directive and potentially more productive is the question that can open up possibilities for further thinking and writing with most any text: “What led you to writing about this topic now?” That question can help a student like Linda to explore her relation in the present to this experience in the past. It may help her to see and consider the kinds of distanced language and devices (such as choosing “it” to mask the identity of the alcoholic parent) she’s used in this text. This question can also help us respond to texts that, unlike Linda’s, seem “author-evacuated”—texts in which the authority of the writer’s personal experience is concealed.1 The question can invite the writer of such a text to bring personal reflection into dialogue with public production and can move the writer to explore his or her relation and commitment to the text he or she has produced.
Through an understanding of the power and productivity of the internally persuasive word, we can also resee and revitalize responding activities already in place in our classrooms. As I read Linda's text, I might use "pointing" from Elbow and Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding* to describe my reactions to the voices that surround the words "ritual" and "tradition" (*Sharing* 15-18). The "movie of the mind" approach could help me to respond to the sharp gap I sense between the essay's first and second sentences (*Sharing* 43-52). Through these kinds of descriptive and interpretive responses to a text like Linda's, we not only acknowledge that this writing "must have been difficult" but also *how* it was difficult: how Linda has orchestrated the diverse and contradictory voices surrounding her themes and how she might return to a conversation with these voices.

Descriptive responses and questions from a teacher, however, are not enough to establish such a conversation since, as we know, students usually bring to the class an understanding of teacher response as *always* and *only* authoritative, as linked to institutions and political powers that must be obeyed. Initially at least, students will seek, and find, some static, authoritative directive in our responses to which they must pledge their allegiance (a fact that continues to surprise me). To promote conversation rather than allegiance, we can establish other arenas for dialogue with students: through letters accompanying drafts in which students offer their reading of and response to their texts, through writing logs in which students reflect on both their writing and their readers' responses.

Peer groups also can be a powerful counter to allegiance to the teacher's word, but peer groups can provide such a counter only if students and teacher work together to exchange monologic, prescriptive responses with the dialogic and descriptive. Too often teachers ask students to respond to each other with teacherly directives—completing mechanistic checklists or pointing to weakness—rather than with words that describe what a text allows them to hear, think about, question, and do. Or a teacher asks students to respond descriptively in their peer groups, then creates a sharp gap between those responses and his or her own by issuing authoritative directives. In contrast, if both teacher and students use descriptive, dialogic responses—sharing reactions, asking questions, dramatizing the complex and evocative interplay between reader and text—they construct an internally persuasive discourse that is creative, communicative, and productive. Through such conversations with a number of readers, students can begin to resist and revise the belief that the teacher's voice is the only voice that is backed by authority and must be obeyed.

**Writing and Ideological Becoming**

Linda's teacher, you may remember, was concerned about helping her to improve her text, but, in fact, a Bakhtinian reading of a paper like "The Power of the Word" challenges us to reconsider what we mean by the word
"improve." Internally persuasive descriptions and questions from a teacher and students won't necessarily produce a neat and tidy text. If Linda returns to her story, her revision won't necessarily make the uncertain certain and harness all conflicting voices into supporting the single assertion that the power of the word “alcoholic” is stronger than the power of “it.” From a Bakhtinian perspective, there is little to be gained from this kind of revision for “communicative effectiveness” or “coherence and continuity” since this revision assumes that there is a fixed, static message that must be communicated by concealing all tension and contradiction.

Instead, a Bakhtinian reading enables students and teachers to recognize the multiple perspectives and multiple messages a single text communicates through its moldable, reverberating collections of personal and public voices. This reading encourages students and teachers to converse with, rather than retreat from, those alien voices that subvert their initial meanings. For Linda, this continued conversation will likely lead to a revision that is even more “unfinished” and contradictory than her first draft. But this kind of revision does lead to “improvement,” for as Linda begins to consider the conflict that arises when she attempts to defy authoritative voices and speak about a “forbidden topic,” she begins to consider the cultural and political forces that have shaped her thought and language, her experience and her expression of it. Revision becomes a process of reflecting on, pushing against, and seeking to reshape those forces, a process that Bakhtin calls “ideological becoming” (341) and that Ronald translates as “learning and commitment” (Ronald and Roskelly 25). It is through this continuing dialogic and revisionary process that students grow as critically aware writers, readers, and learners.

This kind of growth can come only from the Bakhtinian stance that content and form, personal and public, people and texts, cannot be divided. By responding to a student's many voices, a teacher helps the student to recognize those forces that have shaped who the student is and how he or she writes. The teacher can also help the writer to see how he or she has begun to reshape and transform those forces to create a discourse that is internally persuasive and publicly meaningful. Through responses that awaken new words and open up the possibilities for continued dialogue and continued learning, a teacher can help a student like Linda to continue this evolution from “reciting by heart” to claiming and asserting the power of her own words. And through this evolution, Linda takes charge not only of a particular text and a particular revision but also of the person she is and the person she is becoming.

University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska
502 Journal of Advanced Composition

Notes

1 This key Bakhtinian question is one that Recchio declines to ask. After reducing Bakhtin to an explicator of "modes of discourse," he chooses to ignore the mode he calls "confessional, narrative discourse" in his response to a student's text, thereby divorcing personal from public authority (450). From within the dichotomy of content and form, personal and public, he proceeds with the kind of un-Bakhtinian reading that leads teachers to appropriate their students' texts and issue formal directives for "coherence and continuity" (453).

2 Sharing and Responding overlooks the genuine question as a powerful and, from a Bakhtinian perspective, natural form of response. For me, the responding activities listed in this book are must useful when used in conjunction with evocative questions.

Works Cited


